

The relation between parenting strategies, parents' beliefs of children's emotions, and preschoolers' theory-of-mind

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to examine the association between parenting traits, parental beliefs about children's emotions, and theory-of-mind (ToM) abilities in preschool-aged children. **ToM is a socio-cognitive milestone that describes the ability to understand that other's perspectives, thoughts, emotions, and beliefs may differ from one's own.**

Parenting traits may be measured using three dimensions commonly found in literature:

Parental Support: Traits of nurturance, warmth, and involvement that support healthy child development.

Psychological Control: Traits of intrusion, induction of guilt and shame, love withdrawal, invalidation, criticism, and constriction of emotions and self-expression.

Behavioral Control: The provision of rational and consistent expectations to increase child's competency and responsibility.

The way in which parents view children's emotions may influence how they respond to displays of emotion. Those with positive views tend to respond with warmth, support, and understanding, while those with negative views tend to react with invalidation, criticism, minimization, and/or dismissal.

Hypotheses

1. The traits of warmth and involvement, good-natured/easygoing, reasoning/induction, and democratic participation will be positively associated with ToM.
2. Verbal hostility, directiveness, nonreasoning/punitive strategies, corporal punishment, lack of follow-through, and ignoring misbehavior will be negatively associated with ToM.
3. Negative parental beliefs about children's emotions will be negatively associated with ToM.

Method

48 participants aged 3 to 5 years old completed two ToM tasks that required them to differentiate their desires and perspectives from that of story characters. The "Not-Own-Belief" task is a simple false belief task in which children must choose where Mary will look for her lost ball; Mary's belief about the location of the ball is always the opposite of the children's (*Figure 1*). The second task, titled "Ice Cream Machine," required children to remember the color coin that makes Bunny's or Monkey's favorite ice cream (*Figure 2*). Results for the characters with the opposite preferences as the children were used to demonstrate ToM capabilities. **By choosing the correct answers, children demonstrate ToM ability.**

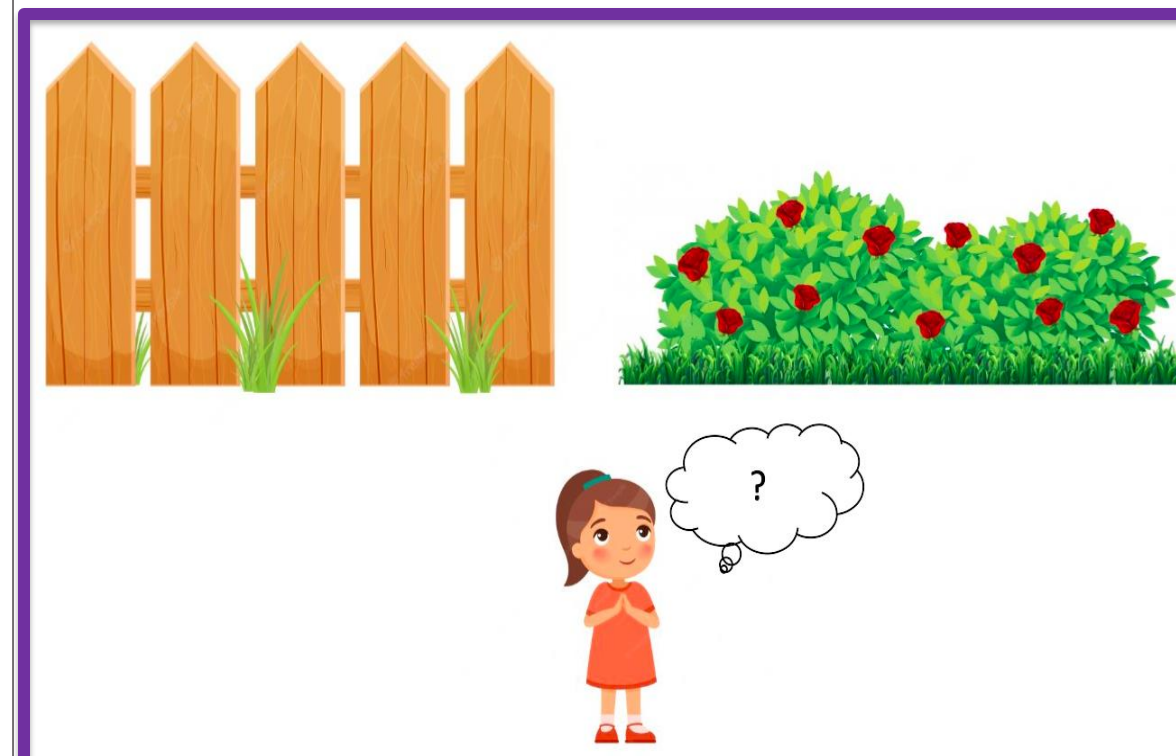


Figure 1. Not-Own-Belief task "Test" screen.

