Mother–child conversations about hurting others: Supporting the construction of moral agency through childhood and adolescence

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In the course of their everyday lives, all children will occasionally engage in behaviors that cause harm to others, and these experiences pose challenges to children's understandings of themselves as moral beings. As children grapple with, and attempt to explain to others, how they hurt someone despite knowing that causing harm is wrong, they tend to construct accounts that include references to not only what they did, but also what they wanted, thought, and felt in that particular situation. By considering these psychological facets of their experiences, children come to understand their wrongdoing as arising from their own motivations, cognitions, and emotions, and thus construct an understanding of their own moral agency (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005).

Although thinking about their harmful experiences in relation to what they thought, felt, or intended does not absolve children of responsibility for their own wrongdoing or transform their hurtful actions into acceptable behavior, it does help children to recognize the ways in which harm can arise from their imperfect attempts to balance the needs of self and others, or from the limitations in their understandings of others. Such understandings can serve to contain these experiences' potentially negative impact on children's broader self-views, by bracketing every instance of wrongdoing within a particular context, with its own motivations and reasons. This helps children to avoid constructing an overgeneralized or essentialized understanding of themselves as immoral people. This more positive sense of their broader moral capacities is in turn crucial in helping children to recognize their potential for reparative action, as well as their ability to behave differently in the future. Thus, by reflecting on their own moral agency in the context of particular experiences, children can ultimately come to understand themselves as imperfect but fundamentally moral people who are capable of growing and learning from their actions (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a; Wainryb, 2011; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2010).

Yet, it is very unlikely that children construct any of these understandings entirely on their own; rather, parents (among others) are likely to play an important role in supporting children's understandings of their transgressive experiences. In this chapter, we explore the varied ways in which mothers may respond to children's transgressive behaviors, and the possible implications of these distinct approaches for children's understandings of themselves and others as moral agents. Furthermore, we consider how mothers adapt their responses to children's transgressions in light of children's developing capacities.

What is the role of parents in helping children to construct meanings about harm, and how is it likely to change with age?

In the moral socialization literature, there is widespread agreement that parents play an important role in helping children to recognize ways in which their actions have caused harm to others (Crusuec, 2006; Smetana, 2006; Thompson, 2006). On the other hand, past research gives less guidance about how parents might respond to children's moral transgressions in situations in which children already recognize the harm that they caused to others. But with age, as children become more adept at detecting the effects of their actions on others, such situations may become increasingly common; given that children tend to judge that hurting others is wrong, experiences in which they themselves recognize they have hurt others may pose particular challenges to children's understandings of themselves as moral beings. Our past research examining children's own narrative accounts of harming others reveals their struggles to reconcile the hurtful consequences of their actions with their positive self-views (Recchia, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, 2013; Wainryb, 2011; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005; Wainryb, Komolova, & Brehl, 2012; Wainryb, Komolova, & Florsheim, 2010). More specifically, we have found that by the early school years children's accounts of their own wrongdoing already include some recognition of the negative emotional consequences that their actions may have for others as well as an acknowledgment of their own justifiable intentions or of the mitigating circumstances that serve to explain their behaviors. Yet research has not charted how input from parents may both undergird and further scaffold these understandings. While it is likely that, in their conversations with their children, parents play an important role in helping children reflect on, and coordinate the various contextual and psychological features of these experience, so
as to better grapple with their wrongdoing, the specific ways in which parents do so have yet to be well explored. One of our goals in this chapter is to examine some of the diverse ways in which parents and children converse about children’s moral transgressions, and consider how parental responses may be more or less supportive of children’s construction of themselves as moral agents.

An additional goal of this chapter is to outline the ways in which parents’ responses in the course of these conversations are sensitive to children’s developing capacities. Our own research has shown, for example, that from preschool to adolescence children become increasingly able to consider and coordinate their understandings of their own and others’ intentions, emotions, and mental states in making sense of their own harmful actions (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b; Wainryb, Brehm, & Matwin, 2005). Furthermore, although by age four children are able to describe basic aspects of their moral selves (see Thompson, 2012), it is during the teenage years that adolescents are first capable of drawing connections between their moral understandings and broader self-concepts (Blasi, 1995; Colby & Damon, 1992; Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Collectively, these findings suggest that younger children may need more support in their attempts to consider the multiple psychological perspectives implicated in their transgression experiences. For adolescents, experiences of harming others may provide unique opportunities to explore the implications of their actions for who they are, who they are not, and who they want to be. As a consequence, inasmuch as parents are sensitive to these changes, their responses to children’s accounts of their moral transgressions may also change with children’s increasing age.

Taken together, these findings from past research provide a number of clues about the role that parents can play in furthering their children’s understandings of morally laden experiences. First, given that children’s own accounts of their experiences of harm imply that children are struggling to reconcile their own hurtful actions with a sense of moral agency, this suggests that a key role for parents is to help children successfully juggle these multiple concerns. In light of this, parents may have multiple goals in responding to their children’s experiences of harm. Certainly, since parents generally wish for their children to develop into good people, they are invested in helping children to recognize their own wrongdoing. Simultaneously, however, most parents also wish to protect their children’s prevailingly positive self-views, even in the face of having done harm. In this respect, parental moral socialization may involve a balancing act that requires parents to respond sensitively to the complexities and variations in children’s accounts of their everyday experiences, as they attempt to help children build a sense of their own moral agency that acknowledges their wrongdoing without becoming overly rigid and unsustainable.

In the following section, we provide examples of some parental responses to children’s moral transgressions that appear to implicitly favor one of these goals over the other. Specifically, we argue that there are ways in which, when faced with their children’s everyday experiences of harm, parents may selectively focus on children’s wrongdoing by either emphasizing or minimizing this aspect of children’s experiences. Subsequently, we also identify several other parental response patterns that may serve to simultaneously meet both socialization goals by helping children to more fully acknowledge the complexity of their experiences of harm.

In describing these patterns, we also delineate how such parental responses may vary with age, as children develop increasingly sophisticated capacities to make sense of their own experiences. Specifically, we highlight how parents respond in ways that account for children’s evolving psychological understandings, their increasing acknowledgment of complexity, and their growing ability to consider the implications of experiences for their broader self-views.

