Maternal Conflict Behavior Profiles and Child Social Skills

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Abstract

The current study examined associations between mothers’ behavioral profiles during mother-child conflict interactions and their children’s social skills. This person-centered approach classified 181 mothers according to their levels of emotional responsiveness, intrusiveness, negativity, and engagement facilitation behaviors during an eight-minute conflict discussion task with their child. Three distinct classes of mothers were identified using latent profile analysis: sensitive/engaged, moderately sensitive/engaged, and insensitive/disengaged. An analysis of covariance indicated that children of mothers in the sensitive/engaged group had significantly higher social skills than children of mothers in the moderately sensitive/engaged and insensitive/disengaged groups. Results suggest that mother-child conflict interactions may benefit children’s social development when mothers facilitate their children’s participation in a highly sensitive manner.

Keywords: mother-child relations; conflict; social skills; conversation

Introduction

Mother-child interactions provide a foundation for children’s developing social and emotional skills (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network [NICHD ECCRN], 2004). Mothers are considered to be the primary agents of socialization due to their extensive involvement in early life caregiving, and disagreements between mothers and children are normative developmental events that contribute to child socialization (Eisenberg, 1992; Sayer, Biahchi, & Robinson, 2004). Because conflict exposes children to others’ feelings and viewpoints, provides opportunities for children to practice conflict resolution skills, and is likely to elicit negative emotions, mother-child conflict experiences have the potential to benefit children’s emotional understanding and perspective-taking, social problem solving abilities, and emotion regulation skills (Klimes-Dougan & Kopp, 1999; Maccoby, 1992). Proficiency in these domains is related to the

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development of social understanding and socially competent behavior, which have been shown to enhance children’s success in difficult social interactions outside the home (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1992; Stein & Albro, 2001).

Research evaluating characteristics of mother-child conflict in relation to children’s social development tends to emphasize either global mother-child relationship characteristics (e.g., Laible, Panfile, & Makariev, 2008) or discrete conversational tactics mothers use during conflict discussions (e.g., constructive vs. oppositional comments; Recchia, Ross, & Vickar, 2010). Few studies explore the combined influence of mothers’ conflict interaction style and specific discussion strategies on the potential social benefits of mother-child conflict, and most of these employ variable-centered analyses, using main effects and interactions between variables to test relations with outcomes. Person-centered analyses, conversely, allow researchers to determine how levels of measured characteristics co-occur within individual mothers in a given sample. For example, Nelson, O’Brien, Grimm, & Leerkes (2014) grouped mothers by levels of sensitivity and conflict frequency, finding a group of agreeable mothers who had high levels of sensitivity and low levels of conflict, a group of dynamic mothers who were highly sensitive with very high conflict frequency, and a group of disconnected mothers who scored very low on sensitivity and had moderate conflict frequency. The authors found that children of disconnected mothers had significantly higher levels of conflict with a best friend 2 years later.

The current study used a person-centered approach to group mothers by facets of sensitivity during conflict interactions, including emotional responsiveness, intrusiveness, and negativity, and the frequency with which mothers attempted to engage children in the conflict discussion. Then, we examined associations of group membership with children’s social skills during early elementary school. This is an especially relevant developmental period for two reasons: children have the emerging cognitive capacity to problem-solve and negotiate with parents (Kerns, 2008), and this is one of the first times children are required to demonstrate socially competent behavior in a formal, peer-oriented arena (Berndt, 2004). Because mothers who communicate with their children using rich and elaborative language tend to have children with more advanced social skills (Cristofaro & Tamis-LeMonda, 2012; Hampson & Nelson, 1993), analyses controlled for the complexity with which mothers spoke to their children during the conflict interaction.

Maternal Sensitivity during Conflict Interactions

Maternal sensitivity is a multifaceted construct defined by warmth and responsiveness, respect for children’s autonomy, and an absence of hostility. This definition of sensitivity includes the presence of positive regard, contingent responses to children’s emotions, and a lack of negativity. These emotional aspects of mother-child interactions promote children’s feelings of security both within and outside the mother-child relationship and encourage children to explore and practice social interactions with mothers as well as peers (Booth, Rose-Krasnor, McKinnon, & Rubin, 1994). Sensitivity also includes respecting children’s independence and avoiding overly restrictive or controlling behaviors. These stylistic aspects of mother-child interactions foster children’s developing sense of autonomy, self-control, and confidence and contribute to socially appropriate behavior (Booth et al., 1994). Both emotional and stylistic aspects of maternal sensitivity have been
related to children’s emotion understanding, emotional perspective taking, and social competence, the ability to successfully navigate interactions with others (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997; NICHD ECCRN, 1999, 2004). Maternal sensitivity and responsiveness during conflict is associated with a greater likelihood that children derive social benefits from these interactions (Nelson et al., 2014; Nelson, Boyer, Sang, & Wilson, 2014). Because of the importance of social problem solving skills in early school age, the extent to which mothers navigate conflicts with their children in a sensitive manner has implications for children’s social skills during this developmental period characterized by increasing expectations for competent peer interactions (Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992). The three major facets of maternal sensitivity in the context of mother-child conflict interactions are discussed further in the following paragraphs along with their relations with children’s social skills.

