



Mind-mindedness, parenting stress, and emotional availability in mothers of preschoolers

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ABSTRACT

Negative perceptions about the child and child behavior are implicit in parenting stress, a construct associated with suboptimal parenting and child outcomes. We examined the extent to which individual differences in mothers' mental representations of their children (mind-mindedness) were related to parenting stress and observed parenting behavior. Participants were 86 Australian mothers and their 4-year-olds who were enrolled in a prospective study. Mind-mindedness was coded from mothers' descriptions of their child, mothers completed a self-report measure of parenting stress, and maternal behavior during free-play was videotaped and coded using the Emotional Availability (EA) Scales, Version 3. Mothers who used more mental state words when describing their child reported lower parenting stress and showed less hostility when interacting with their children. Mothers who used more positive mental state descriptors were rated as more sensitive during interaction. The relation between mind-mindedness and negative maternal behavior was indirect, and mediated through parenting stress. Clinical implications of the findings for families and childcare settings are discussed.

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While many experiences with young children are a source of joy and pride to parents, at times children's behavior and the daily tasks of parenthood "can confuse, frustrate or irritate" (Crnic & Low, 2002, p. 243), making parenting a stressful experience. Parenting stress is typically defined in terms of whether parents consciously perceive difficulties in their child, their relationship with their child, and themselves as parents (Abidin, 1995), rather than with reference to actual experience of stressful events. Higher parenting stress has been linked with parent reports of less optimal parenting (e.g., Abidin, 1992; Anthony et al., 2005; Rodriguez & Green, 1997), and child outcomes (Anthony et al., 2005).

Contextual, child, and parent factors contribute to individual differences in perceived parenting stress (Crnic & Low, 2002). Previous research suggests that parental attitudes about the sources of children's behavior are important (Deater-Deckard, 1998; Harrison & Sofronoff, 2002). More stress is reported by parents who (a) perceive their child to be demanding and difficult, and/or (b) perceive themselves to be ineffective caregivers (Crnic & Low, 2002). However, inter-dependence between parent self-report of both their child's behavior and their experience of parenting stress

constrains accurate interpretation of these findings, since parental attributions and expectations regarding the parent-child relationship are implicit in the measurement of parenting stress (Deater-Deckard, 1998). Rather than asking parents directly to rate their child's behavior, we take a somewhat different approach by investigating whether parents' more general mental representations of their children, assessed through analysis of parental discourse about the child, relate to their experience of parenting as stressful.

Specifically, we examined relations between parental mind-mindedness (Meins, 1997a) and parenting stress. Parents who are mind-minded tend to interpret their child's behaviors with reference to the thoughts and emotions that may govern the child's actions. In infancy, mind-mindedness is assessed by evaluating caregivers' tendency to comment appropriately on the infant's putative internal states while engaged in observed interactions with their infants (Meins, Fernyhough, Fradley, & Tuckey, 2001), or from caregivers' attribution of meaning to their infants' utterances when they begin to talk (Meins, 1998). In older children, mind-mindedness is assessed in terms of caregivers' tendency to focus on their children's mental and emotional attributes when given an open-ended invitation to describe the child (Meins, Fernyhough, Russell, & Clark-Carter, 1998). The 'describe your child' measure of mind-mindedness is unique in focusing exclusively on how the parent represents the child, in contrast to other interview-based assessments (e.g., Working Model of the Child Interview; Zeanah, Benoit, Hirshberg, Barton, & Regan, 1994) that additionally include

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parents' representations of themselves in the caregiving role. This measure has the further advantage of being opaque in the sense that the parent is not aware of what the researcher is assessing, or how their responses will be coded, meaning answers are less likely to be influenced by social desirability.

Our first objective was to examine the relation between individual differences in mothers' mental descriptions of their children and concurrent parenting stress. We set out to investigate whether a focus on the mental and emotional life of their child might give a parent greater insight into the child's behavior, thereby making it more comprehensible, meaningful, and predictable, and thus less likely to induce parenting stress. We therefore predicted that mothers with higher mind-mindedness scores would report lower parenting stress.

Our second objective was to investigate how mind-mindedness and parenting stress related to observed parenting behavior. Although there is accumulating evidence that ratings of mind-mindedness derived from observations of infant–mother interaction are related to observed maternal sensitivity (Demers, Bernier, Tarabulsky, & Provost, 2010a; Laranjo, Bernier, & Meins, 2008; Lundy, 2003; Meins, Fernyhough, Arnott, Leekam, & Turner, 2011; Meins et al., 2001), there is as yet limited evidence that mothers' mind-minded descriptions of their children relate to observed parenting behavior. For example, both Meins et al. (1998) and Demers et al. (2010a) reported a positive, but non-significant correlation between mothers' tendency to describe their children with reference to mental characteristics and their observed sensitivity with the child.