The conversational excerpts we use to illustrate these patterns are drawn from a study involving 103 mother–child dyads, divided into three groups on the basis of the child’s age (7, 11, and 16 years). During a private interview in the family’s home, children were first asked to provide narrative accounts of two events in which they engaged in behavior that resulted in harm to an age-mate: one experience in which they harmed a friend and another in which they harmed a younger sibling (see Recchia, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, 2013). Subsequently, children and mothers were asked to discuss each event, and “see if there is something to be learned from it.” These conversations were audio- and videotaped and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Following these conversations, mothers and children were also interviewed separately about their conversations and their understanding of the event.

**Focusing on children’s sense of wrongdoing**

Although parents may have multiple socialization goals in mind during conversations about children’s moral misbehaviors, in this section we highlight strategies that seem to be guided by a single aim. First, we provide illustrative examples of parental responses to children’s accounts of their transgressions that are conducive to promoting children’s understandings of their wrongdoing without attending to the need to protect children’s positive self-views. In turn, we describe strategies that serve
protective goals but may simultaneously result in minimizing children’s understandings of their own wrongdoing.

Emphasizing children’s wrongdoing

To date, research on parental moral socialization has examined the strategies that parents may use to focus children’s attention on their wrongdoing. In contrast to other parenting approaches, this work has revealed that punitive strategies are as ineffective for parents to promote children’s moral learning (Kochanska et al., 2002; see also Grusec & Hastings, 2007). In the following example of a conversation between seven-year-old Kevin and his mother (all names are pseudonyms), we illustrate how responses to children’s accounts of their wrongdoing that focus on external sanctions imposed by parents may act to constrain children’s sense of moral agency:

**MOTHER:** Ok, so you hurt Greg’s feelings how? ... Did you guys get into a fist fight?
**CHILD:** Well, yeah.
**MOTHER:** And what happened?
**CHILD:** We were done. He cried.
**MOTHER:** And, what happened?
**CHILD:** He said “I’m telling mom on you” [whining voice]
**MOTHER:** Ok, what did I do?
**CHILD:** You started to get mad at me.
**MOTHER:** For hitting your brother?
**CHILD:** Yeah. [...] 
**MOTHER:** And how did you feel?
**CHILD:** Nervous.
**MOTHER:** Nervous? What was your punishment?
**CHILD:** No PlayStation for a week. [...] 
**MOTHER:** And how did you feel about hurting him?
**CHILD:** Nervous.
**MOTHER:** Why were you nervous? Because you didn’t want to get in trouble? Did you get in trouble?
**CHILD:** Yeah.
**MOTHER:** What did you learn from that?
**CHILD:** Never do that again.

Here, the conversation focuses almost exclusively on the harm that Kevin did to his brother, and the punishment that ensued for Kevin. There is little discussion of why Kevin punched his brother or how he felt about doing so; in fact, when asked about his emotions in the aftermath of the experience, Kevin focuses on his anxiety about the punishment that he expects will follow. Thus, despite some implied emphasis

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on moral dimensions of experiences (i.e., that hitting people makes them cry), this conversation may not serve to promote a fuller sense of moral agency in Kevin. Not only are Kevin’s own motivations (e.g., why did he hit his brother?) unexplored, but his moral emotions (e.g., how does it feel to do harm to others?) are perhaps undermined by the focus on the extrinsic consequences of such behavior. The prevailing lesson for Kevin seems to be that his capacity to do the right thing is dependent on the intervention of others.

Another parental response that underscores children’s wrongdoing involves explaining children’s hurtful actions on the basis of their stable, negative characteristics. Overall, this response to children’s accounts of their transgressive experiences arose relatively infrequently in our sample. Nevertheless, consistent with an age-related increase in children’s ability to consider the broader self-related implications of their actions (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012), it was observed somewhat more often in conversations with teenagers. For example, consider the following excerpts of conversations between 16-year-old Paul and his mother (the first concerning an experience with Paul’s younger sibling and the second with his friend):

**CHILD:** It’s just like me calling him stupid or slow when he asks me for help on his homework and he didn’t understand it... I guess it doesn’t come as easy to him and I guess maybe I got him down a little because I called him stupid and maybe he understands it, he just doesn’t get everything, but then coming from his older brother, saying that makes it that much worse. [...] 
**MOTHER:** You should build somebody up, not always cut them down, but sometimes you do that.

**CHILD:** We knew he was going out with this girl last year. She wasn’t the hottest girl at all and so we couldn’t say anything to him cuz we knew he’d get extremely mad, but as soon as he broke up with her, we were just like “dude, she wasn’t that hot at all.” He just got really pissed.
**MOTHER:** Well, do girls all have to be hot? Is looks everything?
**CHILD:** Well, no, but – [nervous]
**MOTHER:** That’s very superficial.

In both of these examples, the mother’s response suggests a negative evaluation of Paul that goes beyond each specific act – in the first case, that he habitually cuts others down, and in the second, that his actions are reflective of superficiality. As shall be discussed in greater detail in the next section, although there are ways in which parents can raise concerns about the self-related implications of children’s actions that suggest the possibility for self-improvement, these two examples appear to be relatively condoning. These maternal responses seem particularly jarring, given the fact that in his initial accounts of his experiences, Paul expresses ambivalence (“we knew he’d get extremely mad”) and even regret (“coming from
his older brother, it makes it that much worse”) about his harmful actions. Thus, especially given that Paul already seems to be struggling with the implications of his behaviors, we argue that these maternal responses may not be particularly conducive to furthering his sense of moral agency. Similar to the previous excerpt, this type of exchange seems to gloss over the possibility that Paul may have had legitimate (or at least, understandable) reasons for engaging in these behaviors. For example, perhaps it was frustrating for him to be constantly asked for help on homework, or perhaps his critical remarks about his friend’s choice of girlfriend were based on a (possibly misguided) view that “honesty is the best policy” — it is impossible to know, because these conversations were not conducive to exploring such aspects of experiences. Related to this, this type of parental response is also problematic in the sense that it does not help children to bracket an experience in a particular set of circumstances, and in fact, risks conveying the notion that the clearest way to explain one’s transgressive behavior is in light of one’s own stable, negative characteristics. Past research has amply underscored the risks associated with children’s reliance on these types of attributions for their behaviors, including a learned helplessness orientation (e.g., Cain & Dweck, 1990) and shame-proneness (e.g., Mills et al., 2010). Thus, this strategy may be counterproductive to the goal of promoting children’s positive and sustainable sense of moral agency (see also Wainryb, 2011).

