

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**The Association between Maternal Education Level
in Mothers with Low S.E.S. Status and 4-6 Year Old
Children's Emotional Comprehension, and the
Quality of Mother - Child Interaction as Expressed
by Emotional - Verbal Communication during Free
Play**

Hila Inbar

Submitted in partial fulfillments of the requirements for the Master's
Degree in the School of Education, Bar-Ilan University

Ramat Gan, Israel

2015

Abstract

Purpose - The goal of the current study was to examine differences within a group of mothers and children of low socioeconomic status, which is characterized by low levels of maternal education, in two aspects: A) the ability of the children, ages 4-6, to identify, comprehend, and express emotions B) dimensions of emotional-verbal communication between mother and child during free play interaction. The study focuses on education levels of the mother as a characteristic of low socioeconomic status and as a way to evaluate differences within this group.

Introduction – A number of studies have demonstrated a relationship between maternal education levels and a child's cognitive development, manifested, among other things, in the child's level of intelligence, his or her scholastic achievement, and his or her language abilities. Moreover, the emotional abilities measured in the current study are associated with various other cognitive skills. However, **within** the low status group, the relationship between a child's ability to comprehend and express feelings and a mother's education level has yet to be examined. Finally, while studies have found a relationship between the quality of mother-child communication and socioeconomic status, in particular the mother's education level, the relationship **within** the low socioeconomic status group between verbal-emotional communication variables and mothers' education has not been examined.

Methodology - 48 pairs of mothers and their 4-6 year old children participated in the study, where mothers' education levels were low. Throughout the study, each mother-child pair was filmed during free play interaction. The quality of verbal-emotional communication was evaluated using a tool for analyzing verbal interaction (Observing Mediation Interaction - OMI). In addition, the study evaluated a child's recognition, comprehension, and expression of simple and ambiguous facial expressions through

tasks that included open and forced recognition of illustrated facial expressions, naming emotions, pointing at an illustrated face, and drawing a face that was featured in a short story. Children's self-regulation was also observed through a task that evaluates motor control. Regulation ability was evaluated on the basis of a series of studies that have demonstrated a relationship between self-regulation ability and cognitive and emotional skills in children.

Findings - The findings of the current study indicate a direct correlation between maternal education levels in mothers of low socioeconomic status and their children's ability to recognize and comprehend emotions. However, when additional factors were added, specifically the addition of a self-regulation variable, the correlation between education level and emotional recognition and comprehension, weakened, with the exception of naming emotions of facial expressions. At the very least, this implies that emotional recognition ability, as measured in the study, is related to maternal education, independent of a child's self-regulation ability. No association was found between mothers' education level and the verbal-emotional dimension of communication during mother-child interaction.

Discussion We believe that the verbal recognition task, the only comprehension and expression of emotions task associated with maternal education levels, independent of the child's self-regulation ability, measures the emotional vocabulary of the child. This conclusion is supported by previous research that indicates that a mother's education level is associated with the quantity and quality of language to which children are exposed in the home environment and therefore is also can be linked to their cognitive and language development. As for the strong effect of self-regulation ability on the comprehension and expression of emotion on the association between maternal

education and comprehension and the expression of emotions, we believe that the relationship between maternal education levels and a child's emotional comprehension ability are mediated through his or her self-regulation ability. This hypothesis stems from findings of studies that emphasize the relationship between socioeconomic status, more specifically parental education levels, and executive function in children, and other research supporting the relationship between self-regulation and cognitive skills, in which there is a known association between the development of emotional comprehension in children and their cognitive and language development. As for our study hypothesis, which was not confirmed, regarding the emotional-verbal dimension in mother-child communication, we believe that the range of years of education used in the current study was not varied enough to affect the dimensions of emotional-verbal communication. Future research will be needed to further evaluate the variation that occurs within low social status groups, to understand its source and how it is manifested.