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Parents and toddlers distinguish joke, pretend and literal intentional contexts through communicative and referential cues

Elena Hoicka *

Department of Psychology, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

Abstract

Parents exaggerate communicative cues (Infant-Directed Speech, IDS; smiling; gaze to children) when pretending or joking, but it is not clear why. Additionally, referential cues (gaze, point to objects) remain unexamined in these contexts. Across Action ($N = 25$; 16–20 months) and Verbal ($N = 43$; 20–24 months) studies, parents pretended, joked, and interacted literally with toddlers. Examined was whether parents use the above cues to express positive emotion, grab attention, or for pedagogical purposes. Parents exaggerated IDS, and sometimes smiling, when joking or pretending to express positive emotion. For younger toddlers, parents increased gaze to toddlers and smiling when joking compared to pretend and literal contexts, feasibly to grab attention to scaffold joke understanding. Parents decreased gaze to objects when joking, plausibly to avoid toddlers generalizing jokes' false information, following pedagogy theory. Younger toddlers responded appropriately to parents' cues, highlighting how toddlers could distinguish intentions to joke from other acts. Parents and toddlers treated pretending as literal. In the older group, parents and toddlers did not distinguish contexts, perhaps because older toddlers rely on sophisticated cues, e.g., language, over the low-level cues measured.

Keywords: Joking; Pretending; Cues; Positive emotion; Attention; Pedagogy theory

Understanding the non-literal world, such as pretending and joking, is an essential part of development. Without this ability, we might not try out new ideas, or think of things in new and different ways. However, distinguishing literal from non-literal information may be difficult for toddlers. Toddlers have a limited understanding of artifacts and language, so simply using an object in a wrong or unusual way, or saying something wrong or unusual, may not be enough for toddlers to identify that information was not literal. Of even greater difficulty could be distinguishing different forms of non-literal intentions. While toddlers engage in joking from the first year (Addyman and Addyman, 2013; Hoicka and Akhtar, 2012; Mireault et al., 2012), and pretending in the second year (Bosco et al., 2006; Jackowitz and Watson, 1980), it may be difficult for them to determine which of these two non-literal intentions others are expressing. One goal of the two exploratory studies is to determine whether communicative cues (Infant-Directed Speech, IDS; direct gaze; smiling) and referential cues (gazing or pointing to objects) help toddlers distinguish pretend, joke, and literal contexts during parent–child interactions. In particular, will parents exaggerate or understate these cues in each of these contexts. A further goal is to determine how these cues might help, i.e., by signaling positive emotion, attention grabbing, or pedagogy.

* Correspondence to: Department of Psychology, University of Sheffield, Western Bank, Sheffield S10 2TP, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 0114 222 6510.
E-mail address: e.hoicka@sheffield.ac.uk.

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Past research shows parents use explicit cues to express they are joking and pretending with their toddlers. When parents joke, they use disbelief language; that is, they correct the content of their jokes. For instance, if a parent jokes, ''The ducks say moo'', they often follow this up with a sentence such as, ''Ducks don't say moo!'' or ''What do ducks really say?'' (Hoicka and Butcher, in press; Hoicka et al., 2008). Parents also use a rising linear contour when joking, making the joke sound questionable (Hoicka and Gattis, 2012). When pretending to eat or drink, parents repeat actions (e.g., spoon to mouth), refer to the referent (e.g., cheerios), and make sound effects more often than when really eating and drinking (Lillard et al., 2007; Lillard and Witherington, 2004).

One limitation of explicit cues is children need to attend to and understand disbelief language, question intonation contours, the labels of references, and the meaning behind sound effects to interpret their parents' cues. If toddlers do not yet have enough knowledge to make sense of these cues, a low-level bottom-up approach might serve them better. Even if they have the capacity to understand this information, ensuring children attend to the information is important. Past research shows parents use a variety of subtle cues to distinguish joking or pretending from literal contexts. Parents exaggerate features of IDS, including increased pitch and pitch variation, when joking and pretending versus speaking or acting literally (Hoicka and Gattis, 2012; Lillard et al., 2007; Reissland and Snow, 1996). Parents gaze to their toddler more when pretending, and sometimes smile more (Lillard et al., 2007). Parents smile more when clowning with their 3-to 6-month-olds (Mireault et al., 2012). Toddlers themselves smile while looking for a reaction more often when joking than playing literally (Hoicka and Akhtar, 2012), but smile less and look to the experimenter more when pretending versus acting literally (Rakoczy et al., 2005). However, this research does not tell us *why* parents use these cues when joking and pretending, nor whether parents use these cues to distinguish joking and pretending.

