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The role of maternal elaborative structure and control in children's memory and suggestibility for a past event



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ABSTRACT

In this investigation, preschool-aged children experienced a staged event about which their mothers received misinformation suggesting that their children witnessed an activity that did not occur. Later, mothers were asked to talk about this event with their children. Consistent with previous research, mothers' provision of structure (defined as elaborative questions and statements) and degree of control (defined in terms of functional control of conversational turns) emerged as separate dimensions of maternal memory sharing style. When later interviewed by an unfamiliar examiner about the event, children whose mothers demonstrated both high structure and high control provided the highest levels of false reports of the activity suggested to mothers and generously embellished their accounts of this activity with nonoccurring details. In contrast, children with mothers who provided low structure, regardless of their degree of control, made few false reports and used sparse narrative detail. The implications of these findings for children's memory and suggestibility are discussed.

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Introduction

A substantial body of work demonstrates that memory sharing conversations about past events with parents play a significant role in the development of children's autobiographical remembering skills. Through these conversations, children learn how to search their memory for the details of personal experiences and relay these recollections in a narrative form to others (see, e.g., Nelson & Fivush, 2004). One of the most robust patterns in this literature centers on naturally occurring variations in the elaborativeness of mothers' memory sharing style. A high-elaborative style typically is defined as an amalgam of elements that serve to scaffold children's accounts such as asking open-ended *wh-* questions, introducing new descriptive detail to help children remember, confirming children's contributions, and following children's personal perspectives. Low-elaborative mothers provide less structure and repeat their own questions with no new information. Longitudinal and experimental work documents that a high-elaborative style produces mnemonic benefits. For example, when remembering with their mothers as well as with others, children whose mothers use a high-elaborative style produce more detailed and coherent event narratives than children with low-elaborative mothers (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997; Hendrick, Haden, & Ornstein, 2009; Leichtman, Pillemer, Wang, Koreishi, & Han, 2000; Reese & Newcombe, 2007). Furthermore, a high-elaborative style is associated with increases in the amount of accurate information children report about their experiences (Cleveland, Reese, & Grolnick, 2007; Leichtman et al., 2000).

The facilitative effects of mother–child memory sharing conversations notwithstanding, Principe, DiPuppo, and Gammel (2013) found that mothers can be a potent source of error in children's remembering when mothers hold false beliefs about their children's experiences. Their study was motivated by experiments in the suggestibility literature (for a review, see Principe & Schindewolf, 2012) demonstrating that natural conversations with others about the past can change the way in which children remember specific personal experiences, especially when conversational partners differ in their beliefs about what happened. Principe and colleagues asked mothers to talk in a natural manner with their preschoolers about an earlier nonshared scripted event. Immediately before this conversation, some mothers received a false suggestion about the event stating that their children may have experienced a certain activity. Mothers were asked to question their children about whether or not this activity happened during the event. When later interviewed about the event by an unfamiliar examiner, children whose mothers were misinformed were much more likely to claim to have experienced the suggested-but-nonoccurring activity and more generously embellished their accounts with fabricated details in line with the suggestion than children whose mothers were not exposed to the misleading information.

Consistent with the literature on memory sharing conversations, Principe et al. (2013) found that mothers' stylistic differences were met with variation in children's memories. Mothers were characterized as high or low elaborative in terms of the numbers of elaborations (i.e., questions or statements that introduce new information to the discussion) and evaluations (i.e., comments that confirm or negate children's utterances) they made during the post-event conversation with their children (Reese & Brown, 2000). As expected, children with high-elaborative mothers produced more detailed accounts of the event during both the mother–child dialogue and the later interview compared with children with low-elaborative mothers. A high-elaborative maternal style also was linked with greater accuracy of children's recall of actually experienced activities during the event. Despite these positive effects of maternal elaborativeness, during both the mother–child conversation and the interview, children whose mothers were characterized as high elaborative were more likely than children with low-elaborative mothers to wrongly report the nonoccurring activity suggested to mothers and to describe this nonevent with abundant narrative detail.

Why might the high-elaborative maternal style usually associated with more skilled remembering be linked with higher levels of false reports? Given what is known about the potency of conversationally introduced misinformation on memory (see Principe & Schindewolf, 2012), it seems likely that the tendency to introduce new detail characteristic of the high-elaborative style might produce greater memory error when mothers hold false beliefs about their children's experiences. Examination of the mother–child dialogues suggests that this happened. Compared with the low-elaborative mothers,

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