In contrast to the predominantly condemning focus of the responses illustrated above, research on parents’ use of empathy induction (i.e., underscoring the emotional consequences of children’s behavior on others; Hoffman, 2000) has shown that, starting at the age of two, this may be a particularly effective strategy for promoting children’s moral learning (Kerr, Lopez, Olson, & Samaroff, 2004). For instance, Lable and Thompson (2000) found that, in conversations about young children’s past misbehaviors, maternal references to emotional aspects of events were related to preschoolers’ conscience development, whereas references to moral rules (e.g., do not harm others) were not. This finding is in line with research suggesting that, from an early age, children construct generalizable moral concepts surrounding the importance of avoiding harm to others, rather than relying on the dictates of authority figures to determine what is right and wrong in a given situation (Lapsa, Turiel, & Cowan, 1995). Nevertheless, due to their limited psychological understandings, young children may not always recognize the harmful emotional consequences of their own actions. For this reason, parents may play a crucial role in helping children to take note of such consequences, but do not necessarily need to teach children the “rule,” so to speak, that it is wrong to hurt others.

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Arguably, parents may emphasize the negative emotional consequences of children’s behavior for others when they feel that children do not comprehend or are not adequately concerned with the moral dimensions of their experiences. Drawing these connections may be particularly difficult for young children given their limited psychological understandings (e.g., Wainryb & Brehl, 2006), hence underscoring the benefits of using this strategy with preschoolers. Yet there are also cases in which older school-aged children or even teenagers may have difficulty recognizing the harmful nature of their actions. For instance, consider the following example of an 11-year-old Ryan describing an experience in which he pushed his sister off of the computer:

Well, one time when um — when we were taking turns on the computer [...] I was at soccer, so I didn’t really know whose turn it was. And since I was at soccer, I kinda sorta guessed that everybody else had a turn, so it was my turn. But, Deanna said it was her turn, and I kept on asking her if she already had a turn, thought that she was lying [...] I really wanted a turn cuz I really wanted to play this game that George was playing. And so I — I told Deanna to get off and so — and she said no, and I pushed her off and got on, and she got really mad, and pushed me off again [...] When she go: off, I was still really mad at her, and I pushed her on my way up to the computer. But after I had my turn, I forgave her.

This narrative is fairly typical of an 11-year-old, in that Ryan has begun to situate his experience within a broader psychological perspective, with ample references to what he wanted (e.g., “I really wanted a turn”), thought (“I didn’t really know whose turn it was”), and felt (“I was still really mad at her”); Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b; Wainryb, Brehl, & Marvin, 2005). Ryan also makes clear that he was well-aware that pushing his sister off of the computer was upsetting to her (“I pushed her off and got on, and she got really mad”). On the other hand, although he describes how his actions were partly explained by his belief that his sister had lied, he does not elaborate on the moral implications of this aspect of the event. In the conversation that follows, his mother addresses this issue in the following way:

MOTHER: How do you think it made Deanna feel that you didn’t believe her?
CHILD: Probably made Deanna feel kind of mad at me, and kind of sad.
MOTHER: Kind of mad at you, kind of sad. Do you like it when Deanna doesn’t believe you?
CHILD: No.
MOTHER: Do you like it when George [other sibling] doesn’t believe you? No.

This example demonstrates that, although older children may be increasingly capable of recognizing the harmful outcomes of their own actions, parents may still play an important role in supporting this
understanding when it pertains to more subtle, psychologically-based forms of harm, or outcomes that are less transparent or more difficult to detect. In this sense, empathy induction may continue to be a useful parenting strategy with older children.

Minimizing children’s wrongdoing

In juxtaposition to parents’ emphasis on children’s wrongdoing, it is useful to also consider parents’ responses at the opposite end of the spectrum—that is, those that minimize the salience of moral concerns in children’s experiences. At first glance, parents’ use of such responses may seem surprising, given that parents are typically understood to be heavily invested in promoting children’s understanding of their own wrongdoing. This type of conversational process is illustrated in the following discussion between seven-year-old Carl and his mother:

CHILD: Jeff wanted to draw Darth Vader, and he asked Tom if he could have a permanent marker, and Tom said yes, and then I said “Don’t draw anything! Jeff, don’t use a sharpie yet, use a pencil.” So Jeff put his head down and started crying. Then Jeff and Tom went upstairs to talk a little […] 

MOTHER: So what did you learn about this? 

CHILD: Well, this is when I said something to someone that made them feel bad.

MOTHER: Hmm. So how did you um how did you say it? Did you say it— 

CHILD: I said it— 

MOTHER: You didn’t say it softly, uh how did you say it? Can you show me how you said it to him? 

CHILD: I did say it softly, I went like this, “Jeff, first use a pencil! Then outline it with a sharpie.” That’s how I said it but he just did start crying. 

MOTHER: So why did you think that he cried if you said it softly? 

CHILD: Well I know I know how he cried […] I asked him what happened, and Tom said that Jeff thought he would make a mistake, and so then he started crying, and so that’s how it worked.

MOTHER: Ooooohhh! So he wasn’t even sad about what YOU said. He was worried he may do a mistake. Is that what you’re saying? 

CHILD: Yah, I think … 

MOTHER: Oh, okay. So it wasn’t you at all then, right? It wasn’t the way you said it, right? 

CHILD: No, but he put his head down and started crying!

Here, although Carl does not provide an explicit negative evaluation of his behavior, he is clearly cognizant of his friend’s distress that occurred as a result of his actions (“that made [him] feel bad; he started crying”). The nature of the harm here is somewhat indirect (apparently, Carl’s comment activated his friend’s fear of making mistakes). However, his mother’s response seems to dismiss the possibility that Carl’s actions could be judged negatively, once she determines that he did not use a harsh tone. In fact, she explicitly mitigates his responsibility for his friend’s negative emotions (“so he wasn’t even sad about what YOU said; so it wasn’t you at all then”). Interestingly, Carl does not readily accept this evaluative framing of the event; while the mother’s distancing strategy would essentially exonerate him, he seems to be uneasy with her reconstrual (“but he put his head down and started crying!”).

