education sciences

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Intuitive Theories of Parenting and the Development of Emotion Understanding in Preschoolers

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Abstract: Emotion understanding develops intensively in preschool and junior school. Although the parent/family environment has been shown to affect the development of emotion understanding in children, very little research has examined examined how parents' view upbringing and education and how they are related to their child's emotion understanding, given that the intuitive theories of parenting are reflected in actual parent behavior. This study fills this gap in the literature and examines the links between children's ability to understand emotions and their parents' intuitive theories of parenting. The sample was 171 5- to 6-year-old children and their parents. Analyses revealed a significant relation between intuitive theories of parenting and children's emotion understanding. In particular, the intuitive attitude of uninvolved parenting was associated with the understanding of mental causes of emotions and the overall level of emotion understanding in preschool children. Integrating these results will allow us to reach more informed conclusions about the role of parental beliefs in the development of emotion comprehension in preschool children.

Keywords: emotion understanding; intuitive theories of parenting; EPAQ; early childhood; care and education

Citation: Bukhalenkova, D.; Gavrilova, M.; Kartushina, N. Intuitive Theories of Parenting and the Development of Emotion Understanding in Preschoolers. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 15. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11010015

Received: 24 November 2020
Accepted: 26 December 2020
Published: 1 January 2021

1. Introduction

Emotion understanding is one of the lines of emotional development that develops intensively in preschool and junior school. In modern research, emotion understanding is defined as the ability to understand the nature, causes, and consequences of one's own emotions and those of others [1]. This ability includes recognizing, describing, explaining, predicting, and controlling the expression of emotions in everyday life and falls within the realm of emotional competence or the theory of mind. The ability to understand emotions allows a child to feel comfortable in different situations, to understand the dynamics and causes of changes in the emotional state and behavior of others [2–4]. Previously, it was shown that children who understand emotions, adapt to changes more easily, can build positive relationships with others, and show more outstanding academic achievement [5–7]. In contrast, low emotion understanding is associated with anxiety, depression, social inappropriateness, and neuroticization problems [8,9]. Therefore, it is important to examine the specifics of developing emotion understanding in preschool and identify factors that can modulate this process.

Preschool age is the most intensive period in the development of the ability to understand, predict, and control emotions. Pons, Harris, and de Rosnay [1] identified and described, in detail, three successive stages in the development of emotion understanding: External (2–3 to 4–5 years), Mental (5–6 to 7–8 years), and Reflexive (8–9 to 10–11 years) stages. The first stage is between 3–5 years of age when children learn to understand the external causes of emotions (recognizing the main emotions of others by facial expression and understanding the influence of external circumstances and desires on emotions). The

second stage comes at the age of 5–7 years, during which children gradually understand that personal beliefs and memories can cause different emotions and the fact that some emotions can be hidden. Then, in the third stage, between the ages of 7 and 9, children learn to regulate their emotions through cognitive strategies, learn that moral rules can influence emotions and that emotional states can be contradictory [10,11].

Research shows that the development of a child's ability to understand emotions depends on both internal (cognitive and affective skills of the child) and external factors (the role of parents, environment, communication with peers, etc.) [12–14]. Parents are not only partners in communication for the child but also largely determine the social situation of development, which is the starting point for the changes that occur in development [15–17], academic achievement, and behaviour problems up to adolescence [18–21]. Thus, recent studies reported that parents influence the development of emotion understanding [6,12,22–24]; parents' level of education, their emotional vocabulary, and conversations that take place in the family about emotions, as well as the child's attachment to the mother, and the mother's sensitivity and responsiveness to the child's emotional needs all have been shown to benefit child's development of emotion understanding [25]. Several studies also revealed the positive impact of family involvement on children's emotional outcomes [26] and academic achievements [27].

