Mother-Child Conversations about Children’s Moral Wrongdoing:

A Constructivist Perspective on Moral Socialization

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Research from a constructivist perspective has traditionally underscored children’s active role in the process of developing moral understandings, but has had little to say about parents’ contributions to this process. For example, research has shown that starting at a young age children consider and reflect on the consequences of simple exchanges involving sharing, helping, everyday misdeeds, and conflicts, and construct their own understandings of these sociomoral events (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2006; Smetana, 2013). Research has also shown that in constructing their own understandings, children often face difficulties as they wrestle with the opacity of others’ beliefs, with incompatible goals, or with the unintended or unforeseeable consequences of their own actions (e.g., Lagattuta, 2005; Wainryb & Brehl, 2006). But in spite of the abundant evidence concerning the complexities of moral life and children’s struggles to balance competing and conflicting considerations, constructivist research has been largely silent about the types of scaffolding that parents may provide to their children along the way.

The reticence to examine parents’ involvement in the process may be due to early claims (e.g., Piaget, 1932) that the hierarchical nature of the parent-child relationship does not support, but rather constrains, children’s moral development; or perhaps it ensues from the longstanding assumption that the core of the moral development process lies in children’s own evolving reflections about their experiences. In any case, such inattention to how parents may contribute to their children’s moral development is both puzzling and untenable given that most parents seem to be deeply concerned about their children becoming good people and actively engaged in guiding, supporting, and nurturing them. From our perspective, although parents are unlikely to be the only people who may have significant impact on the process of moral development, they
are uniquely important by virtue of their role-related responsibility to teach their children right from wrong, their influential emotional bond, and their stable and ubiquitous presence in their children’s lives. Thus in this chapter we rely on a body of conversations that children (ages 7-16) and their mothers had about occasions when children had hurt a friend or sibling to outline a constructivist perspective on the moral socialization process. We examine these conversations to call attention to the multiple ways in which children frame and make sense of their hurtful actions; we also explore the more and less attuned manners in which mothers respond to their children’s framings, alternatively soliciting, elaborating, affirming, challenging, or ignoring their children’s meanings, and the more and less accepting ways in which children interact with their mothers’ suggestions and contributions. More generally, we discuss how these bidirectional and co-regulated conversations may translate into the construction and elaboration of fresh moral understandings, thereby providing a window into the process of moral socialization in action.

The Bidirectionality of the Moral Socialization Process

In stressing the significance of parent-child conversations for moral development we are not suggesting that parents transmit their views on right and wrong to their children, who take it all in and adopt it wholesale. In the past, researchers understood the socialization process as largely unidirectional and deterministic; moral internalization was seen as stemming primarily from parents’ transmission of values through discipline and other parenting practices, with the expected outcome being compliance. But contemporary approaches view parental influence in less unidirectional terms, though there is substantial diversity in the ways in which bidirectionality is conceptualized (e.g., Kochanska et al., 2001; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006).

In our view (see also Turiel, 2010), adopting a constructivist perspective on the moral socialization process requires thinking of socialization as a bidirectional process that implicates
mutual influences and accommodations as well as reflection and meaning-making. As parents and children engage in this process, they may assert their own views and goals while also striving to make sense of the other’s behaviors and perspectives; and they may adopt some aspects of the other’s inputs and change their minds accordingly, but may also resist or challenge suggestions that violate their own understandings.

In spite of its bidirectionality, the parent-child relationship is not symmetrical; by virtue of their greater resources, knowledge, and authority, parents are better positioned to constrain children’s behaviors than children are to compel their parents. And yet, both parents and children bring to bear on their interactions multiple goals that go beyond enforcing or resisting power. Parents may want to understand their children and may want children to understand them; they may want to foster in their children a sense of autonomy and a sense of wellbeing; and they may desire to preserve their warm relationship with their children for the relationship’s sake and because doing so would facilitate meeting other long-term objectives. As these and other parental goals come into play in parent-child exchanges about morally-laden issues, they tend to moderate parental demands for compliance, affording children greater scope for negotiation (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006). Children, on their part, may be motivated by more than a desire to evade parental demands. Children may enter these exchanges with a sincere trust in their parents’ motivations and a desire to figure out how to meet their parents’ demands without entirely giving up their own goals. They may also be driven by a genuine interest in gaining new insights about their own experiences, or by a desire to have their parents understand their point of view.

