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The impact of a brief observation intervention on parental homework involvement

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Abstract
Parental involvement in children's homework plays a pivotal role in fostering academic success, autonomous motivation for learning, and self-regulation skills. However, this involvement often encounters challenges, leading to parental counterproductive behaviors and heightened stress levels and difficulties for both parents and children. This study aims to evaluate a brief preventative intervention designed to enhance parental mentalization and parental practices during homework. This intervention focused on teaching parents to dedicate the initial 5 min of homework preparation to a guided observation of their child before offering assistance. The study involved 76 parents (3 fathers and 73 mothers) of first- to sixth-grade children (49% girls; 51% boys; *M* age = 10.97, *SD* = 1.70), with 37 allocated to the intervention group and 39 to the control group. We assessed parental characteristics such as prementalization modes, emotion dysregulation, and parental stress at Time 1, along with various negative and positive parental practices during homework, pre and postintervention. Findings revealed significant intervention effects on parental mentalization and hostility during homework. Parents in the intervention group demonstrated an enhanced understanding of their child's mental experience and decreased levels of hostility. These results were supported further in within-group analyses in both groups. However, no notable changes were observed in other parental practices, including autonomy support, control, and warmth. The outcomes indicate the importance of heightened parental awareness regarding their child's mental state during homework, facilitating more tailored interventions aligned with the child's perspective and capabilities. Further practical implementations are discussed.

Keywords Parenting · Homework · Mentalization · Intervention · Academic support

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Introduction

During a child's elementary school years, collaborative homework preparation represents a frequent method for parents to engage in their children's education (Cooper et al., 2006; Suarez et al., 2022; Xu & Corno & Xu, 2004). Parental homework involvement can encompass a range of supportive activities, such as creating physical and psychological structures to facilitate the child's homework performance, actively participating in homework tasks and processes, assisting the child in understanding homework, and monitoring their progress. It creates dedicated moments for meaningful parent–child conversations about daily life and school experiences, and it fosters open channels of communication between parents and teachers to exchange updates on a child's academic progress or any learning difficulties they may encounter (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Appropriate parental support during homework preparation can contribute to the development of children's autonomous motivation for learning and self-regulation skills (Bempechat et al., 2011; Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011; Xu, 2011), and foster a strong sense of self-efficacy (Cooper et al., 2012; Dumont et al., 2012; Fernández Alonso et al., 2017; Grolnick et al., 1991; Xu, 2023). These findings were consistent across diverse cultural and educational contexts. Previous research has demonstrated that parental involvement in homework enhances student effort, reduces procrastination, and improves academic achievement (Dettmers et al., 2011; Xu, 2023; Xu & Corno, 2022). Similarly, Moe et al. (2020) found that parental involvement promotes need-supportive parenting, reduces homework stress, and increases student engagement.

However, parental involvement with homework that is not tailored to the child's needs may result in the child feeling frustrated and their stress increasing (Cooper et al., 2012; Dumont et al., 2014; Katz et al., 2012; Pomerantz et al., 2005), potentially acting as a barrier to the child's motivation to learn and to their developing sense of self-efficacy (Cooper et al., 2012; Dumont et al., 2014; Fernández Alonso et al., 2017; Katz et al., 2012; Pomerantz et al., 2005). Considering the significant impact of parental involvement in homework on children's learning outcomes, it is imperative to develop evidence-based strategies to enhance the quality of such involvement. This study aimed to assess the effectiveness of a brief preventative intervention designed to enhance parental comprehension of their child's academic abilities and needs and to foster supportive and responsive parental homework involvement.

Even though parents dedicate time and resources to assist their children's academic progress, many parents face challenges in providing support that matches their child's cognitive and emotional needs. Previous research on parental involvement in homework has highlighted two commonly observed counterproductive behaviors: parental control and emotional negativity (Cohen et al., 2024; Grolnick et al., 1997; Pomerantz & Eaton,). Controlling parenting behaviors during homework interactions may manifest through actions such as taking over the task, intruding and compelling children to achieve specific results, resolving children's tasks on their behalf, excessive monitoring, and checking the work without the child's consent (Grolnick et al., 1997; Pino-Pasternak,; Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001). Research has demonstrated that intrusive and controlling parental homework involvement can disrupt children's learning, diminish their motivation, and hinder their problem-solving abilities (Cooper et al., 2000; Offer, 2013; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Schiffrin et al., 2014). Parental negativity refers to expressing negative emotions or making critical comments, which could include impatience, hostility, disparaging remarks, or dismissing a child's efforts and knowledge (Pino-Pasternak, 2014; Pomerantz et al., 2005).

Parents exhibiting irritability and frustration can convey to children that schoolwork and its challenges are unpleasant and distressing (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1995).

Research indicates that both children and parents experience a heightened sense of frustration and stress on days when homework is assigned. On homework days, children consistently report heightened levels of emotional exhaustion, stress, anxiety, and frustration (Corno & Xu, 2004; Fuligni et al., 2002; Raccanello et al., 2019; Verma et al., 2002). Similarly, parents can often feel anxious or concerned about their children's academic performance, especially when experiencing low motivation or difficulty completing assignments (Cohen et al., 2024; Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001). Additionally, homework time often occurs during busy periods when parents are juggling various household tasks and have limited emotional and attentional resources available. This multitasking and competing for parental resources can hinder parents' ability to pay attention, consider their child's needs and experience, and respond to their child's cues effectively (Rutherford et al., 2018; Yatziv et al., 2018a). Parental homework-related stress can influence parental behavior and lead to expressions of negative emotions and adopting intrusive and controlling practices during homework interactions (Katz et al., 2012; Moe et al., 2020; Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001; Pomerantz et al., 2005). Additionally, parental attitudes regarding homework importance and personal past experiences can lead to rigid expectations and negative emotions (Dieleman et al., 2020). To sum up, disturbingly, parental control, intrusiveness, and negative emotions are prevalent during collaborative homework preparation (Fernández Alonso et al., 2017; Katz et al., 2012; Moe et al., 2020; Pomerantz et al., 2005; Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001).