Maternal emotional responsiveness is a facet of maternal sensitivity that includes the provision of a nurturing emotional climate along with more specific behaviors that convey support for the child’s emotions, interest in the child’s contributions, and a sense of enjoying and valuing the child’s company (Nietzel & Stright, 2003). For example, emotionally responsive mothers may show affection toward the child or use a warm and sympathetic tone of voice if the child is distressed, demonstrate acceptance of the child’s emotions and opinions, or flexibly and creatively attempt to understand and clarify the child’s thoughts. These types of maternal behaviors may be particularly beneficial during conflict interactions in which children are likely to experience negative emotions and may be reluctant to articulate opinions that oppose those of their mothers (Eisenberg, 1992; Recchia et al., 2010). Supportive responses to children’s negative emotions may help attenuate negative affect and arousal, increasing the likelihood that children will be able to attend to and process social information presented during the conflict (Hoffman, 1983). Furthermore, feelings of acceptance and positive regard are likely to increase children’s participation in emotionally difficult discussions, which is related to a higher probability of mother-child dyads resolving conflicts with a mutually beneficial compromise (Nelson, Boyer, et al., 2014).

A lack of intrusiveness is a second facet of maternal sensitivity that captures the extent to which mothers respect their children’s autonomy. Intrusiveness includes qualities of mother-child interactions characterized by a general disregard for the child’s independent thought processes along with frequent controlling behaviors (Nietzel & Stright, 2003). Intrusive mothers may verbally direct the conversation or physically control the child’s movement, interrupt the child frequently, or further their own agendas without considering the child’s ideas or plans. Because mother-child relationships involve a power differential that favors mothers, there is a greater likelihood that mothers will achieve their desired resolution to a given conflict (Recchia et al., 2010). Highly intrusive mothers exercise this power in conflict interactions, utilizing firm control to direct the conversation to a one-sided resolution in which the mother’s goals are realized without giving much consideration to the child’s interests (Nelson, Boyer, et al., 2014). These types of coercive conflict interactions are likely frustrating for children who are not permitted to express themselves or voice their opinions, eliciting negative emotional arousal that interferes with social information processing (Hoffman, 1983; Laursen & Hafen, 2010). Conversely, children of mothers who foster ‘committed compliance’, ensuring that children retain feelings of autonomy within social contextual limits, tend to
demonstrate better internalization of adult social rules and standards of behavior (Kochanska & Aksan, 1995).

The absence of negativity is a third facet of maternal sensitivity that describes the extent to which mothers refrain from directing hostile emotions toward the child. Negativity includes a global disdain for the child expressed by mothers’ behavioral or conversational style, along with specific instances of harsh or unkind comments (Nietzel & Stright, 2003). Negative mothers may use a sarcastic or scolding tone of voice, express disapproval, irritability, or annoyance with the child, blame or threaten the child, or dismiss a child’s ideas or emotions as foolish or irrational. Because conflict interactions are already difficult emotional experiences for children, high levels of maternal negativity heighten negative emotions, hindering children’s social learning ability and shaping children’s conceptualizations of conflict as an emotionally overwhelming and unmanageable experience (Herrera & Dunn, 1997; Hoffman, 1983; Laursen & Hafen, 2010).

In sum, conflict interactions with sensitive mothers, who are highly emotionally responsive and low on intrusiveness and negativity, are more likely to result in social benefits for children for several reasons. First of all, sensitive mothers are more likely to attenuate children’s negative emotions during conflict rather than exacerbate them, reducing negative emotional arousal that interferes with children’s ability to effectively learn from the perspectives and reasoning presented by mothers. Exposure to the opinions, beliefs, and emotions of others is related to perspective-taking ability, which contributes to empathy, pro-social behavior, and positive peer interactions (Farrant, Devine, Maybery, & Fletcher, 2012; Klimes-Dougan & Kopp, 1999). Maternal support for children’s negative emotions is also related to better emotion regulation in children, which is an essential component of social competence that is associated with being liked and accepted by peers (Kerns, Klepac, & Cole, 1996). Second, feelings of acceptance and autonomy instilled in children by sensitive mothers are likely to enhance children’s participation in conflict discussions, which increases the likelihood of reaching a compromise resolution to the conflict in which both the mother and child achieve at least some of their desired goals (Nelson, Boyer, et al., 2014). Experience reaching compromises in mother-child conflict and sharing and justifying opinions during conflict discussions are each related to better social problem-solving skills with peers (Kruger, 1993; Maccoby, 1992). Finally, although disagreements with others are unpleasant, children who experience sensitive maternal behaviors and contribute to successful conflict resolutions are likely to conceptualize conflict as manageable rather than overwhelming (Herrera & Dunn, 1997). In turn, these conceptualizations may increase the likelihood of children engaging in productive and collaborative discussions with peers if disagreements arise.

