

Examining The Effects of Parenting Style and Parents' Social Attitudes on Social Development in Early Childhood

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Abstract : A vast amount of research evidence indicates that children develop social attitudes that are similar to those of their parents. When using general measures of social attitudes, such as social dominance orientation (SDO), right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), and prejudice, studies show that parents' and children's attitudes were correlated. However, the mechanisms behind the intergenerational transmission of attitudes remain largely unexplained. Since it was speculated that the origins of RWA could be traced back to one's relationship with their parents, the aim of this study was to assess how parents' social attitudes and parenting behavior are related to children's social development. One line of research suggests that the different ways in which authoritarian and authoritative parents reason with their children may impact Theory of Mind (ToM) development. That is, inductive discipline (e.g., emphasising how the child's actions affect others) facilitates empathy and ToM development. Conversely, past evidence shows that children have poorer ToM development when parents enforce rules without explanation. Thus, this study addresses the question of how parent behavior plays a role in the gradual acquisition of a ToM and social attitudes. Seventy parents reported their social attitudes, parenting behavior, and their child's mental state and non-mental state vocabulary. Their children were given ToM and perspective-taking tasks, along with a friend choice task to measure racial bias and anti-fat bias. As hypothesised, parents' use of inductive reasoning correlated with children's performance on Theory of Mind tasks. Mothers' inductive reasoning facilitated children's acquisition of mental state vocabulary. Parents' autonomy granting was associated with improved mental state vocabulary. Authoritarian parenting traits such as verbal hostility were linked to children's racial bias. These findings highlight the importance of parent-child discussion in shaping children's social understanding.

Keywords : parenting style, prejudice, social attitudes, social understanding, theory of mind

Conference Title : ICDPA 2023 : International Conference on Developmental Psychology and Adolescence

Conference Location : Tokyo, Japan

Conference Dates : September 04-05, 2023