



# Coaching mothers of typical and conduct problem children in elaborative parent-child reminiscing: Influences of a randomized controlled trial on reminiscing behaviour and everyday talk preferences

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## ABSTRACT

This study compared the effects of mother-child reminiscing coaching on mothers of typically developing children (community sample) and mothers of children with conduct problems (clinical sample). It also tested whether intervention effects generalize to mothers' preferences for elaborative and mental-state oriented talk with their children in other contexts. Mother-child dyads ( $n = 88$ ) in each sample were randomly allocated to condition: reminiscing intervention or active control. Pre-intervention, sample differences emerged. Mothers in the community sample were more elaborative during reminiscing than mothers in the clinical sample, and also expressed stronger preferences for elaborative talk in everyday contexts. Post-intervention, an intervention effect emerged. In both the community and clinical samples, mothers who had participated in the elaborative reminiscing intervention were more elaborative and emotion-focused during reminiscing than mothers in the active control condition. They also increased their preferences for elaborative and mental-state-oriented language in everyday contexts. While the mothers in the community sample remained more elaborative than mothers in the clinical sample, both experienced equivalent intervention gains. These findings highlight the value of reminiscing coaching for changing mothers' interactional preferences and behaviours.

## 1. Introduction

Parent-child conversation about the past plays a critical role in children's cognitive and social development (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Salmon & Reese, 2016; Wareham & Salmon, 2006). In early childhood and beyond, parents who use an elaborative reminiscing style, encouraging their child's contribution via open questions and supportive detail, have children who later come to provide more complete autobiographical narrative reports (Fivush, 2011; Leyva, Sparks, & Reese, 2012; Raikes & Thompson, 2008; also see; Hedrick, Haden, & Ornstein, 2009). When these conversations include reference to emotions, beliefs, and thoughts, children eventually come to include this same mental state content in their own reminiscing, and to show greater understanding of emotions and minds (Taumoepeau & Reese, 2013; Van Bergen & Salmon, 2009; 2010). While much of the research in the field is observational, experimental studies adopting an intervention design with mothers have demonstrated that elaborative reminiscing has a causal influence on children's positive cognitive and

socio-emotional outcomes (e.g., Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe, 1999; Reese & Newcombe, 2007; Taumoepeau & Reese, 2013; Van Bergen, Salmon, Dadds, & Allen, 2009).

Given the benefits of elaborative and emotion-rich reminiscing, research has recently begun to focus on at-risk children (Salmon & Reese, 2016). Many children with emotional and behavioural problems have particular difficulties understanding others' emotions and minds, together with delayed autobiographical memory skill (Ensor, Spencer, & Hughes, 2011; von Salisch, Denham, & Koch, 2017; see Salmon & O'Kearney, 2014, for review). Emerging evidence also demonstrates that mothers who are maltreating, economically disadvantaged, or exposed to highly stressful life events are less likely than other mothers to be elaborative (Raikes & Thompson, 2008; Valentino et al., 2015) or to use emotion language in conversations with their children (Raikes & Thompson, 2008), with maternal reminiscing mediating the relationship between maltreatment and children's negative physiological functioning (Valentino et al., 2015). Yet rich and elaborative emotional discussion may be particularly important for children in at-risk clinical

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cohorts. While frequent expression of negative emotion in families is associated with poor emotion understanding amongst children (Halberstadt & Eaton, 2002), reminiscing about youth negative emotion may actually be beneficial. For example, elaborative reminiscing about both positive and negative experiences offers similar benefits to emotion coaching (Johnson, Hawes, Eisenberg, Kohlhoff, & Dudeney, 2017): emotions are labelled, causes discussed, and resolutions explored in reflective and explanatory dialogue (Johnson et al., 2017; Sales, Fivush, & Peterson, 2003; Wareham & Salmon, 2006).

Reminiscing conversations also occur with the potential for 'reflective distance', with parents and children each less likely to be negatively aroused than during conversations at the time of the event (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000; Thompson, Laible, & Ontai, 2003; Van Bergen & Salmon, 2010). This distance is important, as parents' own negative emotionality may contribute to conversations that are more coercive or ruminating in nature. Given the developmental difficulties that at-risk children face, therefore, reminiscing interventions may be particularly valuable.

The aims of the current study were two-fold. First, we aimed to extend existing reminiscing intervention research by comparing pre-existing reminiscing differences and intervention responsiveness between a typical community sample and an at-risk clinical sample of children with conduct problems. Despite a small but growing number of reminiscing intervention studies, no research has yet determined whether community and at-risk clinical dyads are equally benefited. Second, we aimed to extend existing intervention research by investigating whether reminiscing coaching would also influence maternal preferences for elaboration and mental state talk in other everyday contexts and, if so, whether these preferences would change differentially for community and at-risk clinical samples. We therefore also measured pre-existing differences and intervention responsiveness in mothers' everyday talk preferences.

