

# 'I don't want to pick!' Preschoolers know when they aren't sure

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Children as young as 3 years old know when they are not sure about a decision, and can use that uncertainty to guide decision making, according to new research from the Center for Mind and Brain at the University of California, Davis.

"There is behavioral evidence that they can do this, but the literature has assumed that until late preschool, children cannot introspect and make a decision based on that introspection," said Simona Ghetti, professor of psychology at UC Davis and co-author of the study with [graduate student](#) Kristen Lyons, now an assistant professor at Metropolitan State University of Denver.

The findings are published online by the journal *Child Development* and will appear in print in an upcoming issue.

Ghetti studies how reasoning, memory and cognition emerge during childhood. It is known that children get better at introspection through elementary school, she said. Lyons and Ghetti wanted to see whether this ability to ponder exists in younger children.

Previous studies have used open-ended questions to find out how children feel about a decision, but that approach is limited by younger children's ability to report on the content of their mental activity. Instead, Lyons and Ghetti showed 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds ambiguous [drawings](#) of objects and asked them to point to a particular object, such as a cup, a car or the sun. Then they asked the children to point to one of

two pictures of faces, one looking confident and one doubtful, to rate whether they were confident or not confident about a decision.

In one of the tests, children had to choose a drawing even if unsure. In a second set of tests they had a "don't want to pick" option.

Across the age range, children were more likely to say they were not confident about their [decision](#) when they had in fact made a wrong choice. When they had a "don't know" option, they were most likely to take it if they had been unsure of their choice in the "either/or" test.

By opting not to choose when uncertain, the children could improve their overall accuracy on the test.

"Children as young as 3 years of age are aware of when they are making a mistake, they experience uncertainty that they can introspect on, and then they can use that introspection to drive their [decision making](#)," Ghetti said.

The researchers hope to extend their studies to younger [children](#) to examine the emergence of [introspection](#) and reasoning.

Provided by UC Davis

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