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Do Children Have Their Own Mind? A Study on Maternal Mind-Mindedness

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Maternal mind-mindedness (MMM) is defined as a mother’s ability to attune to a child’s mental state and her tendency to interpret her child’s behavior with reference to the thoughts and emotions that may govern the child’s actions (Meins, 1998). Research has shown that MMM is correlated with attachment security, child behaviors, and parenting behaviors (Meins, Fernyhough, Fradley, Tuckey, & 2001; Meins, Centifaniti, Fernyhough, & Fishburn, 2013; McMahon & Meins, 2011). Specifically, appropriate mind-related comments have been found to be independent predictors of attachment security (Meins et al., 2001). MMM measured in the first year has been linked to fewer behavioral difficulties later in child development (Meins et al., 2013). A study conducted by McMahon and Meins (2011) found that mothers who used more mental state words when describing their children reported less parenting stress.

Three hundred and eighteen mothers enrolled in the Connections program participated in this study. Connections is a child maltreatment prevention program offered by Family Futures, a non-profit organization. Connections offer developmental screening for children age 0-5. It also provides families with age-appropriate information on child development and community resources. Mothers’ descriptions of children were collected in an annual parent satisfaction survey. These descriptions were used to measure MMM (Meins, 1998).

Descriptions of children were coded according to the Mind-Mindedness Coding Manual (Meins & Fernyhough, 2010). Each descriptor of the child was placed into four mutually exclusive categories: mental, behavioral, physical, and general. A mental attribute is a comment that refers to the child’s mental state, relating to will, mind, imagination, interests, and metacognition (e.g., he is opinionated and well organized). A comment that refers to the child’s behavior such as activities and interactions that the child is involved in is categorized as behavioral (e.g., he is talkative and full of fun). A comment made about the child’s physical appearance, age, or position in the family falls into the physical attributes category (e.g., he’s the middle child). A comment that does not fit into the other categories is placed in the general category (e.g., he is adorable). The MMM score is calculated as the total number of mental attributes divided by the total number of all attributes. There were three coders and the average MMM scores were used.

Results showed that some of the demographic factors such as mother’s ethnicity, education, income, and marital status are not correlated with MMM. However, MMM and child age was significantly correlated (p=.005). This relationship was stronger if a mental descriptor was used when a mother described her child or MMM was greater than 0 (p=.001). The relationship between maternal mind-mindedness and mothers’ age was statistically significant (p=.017). Our results showed that maternal mind-mindedness scores decrease with mothers’ age. The mean MMM score for mothers 35 and older was .23 and the mean MMM score for mothers 34 and younger was .27.

Like previous studies, our results also showed that MMM was not significantly correlated with a mother’s ethnicity, education, income, and marital status (Meins, Fernyhough, & Harris-Waller, 2014). Results showed that the scores increased as the child’s age increased which is consistent with a previous study conducted by Bates and Dozier, 2002. The correlations between MMM and secure attachment, children’s behavior, and parenting behavior are related to protective factors that when properly incorporated into families, reduce the likelihood of child maltreatment. The protective factor most closely related to maternal mind-mindedness is parental resilience. It involves building and sustaining a trusting relationship between the mother and child. Research has shown that MMM generalizes to close relationships (Meins, Fernyhough & Harris-Walker, 2014). Results showed that it generalizes to close relationships because mind-mindedness is a relational construct as opposed to a trait-like quality. The results from our study may potentially inform future interventions aimed at improving MMM in terms of allocation of resources.

*This scholar and faculty mentor have requested that only an abstract be published.