"Are You a Big, Brave Boy?": The Content and Relational Context of Mother-Child Conversations about Children's Characteristics

Rebecca Goodvin, Sara Meyer, Ross A. Thompson, Rachel Hayes, & Rachel Bruhn

University of Nebraska-Lincoln & University of California-Davis

Abstract

Parent-child conversations are important to young children's understanding of mental and psychological characteristics. They may also influence children's developing self-concepts because they frame subjective understanding of children's behaviors and experiences in a coherent and meaningful narrative form. Further, these conversations occur within and reflect a relational context in which relational quality may affect developing self-understanding. The current study examines mother-child conversations about young children's personal characteristics, shared affect, and broad relationship factors associated with variability in the nature of those conversations. Conversation emphasis and strategy varied with maternal negative affect and child attachment security.

Introduction

- Conversations between parents and children during the preschool years help children to construct a subjective understanding of their experiences, emotions, and behaviors. This understanding contributes to children's developing psychological representations, including representations of self.

- Research has focused on parent-child conversations about specific, temporally located past events because of their relevance to the development of an autobiographical self.

- Individual variability in the content and quality of these past event conversations is linked to security of the parent-child attachment relationship, and to maternal negative affect (see Fivush et al., 2006 for review).

- Parents also hold views of their children's characteristics, and how they communicate about those views may have implications for developing self-representations.

- The current study is the first to examine mother-child conversations about children's personal characteristics.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What verbal strategies do mothers use to elicit and expand young children's self-representations? Are characteristics linked to specific episodes, or to generalized perceptions of the child?

Research Question 2: Do emphasis, strategy, and affective quality of conversations vary by topic (i.e., characteristic being discussed)?

Research Question 3: Are parent-child attachment security and maternal negative affect related to individual variability in conversation emphasis and strategy?

Method

Participants: 46 mothers and their preschool children (*M* age = 4.12 years, 3.4 to 4.6 years; 51% female; 80% white) Participants were recruited from community child care centers and preschools.

Procedures: Researchers rated attachment behavior in home observations. One week later, children completed a self-concept measure (Eder, 1990) in a campus lab. Mothers were then prompted to talk with their child about how the child had answered three self-concept questions.

- Do you get scared a lot, or a little?
- Do you sometimes get in trouble for being bad, or never get in trouble?
- Do you like to play with your friends, or by yourself?

Conversations were coded overall and by topic for strategy and shared affect.

Table 1. Measures

Variable	M	SD	Range
Number of conversation segments	12.39	7.01	2 – 39
Rephrase prompts	4.17	3.34	0 – 16
(restating the question without adding new information)			
General example prompts	13.52	8.69	0 – 29
(e.g., "What do you like to play with your friends?")			
Specific example prompts	.70	1.86	0 – 9
(e.g., "What did you play with your friends yesterday?")			
Shared positive affect	55.80	42.78	0 – 100
(% episodes where both mother and child expressed only positive affect)			
Maternal negative affect	.00	1.75	-3.26 – 4.76
(20 item depressive symptoms and parenting stress composite)			
Child attachment security	.27	.20	-.25 – .66
Attachment Q-Sort (Waters, 1985)			

