Using Maternal Mental State Language to Predict Toddlers’ Outcomes: The Different Influences of Talking About Desires and Thoughts

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**Introduction**

There has been considerable research on mothers’ use of mental state language and preschoolers’ social and emotional outcomes, but less research on this influence with younger children.

Mental state language is not a unified concept, but refers to discussions of a range of states including desiring, thinking, and knowing. Even for young children, these different mental state references may be associated with different outcomes depending on their referential context and relevance to the child’s activity.

The purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between different types of maternal mental state language and social and emotional outcomes in toddlers, including toddlers’ prosocial behavior and self-efficacy.

The study was also designed to investigate differences in prosocial responding in different conditions. Research by Warneken and Tomasello (2006) has shown that toddlers will respond prosocially to an unfamiliar adult showing neutral emotion in need of assistance. We replicated the findings of Warneken and Tomasello (2006) that 18-month-olds showing neutral emotion in need of assistance.

**Method**

**Participants**

- 36 18- to 20-month-olds and their mothers (17 males)

**Maternal Mental State Language**

Mothers’ use of mental state language was assessed during a book reading task. The two wordless books used in this task contained images of children displaying specific emotions or mental states along with images suggesting the cause of those states. All maternal talk was reliably coded for a variety of mental state language references to the characters’ states, the mother’s states, and her child’s states. For the purposes of this analysis we are only reporting data on maternal talk about her child’s desires and thoughts/knowledge.

**Prosocial Behavior**

In two neutral trials, the experimenter performed a helping task while expressing neutral/confused affect (straight mouth, furrowed brow, and non-word vocalizations such as “hmm”). In two sad trials, the experimenter performed a helping task while expressing sadness (down-turned mouth, furrowed brow, and non-word vocalizations such as “aww”). Each trial lasted for 30 seconds.

Prosocial behavior was coded on a 5-point scale with a score of 1 indicating no attention to the experimenter and a 5 indicating that the child helped the experimenter reach her goal (instrumentally helped). Children’s prosocial scores were summed for neutral and sad trials separately.

**Results**

We replicated the findings of Warneken and Tomasello (2006) that 18-month-olds instrumentally helped the experimenter without external reward. Specifically, children helped in 36% of the trials.

A paired-sample t-test examined differences in prosocial behavior in the sad and neutral conditions. There were no significant differences in the rate of prosocial behavior in the sad and neutral conditions (t(35) = -0.60, p = ns).

Correlational analyses indicate that mothers’ talk about their children’s desires positively related to their children’s self-efficacy, but mothers’ talk about children’s thinking/knowing showed the opposite pattern. In addition, maternal talk about thinking/knowing had negative associations with children’s prosocial behavior in both affect conditions (Table 2).

**Conclusions**

These findings suggest that different types of mental state references by mothers are not comparably associated with young children’s social and emotional outcomes. Specifically, mothers’ talk about thinking and knowing negatively related to their children’s prosocial behavior in multiple conditions and their self-efficacy. In contrast, mothers’ talk about desires positively related to their children’s self-efficacy.

We think that the differences found may be due to the ways in which mothers used these types of mental state words with their toddlers. Mothers labeling desires may be more accurate in their references to their children’s mental states than mothers labeling thinking/knowing. Although this cannot be coded from the present study, the authors have observed that mothers using desire language are doing so in the context of asking their children open-ended questions, such as “That baby has ice cream. Do you want ice cream?” but that mothers using thinking/knowing language were assigning thoughts to their children that may or may not be accurate. The veridicality of mothers’ statements with children’s own mental states may account for their different correlates.

Researchers must be careful in future studies to distinguish between different types of mental state language rather than assuming there is a single cohesive construct.

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