

The Child's Theory of Mind

Even young children are curious about the nature of the human mind (Birch & others, 2017; Devine & Hughes, 2018a, b). They have a **theory of mind**, a term that refers to awareness of one's own mental processes and those of others. Studies of theory of mind view the child as "a thinker who is trying to explain, predict, and understand people's thoughts, feelings, and utterances" (Harris, 2006). Children's theory of mind changes as they develop through childhood (Devine & Hughes, 2018a, b; Wellman, 2015). However, whether infants have a theory of mind continues to be questioned by some (Rakoczy, 2012). The consensus is that some changes occur quite early in development, as we see next (Scott & Baillargeon, 2017). The main changes occur at ages 2 to 3, 4 to 5, and beyond age 5.

theory of mind Refers to the awareness of one's own mental processes and the mental processes of others.

Ages 2 to 3 In this time frame, children begin to understand the following three mental states:

1. *Perceptions*: The child realizes that other people see what is in front of their eyes and not necessarily what is in front of the child's eyes.
2. *Emotions*: The child can distinguish between positive and negative emotions. A child might say, "Vic feels bad."
3. *Desires*: The child understands that if someone wants something, he or she will try to get it. A child might say, "I want my mommy."

Children refer to desires earlier and more frequently than they refer to cognitive states such as thinking and knowing (Harris, 2006). Two- to 3-year-olds understand the way desires are related to actions and to simple emotions (Harris, 2006). For example, they understand

that people will search for what they want and that if they obtain it, they are likely to feel happy, but if they don't, they will keep searching for it and are likely to feel sad or angry.

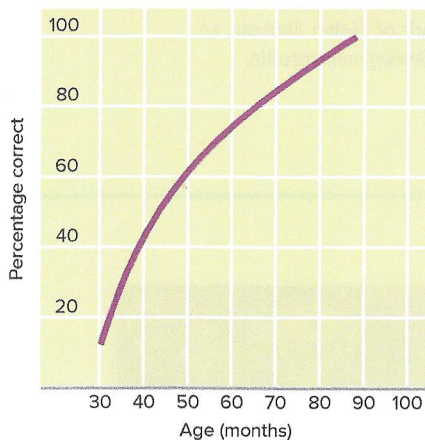


Figure 9 Developmental Changes in False-Belief Performance

False-belief performance—the child's understanding that a person has a false belief that contradicts reality—dramatically increases from 2½ years of age through the middle of the elementary school years. In a summary of the results of many studies, 2½-year-olds gave incorrect responses about 80 percent of the time (Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001). At 3 years, 8 months, they were correct about 50 percent of the time, and after that, gave increasingly correct responses.

Ages 4 to 5 Children come to understand that the mind can represent objects and events accurately or inaccurately (Tompkins & others, 2017). The realization that people can have *false beliefs*—beliefs that are not true—develops in a majority of children by the time they are 5 years old (Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001) (see Figure 9).

In a classic false-belief task, children are told a story about Sally and Anne. In the story, Sally places a toy in a basket and then leaves the room. In her absence, Anne takes the toy from the basket and places it in a box. Children are asked where Sally will look for the toy when she returns. The major finding is that 3-year-olds tend to fail false-belief tasks,

saying that Sally will look in the box (even though Sally could not know that the toy has been moved to this new location). Four-year-olds and older children tend to pass the task, correctly saying that Sally will have a "false belief"—she will think the object is in the basket, even though that belief is now false. The conclusion from these studies is that children younger than age 4 do not understand that it is possible to have a false belief.

Beyond Age 5 It is only beyond the preschool years that children have a deepening appreciation of the mind itself rather than just an understanding of mental states (Wellman, 2015). Not until middle and late childhood do children see the mind as an active constructor of knowledge or a processing center (Flavell, Green, & Flavell, 2000). It is only then that they move from understanding that beliefs can be false to realizing that the same event can be open to multiple interpretations (Carpentale & Chandler, 1996).

Individual Differences As in other developmental research, there are individual differences in the ages when children reach certain milestones