Previous efforts to reduce counterproductive parental involvement and improve parental support during homework have primarily focused on changing parenting practices to reduce control and enhance child autonomy support (e.g., Froiland, 2011, 2015). Additionally, efforts have been made to mitigate homework-related stress by fostering parents' intrinsic motivational resources and adjusting their approaches to address any of the child's negative reactions (Moe et al.,). In the current intervention, our approach shifts the focus from parental practices toward the cognitive and emotional processes that underlie parental homework involvement. In particular, we focus on increasing parental capacity to consider their child's needs before assisting. We suggest that when parents learn to focus their attention and to consider their own and their child's mental state during homework time (e.g., to take a reflective/mentalizing stance), their ability to engage in a responsive manner improves, even without direct instruction on effective involvement strategies.

Parental mentalization refers to the parent's ability to consider and hold in mind their child's motivations, cognitive abilities, and emotional states as underlying their behaviors (Sharp & Fonagy, 2008). It involves viewing the child as a mental agent with distinct thoughts, feelings, and motives that can differ from their own (Fonagy et al., 1997; Luyten et al., 2017; Sharp & Fonagy, 2008). Reflective functioning is a manifestation of mentalization and describes one's ability to mentalize about their and others' mental states (Slade, 2005). In parent–child relationships, the term "parental reflective functioning" refers to the adult's ability to understand and respond to the child's internal state and emotions, rather than to project their feelings onto the child (Ramires & Godinho, 2011; Slade, 2005). Some have proposed that the capacity for mentalization can cultivate parents' curiosity about their child's experiences and increase parental-regulated and attuned responses to the child's emotional and physical needs (Fonagy et al., 1998).

Among parents of school-age children, greater parental mentalization capacity was associated with enhanced support during challenging tasks, as Borelli et al. (2016) evidenced. This capacity also played a role in mitigating the effect of parental stress and

emotional dysregulation on controlling behaviors (Cohen et al., 2022; Gershy & Gray, 2020). Conversely, lower levels of parental mentalization have been linked to biased and hostile interpretations of the child's behaviors, increased parental emotional reactivity, and the manifestation of impulsive, controlling, and negative behaviors (Asen & Midgley, 2019; Dieleman et al., 2020; Luyten et al., 2017). In relation to parental homework involvement, a recent observational study demonstrated that parents who understood their child's homework performance in terms of their underlying mental states responded to their children with less intrusiveness and control during homework time (Cohen et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, homework time can be a challenging context for parental mentalization. Parental role perception, such as assuming responsibility for a child's performance (Katz et al., 2012) or parental multitasking and cognitive load during homework time, can contribute to parental homework-related stress, which can curtail the parental capacity to mentalize and focus on the child's mental state (Luyten & Fonagy, 2015). When mentalization is frequently compromised, homework interactions can become stressful and coercive for both the parent and the child (Asen & Midgley, 2019). For example, reduced mentalization may contribute to misinterpreting the child's homework behavior (i.e., tiredness, annoyance, low attentiveness) as an indicator of the child's inability to tackle the task independently or their unwillingness/low motivation to engage in learning. Negative or biased interpretations of the child's behaviors can contribute to parental impatience, critical comments, and expressions of dissatisfaction, and they can result in intrusive or controlling interventions such as correcting, erasing, or forcing the child to complete the task. Such interventions often overlook the child's existing academic knowledge and abilities and their mental state. Parents may also project their own childhood experiences onto their child, assuming the child perceives homework in the same manner they did. Recognizing the challenges that homework poses to mentalization and the imperative role mentalization plays in fostering a tailored parental response, there is a need to develop homework-related practices that facilitate parental mentalization and hence, increase the quality of parental homework involvement.

In the current study, we tested the efficacy of a brief preventative intervention on the parental capacity for mentalization in the homework context and parental homework-related behaviors. As a preventative intervention, we aimed to change the structure of parental homework involvement in a manner that would remove barriers to mentalization and increase parental opportunities to consider the child's experience (Midgley et al., 2021). Thus, the intervention focused on teaching parents to change their homework involvement by implementing the following: (a) dedicating uninterrupted attention to the child by minimizing external distractions (such as cell phones, other household chores, taking care of other siblings, etc.); (b) pausing and observing their child engaging independently with their homework for 5 min (without offering any intervention), while paying attention to the child's attention level, emotions, motivation, and ability to deal with the task, and the parent's emotional state; and (c) intervening based on the child's assessed needs.

The intervention was developed based on Cohen and colleagues' (1999) "watch, wait, and wonder" approach. This approach highlights the transformative role of parental observation of the child's initiative in fostering a reflective stance for the parent and its potential to enhance parental sensitivity to the child's needs. Additionally, the intervention aligns with a significant finding from neuroscience studies, which indicates that stress or arousal is a key factor influencing the quality of mentalizing (Luyten & Fonagy, 2015) and, in particular, the manner by which mentalization can support parental sensitivity (Yatziv et al., 2018b). Therefore, reducing the arousal level and regulating the response by removing

competitive cognitive demands, slowing down, and engaging in observation can enhance the quality of parental mentalization (Yatziv et al., 2018b).

