


The Benefits of Reminiscing With Young Children

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Abstract

Parents talk about the past with their young children from the time their children can talk. There is robust evidence that when parents discuss the past in a detailed, emotional, and collaborative way (elaborative reminiscing), their children have stronger autobiographical memory skills. We review recent research showing that elaborative reminiscing also has significant benefits for children's language and socioemotional skills. Importantly, these findings show that elaborative reminiscing is effective with children at risk of compromised development in the context of poverty, maltreatment, or psychopathology. Elaborative reminiscing appears to foster development by providing children with practice using challenging language, encouraging them to put their experiences into words, and optimizing memory for the information gained during conversations. Although further research in diverse cultures is required, reminiscing is a promising tool—available to all families—for promoting children's cognitive and socioemotional development.

Keywords

autobiographical memory, language, socioemotional development, parent-child conversation

One of the most effective ways that parents can promote their young children's cognitive and emotional development is to talk with them. But not all talk is equal—the how and what of these conversations matters. Conversations focusing on the past, in particular, play a unique and vital role in children's growing ability to remember and talk about their own personal experiences (their autobiographical memories); parents' styles of talking about the past are increasingly reflected in their children's styles of remembering and narrating their own past experiences (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006). These findings are consistent with the theoretical idea that as children develop language, they internalize skills and knowledge by means of collaborative interactions with more capable adults (Nelson & Fivush, 2004).

In our review, we build on more than three decades of research with 18-month-old to 5-year-old children in Western (e.g., the United States, New Zealand) and Asian (e.g., China, Korea) cultures to examine new empirical and theoretical directions in investigations of parent-child conversations about the past (reminiscing). We focus on children's language and socioemotional development and pay special attention to research investigating the benefits of reminiscing with children who are at risk of

negative psychological outcomes because they live in poverty, have been exposed to maltreatment, or experience psychopathology.

This excerpt from a discussion between a Western European mother and her 3.5-year-old son, Jesse, about the child's recent haircut provides an example of key elements of an elaborative and emotion-rich style of reminiscing:

Mother: "What was the first thing he [the barber] did?"

Child: "Bzzzz." (running his hand over his head)

Mother: "He used the clippers, and I think you liked the clippers. And you know how I know? Because you were smiling."

Child: "Because they were tickling."

Mother: "They were tickling, is that how they felt? Did they feel scratchy?"

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Child: "No."

Mother: "And after the clippers, what did he use then?"

Child: "The spray."

Mother: "Yes. Why did he use the spray?"

Child: (silent)

Mother: "He used the spray to tidy your hair. And I noticed that you closed your eyes, and I thought 'Jesse's feeling a little bit scared,' but you didn't move or cry and I thought you were being very brave."

The mother's highly elaborative style is reflected in her use of questions that add new information and in her encouragement and affirmation of her child's contributions. Together, these strategies provide structure to help him to understand the experience and to put it into words. More generally, the child is learning that his involvement in reminiscing conversations is valued. A parent adopting a less elaborative style might instead repeat her own questions and provide limited conversational opportunity for her child.

The mother in our excerpt also teaches her child about emotions, describing their causes, indicators, and consequences, whereas other parents might include limited emotion content. It is likely that this mother and child enjoy a positive relationship: We know that when the child is securely attached and there is a good fit between the mother's and child's temperament, they are able to have more emotionally open conversations (Bird, Reese, & Tripp, 2007; Fivush et al., 2006).

Because his mother's style is likely to remain consistent, over time the child will come to report his own personal memories in a detailed, structured, and emotionally imbued way. Of course, it is also possible that the child could have had this discussion with his father. Few studies have included fathers, but when gender differences are apparent, mothers tend to be more elaborative (Zaman & Fivush, 2013).

The unique benefits of reminiscing become clear when we realize that mother and child could not have had this richly detailed conversation at the time of the haircut, nor in anticipation of it: Hindsight is required to weave together its elements into a narrative that includes the perspectives and reevaluations of both experiencers. Reminiscing is also uniquely important when the conversation is related to how the child and others felt *during* the event. Talking about negative emotions after their intensity has abated provides a prime opportunity to reflect upon feelings and explore their causes and consequences (Fivush, Hazzard, McDermott Sales, Sarfati, & Brown, 2003; Laible, Panfile Murphy, & Augustine, 2013).

Elaborative Reminiscing and Language Development

Because elaborative reminiscing occurs in the context of conversations between parent and child, it makes sense that reminiscing fosters language development, at least in the Western cultures studied to date. The more parents talk to their children, the faster their children's language develops (Hart & Risley, 1995). But elaborative reminiscing has special qualities that make it particularly useful for young children's language development (Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe, 1999). Rowe (2012) identified conversations about personal experiences in the past and future (narrative talk) as pervasive in children's everyday lives and as especially important for preschool children's complex language skills. Narrative talk contains longer, more complex sentences than talk about the here and now (Rowe, 2012). Note the embedded nature of the mother's final sentence in our excerpt: ". . . I thought 'Jesse's feeling a little bit scared,' but you didn't move or cry. . . ." Narrative talk in the preschool years establishes the beginnings of academic language, which bodes well for children's school success (Snow, 2010).