One potential reason for these null findings may be the way in which sensitivity has been assessed. The sensitivity assessment used by Demers et al. (2010a) is anchored in an attachment theory based approach of viewing the behavioral responsiveness of the parent to the child's cues as central to sensitivity (van Ijzendoorn, 1995). The same is true of the measure of sensitivity in Meins et al.'s (1998) study that was derived from maternal behavior during a tutoring task (Meins, 1997b). A stronger association might be observed between parents' mind-minded descriptions of their children and sensitivity if sensitivity is defined as encompassing the parent's emotional engagement with the child.

The Emotional Availability (EA) Scales, 3rd edition (Biringen et al., 1998) differ from many interaction measures due to their multidimensional approach and central focus on emotion, as characterized both by the parent's acceptance of a wide range of emotions from the child, and the congruity and appropriateness of the emotional signals the parent communicates (Biringen, 2008). The present study investigated whether parents' mind-minded descriptions of their children would be positively related to their observed sensitivity as assessed using the EA Scales. The broad range of parenting behaviors assessed by the EA Scales also enabled us to investigate in detail how parenting stress relates to observed parenting behavior, a link which remains surprisingly unclear in the extant literature (Crnic, Gaze, & Hoffman, 2005). Importantly, the EA Scales include an assessment of hostility, incorporating directly hostile statements or acts in addition to more subtle "background discontent, impatience and anger" (Biringen, 2008, p. 61), which we postulated may occur in the context of high levels of parenting stress. The EA Scales thus enabled us to investigate whether any relation between parenting stress and parenting behavior was general, or specific to certain aspects of parenting behavior.

Alternatively, the null findings for the relation between mind-minded child descriptions and observed parental sensitivity may indicate that these two factors are indirectly related. Our final objective was thus to investigate possible direct and indirect relations between mind-mindedness and parenting behavior. We predicted that higher mind-mindedness would be associated with lower parenting stress, but also with more optimal emotional

availability (more positive and fewer negative parenting behaviors). We also tested a model to determine whether parenting stress might mediate the link between mind-mindedness and parenting behavior. This model was derived from (a) theoretical assumptions in the parenting stress literature that parental cognitions about the intent of children's behavior are an important contributor to parenting stress (e.g., Deater-Deckard, Smith, Ivy, & Petrill, 2005; Harrison & Sofronoff, 2002), and (b) empirical findings that mind-mindedness is a stable characteristic that predates the birth of the child. Meins et al. (2003) reported a positive association between mothers' tendency to comment appropriately on their infants' internal states at age 6 months and their mental descriptions of their children at 4 years of age. Arnott and Meins (2008) found that parents' ability to describe their future child during the last trimester of pregnancy was positively related to mind-mindedness when interacting with the infant at six months postpartum. In addition, research has shown that mind-mindedness is not determined by mother-centred factors such as socio-economic status (Meins et al., 1998) or psychological well-being (Meins et al., 2011; Pawlby et al., 2010). These findings have led to the proposal that mind-mindedness may be influenced by stable cognitive-behavioral traits in the parent (Meins et al., 2011).

Thus, the mind-minded tendency to interpret the child's behavior as resulting from various potential cognitions or emotions may play an important role in whether parents perceive the child's behavior as difficult or annoying, and the extent to which they experience the parent–child relationship as challenging. Some support for this proposal comes from the results of Demers, Bernier, Tarabulsky, and Provost's (2010b) prospective study that explored the relation between mind-minded descriptions of children and parenting stress. Demers et al. expanded the original mind-mindedness coding system to investigate whether the emotional valence of parents' mental descriptors related to parenting stress. Although they found no association between parents' overall mental descriptors of their children and their reported parenting stress in the first year of life, mothers who tended to describe their infants using positive mental descriptors had previously reported lower levels of parenting stress.

However, contrary to our proposal that parenting stress may mediate the relation between mind-mindedness and parenting behavior, Demers et al. (2010b) argued that lower levels of parenting stress may causally contribute to the construction of more positive and more mind-minded representations of the child. This proposed direction of cause and effect stemmed from the fact that these authors assessed parenting stress at age six months and explored how it related to mind-minded descriptions 12 months later. These findings do not rule out the opposite direction of cause and effect. Indeed, our proposal that parenting stress may mediate any effects of mind-mindedness is more consistent with the findings that mind-mindedness predates the birth of the child (Arnott & Meins, 2008) and appears immune to the impact of general stressors such as low socio-economic status and psychological ill health (Meins et al., 2011; Pawlby et al., 2010), as well as the fact that parental cognitions are implicated in construing parenting as stressful (Deater-Deckard et al., 2005; Harrison & Sofronoff, 2002). In addition, the participants in Demers et al.'s study were predominantly adolescent mothers and the child descriptions were obtained when the children were only 18 months of age (much younger than the 3-year-old sample on which this measure was operationalized; Meins et al., 1998), so the extent to which these findings may generalize to different samples and child age-groups is unclear.

In summary, the present study investigated relations among mind-mindedness, parenting stress, and observed parenting behavior. We hypothesized that (a) mind-minded descriptions of children would be negatively related to parenting stress, and

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