In the current study, we randomly assigned parents to a control versus an intervention condition to assess the efficacy of a brief observational intervention in enhancing parental mentalization and improving parental homework practices. We hypothesized the following:

1. Parents who practiced the 5-min observation technique would demonstrate improved capacity to understand their child's mental experience during homework compared to the control condition, as measured by an increase in their Reflective Functioning scores.
2. Parents who practiced the 5-min observation technique would report on reduced counter-productive parental homework behaviors, including controlling behaviors and hostility, following the intervention, and compared with the control condition.
3. Parents who practiced the 5-min observation technique would report an increased parental productive homework behaviors, including autonomy-supporting behaviors and warmth following the intervention compared with the control condition.
4. Another hypothesis concerns the changes that are expected to occur within the groups over time. Specifically, we speculate that significant changes will be observed within the intervention group from T1 to T2 in the measured variables (autonomy support, control, hostility, and warmth), reflecting the positive effects of the intervention. In contrast, we do not anticipate significant changes within the control group between T1 and T2 (the waitlist period). However, we expect that changes may occur within the control group between T2 and T3, following their participation in the intervention.

A preliminary pilot study established the acceptability and feasibility of the 5-min observation intervention (Gershy et al., 2023). This study demonstrated that the intervention was easy to implement and highly accessible to parents. Moreover, participating parents reported feeling more available to their children and less emotionally reactive, providing initial support for the intervention's potential benefits.

Method

Participants

An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power version 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al., 2007) for sample size estimation at a power level of 0.95, based on data from a pilot study (Gershy et al., 2023; $n=32$). The effect size in the pilot study (Gershy et al., 2023) was small-medium ($\eta p^2=.04$). With a significance criterion of $\alpha=.05$, the minimum sample size needed with this effect size is $n=80$[1] for detecting an interaction effect in a repeated measures mixed ANOVA.

Figure S1 presents the participant flow diagram (see supplemental material; Appendix A). We approached 147 Israeli parents to assess their suitability to participate in the study following recruitment on social networks. Inclusion criteria were parent–child

[1] Our initial aim was to obtain 80 participants. Unfortunately, we had to discontinue data collection due to the onset of a war in Israel in October 2023.

dyads in which (a) the child was in elementary school, (b) the child attended regular education (rather than special education), and (c) the parents assisted their children with homework at least once a week. Of the participants approached, 60 families either did not meet these criteria or were unwilling to participate in the study protocol (e.g., did not want to be recorded in the meetings); 87 parents were randomly assigned to the intervention ($n = 46$) or the control condition ($n = 41$). Seven families assigned to the intervention conditions dropped out due to a lack of homework at the time ($n = 3$) and reported a burden of participation ($n = 4$). Two families in the intervention group were excluded—one because the mother completed the intervention with a different child and another due to a lack of cooperation with the observation instructions. In the control group, one family was excluded due to prior acquaintance with the researcher, and one family dropped out due to a lack of homework. The final analyzed sample consisted of 76 parents (3 fathers and 73 mothers) of first- to sixth-grade children (49% girls; 51% boys; *M age* = 10.97, *SD* = 1.70; 37 intervention and 39 control). Family income of 55.3% of the sample was above the national average (16,518 ILS; Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019), and 85.5% of the parents had completed higher education (i.e., academic degrees, vocational training, and other educational programs). More than half of the parents identified as traditional or religious (57.8%). All parents gave consent to participate in the study and received monetary compensation.

Procedure

Figure S2 summarizes the randomized control trial (RCT) procedure (see supplemental material; Appendix B). Participating parents were assigned to either an intervention or a control (waitlist) group using a computerized randomization algorithm balanced for the child's gender and age. Three graduate-level research assistants administered the intervention. All meetings with parents were video-recorded and reviewed by the first author to monitor protocol adherence. Participants in both conditions initially completed Time 1 (T1) measures online, which included assessments of prementalization modes, emotion dysregulation, parental stress, autonomy support, and control as well as negative and positive parental emotional reactions. Following this, they met with a researcher for a short interview using the Reflective Functioning (RF) scale (Fonagy et al., 1998; Cohen et al., 2024) to discuss their most recent experience assisting their child with homework.

Following the interview, parents assigned to the intervention condition were requested to incorporate a new practice during their next homework session with their child. This practice involved observing the child doing homework for 5 min before offering any assistance. During the observation, parents completed an online form guiding them to pay attention to their own patience level and their child's motivation, feelings, and efficacy, and to consider the assistance they believe their child needs (see supplemental material; Appendix C, for the detailed guided observation form). Parents practiced the 5-min observation for the following 2 weeks at least twice. Parents assigned to the control condition continued the homework routine with their children as usual for 2 weeks following the reflective functioning interview.

After the 2-week practice period, parents in both conditions completed Time 2 (T2) measures online, including measurements of autonomy support and control as well as

negative and positive parental emotional reactions concerning their homework involvement in the past 2 weeks. Parents met with the researcher for a second reflective functioning interview regarding the last time they assisted their child with homework. Parents in the intervention condition then shared their experience with the intervention. We asked parents to describe if there were any implementation challenges and what they had learned while implementing the technique. The content of their responses was used for qualitative analysis, complementing the quantitative analyses. Parents in the control condition received an explanation regarding the intervention, and they were invited to practice it for 2 weeks. After 2 additional weeks, parents in the control condition completed Time 3 (T3) measures online and met with the researcher for a third reflective functioning interview regarding the last time they assisted their child with homework. The parents were also asked about their intervention experience.

All procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later comparable ethical standards. The Ethics Committee of the XX University approved the study (approval number 2021Y0306). The study and the following analytic plan were preregistered on Open Science Framework (the link to the full preregistration was removed to ensure the deidentification of the manuscript and was provided on the Title page).

Measures

Parental mentalization (reflective thinking)

We used the RF scale (Fonagy et al., 1998) to evaluate parental capacity for mentalization in relation to the child. Parental reflective functioning was coded from a transcribed manuscript of structured interviews conducted with parents during the meetings with the researcher (T1 and T2 for intervention and control condition, T3 only for control condition). The interviews (see supplemental material; Appendix D) were based on the Adult Attachment Interview (Main & Goldwyn, 1994) that has been adapted to the homework context (Cohen et al., 2024; for example, "Describe how you think your child felt and/or what they thought during the homework you two did together recently? Why do you think your child felt/thought/behaved that way?" and "What kind of help did they need from you while doing their homework? What made you think these were the things he needed help with?"). The coding was conducted on de-identified transcripts by two trained coders and was based on the following criteria: (a) awareness of the nature of mental states, (b) explicit effort to tease out mental states underlying behavior, (c) recognizing developmental aspects of mental states, and (d) mental states in relation to the interviewer. The final score ranged from 1 = "Unintegrated, Bizarre or Inappropriate RF" to 9 = "Exceptional RF" (PRF; Fonagy et al., 1998). Inter-rater reliability, calculated based on 30% of the interviews coded by two independent coders, was high, ICC (2,1) = .81.

We used the Reflective Functioning (RF) interview to assess parental mentalization, given its advantages over self-report measures, which are more prone to social desirability biases. The RF interview prompts parents to describe and reflect on behaviors during the homework interaction, focusing on the underlying mental states. Coding emphasizes the parent's capacity to interpret behaviors in mental state terms and the coherence of the narrative based on concrete examples.

Parental autonomy support and control

These factors were assessed using the Hebrew version of the 18-item Perceived Autonomy Support Scale (Mageau et al., 2015; translated by Katz et al., 2012), which has two subscales, autonomy support and control. For the current study, we adopted the scale to the homework context (e.g., "I make my child feel guilty when not concentrating or making mistakes while we are doing homework"). The scales' internal consistencies in the current study were good (autonomy support: Cronbach's α T1 =.76, T2 =.86; control: Cronbach's α T1 =.88, T2 =.87).

Negative and positive parental emotional reactions

These factors were assessed using two subscales of the Hebrew version of the Multidimensional Assessment of Parenting Scale (Parent & Forehand, 2017) adapted to the homework context. The hostility scale assesses parental harshness and coercive processes such as arguing, yelling, and irritability. The warmth scale assesses the display of positive emotions (e.g., "During homework, I express affection by hugging and kissing my child"). Internal consistency of the two subscales in the current study was good (warmth: Cronbach's α T1 =.72, T2 =.82; hostility: Cronbach's α T1 =.89, T2 =.85).

Parental experience of the intervention

During an interview, we asked all parents in the intervention condition to share their experience implementing the 5-min observation technique by the end of the intervention. Specifically, we asked parents to describe if there were any implementation challenges and what they had learned while implementing the technique. We analyzed participants' responses thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure in the following order: (1) answers were transcribed verbatim, (2) each answer was given a detailed code capturing its main content, (3) answers with similar/close codes were collated under descriptive themes, (4) a second researcher assessed the goodness of fit of the themes to the original verbatim transcript, and (5) disagreements were discussed and final themes were named and described using examples from the transcripts.

Analytic plan

Little's (1988) Missing Completely at Random tests indicated random missing data (χ^2 (44) = 49.69, p =.30). Firstly, t-tests ensured no initial differences in parental characteristics between intervention and control groups. Then, we conducted five repeated measures ANOVAs to analyze changes in parental mentalization and practices over time, treating time as a within-subject predictor and condition as a between-group predictor. Additionally, correlations between parenting characteristics and changes in practices post-intervention were examined separately for each condition. Residuals from regression models quantified improvements from T1 to T2. Within-group effects were assessed for both intervention and control groups using planned contrasts. Last, to capture parental experience of the intervention beyond the outcome measures, we conducted qualitative analysis of parents' responses to the post intervention interview.

Table 1 Pearson correlation between parents' characteristics and outcome-variables in Time 1

Study's variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Parental mentalization	-	.14	−.04	−.29*	−.08	.12	−.21	−.08	.16
2. Autonomy support		-	.37**	−.20	−.31**	−.06	.11	.14	.18
3. Warmth			-	−.21	−.40**	.05	−20	−02	.13
4. Control				-	.63**	−.16	.17	.03	−.12
5. Hostility					-	−.29*	.22	−.04	−06
6. Child's gender						-	−.22	−08	−07
7. Child's age							-	.02	.14
8. Family income								-	.22
9. Parent education									-

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$. Coding for gender was implemented as follows: 1 = boys, 2 = girls

Table 2 Means and standard deviations of outcome variables across intervention condition and time

Outcome	Condition	*n*	Time 1		Time 2	
			M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Parental mentalization	Intervention	37	3.86	1.67	4.88	1.71
	Control	39	4.19	1.29	4.03	1.26
Autonomy support	Intervention	37	17.54	2.28	18.04	2.10
	Control	39	18.09	2.54	17.95	2.76
Control	Intervention	37	8.26	3.37	7.78	3.17
	Control	39	7.52	3.19	7.48	2.97
Hostility	Intervention	37	16.94	3.91	16.05	3.70
	Control	39	16.64	3.89	16.97	4.15
Warmth	Intervention	37	10.57	1.79	10.02	1.62
	Control	39	10.95	2.44	10.82	2.41

This approach aimed to enrich our understanding beyond self-report measures, providing a more holistic perspective that enhances the interpretation of the data and analyses results (for the full analytic plan see supplemental material; Appendix E).