Engagement Facilitation during Conflict Interactions

Mothers’ conversational strategies have been conceptualized as discrete behaviors that are independent of more global mothering characteristics (Nelson, O’Brien, et al., 2014), and have been shown to predict children’s social competence above and beyond sensitive mothering (Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993). Strategies mothers use during conflict interactions, such as the extent to which mothers encourage children to participate in formulating a plan to resolve conflict, have also been associated with conflict outcomes. Generating, assessing, or
adopter plans to resolve a conflict in the future has been related to a greater likelihood of reaching a resolution to the conflict (Recchia et al., 2010). Greater frequency of future-oriented planning may contribute to successful conflict resolution due to the emphasis on creating new strategies for managing future disagreements rather than focusing on past arguments (Stein & Albrow, 2001). Mothers and children may both engage in planning during conflict discussions, but children’s participation has been shown to be particularly important in predicting collaboration and eventual compromise (Nelson, Boyer, et al., 2014). Because previous work has demonstrated that mothers’ contributions to discussions about stressful events are highly related to their children’s contributions to these discussions (Sales & Fivush, 2005), more specific conversational tactics mothers use to promote children’s engagement may be especially fruitful during conflict because children are likely to be reluctant to express themselves due to negative emotions, disagreements, and power differentials favoring mothers (Emery, 1992; Hastings & Grusec, 1998; Recchia et al., 2010). Indeed, Laible & Thompson (2002) found that more frequent maternal justification, defined as the use of clarification, reasoning, or requests for clarification, during conflict interactions predicted children’s emotional understanding and rule internalization six months later. The current study uses the term maternal engagement facilitation to describe the extent to which mothers encourage children to participate in future-oriented planning by asking questions and discussing details about plans with their children during conflict interactions.

Engagement facilitation behaviors may be qualitatively different depending on the extent to which mothers deliver these behaviors in a sensitive manner. For example, mothers who frequently ask children questions and elaborate on child remarks in a sensitive manner may be more mindful of the space children need to formulate ideas and respond. Sensitive mothers are more likely to positively reinforce their children’s ideas rather than consistently redirect the conversation to suit their own opinions. Because maternal sensitivity during conflict attenuates negative emotions and conveys respect for children’s ideas and opinions, children whose mothers attempt to engage them in conflict discussions in a sensitive manner are more likely to contribute to resolutions and manage negative emotions (Laursen & Hafen, 2010; Steinberg, 1990). Indeed, when mothers request children’s compliance using conversational strategies in a suggestive or inductive manner, rather than demand compliance using a coercive style, children tend to utilize less coercion and disruptive talk in peer interactions (Crockenberg & Lourie, 1996).

Conversely, maternal insensitivity during conflict undermines children’s social confidence and heightens negative emotional arousal (Maccoby, 1992), which may weaken the effectiveness of maternal attempts to engage children in discussions. Mothers who ask questions or elaborate during conversations in a negative or intrusive manner may be less likely to give children time to respond and more likely to ask multiple questions at once, failing to match the pace of the conversation with the child’s developmental level. This may result in less child participation, and an inability to reach a resolution, undermining children’s ability to participate in difficult interactions about disagreements and confidently engage in conflict resolution with peers (Neitzel & Stright, 2003; Nelson, O’Brien, et al., 2014). Alternatively, experiencing power assertive interactions with parents may result in maladaptive overconfidence during peer conflict; children whose mothers use conversational strategies that assert dominance tend to use these same power assertive techniques with peers (Parke & Ladd, 1992). Taken together, engagement facilitation behaviors
are likely to take on qualitatively distinct characteristics and differentially associate with children’s social outcomes based on the emotional climate and manner in which they are delivered during conflict interactions.

The Current Study

The current study examined parenting qualities and maternal engagement facilitation of 5- to 7-year-old children during a mother-child conflict interaction task using a person-centered approach. Person-centered analyses conceptualize the individual as the level of analysis and define the person as an integrated totality, best understood as a system of interacting processes occurring simultaneously (Bergman & Trost, 2006). While variable-centered analyses provide important theoretical information about relations between variables, person-centered analyses allow researchers to evaluate the practical significance of this information by determining whether groups of mothers in a given sample possess a constellation of features.

