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The format of children's mental images: Penetrability of spatial images

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Abstract

To investigate the format of mental images and the penetrability of mental imagery performance to top-down influences in the form of gravity information, children (4-, 6-, 8- and 10-year-olds) and adults ($N = 112$) performed mental rotation tasks. A linear increase in response time with rotation angle emerged at 6-years, suggesting that spatial properties are represented in children's mental images. Moreover, 6-, 8-, and 10-year-olds, but not 4-year-olds or adults, took longer to respond to rotated stimuli pairs when gravity information was incongruent with the direction of rotation rather than congruent. Overall, findings suggest that in contrast to adults', 6- to 10-year-olds' mental rotation performance was penetrated by top-down information. This research a) provides insight into the format of young children's mental images and b) shows that children's mental imagery-rotation performance is penetrable by top-down influences.

Keywords: mental imagery; mental rotation; imagery format; visuo-spatial processes

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7 Research with adults in mental imagery over the last 30 years has revealed that our
8 images are depictive representations that preserve metric qualities such as space and distance
9 (e.g., Kosslyn, Ganis, & Thompson, 2003).
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12 Support for this depictive account comes from mental rotation tasks, whereby
13 participants judge whether pairs of objects are the same or mirror images of one another
14 when one of the pair is rotated to different degrees. A key finding is that response times
15 increase linearly with increasing difference in rotation angle between objects (Shepard &
16 Metzler, 1971). Such findings demonstrate that mental images incorporate the spatial
17 information present in the original object; whole patterns are mentally rotated until aligned in
18 orientation of the other object, and patterns possess a structure similar to representations that
19 arise from perception (Kosslyn et al., 2003). This linear increase in rotation time with angle is
20 already evident in 5- and 6-year-old children (Estes, 1998; Frick, Daum, Walser, & Mast,
21 2009; Kosslyn, Margolis, Barrett, Goldknopf, & Daly, 1990; Marmor, 1975), indicating a
22 depictive format of children's mental images.
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26 However, it has also been shown that mental images are susceptible to top-down
27 influences, and are thus *cognitively penetrable*: visual perceptual and mental experiences can
28 vary as a function of participants' beliefs, expectations, and knowledge (Pylyshyn, 2002;
29 Kosslyn et al., 2003). In visual perception, adults and children are more likely to perceive
30 alternative interpretations of ambiguous figures when they have knowledge of ambiguity
31 (Doherty & Wimmer, 2005; Gregory, 2009; Wimmer & Doherty, 2011). Similarly, in mental
32 imagery adults can reverse between alternative interpretations of ambiguous figures when
33 cues are provided (Mast & Kosslyn, 2002; Peterson, Kihlstrom, Rose, & Glisky, 1992). Thus,
34 evidence shows that adults' mental images are depictive in format (Kosslyn et al., 2003) but
35 also cognitively penetrable by top-down information (Mast & Kosslyn, 2002; Peterson, et al.,
36 1992). However a fundamental question remains whether the mental depiction of visual
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7 information can be penetrated by top-down knowledge in children. Surprisingly little is
8 known about conceptual penetrability of children's mental imagery, and of mental rotation
9 processes in particular.
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12 To date, there is evidence of penetrability of mental rotation processes by motor
13 processes in children and adults. Specifically, both children and adults take longer to
14 mentally rotate kinetic stimuli when they are~~that when they~~ incongruent in
15 interference incongruent with motoric components (such as incongruent hand movements)
16 compared to when they are~~compared to when they are~~ versus congruent ones (Funk, Brugger,
17 & Wilkening, 2005; Ionta, Fourkas, Fiorio, & Aglioti, 2007; Parsons, 1994). Specifically,
18 these types of mental rotation processes become increasingly differentiated from motor
19 processes with increasing age (Frick et al., 2009; Funk, ~~Brugger, & Wilkening et al.~~, 2005). In
20 contrast to 11-year-olds and adults, 5- and 8-year-olds are faster at responding to rotated
21 stimuli when a manual rotation of their hands is in line with the stimulus rotation direction,
22 rather than in reverse (Frick et al., 2009; Funk et al., 2005). ~~These~~ Thus, findings indicate that
23 young children's ~~but not adults'~~ kinetic mental rotation processes are guided to a larger extent
24 by motor processes than adults (see ~~-~~ Kosslyn, Ganis, & Thompson, 2001; Kosslyn,
25 Digirolamo, Thompson, & Alpert, 1998 for neuroimaging evidence supporting the role of
26 motor processes in kinetic rotation in adults). Together with findings that children's visual
27 perceptual processes are penetrated by top-down influences (Wimmer & Doherty, 2011), one
28 would predict that children's mental rotation processes may also be influenced by top-down
29 processes and possibly to a larger extent than adults' (Funk et al., 2005).
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33 The aim of the present research was two-fold. First, to examine further whether young
34 children's mental images are depictive in nature, we assessed whether children show the
35 typical linear increase in mental rotation response times with angle. This provides insight into
36 the format of their images. Second, we asked whether children's and adults' mental imagery
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rotation performance is penetrable by top-down information. If children preserve spatial properties in their mental images and their rotation is influenced by top-down factors then this suggests that children's mental images are pictorial in nature and that performance can be penetrated by conceptual factors. Further, if the differentiation of mental rotation processes from motor processes previously reported (Frick et al., 2009; Funk et al., 2005) reflects development of imagery processes *per se*, then one would also predict less top-down influence on mental rotation processes with increasing age.