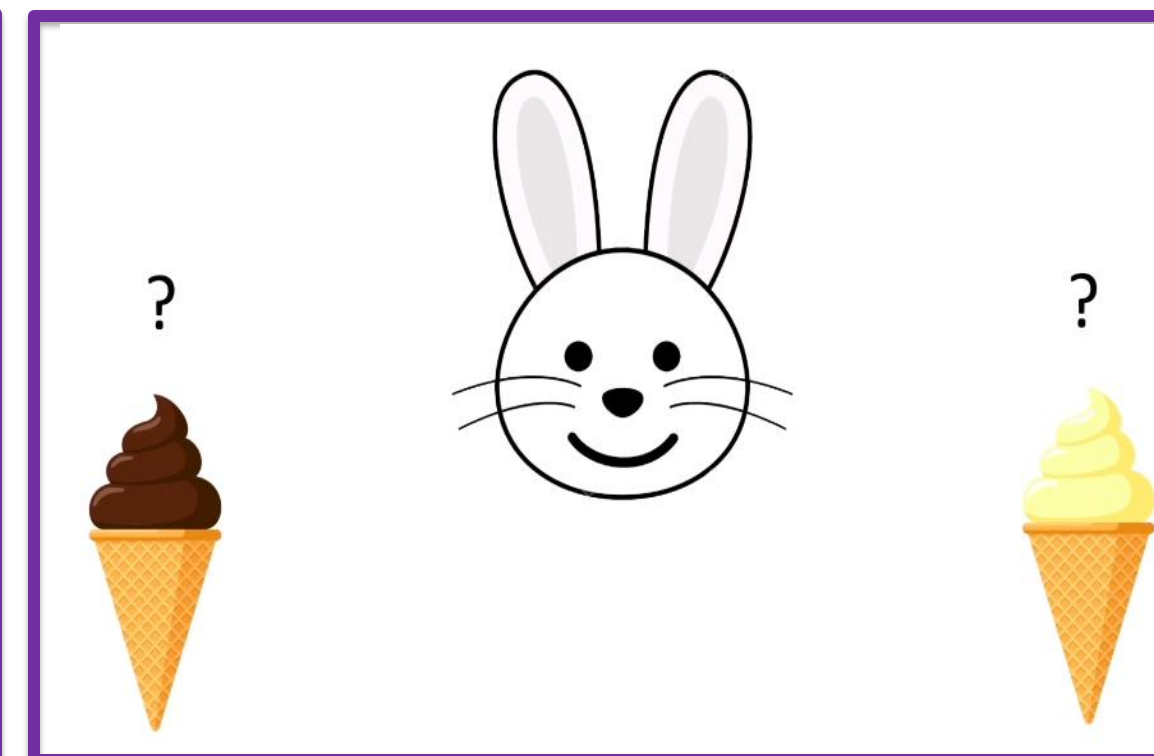


Figure 2. Ice Cream Machine character preference screen.

Participants' parents completed the **Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSDQ)**, which measures 11 dimensional traits of parenting. They also completed the **Parents' Beliefs About Children's Emotions (PBACE) questionnaire**, which measures the ways in which they feel about their children's displays of emotions.

Results

A hierarchical multiple regression model was used to analyze the ability of 10 parenting traits to predict ToM performance after controlling for age. None of the parenting traits explained unique

Table 1
Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting ToM Performance with Parenting Traits

	B	Beta	Change in R ²	R ²
Step 1			.08*	.08
Constant	.21 (.23)			
Age	.12 (.06)	.29*		
Step 2			.16	.24
Constant	-.20 (.90)			
Age	.12 (.08)	.29		
Warmth & Involvement	-.03 (.02)	-.35		
Good-Natured/Easygoing	.05 (.04)	.30		
Reasoning/Induction	.02 (.02)	.19		
Democratic Participation	.02 (.02)	.21		
Verbal Hostility	.03 (.03)	.23		
Directiveness	.01 (.03)	.07		
Nonreasoning/Punitive Strategies	.004 (.03)	.03		
Corporal Punishment	-.01 (.04)	-.07		
Lack of Follow-Through	-.01 (.02)	-.12		
Ignoring Misbehavior	.01 (.03)	.04		

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < .05$ indicates significance.

Table 2
Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting ToM Performance with Negative Parental Beliefs About Children's Emotions

	B	Beta	Change in R ²	R ²
Step 1			.08*	.08
Constant	.21 (.23)			
Age	.12 (.06)	.29*		
Step 2			.002	.08
Constant	.28 (.34)			
Age	.12 (.06)	.29*		
Parental Negative Beliefs	-.001 (.003)	-.04		

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < .05$ indicates significance.

variance, but they collectively explain an additional 15.9% of the variance in ToM performance. However, this is not a statistically significant contribution (*Table 1*). Similarly, having negative beliefs about children's emotions does not significantly explain for additional variance in the model (*Table 2*).

Discussion

Neither parenting traits nor negative parental beliefs about children's emotions had significant impact on ToM performance in preschoolers. Likewise, no specific parenting trait significantly explained unique variance in the model. Therefore, none of our hypotheses were supported. Results such as these may indicate that ToM development is influenced by other factors not measured in this study. Results may also be impacted by the small sample size.