Early research indicates that parents' views and perceptions of their own role in a child's development largely determine how they build interactions and organize children's daily lives [28,29]. The range of individual differences in parental behaviors is largely explained by their influence on their children's upbringing and education [28]. Furthermore, the body of these perceptions is the intuitive theory of parenting [30], which is based on a parent's life experience and knowledge. Intuitive theories of parenting, such as other intuitive theories, may not be fully understood by the parents themselves [31,32]. Contemporary empirical research has shown that intuitive theories of parenting are reflected in actual parent behavior [33]. For example, a parent makes decisions about the strictness of rules for the child and the degree of emotional intimacy with the child [33]. However, there is no research on how parents' views of upbringing and education are related to their child's emotion understanding. This study is intended to fill this gap and examine the links that are believed to exist between children's ability to understand emotions and their parents' views on early childhood care and education. Three research questions were formulated. First, what intuitive theories of upbringing do contemporary Russian parents adhere to, and are they meaningfully consistent with the intuitive theories of US parents? Second, is there a connection between intuitive theories and socio-demographic factors? Third, how do intuitive theories relate to emotion understanding among children? An understanding of family factors related to parents' beliefs is important to build a more complete picture of children's development in preschool and significant factors that influence it. In the future, the results of this research may be useful for building effective practical ways to support and develop Emotion understanding in preschool.

2. Materials and Methods

The final sample was 171 5- to 6-year-old children (M = 70.2, SD = 4.56 months), 55% girls and their parents (93% are mothers and 7% are fathers). Among parents, 2.7% had a PhD degree, 61.7% had a higher education degree, 25.5% had specialized secondary and incomplete higher education, and 10% had compulsory secondary education.

The recruitment process was based on an existing agreement between the Lomonosov Moscow State University and ten kindergartens in the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). Parents received a link to an electronic survey, where the title page provided detailed information on the conditions of participation in the study. Originally, a total of 350 parents, including fathers and mothers, were invited, but only 172 of them agreed to participate and to let their child participate in the study. After giving informed consent to participate in the study, parents were invited to proceed by filling in the electronic questionnaire. Parents first completed the questionnaire about their parental attitudes and then completed a short

demographic form indicating the age and sex of the child, level of education, and parents' income. One parent-child pair was excluded from the analyses because a child was born prematurely. The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology at Lomonosov Moscow State University approved the study and consent procedures (the approval No:2020/61).

The Russian version of *the Test of Emotional Comprehension (TEC)* [34] was used to assess children's emotion understanding. The material of the test is an illustrated book with simple stories. In each task, the child is told a story and then asked to specify "which feeling the hero of the story has" from the four drawings with different facial expressions of the hero at the bottom of the page. The answers are non-verbal; the child only needs to specify the chosen option. The method has a three-level structure for understanding emotions, which includes External, Mental, and Meta components. Each component contains several indicators, which are described below. The first component, which is denoted by the authors as "External", is the basic one and focuses on the external aspects of emotions. The second component, named "Mental" by the authors, is intermediate in complexity and includes various mental aspects of understanding emotions. The third component, "Meta", is the most complex and focuses on children's understanding of how a person can monitor and analyze their own emotional states. For each component, scores range from 0 to 3. Accordingly, the overall level of emotion understanding (TEC Emotion) is determined by calculating the sum of points for all components and ranges from 0 to 9 points. The Russian version of the technique was assessed for psychometric properties in a Russian sample of 596 children aged 5–6 years and showed sufficient correspondence with the theoretical model $\chi^2/df = 22.702/24$ ($p = 0.53$); CFI = 1.000 > 0.90; RMSEA = 0.000 <0 [34].

