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Preschoolers' fantasy–reality distinctions of emotional events

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that emotions influence children's ability to discern fantasy from reality; however, reasons for this association remain unknown. The current research sought to better understand the mechanisms underlying children's distinctions by examining the roles discrete emotions and context have in 3- to 5-year-olds' evaluations of fantasy and reality. In Study 1, children's fantasy–reality distinctions of images depicting happy, frightening, or sad events were obtained under two conditions: Children responded freely or were motivated to respond accurately. When responding freely, older children reported that happy and sad fantastic and real events could occur but frightening events could not. When motivated to respond accurately, children's accuracy improved for fantasy but not for reality. Study 2 examined real events exclusively and found that children may lack the knowledge that frightening, but not happy or sad, real events can occur. The findings provide new insight into how emotions affect children's fantasy–reality distinctions.

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Introduction

Children are routinely required to discern fantastic from real information. They must understand that what they read in storybooks or see on television may or may not reflect reality, that events during pretend play are only make-believe, and that everyday conversations can include real or false information. Typically, maneuvering between fantastic and real information does not prove to be overly troublesome to young children. Research has examined several aspects of children's evaluation and use of fantastic and real information, including understanding fictional or fantastic entities (e.g., Skolnick & Bloom, 2006, 2009; Tullos & Woolley, 2009; Woolley & Cox, 2007), belief in imaginary

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companions (Taylor, Shawber, & Mannering, 2009), understanding of magic (Browne & Woolley, 2004; Subbotsky & Slater, 2011), and discerning between improbable and impossible events (Cook & Sobel, 2011; Shtulman & Carey, 2007). Although age-related improvements exist across most studies, children typically treat information that represents reality differently from information that violates reality, suggesting that they appreciate the boundaries of imaginary or fantastic information.

This conclusion, however, appears to be true primarily for information that is neutral rather than emotional in tone. Studies have found that children's competency at discerning fantasy and reality decreases for emotionally evocative information. For example, when 4- to 7-year-olds are asked to imagine positive or negative entities (e.g., puppy, monster) inside empty boxes, they approach boxes containing positive entities and avoid boxes containing negative entities, suggesting that the children's emotional reaction to the entities increases their belief that the entities are real (Bourchier & Davis, 2000a, 2000b; Harris, Brown, Marriott, Whittall, & Harmer, 1991). Other research, however, has found that when 3- to 5-year-olds are asked to evaluate images of fantastic or real events that are frightening, they will accurately report that frightening fantastic events are not real (Sayfan & Lagattuta, 2009) but inaccurately report that frightening real events are not real (Samuels & Taylor, 1994), suggesting that fear can decrease children's belief in fantasy and elicit errors in reality. Taken together, these studies reveal that emotions influence children's evaluations of fantastic and real information but do not clearly document whether emotions increase or decrease the accuracy of children's judgments or provide reasons for the effect of emotion.

One study attempted to reconcile prior findings by systematically testing children's fantasy–reality distinctions of events depicting several discrete emotions: happiness, fear, and anger (Carrick & Quas, 2006). Discrete emotions were selected because they vary in both valence (i.e., positive vs. negative) and motivational tendencies (i.e., approach vs. avoidance), which can provide insight into children's reactions to and judgments of the information. That is, children viewing emotional events associated with approach tendencies may find them to be desirable and want to engage with the events, hence reporting that the events are real, versus events associated with avoidant tendencies, which children may want to disengage from and report are not real. For example, happiness is positively valenced and associated with approach tendencies (Carver & White, 1994; Gray, 1981, 1990); therefore, individuals should report that positive events (fantastic or real) are real in order to maintain positive feelings or engage with the events. Fear is negatively valenced and associated with avoidant tendencies (e.g., Davidson, 1998; Lazarus, 1991; Wacker, Heldmann, & Stemmler, 2003); thus, individuals should report that frightening events are not real in order to avoid or distance themselves from the events. Anger is negatively valenced like fear, but it is associated with individuals engaging with the anger-eliciting stimulus to eliminate a blocked goal (Berkowitz, 1999; Harmon-Jones & Sigelman, 2001; Lazarus, 1991; Levine, 1995; Wacker et al., 2003). Therefore, judgments can vary depending on whether individuals are responding to the negative valence (and report that events cannot occur) or approach tendency (and report that events can occur).

Carrick and Quas (2006) found that when 3- to 5-year-olds viewed fantastic and real happy, frightening, and angry events and were asked, "Can this happen in real life?" children reported that happy events (e.g., mice dancing, parent hugging child) could occur more often than frightening events (e.g., witch, house on fire) and angry events (e.g., raccoons arguing, parents yelling at child) regardless of whether events depicted fantasy or reality. Thus, children did not discriminate the fantastic or real status of the images or the motivational tendency (approach vs. avoidance); rather, they differentially judged the images based on the positive or negative valence of the events. The authors suggested that children's responses reflect their desires for positive but not negative events to occur or children's attempts to regulate their positive or negative reactions to viewing the events. Although these findings begin to capture the association between emotions and children's fantasy–reality distinctions, two additional issues must be resolved before a thorough understanding of this association can be obtained.

First, examining the contribution of discrete emotions versus general emotional valence to children's judgments may better explain why children report that certain events can or cannot occur. In Carrick and Quas's (2006) study, children reported that the angry events could not occur, suggesting that children responded to the emotional valence more so than the motivational tendency associated with anger. However, before concluding that valence is the primary influence, other discrete negative emotions need to be examined. Sadness is a useful emotion to test because it can differentially affect a

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