

What roles do language and executive function have in adults' theory of mind, and what does this tell us about theory of mind development?

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There is strong evidence that developments in children's theory of mind (ToM) at 3 to 4 years are related to developments in language and executive function. However, these relationships might exist for two reasons. First, language and executive function might be a cause or consequence of the mature ToM abilities that children are in the process of developing. Second, language and executive function may be necessary for developing ToM, but have no necessary role in mature ToM. It is difficult to distinguish between these possibilities if we only study young children. Studies of adults can provide direct evidence about the role of language and executive function in mature ToM. I will review recent work from brain injured patients suggesting that impaired executive function has both general and specific effects on adult ToM, but that severely impaired grammar can leave ToM structurally intact.

While studies of children report that ToM correlates with both language and executive function, findings from adults suggest that these relationships should be interpreted in importantly different ways.