

Abstract

Although research on parent-child discourse has explicated social and cognitive functions of joint reminiscing of past events, few studies have examined functions of anticipatory event conversations. This study examined links between future-oriented practices in the home, parent-child anticipatory discourse, and children's future-oriented knowledge and skills. Thirty-eight 5-year-old children and their mothers engaged in future event conversation and mothers completed a questionnaire about future-oriented practices and behaviors. Children were also interviewed about their knowledge of the future events with a naïve partner and completed a planning task. Findings support the contribution of future-oriented practices in the home on children's future-oriented knowledge and skills, and lends supports the unique contribution of anticipatory discourse in the organization of these abilities.

Introduction

- Parents initiate anticipatory event conversations with their children early and frequently during childhood.
- Individual differences in the style and content of family anticipatory event conversations have been found, yet little research has been devoted to exploring the function of these differences as they relate to how children think about themselves, others, and events in a future-oriented context.
- Future-oriented speech may influence how children anticipate future events, how children think within a complex temporal context, and may serve as a basis for joint structuring and planning of future events.
- Parental guidance in negotiating how to integrate multiple temporal representations may be a very important factor in creating a coherent, organized hypothesis about the future (Hudson, 2006).
- Moreover, anticipatory conversations with parents may provide a forum for learning how to form flexible mental representations of goal-oriented actions that are required when planning.
- The present study examined relations between family future-oriented behaviors and values, and children's future-oriented behaviors, knowledge and skills.

Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1:** Children from families that report more future-oriented family practices and values would evidence more future-oriented behaviors.
- Hypothesis 2:** Children with mothers who provide a detailed description of anticipatory events would have more developed future-oriented behaviors, knowledge, and skills.
- Hypothesis 3:** Children that evidenced more future-oriented behaviors in daily family life would provide more future-oriented details during anticipatory conversations with a naïve partner and more detailed plans.

Methods

Participants. Thirty-eight children (*M* age = 5.2 years, 52% female) and their mothers were recruited from community child care centers and preschools in a Midwestern city.

Procedures. Mothers reported their own future-oriented behaviors and values and their child's demonstration of future-oriented behaviors in the home. A week later, mothers engaged children in two anticipatory conversations at a university laboratory. An experimenter later interviewed the children about what they thought would happen during each event. Children also completed a planning task with an experimenter.

Measures.

Development of Future-Oriented Processes Questionnaire (Benson, 1994): Parents completed a self-report questionnaire designed to measure contextual family factors that might influence developing future-oriented processes and behavior in children. (See Table 1.)

Anticipatory Conversation Tasks

Parent-child: Mothers were asked to engage in a conversation with their child about two events the child would experience within a week. Conversations were coded for the amount of *information detail* provided by the mother. (See Table 2.)

Naïve partner-child: An experimenter served as a naïve conversation partner and interview the children later during the session about what they thought would happen during each future event that was previously discussed with their mother. Children's descriptions were coded for the amount of *future-oriented detail* they provided about the events. (See Table 2.)

Planning Task (adapted from Hudson et al., 1995): An experimenter asked children how to plan for two events (planning a birthday party and planting a garden). Children's responses were coded for the amount of *planning details* they provided. (See Table 2.)

Table 1. Development of Future-Oriented Processes Questionnaire

Domain	# of items	reliability	Sample item
Family Practices			
1. Future-Oriented Speech	14	.72	We talk about things that will happen tomorrow.
2. Future-Oriented Tool Use	5	.73	We use a calendar to explain when something would happen.
3. Organizing Daily Life	28	.81	We eat dinner around the same time each day.
Child Behaviors			
1. Routine & Order	8	.70	Has some routines that (s)he follows the same way each day. (Bedtime routine)
2. Expectation & Preparation	15	.79	Anticipates what will happen by watching what others do. (Knows Daddy will leave when watching him pack his suitcase)
3. Time	11	.81	Asks about things that will happen in the future. ("Are we gonna eat cake at the party tomorrow?")
4. Problem-orientation	6	.70	Tries different ways to solve a problem when the first way doesn't work. (Getting a chair to stand on to help reach)

Table 2. Anticipatory Conversation and Planning Task Coding

Task	Code	Description	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Parent-child anticipatory event conversation	Informational Detail	A global score (1-5) of the amount of detail about the future event provided by the parent.	3.03	1.06	1-5
Naïve partner-child anticipatory event conversation	Future-oriented Detail	A discrete count of the number of unique details about the future event provided by the child.	9.43	5.17	0-17
Planning Tasks	Planning Details	A discrete count of the number of unique details provided by the child that were specific to planning an event.	6.84	3.91	0-18

Results

Hypothesis 1:

- Maternal future-oriented speech was positively related to children's future-oriented behaviors (routine & order, expectation & preparation, and time).
- Maternal practices of future-oriented tools (e.g., calendars) and organizing behavior were not related to any child behaviors. (Table 3).