A Russian translation of *the Early Parental Attitudes Questionnaire* (EPAQ) [33] was used to identify aspects of intuitive parenting theories. The structure of the questionnaire includes three scales covering different areas of intuitive theories of education. The first scale, Emotions and Attachment (Affection and Attachment), contains questions about parent–child relationships and emotional interaction between parent and child. The second scale, Early Learning, assesses a parent's ideas about how to integrate learning into free child play and free experimentation. Finally, the third scale, Rules and Respect, is aimed at assessing a parent's ideas on how to control and encourage their child's behavior. The survey contains 24 statements (8 on each scale); for each of them, the respondent is asked to express a degree of agreement on a 7-point Likert scale from 0 to 6 (where 0 is "completely disagree", and 6 is "completely agree"). The authors of the EPAQ conducted a series of studies that confirmed the validity and reliability of the tool in a sample of American parents [33,35]. Translation and validation of foreign questionnaires is a frequent practice in academia [36,37]. According to the ITC Guidelines for Translating and Adapting Tests (Second Edition) [38], the questionnaire was translated from English into Russian by a native Russian speaker who lives permanently in Russia and is familiar with survey methods. The translation process took into account the differences between the languages, including the specifics of sentence structure. All original characteristics of the test (questionnaire structure, instructions, semantics, and sequence of the statements, scoring scale, and layout features) were retained while adapting to the grammatical structure of Russian. The Russian-language version of the questionnaire was finalized in cooperation with a bilingual specialist in the field of child development to confirm the equivalence of the two versions of the tool.

Descriptive statistics were prepared for emotion understanding scores and demographic characteristics of the sample to study the data structure. The principal axis factoring extraction method was then used in combination with a 'varimax' rotation to classify intuitive parenting theories based on their responses to EPAQ points. ANOVA was used to assess the effect of the child and parent gender on individual factor scores, reflecting intuitive parenting theories. Finally, Spearman's correlation analysis was used to assess the relationship between factors reflecting intuitive theories of parenting, indicators of emotion understanding, and family socio-demographic variables (e.g., gender, socio-economic status (SES), and the number of siblings).

3. Results

Descriptive statistics for emotion understanding variables and demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. For the TEC External variable, there is a "ceiling effect" (M = 2.73, SD = 0.44 with a maximum score of 3). There is no "ceiling effect" or "floor effect" on other TEC indicators.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for emotion understanding and demographics.

	Range	Mean	SD	SE
TEC External	0–3	2.731	0.445	0.034
TEC Mental	0–3	1.883	0.86	0.0657
TEC Reflective	0–3	1.678	0.795	0.0608
TEC Emotion	0–9	6.292	1.4	0.1071
Family SES	0–3	1.939	0.539	0.0445
Parents' highest education	0–4	3.262	1.129	0.0925

Notes: Family socio-economic status (SES) is coded as follows: 1—family income below average, 2—average income, 3—above average income; Parents' education level is coded as follows: 1—compulsory school education, 2—secondary vocational education, 3—incomplete higher professional education, 4—higher professional education, 5—scientific degree.

An exploratory factor analysis (Principal axis factoring extraction method) was used in combination with a 'varimax' rotation to identify the internal structure of parental EPAQ answers. Sampling adequacy was checked using the Kaiser–Meyer—Olkin Test (KMO). The total KMO was 0.77, above the commonly recommended value of 0.6, indicating that variables were not multicollinear. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (χ^2 = 1018.276, $p < 0.001$). The number of factors was determined using eigenvalues ($\geq$1). The minimum factor load, including a variable into a factor, was 0.4. As a result, eight items were not included in any of the factors. Three factors reflecting intuitive theories of parenting were identified (see Table 2).

The first factor in Table 2 can be characterized as Traditional Parenting, where the adult strives to take a leading position, appreciates teaching the child skills of emotional regulation and preparation for school, and expects respect and gratitude from the child. The second factor, characterized as Uninvolved, represents an adult who occupies an observer position. The parent does not strive to speed up the process of a child's learning and development and does not consider it important to build an emotionally close relationship with the child, allowing him/her to cope with his/her own emotions. The third factor can be characterized as Supportive Parenting, where a parent believes that it is important to promote the child's emotional comfort, appreciates the child's independence, and also notes the developing potential of the game for the child's development.