Therefore, conflicts that arise in the moral socialization process do not merely reflect children’s failure to comply; rather, they are inevitable elements of interactions among people with complex goals and understandings, and can often (though not always) be understood and
tolerated as such by both parties. Further, because this process is embedded within an ongoing, long-lasting, and evolving relationship, children’s and parents’ interpretations of what the other person says, wants, or demands are rarely limited to the immediate contingencies created in any given interaction. Rather, parents’ and children’s sense-making of the other’s perspectives and behaviors is often informed by understandings and expectations each has developed based on their relational history; this, in turn, frequently (though not always) creates a deeper pool of shared experience within which disagreements are grasped and negotiated. Therefore, what is often at stake in moral socialization exchanges is not merely compliance understood as an exact match between the parent’s demands and the child’s behavior, but the co-regulated and non-deterministic construction of new understandings that may encompass some aspects of the give-and-take and negotiation between parents and children, including concessions, compromises, and resistances. Ultimately, the moral socialization process thus conceived incorporates the contributions and mutual adaptations of both parents and children, and may result in changed or new ideas and commitments among children as well as their parents.

Parent-Child Conversations as Unique Contexts for Moral Socialization

To date, most research on the contributions of parents to children’s moral learning has focused on the impact of discipline and parenting strategies, and the quality of the parent-child relationship. Findings highlighted the ineffectiveness of power assertion and the effectiveness of strategies involving reasoning and induction, and underscored the facilitative role of warm and supportive relationships (Eisenberg et al., 2006; Grusec & Davidov, 2006; Thompson et al., 2006). In comparison to the literature examining the strategies that parents use to promote their children’s moral growth, researchers have paid relatively little attention to the sorts of conversations that parents and children actually have about morally-laden events.
But conversations that parents and children have about moral experiences not only illustrate but constitute the critical features of the moral socialization process as we have defined it—its bidirectional quality, the prevalence of interpretations and meaning-making, the coexistence of multiple goals and perspectives, and its embeddedness within a relational context. Further, conversations are an essential vehicle through which the business of moral socialization is transacted. When children struggle to make sense of upsetting fights, admit to their own transgressions, or boast about their own good deeds, they tend to do that in the course of conversations. When parents teach their children about rules, talk to them about consequences of varied actions, scold them for their misdeeds, or praise them for their kindness—much of that also happens in and via conversations.

Recently, researchers begun exploring moral socialization processes through the lens of parent-child conversations (Wainryb & Recchia, 2014b), but have largely used those conversations as a window into the forms and contents of the parents’ activities. Collectively, this research has shown that parent-child conversations serve as an important platform from which parents convey moral messages to children, and that parents use diverse strategies during conversations to foster desired outcomes. They may discuss the effect of children’s actions on others to induce empathy and psychological understanding; they may help children explore their own perspectives of why events happened; they may express feelings of disappointment and anger to induce shame or guilt; they may evaluate the child’s actions; they may suggest possible paths for restitution or improved behavior in the future; and may describe expectations or attempt to teach specific moral lessons. Research has also shown that the warmth and elaborative style of parents, as well as the strategies they deploy during their conversations with their children are often associated to children’s moral behavior and moral understanding. As a whole, this research
has yielded a rich picture of how parental goals and practices get played out in actual conversations with their children, and has contributed to a better understanding of what processes such as induction, power assertion, love withdrawal, or shaming look like in action.

