



Effects of maternal mentalization-related parenting on toddlers' self-regulation

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 March 2017

Received in revised form 1 February 2018

Accepted 2 February 2018

Keywords:

Mentalization

Self-regulation

Mind-mindedness

Mental state language

Toddlers

ABSTRACT

Little research has examined associations between multiple indicators of parental mentalization and children's regulatory capacities. This study aimed (1) to examine the validity of a latent mentalization-related parenting construct and (2) to examine the relationship between the mentalization-related parenting construct and toddler's self-regulation, controlling for maternal depression, emotion disapproving beliefs, warmth, cumulative demographic risk, and child's gender. Mentalization-related parenting behaviors (MRPBs) included maternal use of mental state words, use of emotion bridging (linking emotions and behaviors in child and others), and representational mind-mindedness. Self-regulation was indicated by toddlers' coping behaviors, effortful control, and delay of gratification. Data were collected for 95 mother-child dyads from low-income families at two time points and included observation of a book share task (Time 1), Early Head Start home visitor assessments of toddlers' coping behaviors (Time 2), parent ratings of toddlers' effortful control (Time 2), and direct assessment of toddlers' delay of gratification (Time 2). Results of confirmatory factor analyses provided evidence for latent mentalization-related parenting (Time 1) and self-regulation (Time 2) constructs. Structural equation models revealed that maternal mentalization-related parenting (Time 1) was related to toddlers' self-regulation 6 months later (Time 2). Maternal depression and emotion disapproving beliefs were negatively related to mentalization-related parenting. The study's findings suggest that toddlers' self-regulatory skills may be supported by maternal efforts to mentalize.

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1. Introduction

Growing up in poverty places children at greater risk for poor mental health outcomes (Reiss, 2013), including poor self-regulation (Evans & Kim, 2013). However, the negative effects of poverty are reduced in resilient children characterized by high levels of self-regulation (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003; Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2009), making the examination of developmental models for self-regulation especially relevant for vulnerable children. Parental¹ practices such as modeling effective self-regulation strategies, demonstrating acceptance of

negative emotions, and scaffolding emotional and motivational states (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Spinrad et al., 2012) have been linked with children's self-regulatory development. While considerable research has focused on these emotional and behavioral dimensions of parenting (Bridgett, Burt, Edwards, & Deater-Deckard, 2015), the link between social-cognitive aspects of parenting and children's self-regulation has been neglected, particularly among parents and very young children. Particularly, toddlerhood presents a developmentally salient period in which to examine relations between social-cognitive aspects of parenting and self-regulation, given that toddlers are beginning to transition from other-dependent regulation to more autonomous self-regulation (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000).

An emerging line of contemporary parenting research emphasizes parental use of mental state words, emotion bridging (e.g., linking emotions with behaviors in child and others), and parents' mind-mindedness in children's optimal social-emotional and social-cognitive development (Bernier & Dozier, 2003; Brophy-Herb et al., 2015; Meins, Fernyhough, Fradley, & Tuckey, 2001; Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2008). This dimension of parenting

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¹ Throughout the paper, the term *maternal* is specifically used to refer to the current study's sample, while we use the term *parental* to refer to mentalization-related behaviors observed in broader population of parents such as fathers or other primary caregivers.

reflects parents' intentional consideration of their children's internal mental states. Mental state words are references to internal states including emotions (e.g. happy, sad), cognitive states (e.g., know, think), and desires (e.g., want, like) (Howe, Rinaldi, & Recchi, 2010). Emotion bridging refers to comments that identify, interpret, and describe the emotional context of behaviors (e.g., "she looks worried because she can't find her mom", Brophy-Herb et al., 2015). Representational mind-mindedness is the maternal tendency to assign mental agency to her child when describing her child (e.g., "she is persistent", "he is inquisitive") (Meins, Fernyhough, Russell, & Clark-Carter, 1998). In short, these behaviors (hereafter referred to as Mentalization-Related Parenting Behaviors; MRPBs²) reflect the parent's intention to envision the child's mental states, to recognize the child's behaviors as motivated by his/her unique and temporary mental states, and to see the world from the child's perspective (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) or to "mentalize" (Slade, 2005).

Theoretically, a mentalizing parent promotes development of mental representations associated with everyday experiences of infants and toddlers, scaffolds the child's attentional orientation toward his/her internal states, and models an understanding of the mind (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, and Target, 2002). To date, much of the existing research has examined these "mentalization-related" social-cognitive aspects of parenting (hereafter referred to as mentalization-related parenting) as they relate to children's attachment security (Meins et al., 2001; Slade, Grienenberger, Bernbach, Levy, & Locker, 2005) and representational capacities, in particular, emotion knowledge (Doan & Wang, 2010), emotion understanding (Kärstad, Wichstrøm, Reinjell, Belsky, & Berg-Nielsen, 2015), emotion talk (Salmon et al., 2013), and theory of mind (Meins & Fernyhough, 1999). Thus, although the role of mentalization-related parenting has been established in children's representation of mental states, its contributions to children's control of mental states and behavioral processes (i.e., self-regulation) remain to be examined.