The presence of this type of mitigating response in our data is not unprecedented. For instance, in their work with preschool-aged children, Miller et al., (2012) show that North American parents use a variety of strategies that aim to protect children’s positive self-views when discussing past transgressions (e.g., by discussing them in lighthearted ways). Consistent with this, when asked to describe what their goals had been during the conversations with their children, some mothers in our study referred to similarly protective aims. To illustrate, in describing her evaluation of Carl’s actions in the “sharpie” incident analyzed above, this mother said the following:

I think it was okay for him to say it. You know, cuz I didn’t feel like he said, that the way he said it was upsetting him […] I like want him to say what he wants to say, but at the same time not hurting people. I don’t want him to just say nothing just because he’s so worried about hurting people. That’s what I’m thinking.

This example suggests that this mother’s response to her child’s experience was guided by her desire to help him from becoming overfocused on the moral features of this experience; in other words, she did not wish for Carl’s moral concern with hurting others to interfere with his adaptive social functioning, more broadly construed. In light of research findings suggesting that young children struggle to coordinate competing aspects of complex events (e.g., Shaw & Wainryb, 2006; see also Wainryb & Breth, 2006), it is perhaps not surprising that parents’ contributions to discussions of moral transgressions with their preschoolers and early school-aged children are sometimes guided by these protective goals.

Although this type of response to children’s accounts of wrongdoing may serve self-protective functions for the child (and perhaps also for the parent), it may also come with some potential costs. Specifically, it is possible that such protective responses, if used consistently and exclusively, may encourage children to minimize their sense of responsibility for their own behavior, discourage their consideration of the negative emotional consequences that follow from their actions, or even undermine children’s ability to consider the moral issues implicated in their experiences.

Yet this example also suggests that these responses may not always be effective at resolving children’s moral conflicts in the aftermath of their
harmful behavior, since in many cases, parents' attempts to minimize harm may be inconsistent with children's own psychological experience. Carl's response indicates that he is both confused by and resistant to his mother's suggestion that his friend's tears did not follow from Carl's actions. This finding is in line with research suggesting that even young children do not blindly accept or obey the directives of others, especially when such directives are in conflict with children's own moral judgments; this is true even if the "others" in question happen to be their parents (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007; Laupa & Turiel, 1986). Thus, even in contexts where parental responses may strive to minimize children's responsibility for their harmful behavior, this example highlights that children do not uncritically accept their parents' construals of experiences. In this sense, parental responses inform but do not determine how children will construe their own interpretations of their transgressions, as well as their broader understandings of themselves as moral agents.

On the other hand, there may be other circumstances in which parents' responses that ultimately serve to minimize children's wrongdoing may be both effective and appropriate, given young children's difficulties in coordinating competing considerations at play in complex events. The results of Shaw and Wainryb (2006) are particularly germane to this issue. In this study, children of various ages were presented with stories in which one character ("perpetrator") makes unfair demands of another character ("victim"), such as "give me your markers!" In one of the conditions, the "victim" resists such demands and refuses to go along. One of the most striking findings of this study was that, even though children of all ages judged the perpetrator's actions to be morally wrong, five-year-olds (but not older children) also made negative judgments of the victim's refusal to go along with the unfair demand. Five-year-olds' reasoning that the victim "should be nice and a good friend" or that "it's not fair for her to just keep her markers and not share" suggest that their judgments about the victims' refusal to share were not yet coordinated with their own judgments about the unfair nature of the perpetrator's demands.

Among some of the youngest children in our study (age seven), we also observed a similar pattern, as children reflected on their own interpersonal experiences of hurting others prior to conversing with their mothers. Consider the following example, in which seven-year-old Lauren recounted an experience in which two of her friends were planning an exclusive "day," that is, an exclusive activity that left out Lauren and other classmates:

We were walking to [the park] and on the way there, they started talking about their "days" and how they're gonna do their "days"... cuz they were talking about

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having their own "day," and I said behind their backs that I think "days" are really not appropriate and I think they should stop and I felt like I hurt them because I said something wrong.

In Lauren's account, although she makes an explicit negative evaluation of her friends' exclusionary behavior ("I think 'days' are really not appropriate"), she nevertheless construes her own opposition as simultaneously violating a moral norm ("I hurt them because I said something wrong"). In these situations, parental responses that serve to reframe children's negative evaluations of their own behavior may support children's understanding of the self-affirming, and perhaps even fair, nature of such resistance. In other words, although a child's assertive confrontation may in fact hurt or anger another person, parental reframing may help children to integrate their judgments of their own behavior with a consideration of the larger interpersonal context in which it occurs. Consider her mother's response to this account:

CHILD: I said "I don't think that is appropriate, Kelly" and that really hurt them, and [...] I said "excuse me, but I think that talking about days is not okay with - is just not okay with me" [...] they said "Well if you don't like our days then maybe you should just like move to a different school."

MOTHER: They said that?

CHILD: Yeah

MOTHER: So, why don't you just go off and find another friend? Do something else?

CHILD: I don't know.

MOTHER: Do something different.

CHILD: A lot of times I don't think about that.

MOTHER: Well, you need to. You need to think outside the box about all the different things that you could be doing, instead of wasting your time with people who are just trying to bug you and hurt your feelings.

CHILD: Well—

MOTHER: You have - there's 300 kids at that school. That gives you 300 opportunities to hang out with somebody else that appreciates you. Right? And that's what life's about, is different experiences and doing different things and learning about different people. Right?

