

“That’s a grown up!” Children’s development of the concept of age

Kosta Boskovic & David Barner
University of California, San Diego



UC San Diego

kboskovic@ucsd.edu

BACKGROUND

- As we age, our minds, bodies, and behaviors change, making age an important social cue
- Unlike cases like gender and race¹⁻¹¹, little is known about how children reason about age
- In a recent study¹², we found that preschoolers can identify who is a “grown up” at 3 years old and who is “older” at 4 years old, but the nature of this early knowledge and how it might guide children’s predictions about others remain unclear

CURRENT STUDIES

- **Study 1:** Do young children represent age chronologically or is their understanding limited to categorizing people into different social groups? (e.g., “baby”, “adult”, etc.)
- **Study 2:** Do children make predictions about others’ biological, behavioral, and social traits based on age?

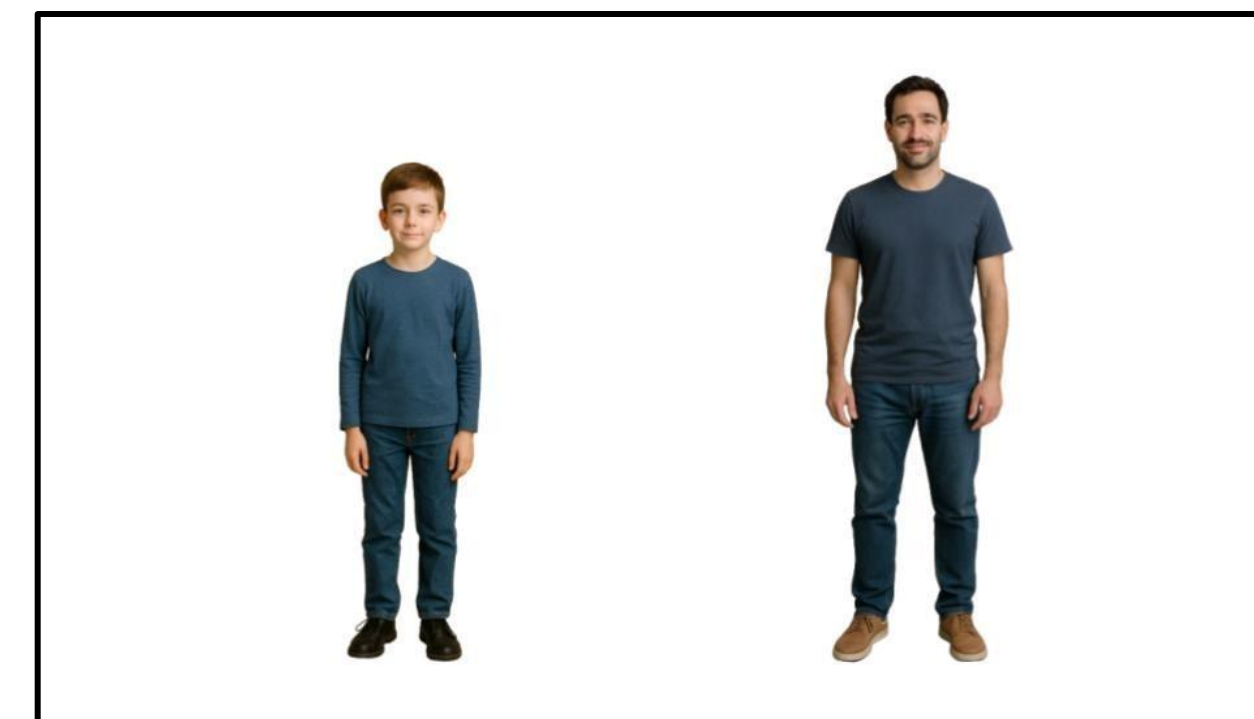
Study 1: Are children’s early representations of age categorical or chronological?

Methods

Participants: 103 3- to 4-year-old children ($M_{age} = 4;0$)

Label Comprehension Task

Children were asked to identify the referent of the age labels “baby”, “child”, “boy”, “girl”, “grown up”, “lady”, and “man”



“One of these is a child and one of these is a grown up. Who is the grown up?”

