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# Antecedents of Mother-Child Co-Construction of Coherent Narratives of Past Emotional Experiences

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## INTRODUCTION

- Mothers' sensitive guidance during conversations with their children about past events with emotion-laden content plays an important role in assisting children to coherently represent their emotional experiences. The ability to recount one's emotional past in a well-organized manner significantly contributes to children's autobiographical memory skills (Cleveland & Reese, 2006) and the healthy emergence of their self concept (Fivush, 1994).
- Most studies on the developmental origins of the quality of mother-child emotion dialogues have largely focused on infant attachment security (e.g., Oppenheim, Koren-Karie, & Sagi-Schwartz, 2007).

## PRESENT STUDY

- The purpose of this longitudinal study is to further our knowledge of the early developmental antecedents of coherent mother-child emotion dialogues in the preschool years by examining:

- 1. Mothers' coherent accounts of their own childhood experiences.** The manner and coherence in which mothers reflect upon their own personal experiences may impinge on the extent to which they guide their children in reminiscing about personal memories within an organized context (Reese, 2008).
- 2. The quality of interactions during infancy.** Open and coherent verbal emotion communication during the preschool years are likely an extension of open and responsive caregiving during the non-verbal years, reflected in mothers' sensitivity to children's emotional signals during infancy (Bretherton, 1990).
- 3. Emotional coaching during toddlerhood.** Mothers who provide effective strategies to help their children deal with emotions during toddlerhood (e.g., by talking to the child about the emotions being experienced) are also more likely to later provide appropriate scaffolding when reminiscing about emotional experiences, and thus creating more detailed and coherent narratives.

- Understanding the origins of mother-child emotion discourse during the preschool years is of particular import as it is a period accompanied by major representational, cognitive, linguistic, and affective advances, permitting the child to become active participants of shared conversations.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

- Fifty mothers and their first-born children (26 girls, 24 boys) from middle class, average income families participated in the current study over the first 3.5 years of the child's development.

### PROCEDURE and MEASURES

- **3 months:** The Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996) was conducted to assess mothers' ability to construct a coherent narrative of their own childhood experiences. The coherence of transcript scale was used for the current study.
- **10 months:** Mother-infant interactions were observed during a home visit to assess maternal sensitivity during infancy. The observations were coded based on the Maternal Behaviour Q-Sort (MBQS; Pederson & Moran, 1995).
- **21 months:** Mothers completed the Meta-Emotion Interview (MEI; Katz, Gottman, Shapiro, & Carrere, 1997) to measure their attitudes, beliefs, and philosophy regarding emotions both within herself and those emerging in her toddler. The "coaching" scale was used for the current study. This scale reflected how mothers assisted their children in coping with various negative emotions.
- **3.5 years:**
  - **Mother-child emotion dialogues:** Mothers and children were observed while engaging in a discussion regarding the child's past emotional experiences. The Autobiographical Emotional Events Dialogue (AEED; Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, & Etzion-Carasso, 2000) was applied to the narratives to measure whether mothers and their children worked together in co-constructing an emotionally open and coherent account of the child's past experiences. The coherence scale was used for purposes of the current study. This scale assessed the extent to which mothers and children created narratives that were not only organized, but that were also products of a collaborative effort.
  - **Mother and Child Vocabulary:** The National Adult Reading Test (NART-R; Blair & Spreen, 1989) and Expressive Vocabulary Test (EVT; Williams, 1997) were used to assess mother and child linguistic capacities, respectively. These were then used as control variables in analyses.

## RESULTS

- **Control variables:** Child gender (with males coded as 1, females coded as 2), maternal education at 3.5 years, and mother and child linguistic capacities.
- **Three separate hierarchical linear regressions** were performed in order to determine whether the three key variables would predict coherent mother-child emotion dialogues, after taking into consideration the effects of the various controls.
- In each regression model, mother-child emotion dialogue coherence was entered as the outcome variable; child gender, maternal education, and mother and child linguistic abilities were entered as a first step; followed by each of the key predictor variables in the second step.
- Results indicated that:
  - 1. Mothers' coherent account of their own childhood experiences significantly predicted coherent constructions of narratives surrounding children's emotional experiences at 3.5 years** above and beyond the effects of child gender, maternal education, and mother and child linguistic capacities.
  - 2. Maternal sensitivity during infancy was a marginally significant predictor of emotion dialogue** ( $p = .05$ ) after taking into account contributions of the control variables.
  - 3. Emotional coaching during toddlerhood significantly contributed to coherence of emotion dialogues** beyond the effects of child gender, maternal education, and mother language. Child linguistic capacity, however, was significant.

Table 1. Summary of Hierarchical Regressions

DV = Emotion Dialogue Coherence	B	SE	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
<i>Regression 1: IV = Maternal Coherence</i>					
<i>Step 1</i>					
Gender	-.61	.68	-.15	.08	.08
Mother Education	.18	.23	.13		
Maternal Language	-.67	2.51	-.04		
Child Language	.03	.02	.27		
<i>Step 2</i>					
Gender	-.48	.64	-.12	.21	.13*
Mother Education	.10	.22	.07		
Maternal Language	-.63	2.36	-.04		
Child Language	.02	.02	.15		
<b>Maternal Coherence</b>	<b>.41</b>	<b>.16</b>	<b>.38*</b>		

## RESULTS Cont'd

DV = Emotion Dialogue Coherence	B	SE	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
<i>Regression 2: IV = Maternal Sensitivity</i>					
<i>Step 1</i>					
Gender	-.61	.68	-.15	.07	.07
Mother Education	.18	.23	.13		
Maternal Language	-.67	2.51	-.04		
Child Language	.03	.02	.27		
<i>Step 2</i>					
Gender	-.24	.68	-.06	.17	.09†
Mother Education	.09	.22	.06		
Maternal Language	-.89	2.42	-.06		
Child Language	.04	.02	.30		
<b>Maternal Sensitivity</b>	<b>1.06</b>	<b>.53</b>	<b>.32†</b>		
<i>Regression 3: IV = Emotion Coaching</i>					
<i>Step 1</i>					
Gender	-.61	.68	-.15	.08	.08
Mother Education	.18	.23	.13		
Maternal Language	-.67	2.51	-.04		
Child Language	.03	.02	.27		
<i>Step 2</i>					
Gender	-.52	.63	-.13	.25	.17**
Mother Education	.13	.21	.09		
Maternal Language	-1.46	2.3	-.10		
Child Language	.04	.02	.31*		
<b>Emotion Coaching</b>	<b>.38</b>	<b>.13</b>	<b>.42**</b>		

Note: \* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  † $p < .1$

## CONCLUSIONS

- Conversations about past emotional events serve as an important context for mothers to help their children organize memories and coherently represent their emotional past. Findings from this study suggest that this process begins early in the child's development.
- Our results emphasize the need to focus on early antecedents, such as mothers' coherent representations of their own past, and their responsiveness and involvement throughout their children's emotional experiences, in order to understand the developmental origins of children's ability to coherently integrate their personal memories into their emerging self-concept.

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