Hypothesis 2:

- Contrary to our hypothesis, the amount of information detail provided by mothers in anticipatory event conversations did not relate to any child future-oriented knowledge or skill variables (Table 3).

Hypothesis 3:

- Children's demonstration of expectation and preparation behaviors in the home was positively associated with the amount of future-oriented details providing during the anticipatory event conversation with a naïve partner
- Children's demonstration of routine and order and problem-orientation behaviors in the home were positively related to the amount of details when planning for events (Table 3).

Table 3. Bivariate Correlations of Maternal and Child Future-Oriented Behaviors

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<i>Maternal Behaviors</i>									
1. Informational detail	--								
2. Future-oriented Speech	.43**	--							
3. Future-oriented Tool Use	.26	.29*	--						
4. Organizing Daily Life	.02	.38*	.57**	--					
<i>Child Behaviors in the home</i>									
5. Routine & Order	-.25	.31*	.10	.25	--				
6. Expectation & Preparation	-.13	.33*	-.08	-.10	.64**	--			
7. Time	.03	.40**	.23	.16	.48**	.64**	--		
8. Problem-orientation	-.10	.17	.08	.02	.42**	.55**	.40**	--	
<i>Observed Child Behaviors</i>									
9. Future-oriented detail	-.01	.12	.24	.17	.16	.33*	.30*	.18	--
10. Planning detail	-.24	-.23	.05	-.27	.35*	.31*	.17	.45**	.12

*p < .07 *p < .05 **p < .01

Discussion

Hypothesis 1:

•Findings support the **unique contribution of future-oriented speech in organizing children's future-oriented abilities.** This study measured multiple dimensions of future-oriented behaviors in the home. While daily organization practices and tool use (e.g., calendars) did not relate to children's demonstration of future-oriented behaviors in the home or in the lab, maternal reported future-oriented speech was positively associated with three child behavioral factors. Mothers who reported discussing the future more in the home had children who demonstrated more ordering behaviors around routine events, preparation behaviors, and enacted behaviors such as making inquires about the future more often. **Mothers who discussed the future more often in the home may be acting to structure rich and coherent anticipatory event representations.**

•These findings reinforce the importance of examining the influence of future-oriented discourse processes in the home and how children's knowledge about the future is fostered.

Hypothesis 2:

•Surprisingly, the amount of informational detail provided by mothers during anticipatory event conversations did not relate to any child future-oriented knowledge or skill variables. A detailed anticipatory conversation may not foster concurrent use of cognitive abilities in young children.

•The amount of detail provided in anticipatory conversations may not influence children's event representations in the same way as it does in retrospective conversations. **With the cognitive complexity required to represent the future temporal context and a lack of prior experience to draw upon, qualities of speech beyond the informational detail may be needed to foster children's future-oriented knowledge and skills.** A longitudinal study is needed to further explicate the developmental impact of anticipatory discourse style.

Hypothesis 3:

•**There are specific patterns of everyday home skills and activities that related to the amount of future-oriented details provided by children about upcoming events, as well as detailed plans.**

•Children's behaviors indicating expectation and preparation for future events were associated with the amount of future-oriented detail they use to describe an upcoming event to a naïve partner. By regularly engaging in such behaviors as asking about and discussing future events in the home, children may be more prepared to discuss future-oriented events with a naïve partner, as they are better equipped with the skills needed to describe an anticipatory event, and to negotiate a more complex anticipatory representation.

•Children's planning abilities, indexed by the amount of detail they could provide about two standard events, was positively associated with their abilities enact daily routine events, as well as with their problem solving abilities. The organization of anticipatory representations involved in planning may be supported by children's opportunities to participate in routine daily activities in the home, and fostered by the flexibility and goal-oriented skills required to anticipate solutions to challenges that may arise in the context of daily activities.