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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 & Hafen, 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 (Kerns, 2008; Nelson, Boyer, Sang, & Wilson, 2014; Recchia, Ross, & Vickar, 2010). Conflict discussion tactics mothers use may be qualitatively distinct, and have different implications for children's social skills, based on whether mothers provide a sensitive relational context versus a more intrusive and negative context (Adams & Laursen, 2007; Laursen & Hafen, 2010). Person-centered analyses were used to determine whether specific constellations of maternal characteristics were present in our sample (Bergman & Trost, 2006; von Eye & Bogat, 2006).

The current study examined:

- 1) The presence and characteristics of maternal conflict behavior profiles based on sensitivity and engagement facilitation behaviors
- 2) Relations between these groups of mothers and children's social skills

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 (Robin & Foster, 1989)

- Assesses which conflicts dyads discuss, how upset each topic makes them (1 = calm, 4 = very angry)



Methods (cont.)

Maternal Sensitivity (Neitzel & Stright, 2003)

- 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

Child Social Skills (Gershman & Elliott, 1990)

- Social Skills Rating System (SSRS)
- Total social skills score ($\alpha = .86$) assessing cooperation, assertion, self-control, and responsibility

Results (cont.)

Table 1. Characteristics Associated with Maternal Conflict Behavior Profiles

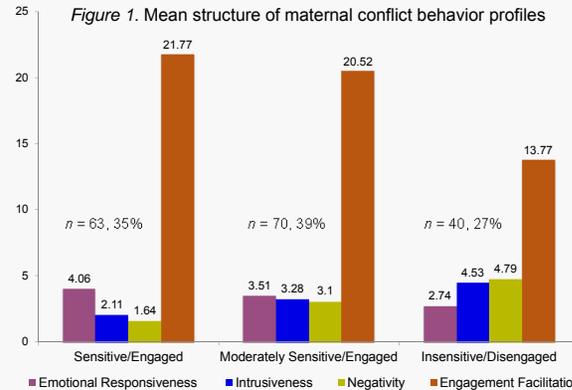
Variable	Log-Odds B (SE B)			Odds Ratio		
	1 vs. 2	1 vs. 3	2 vs. 3	1 vs. 2	1 vs. 3	2 vs. 3
Child Ethnicity	-.57 (.45)	-.83 (.46)	-.25 (.44)	0.56	0.44	0.78
Mother Education	.11 (.13)	.14 (.14)	.02 (.14)	1.12	1.14	1.02
Mother MLU	.01 (.05)	.17 (.10)	.16 (.10)	1.01	1.18	1.17
Child Social Skills	.07** (.02)	.07* (.03)	-.002 (.03)	1.07**	1.07*	1

Note. 1 = sensitive/engaged, 2 = moderately sensitive/engaged 3 = insensitive/disengaged
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Children with greater social skills were significantly more likely to have a mother in the sensitive/engaged group compared to the moderately sensitive/engaged or insensitive/disengaged groups.

There were no significant differences in the likelihood of having a mother in the moderately sensitive/engaged group versus the insensitive/disengaged group based on children's social skills.

Results



Latent profile analysis (LPA) was used to test 2-, 3-, and 4-profile solutions. The 3-profile solution was selected based on established criteria (Ram & Grimm, 2009) and this solution demonstrated good fit to the data; BIC = 3128.26, p LMR = .00, posterior probabilities of class membership = .91-.96, entropy = .87.

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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