

Development of social problem-solving abilities, “Theory of Mind,” and inhibitory control in preschool children

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The preschool period is a very important time for the development of children’s social skills. In preschool, the time spent with others increases enormously and children sometimes experience conflicts. Needless to say, it is very important for children to learn how to solve conflicts appropriately. This cognitive social skill that is necessary to interact with others smoothly is called the social problem-solving (SPS) ability. Some researchers have investigated SPS in preschoolers in terms of Theory of Mind (ToM) but few have done it in terms of inhibitory control (IC) even though it is known that ToM and IC are strongly bounded. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine SPS in terms of both ToM and IC. Additionally, the effect of gender on SPS is not coherent so another aim of this study is to examine the connection between SPS and gender.

This study was conducted with thirty-six 4-5 year olds (17 boys and 19 girls) whose mean age was 61.16 months in M preschool in Osaka City. Four tasks including the SPS task, False Belief task, Red-Blue task and vocabulary task were administered to children individually. The SPS task had four scenes, two of which contained an unintentional condition while the rest of them were displayed an intentional condition. After the story, children were asked to answer two questions: the knowledge question and the intentional questions, and to choose among the four SPS methods: the assertive way, inhibitory way, aggressive way and the reliant way.

(Understanding others’ intentions) It was found that it is more difficult to understand others’ intentions than understanding others’ mental state knowledge. It was also shown that it is more difficult for children with a low IC than those with a high IC to understand other’s intentions in the accidental conflict situation. This is because it is difficult for children with a low IC to suppress the dominant response to judge that the other child is hostile when the other child is not.

(SPS methods) The result implies that children who have not acquired ToM are more likely to choose the aggressive way than those who have acquired ToM in the intentional conflict situation. This is because children who have not acquired ToM cannot predict how others would feel when they get hit or pushed, whereas children who have acquired ToM can predict that the other child would be in pain if they were to hit or push him/her, thus they did not choose the aggressive way.

(Gender) It is implied that boys tend to ask somebody for help more often than girls in the intentional conflict situation. According to Furuuchi & Nagata (2015), self-regulation, which is included in IC, is a key to the externalization of problematic behavior, and children who have high IC can calm down in stressful situations but not those who have low IC. In this study, it was found that boys have significantly lower IC than girls. Therefore, it is possible that boys were unable to deal with stressful situations, such as the conflict situations in which the other child was hostile, very well and ended up asking somebody for help. (比較発達心理学)