



Full length article

# The importance of parental verbal and embodied mentalizing in shaping parental experiences of stress and coparenting



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## ABSTRACT

Parental mentalizing—recognizing that children are separate psychological entities, who have their own thoughts, wishes, and intentions that motivate their behaviors—is traditionally considered a verbal, linguistic capacity. This paper aimed to examine the relation between parental verbal mentalizing (parental reflective function; PRF) and its nonverbal form—parental embodied mentalizing (PEM)—and how both constructs contribute to parents' subjective experience of parenting, namely parental stress and coparental alliance. 68 mothers and their three-months-old babies were observed to assess PEM, interviewed to code PRF, and completed self-reports of coparental alliance and parental stress. PEM was found to be positively correlated with PRF. Mediation analyses revealed that higher PEM, but not PRF, was associated with lower parental stress, mediated by positive reports of coparental alliance. The findings support adopting a multifaceted approach when studying parental mentalizing, both in terms of assessing parental mentalizing beyond its verbal expressions to include also embodied aspects, as well as investigating its impact beyond infant development to include the familial context within it operates. Conceptual, empirical and clinical implications are discussed.

“You may give them your love but not your thoughts.  
For they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,  
Which you cannot visit,  
not even in your dreams.” Kahlil Gibran, “On Children”, 1923

## 1. Introduction

In his poem, Gibran stresses the importance of parents recognizing that their children are separate psychological entities, who have their own thoughts, wishes, and intentions that motivate their behaviors. This parental ability is otherwise known as parental mentalizing. Although considered mostly a verbal, linguistic capacity, this mixed-method study aims to examine the relation between parental verbal mentalizing and its nonverbal form—parental embodied mentalizing—and how both forms contribute to parents' subjective experience of parenting, namely parental stress and coparental alliance.

Slade (2005) defines parental mentalizing as the parent's ability to perform a mental visualization of the child's various internal

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states (such as thoughts, feelings, and wishes), and to recognize that the child's actions are motivated by those internal states. Individuals with low parental mentalizing may be unable to recognize even the crudest of mental states, whereas individuals with higher levels of parental mentalizing are likely to understand the complex and dynamic interplays of mental states and their influence on behavior (Rutherford, Goldberg, Luyten, Bridgett, & Mayes, 2013). A high mentalizing parent is also capable of perceiving the separateness of his or her mind and the child's mind, while holding the conception that both minds influence one another reciprocally (Slade, Grienenberger, Bernbach, Levy, & Locker, 2005).

### 1.1. Parental reflective functioning

Perhaps the most established operationalization of parental mentalizing is 'Parental Reflective Functioning' (PRF; Slade, 2002), which refers to the linguistic capacity parents demonstrate in an interview to hold in mind that their child has feelings, thoughts, and desires and to verbally reflect upon the connection between behavior and mind, both of the parent and the child (Slade, 2002, 2005; Ordway, Sadler, Dixon, & Slade, 2014). The predominant interview used to evaluate PRF is the 'Parent Development Interview' (PDI; Slade, Aber, Berger, Bresgi, & Kaplan, 2003), which is a 45-item semi-structured clinical interview in which parents are asked to depict parenting experiences and events in a way that triggers reflective thinking about their child, his or her internal experience, and the relationship between the child and the parent. Indeed, studies using the PDI have shown that higher PRF contributes to optimal child functioning and positive parenting behaviors (e.g., Borelli, West, Decoste, & Suchman, 2012; Grienenberger, Kelly, & Slade, 2005; Ordway et al., 2014; Slade, Grienenberger et al., 2005; Slade, Sadler et al., 2005; Slade, Sadler, Mayes, 2005; Smaling et al., 2016; Stacks et al., 2014; See Camoirano, 2017 for a review).

