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Maternal behaviors in toddlerhood as predictors of children's private speech in preschool



Kimberly L. Day^{a,b}, Cynthia L. Smith^{b,*}

^a Department of Psychology, College of Health, University of West Florida, Pensacola, FL 32514, USA

^b Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061, USA

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ABSTRACT

Private speech is an important strategy reflecting children's self-regulation, and thus understanding how parenting may support private speech can inform intervention work on improving self-regulation. The current study longitudinally investigated how sensitive parenting and directive parenting in toddlerhood interacted to predict preschoolers' private speech in an emotion-eliciting task. In toddlerhood, maternal parenting behaviors were observed during two freeplay sessions. Preschoolers' social and private speech were transcribed and coded during a frustration task. Whereas parenting did not relate to other forms of private speech, preschoolers' facilitative task-relevant private speech was predicted by the interaction of mothers' sensitive and directive behaviors. When sensitivity was high, parents who were less directive had children who used more facilitative task-relevant private speech. These findings highlight that children's regulation may be supported through the combination of high sensitivity and low directiveness when parents and children are engaged in unstructured play together.

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Introduction

Children's ability to self-regulate is related to many positive adaptive developmental outcomes (Drake, Belsky, & Fearon, 2014; Ursache, Blair, & Raver, 2012; Valiente et al., 2006). One strategy for

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 540 231 7012.

E-mail address: smithcl@vt.edu (C.L. Smith).

children's self-regulation is their use of private speech, which is speech directed to the self (Winsler, 2009). Private speech is seen as a strategy of cognitive self-regulation because children can use it to organize their behavior, internalize new information by repeating it aloud, and focus on what is most important during a task. These behavioral guides are also relevant to children's self-regulation of emotion, and as such private speech has also been found to relate to emotion self-regulation (Day & Smith, 2013, 2014). The emotional aspect of private speech has been described as a window to observe children's self-regulation through their externalization of their emotions included in their private speech (Winsler, Carlton, & Barry, 2000).

Categories of private speech, specifically inaudible muttering (whispering and other speech that appear to be words but are difficult to understand) and task-relevant private speech (speech related to the immediate task), have been associated with better regulation (Berk & Spuhl, 1995; Manning, White, & Daugherty, 1994; Winsler, de León, Wallace, Carlton, & Willson-Quayle, 2003; Winsler, Diaz, & Montero, 1997; Winsler, Ducenne, & Koury, 2011). However, vocalizations (sounds that do not appear to be words), task-irrelevant private speech (speech unrelated to the task), and negatively valenced task-relevant private speech (speech related to the task but focused on task difficulty) are associated with poorer regulation (Berk & Spuhl, 1995; Manning et al., 1994; Winsler et al., 2003, 1997, 2011).

Whereas this research has focused on private speech and its association with self-regulation in general, there has been limited research that has investigated private speech in regard to how it is associated with emotional self-regulation. Previous research has found that private speech moderated associations between observed emotion regulation strategies and anger and sadness during a frustration task (Day & Smith, 2013) and that private speech moderated the association between reported effortful control and aggression (Day & Smith, 2014). Furthermore, other researchers have theorized and found that private speech is associated with motivation during challenging tasks (Atencio & Montero, 2009; Chiu & Alexander, 2000; Sawyer, 2017). However, although these studies found that private speech was an important factor in emotional self-regulation, they neglected to include the important aspect of socialization and how it may be associated with private speech usage.

By interacting with mothers, children learn important aspects of self-regulation, typically adopting their mothers' standards for how to behave and work with others (Bugental & Goodnow, 1998). In toddlerhood, children's regulation is beginning to shift from more external regulation by others to more internal self-regulation (Kopp, 1982). Many researchers have found that sensitive parenting was related to better self-regulation (e.g., Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Spinrad et al., 2007); however, effective parenting is a result of both responsive parenting behaviors and setting clear expectations (Barber & Xia, 2013). The current study took a dimensional approach to investigating the contribution of two parenting behaviors, sensitivity and directiveness observed during unstructured play, to children's later private speech. Previous research has found that directive controlling behaviors were related to more behavior problems and poorer regulation (e.g., Brophy & Dunn, 2002; Calkins, Smith, Gill, & Johnson, 1998; Smith, Calkins, Keane, Anastopoulos, & Shelton, 2004). However, it is important to examine the context in which the directiveness is taking place because high levels of directive behavior during times when direction is not necessary, such as during unstructured play, may inhibit children's developing self-regulation (Kopp, 1982; Kwon, Bingham, Lewsader, Jeon, & Elicker, 2013). As reviewed by Ginsburg, Committee on Communications, and Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health (2007), play is a very important aspect of child development and allows children to be creative and develop new abilities. Less time for child-directed unstructured play is also associated with more externalizing behaviors, which may reflect poorer self-regulation (Veiga, Neto, & Rieffe, 2016). When play is driven by adults in a directive manner, it might not be as beneficial to children because adults may make the rules and lead the interaction.

Private speech research has focused on regulation, with some studies focusing on cognitive regulation and others focusing on emotion regulation. Given that emotional development and cognitive development are integrated (Calkins & Bell, 2010), children likely experience emotion that may be motivating or might be associated with disengagement during both cognitively focused and emotionally focused tasks. For example, joy can be felt when success is expected, anger can be felt when success cannot be achieved as a result of an obstacle, and sadness can be felt when failure is expected (Campos, Barrett, Lamb, Goldsmith, & Sternberg, 1983). In cognitive tasks, more negative verbal

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