



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Child Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jecp



Self-awareness moderates the relation between maternal mental state language about desires and children's mental state vocabulary



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 January 2015

Revised 22 November 2015

Available online 23 December 2015

Keywords:

Intervention

Mental state talk

Social understanding

Toddlers

Mental state vocabulary

Desire understanding

ABSTRACT

In this intervention study, we tested the differential effect of talking about children's desires versus talking about others' thoughts and knowledge on children's acquisition of mental state vocabulary for children who did and did not have mirror self-recognition. In a sample of 96 mother–toddler dyads, each mother was randomly assigned a specially constructed, interactive lift-the-flap book to read to her child three times a week for 4 weeks. In the child desire condition the story elicited comments regarding the child's desires, and in the cognitive condition the story elicited the mother's comments about her own thoughts and knowledge while reading the story. Children's mirror self-recognition and mental state vocabulary were assessed at pre- and post-test. Children in the condition that focused on the child's desires showed a significantly greater increase in their mental state vocabulary; however, this effect was moderated by their levels of self-awareness, with children benefitting more from the intervention if they also showed self-recognition at pre-test. We argue that the combination of specific types of maternal talk and children's prior insights facilitates gains in children's mental state vocabulary.

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Introduction

There is now ample evidence supporting direct longitudinal relations between parents' use of mental state language and children's later mental state understanding, as indexed on a variety of tasks tapping their understanding of belief, knowledge, desires, and emotions (e.g., Adrián, Clemente, & Villanueva, 2007; Ensor & Hughes, 2008; Hughes, Marks, Ensor, & Lecce, 2010; Meins et al., 2003; Ruffman, Slade, & Crowe, 2002; Slaughter, Peterson, & Mackintosh, 2007). However, the converging evidence linking specific types of caregiver mental state language and social understanding in young children, in particular, has been derived largely from correlational studies. The current study has advanced these findings by employing an intervention design to test for a causal link between specific types of parent mental state talk and children's later mental state vocabulary.

There are several explanations for why parental mental state language might facilitate children's social understanding (Astington & Baird, 2005; de Rosnay & Hughes, 2006; Ruffman et al., 2002). Conversations about the mind that focus on concepts such as "thinking," "knowing," and "wanting" place children in a situation where they can potentially reflect on the workings of the mind (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995; Olson, Astington, & Harris, 1988), helping to make implicit knowledge explicit (Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2006) and focusing attention on different points of view or perspectives (Harris, 1999). Conversational experiences that are rich in mental state language use and varied in their referents also allow children to learn the underlying mental state concepts and to link these concepts to a broad set of seemingly unrelated behaviors. For example, parents' use of particular terms such as *want* to describe a person who reaches for a biscuit, or who smiles when he or she receives a present, helps to highlight that mental state terms do not refer to specific behaviors (because the behaviors described are so different) but instead refer to the common underlying internal state of desire (Ruffman, 2014).

Whereas earlier studies mainly established a relation between *general* maternal mental state talk and children's subsequent social understanding, recent efforts have focused more closely on specific categories and referents of maternal mental state language and the match between the level of maternal talk and the level of children's development. Taumoepeau and Ruffman (2006) argued that talk about desires (e.g., "want," "like") may be a good starting point for children to learn about mental states because desires are salient internal experiences and much of early life involves attempts to fulfill desires, particularly in comparison with cognitive states (Pascual, Aguado, Sotillo, & Masdeu, 2008). To this end, Taumoepeau and Ruffman (2006) found that maternal talk about children's desires at 15 months of age (e.g., "You want the lollypop?") was the most consistent correlate of children's mental state vocabulary and emotion situation knowledge 9 months later rather than maternal talk about others' desires or talk about thoughts and knowledge (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995; Symons, Fossum, & Collins, 2006; Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2008).

In contrast, parental cognitive talk (e.g., "I think that's a dog") becomes important for older children (Adrián et al., 2007; Ruffman et al., 2002; Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2008), especially cognitive talk that refers to the explanatory, causal, and contrastive nature of mental states (Slaughter et al., 2007) and that is semantically connected to children's utterances (Ensor & Hughes, 2008). The consistent finding over all studies is that during the early preschool period, mothers change their pattern of talk—first talking more about their children's desires and subsequently talking more about other people's cognitions. Such findings demonstrate the process of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), consistent with the notion that children benefit from different kinds of talk at different ages.

Training studies

Although correlational studies demonstrated an important effect of talk about the mind on children's theory of mind (ToM), it is impossible to state with certainty that a particular variable (e.g., a mother's talk about her child's desires) plays a causal role in facilitating children's social understanding because the potential role of confounding variables is not measured. Growing evidence from training studies with preschoolers, school-aged children, and deaf children has demonstrated a positive effect in mental state understanding when children are exposed to mental state language. For

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