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Oscillatory Electroencephalographic Patterns of Arithmetic Problem Solving in Fourth Graders

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Oscillatory electroencephalographic (EEG) patterns associated with arithmetic solution strategies have been found in numerous studies with adults. Fact retrieval is associated with left-hemispheric theta ERS (event-related synchronization), whereas procedural strategies are accompanied by bilateral alpha ERD (event-related desynchronization). It is currently not clear if these findings generalize to children.

Our study assessed ERD/ERS correlates of 31 children in fourth grade during arithmetic problem solving. They solved multiplication and subtraction problems with either fact retrieval or a procedure.

We found similar strategy-related patterns to those reported in studies with adults. Retrieval problems elicited stronger left-hemispheric theta ERS and weaker alpha ERD as compared to procedural problems. Although there were no behavioral differences, we observed operation-specific neurophysiological patterns between multiplications and subtractions within retrieval problems. This finding could indicate that retrieval of multiplication and subtraction facts are distinct processes, and/or that multiplications are more frequently retrieved than subtractions in this age group.

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