Socializing Talk and Frustrated Preschoolers

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Abstract

Topic-centered frustration episodes that contained the child crying, fretting, or saying *no* were reliably identified and analyzed in terms of three phases: antecedent, ongoing accompaniment, and finalizing coda. The tempo and variety of socializing speech acts used by family members across the three phases were compared. Parents' common strategies were inferred from common conflict initiations, resolutions, and use of parental strategies. Implications are drawn for goodness-of-fit with school expectations.

Introduction

Of general interest in this study are the culturally patterned practices used by parents to socialize their preschoolers into and away from frustration. What prompts preschoolers to move toward the edge of a temper tantrum and how do families pull their children back from the edge (Miller & Sperry, 1987)? We define parent-child conflict and describe its occurrence in parent-child interaction. Children learn about discordance and getting along from their parents and family members. Many studies have demonstrated that family-managed discordance holds implications for self-regulation, impulse control, effortful control, temperament, personality, coping, stress, frustration tolerance, empathy, emotionality, and social competence, including sibling and peer relationships (Caspi & Henry, 1995; Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000; Garner, 1995; Klein, Feldman, & Zarur, 2002; Kochanska & Tjebkes, 1998; Martin, Anderson, Burant, & Weber, 1997; Olson, Bates, & Bayles, 1990; Sethi, Mischel, Aber, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 2000; Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008).

Of specific interest is the identification of particular techniques used by parents of working-class European American children to help their children *resolve* conflict. Through an understanding of particular techniques, educators will benefit by learning to help students, teachers, and families analyze what may be happening in peer or adult-child conflict.

Method

Participants

•Rural European-American working-class community in Midwest
•Met qualifications for free- or reduced-lunch
•Ethnographic approach, descriptive intent, and longitudinal sampling
•15 children between ages of 1 ½ and 3 ½ years
•Naturalistic observation; 2nd ½ hour transcribed verbatim of up to five samples per child
•Samples divided into younger (22-30 months) and older (32-42 months)

Table 1
Participants with Half-Hour Transcripts

Child *	Age of Sample (in months)									
Betsy	--	--	--	--	26	--	--	--	36	--
Billy	--	22	--	24	--	--	30	--	36	--
Chrissie	--	--	--	24	--	28	--	--	--	--
Charity	--	--	--	24	--	28	--	34	36	42
Derek	--	--	23	--	--	--	30	--	--	--
David	--	--	--	24	--	28	30	--	--	--
Evan	20	--	--	24	--	28	--	--	36	--
Jerry	--	--	--	24	--	28	--	--	36	--
Janet	--	--	--	24	--	28	--	--	36	--
Kerry	--	--	--	24	--	28	--	--	36	--
Mary	--	--	--	24	--	28	--	--	--	--
Ronald	--	--	--	--	26	--	--	--	--	--
Sarah	--	--	--	24	--	28	--	--	36	--
Scott	--	--	--	24	--	--	--	--	--	--
West	--	--	--	24	--	--	--	--	--	--

Method (continued)

Procedures

Principles of grounded theory

- Categories based in the data themselves (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)
- Trustworthiness sought through recursive analysis of episodes (Ely, 1991)
- Thick and rich description (Geertz, 1972)

Definition of "topic-centered episode of frustration"

- Begins with the family member utterance that precedes a child turn within which the child cries, says "No" or its equivalent, whines, frets, or acts oppositionally.
- Ends with the child turn where the child indicates verbally that he or she has moved away from the conflictual topic of conversation.
- Average 94% accuracy reliably coding beginning and ending line numbers.

Reasons for conflict

Four categories of conflict were identified:
1. Child wants / does not want an object
2. Child wants / does not want to do something
3. Child wants / does not want someone else to have an object
4. Child wants / does not want someone else to do something

Episode resolutions

Five types of resolution were identified, arrayed along a continuum of child agreeability:

1. **Child compliance** [P: Quit your screaming! C: there a big bubble/ (in normal voice)]
2. **Child distraction on own** [P: You can't go outside. It's raining! C: look/ (pointing to a leaf]
3. **Child distraction by other** [Child is upset about coming inside, P: Do you wanna read "Green Eggs and Ham"? C: yes/]
4. **Interlocutor compliance** [Child has been asked to go downstairs but he requests a different computer game to be opened]
5. **Child perseverance** [Child wants to go to the park "to feed da ducks" and after numerous attempts to distract her she continues to say, "want to feed da ducks"]

Results

- 39.5 hours of transcript; 85 episodes of frustration
- About 4 episodes per hour, on average, across 15 families of 2-year-olds
- Most episodes were relatively fleeting. A few were long and involved.

Reasons for conflict

Children initiate conflict most often due to wanting to do or not do some action (52%) (or wanting someone else to do or not do some action) (32%). Taken together, these two categories account for approximately 8 of 10 episodes. In working-class European American homes, the majority of disagreements involve doing or not doing actions. The only other difference concerned **younger children being more likely than older children to have conflicts about objects.**

Results (continued)

Table 2
Reason for Conflict

Type of Conflict	Younger Age		Older Age		Total	
	No. episodes	(%)	No. episodes	(%)	No. episodes	(%)
Conflict about objects						
Child wants	10	(15)	0	(0)	10	(12)
Child doesn't want	2	(3)	0	(0)	2	(2)
Conflict about actions						
Child wants	19	(29)	7	(37)	26	(31)
Child doesn't want	14	(21)	4	(21)	18	(21)
Conflict about person/object						
Child wants	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)
Child doesn't want	1	(2)	1	(5)	2	(2)
Conflict about person/action						
Child wants	12	(18)	4	(21)	16	(19)
Child doesn't want	8	(12)	3	(16)	11	(13)
Total	66		19		85	

As an example of the seriousness of children's protests about having persons *not* do actions that are undesired, Janet was 24 months old when her mother insisted her diaper be changed before she went outside to play (see Table 3).

