

Kids' earliest memories might be earlier than they think

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A small child in Mumbai, with a shaved head, eating bread with her hand.
Credit: Wen-Yan King/Wikipedia

(Medical Xpress)—The very earliest childhood memories might begin

even earlier than anyone realized – including the rememberer, his or her parents and memory researchers.

Four- to 13-year-olds in upstate New York and Newfoundland, Canada, probed their memories when researchers asked: "You know, some kids can remember things that happened to them when they were very little. What is the first thing you can remember? How old were you at that time?" The researchers then returned a year or two later to ask again about earliest memories – and at what age the children were when the events occurred.

"The age estimates of earliest childhood memories are not as accurate as what has been generally assumed," report Qi Wang of Cornell University and Carole Peterson of Memorial University of Newfoundland in the March 2014 online issue of *Developmental Psychology*. "Using children's own age estimates as the reference, we found that memory dating shifted to later ages as time elapsed."

Childhood amnesia refers to our inability to remember events from our first years of life. Until now, cognitive psychologists estimated the so-called childhood amnesia offset at 3.5 years – the average age of our very earliest memory, the authors noted in their report, "Your Earliest Memory May Be Earlier Than You Think: Prospective Studies of Children's Dating of Earliest Childhood Memories."

But the children who originally answered, for example, "I think I was 3 years old when my dog fell through the ice," postdated that same earliest memory by as much as nine months when asked – in follow-up interviews a year or two years later – to recall again. In other words, as time went by, children thought the same memory event occurred at an older age than they had thought previously. And that finding prompts Wang and Peterson to question the 3.5-year offset for childhood amnesia.

"This can happen to adults' earliest childhood memories, too," says Wang, professor of human development and director of the Social Cognition Development Laboratory in Cornell's College of Human Ecology. "We all remember some events from our childhood. When we try to reconstruct the time of these events, we may postdate them to be more recent than they actually were, as if we are looking at the events through a telescope. Although none of us can recall events on the day of our birth – childhood amnesia may end somewhat earlier than the generally accepted 3.5 years."

Parents might help because they have more clues (e.g., where they lived, what their children looked like at the time of events) to put their children's experiences along a timeline. When asked, for example, "How old was Evan when Poochie fell through the ice?" they erred less than Evan had. Still, they are not free from errors in their time estimates.

The only way to settle that, Wang and Peterson mused, would be to look for documented evidence – a parent's diary, for instance, or a newspaper account of Poochie's memorable rescue.

What girls remember

In this study, as in another published by Wang in 2013, a gender-related difference was noted:

"Females generally, although not always, exhibit superior retention of episodic memories than males," Wang and Peterson wrote in the 2014 report. The gender differences, according to the researchers, may reflect the development of life narratives in late childhood and early adolescence, where girls often tell lengthier and more coherent life stories than boys.

"The narrative organization of life events," they speculated, "may allow

girls to better remember the events over time, compared with boys."

Wang, author of "The Autobiographical Self in Time and Culture" (Oxford University Press, 2013), says her earliest childhood memory is "playing with the girls next door." And given her findings, she wonders if that was around age 4.

More information: "Your Earliest Memory May Be Earlier Than You Think: Prospective Studies of Children's Dating of Earliest Childhood Memories." Wang Q, Peterson C. *Dev Psychol.* 2014 Mar 3. [Epub ahead of print]. PMID: 24588518.

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