Analyses of variance (ANOVA) was performed to test the effect of children's and parents' gender (and their interaction) on individual factors of intuitive theories of parenting scores. None of these effects was significant. Then a different ANOVA was used to examine differences in emotion understanding as a function of children's gender. The analysis revealed no significant differences between girls and boys on the overall level of emotion understanding score and all underlying components.

Spearman's rank correlation with the Bonferroni correction was used to assess the relationship between Factors of Intuitive Theories of Parenting, indicators of emotion understanding, and socio-demographic variables (see Table 3). The non-parametric criterion of correlation was chosen given the inconsistency of data distribution on all TEC indicators with respect to a normal distribution (Kolmogorov–Smirnov criterion).

Table 2. *Early Parental Attitudes Questionnaire* (EPAQ) factors extracted from the Russian data using the Principal axis factoring' method.

	Factor			Uniqueness
	1	2	3	
Traditional Parenting				
It's important for parents to help children learn to deal with their emotion (AA)	0.68			0.525
Children should be grateful to their parents (RR)	0.601			0.585
Parents should pay attention to what their child likes and dislikes (AA)	0.576			0.55
It is very important for young children to do as they are told (RR)	0.559			0.685
Parents can prepare young children to succeed in school by teaching them things, such as shapes and numbers (EL)	0.495			0.704
It is very important that children learn to respect adults, such as parents and teachers (RR)	0.489			0.59
A child who has close bonds with his or her parents will have better relationships later on in life (AA)	0.443			0.608
Uninvolved Parenting				
Children and parents do not need to feel emotionally close as long as children are kept safe (AA)		0.629		0.53
Reading books to children is not helpful if they have not yet learned to speak (EL)		0.628		0.553
Babies can't learn about the world until they learn to speak (EL)		0.585		0.64
Too much affection, such as hugging and kissing, can make a child weak (AA)		0.547		0.684
It is not helpful to explain the reasons for rules to young children because they won't understand (EL)		0.487		0.745
Parents should not try to calm a child who is upset; it is better to let children calm themselves (AA)		0.46		0.698
Supportive Parenting factor				
Children should be comforted when they are scared or unhappy (AA)			0.616	0.544
Babies can learn a lot just by playing (EL)			0.592	0.582
Young children should be allowed to make their own decisions, like what to play with and when to eat (RR)			0.495	0.739
Items not included in any of the factors				
Parents can help babies learn language by talking to them (EL)				0.794
It is okay if young children boss around their caregiver (RR)				0.818
It is okay if children see adults as equals rather than viewing them with respect (RR)				0.666
Children who receive too much attention from their parents become spoiled (AA)				0.81
Children don't need to learn about numbers and math until they go to school (EL)				0.857
Parents do not need to worry if their child misbehaves a lot (RR)				0.89
It is very important that the are consequences when a child breaks a rule, big or small (RR)				0.86
It is good to let children explore and experiment (EL)				0.894

Note: Item regrouping into three factors (Affection and Attachment AA, Early Learning EL and Rules and Respect, RR) revealed in the original study [33] is indicated for comparison.

Table 3. Spearman's rank correlation for factors of Intuitive Theories of Parenting, emotion understanding, and socio-demographic variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. TEC External	—								
2. TEC Mental	0.156 *	—							
3. TEC Reflective	0.110	0.162 *	—						
4. TEC Emotion	0.471 ***	0.736 ***	0.697 ***	—					
5. Traditional Parenting	−0.060	−0.014	−0.106	−0.068	—				
6. Uninvolved Parenting	−0.074	−0.161 *	−0.065	−0.157 *	0.104	—			
7. Supportive Parenting	−0.063	0.058	−0.144	−0.068	−0.061	−0.031	—		
8. Parent education	−0.165 *	0.052	0.042	−0.015	−0.317 **	−0.371 ***	0.085	—	
9. Family income level	−0.010	0.063	0.178 *	0.131	−0.177 *	−0.224 **	−0.152	0.416 ***	—
10. Number of siblings	0.007	−0.141	−0.054	−0.120	0.156	0.216 **	0.187 *	−0.095	−0.128

