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Con-Constructing the Past: Examining Mother- and Father-Child Narratives about Past Events involving Pain versus Sadness

Storytelling is a powerful social transaction that forms the basis of our identities and shapes our development. Indeed, it has been argued that talking to children about past negative events is one of the most influential ways to optimize their social, emotional, and cognitive development. But not all reminiscing is created equal. Young children whose parents are topic-extending and elaborative (e.g., open-ended questions that pull for richer, more detailed accounts), who support the child's interests and autonomy, and who use emotional language when reminiscing about past negative events, have better developmental outcomes. Two frequently occurring negative events in childhood are those involving pain and sadness. 'Everyday pains' (i.e., minor bumps and scrapes incurred during everyday activities) are experienced frequently from the time that children begin walking and children experience interpersonal sadness from infancy (e.g., separation from caregivers, loss). *These painful and distressing experiences provide powerful social learning opportunities during formative developmental periods.* Nevertheless, little is known about the ways in which parents talk to children following painful events and how these interactions may differ from other negative emotional events involving sadness. Moreover, despite gender differences in adult reminiscing and the importance of fathers in parenting and influencing children's developmental trajectories, differences between mother-child and father-child narratives about past negative events remain a gap in the literature. Given that reminiscing about past sad and painful events is likely linked to social and emotional responses, filling this gap in knowledge could inform advances in social-cultural developmental theory as well as optimal ways of helping mothers and fathers enhance young children's socio-developmental outcomes.

We will examine parent-child reminiscing about past events involving sadness and pain. The objectives of this research are: **Objective 1.)** To examine parent-child narratives for past autobiographical events involving pain and sadness in 4 and 6 year-olds and their concurrent relations with key socio-developmental factors (empathic and prosocial behaviors, social development, theory of mind); **Objective 2.)** To examine differences between mother-child and father-child narratives about past events involving pain and sadness and their relative influences on socio-developmental outcomes. We hypothesize that parent-child narratives about sad events will contain more elaborative, emotional, and supportive language than narratives about pain and differences will be present across age groups. Moreover, we hypothesize that mothers will use more elaborative, emotional, and supportive language when reminiscing with their children than fathers; however, both mother- and father-child narratives about painful and sad events will be related to children's socio-developmental outcomes.

The research will include 128 father- and mother-child dyads (4 and 6 year-old children) recruited from a large participant database at the Language and Cognitive Lab at the University of Calgary. Children will complete a structured narrative elicitation task wherein they will reminisce about distinctive past events involving pain and sadness. Upon completion of the task, parents will complete measures of children's social development (prosocial behavior, empathy, social development, theory of mind). Children will engage in observational tasks to assess their theory of mind and prosocial behaviors. Two independent coders will then code the narratives for elaborative parental reminiscing style, emotional language, and autonomy support.

Findings will advance understanding of a critical socio-linguistic skill that could inform parenting interventions to promote children's social development. In so doing, it will benefit society by enhancing knowledge of children's social development and informing policy and language-based interventions to improve the development of Canadian children. Knowledge mobilization will involve targeting academic audiences interested in child development, psychology, and linguistics (journal articles, conference presentations), policy makers and practitioners (research briefs, professional workshops), and the general public (community lectures, media interviews).