Nevertheless, the bulk of research on parent-child conversations about morally-laden experiences has paid little attention to children’s contributions to the conversations. Indeed, descriptions and prescriptions concerning parental styles and strategies and their effects on children have often been articulated without concomitant attention to children’s contributions to the conversations; parental contributions have been depicted as though they work on their own, rather than in the context of and in response to specific meanings made by children. This is not to say that researchers simplistically assumed that conversations consist of parents teaching children moral lessons or that children are passive recipients of such lessons. In fact, researchers have explicitly acknowledged that children’s contributions to conversations remain an important unexplored question and have speculated that children may shape the content and tone of conversations by switching topics, ignoring parents’ requests for information, or challenging parents’ interpretations (Callanan et al., 2014; Laible & Murphy, 2014). In some studies, the conversations between young children and their mothers have been examined for evidence of the extent to which children talk about moral dimensions of their everyday lives (e.g., Dunn & Hughes, 2014); yet for the most part this research served as a basis for analyzing individual differences in children’s language use (e.g., Wright & Bartsch, 2008), rather than as a way to examining the give and take between children and their parents. With few exceptions (e.g., Miller, 2014; Sterponi, 2014), the simultaneous consideration of parents’ and children’s bi-directional contributions and mutual adaptations in morally-laden conversations remains a largely neglected aspect of socialization research (see also Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006).
In our work, we focused on conversations precisely because conversations instantiate the bidirectional nature of the process. Conversations engender a shared psychological space where the topics and opinions being discussed may evolve and change with contributions from the two parties. Another way to put this is that conversations are much more than an exchange of information. As people talk with one another, they don’t just swap facts: they may learn new facts, but they may also begin to view these facts in a new light, draw new conclusions from them, and engage in new trains of thought. This is likely to be especially significant in conversations between parents and children about morally laden issues.

Though parents are not arbiters of moral truth, by virtue of their continuous involvement in children’s lives they often have unique knowledge concerning where “a story begins”; parents often know about circumstances preceding whatever incident they and their child are discussing. This “insider” knowledge may render them particularly valuable when helping their child consider, or reconsider, the facts and meanings surrounding complex events. Parents also know their children quite a lot better than most and they can, and often do, draw on this knowledge when discussing events with their child. Even if in such contexts parents at times assume a didactic tone, most parents don’t just lecture, or at least they don’t just lecture and then exit the stage. Parents, but also children, may at times enter into conversations with a goal in mind—a mother may want her son to understand that what he did was wrong, or may want him to comply with an expectation; a child may want to explain what made him angry, or may want to mitigate his responsibility for some wrongdoing. But it is often the case that goals and understandings evolve in the course of conversation. As conversations unfold, with each partner explaining, listening, arguing, elaborating, cajoling, insisting, and resisting, a new story is created and new knowledge is constructed. In these ways, conversations about morally-laden experiences might
create the space for a bidirectional process whereby the child’s understandings are expanded and
dchanged in ways that may integrate, albeit imperfectly, the parent’s ideas and viewpoints.

But conversations are not only about the contents being transacted and constructed. When
discussing morally-laden experiences, including who did what to whom, why, what it felt like,
what it meant, and whether it was right or wrong, a variety of emotions might also emerge. The
sharing of emotion in conversation helps children to learn how to interpret and regulate their own
emotional experience (Fivush, 2007; Thompson, 2010); conversations thus can serve to contain
emotions that might otherwise be overwhelming. In this regard, it matters that these
conversational exchanges are embedded within a close relationship. Especially in relationships
characterized by warmth and trust, conversations with parents may provide an inimitable milieu
for children to safely explore the difficult implications of their morally-laden experiences,
including uncertainties and regrets. When children discuss sensitive topics, parents may certainly
challenge children’s ideas or question their choices. In fact, by virtue of their special role, parents
are more likely than other people to “tell it like they see it”, even if the message is one that
children will not be pleased to hear. Yet inasmuch as these conversations occur within a climate
of positive regard, children receive powerful reassurance that they are accepted despite having
done the wrong thing or having been a “bad person”. Similarly, children also learn that they can
disagree with their parents’ stances on morally-laden topics without risking the relationship. As a
consequence, conversations with parents may provide a unique context for children to develop
their own views and a sense of their own moral agency (Komolova & Wainryb, 2011).