Table 3
Episode Centered Around Child Not Wanting her Diaper Changed

M: Sshi/ You can't wear the same diaper all day/ [beginning of episode]
J: (cries)
M: You don't have to sit on the potty chair, but I am going to change your diaper/ No, you can't keep/ No, that's nasty/
J: (cries)
M: Throw a fit/ You're a naked bottom kid/ Hey, you're a naked bottom kid/ Hey, Naked Bottom/ Yeah (inaudible)/ Janet, I gotta find my naked bottom kid/ Oh, gee/ Come here Naked Bottom/
J: (squeals)
M: Janet, no/ No, nasty/
J: (cries) I have it/
M: No, you can't have a pee pee diaper/
J: (cries)
M: Come here/ So, you wanna go outside and play?/
J: (cries)
M: You don't have to go outside and play/
J: no/ (cries)
M: No, want me to throw you on the bed?/ Come here/
J: no/
M: Oh, you're gonna live/ No, now cool it/ Hey, cool it/
J: (cries)
M: You're okay/ You're okay/
J: (cries)
M: You wanna go read a book or go outside?/ Tell Mommy whatcha want/ What do you want to do?/ What do you wanna do?/
J: I wan/
M: You wanna read books or go outside and play?/ No you can't play with those kitties/ You wanna play with your telephone?/
J: no/
M: You can play with your remote control/ (backs into an open drawer) Daddy doesn't know how to close a drawer/
J: (cries)
M: Say, we'll fix it/ Whaddaya want?/
J: Want down/ [end of episode]

Episode resolutions

In Janet's conflict in Table 3, her mother offers her several choices as she calms down. These choices were coded as offering her distractions, one of which ended the crying that marked the episode. **Exactly this type of distraction-by-other combined with interlocutor-compliance together accounted for nearly half of the total episode resolutions,** according to Table 4. Interlocutor compliance occurs twice as often in episodes of younger compared to older children. Parents were more likely to give in to their younger preschool-aged children. **Nearly one out of three times, children either comply or distract themselves to resolve a conflict. Children persevere with their conflict one out of nine times** (e.g., Sarah insists on being able to go to the park to feed the ducks).

Table 4
Resolution of discordant episodes

Resolution	Younger Age		Older Age		Total	
	No. episodes	(%)	No. episodes	(%)	No. episodes	(%)
Child compliance	12	(18)	4	(21)	16	(19)
Child distraction on own	8	(12)	3	(16)	11	(13)
Child distraction by other	18	(27)	7	(37)	25	(29)
Interlocutor compliance	21	(32)	3	(16)	24	(28)
Child perseverance	7	(11)	2	(11)	9	(11)
Total	66		19		85	

Results (continued)

Table 5
Parental strategies

Type of Conflict	Younger Age		Older Age		Total	
	No. episodes	(%)	No. episodes	(%)	No. episodes	(%)
Parents' goal at beginning						
Met	37	(56)	14	(74)	51	(60)
Not met	29	(44)	5	(26)	34	(40)
Parent finally distracts						
Positive Alternative	21	(32)	8	(42)	29	(34)
Negative Alternative	13	(20)	1	(5)	14	(16)
Parent sends message						
Consistent	62	(94)	13	(68)	75	(88)
Inconsistent	4	(6)	6	(32)	10	(12)
Parent uses multiple basic strategies						
Yes	37	(56)	11	(58)	48	(56)
No	29	(44	8	(42)	37	(44)
					85	

Parental strategies

The third set of analyses focused on characterizations of parental strategies. First, **parents almost always (9 of 10 times) used consistent strategies, that is, they stayed with their reasons.** Janet's mother insisted on changing Janet's diaper. She used many different types of strategies (humor: "Come here, Naked Bottom," shame: "Now cool it," positive alternatives: "Want me to throw you on the bed?," firm direct commands: "No, you can't have a pee pee diaper"), but she did not waver from her position that Janet's diaper needed to be changed. **A second finding is that parents used positive alternatives, such as comments of praise and promises, twice as often as they used negative alternatives, such as warnings and threats.** Notice how Janet's mother offered her daughter the opportunity to read a book, go outside, play with her telephone, or play with her remote control as possible alternatives after securing the clean diaper. She did not put her in the corner, call her rotten or bad, or warn her about what Dad would do when he got home, although each of those outcomes did occur in other episodes from other families.

Negative alternatives were somewhat more likely in episodes of younger children compared to episodes of older children. A second developmental finding was that parents of older children compared with younger children followed through with their original goal more often (74% versus 56% of the time). This is likely due to a higher rate of compliance and distractibility from older children. In fact, children appear to be getting socialized, even by the tender age of 3 years, which was the oldest age of most of the children transcribed for the study.

Discussion

- What generalizations can we reach about the nature of episodes of frustration among working-class European American families from the rural Midwest of the U.S.?
- First, frustration provides a fertile context for learning to negotiate with others. It occurs on average four times per hour.
- Second, two year olds in this culture did not seem focused on object acquisition. Only 16% of conflicts centered around acquiring or preventing acquisition of objects.
- Third, parents and children seemed to learn to work together. Child compliance, child distraction on own, and child distraction by other all increased in likelihood over time while interlocutor compliance and child perseverance remained at low rates or decreased over time.
- Fourth, on average, parents are consistent and relatively positive in encouraging compliance. Only two of the families (13%) in this study did not meet the standard of being both consistent and positive with their 2 year olds the majority of the time.

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