We used latent profile analysis (LPA), a technique that produces latent categories based on continuous variable indicators to group mothers by emotional responsiveness, intrusiveness, negativity, and engagement facilitation. We hypothesized that there are qualitative differences in how mothers facilitate engagement based on sensitivity, and that there are also mothers who are neither sensitive nor interested in engaging the child in the discussion. Next, we examined associations between maternal conflict behavior type and children’s social skills, over and above the complexity with which mothers spoke to their children during conflict.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 5- to 7-year-old children and their mothers recruited from kindergarten and first grade classrooms in public and private elementary schools in a large metropolitan area. Of the 190 participating families, the current sample included 181 mother-child dyads that participated in a filmed conflict discussion task. Children were evenly split by gender (53 percent male), were 6.47 years old on average (SD = .79), and were ethnically diverse, with 56 percent classified as Caucasian, 15 percent African-American, 8 percent Hispanic, and 21 percent classified as another or mixed ethnicity. Families were also economically diverse; 36 percent were low-income (income-to-needs ratio <2, n = 65), 52 percent were middle-income (income-to-needs ratio 2–5, n = 95), and 12 percent were high-income (income-to-needs ratio >5, n = 21). Mothers were 37.4 years old on average (SD = 5.74) and 66 percent had at least a 4-year college degree.

Procedure

Participating mothers reported demographic information and filled out a series of questionnaires during a laboratory visit while their children interacted with a research assistant in another room. Both mothers and children separately completed the Issues Checklist (Robin & Foster, 1989), a list of common topics of disagreement between parents and children, reporting whether or not they recently disagreed about each topic, and if they did disagree, how angry they felt when discussing the topic at home (1 = calm, 4 = very angry). Children completed the checklist with the
help of a research assistant and reported on angry feelings using illustrated pictures of faces rather than a numeric scale. Research assistants selected two topics that both the mother and child indicated they disagreed about at home and made them feel angry. The most common conflicts selected for discussion were fighting with a sibling, talking back to parents, cleaning bedroom, and lying; these topics were selected for 43 percent of the dyads. Out of the topics that were discussed, the average anger rating for children was 3.04 (SD = 1.00), with 71 percent of children reporting 3 or 4 for anger. The average anger rating for mothers was 2.63 (SD = .99), with 56 percent of mothers reporting 3 or 4 for anger.

Dyads were instructed to discuss the two topics as they normally would at home and were provided prompt questions on a notecard for additional guidance, if needed (What is the problem? How does the problem begin? Who becomes involved in the problem? What might be done to avoid the problem in the future?). Research assistants then left the room whereas the mother and child discussed the two topics. Mutual opposition was present in 91 percent of the mother-child conflict discussion tasks, in the form of negativity or contemptuous comments from the mother and child. Mother-child conflict interactions were filmed and later coded.

**Measures**

*Global Maternal Sensitivity Behaviors.* Mothers’ emotional responsiveness, intrusiveness, and negativity were rated from the videos by trained coders using an adapted sensitivity coding scheme, and were scored using a 5-point Likert scale with higher scores indicating a greater quality and quantity of behaviors characteristic of that particular facet (Neitzel & Stright, 2003; NICHD ECCRN, 2008). These global scores were used to measure the sensitivity of the emotional climate mothers created during the conflict discussion; thus, one score on each scale was rated for the entire interaction.

Emotional responsiveness was coded on a scale of 1 (little responsiveness shown) to 5 (consistently emotionally responsive); a score of 1 was characterized by consistent disengagement and very few or no instances of encouragement or affection. A score of 3 was characterized by inconsistent engagement and enjoyment, passivity or boredom during part of the interaction, and few demonstrations of valuing the child’s contributions. A score or 5 was characterized by consistent and obvious enjoyment of the conversation, and frequently encouraging, praising, or showing affection toward the child.

Intrusiveness was coded on a scale of 1 (not at all intrusive) to 5 (consistently intrusive); a score of 1 was characterized by no interruptions or attempts to control or assert power over the child and using creative techniques to guide the child to clarify his or her own plans. A score of 3 was characterized by occasionally insisting that things be done her way when the child disagrees and occasionally interrupting or physically controlling the child. A score of 5 was characterized by consistently controlling the conversation, promoting her own ideas without considering the child’s contributions, and frequently interrupting the child.

Negativity was coded on a scale of 1 (no negativity shown) to 5 (more often negative than not); a score of 1 was characterized by an absence of hostile attitudes or behaviors throughout the discussion. Because negativity is generally more frequent in laboratory-based observational studies of mother-child interactions (Neitzel & Stright, 2003), a score of 2 was given if even one instance of negativity was
shown (e.g., sarcasm, mild criticism). A score of 3 was characterized by a low level of persistent negativity throughout most of the discussion or a few episodes that were moderately negative (e.g., expressing annoyance, blaming the child). A score of 4 was given if there was more than one instance of severe hostility (e.g., threatening the child) that was clearly noticed by the child. A score of 5 was given if the mother was more often negative than not, with negative comments occurring throughout most of the discussion. Intraclass correlations for the three maternal sensitivity scales were tested for approximately 25 percent ($n = 45$) of the videos and ranged from .77–.88.

