

Previous research suggests that mothers adjust their interaction strategies in response to their children's developmental level. This study examined how mothers of typically developing children and children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) used mental state language. A total of 22 mothers of children with ASD and 24 mothers of typically developing children participated in story-telling tasks using wordless pictures specifically designed to elicit mental state talk. Interactions were coded reliably for mothers' and children's frequency (absolute amount of talk) and proportion (relative amount of talk) of mental state term types and functions, relevant and irrelevant utterances, as well as mothers' causal talk and causal questioning. Results indicated that mothers of typically developing children used more causal talk than did mothers of children with ASD in both absolute and relative terms. In addition, mothers of typically developing children produced a greater relative number of desire terms and mental state functions to encode true mental states. Children with ASD produced more irrelevant (and fewer relevant) utterances than their typically developing counterparts in both absolute and relative terms. Implications, limitations, and directions for future research are considered.