Note: ** Correlation is significant at * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Our analyses revealed that Uninvolved Parenting was significantly and negatively related to children's ability to understand Mental causes of emotion (rs(170) = −0.161, $p < 0.05$), and overall level of emotion understanding (rs(170) = −0.157, $p < 0.05$). Traditional Parenting and Supportive Parenting were not significantly related to emotion understanding variables. Factors of Intuitive Theories of Parenting did not significantly link to each other.

In terms of family socio-demographic variables, the results indicated that there were significant negative associations between Traditional Parenting and parent education level (rs(170) = 0.317, $p < 0.001$) and family income level (rs(170) = 0.177, $p < 0.05$). Uninvolved Parenting was related negatively to parent education level (rs(170) = 0.371, $p < 0.001$), family income level (rs(170) = 0.224, $p < 0.001$) and positively to the number of children in a family (rs(170) = 0.216, $p < 0.001$). Supportive Parenting Factor was only positively related to the number of children in a family (rs(170) = 0.187, $p < 0.05$).

4. Discussion

Previous studies have reported that intuitive theories of parenting, assessed via the Early Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire (EPAQ) [33], predicted self-reported parenting behaviors and varied across demographic factors, e.g., age, SES, and education [35]. The present study was designed (1) to explore intuitive theories of parenting in Russian parents via EPAQ, (2) to determine their effects on children's' emotion understanding, and (3) to assess their differences across family socio-demographic variables (e.g., gender, SES, and number of siblings).

An exploratory factor analysis of the parental responses on EPAQ identified three factors of intuitive theories in Russian parents. The factors obtained in the Russian sample differed substantially in content from those revealed earlier in the American parents' sample. EPAQ answers of parents from the previous study were put in three categories that addressed Rules and Respect, Affection and Attachment, and Early Learning aspects [33]. Factors derived from the Russian sample represent an intertwined structure of originally-clustered EPAQ items. Each factor included points in the questionnaire related to both emotional, learning, and respect aspects of intuitive theories of parenting. Based on careful consideration of the obtained factors, it was assumed that they could be identified as Traditional Parenting, Uninvolved Parenting, and Supportive Parenting Factors. Traditional Parenting includes beliefs that are typical of the approach in which a parent seeks to take a leading position and intentionally teaches the child cognitive and emotional skills, and expects gratitude and obedience from the child. Uninvolved Parenting is the approach in which a parent believes that there is no need to build an emotionally close relationship with the child and that it does not make sense to engage a child in activities inaccessible to the child before they can read or speak. Supportive Parenting is manifested in the belief of parents that it is important to promote the emotional comfort of the child, to appreciate the independence of the child, as well as to recognize the potential of play for child development.

The main result of the current study is that Russian parents' intuitive theories of parenting significantly related to children's outcomes in emotion understanding. Namely, children to those parents who had a propensity for Uninvolved Parenting demonstrated lower results in understanding mental causes of emotions and overall level of emotion understanding. This result indicates that the child is less proficient in emotion understanding when parents do not consider emotional closeness in the relationship with the child to be important and do not engage in joint activities with him or her. Traditional Parenting and Supportive Parenting were not significantly related to the overall level of emotion understanding score or any of the underlying components. In sum, the association between children's results in emotion understanding and parents' intuitive theories is probably due to certain parental behaviors derived from their attitudes about parenting. An earlier study by Hembacher and Frank [33] showed that intuitive theories predicted the behavior of parents, which they themselves reported. Future research needs to clarify why only one of the three factors of intuitive theories (Uninvolved Parenting) was significantly related to children's results in emotion understanding.

