

Mum's the word: Maternal language has strong effect on children's social skills

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Psychologists at the University of York have revealed new evidence showing how specific language used by parents to talk to their babies can help their child to understand the thoughts of others when they get older.

Studying the effects of maternal mind-mindedness (the ability to 'tune in' to their young [child](#)'s thoughts and feelings), lead author Dr Elizabeth Kirk observed 40 mothers and their babies when they were 10, 12, 16, and 20 months old.

Keeping a record of parental language while a mother and her child

played for 10 minutes, psychologists logged every time the mother made 'mind related comments' - inferences about their child's thought processes through their behaviour (for example, if an infant had difficulty with opening a door on a toy car, they could be labelled as 'frustrated').

Revisiting 15 mother-child pairs when children reached 5 - 6 years old, the child's Theory of Mind (ToM) or socio-cognitive ability was assessed. Using the 'strange stories' method, the level at which the child was able relate to others and understand another person's thoughts was recorded.

The strange stories method involves reading a fictional vignette to the child which poses one of 12 social scenarios (contrary emotions, lies, white lies, persuasion, pretend, joke, forget, misunderstanding, double-bluff, figure of speech, appearance versus reality or sarcasm). Children are then asked a comprehension question followed by a test to prove whether they have understood the mental manipulation covered in the story.

Results showed a strong, positive correlation between mind-related comments at 10, 12 and 20 months old and a child's score on the strange stories task. Therefore, children's ability to understand the thoughts of other people when they were aged 5 was related to how mind-minded their mothers were when they were babies.

Dr Kirk, Lecturer in York's Department of Psychology, said: "These findings show how a mother's ability to tune-in to her baby's [thoughts](#) and feelings early on helps her child to learn to empathise with the mental lives of other people. This has important consequences for the child's social development, equipping children to understand what other people might be thinking or feeling.

"These results are significant as they demonstrate the critical role of conversational interaction between mothers and their children in infancy. This also supports previous research led by psychologist Professor Liz Meins, who leads mind-mindedness research at York."

More information: A longitudinal investigation of the relationship between maternal mind-mindedness and theory of mind is published in the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*. To read, visit: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... /bjdp.12104/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/bjdp.12104/abstract)

Provided by University of York

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