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Maternal mental state language during storytelling versus free-play contexts and its relation to child language and socioemotional outcomes at 12 and 30 months of age[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study compared two contexts (storytelling and free-play) to analyse which context promoted more maternal references to mental states at two time points and to investigate their relationships with children's language and socioemotional outcomes. The sample comprised 91 mothers during interactions with their children (44% boys) when the children were aged 10–15 months and subsequently at 28–33 months. The mothers were asked to tell 2 stories to their children and interact with them during 5 min of free-play. At both ages, the mothers used more references to emotions, states of consciousness, causal talk and links to the children's life during storytelling and more references to desires and physiological states during free-play. At 30 months, the mothers increased their use of cognitions, emotions and causal talk and decreased their use of desires and physical expressions, although these differences were context-specific. The number of words and the mothers' use of desires at 12 months were related to the children's language at 30 months, and maternal references to desires, emotions and states of consciousness were related to the children's socioemotional skills, especially at 30 months.

1. Introduction

Parental mentalization refers to parents' ability to perceive their children as individuals with minds who are capable of intentional behaviour (Meins, Fernyhough, & Russell, 1998). Parents' perceptions of their children as mental agents motivated by mental states such as thoughts, beliefs, intentions, feelings and desires can be observed both through the manner in which mothers refer to their children and describe them in terms of mental characteristics (see, e.g., Meins et al., 1998; Slade, 2005) and through the language mothers use when they interact with their children, particularly their use of mental state talk (see, e.g., Meins et al., 2012; Ruffman, Slade, & Crowe, 2002).

Studies that focus on the language of the adult in the parent-child dyad, specifically on the presence and types of references to mental states, have generally been conducted with mothers. Research has shown that maternal verbalizations play a unique and causal role in facilitating the child's development of theory of mind (Ruffman et al., 2002). In addition, explicit maternal comments on the child's internal states are important predictors of the central aspects of child development, including attachment security (Ensink, Normandin, Plamondon, Berthelot, & Fonagy, 2016; Meins, Fernyhough, Fradley, & Tuckey, 2001), understanding of mind

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