To manipulate top-down conceptual information, we used stimuli of a monkey standing on a table with one leg that was shorter than the other, suggesting that table and monkey would fall in the direction towards the shorter leg. This was either congruent or incongruent with the direction of the rotated stimulus. Using this top-down information required basic knowledge of gravity. Previous work has shown that 4-year-olds are around 90% and 60% correct at judging from photographs whether an abstract symmetrical/asymmetrical (respectively) object would fall off a partially supporting block (Krist, 2010); that children as young as 3 years of age are sensitive to gravity (Kim & Spelke, 1999); and 41/2-months-olds have "intuition" about physical support (Needham & Baillargeon, 1993). Thus, the present task should pose no difficulties in conceptual understanding for 4-year-olds. Nevertheless, we checked children's understanding at the end of the task.

If children's mental images are pictorial in nature, then they should demonstrate a linear increase in response times with increasing rotation angles. If children's and adults' mental images are penetrated by top-down conceptual information about gravity then they should be faster in the congruent trials (table falling in the same direction as the rotated monkey) than in incongruent trials (table falling in the opposite direction).

Method

Participants

Overall 112 participants participated. Eighty-eight were children [17 4-year-olds ($M = 4.46$ years, range = 4.05-5.03; 13 male, 4 female), 31 6-year-olds ($M = 6.38$ years, range = 6.04-7.05; 19 male, 12 female), 16 8-year-olds ($M = 8.32$ years, range = 8.05-9.04; 9 male, 7 female), 24 10-year-olds ($M = 10.39$ years, range = 10.00-11.05; 10 male, 14 female)]; 24 were adults ($M = 21.46$ years, range = 18-46; 4 male, 20 female). Children were recruited from two primary schools and predominately White, middle class. Adults were students recruited from the university's online participation system and participated for course credit.

Materials and procedure

Participants were seen in a quiet area outside the classroom (children) or at the university laboratory (adults). Tasks were computerized and presented on a 17.3 inch laptop PC running with the program Visual Basic that recorded the two dependent measures: (i) correctness and (ii) time taken to respond (reaction time from stimulus onset to button press).

The images used throughout were taken from the monkey pairs from Estes (1998) which were adapted by adding extra stimuli. Participants' task was to judge whether two monkeys appearing next to each other held up the same or different arms. The monkey on the left hand side was always upright and stood on a table with one leg cut off (see Figure 1). There were two different table versions: Either the monkey looked likely to fall to the right (congruent: towards the rotated monkey on the right hand side) or the monkey looked likely to fall to the left (incongruent: away from the rotated monkey on the right hand side). The monkey on the right hand side was shown in 7 different rotation angles, from 0° to 180° at 30° increments. Both stimuli remained in view, so no memory assessment or control condition was required.