Indeed, elaborative reminiscing is linked to all aspects of language development—vocabulary, awareness of language sounds (phonological awareness), and narrative skills—that are crucial for children's later reading and academic achievement. For instance, mothers' naturally occurring narrative talk about the past and future is linked to children's vocabulary growth over time, even after controlling for the quantity of maternal talk and children's previous vocabulary (Rowe, 2012). Mothers' reminiscing about unshared events (e.g., a preschool field trip) was linked to growth in children's phonological awareness, whereas shared book reading was not (Leyva, Sparks, & Reese, 2012). In the same study, mothers' elaborative reminiscing about their children's positive behavior and misbehavior was uniquely associated with children's story understanding and early literacy skills (Sparks & Reese, 2013). Importantly, this research was conducted with families from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Experimental studies have also established the benefits of elaborative reminiscing for children's narrative skills (Reese & Newcombe, 2007). Narrative skills are crucial for later reading comprehension, over and above the role of vocabulary (Reese, Suggate, Long, & Schaughency, 2010). When researchers taught low-income mothers of children attending Head Start (an early intervention program for low-income children) to reminisce in more elaborative ways, this instruction advanced the children's fictional narrative skills to a greater extent than an interactive book-reading program (Reese, Leyva, Sparks, & Grolnick, 2010). Critically, children's retelling of fictional narratives

is a task similar to ones they will encounter in school and a strong predictor of later reading success (Reese, Suggate, et al., 2010). Reminiscing is thus a promising complement to shared book reading for enhancing preschool children's higher-order language skills, with the potential to shrink the gap in language input between middle- and low-income children (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Why might reminiscing influence literacy? The linguistic complexity of talk about the past relative to the here and now is pivotal. For example, children are challenged to understand and use more sophisticated vocabulary and syntax to think about abstract concepts (including past and future) and to put their experience into language. They also become adept at using the linguistic context rather than the physical world to understand new words (Demir, Rowe, Heller, Goldin-Meadow, & Levine, 2015; Reese, in press). Via multiple pathways, therefore, reminiscing can influence diverse but interconnected aspects of literacy development.

Elaborative Reminiscing and Socioemotional Development

As we have seen, a major advantage of reminiscing about an emotional experience is the possibility of reflection and re-evaluation when the emotional heat has subsided. The research evidence concurs. It is talk about *past* emotions, not all parent-child talk about emotions, that is linked concurrently and over time to young children's socioemotional skills (Lagattuta & Wellman, 2002; Laible, 2004; Reese, Bird, & Tripp, 2007; Wang, 2013). In Western cultures in particular, children whose parents reminisce in a more elaborative and emotional way, particularly about negative emotions, have a more solid self-concept and show greater insight into their own and others' feelings (Laible, 2004; Reese et al., 2007).

During elaborative reminiscing conversations, children are also getting practice at controlling their attention and managing their emotions. Thus, it is not surprising that parents' emotional reminiscing is linked longitudinally to children's ability to regulate their negative emotions and respond in socially competent ways in challenging situations (Leyva, Berrocal, & Nolivos, 2014; Leyva & Nolivos, 2015). Emotion and self-management skills are crucial for children to successfully navigate their social and academic worlds (Denham et al., 2012). These findings apply to low-income and Spanish-speaking children as well as to middle-income English-speaking children (Leyva et al., 2014).

Experimental studies provide evidence of causal relationships, strengthening the correlational findings. When parents were taught to reminisce in an elaborative and emotion-rich way, their young children's elaborative and

emotion talk and understanding of emotions increased over the next 6 months, whereas there was no such growth for children in a control condition (Van Bergen, Salmon, Dadds, & Allen, 2009). In another study, researchers taught mothers of toddlers to reminisce elaboratively and, 2 years later, assessed the impact on their theory of mind (their understanding of others' thoughts), which is closely connected with language. The children who started the study with low language levels reached theory-of-mind understanding similar to that of children with high language levels whose mothers were in a control condition (Taumoepeau & Reese, 2013).

Elaborative reminiscing likely promotes children's socioemotional skills because, over and above influencing language, it supports processes that foster optimal learning and memory (e.g., retrieval of an earlier experience; high structure; focus on emotion; cognitive demand; Cleveland & Morris, 2014; McGuigan & Salmon, 2004; Van Bergen & Salmon, 2010). Such processes can ensure that the knowledge and skills that children acquire during their conversations are retained and contribute to their understanding of their internal and external worlds.