Results

Descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses

The correlations among the outcome variables, parents' mentalization, and demographic variables, measured at T1, are presented in Table 1, and the means and SDs of the outcome variables across conditions and time are presented in Table 2. Parental mentalization, as measured by the RF interview, negatively correlated with parental control, but not with the other outcome variables. Among demographic variables, child gender was

significantly correlated with hostility, indicating higher reported hostility among parents of boys. No significant correlations were found between the outcome variables and child's age, family income, or parental education. A *t*-test comparison revealed no a-priori differences between the parents in the intervention and control conditions in initial levels of parental mentalization, indicating that no initial group differences confounded the intervention effects on these variables.

Intervention effects

Parental mentalization of the child

Parental capacity for mentalization was submitted to a repeated measures analysis with time as a within-subject predictor and condition as a between-group predictor. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for time $F(1, 74) = 7.03$, $p = .01$, $\eta p^2 = .09$ but not for condition $F(1, 74) = .75$, $p = .39$, $\eta p^2 = .01$. Importantly, the predicted time × condition interaction was significant, $F(1, 74) = 13.64$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .15$. As seen in Fig. 1, a significant improvement in parent-reported mentalization was observed only in the intervention condition. A subsequent Bonferroni post hoc test for parental mentalization in the intervention condition revealed significant improvement in the capacity for mentalization from T1 ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.67$) to T2 ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.71$) in the intervention condition (mean difference = 1.01, 95% CI [.55, 1.47], $p < .001$). This improvement was not displayed in the control condition ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.29$) to T2 ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.27$; mean difference = −.16, 95% CI [−.61, −.007], $p = .29$).

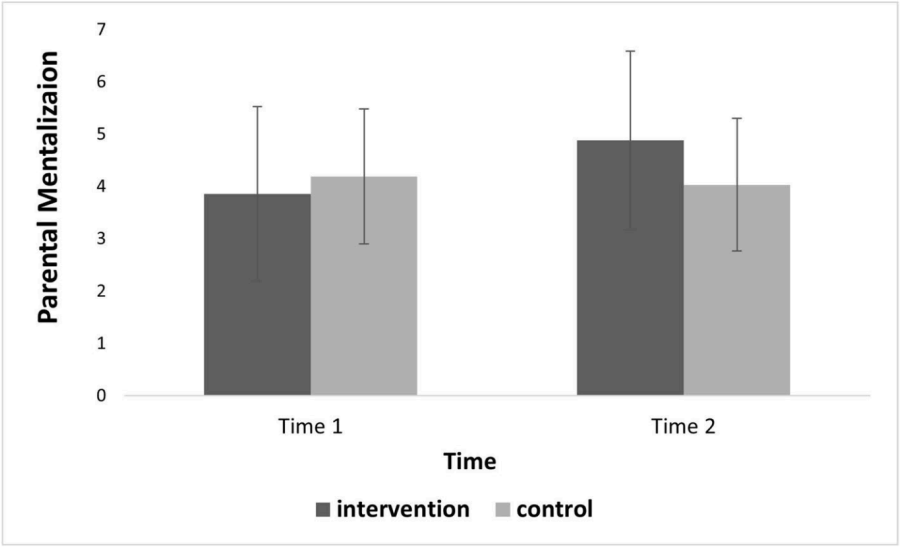

Fig. 1 Changes in parental mentalization over time and across conditions. *Note:* A higher score of parental mentalization represents a higher parental reflective thinking (higher mentalization) toward the child

Productive and counterproductive parenting practices during homework

To examine the intervention's effect on parental involvement during homework, we looked at counterproductive behaviors involving control and hostility, and productive behaviors encompassing autonomy support and warmth. Repeated measures analyses of variance were conducted for each parental practice, treating time as a within-subject predictor and condition as a between-group predictor.

For counterproductive parental behaviors, the analysis of controlling parenting practices showed nonsignificant main effects for time $F(1, 74) = 1.50$, $p = .22$, $\eta p2 = .02$ and condition $F(1, 74) = .55$, $p = .46$, $\eta p2 = .01$, with a nonsignificant small effect size for the interaction between time × condition $F(1, 74) = 1.12$, $p = .29$, $\eta p2 = .02$. Lastly, parental hostility during homework was examined, revealing a nonsignificant main effect for time $F(1, 74) = .81$, $p = .37$, $\eta p2 = .01$ and condition $F(1, 74) = .13$, $p = .71$, $\eta p2 = .002$. However, as predicted, a significant medium effect size emerged for the time × condition interaction $F(1, 74) = 3.90$, $p = .05$, $\eta p2 = .05$, see Fig. 2. Post hoc tests showed a significant reduction in hostile behaviors in the intervention condition (T1: $M = 16.94$, $SD = 3.91$; T2: $M = 16.05$, $SD = 3.70$; mean difference = −.89, 95% CI [−1.77, −.007], $p = .04$), while the control condition exhibited no such reduction (T1: $M = 16.64$, $SD = 3.89$; T2: $M = 16.97$, $SD = 4.15$; mean difference = −.89, 95% CI [−1.77, −.007], $p = .44$).