(Figure 1 about here)

There were 56 stimulus pairs: Half of them were "same" pairs (right arm-right arm/left arm-left arm) and half were "different" pairs (right arm-left arm/left arm-right arm).

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7 Half of the pairs appeared in a congruent fashion (monkey standing on a table that looked as
8 if it would fall towards the direction of the rotated monkey) and half in an incongruent
9 fashion (monkey standing on a table that looked as if it would fall away from the direction of
10 the rotated monkey).
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14 Children were shown half the stimuli (28) to ensure concentration throughout the
15 experiment. Children saw one “congruent same” (either right-right arm or left-left arm), one
16 “incongruent same” (either right-right or left-left), one “congruent different” (either right-left
17 or left-right) and one “incongruent different” pair (either right-left or left-right), each in seven
18 rotation angles (0°-180°). Adults were shown all 56 stimuli, for example, both “incongruent
19 same” right-right and left-left, and so forth.
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26 The task was to judge whether monkeys held up the same or different arms.
27 Participants received four practice trials, containing first one “same” and one “different”
28 monkey-pair (without the table) at 0° and then one “same” and one “different” pair at 30°.
29 Practice was repeated if participants did not understand the task or answered more than one
30 trial incorrectly. After a maximum of two repetitions all participants answered all practice
31 trials correctly. In the test trials adults pressed the 'S' for same and 'D' for different keys,
32 indicating whether the monkeys held up the same or different arms. Children either said
33 “same” or “different” and the naïve experimenter was instructed to look at the children and
34 pressed the appropriate response button for them. This minimised working memory demands
35 and avoided the known risk of interference between button presses and imagery processes
36 (Kail, 1988; 1991).
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47 After the test trials, children were asked in which direction the monkey on the table
48 would fall. Only one 4-year-old answered incorrectly that the monkey on the table would fall
49 in the direction of the longer leg. He was excluded from the analysis of the direction of the
50 fall.
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Results

Table 1 shows mean accuracy and response times for each direction condition (congruent vs. incongruent). Figure 2 shows mean response times on trials with accurate responses for each rotation angle and direction condition across age groups. Bonferroni confidence interval adjustments and post-hoc analysis were used throughout.

Accuracy

The effects of age group (4-, vs. 6-, vs. 8-, vs., 10-, vs. adults), rotation angle (0 vs. 30 vs. 60 vs. 90 vs. 120 vs. 150 vs. 180), and direction condition (congruent vs. incongruent) on mean accuracy (range 0 to 1 fully accurate) were examined in a mixed ANOVA where age group was the between participants variable. Accuracy increased with age, $F(4, 107) = 20.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .43$. Four-year-olds ($M = .68$) were less accurate than all older age groups (all $ps < .01$). Six-year-olds ($M = .82$) were also less accurate than all older age groups (all $ps < .02$). There was no difference in accuracy between 8-year-olds ($M = .92$), 10-year-olds ($M = .97$) and adults ($M = .96$), all $ps > .15$. Overall, accuracy decreased with increasing rotation angle, $F(6, 642) = 9.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .08$. Moreover, there was an age group x angle interaction, $F(24, 642) = 4.06$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .13$. Post-hoc analyses revealed that only 4-year-olds showed a significant diminution in accuracy with increasing angle ($p < .001$). All older age groups did not show a significant decrease in accuracy with increasing angle (all $ps > .05$).

For congruency of the fall, participants were equally accurate whether the direction of potential fall was congruent or incongruent with the direction of rotation, $F(1, 642) = .51$, $p = .48$, $\eta p^2 = .01$, and this was the case for all age groups as indicated by the non-significant interaction, $F(4, 642) = 1.07$, $p = .37$, $\eta p^2 = .04$ (Table 1). Furthermore, there was no rotation direction x angle interaction, $F(6, 642) = 1.18$, $p = .31$, $\eta p^2 = .01$.

