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. This 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-observation during a prompted task or academic conversation. This study takes the first step in determining whether or not laboratory and self-observation during a prompted task or academic conversation.

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) expression 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

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 differences in 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).

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.