Children were also screened for their understanding of the word “next”, which did not relate to performance on the other tasks

Chronological Ordering Task:

Children were shown a figure and asked which of two other age groups the person will be next

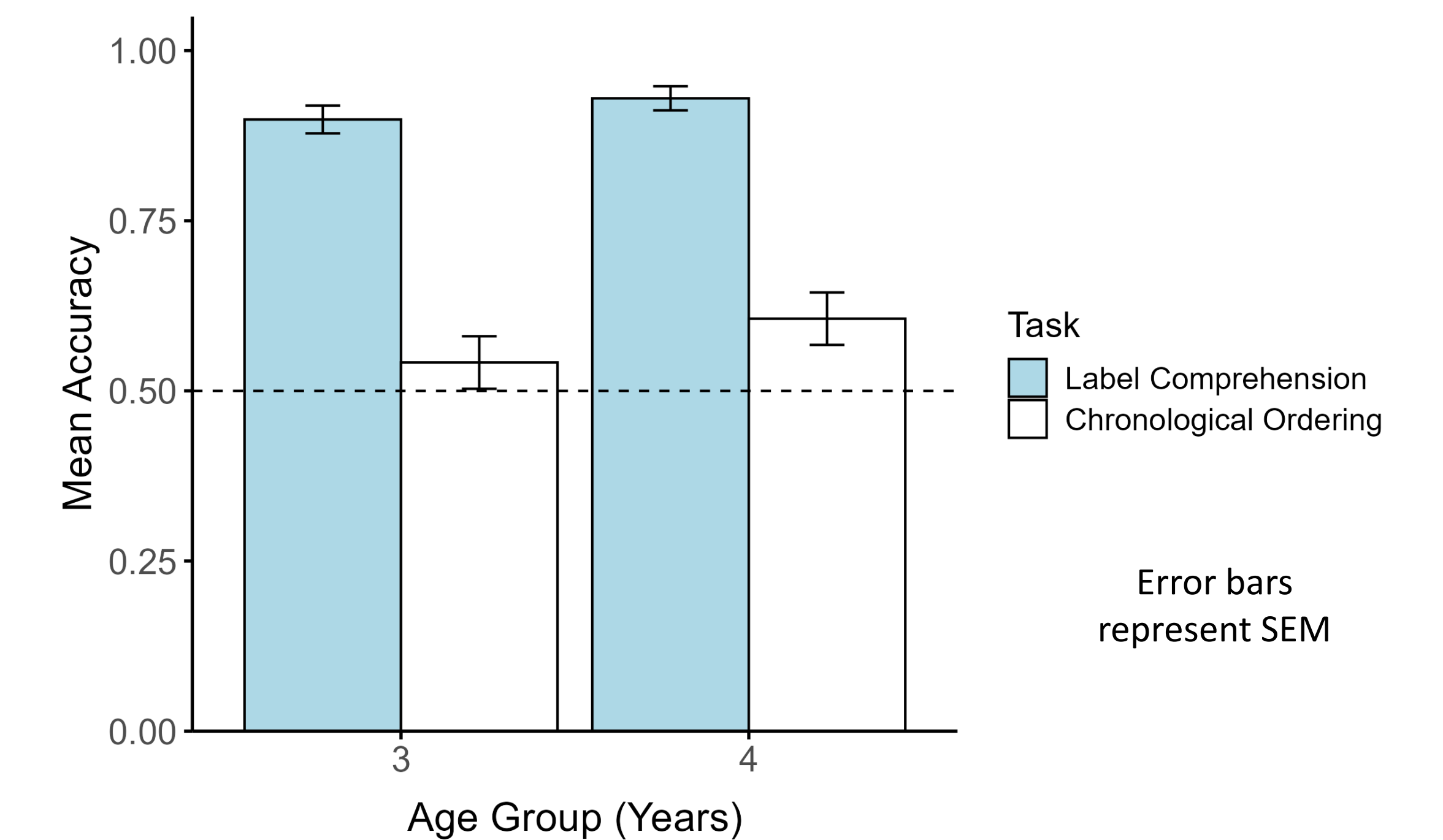


“Look, it’s a girl. What will they be next, a lady or a baby?”