(Table 1 about here)

Response times

To examine the effects of age, angle, and direction of fall on response times, only participants who performed significantly above chance ($p < .05$) were included (at least 19 out of 28 trials correct for child participants; at least 35 correct out of 56 trials for adult participants) (Binomial-test). In total 95 out of 112 participants met this criterion (8 out of 17 4-year-olds, 25 out of 31 6-year-olds, 14 out of 16 8-year-olds, all 10-year-olds and adults). However, the same findings emerged when all participants were included, and above chance performance was observed for each of the ages as an overall group (all $ps < .001$).

Outlier trials for each age group, those greater than twice the median response time per angle, were excluded (4-year-olds: 6.7% of all trials, 6-year-olds: 4.5%; 8-year-olds: 3.3%; 10-year-olds: 2.9%, adults: 1.5%).

0° Trials. To examine the stimulus encoding and comparison time between direction condition (congruent versus incongruent) and across age groups when stimuli were unrotated, mean response times of correctly solved 0° trials were submitted to a mixed Linear Model based on maximum likelihood method.

Mean response times decreased with increasing age, $F(4, 175) = 60.15, p < .001$. Adults' ($M = 117\text{ms}$) encoding and comparison time was faster ($p < .001$) than all child age groups (10-year-olds: $M = 2018\text{ms}$; 8-year-olds: $M = 2698\text{ms}$; 6-year-olds: $M = 3064\text{ms}$; 4-year-olds: $M = 2984$). Ten-year-olds were also faster than all younger age groups ($p < .001$), and 8-year-olds were faster than 6-year-olds ($p < .05$) but did not differ from 4-year-olds ($p = .18$). The youngest two age groups did not differ ($p = .68$). Further, participants responded more quickly in congruent trials (when the stimulus on the table appeared falling towards the comparison stimulus) ($M = 2184\text{ms}$) than in incongruent trials ($M = 2589\text{ms}$), $F(1, 175) = 14.24, p < .001$. However, this effect was due to 6- and 8-year-olds who took longer to respond on incongruent 0° trials ($p < .001$) whereas the remaining age groups showed no

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7 difference in response times on congruent and incongruent 0° trials (all $ps > .18$), shown by
8 the age group x direction interaction, $F(4, 175) = 6.17, p < .001$ (Figure 2).

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11 **Congruent versus incongruent response times.** The effects of age group (4-, vs. 6-,
12 vs. 8-, vs., 10-, vs. adults), angle (30 vs. 60 vs. 90 vs. 120 vs. 150 vs. 180), and direction
13 (congruent vs. incongruent) on mean response times of trials solved correctly, were examined
14 in a Linear Mixed Model based on maximum likelihood method. For a results overview see
15 Figure 2.
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20 (Figure 2 about here)