**Maternal Engagement Facilitation.** Trained coders used an adapted frequency coding scheme (Recchia et al., 2010) to code for the number of future-oriented planning comments made by mothers for each conflict discussion topic. The frequency with which mothers used discrete conversational tactics to encourage children’s participation in the conflict discussion was measured as a sum of the number of times mothers asked children questions and discussed details with children about managing future disagreements related to this topic. The number of questions asked and details discussed were highly correlated, $r(179) = .50$, $p < .01$, and were summed to form a maternal engagement facilitation composite. This composite had an observed range of 0–71, with higher scores indicating more engagement facilitation by mothers. Inter-rater reliability (Pearson correlation) for questions asked and details discussed were $r(42) = .87$ and $r(42) = .84$, respectively, $ps < .01$.

**Child Social Skills.** Mothers reported on their children’s social skills using the Social Skills Rating System (Gresham & Elliot, 1990). Thirty-nine social skills were presented to mothers from four subscales: cooperation (e.g., ‘attempts household tasks before asking for your help’), assertion (e.g., ‘introduces herself or himself to new people without being told’), responsibility (e.g., ‘asks permission before using another family member’s property’), and self-control (e.g., ‘responds appropriately when hit or pushed by other children’). Mothers were asked to describe how often their child exhibits each social behavior. Response options were 0 (never), 1 (sometimes), and 2 (very often). The raw scores for the 39 items were summed to create the social skills total raw score. The total raw score had an observed range of 29–74, with higher scores indicating greater child social skills. Internal reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) of the items used to create the composite was .86.

**Covariates.** Mothers reported their child’s ethnicity during the laboratory visit, which was dichotomized as White or non-White. The complexity of maternal speech, measured by mean length of utterances (MLU), was coded from filmed segments of the mother-child conflict discussion tasks. The MLU of maternal speech was calculated as a ratio of the total number of morphemes over the total number of utterances during two one-minute segments of the conflict discussion (Brown, 1973). To measure the complexity of conflict-related maternal speech, research assistants chose the first one-minute segment for each topic during which both mother and child were on task. If dyads only discussed one topic, both segments were chosen from that topic. Dyads were considered to be off-task if they were silent, discussing an unassigned or unrelated topic, or playing with or focusing on objects in the room for 5 or more consecutive seconds. Research assistants
transcribed the maternal speech from the two segments for coding of morphemes, the smallest unit of a word that conveys linguistic meaning (e.g., plurals, prefixes, and suffixes like -s, -ing, or pre-; root words like sister or walk) and utterances, complete sentences or phrases bound by child speech (e.g., the child speaks before and after the mother’s phrase). Segments in which mothers were off task were not transcribed, nor were false starts or sounds, such as ‘hmm’ or ‘umm’. Trained coders scored the frequency of morphemes, as well as the frequency of utterances, and independently calculated maternal MLU as a ratio of morphemes divided by utterances. Inter-rater reliability for MLU was established for approximately 23 percent (44 cases) of the sample and was $r(42) = .94, p < .01$.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables are displayed in Table 1. In general, mothers who were more emotionally responsive tended to be less intrusive and negative, and intrusiveness and negativity were strongly positively correlated. Mothers who demonstrated more engagement facilitation behaviors also tended to be more emotionally responsive and less negative, but these correlations are considered small to moderate according to Cohen’s criteria (1988). Engagement facilitation and intrusiveness were not significantly related. Mothers who spoke more during conflict interactions, indicated by a higher MLU score, used more engagement facilitation, but this correlation was small (Cohen, 1988).

Mother–child Conflict Behavior Typology

LPA was run in Mplus v7.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012) using four variables coded from the mother-child conflict discussions: mothers’ emotional responsiveness, intrusiveness, negativity, and engagement facilitation. Full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation was used to account for missing data. To
identify the appropriate number of groups in the typology, models were run testing 2-, 3-, and 4-profile solutions and were evaluated based on relative fit information criteria, likelihood ratio tests, accuracy in classifying individuals, and interpretability (Ram & Grimm, 2009). Table 2 shows relevant fit statistics for each solution tested. Bayesian information criterion (BIC) and sample-sized adjusted BIC are commonly used to evaluate relative fit, with lower values in relation to the other solutions indicating a better fit to the data (Muthén & Muthén, 2000). Likelihood ratio tests include the Vuong-Lo-Mendell-Rubin test and the Lo-Mendell-Rubin sample size adjusted test. These tests generate a *p*-value, which, if less than .05, indicates that the model under consideration is a significant improvement on a solution with one less profile (Lo, Mendell, & Rubin, 2001). Although BIC values for the 4-profile solution were lower than the 3-profile solution, there are no established standards that specify a meaningful decline in BIC. VLMR and LMR tests, conversely, offer statistical comparisons between profile solutions, and these tests indicated that the 4-profile solution did not significantly improve on a 3-profile solution. The 3-profile solution significantly improved on the 2-profile solution, and was also found to accurately classify individuals into profiles; high posterior probabilities indicate that individuals placed into each of the three groups were highly likely to belong in that group. High entropy values indicate that the 3-profile solution offered clear delineation between groups, indicating that mothers in a given group were much more similar to other mothers in that group compared to mothers in the other two groups (Celeux & Soromenho, 1996). Additionally, the 3-profile solution was interpretable with groups of comparable size and theoretically meaningful structure. Thus, the 3-profile model was selected as the best-fitting solution. Variances were constrained to be equal across groups, a common adjustment made to LPA models to facilitate convergence (Ram & Grimm, 2009).

