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Cognitive Development



Exposure to media and theory-of-mind development in preschoolers

Raymond A. Mar^{a,*}, Jennifer L. Tackett^b, Chris Moore^c

^a York University, Department of Psychology, 239 Behavioural Sciences Building, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON, Canada M3J 1P3

^b University of Toronto, Canada

^c Dalhousie University, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Exposure to different forms of narrative media may influence children's development of theory-of-mind. Because engagement with fictional narratives provides one with information about the social world, and possibly draws upon theory-of-mind processes during comprehension, exposure to storybooks, movies, and television may influence theory-of-mind development. We examined 4–6 year-olds' inferred exposure to children's literature, television, and film, using an objective measure that controls for socially desirable responding. Theory-of-mind was assessed using a battery of five tasks. Controlling for age, gender, vocabulary, and parental income, inferred exposure to children's storybooks predicted theory-of-mind abilities. Inferred exposure to children's movies also predicted theory-of-mind development, but inferred exposure to children's television did not.

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1. Introduction

The developmental benefits of reading to one's child from an early age, and with great frequency, have been widely recognized. Language skills are thought to be the primary beneficiary of this practice (e.g., Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; cf. Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994). However, improved linguistic com-

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 416 736 2100x20769; fax: +1 416 736 5814.

E-mail address: mar@yorku.ca (R.A. Mar).

URL: <http://www.yorku.ca/mar/> (R.A. Mar).

petence may not be the only advantage that accrues for preschoolers as a result of storybook exposure. Social cognitive development may also benefit.

1.1. *Theory-of-mind and children's storybooks*

By the age of 4 years, children have begun to develop an understanding of the mental states of others, known as a theory-of-mind (Astington, Harris, & Olson, 1988). This ability is important for social functioning, as it helps children to coordinate relationships with others (Watson, Linkie-Nixon, Wilson, & Capage, 1999). The content of stories certainly seems well-suited to promote the acquisition of theory-of-mind language and perhaps foster the development of this capacity. Cassidy et al. (1998) found that of the books read to preschoolers by a group of parents, over 75% contained some language related to internal states, and a third dealt directly with the concept of false belief (a key component of theory-of-mind). In an in-depth content analysis of 90 books for 3–4 and 5–6 year-olds, Dyer, Shatz, and Wellman (2000) found that the incidence of mental-state references was frequent, occurring once every three sentences or so. Children's stories are social in nature, centering on interactions between individuals who often have competing goals and frequently describe situations in which characters hold diverging beliefs (Peskin & Astington, 2004). Situational irony, for example, occurred in roughly a third of the children's books studied by Dyer et al. (2000).

Empirical research related to this idea, however, has not been extensive and has yielded mixed results. In one study, children exposed to stories embedded with mental-state terms were more likely to spontaneously produce such words, but they exhibited no greater understanding of their meaning (Peskin & Astington, 2004). Another study (Adrian, Clemente, Villanueva, & Rieffe, 2005) reported that parent–child book reading is correlated with theory-of-mind, but this investigation suffers from some notable limitations, including reliance on self-reported reading habits, a single theory-of-mind measure, and lack of control for important mediators such as the child's age, gender, and parental income. Although Astington (1990) has previously argued that the acquisition of theory-of-mind may aid story comprehension (particularly stories that involve mental states), it remains unclear whether exposure to storybooks aids the development of theory-of-mind. The current study examines this question.

1.2. *Theory-of-mind and media*

A largely neglected issue is whether other forms of narrative aside from storybooks may also be related to theory-of-mind development. Although there has been some theorizing that television could influence the development of theory-of-mind (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1997), little empirical research exists regarding this possibility. Naigles (2000), however, did report an exploratory study in which preschoolers who watched 10 episodes of "Barney and Friends" demonstrated weak comprehension of the distinction between the words "think," "guess," and "know," despite the fact that these particular episodes featured these words. Naigles hypothesized that this show employed these words rather interchangeably, resulting in decreased discrimination among those exposed to these episodes. Whether this finding can be generalized to other television shows, or even other episodes of this show, remains unknown.

The present study aims to extend work in this area by examining whether there exists a relation between various forms of media (children's storybooks, television, and movies) and theory-of-mind development. This relation is examined while taking into account important variables such as age, gender, vocabulary and family income.

2. Method

2.1. *Participants*

Participants were 55 children (30 female; ages 4;1 to 6;11, $M = 63.7$ months, $SD = 8.3$), and one of their parents (5 fathers; ages 28–50, $M = 39.7$, $SD = 5.2$, with 2 not reporting age). English was spoken in all homes, although other languages were also spoken in 40% of homes. Family income averaged

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