In addition to theoretical support for the role of maternal mentalization in affect regulation and self-organization (Fonagy, 2004; Fonagy et al., 2002), newly emerging evidence suggests that mothers' mentalization-related parenting promotes behavioral competence in toddlers (Brophy-Herb et al., 2015), preschoolers (Meins, Centifanti, Fernyhough, & Fishburn, 2013), and preadolescents (Hughes, Aldercotte, & Foley, 2017). Additionally, behaviors reflective of mentalization-related parenting likely appear in concert together. For example, in our prior work (Brophy-Herb, Stansbury, Bockneck, & Horodynski, 2012), we have shown that parental behaviors focused on emotions, such as the use of emotion talk and emotional responsiveness, reflect a larger parenting construct in which these varying parenting behaviors work in concert. Similarly, it is highly likely that if a parent is mentalizing, the expressions of her mentalization are manifested in numerous, related behaviors. Hence, empirically validating the co-occurrence of behaviors reflective of mentalization-related parenting is a necessary next step that contributes to the science of parenting and informs parenting programs seeking to build early parenting skills. We first discuss parental mentalization, noting its origins in the attachment literature, followed by dimensions of self-regulation in toddlerhood. Then we address the ways in which mentalization is unique from traditional dimensions of parenting, such as parental sensitivity, followed by how each dimension of self-regulation is associated with MRPBs.

1.1. Mentalization-related parenting: theoretical framework

Recent focus on social-emotional development within an attachment framework has led to the emergence of several social-cognitive parenting constructs, including parental reflective function (Slade, 2005), mind-mindedness (Bernier & Dozier, 2003; Meins et al., 2001), and meta-emotion philosophy (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996), which contribute to attachment security and developmental outcomes (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Gottman et al., 1996; Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, Dolev, Sher & Etzion-Carasso, 2002; Meins et al., 2001; Sharp & Fonagy, 2008; Slade, 2005). Additionally, modern reconceptualization of attachment theory highlights the significant external regulatory role of the parent-child relationship in the child's internalization of regulation of mental states (Schore & Schore, 2008). Secure parent-child attachments facilitate maturation of limbic and autonomic structures responsible for regulation of affect and behavior (Schore, 2001). For instance, compared to insecurely attached infants, securely attached infants use a variety of coping strategies such as self-vocalization and comfort seeking to regulate separation-induced distress while insecure infants adopt fewer regulatory strategies (Riva-Crugnola et al., 2011). However, evidence suggests that attachment security is partly acquired through repeated interactions with a mentalizing caregiver above and beyond parental sensitivity (Meins et al., 2001). For example, parents' mentalization behaviors with infants uniquely contribute to attachment quality even when considering parental sensitivity. Inquiry into the associations between social-cognitive parenting attributes and children's self-regulation has been neglected with the exception of a few studies (Bernier, Carlson, & Whipple, 2010; Brophy-Herb et al., 2012; Feldman, Dollberg, & Nadam, 2011).

1.2. Defining self-regulation

Throughout early childhood, self-regulation emerges from the integration of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional domains of control (Bell & Deater-Deckard, 2007). Effective self-regulation involves interplay of cognitive and emotional processes (e.g., using distraction to reduce frustration) to facilitate execution of goal-directed behavior (Mischel & Ayduk, 2002). In this study, we examine three developmentally salient early regulatory behaviors reflective of behavioral and cognitive self-regulation. Specifically, we examined toddlers' effective coping (behavioral), effortful control (cognitive), and delay of gratification (behavioral).

Coping effectiveness involves toddlers' purposeful utilization of behavioral strategies used to integrate sensory and motor systems and to regulate sensory stimuli and psychophysiological functions (Zeitlin, Williamson, & Szczepanski, 1988). Integration of sensory and motor systems refers to demonstration of coordinated and adaptive coping behaviors in response to specific environmental stressors. For example, adaptive coping behaviors include tolerance of being in a variety of positions, adjusting activity levels according to the situation, maintenance of visual attention to people and objects, and the ability to self-comfort in distress. Effectiveness refers to the extent to which toddlers use appropriate behaviors to regulate sensory information across situations. In addition to behavioral regulation, adaptive coping responses are closely related to emotion-related self-regulation as they involve regulation of attentional, emotional, and behavioral control systems (Eisenberg, Valiente, & Sulik, 2009).

Effortful control refers to "the efficiency of executive attention, including the ability to inhibit a dominant response and/or to activate a subdominant response, to plan, and to detect errors" (Rothbart & Bates, 2006, p. 129). For toddlers, effortful control is predominantly manifested as attentional control (i.e. the ability to shift and focus attention) and inhibitory control, i.e., the ability to inhibit dominant responses and activate subdominant

² Throughout the paper the term mentalization-related parenting or parental mentalization refers to the latent construct, while Mentalization Related Parenting Behaviors (MRPBs) refer to the current study's indicators of parental mentalization.

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