Rutherford et al. (2013) suggested that parental mentalizing impacts how parents respond, in real time, to their infant's signaling of their internal states during dyadic interactions. It is plausible, however, that the type of mentalizing recruited when interacting in real time with the nonverbal infant is qualitatively different than the type of mentalizing recruited when thinking and consciously reflecting on the infant's internal world (Camoirano, 2017). Specifically, since the early parent-infant reciprocal communication is limited to a nonverbal level, parents' activation of their mentalizing capacity involves them quickly interpreting the infant's internal world through observation of the child's movements and nonverbal behavior—an interpretation that may very well be outside of their awareness or control. Thus, parents' capacity to consider their child's mental states based on these nonverbal signals likely represents a qualitatively different function than the more generalized and conscious capacity that is PRF. This embodied capacity likely operates on a more reflexive, unaware level (e.g., Fonagy, Bateman, & Luyten, 2012; Shai & Belsky, 2011b), which determines, at least in part, the quality of the parent's responsive caregiving in real time (e.g., Grienenberger et al., 2005). Indeed, based on an extensive review, Camoirano (2017) proposed that it is necessary to investigate parental mentalizing beyond verbal measures and consider implicit, less controlled facets of parental mentalizing.

### 1.2. Parental embodied mentalizing

The recently introduced construct of Parental Embodied Mentalizing (PEM; Shai & Belsky, 2011a, 2011b, 2017; Shai & Fonagy, 2014) addresses the importance in adopting a nonverbal framework for mentalizing. PEM conceptualizes parental mentalizing as an embodied capacity in which parents recognize, appreciate, and extrapolate the infant's feelings and thoughts from his or her nonverbal behavior. This parental capacity is evident in parents' adjustments and modification of their own movement based on what the infant is signaling nonverbally.

The assessment of PEM relies solely on analyzing the whole-body movement patterns of both the infant and the parent while excluding consideration of the verbal content. This approach is based on the recognition that parents and infants share a bi-directional communicative channel of their desires, feelings, or thoughts, which is based on nonverbal, and often unconscious, body movements of the entire body. Infants are capable of conveying their mental states using their directed, whole body as a way of communication with their parents, expressing pleasure, curiosity or frustration in a subtle but rich nonverbal fashion (e.g., Beebe, 2000; Malloch, 1999; Murray & Trevarthen, 1986; Stern, 1985; Trevarthen, 1990). Respectively, parents seem to be very attentive to their infant's nonverbal communicative signals, and tend to use nonverbal messages including head movements, posture, touch, and facial expressions in order to engage with and relate to the infant (Beebe et al., 2010; Stern, 1985; Trevarthen, 2004, 2008, 2011; Tronick, 1989). Moreover, parents use similar nonverbal communication signals to indicate their emotional availability and engagement with the infant. Importantly, much of this communication—of both parents and infants—has been shown to fall outside of the realm of parents' awareness and reflection (e.g., Beebe & Lachmann, 2013; Papoušek, 2000).

In line with Stern's (1985) notion of "vitality affects" which refers to the significance of the manner or style of a behavior, rather than on its categorical content, measuring PEM involves analyzing *how* the actions of both the parent and the infant are performed rather than evaluating *what* actions unfolded in the parent-infant interaction. That is, the coding of PEM is concerned with the form in which an action is performed rather than the action itself, or its content (Shai & Belsky, 2017). Video-recorded parent-infant interactions are analyzed using six dimensions of observable movement (or kinesthetic) qualities: Directionality (movement towards or away), Tempo (slow or fast movement), Space (Close or far), Pathways (linear or rounded movement), Pacing, (gradual or abrupt movement) and Tension Flow (muscle tone involved in the movement) (Shai & Belsky, 2017). These are used to describe the unfolding interaction, and aid in determining the extent to which the parent's movement is attuned to the subtle changes in the infant's mental state as can be inferred from the infant's bodily movements. A high PEM score can reflect the parent's swift change in the movement qualities to better suit those of the infant (Shai & Fonagy, 2014). A parent would be rated low on PEM when he or she falls

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