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22 Response times decreased with increasing age, $F(4, 1049) = 221.047, p < .001$.
23 Decreases occurred between all adjacent age groups (all $ps < .001$) (adults: $M = 1630$ ms; 10-
24 year-olds: $M = 2244$ ms; 8-year-olds: $M = 2287$ ms) except between 6- ($M = 3256$ ms) and 4-
25 year-olds ($M = 3270$ ms) who did not differ ($p = .87$). Additionally, response times increased
26 with increasing rotation angle, $F(5, 1049) = 9.34, p < .001$. Response times differed between
27 all rotation angle pairs (all $ps < .01$) except between 30°-90°, and 120°-180° ($ps > .06$).
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34 These main effects were qualified by an age x angle interaction, $F(20, 1049) = 2.65, p$
35 $< .001$. To interpret this interaction, we examined which ages showed a linear increase in
36 response times of accurate trials with increasing angles. The best-fitting linear function was
37 calculated by the method-of-least-squares within each age group separately for participants
38 who performed significantly above chance. Response times increased linearly with increasing
39 angle for most age groups: 6-year-olds, $R^2 = .03, F(1, 284) = 9.47, p = .002$; 10-year-olds, R^2
40 $= .06, F(1, 285) = 16.50, p < .001$; and adults, $R^2 = .63, F(1, 286) = 184.17, p < .001$. Both, 4-
41 year-olds and 8-year-olds, however, did not show a significant linear increase in response
42 times with angle: $R^2 = .02, F(1, 89) = .172, p = .19$; $R^2 = .01, F(1, 160) = .02, p = .89$,
43 respectively. The lack of linear increase in 8-year-olds is hard to explain but closer inspection
44 of Figure 2 reveals large variation of response times on individual stimulus orientations.
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Moreover, response times were longer in incongruent directions (when the table potentially fell away from the direction of rotation of the monkey) ($M = 2707\text{ms}$) compared with congruent ones ($M = 2487\text{ms}$), $F(1, 1049) = 21.35, p < .001$. However, this was not the case for all age groups: the age group \times fall direction interaction was significant, $F(4, 1049) = 4.75, p < .001$. Neither 4-year-olds' nor adults' response times differed for fall direction ($ps > .79$). In contrast, all intermediate age groups, 6-, 8-, and 10-year-olds, took longer to respond on incongruent than on congruent trials (all $ps < .04$) (Table 1). There were no further interactions.

Discussion

The current aim was to provide novel insights into the conceptual penetrability of children's mental rotation processes. Two main findings emerged. First, 6-year-old children's but not 4-year-olds' response times for rotated stimuli increased linearly with increasing rotation angle, consistent with previous mental rotation research (Estes, 1998; Frick, Ferrera, & Newcombe, 2013; Frick, et al., 2009; Funk et al., 2005; Kosslyn et al., 1990; Marmor, 1975). This suggests that mental images are quasi-pictorial in format at age 6: children preserve spatial relations in their mental images. Four-year-old children did not show this effect, however fewer than half the children this age group performed above chance. Thus, 4-year-olds might have been guessing and not, in fact, mentally rotating. The drop in accuracy with increasing rotation angle supports this supposition and indicates that the task was too difficult for them. Moreover, the remaining sample, once those who performed below chance were excluded, left only eight 4-year-old children the analysis; even if these children mentally rotated the sample may have lacked power to detect an effect. Although the majority of 8-year-olds performed above chance (14 out of 16), they also did not reveal a linear increase in response times with rotation angle. However, closer inspection of Figure 2 reveals

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7 great variation of response times at different angles and this age group also had a small
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9 sample size ($N = 14$). Thus the sample may have suffered from low power.

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11 The second novel key finding is that 6-, 8-, and 10-year-olds took longer to rotate
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13 stimuli when the direction of rotation of the monkey on the right hand side was incongruent
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15 with the potential direction of fall of the monkey on the left hand side. Thus, between 6 and
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17 10 years of age children's mental [imagery-rotation](#) performance varied with conceptual
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19 information concerning the effect of gravity on the monkey on the left. In contrast, adults'
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21 response times of rotated stimuli did not differ with the congruency of the potential direction
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23 of fall, suggesting no effects of conceptual penetrability on mental rotation.

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25 This pattern of conceptual penetrability is in line with previous research on
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27 interference of motor processes on mental rotation (Frick et al., 2009; Funk et al., 2005).
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29 Taken together, the findings suggest that mental and motor processes become increasingly
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31 differentiated with increasing age. In line with this notion, current findings indicate that 6-
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33 [and 10-year-olds,](#) but not adults,' mental rotation processes are cognitively penetrable.
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35 With increasing age, mental rotation processes not only become increasingly differentiated
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37 from motor processes (Frick et al., 2009; Funk et al., 2005) but also from top-down processes
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39 (current findings). This raises the possibility that mental [imagery-rotation](#) performance in
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41 childhood is supported both by sensorimotor processes and by conceptual processes.