Although her mother provides a number of suggestions to help Lauren to navigate the difficult situation with her friends, all of them implicitly underscore that Lauren's response was acceptable in the face of her friends' exclusionary and hurtful behavior. Thus, although Lauren initially makes a negative judgment of her own actions in light of her friends' hurt feelings, her mother subsequently focuses on the broader relational context of the event in a way that encourages her daughter to reconsider the broader meaning of this aspect of the experience. Put another way, she supports Lauren's ability to coordinate her evaluation
of her own oppositional action with an appreciation of how it followed
directly from her friends’ exclusionary behavior. Perhaps as a conse-
quence, when asked to evaluate her own behavior following the conver-
sation with her mother (i.e., “Was it okay for you to say that ‘days’ weren’t
appropriate?’”), Lauren had this to say: “I thought it was ok because it
hurts everybody else for them just to hang out and leaving out all the
other friends – they feel like chopped liver.” In this respect, there may be
a particular subset of hurtful behaviors that are initially interpreted as
unequivocally “not CK” by children, but around which the use of self-
scaffolding strategies that challenge children’s negative judgments of harm
may be developmentally constructive. Indeed, it is precisely this type of
assertive behavior that is advocated in the context of anti-bullying cam-
paigns (e.g., Smith & Sharp, 1994).

Helping children to reconcile their hurtful behavior with a positive self-view

In the previous section, we provided examples of conversational pro-
cesses that serve to either emphasize or minimize the transgressive
nature of children’s hurtful actions. We argued that these strategies are
often responsive to children’s evolving psychological understandings
of complex experiences. In particular, we illustrated how parents may
use empathy induction to support children’s increasingly sophisticated
understandings of the ways in which their actions may result in harm or
injustice to others. We also suggested that, inasmuch as young children
have difficulty coordinating concerns with self and other, parents may be
especially likely to respond in ways that minimize harm when children
are strongly focused on the negative implications of their own actions.

These patterns imply that when children harm others, their parents
may wish to help them recognize their own wrongdoing and that they
may also wish to protect their children’s positive self-views. The use of
responses such as empathy induction may be conducive to the first goal,
whereas parents’ tendency to minimize the harm may be conducive to the
latter. In this sense, each of the mothers’ responses described in the
previous section appears to prioritize one of these goals over the other.
Thus, although there are circumstances in which these parental contrib-
tutions to conversations may effectively support children’s moral learn-
ing, they are not necessarily conducive to promoting children’s capacity
to reconcile having done harm to another person with a view of them-
selves as a good person. In this section, we provide examples of parental
responses to children’s transgressions that appear to strike a more
delicate balance between these goals, inasmuch as they simultaneously
underscore children’s unique legitimate concerns and perspectives while
avoiding the pitfalls associated with merely minimizing the harm.

Helping children anchor harm in a particular context by
elaborating on the underlying psychological perspectives

As we argued at the outset of this chapter, children’s explanations of
their own harmful actions in relation to the thoughts, intentions, and
feelings they had in that particular situation provide a foundation for
how they construct themselves as moral agents. Yet some research sug-
gests that young children may have difficulty considering their own goals,
thoughts, and feelings when trying to explain their harmful behavior,
instead referring more frequently to external, nonpsychological reasons
including situational constraints such as “my friends made me do it” or
“there was no space for her to sit with us” (Recchia, Brehl, & Wainryb,
2012). Therefore, one role for parents may be in helping young children
to consider the possibility that internal, psychological reasons might also
sometimes underlie their own hurtful behavior, thereby helping them
take ownership over their own actions. Consider the following exam-
ples of a conversation between seven-year-old Karen and her mother, in
which Karen describes an experience of exclusion:

CHILD: So, me and Sarah were walking just up the sidewalk, and Irene usually
likes to play kickball. And Sarah doesn’t like Irene. So Irene came up from
kickball, cuz it wasn’t her turn, she was kind of waiting to play. And she
comes up and says “hey guys, hey guys, can I play? Can I play?” and Sarah
was like “no” [...] So I’m like “you should go back and play kickball, I bet
it’s your turn.” I said that because Sarah really didn’t want to.

MOTHER: So instead of saying no, you were trying to get her to go back and play
kickball.

CHILD: Yeah. I didn’t want to say no, because Irene is my friend, so I didn’t know
really what to do.

Consistent with our other research (Recchia, Brehl, & Wainryb, 2012),
in initially describing this event, Karen explains her exclusionary behav-
ior largely on the basis of external peer pressure from Sarah (i.e., Sarah
doesn’t like Irene; Sarah said no; Sarah really didn’t want to). Remarkably,
although Karen is quite capable of noting the discrepancy between Sarah
and Irene’s motivations, her own psychological experience is absent
from her account. Thus the mother’s subtle prompting to elaborate on this
aspect of the event (i.e., by introducing what Karen was trying to do) helps
Karen to articulate her own psychological conflict between her desire to
spend time with and please Sarah, and her simultaneous reluctance to
cause harm to Irene. In other words, we suggest that through exploring
and eliciting further elaboration of children’s own psychological experiences of harm, mothers may be supporting children’s constructions of themselves as moral agents with their own perspectives on experiences. In doing so, they are also providing their children with a more sophisticated and perhaps more constructive way of bracketing their harmful behavior in a specific context. As was the case with Karen, children’s attempt to explain their behavior in terms of external causes may also serve to mitigate against the negative implications of their actions, but it does so in a way that minimizes their experience of their own moral agency. By encouraging children to also consider the internal reasons for their actions, mothers may be helping children to take ownership over their own moral transgressions, but in such a way that nevertheless allows them to reconcile their occasionally hurtful behavior with a positive self-view. It is worth noting that this type of attempt to promote children’s sense of ownership for their behavior constitutes one way in which this parental response differs from that illustrated in the “days” example described at the end of the previous section. Whereas Lauren’s mother directs Lauren’s attention to her friends’ exclusionary actions, thus shifting Lauren’s focus away from her own hurtful behavior, Karen’s mother encourages Karen to attend more fully to the internal, psychological reasons for her own harmful actions.

As children get older and develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of their own internality (Parapathi & Wainryb, 2010b; Wainryb & Breth, 2005), parents may respond to children’s accounts in other ways that serve to contain children’s hurtful actions within a particular set of circumstances. In comparison to younger children, older children and adolescents may need less support in considering their own situated psychological experience to explain their hurtful behavior. However, parents may nevertheless play an important role in helping youth to explicitly acknowledge the ways in which their hurtful actions may diverge from their typical patterns of behavior or from the tenor of their overall relationships with others. In other words, rather than promoting children’s psychological understandings of their behaviors in the moment (as they do with their younger children), parents may be helping older children and adolescents to consider their own actions in light of their relationship histories and stable understandings of themselves. Consider the following example of a conversation between 11-year-old Suzanne and her mother, about a time when Suzanne hurt her younger sister:

CHILD: Okay, so when we got home from swimming, Wendy was being really rude to me and I couldn’t think of anything to say so I said, “The reason you’re so, the reason you’re always last on the swim team is cuz you’re so bad. You’re the worst person there,” and she got, felt really bad about it.

