

NDAU Task Information

Theory of Mind

What is Theory of Mind?

Theory of mind is the ability to attribute mental states to oneself and to others. This function enables an individual to understand or predict other people's behaviour in social situations.

Why is Theory of Mind important?

As children develop, so does their theory of mind understanding; they increasingly see human beings as individuals with beliefs, desires, intentions and feelings that are separate to their own. This ability helps children to develop the social skills that are needed for social pretend play, reciprocal friendships and appropriate cooperation.

How does the NDAU measure Theory of Mind?

Theory of Mind is measured through a series of stories using soft toys or toy figures as the main characters. Each story creates a situation in which the child is aware of something that a main character in the story is not. The child is then asked questions about what the main character thinks. To pass the task, the child must be able to understand that another's mental representation of the situation is different from their own, and use that information to predict the character's behaviour.

For example, in the 'Sally-Anne Location Task', children are introduced to toy figures called Max and Sally (see figure 1). Max has a football and he puts it in a basket before going out for a walk. While Max is away, Sally moves the football from the basket to the cupboard. When Max returns, the child is asked, 'Where will Max look for his football?'. The correct answer is that Max will look in the basket as he is unaware that his football has been moved, unlike the child who is aware where the ball really is.



Figure 1. Sally-Anne Location Task