Dear Families….

We wanted to write and thank you for your enthusiastic and continued participation in our research! This year has been a productive year for us and we would like to share with you some of the new developments in the lab here at Cornell.

We began our fourth round of data collection this summer and it was wonderful to see how the children have grown since our first visit nearly 4 years ago! The stories and memories they have told us about their lives have grown increasingly complex and their understanding of emotions more nuanced since our first visit when they were 3 years of age. In this newsletter, we provide you with some results from our recent analysis of the data that shows the developing trend in children’s autobiographical memory and its connection with children’s increasing understanding of emotion. We hope you enjoy reading the results (pg 2). In addition, we have started a new project that will allow us to explore the complexities of children’s autobiographical memory, self-concept, narrative abilities and emotion understanding during the early grade school years.

Once again, thank you for your support of our research!

Special points of interest:

* The development of pre-school children’s autobiographical memory and emotion understanding (pg 2).
* New Study! What is it about (pg. 3)?
* New lab members (pg. 4)!
The development of children's autobiographical memory

One purpose of our study is to examine the development of children’s autobiographical memory over time and across cultures. We are also interested in variables that may influence children’s ability to recall and narrate personally meaningful stories.

In measuring children's memories, we ask children to tell us about events that have happened recently in their lives. Children’s stories were coded for the amount of specific information provided about past events as well as their thoughts, emotions, and evaluations on the event itself.

Over the past several years of data collection, we have been able to track the trajectories of children’s autobiographical memory between the ages of 3 and 6 years of age. While we are still coding and analyzing data from our recent visit, we report here the development of children’s autobiographical memory between the ages of 3 and 4.5 years of age.

In addition, we are interested in examining how culture may affect these variables, thus our sample included Chinese immigrant children in the U.S., as well as Chinese children currently living in Beijing, and European American children.

Results from our study illustrates that the amount of specific information provided by children increased with age, and this is particularly pronounced among European American and Chinese immigrant children.

Furthermore, the amount of references to internal states such as thoughts, feelings and judgments are also seen to increase as children develop. Our data suggest that as children get older, their recall abilities improve.

In addition, with age, children start to talk more about their thoughts and feelings about an event. This may reflect their increased abilities to relate information to the self in meaningful ways which would aid in the recollection of past events.

Changes in children’s emotion understanding through the preschool years

In addition to examining the general trend in autobiographical memory development, we have looked at how children’s understanding of emotion develop with age and how their emotional understanding may be linked to their autobiographical memories.

In our study, we present children with emotional terms (e.g., happy, sad) and ask them to describe situations that would elicit these emotional states. Our data suggest that this ability increases with age. Children not only become better at understanding the different types of emotions, they improve in their ability to think of different situations that would elicit these emotions. See Table 2.

Additionally, our results suggest that regard-
Children’s emotion understanding influences autobiographical memory

less of culture, children who had higher emotion understanding scores also showed better memory skills.

Research has shown that events that are emotional and personally meaningful are more readily remembered than those that are neutral. Our research further demonstrates that as children began to understand emotions and their antecedents they are better at grasping the personal relevance of an event. This increase in emotional understanding therefore facilitates children’s ability to recall past experiences.

New study: What is it about?

Our new project on children’s development in middle childhood is funded by the National Science Foundation. In this project, we are interested in seeing how children develop various social, emotional, and cognitive abilities between the ages of 6 and 10. Although researchers have done a great deal of work on preschool children and adolescents, relatively little is known about the development in middle childhood.

The project starts when children are around 6 years of age. During our visit to the children, we play with them in several tasks, such as asking them to tell a story from a picture book, to describe themselves, and to tell us what they know about people’s emotions. At the end, we play a game with the children about science experiments. We also ask mothers to help fill out some questionnaires. These tasks help us understand children’s social-emotional knowledge and their cognitive abilities such as language, narrative skills, self-concept, autobiographical memory, and school performance. We hope to track the trajectories of these variables and examine their relations to one another over time.

This new project has kept us busy since last summer. We have collected data with 33 European American and 24 Chinese immigrant children. Among these children, 54 participated in our earlier longitudinal study when they were little preschoolers and 3 are new participants.

We plan to visit the children and families again in a year or so. We are also working on recruiting more children to participate in the project. If any of your friends have children at a similar age as your child, we appreciate that you recommend them to let their children participate in our research!
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There has been several new faces in the lab. Our new lab manager, Jessie Koh, graduated with a Masters in Psychology from National University of Singapore.

Jessie is currently pursuing her PhD at Cornell University, she is interested in examining culture, memory and well being in children.

In addition, three other Cornell graduate students, Stacey Doan, Zoe Klemfuss, and Qingfang Song have been actively involved in the lab, interviewing children and helping to analyze the data.

Furthermore, we recently hired Jing Zhang to help us with recruitment and data collection. Jing has two children, a 2-year-old girl and a 6-year-old boy. Jing and her family has been living in Ithaca for four years. She is a wonderful mother and an excellent researcher. We are very happy to have her on our team.

We also have a host of undergraduate students working on the project. The undergraduates are responsible for scheduling interviews, coding the data, and preparing research materials. The undergraduates gain research experience while working on the projects.

You may have remembered our last lab manager, Sarah Kulkofsky who interviewed many of the children. Sarah graduated this past June and is now teaching and conducting her own research at Texas Tech in Lubbock, Texas! Sarah continues to collaborate with us on current projects.

We wish Sarah the best of luck in all her endeavors!