MOTHER: So why did you say that to her? Did you, what was your purpose?

CHILD: Um I can’t quite remember but she was being really rude to me and I just felt hurt and so I kind of had a feeling to hurt her back. […] MOTHER: [after an extended discussion of the event] Do you feel like you are a good person or do you feel like you are a bad person?

CHILD: Most of the time I feel like I am a good person but sometimes I feel really, really bad because of what I have done and I’ve done it like so many times […] But then I know I am not so it’s kind of confusing [child is crying] […] I don’t feel like I’m a bad person it’s just, I’ve got, I can get really angry […] And I just yell at her sometimes and even when I yell I just feel really bad inside so it kind of makes me feel like a bad person.

MOTHER: Yeah that makes sense […] I know that’s sometimes hard for you to understand but you are a great person Suzanne, you’ve got lot of great talents and you’ve got lot of great strengths and I tell you all the time how lucky I am to have you in my life. And maybe you just need to tell yourself that, that if somebody’s being rude to you then you just need to be like “you love me, I love you, that’s all” […] What do you think about that?

CHILD: I’ll try harder.

MOTHER: Sweetie you’re amazing. You do a great job. You do so much around the house and you are just wonderful. I know that sometimes too, Wendy can be a little stinker [sighs] and she’s young and definitely going through changes of, you know, wanting to be involved or have your attention and I think that’s just it, is that she looks up to you so much and that you’re such a huge example to her that when you say things that are hurtful it, it kind of shatters your bubble like it does Wendy’s bubble.

There are a number of notable features to this excerpt from a long and emotional conversation. First, in contrast to the seven-year-old girl in the previous example, this 11-year-old girl seems to be much more aware of her own internally driven reasons for engaging in harm (I couldn’t think of anything to say; I had a feeling to hurt her back). In fact, Suzanne’s palpable sense of remorse appears to follow directly from her experience of owning her own angry and hurtful behavior (see Wainryb & Recchia, 2012, for a more elaborated discussion of such interpretative processes that undergird adolescents’ experiences of guilt). Perhaps as a consequence, when asked about broader implications of the event for her view of herself, she seems to be uncertain about the extent to which her hurtful actions are indicative of her overall moral character. Her mother plays a crucial role in helping Suzanne to contain and contextualize her harmful behavior, and thus avoid essentializing a sense of herself as an immoral person. Not only does her mother challenge Suzanne’s perspective that engaging in rude behavior should be understood as broadly reflective of her moral self, but she highlights a number of her daughter’s more positive and prosocial characteristics that stand in contrast to this experience. Similarly, she notes that the overall positive
tenor of Suzanne's relationship with her younger sister not only contrasts with, but also partially explains, the reciprocal emotional impact of their occasionally ruthless exchanges. Therefore, in various ways, this mother helps to prevent her daughter's sense of guilt from becoming overwhelming and self-diagnostic, by placing her behavior and this experience in a broader psychological and relational context.

Another way in which parents may serve to anchor children's experiences of harm in a particular context is by drawing children's attention to the victim's characteristics and psychological experience that serve to explain why the child's actions may be uniquely upsetting for that particular individual. We argue that this type of response is distinct from the more basic form of empathy induction described in the previous section, in that it does not merely underscore the negative emotional consequences for the other, but rather explains why this person might have been distressed. Similar to empathy induction, across childhood and adolescence, parents may use this strategy effectively in ways that are responsive to the developing psychological capacities of their children. Indeed, at all ages, there may be circumstances in which a person can become distressed for reasons that are difficult for another to understand or hard to articulate. Consider the following example of a conversation between 16-year-old Eric and his mother, concerning Eric's experience with his half-brother Larry.

CHILD: So the time was when we had gotten Guitar Hero 3 for Christmas, and I was going through the memory card on the PS2 um, deleting things like that we didn't play anymore or have anymore [...] And so there was some saved files on there that I didn't know who they belonged to, and I thought maybe they were Larry's since it was his memory card. But I was just deleting them because we don't have those games. Then Larry had come down right at that time and he was like "Don't delete those!" and I was like "Why? we don't even have these games" and he's like "because I don't want you to" and I just like kept on pretending that I was going to do it. And then he like started crying and I was like "why are you crying over this? I don't understand what you, why you don't want me to delete this." And he was like "cuz I played it with my dad."

MOTHER: Oh [...] So that was just 4 months after his dad died.

CHILD: Yeah.

MOTHER: So he was hypersensitive to all the memories around his dad right then [...] It's an emotional memory connection to that thing, which may seem silly to you, but obviously has a valid, you know, worth to him [...] So did you, when he was crying and asking you not to do it, initially, did you feel bad at all?

CHILD: Not exactly, because I didn't, I still like didn't quite understand why he was like freaking out over it. At first, I thought he was kidding. At first, I was just like "okay, I'm going to delete them" and then he started like crying over it, so I was just like "I don't know" and then after a while I decided that I wasn't gonna do it because I realized that that it was like that attachment deal [...] I still don't get it.

MOTHER: Well, everybody handles grief differently, and I kind of felt the same way when uncle Wayne died, and I didn't want to get rid of any of his stuff. It was really hard cuz I was trying to understand more about him by -

CHILD: What he left behind.

MOTHER: Yeah, exactly. And um, but it's been four and a half years now since my brother died, and I feel better about letting things go. And everybody's on their own timetable for that. And so that's something that you need to remember throughout your life, that everybody handles grief differently [...] Just like some people like chocolate [and others don't], some people need a different process of grief than you do. And it doesn't make it any less valid just because it's different from yours. And so just hang onto that.