The Importance of Conversations about Children’s Own Moral Transgressions

Our decision to focus on the conversations that mothers and their children have about
children’s moral transgressions has to do with the centrality of those experiences for children’s
moral growth. The study of moral development has traditionally focused on children’s moral concepts and judgments, with contemporary research showing that even young children know that it is wrong to hurt others (Smetana, 2013). Still, in the course of their everyday life, all children occasionally engage in behaviors that cause harm to others, such as hitting a sibling, excluding a peer from a game, or betraying a secret. Though these occasions may be thought of as failures in moral socialization, harm is an intrinsic part of interpersonal interactions and an inevitable dimension of moral life (Wainryb et al., 2005; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2015). Consequently, being a moral person involves not only knowing right from wrong and trying to do the right thing, but also acknowledging one’s capacity for harm and grappling with those instances when one has harmed another. And it is precisely those occasions when children’s actions result in harm to others that may pose challenges to children’s understandings of themselves as moral people, thus creating meaningful opportunities for moral growth.

It is hard to determine the extent to which children grapple with these situations on their own. Still, it is quite likely that children’s ability to fully make sense of these experiences in ways that promote their understandings of their actions and the construction of a sense of themselves as moral people, does not develop in a vacuum but is rather scaffolded by, and benefits from conversations with, other people. In some cases, children may choose to talk about these experiences to others, spontaneously sharing with friends or parents; but children are also habitually prompted to account for their wrongdoing.

As children wrestle with, and talk to their mothers (or others) about, how and why they hurt someone despite knowing that causing harm is wrong, they are likely to consider (or be encouraged or directed to consider) not only what they did, but also what they wanted, thought, and felt during that event. By connecting their own actions to psychological aspects of their
experiences, children might come to understand their wrongdoing as being related to their own desires, beliefs, and emotions, and in so doing construct a sense of their own moral agency (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010a; Recchia & Wainryb, 2014; Wainryb et al., 2005). Relating their actions to what they thought, felt, or intended does not absolve children of responsibility or transform their hurtful actions into acceptable ones; rather, it helps children recognize that harmdoing can arise from their desires to harm others or their failures at managing their own anger, fear, or jealousy, but may also stem from their self-oriented or pro-social goals, from their imperfect attempts to balance their own and others’ needs, or from their limited grasp of others’ perspectives. Such understandings can help to contain the potentially negative impact of these experiences 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 essentialized understanding of themselves as bad or immoral people. In turn, this permits children to acknowledge the pain they caused and to recognize their potential for reparative action and 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; Recchia & Wainryb, 2014).

Given the variety of children’s harmful encounters and the complexity of internal and external factors bearing on the meanings of their actions, the task for mothers and children to jointly construct understandings of responsibility in their conversations about these events is far from straightforward. Much of the moral socialization literature might lead us to assume that, in conversations about moral transgressions, mothers would largely focus on issues of right and wrong and underscore the negative consequences of the child’s actions for others. This literature
might also suggest that, ideally, children would tend to internalize these suggestions and thus avoid engaging in similarly hurtful actions in the future due to an improved understanding of the effects of their actions on others. Our data, however, suggest that this is an oversimplification of what actually occurs in reflective conversations about children’s past transgressions.

In the following sections, we use examples from our data to show how conversations about hurting others are an important vehicle whereby children, with their mothers’ help and support, construct and adapt their understanding of their own transgressions. We focus on a corpus of conversations collected in a sample of approximately 100 mother-child dyads, evenly divided into three groups on the basis of the child’s age (7-, 11-, or 16-years). Each child nominated events when he/she hurt or upset a friend and a younger sibling (see Recchia et al., 2013), and subsequently each mother-child dyad was instructed to “talk about what [child] did, try to figure out everything that happened around it, and also see if there is something to be learned from it”. In these conversations, children represented their experiences in varied ways (e.g., taking more or less responsibility for their actions; demonstrating more or less awareness of the effects of their actions on others) that often had a crucial impact on the direction that the conversations would ultimately take. In turn, mothers contributed to these conversations in ways that reflected a variety of goals. Often, mothers were responsive to children’s particular ways of constructing of their experiences, but other conversations were less well-coordinated. Last, we discuss how children responded to mothers’ suggestions, sometimes accepting or elaborating on them, and sometimes resisting them. We explain how varied types of exchanges provide distinct types of opportunities for children to further their understandings of their experiences.

