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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0gd5n36f>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 36(36)

ISSN

1069-7977

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Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed

Choice and Strategy Use Facilitate Preschoolers' Cognitive Flexibility

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Abstract: In some cases, children perform better in tasks that allow them to make active choices. However, the cognitive mechanisms underlying this facilitation remain uninvestigated. One possibility is that choice aids children's cognitive flexibility, which develops rapidly during the preschool period. In Experiment 1, we assessed whether 5-year-olds more flexibly switched tasks when allowed to choose when to switch. Overall, there was little evidence of facilitation. However, children who chose strategically (i.e., chose to stay with the same task rather than switch) outperformed children who were not allowed to choose. Experiment 2 assessed whether children's ability to benefit from choice was related to their ability to monitor task difficulty and control task demands. For only those children allowed to choose between tasks, flexibility performance correlated with sensitivity to task difficulty in a separate measure. These findings suggest a possible association between children's metacognitive ability and their ability to benefit from choice.