Consistent with what we would expect from a 16-year-old, Eric demonstrates a considerable amount of insight into his brother's psychological experience that helps him understand his brother's distress. Whereas younger children might need a parent's support to understand that someone could become distressed due to an emotional attachment to an object, Eric makes this connection fairly easily on his own. Nevertheless, he struggles to understand the reasons why his brother might have this psychological need, and thus appears to initially question the validity of his sibling's perspective. By drawing analogies to her own experience with grief and by underscoring the natural differences between individuals' unique preferences in another domain, his mother's contributions aim to help Eric understand that people may have distinct ways of dealing with grief that are equally legitimate. As used in this context, this type of response has parallels with empathy induction in that it helps to underscore Eric's wrongdoing. Nevertheless, it also simultaneously provides a way for Eric to recognize how the harmful consequences of his actions followed from unique differences between his own and his brother's ways of dealing with grief.

Underscoring children's capacity for moral awareness

In the previous section, we described maternal responses to children's transgressions that served to help children to consider their harmful behaviors in light of their own and others' psychological experiences, as well as to situate these events within the larger context of their enduring characteristics and relationship histories with others. Thus, collectively, these responses may support children's ability to anchor and contain their harmful acts within a particular context, thereby providing a means for children to reconcile their actions with a prevailingly positive self-view.
An additional way in which parents may do so is by highlighting indicators of children's moral awareness, or recognition of the moral implications of their actions, in the context of the actual harmful experience.

One type of parental response that may support children's moral awareness involves parents' attempts to promote children's understanding of the epistemological processes whereby children became aware of the harmful emotional consequences of their actions for others. Our data suggest that parents may play a particularly crucial role in supporting this understanding in conversations with seven-year-old children, as compared to 11- and 16-year-olds (Bourne et al., 2013). Consider the following example of a conversation between seven-year-old Samantha and her mother:

**CHILD:** I just said that and it made her upset.
**MOTHER:** Did she start crying, or did she tell you that it upset her?
**CHILD:** No.
**MOTHER:** So how did you know it upset her?
**CHILD:** Because she was mad at me.
**MOTHER:** She was mad? Did she tell you that?
**CHILD:** No. But I know she was really mad at me.

This conversation underscores that, although young school-aged children may be able to detect the negative effects of their actions on others, it may be more difficult for them to spontaneously recognize the processes whereby they gained access to this information. Yet, given advancements in socio-cognitive abilities, seven-year-olds may be developmentally prepared to consider these processes with their parents' support. More specifically, Astington, Pelletier, and Homer (2002) revealed that children's second-order false belief understanding was related to advances in the ability to reason about evidence (i.e., make distinctions between the cause of a situation and people's reasons for believing it). Thus, inasmuch as these capacities tend to emerge around five to seven years, it is during this developmental period that children may become prepared to reason about such epistemological issues. Even more germane to the present argument, by helping children to reflect on the ways in which they became aware of their friends' needs and emotions, we argue that these parental responses may also be fruitful in furthering children's understandings of their own moral awareness. In other words, these responses may support children's ability to recognize the ways in which they are sensitive and responsive to the needs and emotions of others.

Another way in which parents may promote children's moral awareness is by underscoring children's experiences of moral emotion (e.g., guilt, remorse) or other-oriented action (e.g., reparation) in the aftermath of the harm. Consider the following example of a conversation between 11-year-old James and his mother:

**MOTHER:** What I was at the park and we were playing soccer for a little white and he didn't want to play anymore so I left him and I went to Wade's to play basketball on his tramp and then Mark was sad. And I left.
**CHILD:** [nods] [...]
**MOTHER:** So he got bummed out that you left him, that you switched gears like that and just left him behind and didn't include him?
**CHILD:** [nods]
**MOTHER:** But obviously you felt bad hurting Mark's feelings?
**CHILD:** [nods]
**MOTHER:** Good, I think that's good that you have, do you know what that means?

One thing that is noteworthy about this conversation is the extent to which his mother simply assumes that James will have felt guilty in the aftermath of his harmful actions. Thus, without negating the wrongness of his initial behavior, her response to James' account of his experience is guided by her confidence in his capacity for moral awareness; while she refrains from providing an evaluation of his harmful behavior, she does make a positive judgment of his traits on the basis of his remorse. This type of strategy may be linked to parents' "developmental optimism" (Gopnik, Knight, & Cashmore, 1986), a belief system thought to be quite adaptive and linked to more reasoned and less angry and punitive responses to children's misbehavior (Coplan et al., 2002). Specifically with respect to development in the moral domain, when parents highlight children's guilt, remorse, or attempts at reparation, they are sending the message that despite having engaged in hurtful behavior, their children are attuned to the effects of their actions on others; this constitutes a deft way of promoting children's sense of moral agency in the face of wrongdoing, and also conveys parents' confidence in their children's moral capacities.

**Highlighting children's potential for moral growth and learning**

One final set of parental response patterns that may help children to consider their wrongdoing in light of a broader, positive self-view are those that emphasize children's future potential to engage in reparative
action and behave more constructively, as well as the possibility for self-
improvement. With younger children, parents may focus primarily on
helping children to identify relatively concrete strategies that serve to rec-
tify harm, and also prevent: similar situations in the future. For instance,
consider the following conversation between seven-year-old Angela and
her mother, which includes both sets of strategies:

**CHILD:** Well I said to her that I don’t want to play with her other games, animal
games.

**MOTHER:** Ohh. So how did that make Polly feel?

**CHILD:** Sad. And she said “you’re not my friend anymore” but I’m still her friend,
just she didn’t get it.

**MOTHER:** Oh. So have you done anything else to help her out so she knows that
you’re her friend still?

**CHILD:** No.

**MOTHER:** No, well how, what do you think you should do instead? Maybe
next time?

**CHILD:** Um tell her that her animal games make me crazy?

**MOTHER:** Yeah, tell her why. So she didn’t know that it’s because of her, that it’s
just something you’re having a hard time with. Huh?

**CHILD:** [nods]

**MOTHER:** Yeah. So do you think you can do anything for her now?

**CHILD:** [nods]

**MOTHER:** What should you do now?

**CHILD:** Um tell her that I just um, to wait, to give me two or three minutes.

**MOTHER:** Right. Yeah. And just say, just say, “Polly, it wasn’t you it was just me, I
just don’t want to be too silly.” Huh? Well so what do you think you learned
from that?

**CHILD:** I learned that to tell her what happens with me.

**MOTHER:** Yeah, tell her what’s really going on. So she knows what’s really the deal
and that it’s not her, huh? Maybe you can always think things through too,
first. Before you talk to her. It helps to think it through before talkin’.

