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 these 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 & Spera, 1987)? We define parent-child conflict and describe its occurrence in parent-child interaction. Children learn about discipline and getting along from their parents and family members. Many studies have demonstrated that family-management discord holds implications for self-regulation, impulse control, effortful control, temperament, personality, coping, stress, frustration tolerance, empathy, emotional intelligence, and social competence, including sibling and peer relationships (Capri & Henry, 1995; Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000; Garner, 1995; Klein, Feldman, & Zarr, 2002; Kochanska & Tjhiska, 1993; Martin, Anderson, Barratt, & Weber, 1997; Olson, Bates, & Buyea, 1990; Selman, Mishel, Abu-Sha, & Rodopulos, 2000; Whitman & Christianson, 2003).

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 and 3 1/2 years
• 36 caregivers
• Naturalistic observation: 2 1/2 hr transcriptual verbatim of up to five samples per child
• Samples divided into younger (22-30 months) and older (32-42 months)

Table 1

Participating with Half-Hour Transcript

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Moyo</th>
<th>Jaya</th>
<th>Rana</th>
<th>Anu</th>
<th>Mitesh</th>
<th>Prit</th>
<th>Ruhan</th>
<th>Sathya</th>
<th>Meenakshi</th>
<th>Laxmi</th>
<th>Astha</th>
<th>Suman</th>
<th>Vishal</th>
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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.

Results of 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 (22%). Taken together, these two categories account for approximately 80% of all 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.

Method (continued)

Principles of grounded theory

• Categories based in the data themselves (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)
• Theoretical correctness achieved through recursive analysis of episodes (Ely, 1991)
• Thick and rich description (Gereke, 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, fits, or acts out
• 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

Table 2

Reason for Conflict

Table 3

Episode histories

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

1. Child compliance (e.g., “Quit your scraping! C: there’s a big bubble in/on normal vowel)
2. Child distraction on own (e.g., “You can’t go outside. It’s raining! C: look")
3. Child distraction by other (e.g., “You’re gonna live/ No, now cool it/ Hey, cool it/J: (cries)
4. Interlocutor compliance (e.g., “Say, we’ll fix it/ Whaddaya want? J: Want down/ [end of episode]
5. Negative alternative (e.g., “You wanna read books or go outside?/ Tell Mommy what you want/ What do you want to do?/ What do you wanna do?"

Results (continued)

Table 4

Resolution of discordant episodes

Table 5

Parental strategies

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, every 10-year-old in this culture did not seem focused on object acquisition. Only 10% 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.