

LANGUAGE, COGNITION AND ACCESS TO OTHER MINDS

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Access to other minds is closely tied to access to language. The more precise role of language as compared to communication more generally, memory and executive functioning is however unresolved. At the same time it is clear that access to other minds is related to a typically developing brain. Pioneering studies of autism indicated that children with this diagnosis have problems with accessing other minds the way this was operationalized in terms of "theory of mind" tests. Though in the case of children with autism, the picture of their problems with theory of mind has become more complex over the years, it is clear that biological structures and functions are prerequisites for developing a typical attitude towards other people as intentional agents. Nevertheless, results presented in the symposium indicate that children with autism, but with a high mental or verbal level, were very similar to typical children in respect of joint attention. Other data from typically developing children show that early joint attention predicts later language level. Looking at the population of infants and children, we find a number of subgroups with special learning conditions in respect of language access. Studies of deaf children with differing early language experience offer one important source of data. Deaf children from hearing families show a delay in mentalizing development. Hearing bilingual children, on the other hand, are more advanced than monolingual hearing children concerning specific pragmatic features of language understanding, indicating that children with an abundance of language experience learn more than different linguistic structures.