As shown in Figure 1, *sensitive/engaged* mothers (35 percent of the sample, *n* = 63) had high emotional responsiveness, low intrusiveness, low negativity, and high engagement facilitation. *Moderately sensitive/engaged* mothers (39 percent, *n* = 70) had mean-level emotional responsiveness, moderate intrusiveness, moderate negativity, and high engagement facilitation. The *insensitive/disengaged* group (27 percent, *n* = 48) had low emotional responsiveness, high intrusiveness, high negativity, and low engagement facilitation.

### Table 2. Latent Profile Analysis Fit Statistics for 2- to 4-Profile Solutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of Groups</th>
<th>BIC</th>
<th>SSA-BIC</th>
<th><em>p</em> LMR (adj LRT)</th>
<th>Posterior probability</th>
<th>Entropy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3146.68</td>
<td>3105.51</td>
<td>.00 (.00)</td>
<td>.96–.97</td>
<td>.86</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3128.86</td>
<td>3071.85</td>
<td>.00 (.01)</td>
<td>.91–.96</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3116.32</td>
<td>3043.47</td>
<td>.10 (.11)</td>
<td>.96–1.0</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion; SSA-BIC = sample-sized adjusted Bayesian Information Criteria; *p* LMR (adj LRT) = *p*-values for Lo-Mendell-Rubin likelihood ratio test for *K* vs. *K* – 1 profiles (sample size adjusted likelihood ratio test).
Group means on emotional responsiveness, intrusiveness, negativity, and engagement facilitation were compared using independent sample t tests to describe and differentiate the profiles. Sensitive/engaged mothers displayed more emotional responsiveness than moderately sensitive/engaged mothers, \( t(131) = 4.02, p < .01 \), or insensitive/disengaged mothers, \( t(109) = 8.66, p < .01 \). Moderately sensitive/engaged mothers also displayed more emotional responsiveness than insensitive/disengaged mothers, \( t(116) = 4.76, p < .01 \). Sensitive/engaged mothers displayed less intrusiveness than moderately sensitive/engaged mothers, \( t(129.72) = -6.55, p < .01 \), and insensitive/disengaged mothers, \( t(109) = -15.80, p < .01 \), and moderately sensitive/engaged mothers were less intrusive than insensitive/disengaged mothers, \( t(113.90) = -7.95, p < .01 \). Similarly, sensitive/engaged mothers displayed less negativity than moderately sensitive/engaged mothers, \( t(129.57) = -17.92, p < .01 \), and insensitive/disengaged mothers, \( t(108.98) = -39.10, p < .01 \), and moderately sensitive/engaged mothers were less negative than insensitive/disengaged mothers, \( t(116) = -20.15, p < .01 \). Sensitive/engaged mothers and moderately sensitive/engaged mothers facilitated child engagement to a similar extent, \( t(131) = .81, p = .419 \) and did so more than insensitive/disengaged mothers, \( t(109) = 3.19, p < .01 \); \( t(116) = 2.25, p = .026 \).

Association Between Conflict Behavior Profiles and Children’s Social Skills

Children classified as White were significantly more likely to have mothers in the sensitive/engaged group and less likely to have mothers in the insensitive/disengaged group compared to non-White children, \( \chi^2(2) = 9.51, p < .01 \), and had significantly higher social skills compared to children classified as non-White, \( t(179) = 2.15, p = .033 \). Thus, child ethnicity was included in analyses as a covariate. Mothers in the sensitive/engaged and moderately sensitive/engaged groups each had significantly higher MLU compared to mothers in the insensitive/disengaged groups, \( F(2, 178) = 4.33, p = .015 \). Because the current study seeks to examine engagement facilitation as a specific maternal conversational tactic, MLU was included as a covariate to account for the fact that mothers who use more engagement facilitation
behaviors likely speak to their children with a greater degree of complexity. Child gender, maternal education, and family income-to-needs ratio were not significantly associated with maternal conflict profile membership or child social skills, and including these variables as covariates did not alter study findings; thus, they were not included as covariates in analyses.

Controlling for child ethnicity and mother MLU, an analysis of covariance demonstrated that there were significant differences in social skills across the three groups. Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons revealed that children of mothers in the sensitive/engaged group had significantly higher social skills than children of mothers in the moderately sensitive/engaged and insensitive/disengaged groups. There were no significant differences in social skills for children of mothers in the moderately sensitive/engaged group vs. the insensitive/disengaged group (see Table 3).

