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How are parental reactions to children's emotions linked with Theory of Mind in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder?



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ABSTRACT

Background: Based on the model of 'Parental Socialization of Emotions' (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998), these studies examined the profiles of parental reactions to their children's emotions and the relation between these reactions and their ASD children's ToM abilities. They could help identify protective versus risk factors in their ToM development.

Method: The participants in Study 1 included 29 mothers and 29 fathers of ASD children (26 boys and 3 girls). In Study 2, 39 mothers and 31 fathers and their ASD children participated. In both studies, mothers and fathers independently completed a questionnaire about their reactions to their children's emotions. In Study 2 only, children's ToM abilities were assessed by means of direct measures and a questionnaire completed by parents.

Results: The results indicated that mothers displayed more encouragement and less minimizing responses to their ASD children's negative emotions than fathers. For both maternal and paternal model analysed by stepwise regressions, the results highlighted specific links between each parent's reactions and children's ToM abilities that varied according to mental states. These findings suggested that parental reactions which help the children to understand how they can solve problems are protective factors, while parental reactions which deprive children of an opportunity to explore their feelings are risk factors.

Conclusion: These studies provide new information about how parental reactions to children's emotions could socialise ASD children's ToM abilities better; this could be useful for adapting parental support programmes.

1. Introduction

Parents' reactions to their children's emotions correspond to a type of parental emotion-related socialization behaviours (ERSBs), described by Eisenberg, Cumberland, and Spinrad (1998), that could affect children's emotional development. When parental ERSBs are favourable for the children's emotional and social development, they are considered as being supportive, while when they are not, they are considered as being non-supportive. In typically developing studies (e.g. Eisenberg, Fabes, & Murphy, 1996; Fabes, Poulin, Eisenberg, & Madden-Derdich, 2002; Jones, Eisenberg, Fabes, & MacKinnon, 2002; McElwain, Halberstadt, & Volling, 2007), parental supportive reactions are problem-focused responses, socialization, comforting and encouragement, whereas parental non-supportive reactions are minimizing, distress, discomfort, avoidance and punitive (see Appendix of Supplementary material for more details). These studies suggest that parents who react in a supportive way may foster their child's emotional and social cognition development, notably their Theory of Mind (ToM) abilities. ToM refers to abilities to understand one's own mental states, to take others' perspective

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and to infer other people's mental states (Astington, 1996; Baron-Cohen, 2001; Flavell, 1999). These mental states may be more 'affective', such as emotions and desires, or more 'cognitive', such as beliefs or thinking. This understanding of others' mental states contributes to children's social adjustment by helping them to have harmonious and reciprocal social interactions (Nader-Grosbois, 2011). As children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) show deficits in social interaction and in ToM (Nader-Grosbois & Day, 2011), these studies explored the extent to which parental reactions to children's emotions could be a protective or risk factor for ASD children's ToM abilities.

1.1. ASD children's ToM abilities

Decades of robust empirical results have attested to a major deficit in ToM development in ASD children. Both theoretical models and empirical studies try to explain this deficit (for a review, see Nader-Grosbois & Day, 2011). On the one hand, there are innate models, such as the 'Theory of Mind Hypothesis' (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985) that emphasised a maturation disorder of a specific module 'theory of mind mechanism' (ToMM) allowing ASD children to understand the social human world. On the other hand, there are cognitive models, such as the 'Executive control dysfunction Hypothesis' postulating that the deficit in the executive control system in ASD children impact in their ToM development (Corbett, Constantine, Hendren, Rocke, & Ozonoff, 2009; Ozonoff, Pennington, & Rogers, 1991). However, these conceptions present a major limitation. They fail to take into account the impact of socio-cultural factors (for example, social experiences and interactions) (Astington, 1996; Symons, 2004). Moreover, studies, which have tested these hypotheses, have not used a variety of ToM tasks that would enable both affective and cognitive mental states to be assessed. Based on a developmental approach of ToM from infancy to adolescence, empirical studies have focused on specific characteristics and variability in the sequences of understanding of different mental states (e.g. Hutchins, Prelock, Morris, Benner, LaVigne, & Hoza, 2016; Peterson, Wellman, & Liu, 2005; Steele, Joseph, & Tager-Flusberg, 2003). This approach of ToM has highlighted variability in the development of children's ToM abilities depending on individual characteristics (such as verbal and non verbal developmental age and levels of autistic traits) and family or educational factors (e.g. Matthews, Goldberg, & Lukowsky, 2013).

1.2. Parental reactions to children's emotions and children's ToM abilities

In accordance with the socio-constructivist Vygotskian approach of ToM, which considers that the child elaborates a ToM through repeated social interactions (Astington, 1996), studies have examined the links between parental supportive reactions to TD children's emotions and their understanding of mental states. Denham, Zoller, and Couchoud (1994) showed that mothers' positive responses to their children's emotions are positively related with their children's abilities in ToM-emotions, including the recognition of facial expressions, reference to internal emotional states, and the understanding of causes of emotions. These positive links with children's understanding have not only been found for affective mental states but also for cognitive mental states (Mazzone & Nader-Grosbois, 2016; McElwain et al., 2007). Majority of these studies have been conducted with mothers, but in the continuity of research exploring the differences between mothering and fathering and their influence on children's development (e.g., Belsky, Gilstrap, & Rovine, 1984; Belsky & Volling, 1987; Isley, O'Neil, & Parke, 1996) some of these included also fathers. Gender differences regarding the impact of parental reactions on children's development have been highlighted, notably it was observed that mothers socialize affective mental states, while fathers are likely to better socialize cognitive mental states (Mazzone & Nader-Grosbois, 2016). The family should be conceptualized as a system of interdependent relationship (Belsky, 1981) and therefore it is important to include the fathers in parenting studies. No study has investigated reactions to children's emotions in mothers and fathers of ASD children and their impact on ToM development. However, concerning parental discussion about mental states, it was observed that mothers of ASD children adjust the nature of their talk to suit their children's developmental level or abilities (Bird, Cleave, Curia, & Dunleavy, 2008; Slaughter, Peterson, & Mackintosh, 2007). The study of Slaughter et al. (2007) showed that maternal clarification of affect (emotions and desire) is positively related to ASD children's ToM abilities (perspective-taking task and false belief task), and not, as expected, cognitive clarifications. This result highlights that a narrative strategy, identified as the most consistently significant maternal narrative correlate of TD children's understanding of false belief, might not be the most efficient for ASD children. Moreover, based on parental emotion coaching approach (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996), Wilson, Berg, Zurawski, and Kling (2013) observed that a high level of parental emotion coaching (parents assisting their children in labelling and dealing with negative emotions) can help reduce ASD children's externalizing behaviours. This study emphasised that mothers' and fathers' ERSBs could be protective or risk factors in the development of emotional and social abilities in ASD children.

1.3. Objectives of the present studies

Given the lack of research on ERSBs in parents of ASD children, we have to refer to results obtained with parents of TD children in order to elaborate our hypotheses. The goal of Study 1 was to analyse the profile of maternal and paternal reactions of ASD children and to observe which specific reactions differ between mothers and fathers. As observed in parents of TD children, we expected that mothers would display more SR, such as comforting or encouragement, and fewer NSR, such as punitive or minimizing reactions, than fathers. Study 2 also explored how individual children's characteristics and parental reactions (mothers and fathers independently) to their children's emotions explain ASD children's understanding of affective and cognitive mental states. As suggested by previous studies on parenting, it was expected differentiated effects of maternal reactions and paternal reactions on ASD children's ToM abilities. Moreover, the ToM development in ASD children should vary depending on their chronological and developmental age.

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