**CHILD:** Okay.

**MOTHER:** Okay? Right? K, well I think it would be good to talk to her when you
see her again at school. And talk to her again and just explain to her.

In this conversation, her mother not only helps Angela to develop a plan
for repairing the relationship with her friend, but also for avoiding similar
misunderstandings in the future. It is also worth noting that her mother’s
suggestions of possible alternative strategies take into account Angela’s
description of her reason for engaging in the harmful behavior (i.e., that
she has trouble controlling her level of emotional arousal when playing
animal games). Again, neither of these suggested strategies implies that

the mother believes that the initial behavior was acceptable, but never-
theless, each provides concrete ways in which Angela can learn from this
experience and more successfully navigate such situations in the future.

With older children and adolescents, parental responses aimed at pro-
moting children’s moral growth and learning may increasingly focus on
more abstract forms of self-improvement. To reiterate, in previous sec-
tions we have noted that parents may highlight: ways in which experi-
ences of harm may result in stable, negative characteristics of their children,
and also ways in which the youths’ overall characteristics may stand in
contradistinction to their harmful actions. Here, drawing on a conversation
between 16-year-old Erin and her mother, we illustrate a third process
whereby parents may help children to use experiences of harm as opportu-
nities to reflect on the possibility for self-improvement:

**CHILD:** [...] Vic was like “so you want to come sit at this table with me? Like over
there, at our usual table?” and I was like, “No I don’t really want to,” and
I was like being pressured by other people around me, I was like “because
we’re not really friends,” and that kind of stuff [...] I was being like really
rude to him and he was like “fine” and he went and sat at the other table and
I felt really bad about being so mean to him and I remember later that day I
apologized to him and then sat at the table with him. But yeah [...]”

**MOTHER:** Why do you think you were so mean?

**CHILD:** Um I, I don’t know I think I, it was a lot of pressure, I think from the
other kids, cuz nobody really liked him, but I think that’s, I um I don’t know,
I was just being rude in general to him. I don’t know why [...]”

**MOTHER:** And did you prove that made him feel?

**CHILD:** Really bad. I thought, he probably felt like “why have I been hanging out
with her? Why did I buy her a birthday present? You know even when she’s
so rude to me all the time.” So ...

**MOTHER:** [When you apologized] how did he respond?

**CHILD:** He was like, “Oh that’s okay.”

**MOTHER:** So he believed you?

**CHILD:** Yeah, cuz it was true.

**MOTHER:** Did you prove yourself then?

**CHILD:** Yeah I never did that again and I always sat with him.

**MOTHER:** Uh huh. So what did you learn? In that situation?

**CHILD:** That trying to be um cool or popular is, can hurt people?

**MOTHER:** Did you hurt yourself too that day?

**CHILD:** Yeah I think so because I felt really bad. Like, I just felt so bad about say-
ing that to him because I knew he was just confused about the thing he gave
me and I was being mean.

**MOTHER:** Did you know too that that was not the kind of character that you
wanted to have or be?

**CHILD:** Yeah ... yeah.

**MOTHER:** Uh huh. So are you tempted in situations like that? Now, currently?
Mother-child conversations about hurting others

elucidate how parents' responses to children's accounts of their transgressions may vary as a function of children's developing capacities to make sense of their experiences.

Our data confirm that, under some circumstances, mothers may respond to children's moral transgressions in ways that do primarily serve to emphasize the moral facets of their experiences. We also identified examples of conversations in which mothers responded in ways that served to reframe, or minimize, the harmful nature of children's actions. Finally, we documented mothers' use of a number of strategies that more fully acknowledge the complexity of children's experiences, such that they may help their children to reconcile their wrongdoing with their positive self-views.

Our data also revealed that, with children's increasing age, mothers' approaches evolved in ways implying that they were responsive to children's developing psychological understandings. In the early school-aged years, mothers helped their children to recognize basic psychological conflicts between their own and others' perspectives, by drawing attention to others' emotions as well as to children's own internally driven reasons for engaging in harmful behavior. With this age group, mothers' approaches also appeared to be sensitive to the ways in which young children struggled to coordinate their understanding of different dimensions of complex experiences, and also supported children's ability to recognize the epistemological processes whereby they became aware of others' emotions and needs. In contrast, with children's rising age, mothers focused increasingly on more complex forms of psychological conflict that took account of children's more sophisticated ability to consider the cognitions, motivations, and emotions of both self and others, and to coordinate multiple aspects of experiences. Furthermore, in the later school-aged years and adolescence, mothers increasingly helped their children to situate their experiences of harm in the context of their broader relationship histories and understandings of themselves and others.

More broadly, and related to this point, our research also highlights the active role that children themselves play in conversations about their morally laden experiences. Not only do children's understandings of their experiences apparently influence the particular ways in which mothers respond to their accounts of their transgressions, but children also do not uncritically accept or absorb their mothers' construals of events. And while children's resistance to their parents' accusations or admonishments would not be terribly surprising (although still noteworthy), our data revealed that children occasionally also resisted their parents' exculpatory contributions. In these ways, our findings are consistent with the view that parents and children make joint contributions to conversations about children's experiences of moral transgressions; while children's
constructions of meanings may be informed by parents’ responses, they are certainly not determined by them.

Taken together, these data imply a number of novel directions for future research on moral socialization. Throughout this chapter, we have suggested that mothers’ contributions to conversations are responsive to their children’s accounts of their experiences; it would be useful to delve more deeply into the nature of these contingencies. For instance, we suggested that maternal responses that emphasize moral facets of experiences may be particularly likely when mothers are concerned that their children are not adequately cognizant of or focused on these issues. Thus, are these responses more likely when children describe engaging in particularly callous or ruthless forms of harm? And do they have distinctive effects on children’s moral understandings when used in response to these types of events, as compared to contexts in which harm may result from more benign forms of goal conflict or misunderstanding? Similarly, it would be important to explore the relative efficacy of each type of parental response in conversations with children at different ages, and how children of different ages respond to each type of parental contribution. For instance, given that teenagers are often well aware of the complexity of their experiences, are they resistant to parenting approaches that serve to oversimplify multifaceted events?

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