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The development of commitment: Attention for intention

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Abstract

The ability to take action according to a partially defined plan allows humans to resolve a distant future, even when steps are missing between the present and that future. Adhering to this partial plan requires an intentional commitment that curbs distracting desires conflicting with the planned course of action, enabling humans to act coherently over long horizons. This research (N = 50, 23 boys, ages 5-6, Chinese) explored the cognitive development of commitment to partial plans in a sequential decision-making task, and its correlation to participant capacity for attentional control. Our results suggest that only 6-year-olds committed to partial plans, and moreover, that in both age groups, intentional commitment was positively correlated with the use of proactive control. These findings indicate that intentional commitment does not develop simultaneously with the understanding of intention at infancy, but rather matures gradually in parallel with the development of attentional control.