



# Children's responses in argumentative discussions relating to parental rules and prescriptions



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- To investigate parent-child argumentative interactions.
- The data corpus is composed of 132 argumentative discussions.
- In their argumentative choices, parents and children affect one another.
- The children's arguments mirror the same types of arguments previously used by parents.
- When parents advance complex arguments, children do not advance arguments.

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## ABSTRACT

This study sets out to investigate the types of responses by children aged between 3 and 7 years in argumentative discussions relating to parental rules and prescriptions. The data corpus is composed of 132 argumentative discussions selected from 30 video-recorded meals of 10 middle to upper-middle-class Swiss and Italian families. Data are presented through discursive excerpts of argumentative discussions and analysed by the pragma-dialectical ideal model of critical discussion. The findings show that when parents advance context-bound arguments such as the arguments of quality (e.g., very good, salty, or not good) and quantity (e.g., too little, quite enough, or too much) of food, the arguments advanced by children mirror the same types of arguments previously used by parents. On the other hand, when parents advance more complex, elaborated, and context-unbound arguments such as the appeal to consistency's argument, the argument from authority and the argument from analogy, the children typically did not advance any argument, but their response is an expression of further doubt or a mere opposition without providing any argument. Overall, the results of this study indicate that the types of children's responses are strictly connected to the type of argument previously advanced by their parents. This aspect is particularly relevant in terms of children's capacities to engage in argumentative exchanges and to react in rational ways during the confrontation with the parents. Further research in this direction is needed in order to better understand specific potentialities of language in the everyday process of socialization within the family context.

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## 1. Introduction

Mealtime represents a crucial activity to investigate how parents and children interact and argue since it is one of the few occasions during the day that brings all family members together (Bova and Arcidiacono, 2015; Fiese et al., 2006; Ochs et al., 1996).

Within the framework of family argumentation research (Arcidiacono and Pontecorvo, 2009; Bova and Arcidiacono, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Brumark, 2008; Pontecorvo and Fasulo, 1997; Pontecorvo and Pirchio, 2000; Pontecorvo and Sterponi, 2002), this study sets out to investigate the types of responses by children aged between 3 and 7 years in discussions at mealtimes relating to parental rules and prescriptions. It is not a goal of the present study to make an assessment of the arguments advanced by parents and children, i.e. deciding whether or not a certain argument is fallacious. Rather, my goal is to investigate the children's capacities to

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engage in argumentative exchanges and to react in rational ways during the confrontation with their parents. In particular, the following two research questions will guide this study: (1) *In discussions of parental rules/prescriptions, when do children advance arguments to refute their parents' arguments?* (2) *When children try to refute their parents' arguments, what types of arguments do they advance?* These research questions will be answered by means of a qualitative analysis of a corpus constituted of 132 argumentative discussions between parents and children.

The analytical approach for the analysis of the argumentative discussions between parents and children is based on the pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004). This model proposes an ideal definition of argumentation developed according to the standard of reasonableness: an argumentative discussion starts when the speaker advances his/her standpoint, and the listener casts doubts upon it, or directly attacks the standpoint. Accordingly, confrontation, in which disagreement regarding a certain standpoint is externalized in a discursive exchange or anticipated by the speaker, is a necessary condition for an argumentative discussion to occur. This model particularly fits this study, and more generally, the study of argumentative interactions occurring in ordinary contexts such as family mealtime conversations, because it provides specific criteria in order to select and identify the argumentative discussions as well as the arguments advanced by participants.

The present paper is structured as follows: in Section 2, a concise review of the most relevant literature on argumentative interactions between parents and children at mealtimes will be presented. In Section 3, the methodology on which the present study is based will be described. The results of the analysis are discussed in Section 4, followed by the Section 5, which summarizes the main findings and comments on their limitations and strengths.

