

The Maternal Context of Empathy: Exploring Its Emergence in Children Aged 3–6

Introduction

What is Empathy?

Empathy is a multidimensional construct consisting of cognitive, affective, and behavioural components ^[1]. As a foundation for prosocial and collaborative behaviour, empathy plays a crucial role in facilitating positive relationships and social cohesion ^[2]. Therefore, understanding the factors that shape its development may provide valuable insight into how these important behaviours can be cultivated within current and future communities.

Aim

The aim of this study was to explore the emergence of empathic responding in children aged 3-6, and investigate the influence of maternal psychosocial factors on its development.

Research Questions

1. Does children's age predict empathic responding between 3 and 6 years?
2. Are maternal psychosocial factors associated with children's empathic responding?
3. Do children demonstrate similar levels of comforting and concern in response to others' distress?

Methodology

We conducted behavioural observations of children aged 3-6 ($N = 40$) responding to their mother in distress. Trials were coded for comforting, concern, hypothesis testing, helping, and child distress.

Mothers complete demographic and psychosocial questionnaires prior to testing

Participant is observed responding to their mother falling onto the floor

Trial recordings coded by researcher using established coding scheme ^[3]

Statistical analysis conducted using JASP ^[4] on valid trials only ($n = 29$)



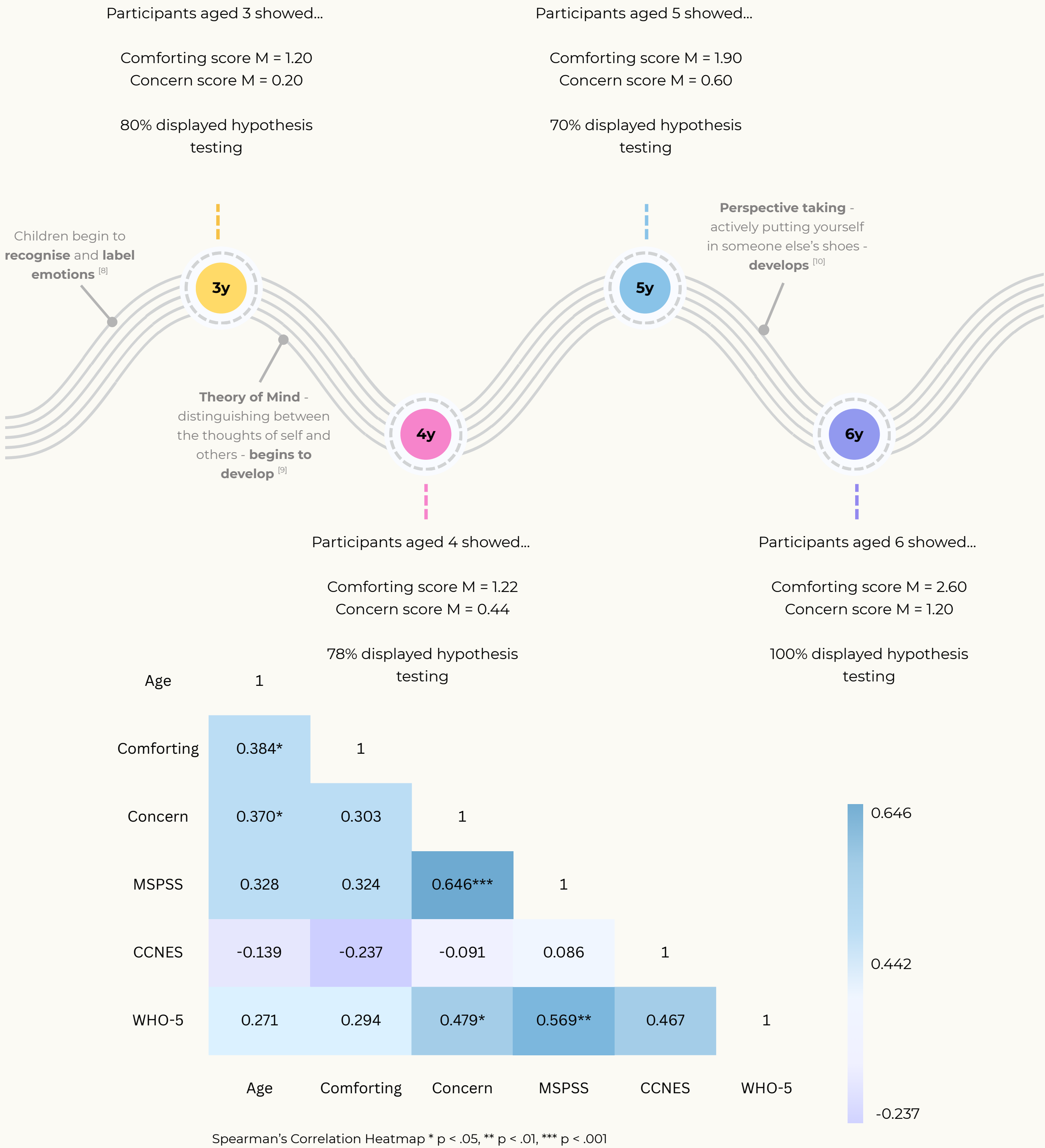
Example of comforting behaviour

Example of no comforting displayed

Additionally, maternal psychosocial factors were assessed using the WHO-5 Well-Being Index ^[5], Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) ^[6], and Coping with Children's Negative Emotions Scale (CCNES) ^[7].

Results

- ★ Significant positive correlation between age and comforting scores, and age and concern scores.
- ★ Maternal mental health and perceived social support was significantly correlated with higher concern scores
- ★ No significant difference in mean comforting or concern scores between age groups.



Discussion

RQ1 - A significant correlation between age and both comforting and concern scores suggests cognitive, affective, and behavioural empathy increase with age.

RQ2 - Specifically, maternal mental health and social support were significantly associated with increased display of concern behaviours. However, no significant relationship between maternal sensitivity to child's negative emotions was found. This suggests certain maternal psychosocial factors influence child empathy development at various degrees.

RQ3 - No significant correlation between concern and comforting scores. This may imply these two components of empathy have independent developmental trajectories - with children's emotional concern not necessarily translating into comforting behaviours.

Additional finding: At each age group, the majority of participants displayed hypothesis testing. - characterised by repeated gaze between the mother's site of injury, face, and/or experimenter. This may suggest most children attempted to understand their mothers' distress, potentially implicating the arousal of cognitive theory of mind and perspective-taking abilities.

Overall, these findings support the notion that empathic responding increases over the preschool years, and certain maternal psychosocial factors may be associated with empathic concern in particular.

Limitations

- Due to the small sample ($N = 29$) in this study, statistical power is limited.
- Whilst the coding of behavioural responses utilised an established coding ethogram, this was conducted by a single researcher, meaning inter-observer reliability could not be assessed.
- Finally, empathy scores were based on observational data alone, rather than multiple modes of measurement.

In future...

These findings should be used as exploratory hypotheses for further study. Future research should incorporate both behavioural observations and caregiver-report questionnaires to provide a comprehensive overview of participants' current level of empathy. Additionally, analysis of a larger dataset alongside conducting inter-observer reliability would allow the identification of consistent trends in the wider population.

