



Characteristics and Differences in Everyday Parent-Child Academic and Peer Conversations



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Introduction

Unprompted parent-child conversations provide an ecologically valid means to investigate how information about a child's academic events and peer relationships are transmitted to parents during middle childhood. The current study examines naturally occurring parent-child conversations in thirty dual working-parent families with a child between eight and twelve years of age over two weeknights after school/work.

Numerous features of parent-child interactions, analogous to the conversation characteristics studied here, have been linked to various child outcomes and aspects of the parent-child relationship. For instance, the frequency and quality of peer-related talk has been linked to children's social competency (Laird et al., 1994). It has also been found that parents' expression of emotion and reaction to children's emotion during conversation predicts children's social competency and coping ability (Eisenberg et al., 1999; Valiente et al., 2004). Further, when examining parental monitoring and child disclosure, Kerr and Stattin found child disclosure to be the strongest predictor of several measures of child adjustment (2000).

However, such studies have relied on daily diary reports, survey measures, structured interviews, and behavior observation during a prompted task or discussion. This study takes the first step in determining whether or not laboratory and self-reported parent-child interactions are representative of everyday parent-child interactions in the home.

All data used in this presentation were collected by the UCLA Sloan Center on the Everyday Lives of Families (CELf) and were coded by the Parent-Child Conversation Project team.¹

Participants

- 30 families
- Two parents present in the home (2-3 children per family)
- One focal child 8-10 years old (15 girls)

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Methods

- We examined video (with transcripts) of families interacting in their homes on two weekday afternoons and evenings after school.
- There were 518 parent-child conversations that took place in children's homes.
 - 67% of conversations were with mothers
 - 58% of conversations were with daughters
- There were two groups of parent-child conversations.

Peer conversations: 234 conversations about peers (excluding siblings), such as a plan to see a friend, a recent conflict with a peer, or a lunchtime interaction with a classmate.

Academic conversations: 284 conversations about academic topics, such as a homework assignment, an upcoming test, or a meeting with a tutor

- In each parent-child conversation we noted the presence of seven conversation characteristics. Each conversation characteristic was coded only if it occurred in a part of the conversation relevant to peer or academic content. Table 1 includes examples of each conversation characteristic within a conversation excerpt.

Conversation Characteristics

Child Report of Information: information volunteered or elicited by the child about an event, activity, or conversation that occurred in the past

Parent Monitoring: evidence of a parent trying to keep track of the child's whereabouts, activities, or who they are, were, or will be with

Planning: parent or child discussion of arrangements or tasks to prepare for a future event

Problem-focused Talk: parent or child talk focused on how to resolve something problematic to the parent or child; including advice-giving and efforts to help the social partner understand, reinterpret, or cope with emotion related to conversation topic the problem

Child Help-seeking: child expression of request or desire directed toward a parent for help in attaining a goal he or she is unable to attain alone

Child Expression of Negative Emotion: vocal or physical (including facial expression, body posture or gesture) expressions of sadness, fear, anger, or disgust by the child

Child Expression of Positive Emotion: vocal or physical (including facial expression, body posture or gesture) expression of happiness or enjoyment by the child

Table 1. Characteristics of Parent-Child Conversations. Bolded portions indicate lines meeting criteria for conversation characteristic.

Conversation Characteristic	Example of Conversation Characteristic
Child Report of Information	Son: This is- ((showing Mother paper)) Mother: Oh, Billy: Son: Thirteen out of fourteen on my spelling test. Mother: Oh, that's very good.
Parent Monitoring	Father: Who's going to watch you at Justin's house? Son: Leslie Father: Leslie's where? Son: ((shrugs his shoulders)) Father: Where did she go? Son: Soccer practice Father: How is she going to watch you at her house? Son: uh-hh Father: No you can't go to Leslie's house there's no one to watch you
Planning	Mother: kay Laura tomorrow you're supposed to bring some stuff to school right? do you know what you're supposed to bring? Daughter: read it Mother: it says examples of ads for the postal services, grocery ads, government or political ads, ads for carpet cleaning do you know anything about this? Daughter: no he didn't tell us
Problem-Solving	Mother: I would- I would maybe say something to Morgan and say, "You know what Morgan. You know that Emily really hurt my feelings the other day." Daughter: That's what I said. Mother: What did Morgan say? (P) Sometimes girls at this age can be really mean.
Child Help-Seeking	Daughter: Mommy do we could you tell Marisol to not clean this up? Mother: Yes I will because Abby's going to come over after [school tomorrow]. Daughter: [I know= Daughter: =and we don't want this dirty.
Child Positive Emotion Expression	Daughter: And Carmen got the same thing? and we both went like this ((Stares blankly at paper)) And then she opened hers to see what was wrong. She went ((Demonstrates Carmen's reaction)) And >she's all< √ooh::√ ((Slowly opens paper)) >She got< citizenship. Daughter: ((Squeals and wiggles fingers)) I got the same exact thing she did (P) except it said (P) the parents of Carmen >bla bla bla<
Child Negative Emotion Expression	Father: So how many people went to this? Son: All the people that passed their olive. Father: Is that most of the class? Son: About half. Mother: Mm that's great. Father: Good. Mother: Did Brenton go? Son: Yeah he passed. Mother: That's great (P) and James too? Son: Mmhm. Sister: Cori? Son: ((shakes head)) I feel sorry for Cori.

Results

During the two weekday afternoon and evenings we studied, children had an average of 9.5 academic conversations (range: 1-35) and 7.8 peer conversations (range: 0-24) with parents. Parent-child academic and peer conversations frequently included many of the studied conversation characteristics as summarized in Table 2.

On average, parent monitoring, problem-focused talk, and child help-seeking were more likely to occur in academic conversations than in peer conversations, and child expression of positive emotion was more likely to occur in conversations about peers.

Interestingly, there were no significant correlations between the characteristics of a child's conversations with parents about academic topics and his or her conversations with parents about peers. Although a small sample limited the study's statistical power to detect small effects, some of the correlations were near zero (e.g., parent monitoring in peer and academic conversations).

Table 2. Observed Characteristics of Parent-Child Academic and Peer Conversations

Conversation Characteristic	Occurrence in Academic Conversations	Occurrence in Peer Conversations	T-test t(28) =	Pearson Correlation r(27) =
Child Report of Information	63%	61%	.50	.25
Parent Monitoring	69%	37%	4.67***	.03
Planning	46%	40%	1.25	.27
Problem-focused Talk	46%	30%	2.84**	.16
Child Help-seeking	18%	8%	2.52*	.06
Child Positive Emotion Expression	7%	15%	-2.15*	-.06
Child Negative Emotion Expression	10%	8%	.72	-.03

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Note: T-tests and correlations are calculated between percentage occurrence of conversation characteristics in academic and peer conversations in the 29 families who had at least one peer and one academic conversation.

Discussion

Our study provides a window into the everyday lives of families, allowing us to describe how often parent-child dyads engage in behaviors of interest to developmental psychologists. For example, the results suggest that parent monitoring and problem-focused talk are more likely to occur during parent-child interactions related to academics than during interactions regarding peers. When studying parent-child interaction, the topic or content that is the focus of the dyad's attention plays an important role in shaping the characteristics of the interaction.