For productive parental behaviors, the analysis of parental autonomy support revealed nonsignificant main effects for time, $F(1, 74) = .53$, $p = .47$, $\eta p2 = .01$, and for condition, $F(1, 74) = .21$, $p = .65$, $\eta p2 = 0.003$, with a similarly nonsignificant small effect size for the time × condition interaction, $F(1, 74) = 1.73$, $p = .19$, $\eta p2 = .02$. Similarly, examining parental warmth during homework revealed a nonsignificant medium effect size for time, $F(1, 74) = 3.62$, $p = .06$, $\eta p2 = .05$, a nonsignificant small effect size for condition, $F(1,$

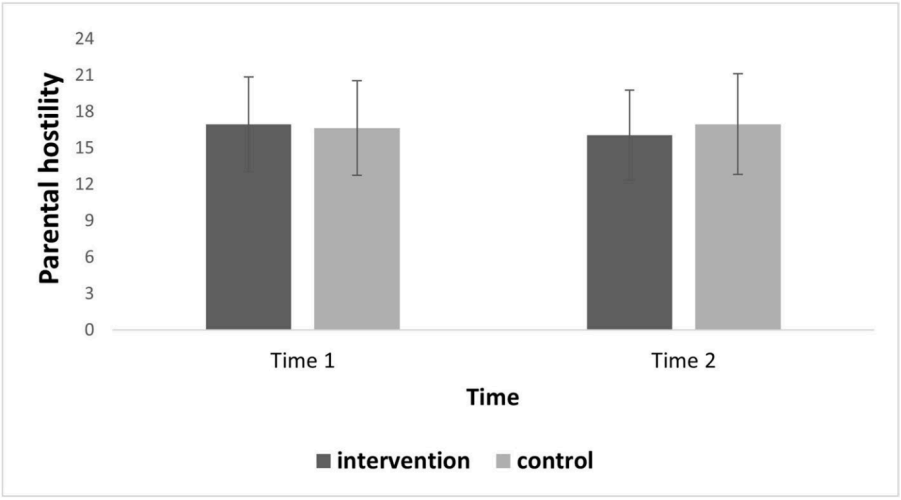

Fig. 2 Changes in parental hostility over time and across conditions. *Note:* A higher score of parental hostility represents a higher prevalence of hostile behaviors toward the child

74) = 1.70, p =.20, $\eta p2$ =.02, and a nonsignificant small effect size for the time × condition interaction, $F(1, 74) = 1.38$, p =.24, $\eta p2$ =.02.

To summarize, significant changes across study conditions and time were found in parental mentalization and parental hostility. Parents receiving the brief mentalization-based intervention demonstrated improvement in their capacity to consider their child reflectively and reported a reduction in their angry and hostile responses toward the child. Nonetheless, no significant changes were observed in relation to parental reports on autonomy support, control, and parental warmth.

Within intervention effects

To better understand the effects within each group, we tested specific hypotheses about changes in the measured variables (autonomy support, control, hostility, and warmth). Specifically, within the intervention group we compared T1 with T2. For the control group, we used planned contrasts, comparing T1 with T2 and comparing the mean of T1 and T2 with T3. These contrasts were designed based on a priori hypotheses anticipating that significant within-group effects would emerge postintervention, but not during the waitlist period for the control group (i.e., between T1 and T2).

Predicting parental mentalization, the analysis revealed the predicted pattern. There was a significant increase from T1 to T2 in the intervention group $F(1, 36) = 16.94$, p <.001, $\eta p2$ =.32. In contrast, in the control group, there was no significant change in parental mentalization between T1 and T2 (during the waitlist period), $F(1, 38)$ =.91, p =.35, $\eta p2$ =.02, but there was a significant effect when comparing the mean of T1 and T2 with T3, $F(1, 33) = 17.63$, p <.001, $\eta p2$ =.35, suggesting a notable increase in mentalization following the intervention period.

Regarding predicting parental hostility, the analysis indicated a predicted significant reduction from T1 to T2 in the intervention group $F(1, 36) = 7.08$, p =.01, $\eta p2$ =.16. In contrast, in the control group, there was no significant change in parental hostility between T1 and T2 (during the waitlist period), $F(1, 38)$ =.42, p =.52, $\eta p2$ =.01, but there was a significant effect when comparing the mean of T1 and T2 with T3, $F(1, 34) = 7.95$, p =.008, $\eta p2$ =.19, suggesting a notable decrease in hostility following the intervention period. For the other measures, only small and nonsignificant effects were observed.

Parental experience of the intervention

Thematic analysis was conducted to assess the main themes parents used to describe the implementation challenges and what they had learned while implementing the intervention. The analysis revealed four descriptive themes.

1. Of the parents in the intervention condition, 18% described that the observation technique increased their ability to pay attention to their child and support the child's motivation and natural interest by providing choices and letting the child lead the interaction. The following quotes convey this.

> "I think, beyond homework, it gave me a little more confidence to give her the option to choose for herself; she is much happier about that too" (P51).
> "I realized that instead of deciding myself what the prize would be and what the task would be for which he would receive the prize, I let him be the decision maker and decide according to her will" (P51).

2. Of the parents in the intervention condition, 40% described that the observation technique improved their ability to pay attention to their own mental state during the homework interaction. The following quotes express this.

> "I was able to understand that to a large extent, this is a situation and an interaction that requires me to work on myself before I attempt to sit with him. This is an interaction that cannot succeed in a negative environment but must be in a positive and enabling environment and there is a great influence here of the way I arrive to it" (P4).
> "I felt that I needed to approach it with patience and a different mindset. It [the intervention] taught me that emotional distance is necessary to achieve any results, not to be emotionally involved in all the processes that occur. And not to blame myself and not to take it as if it's coming from a place where, well, it's hurting me. It's the observation, the additional dimension that comes in" (P4).