One possibility is that parents increased communicative cues in past studies to express positive emotion. Positive emotion shares several features with IDS (e.g., Banse and Scherer, 1996; Wassink et al., 2007; Fernald and Simon, 1984; Nakata and Trehub, 2004) including increased mean pitch, pitch variation, mean amplitude (loudness), and amplitude variation. IDS may increase emotional rapport between infants and caregivers (Werker and Mcleod, 1989), and infants may prefer IDS because it sounds happy (Singh et al., 2002). Additionally, people increase eye contact when emotionally positive (Lalljee, 1978). Finally, smiling is universally linked to positive emotion, such as happiness, joy, enjoyment, or amusement (Darwin, 1955; Ekman and Rosenberg, 2005). Thus parents may have exaggerated communicative cues when joking or pretending versus acting literally because the control situations were serious, or at minimum less playful (Hoicka and Gattis, 2012; Lillard et al., 2007; Mireault et al., 2012; Reissland and Snow, 1996). If these cues are about positive emotion, then we would expect parents to use these cues to a greater extent when playing literally (such as playing with a toy car as a toy car), pretending or joking, compared to interacting in a serious way with their child.

Hoicka and Gattis (2012) suggested parents used IDS when joking to grab toddlers' attention to scaffold the difficult information inherent to a joke. Therefore a second reason parents might increase the use of communicative cues when joking or pretending could be to grab toddlers' attention. This would be a good strategy as several experiments found infants pay more attention when communicative cues are used. Six-month-olds are more likely to follow gaze to an object when direct gaze or IDS are first used (Senju and Csibra, 2008). Four-month-olds are more likely to attend to a speaker playing IDS versus Adult-Directed Speech (ADS) (Fernald and Kuhl, 1987). Parents use features of IDS to grab toddlers' attention in difficult situations, such as noisy environments (Newman, 2003). Finally, infants better attend to and resolve difficult problems, such as discovering word boundaries and parsing sentences, when spoken in IDS versus ADS (Thiessen et al., 2005).

While communicative cues have been studied in non-literal contexts, referential cues have not. These cues draw attention to the object, e.g., gaze to the object or pointing (Csibra and Gergely, 2006). According to pedagogy theory, both communicative and referential cues are used to express that information is generalizable. If this is the case, we would expect that parents would *decrease* their use of communicative and referential cues when joking and pretending as the information is not literal, and hence not generalizable. Another possibility is that the combination of communicative and referential cues is important to pedagogy, and so we might expect that parents would decrease their communicative-referential cue combinations (where referential cues quickly follow communicative cues) when acting non-literally. However, recent research suggests children learn literal, generalizable information through pretending (Hopkins et al., 2015; Sutherland and Friedman, 2012, 2013; Weisberg and Gopnik, 2013). Therefore it is also possible that parents will treat pretend play as literal, and so not decrease any cues in a pretend situation, but still decrease them in a joke situation.

This highlights a second aspect of non-literal play – that perhaps joking and pretending will be treated differently by parents. When parents joke with their toddlers, they show more disbelief and less belief through their language and actions than when they pretend (Hoicka and Butcher, in press). Furthermore, using a normativity paradigm, when a first experimenter pretends with 2-year-olds, toddlers are very normative about how a second experimenter plays, and expects them to play in the same way. However, when a first experimenter jokes with 2-year-olds, toddlers are very open, and allow a second experimenter to play however she likes (Hoicka and Martin, in press). This suggests toddlers see pretending as a time for following rules, whereas they see joking as a time to be open-minded and try out different things. We may then expect parents to treat pretending and joking differently, even when the cues are subtle. Again, as

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