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Children's Expectations About Epistemic Change

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Abstract

People's mental states constantly change as they navigate and interact with their environment. Accordingly, social reasoning requires us not only to represent mental states but also to understand the ways in which mental states tend to change. Despite their importance, relatively little is known about children's understanding of the dynamics of mental states. To explore this question, we studied a common type of mental state change: knowledge gain. Specifically, we studied whether five- and six-year-olds distinguish between agents who gain knowledge and those who lose knowledge. In one condition, children saw an agent answer a two-alternative choice question incorrectly, followed by an identical-looking agent who answered the same question correctly (i.e., gaining knowledge). In another condition, children saw the reverse pattern (i.e., losing knowledge). Children were more likely to infer they had seen two different agents in the knowledge loss condition relative to the knowledge gain condition. These results suggest that children have intuitions about how epistemic states change and open new questions about children's naive theories of mental state dynamics.