Maternal Conflict Behavior Profiles and Child Social Skills

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Introduction
Recent perspectives suggest that conflict is a common experience that may contribute to children’s social-cognitive understanding and social skills (Eisenberg, 1992; Laursen & Helen, 2010). When mothers attempt to engage their children in conflict discussions by asking questions or elaborating upon children’s ideas, children may be more likely to contribute to the discussion, which is related to critical thinking and problem solving skills, social competence, and experience with compromise (Kerr, 2008).

Conflicting viewpoints suggest that conflict is a common experience that may contribute to children’s social-cognitive understanding and social skills (Eisenberg, 1992; Laursen & Helen, 2010). When mothers attempt to engage their children in conflict discussions by asking questions or elaborating upon children’s ideas, children may be more likely to contribute to the discussion, which is related to critical thinking and problem solving skills, social competence, and experience with compromise (Kerr, 2008).

Methods
181 mother-child dyads recruited from kindergarten and first grade classrooms in a large, metropolitan area.

• Child age: 6.47 (SD = .79), Mother age: 37.4 (SD = 5.74)
• 53% male, 56% Caucasian, 15% African-American, 8% Hispanic, 21% other/mixed ethnicity
• 36% low-income, 52% middle-income, 12% high-income

Dyads engaged in an 8-minute taped conflict discussion task based on 2 topics discuss at home that make them both very upset.

Issues Checklist (Rubin & Foster, 1989)
• Assesses which conflicts dyads discuss, how upset each topic makes them (1 = calm, 4 = very angry)

Methods (cont.)
• Coding: 1 = not at all, to 5 = consistently true of this mother
• Emotional Responsiveness – flexibility, supportiveness, acceptance of child (ICC = .77)
• Intrusiveness – verbally or physically controlling behavior, interrupting child (ICC = .81)
• Negativity – dismissal, disapproval, criticism (ICC = .88)

Maternal Engagement Facilitation (Recchia et al., 2010)
• Sum of frequency mothers asked questions (r = .87) and discussed details (r = .84) of a resolution plan with their child

Maternal Complexity of Speech (Brown, 1973)
• Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) from two 1-minute excerpts of maternal speech (MLU = Morphemes/Utterances, r = .94)
• Morphemes: smallest units of speech that convey meaning (e.g., dis-agree-d = 3 morphemes)
• Utterances: sentences/phrases bounded by child speech

Results (cont.)
Table 1. Characteristics Associated with Maternal Conflict Behavior Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Log-Odds B (SE B)</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child Ethnicity</td>
<td>-.57 (.45)</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother Education</td>
<td>.11 (.13)</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother MLU</td>
<td>.01 (.50)</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Social Skills</td>
<td>0.07 (-.02)</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. 1 = sensitive/engaged, 2 = moderately sensitive/engaged 3 = insensitive/disengaged

Discussion
Discrete conversational tactics mothers use during conflict discussions with their children take place within diverse relational contexts, suggesting that mothers attempt to engage their children in qualitatively different ways.

Because children may be particularly hesitant to participate in conflict discussions (Recchia et al., 2010), a sensitive emotional climate without the presence of hostility or intrusiveness may be necessary for early school-aged children to derive social benefits from engagement facilitation behaviors mothers use during conflict.

Children with more advanced social skills likely elicit more sensitive behaviors from mothers during conflict discussions (Newton et al., 2014), so future research should assess bidirectional relations among maternal conflict behaviors and child social skills using longitudinal methods.

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