

See if you can get better at thinking about the future!

In [Planets of the Apes](#), we see great apes evolving to the point where they think about the future as humans do, which was evident in their innovations, manipulations of tools to solve problems. They are presented as being learned through their experiences and improving their future-oriented abilities (i.e., problem solving). This was of course a product of fiction. However, can humans improve their future-oriented thinking?

ANSWER:



The research suggests that yes, they can! In the final part of this blog series, we will see the ways in which one can improve their future thinking.

Research with children shows that there are a few ways that one can improve their future thinking. For instance, in [2017](#), Nadia Chernyak and colleagues examined if talking about the self in time,

which they referred to as “extended self” improves preschoolers’ future thinking abilities. The researchers divided children into four conditions where they read and discussed a story with the child. They had four different stories: (i) a story about the events that will happen to the child *after now within 24 hr*, (ii) a story about the events that happened *before now within 24 hr*, (iii) a story about events that will happened *later*, and (iv) a story about events that are happening *now*. The research team assessed children’s future thinking abilities by observing:

- whether or not they select more stickers later instead of less stickers now
- whether they can select correct items to take with them to a future event (e.g., a water bottle to a long trip)

Children who discussed stories about their selves in stories (i) near future and (ii) near past seemed to perform better in selecting correct items for a future event than children who discussed stories about their selves in (iii) distant future and (iv) present. The researchers attributed this increase in children’s performance to the idea that talking about the self in time (close to now) strengthens their understanding of the events but also assists children to think about these abstract thoughts more

Figure. Choosing a few stickers now or more stickers later?

concretely.

By adapting a similar methodology, Kathryn Leech and colleagues examined whether it's the talk about the self or the events in near future that helps children to improve their future thinking abilities in [2019](#). Similar to Chernyak and colleagues (2017), Leech and colleagues created four stories where children discussed events that will happen in the future or that are happening now. However, different than the previous study, Leech and colleagues also manipulated the perspective of the character:

- in Story 1, children discussed about the events that will happen to themselves in near future (e.g., “I will go to the doctor soon. But wait! What if the doctor will give me a shot?”)
- in Story 2, children discussed about the events that will happen to others in near future (e.g., Lee thinks about how he/she will go to the doctor soon. “But wait! What if the doctor will give me a shot?”)
- in Story 3, children discussed about the events that are happening to themselves in the present (e.g., waking up in the morning, you sit up in your bed.)
- in Story 4, children discussed about the events that are happening to others in the present (e.g., Lee waking up in the morning, he/she sits up in his/her bed.)

They also observed whether children select more stickers later instead of less stickers now and whether they can select correct items to take with them to a future event. In contrast to the previous study, there was no difference between children who had discussed different stories. Whether they discussed a story about themselves or other characters, children's performance were similar, they had more than 60% correct responses in item selection, and around 40% success in sticker selection.

Isn't it interesting? When read a story about themselves in near future or near past, children performed better! However, there was no difference how much they improved when it's about themselves or other people. One can't stop but wonder why talking about both the self and another person's future doesn't matter? Here comes the [2025](#) paper by Rossiter and colleagues' research. This research group examined the self-other distinction and whether *pretending* to be someone



Figure. Figure taken from Rossiter et al. (2025), showing which items are presented to the child

else would improve children's future thinking performance. As in the other two studies, Rossiter and colleagues placed children in different groups. This time, however, there were three conditions, and the conditions were not stories. The researchers told children to either:

- think about what they would choose
- think about what another child would choose
- pretend that they are the other child while answering the questions (it may seem like this condition is bit challenging – but it actually is not! children have immense imagination abilities, and they engage in pretend play daily)

Following the instructions, children were asked first which item they would prefer *right now*, and the which item they would prefer *when they/they/another child is all grown-up*.

Although the experimenter expected to see different performance from children after receiving different instructions, there were no differences in what items children choose for the future. This was not expected, and the research team investigated whether the children did indeed pretend to be another child? In a follow-up study, they asked children to pretend to be a grown-up and to tell them their current preferences. If one is pretending to be an adult, we expect them to choose the adult

items such as a cup of coffee, as compared to a juice, right? However, the results did show that children still chose the child items.

Is it possible that it might be more challenging to improve children's future thinking by focusing on their abilities directly? The only method that seemed to help children is to read and discuss stories about themselves in time, which doesn't require them to take another step by themselves. Should the research focus on the indirect ways to improve this ability in children? Perhaps looking at the frequency and the quality of their conversations about themselves in the future might prove to be more effective in promoting this ability in early ages given children limited cognitive abilities at this age group.

Hopefully we will have more to say about this in the future with current research focusing on children's everyday interactions to unravel how their daily experiences look like, and whether there is any practice that researchers can focus on to promote this ability. After reading this blog-series, I hope you have seen the importance of future thinking in human lives and why it's important for us to promote this ability in earlier ages.

Benefitted Readings and Works Cited

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