42 [However, it should be noted that the current findings examined kinetic mental rotation.:](#)

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44 [Further research should investigate whether this also extends to visuo-spatial rotation of](#)
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46 [objects \(see e.g., Kosslyn et al., 1998\). Moreover, including a more balanced gender adult](#)
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48 [sample might be preferable since there are well documented advantages for males in mental](#)
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50 [rotation tasks \(Collins & Kimura, 1997; Palermo, Iaria, & Guariglia, 2008; Voyer, Voyer, &](#)
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52 [Bryden, 1995\) that may also elicit differences in cognitive penetrability.](#)

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7 However, the question further arises whether findings reflect top-down influences
8 on mental imagery-rotation performance, or could be explained by bottom-up sensorimotor
9 representations, that is, *representational momentum* (Freyd & Finke, 1984). The typical effect
10 is that the anticipation of a moving stimulus' end position is exaggerated in direction of the
11 stimuli's anticipated motion (Freyd & Finke, 1984). Representational momentum for moving
12 stimuli is already present in 2-year-olds (Perry, Smith, & Hockema, 2008), and the effect is
13 larger in 5-8-year-olds than in adults (Hubbard, Matzenbacher, & Davis, 1999). For static
14 stimuli the effect of representational momentum is equally pronounced in 8-, 10-year-olds
15 and adults (e.g., remembering a photograph of someone walking as further along) (Futterweit
16 & Beilin, 1994). Given that the current findings revealed less of an effect in adults and
17 differences between 10-year-olds and adults, the current data do not fit well with a
18 representational momentum explanation.

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30 However, the finding that 6- and 8-year-olds showed different response times for
31 congruent and incongruent trials under no rotation raises the possibility that their congruency
32 effects for rotated stimuli were a result of decreased attention in incongruent trials away from
33 the comparison stimulus, rather than reflecting top-down influences on mental rotation. If so
34 then we would expect lower accuracy in these trials, which was not the case. Rather, findings
35 suggest that at age 6 children's mental images are depictive, as shown by their linear increase
36 in response times with increasing angle, and their imagery-mental rotation performance is
37 influenced by conceptual factors. Overall, this indicates an early reliance on the perceptual
38 properties of images, with children spontaneously utilising conceptual information to guide
39 their mental imagery. This finding adds to earlier work by Estes (1998), who reported that by
40 age 6, children were similar to adults in demonstrating conscious awareness of the process of
41 imaging the rotation path of a visual image. Four-year-olds, by contrast, were poorer at
42 describing the mental process of rotation, thus indicating less metacognitive awareness in the
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process of mental rotation. An insight into one’s own mental states may be necessary in order for mental imagery performance to be conceptually penetrated.

In sum, children’s mental imagery-rotation performance can be penetrated by top-down knowledge and this effect decreases with age. The developmental approach taken here provides novel insights into the emergence of the effects of top-down knowledge on imagery mental rotation performance and the depictive nature of mental images.

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Table 1.

Mean accuracy and response times (ms) of accurate trials from participants who performed significantly ($p < .05$) above chance (standard deviation in parenthesis) as a function of rotation direction (excluding 0°).

		4-year-olds	6-year-olds	8-year-olds	10-year-olds	Adults
Congruent	Accuracy	.71	.81	.91	.97	.96
		(.16)	(.20)	(.20)	(.05)	(.06)
	Response	3238	3095	2303	2169	1622
	Times	(667)	(952)	(496)	(618)	(511)
Incongruent	Accuracy	.66	.83	.91	.97	.95
		(.14)	(.16)	(.14)	(.05)	(.05)
	Response	3283	3418	2874	2319	1634
	Times	(889)	(1040)	(937)	(597)	(566)

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Stimuli pairs examples (from top left clockwise): Incongruent direction, both monkeys hold their left arms up, the monkey on the right is rotated 30°: Incongruent-Left-Left_30, Congruent-Left-Left_30, Incongruent-Left-Right_30, Congruent-Left-Right_30

Figure 2. Mean response times and standard errors as a function of rotation angle, fall direction (congruent vs. incongruent) and age group.