**The Conversations: Children Frame their Transgressions in Varied Ways, and Mothers are Often Responsive to Children’s Framings**
By design, conversations in our dataset were initiated by the children. That is, each conversation invariably began with the child providing an account of his/her hurtful behavior. As such, the child’s framing of his/her experience in the initial telling often served to guide the direction that the conversation would take. These framings could vary along multiple dimensions. For example, children positioned themselves in heterogeneous ways with respect to the psychological experience of hurting others (i.e., the cognitions, motivations, and emotions accounting for their harmful actions). In some cases, children described lashing out at others in angry or even calculated ways. However, more commonly, children described engaging in intentional behaviors that resulted in harm to others, but for which the harm itself was clearly not intended. In some situations, children described engaging in actions while knowing or suspecting that their behaviors would result in harm to others, due to imperfect attempts to balance their own needs and the needs of others (e.g., ignoring a friend’s phone calls to spend time with a different person). Children also described unanticipated harms resulting from their own and others’ divergent beliefs or understandings of specific situations. For example, children described peers reacting badly to insensitive comments (e.g., saying “do I look fat in this?” to an overweight friend) or due to negative interpretations of more benign behaviors (e.g., a friend feeling slighted because the child chose to sit with another group at lunch).

There are at least three factors that might account for such variations in children’s ways of narrating their transgressions. First, it is plausible that there are individual differences in children’s ways of constructing meanings about their transgressions (e.g., describing more or less guilt/remorse, regardless of the circumstances), but our study was not designed to assess sources of individual variation. Second, children’s constructions of meanings about their transgressions may also vary markedly across contexts. For instance, children’s hurtful behaviors against their
sibling are often described as more ruthless than those committed against friends (Recchia et al., 2013), and children’s experiences of excluding others differ markedly from other types of hurtful behavior (Wainryb et al., 2014). Third, children’s constructions of meanings change substantively with age, as youth develop more sophisticated understandings of their social and psychological worlds. For instance, from early childhood to adolescence, youth demonstrate increases in their ability to recognize and coordinate their own and others’ psychological perspectives (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b; Wainryb & Brehl, 2006); and in adolescence, youth continue to struggle to grasp the broader implications of their actions for their understandings of themselves and their relationships (Hardy & Carlo, 2011; McLean & Pasupathi, 2012).

Importantly, our data suggest that mothers’ contributions to conversations about children’s transgressions are often sensitive to both developmental and contextual sources of variation in children’s constructions of meanings about their experiences. To illustrate some of these patterns, below is an excerpt from a conversation between 7-year-old Walter and his mother (all names are pseudonyms), concerning an experience when Walter hurt a friend:

CHILD: Um, we were just playing a game on the tramp then we got in a fight and I keep kicking her and slamming her face to the ground…on the tramp, and she kicked me hard and I kicked her hard then she start crying […]
MOTHER: Do you remember why you started fighting?
CHILD: No, but I remember when we fighted though.
MOTHER: You remember when you fought, but you don’t remember what the fight was about?
CHILD: Like, we like messed up the game or something.
MOTHER: You were playing a game and it got messed up?
CHILD: Yeah
MOTHER: And you started hurting her?
CHILD: Yeah then she started hurting me.
MOTHER: Okay, tell me first what you did to her. (pause) And then I’ll ask what she did to you.
CHILD: Um at first I slammed her head in the ground, then I kicked her really hard. Then she kicked me really hard.
MOTHER: (pause) You slammed her head into the tramp and kicked her?
CHILD: (smiles bashfully) Yeah…
MOTHER: You, well, why - Do you think that’s okay?

