in their theory of mind (Devine & Hughes, 2018a, b; Wellman, 2015). For example, children who talk with their parents about feelings frequently as 2-year-olds show better performance on theory of mind tasks (Ruffman, Slade, & Crowe, 2002), as do children who frequently engage in pretend play (Harris, 2000).

Executive function, which describes several functions discussed earlier in this chapter, such as planning and inhibition, that are important for flexible, future-oriented behavior, also is connected to theory of mind development (Lecce & others, 2018; Powell & Carey, 2017). Children who perform better at such executive function tasks show a better understanding of theory of mind (Benson & Sabbagh, 2017). For example, in one study of 3- to 5-year-old children, earlier development of executive function predicted theory of mind performance, especially on false belief tasks (Doenyas, Yavuz, & Selcuk, 2018). Language development also likely plays a prominent role in the increasingly reflective nature of theory of mind as children go through the early childhood and middle and late childhood years (Meins & others, 2013). Researchers have found that differences in children's language skills predict performance on theory of mind tasks (Devine & Hughes, 2018a, b). For example, in one study of 3- to 5-year-old children, earlier development of executive function predicted theory of mind performance, especially on false belief tasks (Doenyas, Yavuz, & Selcuk, 2018).

Among other factors that influence children's theory of mind development are advances in prefrontal cortex functioning (Powers, Chavez, & Heatherton, 2016), engaging in make-believe play (Kavanaugh, 2006), and various aspects of social interaction (Hughes, Devine, & Wang, 2017). Among the social interaction factors that advance children's theory of mind are being securely attached to parents who engage children in mental state talk ("That's a good thought you have" or "Can you tell what he's thinking?") (Laranjo & others, 2010), having older siblings and friends who engage in mental state talk (Hughes & others, 2010), and living in a higher-socioeconomic-status family (Devine & Hughes, 2018a). A recent study found that parental engagement in mind-mindedness (viewing children as mental agents by making mind-related comments to them) advanced preschool children's theory of mind (Hughes, Devine, & Wang, 2018). Also, research indicates that children with an advanced theory of mind are more popular with their peers and have better social skills in peer relations (Peterson & others, 2016; Slaughter & others, 2014).

Another individual difference in understanding the mind involves autism (Jones & others, 2018; Leung & others, 2016). Researchers have found that children with autism have difficulty developing a theory of mind, especially in understanding others' beliefs and emotions (Berenguer & others, 2018; Garon, Smith, & Bryson, 2018). Also, a recent study found that theory of mind predicted the severity of autism in children (Hoogenhout & Malcolm-Smith, 2017). Thus, it is not surprising that autistic children have difficulty in interactions with others.

Language Development

Toddlers move rather quickly from producing two-word utterances to creating three-, four-, and five-word combinations. Between ages 2 and 3, they begin the transition from saying simple sentences that express a single proposition to saying complex sentences.

As young children learn the special features of their own language, there are extensive regularities in how they acquire that particular language (Clark, 2017; Litz, Snyder, & Pater, 2017). For example, all children learn the prepositions *on* and *in* before other prepositions. Children learning other languages, such as Russian or Chinese, also acquire the particular features of those languages in a consistent order.

Understanding Phonology and Morphology

Phonology refers to the sound system of a language, including the sounds used and how they may be combined. During the preschool years, most children gradually become more sensitive to the sounds of spoken words

phonology The sound system of a language, including the sounds used and how they may be combined.