



Full length article

Mind-Mindedness of Male and Female Caregivers in Childcare and the Relation to Sensitivity and Attachment: An Exploratory Study



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ABSTRACT

Mind-mindedness refers to the caregiver's ability to be attuned to the child's mental states. Within the parent-child relationship, mind-mindedness relates to parents' sensitive caregiving, and to children's secure attachment. However, the same relations are still unexplored in out-of-home care settings. We investigated the associations between childcare professionals' mind-mindedness, sensitive responsiveness and respect for autonomy, and child-caregiver attachment security. Moreover, we examined whether these relations are influenced by caregivers' and children's gender. Participants were 17 caregiver couples (17 males, 17 females) and 34 three-year-old children (17 boys, 17 girls), recruited in childcare centers. Mind-mindedness toward the boy or the girl (dyadic) or both children (non-dyadic), sensitive responsiveness and respect for autonomy were assessed during a semi-structured play. Attachment security was assessed through observations. Male and female caregivers had equivalent scores of mind-mindedness, sensitive responsiveness, and respect for autonomy. Similarly, children were securely attached to male and female caregivers. Girls' and boys' secure attachment was predicted by caregivers' use of non-dyadic mind-related comments. For girls, but not for boys, the relation was partially mediated by caregivers' respect for autonomy. The results are discussed in terms of their relevance for the quality of child-caregiver relationships, and children's socio-emotional development.

1. Introduction

In modern Western societies infants and young children are increasingly cared for by non-parental caregivers like professional caregivers in formal childcare (Howes & Spieker, 2007; Lamb, 1998). Professional caregivers have the main task to take care, to supervise, to engage in age-appropriate interactions, and to teach basic social skills to children in order to contribute to their socio-emotional development in infancy and early childhood (Belsky et al., 2007; Helmerhorst, Riksen-Walraven, Vermeer, Fukkink, & Tavecchio, 2014). Just as parents, professional caregivers' way to interact with children can have a direct impact on the child-caregiver relationship and, therefore, on the child's socio-emotional development (Goossens & Van IJzendoorn, 1990; Mortensen & Barnett, 2015; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011). For instance, there is compelling evidence that children build attachment relationships with nonparental care providers (Cugmas, 2003; Goossens & Van IJzendoorn, 1990; Howes & Spieker, 2008), and that the security of this relationship is often comparable with the parent-child relationship (Goossens & Van IJzendoorn, 1990;

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Howes & Spieker, 2008).

Research is increasingly oriented toward detecting aspects involved in the quality of the relationship between professional caregivers and young children (e.g., Burchinal & Cryer, 2003; Lisonbee, Mize, Payne, & Granger, 2008). In the present study, we investigated a novel and specific aspect in the relationship between professional caregivers and children: caregivers' mind-mindedness (Meins, 1997). Mind-mindedness refers to the proclivity of caregivers to treat children as individuals with a mind. We examined to what extent female and male caregivers' mind-mindedness is related to their sensitive responsiveness, respect for autonomy, and boys' and girls' attachment security to the caregivers.

1.1. *Mind-mindedness in childcare*

Mind-mindedness is the caregivers' tendency to take the intentional stance toward their children (Meins, 1997, 1999, 2013). It concerns the inclination to comment on the putative internal state of their child (Meins, Fernyhough, Fradley, & Tuckey, 2001), manifesting the proclivity to represent the child's thoughts, desires, and feelings (Meins, 2013). For this reason, mind-mindedness can be conceptualized as an important aspect of the quality of a relation between caregiver and child (Barreto, Fearon, Osório, Meins, & Martins, 2016). As such, mind-mindedness should be distinguished from other caregiver socio-cognitive capacities like mental state language, which refers to the caregivers' propensity to use comments concerning mental states in general (e.g., Bretherton & Beeghly, 1982; Olson, & Astington, 1993; Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2006, 2008).