## 2. Argumentative interactions during family mealtimes

Alongside a number of studies that have highlighted the cognitive and educational advantages of reshaping teaching and learning activities in terms of argumentative interactions (see e.g., Pontecorvo and Sterponi, 2002; Schwarz et al., 2008; Muller Mirza and Perret-Clermont, 2009), the relevance of argumentation in the family context is rapidly emerging in argumentation studies. In particular, the structure as well as the linguistic elements characterizing the argumentative interactions between parents and young children have been investigated by several scholars. Bova and Arcidiacono (2013a) have examined a specific type of invocation of authority - that they defined as 'the authority of feelings' - used by parents in argumentative discussions relating to a wide range of topics such as the activity of mealtimes and children's behaviour both outside and within the family context. The same authors have also shown that during food-related argumentative discussions, parents in most cases put forward arguments based on the quality and quantity of food to convince their children to eat (or not to eat more) (Bova and Arcidiacono, 2014a). Similar results can be found in studies on eating practices within family mealtimes by Paugh and Izquierdo (2009) and by Wiggins and her colleagues (Laurier and Wiggins, 2011; Wiggins, 2013).

The interplay between arguments and counter-arguments is evident in the frame of antagonistic situations between parents and children. C. Goodwin (2006), analysing a dispute between a father and his son, has shown how utterances opposing another position in an argument are constructed with a simultaneous orientation to (a) the detailed structure of the prior utterance being opposed and

(b) the future trajectories of action projected by that utterance, which the current utterance attempts to counter and intercept. Examining the sequential analysis of directive use in conversations between parents and young children during mealtimes, M.H. Goodwin (2006) has shown how forms of arguments built of recycled positions differ in important ways from arguments where children are involved in accounting for their own behaviour with their parents. Situations where children shirk their responsibilities can lead to escalations of assertions of authority through threats or a parent's giving up in defeat. By way of contrast, where parents are persistent in pursuing their directives, often facilitated by situations where children and parents join in sustaining face-to-face access to one another, children learn to be accountable for their actions. In a recent study by Arcidiacono and Pontecorvo (2009), an analysis of verbal conflicts in a family context has shown the role of the turn-by-turn details of conflict talk as situated interaction, the main aspects of the linguistic choices speakers make in designing and delivering their utterances, and the role of the contextual aspects such as the participants' social relationship, and age for the production and interpretation of talk.

Turning to children's oral argumentation, most scholars agree with the claim that the capacity to understand and produce arguments emerges early in development (e.g. Anderson et al., 1997; Mercier, 2011; Orsolini, 1993; Pontecorvo and Pirchio, 2000; Stein and Albro, 2001). Dunn and colleagues (Dunn, 1988; Dunn and Munn, 1987; Herrera and Dunn, 1997; Tesla and Dunn, 1992) showed that by age 4 children, in discussions with their mother, are able to justify their own position by arguing about the consequences of their actions. By age 5, children learn how to engage in opposition with their parents and become active verbal participants in family conflicts. Moreover, Slomkowski and Dunn (1992) also show that children most often use self-oriented arguments, i.e. talking about themselves, whilst parents generally use other-oriented arguments, i.e. arguments that refer to children and not to themselves. Pontecorvo and Fasulo (1997) and Bova and Arcidiacono (2013b) observed that during mealtime conversations with their parents, children make use of sophisticated argumentative skills by calling into question the rules imposed by their parents. Brumark (2008) showed that adolescents aged 12–14 years use arguments that last longer and require more exchanges to be resolved, whilst children aged 7–10 years use shorter arguments that are about the immediate context. In particular, the author observed that the arguments of older children are quite elaborate, while the argumentative structure of younger children tends to be simple, and only rarely involves elaboration beyond one or two arguments. Hester and Hester (2010, p. 44) showed that children are able to use both context-bound and cultural resources to produce their arguments.

This concise review of the available literature shows that studies on argumentative interactions among family members during mealtime have devoted considerable attention to investigating the argumentative strategies adopted by parents and the argumentative skills of young children. This study aims to provide a further contribution to the research strand on family argumentation. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the types of responses by children aged between 3 and 7 years in argumentative discussions relating to parental rules and prescriptions.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Data corpus

The data corpus is composed of thirty video-recorded separate family meals (constituting about twenty hours of video data), constructed from two different sets of data, named sub-corpus 1

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