3. Of the participating parents in the intervention condition, 30% described that the observation technique improved their ability to pay attention to their child's mental state and consider their child's homework behaviors in terms of their underlying mental state. The following quotes convey this.

> "Especially the idea of…examining it and stepping into his shoes within this specific situation was fascinating to me. It was refreshing, and it was good. I think I also found myself thinking about how he feels in other situations unrelated to homework" (P7).
> "In these 5 minutes of observation, you do get some insights into how she sees herself in the context of homework. It gives you some understanding of what might prompt her, let's say, to sit down now and do her homework, what could be helpful" (P56).

4. Of the parents in the intervention condition, 12% reported not deriving significant benefits from the intervention. They mentioned two main reasons: (a) they expressed that the intervention did not provide novel insights as they felt they were familiar with the concepts taught in the intervention, and (b) some participants felt that the intervention did not effectively address their child's homework difficulties, which they perceived as particularly complex. Take the following quotes for example.

> "I didn't feel like it contributed. I think coming free from tasks and being calm is something I was already doing or at least trying to" (P6).
> "The difficulty begins even before sitting down to do homework. It's about getting him to the table in the first place. We insist more on doing it in a quiet, closed room, trying to focus only on that, but these are things that can't always be done consistently all the time" (P90).

Discussion

Helping parents in supporting their children's learning can significantly boost children's sense of efficacy, engagement, and motivation in the learning process. Despite the common practice of assigning homework and expecting parental involvement, only a limited number of programs have been developed and implemented to support parents in providing

effective academic support at home. This study employed an RCT design to evaluate the effectiveness of a brief preventative intervention designed to enhance parental mentalization and practices during homework time. The intervention focused on teaching parents to dedicate the first 5 min of homework preparation to observing the child's performance before offering any help. We hypothesized that compared to controls, parents who practiced the 5-min observation technique would demonstrate a greater understanding of their child's mental experience during homework, report increased autonomy support and warmth, and exhibit reduced hostile and controlling parenting behaviors. Our findings provided mixed results in relation to the intervention's effectiveness. We found medium to large significant intervention effects regarding changes in parental mentalization and in relation to parental hostility during homework time, suggesting that parents could change their minds about their child and react differently when implementing the 5-min observation technique. However, no condition differences were indicated in relation to parental reports on using controlling interventions, providing autonomy support, and expressing warmth toward the child during homework time. An additional analysis of planned contrast provided a deeper examination of the within-group effects. This analysis reinforced the intervention's efficacy, underscoring its role in promoting an increase in parental mentalization and a decrease in hostility. These results offer evidence of the intervention's potential to enhance key aspects during shared homework time.

Parents' understanding of the child's experience

Parents' ability to focus on their child's experiences and consider their child's separate feelings, thoughts, and motives is crucial for responsive involvement. This study's findings suggest that structuring parent–child interactions during homework time by instructing parents to direct their attention to their children before intervening may encourage thoughtful consideration of the child's experience and the assistance they require to address the task effectively. This structuring resulted in decreased parental reactivity and consequently fewer negative responses. These adjustments during homework time, such as starting with observation and comprehending the child's abilities and needs before any involvement, may have cultivated an interested stance toward the child's perspective. This likely enhanced consideration of the child's perspective and more tailored parental involvement.

Our findings are in line with theoretical views on links between observation, decreased reactivity, and a parental reflective stance (Cohen et al., 1999; Zhang et al., 2023). Some suggest that fostering parental curiosity can be achieved by offering parents structured opportunities to observe their child's behavior and mental states. Embedding these observations within routine parent–child interactions may help reduce reactivity. Our finding that addressing external conditions that mitigate the capacity for mentalization (e.g., reducing task load, minimizing distractions, freeing up time and place) can enhance parental mentalization supports the theoretical assumption that views the capacity for mentalization as a flexible ability. This assumption sees mentalization as a capacity that fluctuates in relation to the availability of cognitive resources (such as attention) and arousal level (Luyten & Fonagy, 2015). Previous research supports this assumption. For example, Schechter and colleagues (2006) investigated changes in the cognitive processes and attributions of mothers toward their children following a single video feedback session where mothers observed themselves interacting with their child in the presence of the researcher. The study revealed improvements in mothers' capacity for mentalization toward their children and in fostering more positive thoughts and attitudes in mothers toward them.

Productive and counterproductive parenting involvement

In line with our hypothesis, parents in the intervention condition showed a significant reduction in levels of hostility following the intervention, compared to parents in the control condition. One possible explanation is that the intervention, aimed at promoting reflective thinking, encouraged parents to actively pay attention and stay tuned to their child's emotional experiences and to other characteristics such as their ability to concentrate and stay focused on the task as well as their sense of efficacy to solve it. Consequently, adopting a reflective stance diminished the child's negative attributions (e.g., being lazy, intentionally opposing) and enhanced parental empathetic involvement. Therefore, this strengthened parents' capacity to address effectively the child's distress during homework situations while also reducing hostile practices (Lok & McMahon, 2006; Rutherford et al., 2015; Schechter et al., 2006). This reduction in levels of hostility following the intervention aligns with findings from studies indicating that improved parental mentalization capacity was linked to enhanced support during challenging tasks (Borelli et al., 2016). Additionally, previous studies have found that the capacity for mentalization served as a buffer against the effects of parental stress (Cohen et al., 2022; Gershy & Gray, 2020), which is well known in the homework situation. Our findings are also in line with similar results that indicated a reduction in coercive parenting practices, that is, parents less frequently shouted at children, became angry with them, used physical discipline, and engaged in control, which was mediated by improved parental mentalization (Gervinskaitė-Paulaitienė et al., 2023). In other words, parents better understand their mental states, therefore reducing their negative and hostile behavior (Fonagy, 2003).