Figure 2: % Shared Positive Affect by Topic
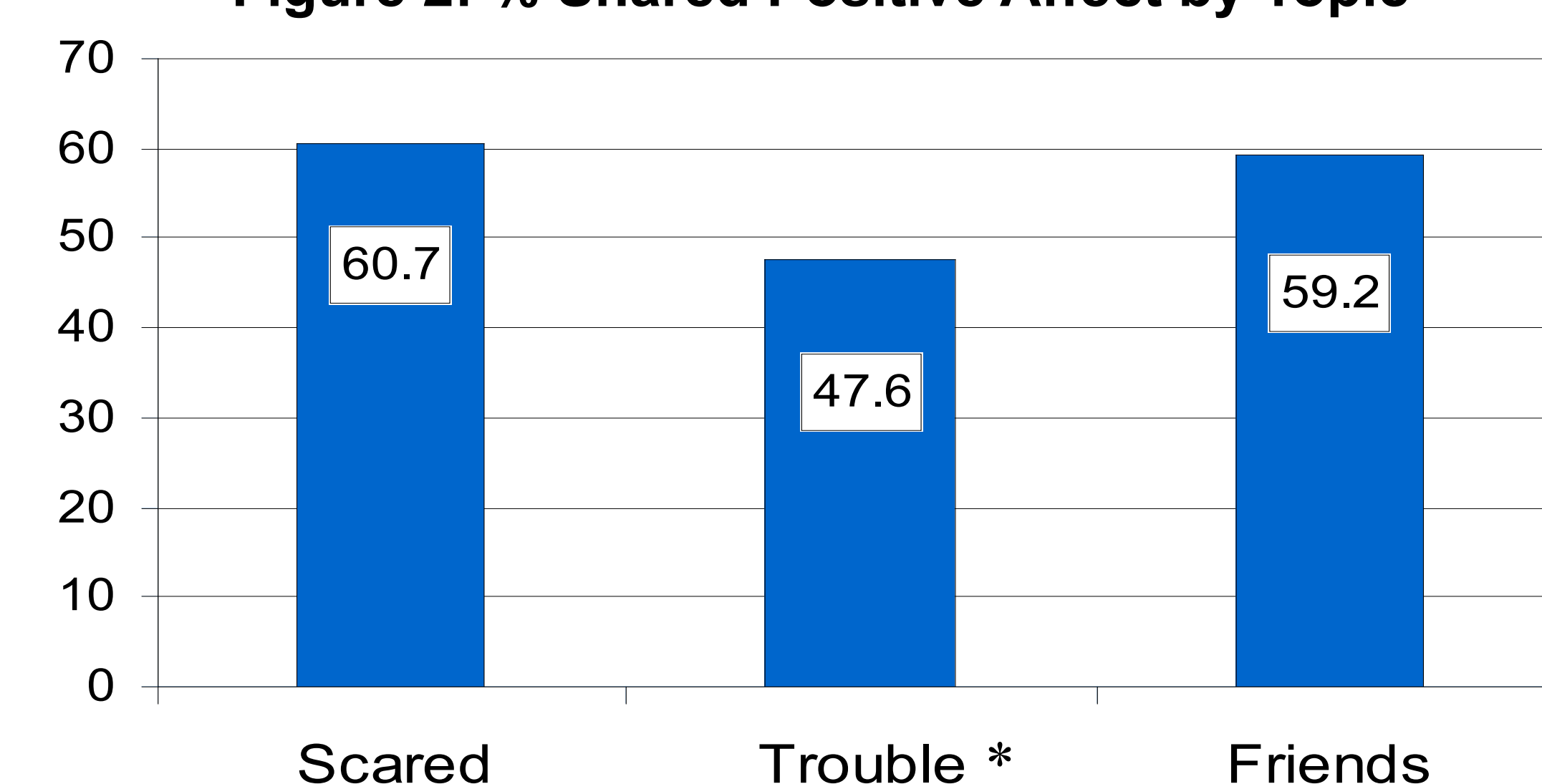
* Mean for trouble is significantly lower than for scared or friends
F (2, 41) = 4.11, *p* < .05

Results

Research Question 1: See Table 1 for descriptive statistics. Nearly all mothers (98%) used at least one general example in discussing characteristics, but few (20%) referred to specific examples.

Research Question 2: Amount of conversation, use of rephrase prompts, general example prompts, and specific example prompts did not vary by characteristic under discussion (see Figure 1). Shared positive affect was significantly lower in "trouble" conversations (see Figure 2).

Research Question 3: More secure dyads talked longer across conversation topic (*r* = .38, *p* < .01). Maternal negative affect was positively correlated with number of "trouble" segments, and with "trouble" rephrase prompts. Child attachment security was positively correlated with number of "friends" segments, and with "friends" general example prompts (see Table 2).