Young children form age group categories and map them onto labels without yet understanding the chronological process of aging

Results

Children performed better on the Label Comprehension Task ($M = 0.92$, $SD = 0.14$) than the Chronological Ordering Task ($M = 0.58$, $SD = 0.28$)



Study 2: Do children make predictions about people based on their age?

Methods

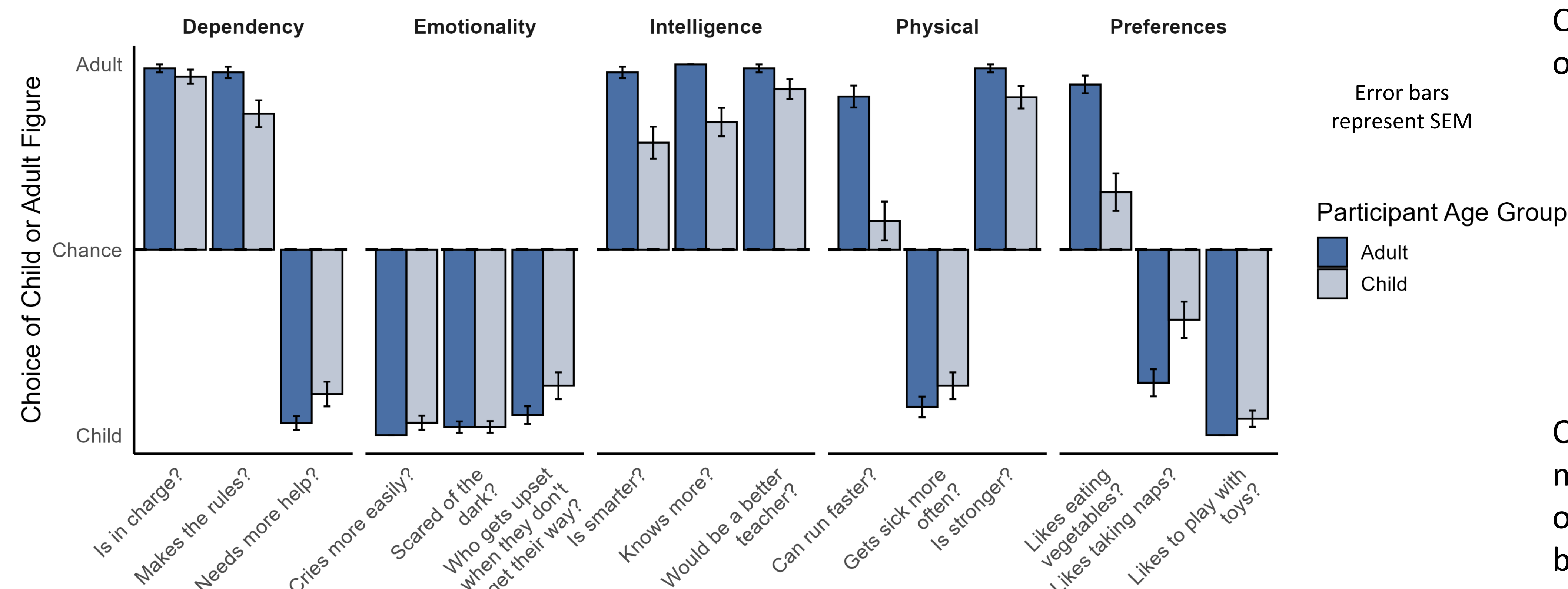
Participants: 92 adults and 90 4- to 6-year-old children ($M_{age} = 5;5$)

Task: Participants were shown pairs of figures of an adult and a child and asked questions assessing their understanding of how the following traits change with age:

1. Cognitive ability
2. Physical ability
3. Emotionality
4. Dependency
5. Preferences



Results



Children made typical adult choices for all but one question (“Who runs faster?”)

Children predict biological, behavioral, and social traits based on perceived age as early as age 4

Open question: are these inferences made based on a continuous measure of age or a categorical distinction between adults and children?