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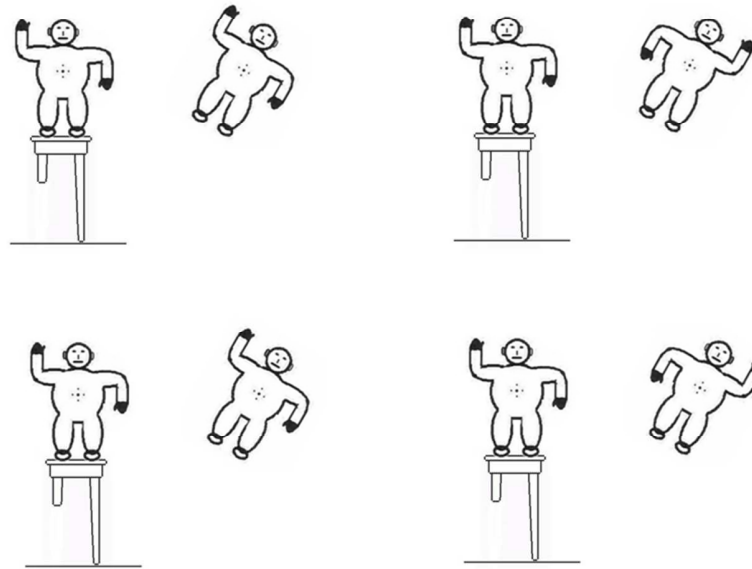


Figure 1. Stimuli pairs examples (from top left clockwise): Incongruent direction, both monkeys hold their left arms up, the monkey on the right is rotated 30°: Incongruent-Left-Left_30, Congruent-Left-Left_30, Incongruent-Left-Right_30, Congruent-Left-Right_30

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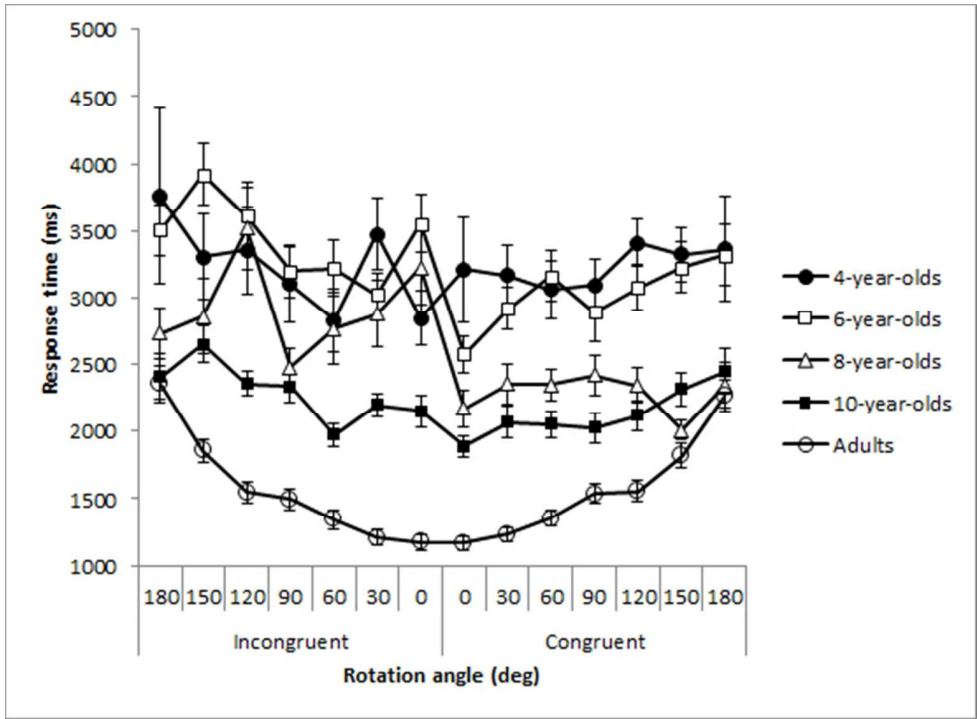


Figure 2. Mean response times and standard errors as a function of rotation angle, fall direction (congruent vs. incongruent) and age group.

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