**Discussion**

The current study used LPA to group mothers by observed conflict behaviors using ratings of emotional responsiveness, intrusiveness, and negativity as well as discrete conversational tactics of asking questions and discussing details with children. Small to moderate correlations among maternal engagement facilitation behaviors and the sensitivity facets indicated that although there were tendencies for more engaged mothers to behave in more emotionally responsive and less negative ways, more sensitive mothers were not necessarily more engaged with their children.

Mothers in the sensitive/engaged group were more likely to speak in a caring and nurturing manner, frequently ask stimulating questions while taking care to allow children space to think and respond, positively reinforce children’s independent contributions to the conversation by discussing details of children’s plans, and

### Table 3. Relations of Maternal Conflict Behavior Profiles with Covariates and Child Social Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sensitive/engaged</th>
<th>Moderately sensitive/engaged</th>
<th>Insensitive/disengaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>$M$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal conflict profile indicators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional responsiveness</td>
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<td>.77</td>
<td>3.50&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intrusiveness</td>
<td>2.10&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>3.27&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negativity</td>
<td>1.62&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>3.14&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement facilitation</td>
<td>21.81&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>13.26</td>
<td>20.10&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child social skills</td>
<td>55.81&lt;sub&gt;a&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
<td>8.66</td>
<td>51.17&lt;sub&gt;b&lt;/sub&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Analyses included mother MLU and child ethnicity as covariates. Means in the same row that do not share subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

**p < .01, * p < .05.
refrain from making critical, dismissive, or hurtful remarks in response to children’s ideas. Moderately sensitive/engaged mothers were less likely to be consistently warm and supportive throughout the interaction and more likely to convey impatience and annoyance with the child. Additionally, compared to sensitive/engaged mothers, these mothers tended to ask too many questions at once or answer their own questions before children were able to respond, elaborate on their own plans without considering children’s ideas, and use disapproving language in response child contributions. Insensitive/disengaged mothers made significantly fewer attempts to involve children in conflict discussions, and these infrequent questions and elaborations were more likely to be hostile and power-assertive, serving the mother’s own interests and carried out using a cold, critical, or dismissive interaction style.

The emergence of these three groups of mothers highlights the fact that discrete conversational tactics mothers uses during disagreements with their children take place within a conflict environment that can be described as more or less sensitive. For example, both sensitive/engaged mothers and moderately sensitive/engaged mothers attempted to engage their children frequently, but moderately sensitive/engaged mothers tended to use a more forceful and hostile interaction style and displayed less warmth and understanding in response to their children’s emotions compared to sensitive/engaged mothers. That children of moderately sensitive/engaged mothers had significantly lower social skills than sensitive/engaged mothers suggests that parental engagement facilitation in conflict discussions can be done in qualitatively different ways, associated with different outcomes for children. The greatest degree of social benefits for children is associated with conflict interactions in which mothers not only encourage children to participate in the discussion, but also provide a warm and nurturing social environment with limited negativity and intrusiveness.

Interestingly, there were no differences in social skills between children moderately sensitive/engaged and insensitive/disengaged mothers. Despite significantly more frequent engagement facilitation behaviors by moderately sensitive/engaged mothers, when the emotional climate of the conflict includes even moderate levels of intrusiveness and negativity, children tend to have social skills on par with children of highly intrusive and negative mothers. Overall, the findings suggest that there may be qualitative differences in how engagement facilitation behaviors are expressed by mothers and perceived by children during conflict discussions depending on the extent to which mothers provide warmth and nurturance and refrain from harsh or controlling behavior during these interactions. Thus, mothers’ attempts to engage their children in conflict discussions may not be socially beneficial for children unless these behaviors are performed within a highly sensitive relational context. It appears as though even slight deficits in maternal sensitivity, including average levels of emotional responsiveness, intrusiveness, and negativity, are related to fewer social benefits for children. Because conflict interactions are inherently difficult experiences for children, perhaps a social climate characterized by very high levels of emotional nurturance coupled with very few instances of interruption or hostile behavior from mothers is necessary for children to understand and learn from the differences in perspective presented during these discussions. Children’s abilities to negotiate and problem-solve during conflict discussions with parents first emerges during early school age (Kerns, 2008), and this challenging developmental
task may require a particularly supportive environment that encourages children to learn and practice these social skills.

The current study contributes to the mother-child conflict literature in several ways. First, the use of a person-centered approach allowed us to classify mothers based on profiles of observable parent behaviors during conflict discussions (von Eye & Bogat, 2006). While studies implementing variable-centered analyses have found links between maternal behaviors during conflict and child outcomes (e.g., Laible et al., 2008; Laible & Thompson, 2002) this approach does not account for the fact that individual mothers are dynamic and display qualitative variations in how they implement parenting strategies (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997). Classifying mothers based on both the frequency with which they used strategies to engage their children in conflict discussions as well as the relational style with which they implemented these behaviors allowed for an examination of unique patterns of parenting present in the current sample of mothers and their associations with children’s social skills. For example, although sensitive/engaged mothers and moderately sensitive/engaged mothers both frequently attempted to engage their children in conflict discussions, moderately sensitive/engaged mothers tended to communicate with their children using a more harsh and controlling style with less emotional warmth. Results support the notion that these deficits in sensitivity undermined the social benefits associated with maternal engagement facilitation during conflict. Person-centered analyses gave us the ability to explore qualitative distinctions in how mothers attempted to engage children, and results suggested that during conflict discussions, high levels of sensitivity may be necessary for school aged children to derive social benefits from maternal engagement facilitation.