### 1.1. Reminiscing coaching amongst community and clinical samples

The first aim of our study was to compare pre-existing reminiscing differences and intervention responsiveness amongst a community sample and an at-risk clinical sample. To date, only one study has undertaken a direct comparison of reminiscing behavior between clinical and typical dyads: as noted above, Valentino et al. (2015) found that maltreating mothers were less elaborative with their children than other mothers. No research has yet compared reminiscing between dyads of typically developing children and dyads where children themselves show clinical difficulties, however, and none has directly compared the responses of clinical and typical dyads to intervention coaching.

Our focus in the current study is children with conduct problems. Conduct problems are amongst the most commonly occurring difficulties presenting at child mental health services and are precursors to many other psychological difficulties across the lifespan (Fergusson, Horwood, & Ridder, 2005; Fleming, McMahon, & King, 2017; Odgers et al., 2007). Families of children with conduct problems experience high levels of stress and distress, and parent-child interactions in conduct problems can be characterized by negative attention (Fleming et al., 2017; see Salmon, 2018, for review), suggesting less opportunity for elaboration and less constructive emotion conversation relative to typical dyads.

While no research has directly compared reminiscing amongst typical community dyads and those in which children have conduct problems, there is evidence that both respond to intervention. In two separate studies, we coached mothers to reminisce in an elaborative and emotion-rich style with their preschool-aged children (Salmon, Allen, Dadds, & Hawes, 2009; Van Bergen et al., 2009). One sample included non-clinical mothers-child dyads (3.5–5 years) while the other included mother-child dyads where the child had significant conduct problems (3.5–8 years; see Valentino, Comas, Nuttall, & Thomas, 2013,

for replication with maltreating parents). In both studies we included an active control, child-directed play, to match the reminiscing condition for facilitator-mother time and mother-child attentiveness. Following the intervention, mothers in the reminiscing condition used more elaborative, emotion-rich talk during reminiscing than did those in the control condition.

As both previous studies were analyzed and published separately, we cannot tell whether the community and clinical samples were equally elaborative. We also cannot tell whether the intervention was equally beneficial. Given the matched elements between the two studies, however, we are in a unique position to address questions about these similarities and differences by combining our samples. In the current study, we directly compare both their natural style of reminiscing and their responsiveness to the intervention.

### 1.2. Reminiscing coaching and everyday talk preferences

The second aim of our study was to extend existing reminiscing intervention research by considering the impact of reminiscing coaching in high-elaborative reminiscing on mothers' everyday talk preferences. To determine this impact we measured pre-existing differences and intervention responsiveness in everyday talk preferences between the community and clinical samples.

The effects of reminiscing interventions on everyday talk preferences have not previously been tested. Yet the coached elements of a high-elaborative style, including open-ended questioning and sensitive scaffolding of the unfolding narrative, may well extend to other conversations located in the present and future. By measuring preferences for such talk amongst our community and our clinical sample, we add to current reminiscing intervention findings in two ways.

First, any increase in mothers' preferences for elaboration in everyday contexts provides additional evidence of the extent to which the high-elaborative style has been internalized and adopted. Standard reminiscing assessments are somewhat vulnerable to experimental demand characteristics. Because the assessments take the same form as the reminiscing practiced during intervention coaching, dyads in each sample may attempt to replicate the coached style. Testing mothers' preferences for conversational elaboration in unpractised everyday contexts offers a strong test of the coached style as it manifests in everyday life.

Second, preferences enable us to consider whether intervention effects might generalize to other aspects of social cognition, such as mental state talk. This is particularly important for at-risk dyads in clinical settings (Salmon & O'Kearney, 2014). While the number of naturally occurring mental state references made during mother-child reminiscing is often very low, even in community samples (Rudek & Haden, 2005), research has long suggested that mental state talk in a range of other everyday contexts is important for children's developing understanding of others' minds (Garner, Jones, Gaddy, & Rennie, 1997; Hughes et al., 2005; Peterson & Slaughter, 2003). Given the relatively greater frequency of mental state talk in everyday contexts, relative to reminiscing, changes in mothers' social cognition following a reminiscing intervention might manifest in preferences for mental state utterances during everyday talk.

### 1.3. The present study

To assess pre-existing reminiscing differences and intervention responsiveness between a community sample and an at-risk clinical sample we combined two independent datasets from which we have previously published separate reminiscing data. One dataset included typically developing children (Van Bergen et al., 2009) and one included children with clinical-level conduct problems (Salmon, Dadds, Allen, & Hawes, 2009). In both samples, mothers were asked to discuss two shared past events with their child at two time-points, before and after the intervention.

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