Figure 1. Mean Frequency of Strategy by Topic

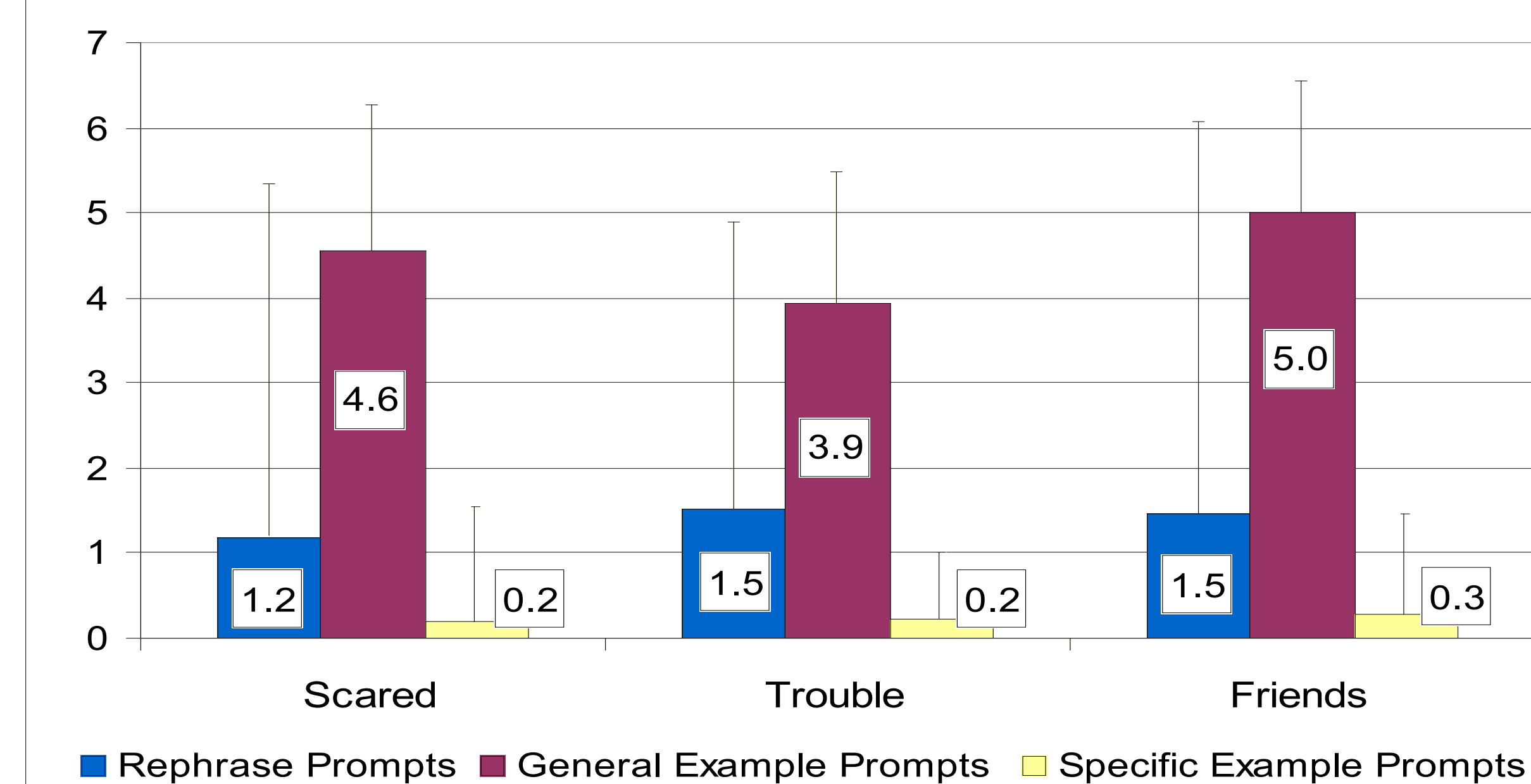Rephrase Prompts — General Example Prompts — Specific Example Prompts

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations of Conversation Dimensions and Relationship Context

	Maternal Negative Affect	Child Attachment Security
# Scared segments	.01	.14
# Trouble segments	.29*	.12
# Friend segments	.14	.33*
Scared rephrase prompts	.08	.05
Trouble rephrase prompts	.47**	-.06
Friend rephrase prompts	.17	.15
Trouble general example prompt	.19	.12
Scared general example prompt	.04	.09
Friend general example prompt	.05	.38**

* p < .05, ** p < .01

Discussion

Research Question 1:

- Overall, mothers referenced few temporally located examples in discussing children's characteristics. Most mothers used general example prompts, suggesting that conversations about the self are associated with generic rather than episodic event representations. While most research in this area has focused on parent-child conversation about specific events, parents think about generalized characteristics. Conversations about characteristics may provide direct information about parents' perceptions, and the related messages children encounter.

Research Question 2:

- Across all dyads, amount and strategy of conversations were equivalent across topics. Conversations about child characteristics each elicited rich generalized example prompts, despite representing very different types of experiences from which to draw examples.

- Affective quality of conversations varied by topic; dyads expressed less shared positive affect when discussing whether the child gets in trouble for being bad, perhaps reflecting greater conflict potential regarding the child's behavior in relation to the parents' expectations.

Research Question 3:

- Conversations about children's characteristics – and thus what could be learned about the self – were linked to parent-child relationship context.

- Mothers high in negative affect had a greater focus on, and were more repetitive in talking about "trouble," relative to mothers lower in negative affect. Children's misbehavior may also be more salient to mothers experiencing high negative affect.

- More secure dyads, to a greater extent than less secure dyads, focused on and were more elaborative about the child's self as engaged in positive relationship experiences with peers.

- These findings suggest that emphasis and strategy in parent-child conversations are one way that relationship context might influence individual variability in children's developing self-understanding.

References

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