



Society for Research in Child Development

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PRESS RELEASE

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Kids Can Remember Events Even if They Can't Remember Times; Finding Has Significant Implications for Child Testimony

Remembering when an event occurred is particularly important when you're a witness in the legal system. But while adults are pretty good at determining the time of an event based on reconstructing that event (i.e., if the event occurred at the beach, it must have been summer), a new study finds that isn't the case for children.

The study, published in the November/December issue of the journal *Child Development*, finds that while children aged 4 through 13 can recall the details of an event fairly well, they are unable to extrapolate further and link those details with a specific time of year, even when it occurs around a major holiday.

Researchers from Oberlin College in Ohio and the University of Southern California in Los Angeles gave a group of 86 children ranging in age from 4 to 13 two, in-class demonstrations shortly before or after Halloween. Three months later, they asked the children to recall the content of the demonstrations and when they occurred.

Regardless of their age, the children had difficulty remembering that Halloween was near one of the target events. They were also unable to remember whether the target event occurred before or after the holiday, regardless of how well they recalled the event's details.

However, regardless of their age, the children recalled at least some contextual information that could be used to reconstruct the time, enough to show that the time was in the current academic year, for instance. Older children, who had highly differentiated school schedules, were also able to recall a very specific time of day for the event's occurrence. Yet most lacked memories for details that could be used to reconstruct the specific time of year.

Overall, the researchers found that many of the abilities needed to reconstruct the times of events were present by age 6, including the capacity to interpret many time-related relevant cues, such as knowing that if they had been jumping in a pile of leaves when they played with their cousin, the event probably took place in the autumn. But there were substantial changes well into middle childhood in memory for the very cues that could help children figure out when an event occurred.

The findings have significant implications when it comes to the use of children's testimony in legal cases, says lead researcher William J. Friedman, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Oberlin College. "These findings are at odds with the practice of attorneys who attempt to discredit the content of a child's testimony if the child cannot remember when an alleged event occurred," he said. "Just because a child doesn't remember when the event occurred, doesn't mean that child doesn't remember the details of the event."

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