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**Parent-Child Discourse**  
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## Conversation and Developing Understanding: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Ross A. Thompson, *University of California, Davis*

With remarkable ease, young children acquire significant insight into mental states, their experiences, psychological processes in themselves and others, and the natural world. It is a challenge to developmental theory to understand how they do so. The contributors to this special issue highlight how children's powerfully inductive mental capacities are aided by the conceptual catalysts of conversation, especially with mature partners. Conversation contributes to conceptual growth through the linguistic structures that scaffold developing knowledge (especially of complex and intangible influences) and permit its sharing; through the encounter with divergent perspectives and a more knowledgeable partner; through its influence on representations of past, present, and anticipated events; and as a medium of cultural transmission. Parents' conversational discourse provokes conceptual growth in developing minds, and children also contribute significantly to conversational quality, which is affected by the quality of the parent-child relationship, the emotional climate of the home, and other influences. This article introduces the special issue by profiling these issues and identifying central themes for future research.

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## Mother-Child Reminiscing and Children's Understanding of Mind

Elaine Reese, *University of Otago*

Emily Sutcliffe Cleveland, *Wellesley College*

Children's autobiographical memory is hypothesized to be a function of their understanding of mind (Perner & Ruffman, 1995; Welch-Ross, 1995). In the context of mother-child reminiscing, children may learn about and display their understanding of mind (Nelson, 1999; Welch-Ross, 1997). We studied links among maternal reminiscing style, children's autobiographical memory, and children's understanding of mind for children from age 3.5 to 4.5 years. We found little evidence of links between children's autobiographical memory and their understanding of mind, but maternal reminiscing style was correlated with children's understanding of mind, specifically their understanding that visual access leads to knowledge. We discuss the specific ways in which maternal reminiscing may be linked to children's understanding of mind.

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Elaine Reese, Department of Psychology; Emily Sutcliffe Cleveland, Department of Psychology.

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## Constructing Emotional and Relational Understanding: The Role of Affect and Mother-Child Discourse

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Deborah Laible, *Lehigh University*

Jeanie Song, *Southern Methodist University*

Research suggests that both emotion-laden discourse and positive affect facilitate the construction of emotional and relational understanding. Despite this, research has not typically examined simultaneously the connections among affect, emotional discourse, and socioemotional development. In this study, 51 preschool children ( $M$  age = 52.80 months) and their mothers took part in two discourse tasks (a reminiscing task and a storybook reading), and both tasks were coded for the emotional content and style of the discourse and for the emotional quality of the interaction between the mother and child. Children also completed measures of emotional understanding and representations of relationships, and mothers completed a maternal report of aggressive behavior. Both the level of shared positivity and the style and content of the discourse between the dyad was related to the child's level of socioemotional development.

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Deborah Laible, Department of Psychology; Jeanie Song, Department of Psychology.

Support for this project was provided by a Young Scholar's Grant from the Templeton Foundation.

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## The Development of Future Time Concepts Through Mother-Child Conversation

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Judith A. Hudson, *Rutgers University*

This study examined the relationship between characteristics of mothers' talk about future events and young children's ability to contribute to naturalistic conversations about future events. Results indicated that three maternal style factors were related to 2.5- and 4-year-olds' contributions: elaborative/advanced language, general and past reference, and repetitive prompts and preferences. Younger children's contributions were related to elaborative/advanced language and general and past reference factors. Older children's contributions were correlated with all three factors, but the highest correlation was found for elaborative/advanced language. These findings indicate that the maternal style variables affecting children's contributions to conversations about future events are different from those found in research on mother-child talk about past events. Mothers' use of conventional time terms was also related to 4-year-olds' production of temporal terms, suggesting that maternal time references contribute to children's understanding and use of temporal terminology. Results are discussed in terms of the relationship between mother-child conversations about future events and the development of young children's understanding of future time.

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Judith A. Hudson, Department of Psychology.

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## Similarity Comparisons and Relational Analogies in Parent-Child Conversations About Science Topics

Araceli Valle and Maureen A. Callanan, *University of California  
at Santa Cruz*

This article explores analogy as a communicative tool used by parents to relate children's past experiences to unfamiliar concepts. Two studies explored how similarity comparisons and relational analogies were used in parent-child conversations about science topics. In Study 1, 98 family groups including 4- to 9-year-olds explored two science museum exhibits. Parents suggested comparisons and overtly mapped analogical relations. In Study 2, 48 parents helped first- and third-grade children understand a homework-like question about infections. Parents suggested relational analogies and overtly mapped analogical relations for children. Use of relational analogies was positively associated with scores on a post-task measure of understanding. These studies suggest that parents help children learn about unfamiliar science topics by suggesting personally relevant or culturally pervasive analogies and by elaborating unfamiliar and non-obvious analogical relations.

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Araceli Valle, Department of Psychology; Maureen A. Callanan, Department of Psychology.

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## Coping, Attachment, and Mother-Child Narratives of Stressful Events

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Robyn Fivush and Jessica McDermott Sales, *Emory University*

Based on attachment theory and recent findings with adults on relations between narrative coherence and well-being, we hypothesized that mothers who are more securely attached and who cope more effectively would be more engaged and more emotionally expressive in mother-child co-constructed narratives about stressful events. Twenty-seven mostly white mixed-SES mothers and their 9- to 12-year-old children with asthma were asked to discuss two asthma-specific stressful events together: a chronic parent-child conflict and an acute asthma attack. Few relations emerged for the asthma attack event, although, against predictions, mothers who were more anxiously attached were more engaged and more explanatory in these narratives than mothers who were less anxiously attached. For the conflict event, mothers who were more anxiously attached talked more about other people's emotions than did mothers who were less anxiously attached, and mothers who cope more effectively were more engaged, more emotionally expressive, and more explanatory, and, in turn, their children showed more flexible coping.

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Robyn Fivush, Department of Psychology; Jessica McDermott Sales, Department of Psychology.

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## A Discussion of the *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* Special Issue

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Judy Dunn, *Institute of Psychiatry*

Developmental issues raised by the papers are considered. First, collaboration between conversational partners raises the possibilities for cognitive change but also involves problems. The difficulty in making causal inferences from the speech of one partner in a conversation is considerable; ways of addressing this are considered. Second, the issue of level of analysis of conversational discourse key to the outcomes under consideration is discussed. Is it the content of the talk, the pragmatic intent of the mother, or the context in which the conversation happens that fosters the children's understanding? Or is the quality of the relationship between the interlocutors key—as suggested by some of the findings reported here? The complexity of what happens in mother-child conversations is usefully illustrated and new questions are opened up for us in these contributions.

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## It's Probably Good to Talk

Paul L. Harris, *Harvard University*

Despite their diverse themes, the various articles in this special issue all focus on the possibility that the child's view of the world is infused with premises and assumptions taken on board from other people. Demonstrating that process of transmission from parent to child is not easy. One powerful strategy would be to show that parental discourse predicts the cognitive attainments of adopted children. Meantime, the articles provide encouraging evidence for the following conclusions: (1) parents vary not just in the sophistication of the emotional insight that they nurture in their children but also in the positive—or negative—orientation of that insight; (2) mothers who offer more explanations in discussing a family conflict have children who report more flexible coping; (3) mothers' metamemory comments are associated with children's sensitivity to the way in which a given source of information supplies information; (4) mothers often invite children to contemplate the future by reminding them of similar occasions in the past; and (5) parental use of analogy is associated with greater scientific understanding on the part of the child.

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