Contrary to our expectations, no significant changes were observed in other parental practices during homework, such as autonomy support, control, and parental warmth. There are several possible explanations for the lack of intervention effect in these domains.

First, in the current study, we relied on self-reporting to assess parental practices employed during homework sessions. It is plausible that the brief self-report measures were not sensitive enough to detect subtle shifts in parental autonomy-supporting and controlling practices postintervention. Evidence supporting this notion can be gleaned from parental verbal feedback postintervention. Parents noted changes in their perceptions of their children, including heightened awareness of their academic abilities and capacity to manage homework independently. Moreover, several parents described adopting new autonomy-supporting practices, such as offering choices or directly inquiring about the type of support their child needed.

Another possibility is that while the intervention increased parental awareness of the child's mental state and facilitated a more positive approach to interactions, it did not equip parents with new intervention strategies to enhance their capacity to support their child's autonomy. It is possible that to bolster their autonomy support, parents might require additional training in homework-related parenting skills, such as how to handle a child's resistance during homework time or gaps between the child's academic knowledge and the task requirements. Acquiring these skills could complement the observational intervention, providing parents with a broader repertoire of strategies tailored to their child's needs.

Regarding parental warmth, the lack of change reported postintervention could be attributed to parental perceptions of warmth gestures as less pertinent to the context of homework support. In verbal feedback, parents expressed surprise at the inclusion of gestures such as

hugs or shared touches when asked about homework interactions because they did not view these gestures as essential in this context. Alternatively, the absence of reported changes in parental warmth might stem from parents' unawareness of utilizing such gestures, particularly subtle ones such as glances, light strokes, and shared joy during interactions. Another possible explanation for the lack of significance in this finding could be cultural differences in physical affection and parent–child interactions. Previous studies have highlighted how perceptions of parenting styles and the use of practices like warmth vary across cultures, which may contribute to these results (Bornstein, 2012; Trommsdorff, 2023).

Future research should explore changes in parental practices and warmth within the context of homework interaction, employing diverse cultures and a range of methodologies, including observation and non-self-reporting measures.

Limitations and future directions

Although the study results support the intervention's positive effects on parental perception of the child's homework behavior and parental hostility level, it is important to consider the study results in light of several limitations. First, the participant number was relatively small and thus susceptible to each family's unique characteristics; it also lacked sufficient power to detect small effects. Second, the study population consisted of parents from Israel, who were of average/high socioeconomic status. Thus, it is hard to discern if the intervention would have been effective to a similar extent with families from other cultures, different levels of education, or families experiencing financial hardship and/or higher levels of child-related difficulties. Given the specific cultural context of this population, it would be worthwhile examining the effect of the intervention on additional populations in future studies to expand the validity and generalizability of the findings across diverse family settings. Similarly, follow-up studies with a larger sample should consider additional parental characteristics (e.g., parental ability for emotion regulation, parental stress, etc.) that may influence the intervention's outcomes. The third limitation of the current study is the short duration of the 2-week intervention, which may not have been sufficient to fully capture the long-term effects of the intervention on parental practices and children's homework engagement. The absence of follow-up assessments limits our ability to evaluate whether the observed changes are sustained over time and whether they translate into meaningful improvements in children's academic progress and motivation. Additionally, the study relied solely on parental reports, omitting valuable perspectives from children and teachers. Including children's viewpoints could have provided important insights into their experience of parental involvement and its impact on their homework engagement, self-regulated learning, and motivation. Moreover, teachers' reports could have offered a broader understanding of the intervention's implications within the learning environment, particularly if the intervention had been implemented over a longer period. Future research should aim to address these limitations by extending the intervention duration, incorporating multiple informants (parents, children, and teachers), and implementing follow-up evaluations to better assess the long-term impact and ecological validity of the intervention.

Summary and implications

Parental involvement in homework offers significant benefits, including fostering students' autonomous motivation, self-regulation, and self-efficacy as learners (Cooper et al., 2012;

Grolnick et al., 1991; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). However, despite its potential, parental homework involvement can lead to frustration and stress for both students and parents (Cooper et al., 2012; Katz et al., 2012; Pomerantz et al., 2005), ultimately harming students' motivation and sense of efficacy (Patall et al., 2008). To address this, we developed an observation-based intervention aimed at fostering a greater understanding of their child's mind, needs, and abilities and in improving the quality of parental homework support. The current results provide evidence that by changing the parent–child interaction structure and teaching parents to observe their children before intervening, parents can pay more attention to their child's perspective and abilities and reduce the levels of hostility and negative responses. Nonetheless, additional skills-related guidance may be needed to improve parental use of autonomy-supporting practices.

Additionally, this intervention offers a straightforward and practical approach to homework preparation that parents can easily implement, making it a practical and effective strategy for improving the quality of parental academic support. Teachers' early implementation of the intervention during the first school years can potentially help parents approach homework from a more regulated and attentive stance and reduce hostility and negative parental involvement during homework time.

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Data availability The complete dataset and supplementary materials can be accessed on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/3BJFU.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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Current themes of research:

Contribution of the parent-teacher alliance to school engagement during COVID-19. Describing the development of a theory-driven intervention to improve parental homework support. Cognitive and emotional mechanisms underlying counterproductive parental involvement in homework.

Gershy, N., Cohen, R., & Poria, N. A. (2023). Parental mentalization goes to school: A brief online mentalization-based intervention to improve parental academic support. *Attachment & Human Development, 25*(2), 254–271.

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