Many young children living in challenging circumstances have difficulties with the socioemotional and cognitive skills that are shaped during reminiscing (Salmon & O'Kearney, 2014; Wareham & Salmon, 2006). Building on this strong recent research with typically developing children, an important new direction is the reminiscing patterns that may emerge in at-risk dyads. Concurrently, our theoretical framework is enriched by incorporating a developmental-psychopathology perspective to understand how compromised reminiscing might, over time, contribute to children's psychological outcomes (Salmon & Reese, 2015; Valentino et al., 2015).

For example, maltreating mothers are less likely than non-maltreating mothers to engage in highly elaborative reminiscing with their children (Valentino et al., 2015). Similar patterns occur with economically disadvantaged mothers, especially if they are young and less educated (Raikes & Thompson, 2008). The emotional elements of reminiscing conversations pose special challenges for at-risk mothers and their children. Mothers exposed to difficult experiences (such as substance abuse or violence) are less likely to use emotion words with their young children than are mothers experiencing fewer risks (Raikes & Thompson, 2008).

The broader clinical literature shows us that for at-risk dyads, the style *and* content of conversations must be understood. For example, mothers and children with conduct problems remain "stuck" in anger when reminiscing about contentious past experiences (Salmon, in press). Yet it is supportive and elaborative discussions of emotions, in which parents provide room for the child's perspective rather than imposing their own, that are

particularly important for developing the skills to understand and manage emotion.

There is encouraging evidence of the benefits of maternal reminiscing with at-risk children. When maltreating mothers do reminisce more elaboratively, their children have better physiological regulation (Valentino et al., 2015). It is also possible to teach parents of some at-risk children these techniques of emotional reminiscing. Interventions with parents of children with conduct problems (Salmon, Dadds, Allen, & Hawes, 2009) and with maltreating mothers (Valentino, Comas, Nuttall, & Thomas, 2013) can be effective. In these samples, the parents of at-risk children learned to talk in more detail and depth with their children about past experiences and emotions. Their children were also more elaborative and referred more often to past emotions immediately after the intervention.

Future Directions

Elaborative reminiscing plays a vital role in the development of children's autobiographical memory. Drawing upon the latest research, we assert that its reach extends to children's language and socioemotional development, not only for typically developing children, but also for children at risk of compromised development in the context of poverty, maltreatment, or psychopathology.

There are clear directions for future research. Despite encouraging findings, we still know little about the quality and content of conversational exchanges in at-risk dyads or the factors that prevent some parents from engaging in constructive elaborative reminiscing. Our recent theoretical innovations implicate multiple interacting factors relating to the child, parent, and context. These may include, for example, the child's inattentive temperament, the parent's limited appreciation of the importance of conversation, or the multiple stressors imposed by poverty (Reese, in press; Salmon, in press).

Cultural factors also play a critical role. Indeed, elaborative reminiscing about personal and emotional experiences is considered inappropriate in Asian cultures that place a high value on relational and social responsibility, in contrast to the Western emphasis on individuality and autonomy (Wang, 2013). These findings highlight that there are multiple developmental pathways to socioemotional and cognitive proficiency. Elaborative reminiscing is facilitative in the Western cultures studied to date, but research across diverse cultures is required.

This new knowledge will improve interventions in which parents are coached in elaborative reminiscing; although promising, the few existing studies have been limited in their "one-size-fits-all" approach, short time frames, and small samples. Thus, we need larger-scale

longitudinal studies in which sensitive measures are used to track processes of change following interventions (Salmon, Dittman, Sanders, Burson, & Hammington, 2014). This raft of new findings will have important implications, helping us to understand, for example, the influence of elaborative reminiscing on children's longer-term outcomes. Despite evidence of the influence of language, and its vehicle—conversation—on children's outcomes, we have paid scant attention to either in clinical interventions in the early years.

A crucial feature of elaborative reminiscing is that it is freely available to all families, regardless of their income or language. Although not all parents feel comfortable reading books with their children, parents in the cultures studied to date reminisce with their young children (Leyva et al., 2012; Miller, Wiley, Fung, & Liang, 1997; Wang, 2013). Talk about the past may be particularly important for developing language and emotion understanding in at-risk children. Our challenge is to understand how we can fully harness its benefits.

Recommended Reading

- Fivush, R. (2011). The development of autobiographical memory. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 62, 559–582. A comprehensive review article.
- Salmon, K., & Reese, E. (2015). (See References). A review of how having or not having conversations about experiences may influence memory.
- Reese, E. (2013). *Tell me a story: Sharing stories to enrich your child's world*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. A book that guides parents in how to engage their child in reading books and having conversations.
- Wang, Q. (2013). (See References). A book for a broad readership on the role of culture in autobiographical memory.

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