Mothers’ teaching strategies and children’s effortful control: A longitudinal study

Findings on the relation of maternal verbal teaching strategies to children’s effortful control (EC; i.e., self-regulation) are limited in quantity and somewhat inconsistent. EC is defined as the efficiency of executive attention – including the ability to inhibit a dominant response and/or to activate a subdominant response, to plan, and to detect errors. In this study, children’s EC was assessed at 18, 30, and 42 months (n = 255, 229, and 209, respectively) with adults’ reports and a behavioral measure Snack Delay. Mothers’ verbal teaching strategies were assessed while the mother and child worked on a task together. Directives referred to explicit or direct behavioral instructions, questioning referred to questions directed toward the child, cognitive assistance referred to instances when the mother tried to help the child understand the task or complete it more effectively. Children’s general vocabulary also was measured. In a structural panel model taking into account prior levels of constructs and correlations within time, as well as the relations of EC and teaching strategies to children’s vocabulary, socioeconomic status, age, and sex of the child, 18-month EC positively predicted mothers’ 30-month cognitive assistance and questioning strategies and negatively predicted 30-month maternal directive strategies. In addition, high 30-month EC predicted greater 42-month maternal cognitive assistance and fewer directive strategies. Thus, mothers’ teaching strategies were predicted by individual differences in self-regulatory skills, supporting potential evocative child effects on mothers’ teaching strategies.