Parents' level of mind-mindedness can be assessed by observing their attitude to comment, either appropriately or in a non-attuned manner, on infants' putative thoughts and feelings during interactions with them (Meins et al., 2001). A mind-related comment is appropriate when it is a correct interpretation of the child's state of mind, while it is non-attuned when the parent misinterprets the child's current internal state (Meins & Fernyhough, 2010). Parents' use of appropriate and absence of non-attuned mind-related comments during infancy and early childhood has shown to be associated with positive developmental outcomes in children, such as secure attachment (Arnott & Meins, 2007; Lundy, 2003; Meins et al., 2001, 2012), higher levels of social understanding (Laranjo, Bernier, Meins, & Carlson, 2010; Meins, Fernyhough, Arnott, Leekam, & Rosnay, 2013a), adequate self-regulation strategies (Bernier, Carlson, & Whipple, 2010), and fewer behavioral problems (Meins, Centifanti, Fernyhough, & Fishburn, 2013b).

While the relevance of mind-mindedness within the parent-child bond has become more evident, we know little about the importance of caregiver mind-mindedness in early childhood education and care. To our knowledge, only the study of Degotardi and Sweller (2012) explored mind-mindedness descriptions, mind-mindedness talk, sensitivity, and developmental stimulation in a childcare context. In their study of 24 female caregivers during dyadic interactions with 9- to 20-month-olds in childcare, concordance was found between mind-mindedness description and talk, and caregivers' production of mind-mindedness was similar to that of parents in family studies. In addition, Degotardi and Sweller's findings support previous childcare studies showing that caregivers who are able to interpret children's inner states and to use mentalistic language, provide more sensitive care (Manlove, Vazquez, & Vernon-Feagans, 2008), and have a more positive interaction style with children (Frampton, Perlman, & Jenkins, 2009).

Unlike parents, professional caregivers are generally used to interact with children in the context of non-dyadic situations. Caregivers' mind-related comments in the context of childcare should, therefore, be directed not only toward individual children, but also toward more than one child at the same time, or to the group as a whole. Hence, caregivers should correctly perceive and interpret the behavior and emotional signals of both individual children and the group (Degotardi & Davis, 2008; King & La Paro, 2015). Related to this, Ahnert, Pinquart and Lamb (2006) found that children's relationship with caregivers in childcare is associated with caregivers' behaviors toward the group as a whole. Mind-mindedness can, therefore, be a crucial aspect of the relationship between professional caregivers and children, in particular when it reflects the caregiver's ability to "tune in" to more than one child.

1.2. *Mind-mindedness and the role of Caregivers' gender*

At present, the proportion of male caregivers is approximately 3% in early childhood care and education in countries all over the world (OECD, 2012). The field of early education and care is predominantly female (Peeters, Rohrmann, & Emilsen, 2015; Warin & Adrian, 2015). The lack of male role models and the less positive relationships with boys, as compared to girls, of female caregivers in childcare raise questions about the importance of male caregivers in childcare, and about their relevance as attachment figures for children, particularly for boys (Ahnert, 2006; Ahnert et al., 2006; Brody, 2014; Drudy, 2008; De Schipper, Tavecchio, & Van IJzendoorn, 2008; NICHD ECCRN, 1997; Wachs, Gurkas, & Kontos, 2004; Winer & Phillips, 2012). Exploring mind-mindedness in both male and female caregivers may provide a clearer understanding of the role of mind-mindedness as a factor involved in the quality of the relationship between caregivers and young children of both sexes.

To our knowledge, no studies explored differences in mind-mindedness between male and female professional caregivers. Family studies, however, already examined the differences between the paternal and maternal use of mind-related comments (Arnott & Meins, 2007; Lundy, 2003), and possible differences due to child gender (e.g., Laranjo et al., 2010; Meins et al., 2011). Arnott and Meins (2007) found that mothers and fathers did not differ in their use of appropriate mind-related comments to their 6-month-old infants. However, fathers produced more non-appropriate mind-related comments than mothers. Furthermore, fathers', but not mothers', appropriate and non-appropriate mind-related comments were positively related to each other, suggesting that fathers may be less skilled than mothers in reading and understanding infants' internal states (Arnott & Meins, 2007). Lundy (2003) found that mothers produced more mind-related comments about their 6-month-olds' thoughts, knowledge and desires, whereas fathers produced more mind-related comments about problem solving. However, both mothers' and fathers' comments related to

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