Despite these strengths, the study is not without limitations. The most substantial limitation involves the concurrent collection of observed maternal conflict behaviors and children’s reported social skills, which precludes the ability to establish causality or direction of effects. Parent-child conflict is naturally dyadic; therefore, it is equally plausible that highly sensitive and engaging mothers enhance children’s social development as it is that more socially competent children elicit more sensitive and engaging behaviors in their mothers during conflict discussions. In turn, mothers of children who display difficult behaviors or lack the social skills necessary for engaging in discussion may find it challenging to interact with their child in a sensitive and engaging manner. Indeed, Newton, Laible, Carlo, Steele, and McGinley (2014) found bidirectional influences between maternal sensitivity and children’s prosocial behavior throughout primary school and middle childhood. The current study design focuses on the contributions of mothers during conflict discussions; thus, it is limited by its lack of dyadic analysis. Because mother-child conflict is a potentially beneficial socialization process, future longitudinal work is needed to specifically examine bidirectional relations between maternal conflict behavioral styles and child social and emotional outcomes to evaluate benefits and detriments of constructive and destructive mother-child conflict interactions over time.

A second major limitation of the current study is the lack of other informant reports of children’s social skills. Because mothers’ behavior during conflict interactions is likely related to the manner in which they report on their children’s social skills.
skills, future studies should implement the use of multi-informant reports of children’s social skills, such as teacher- or peer-report, to shed light on how conflict experiences in the home translate to social interactions in the school environment. Additionally, future work should consider using observed measures of children’s social skills during the conflict interaction to analyze these interactions in a dyadic manner. Using observed measures, researchers could code specific patterns of mother-child discourse to determine whether mothers’ engagement facilitation behaviors result in subsequent child contributions based on the extent to which these behaviors are enacted in a sensitive manner. For example, using state space analysis (Lewis, Lamey, & Douglas, 1999), researchers could determine the frequency and degree to which the behavior of mothers elicits the behavior of children, and vice versa, in each conversational turn within a single conflict interaction. Third, the laboratory conflict discussion task may not be eliciting conflict as it naturally occurs in the home. While mutual opposition was observed during the conflict discussion tasks for the majority of participants, future studies would benefit from naturalistic observations or parent reports. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that LPA is an exploratory technique that may result in multiple profile solutions that provide adequate fit to the data. Future research should conduct similar analyses with different samples of mothers to determine whether maternal demographic characteristics result in different profile solutions, and test relations of these profiles with children’s social skills.

The current study suggests that promoting the use of more elaborative language and encouragement tactics during conflict discussions may not be beneficial unless these behaviors are accompanied by a sensitive mothering style. In particular, respecting the child and his or her conversational space, rather than intrusively asking one question after another or criticizing the child’s contributions, offers children the opportunity for self-expression and opinion justification that may be the underlying mechanism for developing social skills (Kruger, 1993). Furthermore, providing emotional support and minimizing hostility may increase the child’s level of comfort during unpleasant discussions, lowering arousal and permitting the child to attend to the multiple perspectives presented during conflict interactions (Stein & Albro, 2001). This emotional support may contribute to a sense of social equality between mother and child, which has been shown to provide a more beneficial context for children’s social learning. For example, studies examining the positive outcomes associated with disagreements between social equals, like children and their same-age peers, find that the social benefits of peer conflict are largely a function of the degree to which children frequently elaborate on their thoughts and justify their opinions (Kruger, 1993).

Despite the power differential inherent in mother-child conflict, maternal encouragement for children’s independent thought processes and supportive guidance to help children clarify ideas may bolster children’s critical thinking and social problem solving skills. Conflict between parents and children at home is common, and as children progress through formal schooling, they encounter increasingly more opportunities to experience conflict between other adults as well as their peers. Thus, intervention efforts in high-conflict homes would offer the most benefits by teaching parents conversational strategies to use during conflict, but also training parents to regulate their own negative emotions and maximize sensitive parenting behaviors in a conflict context that is likely to be frustrating and emotionally arousing. For example, a video-based parent training intervention designed to improve
parents’ communication and self-control skills resulted in improvements in parents’ problem-solving skills and children’s prosocial understanding (Webster-Stratton, 1994). Overall, these findings provide support for the idea that mother-child conflict interactions can actually benefit children socially when mothers navigate these exchanges in a sensitive manner while encouraging children to engage and participate in the discussion.

References


