Preschoolers' Mind-Related Comments: Stepping Stones to Early Theory of Mind

Gracee Fyfe
Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne

Samantha Anderson
Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne

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Recommended Citation
http://opus.ipfw.edu/stu_symp2015/24
Introduction

Variations in maternal parenting characteristics have been studied extensively in relation to children's acquisition of theory of mind (ToM; e.g., Meins et al., 2002; Ruffman, Perner & Parkin, 1999), the understanding that the behaviors of self and others are governed by internal mental processes (i.e., beliefs, desires, intentions, and emotions; Wellman, Phillips & Rodriguez, 2000). One line of research has focused on the role of maternal mind-mindedness (MM), or the tendency to treat one's child as a unique entity comprised of independent mental processes (Meins & Fernyhough, 1999; Meins et al., 2002, 2003). The MM construct has been operationalized in terms of a mother's use of appropriate mind-related comments in reference to her child's mental processes (e.g., intentions, memories, thoughts and desires) during parent-child interactions (Meins et al., 2002, 2003).

However, research on children's reciprocal mind-related comments during father-child and mother-child problem-solving has received little attention. In addition, little is known about children's mind-related comments during problem-solving in relation to their concurrent ToM performance.

Hypothesis: Mothers and fathers who are more mind-minded would have children who provide a higher frequency of their own mind-related comments and, in turn, would demonstrate higher levels of ToM.

Methods

Procedures: Seventy-five parents (38 fathers, 37 mothers) and their four-year-olds participated. Each parent interacted with his/her child on a collaborative problem-solving task. Interactions were video-recorded and parents' and children's comments were transcribed and coded. Children's understanding of ToM was also assessed.

Mind-Mindedness Interview: The MMI was administered to assess each parent's tendency to describe his/her child in terms of mental attributes versus physical or behavioral characteristics (Meins et al., 1998).

"Can you describe [child] for me?"

Parents' Autonomy Promoting Comments: The parent's comment encourages the child to take responsibility for figuring out the next step.

"How do you want to start this?"

Children's Mind-Related Comments: The child's comments were in reference to their own mental processes, to their parent's mental processes, or to their own mental state.

"I think I have an idea"

"I like your idea, Dad"

"I'm excited"

Theory of Mind: Object transfer false belief task (Hughes & Ensor, 2006). The task involved two well-known characters (Big Bird and Ernie) from Sesame Street. Ernie had a basket in front of him and Big Bird had a box. Ernie placed a miniature rubber duck in his basket and then went for a walk. While Ernie was gone, Big Bird played a trick on Ernie, and took the rubber duck from Ernie's basket and transferred it to his (Big Bird's) box. Children were asked:

"Where will Ernie look for his duck?" and "Why will Ernie look there?" as well as a control question ("Where did Ernie put the rubber ducky first of all?")

Results

Correlational Analyses

Positive correlations were found among parental MMI, parents' autonomy-promoting comments, children's mind-related comments, and children's Theory of Mind scores (See table 1). Given the significant relations, a serial mediation analysis was performed.

Serial Mediation Analysis

Parents' MMI scores indirectly influenced children's ToM performance through its effect on parents' autonomy-promoting comments and their children's online mind-related comments, in serial (i.e., X → M1 → M2 → Y). As can be seen in Figure 1, higher MMI scores predicted more autonomy-promoting comments. More autonomy-promoting comments provided by parents predicted more mind-related comments provided by children. More mind-related comments provided by children, in turn, predicted higher ToM performance. A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval was entirely above zero (0.0580 to 1.0176).

Conclusion

The proposed serial mediation model received empirical confirmation. Parents with a greater tendency to consider their children's mental processes are more likely to scaffold those processes through autonomy-supportive comments. Their children, in turn, demonstrate better mind-reading skills. Such skills are important given their link to individual differences in children's ability to form and maintain friendships (Keenan, 2003; Lalonde & Chandler, 1995). Future research is needed to gain a better understanding of the relationship between parental mind-mindedness and potential precursors to children's mind-reading skills, beginning perhaps, as early as infancy or toddlerhood. The present findings may have important implications for intervention techniques designed to foster early social adaptation skills.