

The Power of the Earliest Memories

Those early childhood memories, which are so quick to fade, are important in influencing decisions in later life. WSJ's Sue Shellenbarger reports on Lunch Break. Photo: Getty Images.

What you can remember from age 3 may help improve aspects of your life far into adulthood.

Children who have the ability to recall and make sense of memories from daily life—the first day of preschool, the time the cat died—can use them to better develop a sense of identity, form relationships and make sound choices in adolescence and adulthood, new research shows.

While the lives of many youngsters today are heavily documented in photos and video on social media and stored in families' digital archives, studies suggest photos and videos have little impact. Parents play a bigger role in helping determine not just how many early memories children can recall, but how children interpret and learn from the events of their earliest experiences.

"Our personal memories define who we are. They bond us together," says Robyn Fivush, a psychology professor at Emory University in Atlanta and an author of dozens of studies on the topic. Children whose parents encourage reminiscing and storytelling about daily events show better coping and problem-solving skills by their preteens, and fewer symptoms of depression, research shows.

The findings come from research on the mysteries of "childhood amnesia"—the fact that most people's earliest memories fade by ages 6 to 8 as the brain hasn't yet developed the capacity to retain them.

In the past two years, new research techniques—including improved data-modeling methods and growth in studies that track children's memories over several years—have identified specific behaviors that help kids as old as 9 retain more vivid, detailed early memories.



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A person whose dog was killed by a car is likely to call on that memory when deciding to keep pets on a leash.

A third type, social-bonding memories, involve relationships with others. People recall these when they want to strengthen relationships or form new ties, the study says. A college student who participated in a different study cited bedtime-reading sessions with his father, who read him the entire "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, as a motivator to build and maintain strong family ties in his adult life.

The ability to draw on all three types of memories predicts higher psychological well-being, a greater sense of purpose and more positive relationships, according to a study of 103 college students published last year in the journal *Memory*. The students were asked to recall four life events and cite reasons they regarded them as significant. Then they filled out assessments gauging their life satisfaction, self-esteem and psychological well-being.

Few childhood memory studies have included fathers. Ones with fathers show mothers are more likely to use a conversation style that helps children retain early memories.

Some memories help build a sense of self-continuity, or personal identity, says a 2011 study. People recall these memories when they "want to feel that I am the same person that I was before," or "when I want to understand how I have changed from who I was before." A hurricane survivor, for example, might recall the memory as proof that she can survive tough experiences and grow stronger as a result.

Other memories serve a directive function, and guide behavior. People recall these when making decisions or to avoid repeating past mistakes. A

Also, kids who can recall more specific memories are able to come up with more potential solutions to social problems, according to a 2011 University of New Hampshire study of 83 children ages 10 to 15.



Memory making: Widaad Zaman with her daughter, Haneefah, then 3 years old. *Ammar Ally*

Widaad Zaman, a co-author of studies on memory, says early memories help her 4-year-old daughter Haneefah build a sense of identity. She used to love petting dogs being walked by their neighbors, Dr. Zaman says. When a stray dog ran up to her in the family's garage in Orlando, Fla., barking and sniffing at her, however, "she was screaming, and very scared," Dr. Zaman says. The memory has made Haneefah cautious around dogs that aren't on a leash. She sometimes tells her mother, "I used to be a person who liked dogs, but now I'm a person that doesn't like dogs."

The incident helped Haneefah learn to talk about her emotions—an ability linked in research to coping skills. Dr. Zaman encouraged her to describe her feelings and gave them a name—fear. "Were there other times when you were scared or you felt very frightened?" she asked. Haneefah has since learned to start conversations about her

emotions, telling her mother, "I had a bad dream and I was scared," Dr. Zaman says.

Few adults remember much before they were 3.5 years old, on average. Some people have credible memories from as early as 18 months of age, however, while others can't recall much before the age of 8, says Patricia Bauer, a psychologist and a senior associate dean for research at Emory.

Early memories have a higher likelihood of surviving when children are encouraged to talk about them soon after the event. Adults can guide them to tell "a good story, that has a beginning, middle and an end," and help them talk about what it means, says Dr. Bauer, a leading researcher on the topic. The key behavior by mothers is "deflecting" conversation back to the child—that is, tossing the ball back to the child repeatedly by asking, say, "We really had fun, didn't we?" or, "Tell me more," she says, based on findings published last year.

Children with mothers who have a "highly elaborative style" of reminiscing with their kids, asking open-ended who, what, where and when questions, are able at ages 4 and 5 to recall earlier, more detailed memories than other children, research shows. Parents with a more "repetitive" style of reminiscing, who ask questions with one-word answers and simply repeat them if the child can't respond, have children with fewer and less vivid recollections.

The elaborative method proved to be easy to learn says Catherine Haden, a psychology professor at Loyola University Chicago, a co-author of a 2003 study of parents of 39 preschoolers. Researchers gave parents a pamphlet to read, then showed them a video describing the elaborative style of conversing with children. Mothers who had the training readily adopted the elaborative style during a staged camping activity, and their kids recalled more details when questioned about the trip later.

Dr. Zaman says she sometimes has to make a conscious effort when she's tired or busy to keep tossing the conversational ball back in Haneefah's court. After a boat ride last weekend, Dr. Zaman encouraged Haneefah to describe the splashing of the waves and her favorite part, watching the driver bring the boat to shore. She wants to show Haneefah "her version of the story matters," she says.

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