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## The Theory of Mind as a mental mechanism of communicative success in preschool children

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### Abstract

This paper shows the results of experimental research into the mental basis of children's communication from the point of coordinated activity between its members. A theory of mind (ToM) represents a mechanism of social cognition that provides communicative success between partners through understanding each partner's mentality. The following aspects of communicative success were selected for estimation: understanding of communication partner's mentality, success in constructing narratives and understanding of a sequence of events in another partner's retelling. The participants of the research were 50 children aged 4 and 6 years. The data showed the coordination between ToM development and selected communication aspects. Children of different age groups demonstrated specific skills in understanding their communication partner's mental phenomenon depending on the context of communication tasks. We obtained arguments for the statement that the success in realizing the functions of an agent and a recipient is based on understanding one's own mental mind and that of the Other. Also it provides coordination to both partners in the communication process.

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*Key words:* theory of mind; social cognition; children communication; communication partner; communicative success

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### 1. Introduction

Successful cooperation in society suggests that communication partners understand to some extent each other's mental world, the partner's mental suggestions about a situation and the object of communication, his readiness and intent to share information. Learning the cognitive mechanisms that form the basis of a communication process is the key to understanding the principles of social cognition in early childhood.

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The ToM approach demonstrates its productivity in studying social cognition processes and achieving social competence [1]. Some researches point out that the transition to a higher level of ToM development is followed by significant changes in children's social process: narrative capabilities [2],[3], manipulative behavior [4], assessment of social skills by teachers [5], peer popularity [6]. Being the basis for singling out the principles of social communications, ToM makes it possible to analyze and predict success in everyday communication.

This work is based on the hypothesis that the formation of different aspects for successful communication is connected to ToM development (understanding one's own mental mind and that of the Other). Communicative success acts as a condition for achieving communication purposes that is determined with a possibility to understand one's own mental mind and that of the Others and also to mark subjective characteristics which are to coordinate one's behavior in accordance with one's communication role.

## 2. Method

The participants of the research were 50 children attending Moscow kindergartens. The children sample was divided into two age groups – 4 and 6 year olds, each group consisting of 25 children. The research included two blocks of methods. Block 1 estimated ToM development and included different types of tasks: understanding of false beliefs, understanding of emotions, intentions, the difference between the animate and the inanimate, mental and physical reasons for an event, a sense of humor. Block 2 was designed to estimate communicative success in preschool children. The following aspects of communicative behavior were pointed: understanding of communication partner's mentality, transmission of messages focused on the recipient's knowledge level (narrative capabilities) and understanding of events according to the Other's description. The author's following methodological tasks were developed and approved to estimate the above values:

- *The Partner choice method* estimated understanding of differences between the mentality of animate and inanimate partners (pseudo partners). A child had to choose a partner in order to solve a communicative task ("Who will not tell the secret to others?"). The following partners were given to choose from: a physical object (a ball), a humanlike partner (a teddy-bear) and another child. At the experimenter's request the children explained their choice demonstrating a variety of mental conditions attributed to each partner and the ability to predict results of their action.

- *The Event Description method* assessed the success of an information agent. A participant receives a story with one missing element (e.g. "A kitten is sitting near a hat" and "The hat is moving; the boys are running away from the hat"). It is necessary to determine causal links and retell the event to the partner depending on his knowledge level. With the absence of an integral literary example, the description appeared to be a productive task. The most important thing here was the question of meaningful novelty for the recipient. The experimenter assessed the narrations on the strength of the following characteristics: informational content (the information was transmitted insufficiently, partially or fully) and a meaningful specification of the text (fragmentary, short, detailed retelling or with the author's additions).

- The method of understanding an event by description estimated the success of an information recipient. After listening to the story a child was asked a number of comprehension questions. They were assessed on the basis of the following characteristics: (insufficient, partial or complete comprehension).

The research procedure was organized in a special cyclic order enabling each child to take part in a communicative task both as an agent and as a recipient (a storyteller and a listener) [7].

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