Personal Distress Mediates the Relationship between Adult Attachment and Empathy

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Autonomy-Supportive Comments During Parent-Child Interactions and Early Theory of Mind Development
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Abstract

Autonomy-supportive comments were explored in relation to scaffolding effectiveness and theory of mind. The results of a mediation analysis revealed that scaffolding effectiveness mediated the relationship between: children's frequency of parents' autonomy supportive comments and children's theory of mind performance.

Introduction

Children's social interactions with those who are more knowledgeable or skilled may foster cognitive development (Conner & Cross, 2003). Conner, Knight, & Cross (1997) hypothesized that scaffolding (or scaffolding) is most effective when it occurs within the child's zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD refers to the distance between what the child is capable of accomplishing independently and what the child is able to accomplish with the assistance of someone more knowledgeable. Individual differences, however, have been reported in parents' scaffolding effectiveness, and the reasons for the variations are not well understood. The purpose of the present research was to explore differences in the frequency of parents' autonomy supportive (i.e. controlling) comments scaffolding effectiveness and children's theory of mind. It was hypothesized that individual differences in parents' ability to effectively scaffold their children would account for the relationship between the type of comments provided and their children's theory of mind. It was proposed that when parents consider their children's mental processes (that is, when they provide more autonomy-supportive comments and engage in more autonomy interactions), they may, in turn, foster early perspective-taking skills in their children.

Methods

Participants
Sixty-four parents and their four-year-old participated

Procedures
Each parent completed demographic measures and participated in a collaborative problem-solving task with their child. Children's theory of mind was assessed using a false belief task. Parent-child interactions during the problem-solving task were video-recorded and parents' comments were transcribed. Interactions were coded for (a) the content of parents' comments (autonomy supportive, directive, or controlling) and for (b) levels of scaffolding effectiveness (parent-child interaction alignment).

Results

Critical analyses are presented in Table 1. The results of mediation analysis revealed that parents' autonomy supportive comments predicted high levels of parental scaffolding effectiveness which, in turn, predicted children's higher theory of mind performance (β = .21, F(2,60) = 7.50, p = .001, 95% CI [.150 to .5-50]). (See Fig. 1). By contrast, more control comments predicted low effectiveness scaffolding and, in turn, lower theory of mind (β = .21, F(2,60) = 1.10, p = .331, 95% CI [.150 to .5-400]). (See Fig. 2).

Conclusions
Parents who provide more autonomy-supportive (and fewer controlling) comments appear to be more attuned to their children's mental processes during problem-solving. That is, they appear to scaffold their children's mental processes more effectively. In addition, parents' ability to effectively scaffold their preschoolers' mental processes predicts their child's ability to consider the mental processes of others. Parents who render a higher frequency of controlling comments appear to be less effective at using feedback from their children's performance to tailor their interventions appropriately. Their children, in turn, demonstrate lower perspective-taking skills, as demonstrated by their poorer false belief performance. The present findings contribute to our understanding of individual differences in parents' ability to effectively scaffold their children during problem-solving. These findings may have important practical implications given that the quality of early parent-child interactions may play an important role in children's early cognitive development and perspective-taking skills.

References


Table 1. Correlations among parents' comments during problem-solving, scaffolding effectiveness and children's theory of mind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Scaffolding</th>
<th>False Belief</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents' Comments</td>
<td>Autonomy-Supportive</td>
<td>.38**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderate Support/Control</td>
<td>-.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaffolding</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1 Mediation Analysis: Parent autonomy comments as IV

Fig. 2 Mediation Analysis: Parent control comments as IV