

Mentalization in Chilean Educational Staff With 12-Month-Old Children: Does It Make a Difference in Relation to What Children Receive at Home?

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ABSTRACT

Parental mentalizing, which is the capacity to understand behavior in terms of mental states and to reflect this back to a child through speech, is a key construct in child development. Adults with high mentalization promote children's secure attachment, mentalization and self-regulation. This study describes this competency in a sample of teachers from Chilean nurseries in interaction with 12-month-old children during a storytelling scenario and compares it with the children's mothers. The sample comprised 208 adults (104 teachers and 104 mothers). The adults were asked to tell 2 stories to the children, and these situations were recorded, transcribed, and codified using guidelines that identified 4 references to mental states (desires, cognitions, emotions, and attributes) and 4 references to nonmental states (causal and factual talk, physical states, and connections with the child's life). *Research Findings:* The results showed significant differences between the educational staff and the mothers, and the teachers performed better than the mothers in terms of both greater mentalization and a greater number of references to desires, causal talk, emotions, and physical states. *Practice or Policy:* The results provide evidence regarding the supportive role played by educational staff in children's development, especially in underprivileged sectors.

Mentalization: Individual Capacity and Parental Competency

Mentalization is the process through which the mind mediates the experience of the world and allows an individual to understand and distinguish mental processes as well as intrapersonal and interpersonal emotions, which allows for the creation and integration of the self over the course of development (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002; Zucchi, Huerin, Duhalde, & Raznoszczyk de Schejtmán, 2006). When individuals mentalize, they can transform experiences and behaviors to build mental representations of feelings, thoughts, desires, and beliefs that give meaning to their internal experiences of both themselves and other people with whom they interact (Fonagy & Allison, 2012).

The operationalization of the mental ability that makes mentalization possible is known as reflective functioning (RF; Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Moran, & Higgitt, 1991; Fonagy, Target, Steele, & Steele, 1998) and represents an essential step in a human being's emotional and sociocognitive development. RF begins in early childhood as a result of an interpersonal process in the context of the relationship between a child and his or her significant caregivers (Fonagy & Allison, 2012; Katznelson, 2014). In the dyad's interactions, the adult must be able to function as a mirror by