Question Asking as Active Learning: Scaffolding Shapes the Development of Child Inquiry

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Abstract

Question asking is a key mechanism through which children resolve knowledge gaps and construct causal models of the world. This study investigates the developmental trajectories of diverse inquiry types (factual, procedural, causal, clarification, and epistemic questions) and examines how conversational scaffolding influences these transitions. Using longitudinal naturalistic data from children (age= 2;00 to 4;00), we employed a Bayesian regression analysis to map the restructuring of child inquiry. Results indicate a significant developmental shift from simple informational seeking toward more sophisticated explanatory and task-oriented inquiry. While factual inquiries declined with age, procedural, causal, clarification, and epistemic questions showed robust growth. Notably, the velocity of this transition was mediated by social context: high-scaffolding environments accelerated the increase in complex inquiries. Our findings suggest that although complex inquiry is a universal feature of early curiosity, its developmental trajectory is socially shaped and varies across individuals.

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