



Mother-Child Conversations about Past Emotional Events: Links with Mothers' Attachment Representations and Children's Socioemotional Adjustment

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INTRODUCTION

- Research indicates that during discussions of past emotional events with children, mothers' **elaborative reminiscing** – in which mothers provide many details and encourage children to contribute to conversations about past events with open-ended questions and statements – promotes children's cognitive development (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006).
- However, little is known about maternal factors that contribute to their elaborative reminiscing and the significance of maternal elaborative reminiscing for children's socioemotional development.
- Adult attachment representations - internalizations of early attachment-related experiences – are thought to guide emotional experiences within interpersonal contexts and provide a cognitive filter through which emotions are processed and expressed (Dykas and Cassidy, 2011).
- Given that the topics that mothers and children discuss pertain to significant emotional events, how mothers talk about these events might be associated with children's social competence and internalizing and externalizing problems.
- The present study will examine the role of mothers' attachment representations in predicting maternal reminiscing and the significance of maternal reminiscing for child social competence, externalizing behaviors, and internalizing symptoms.

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1: Mothers' secure attachment representations will be positively correlated with elaborate mother-child reminiscing.

Hypothesis 2: Elaborative mother-child reminiscing will be positively correlated with child social competence.

Hypothesis 3: Elaborative mother-child reminiscing will be negatively correlated with child externalizing behaviors.

Hypothesis 4: Elaborative mother-child reminiscing will be negatively correlated with child internalizing symptoms.

METHODS

Participants

- This study comprised 16 mothers (M age = 31.7 years, SD = 3.75) and their children, who ranged in age from 2.5 to 3 years old.
- Mothers were 94% White/Caucasian and 6% Hispanic.
- Family income varied from less than \$10,000 per year to over \$100,000 per year, with a median family income level of \$61,000 - \$70,000 per year.

Measures

Mother Attachment

The Attachment Script Assessment (Waters and Rodrigues-Doolabh, 2004) is a narrative-based measure of adult attachment. Security is indexed by secure base script knowledge (i.e, understanding that attachment relationships serve secure base and safe haven functions; ICC = .90).

Children's Socioemotional Outcomes:

Mothers reported on their child's social competence, internalizing symptoms, and externalizing problems using the Brief Infant Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment (Briggs-Gowan et. al., 2004).

Mother-Child Emotion Conversations

- Procedure:** Mothers and their children were video recorded while discussing three emotional events, including when the child was hurt, scared, and happy.
- Elaborative Coding Scheme:** Verbatim transcripts were coded for elaborative reminiscing indicated by (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 1996; Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006):

(1) **General Memory Question-Elaborative (GMQ ELAB):** Open-ended memory questions that ask the child to provide *new* information about an event

(2) **Yes-No Questions-Elaborative (YNQ ELAB):** Questions that ask the child to confirm or deny a *new* piece of memory information

(3) **Statement Elaborations (ST ELAB):** Statements that provide the child with *new* information about the event

(4) **Confirmative Evaluations (EV CON):** Comments that confirm information provided by the child

Example Transcript:

Mom: Do you remember when we went trick or treating and you saw that big scary monster?

Child: Yeah

Mom: Yeah at the house- Was that scary?

Child: Yeah

Mom: Yeah you remember that. What did we do? Did momma hold you?

RESULTS

Table 1. Correlations Among Key Study Variables.

	Mothers' Elaborative Reminiscing			
	Hurt Event	Scared Event	Happy Event	All Events Combined
1. Mother's Security	.192	.345	.385	.472*
2. Child Social Competence	.317	-.104	-.153	.046
3. Child Internalizing Symptoms	-.183	.007	-.016	-.104
4. Child Externalizing Problems	-.086	-.115	.203	-.011

* $p < .05$ (1-tailed).

DISCUSSION

Mothers' Attachment and Elaborative Reminiscing

Findings indicated that mothers' attachment security was associated with more elaborative reminiscing when discussing past events with their toddlers.

Attachment representations reflect the cognitive-affective residue of individuals' early caregiving experiences. Thus, findings suggest that the legacy of early experiences with parents as reflected in mothers' attachment contributes to the way in which they discuss past emotional events with their child.

Mothers' Elaborative Reminiscing and Children's Socioemotional Development

Mothers' elaborative reminiscing was not significantly associated with children's social competence, internalizing symptoms, or externalizing problems.

One potential reason for the non-significant associations is the small sample size. Data coding is on-going, and it is expected that with an increased sample size, associations may reach conventional standards of significant.

Specifically, the association between mothers' reminiscing when discussing a time when the child was hurt was moderately associated with children's social competence. Mother-child conversations have different functions depending on discussion topic. When discussing an event in which a child is hurt, mothers use more practical, problem-solving narratives which might be especially relevant to promoting children's social competence.

Limitations: Due to current circumstances, coding is ongoing. Based on preliminary data, when all data are coded, we expect greater support for hypotheses.

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