Analyses of the relationship between the three identified factors on the EPAQ and the socio-demographic variables revealed that less educated and financially wealthy Russian parents were tending to traditional and uninvolved parenting. In addition, analyses revealed that the number of children in the family was positively related to both supportive and uninvolved parenting, although the relationship with uninvolved parenting was stronger. This result suggests that parents with a large number of children are inclined to believe that it is good to support their children, yet, at the same time, they report a somehow uninvolved attitude towards their children. This inconsistency may be due to the difficulties experienced by parents in the upbringing of more than one child. With an increasing number of children in the family, parents' load expands considerably, resulting in parents' inability to cope due to lack of time or other resources.

To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to provide evidence for intuitive theories of parenting as a significant factor of emotion understanding development in preschool. However, the results must be interpreted in the context of some limitations. First, the sample of the study was limited and consisted of mainly mothers. Further research should run the EPAQ in a larger sample size with a greater proportion of fathers to have more representative samples and draw stronger conclusions about cross-cultural differences in the factor analysis. Second, the current study was correlational; therefore, causal inferences cannot be made. Third, children in the sample came from families who live in a culturally and geographically specific region of Russia (The Republic of Yakutia), suggesting that the findings may not generalize to broader populations of preschool children in Russia. Future studies need to replicate the results of the current study with more diverse and larger samples.

5. Conclusions

When attempting to build a complete theoretical picture of children's development during preschool, it is important to be aware of parents' intuitive theories of parenting and their influence on children's development [39]. The present study made an important contribution to this topic by examining the relationship between intuitive theories of parenting and emotion understanding in preschool children across families with varying socio-demographic backgrounds. The study asked three questions. The first research question was two-fold: What intuitive theories of upbringing do Russian parents adhere to, and are they similar to the intuitive theories of American parents? The results of the current study identified three factors of intuitive theories in Russian parents (Traditional, Uninvolved, and Supportive Parenting), which differed substantially from those revealed previously in American parents [33]. The principal difference between the results in the Russian and the American samples is that each of the three factors revealed in the Russian sample (Traditional, Uninvolved, and Supportive parenting) contained some items related to all three (Affection and Attachment, Early Learning, and Rules and Respect) aspects

of intuitive theories of parenting in the American sample. The second research question asked whether there was a relationship between intuitive theories and families' socio-demographic background. The present study demonstrated preliminary evidence that less educated and less financially wealthy Russian parents tended to adhere to traditional and uninvolved parenting styles. The number of children in the family was positively related to Supportive and Uninvolved parenting. Finally, the current study provided initial evidence of a relation between intuitive theories of parenting and children's emotion understanding (our third research question). Namely, our results suggested that the intuitive attitude of uninvolved parenting may play an important role in the development of emotion understanding, and, in particular, in the understanding of mental causes of emotions in preschool children. These abilities were supportive of long-term academic and personal achievement [3–7].

Overall, the results of this study indicate, in line with a key assumption of a cultural-historical and ecological systems approach, that the social environment, particularly parents and their beliefs, to some extent, determines the emotional development of their children [15,16,40]. While the results of this study can be considered pioneer and in need of further investigation and validation of the Russian translation of the EPAQ with a large Russian sample, we believe that the study of intuitive theories of parenting can be a very promising avenue for exploring the mechanisms of influence that the social environment exerts on a child's development. The results of this avenue of research may be useful for building effective practical ways to support and develop emotion understanding in preschool-aged children.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, D.B. and N.K.; data curation, D.B.; formal analysis, M.G.; funding acquisition, N.K.; investigation, D.B.; methodology, D.B. and N.K.; project administration, N.K.; resources, D.B.; software, M.G.; supervision, N.K.; validation, N.K.; writing—original draft, M.G.; writing—review & editing, D.B. and N.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Russian Science Foundation, grant number 20-18-00457.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study and consent procedures were approved by the Ethics Committee of Faculty of Psychology at Lomonosov Moscow State University (the approval No: 2020/61).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to the details of ethical permission for research.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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