CHILD: No! (says emphatically)

MOTHER: It’s not?

CHILD: Uh uh. (shakes head)

MOTHER: Then why do you think you did it?

CHILD: She was hurting me?

MOTHER: But you said that you hurt her first, and then she hurt you.

CHILD: I don’t know who like hurt us first, but we… but I know that we got in a fight.

MOTHER: So what do you think you could do next time? Cause you know it’s not right, right? To hurt people?

CHILD: Yeah.

MOTHER: So what do you think you could do, to make sure you don’t do that?

CHILD: Um, I could just tell her that it doesn’t care, if we mess up the game, we could just start it over.

MOTHER: That’d be a good idea. But what if you’re so so so mad, and she did something so wrong to you. Not hurt you, but what if she did something that made you so so mad? Would you be able to say, “It doesn’t matter”? What if you’re so so mad?

CHILD: I’d just say… it, doesn’t care but I won’t still fight you. I won’t um, be mean, still.

MOTHER: Well sometimes when you get so so mad, and it’s not okay what she did, I would just say, I would tell her that it made you mad and that your feelings were hurt, and then I’d say, “I need to go home for a little while”. And then, when you’re ready, when you’re not so mad anymore - cause sometimes if you go away, like sometimes, have you done that when you go into your room? Like when you’re really mad at me and dad and you go into your room, and you’re there for a little while and then when you come out you’re not as mad anymore right?

With respect to Walter’s initial narration of the event, a number of features stand out.

First, he largely fails to consider the psychological dimensions of his hurtful behavior: that is, he makes no reference to his own goals, thoughts, or feelings that might account for his actions.

This type of pattern is particularly likely to characterize young children’s descriptions of their transgressive behaviors, given their social-cognitive limitations and resulting tendencies to omit “landscapes of consciousness” from their narrative accounts (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010b; Wainryb et al., 2005). Perhaps partly as a result of this omission, Walter’s behavior comes across as fairly ruthless, especially in light of the maximizing language he uses to describe his actions (e.g., “slamming” her face; kicking her “hard”). Thus, it is not surprising that his mother notes the negative moral implications of his actions (“do you think that’s okay?”; “you know it’s not
right to hurt people"), albeit in a way that acknowledges Walter’s existing moral capacities. In other words, Walter’s mother does not appear to be trying to teach her son about moral concepts per se, but rather evoking and highlighting his own belief that it is wrong to hurt others. She also accompanies this judgment with a number of other developmentally-appropriate contributions that may serve to further Walter’s sense of his own moral agency. Specifically, one central line of the mother’s inquiry concerns the reasons for Walter’s behavior, helping him to recognize the situational and emotional dimensions of the event that might account for his harmful actions. She also goes on to help him consider strategies for how he might prevent similar instances from occurring in the future (i.e. when his emotions become overwhelming). Thus, although this conversation is characterized by a predominantly shared sense, between mother and son, of the son’s wrongdoing, Walter is supported in his capacity to reflect on his goals and emotions that explain his actions, as well as provided with some tools to contain his aggressive impulses.

As we have noted above, much of the moral socialization literature might lead us to assume that parent-child conversations about moral transgressions would largely emphasize the child’s wrongdoing. However, as discussed elsewhere (Recchia & Wainryb, 2014; Recchia et al., 2014), our data also make clear that is not the only type of parenting goal that guides these discussions. Even in the conversation above, it is evident that Walter’s mother is not only invested in noting her son’s wrongdoing, but also in exploring her child’s legitimate motives for his behavior, his positive moral qualities, and his capacity to behave differently in the future. Even more, it is sometimes the case that mothers in fact minimize their child’s blameworthiness or responsibility for their morally-laden actions, again, often in response to children’s framing of events. Consider the following conversation between 7-year-old Natalie and her mother:

CHILD: What happened with me and Kelly and Joleen was we were going to the park last year and they were talking about their “days” […] when like they’re at school and
they don’t allow anyone else to play with them. […] And I said “I don’t think that is appropriate” and that really hurt them. […] I said “excuse me, but I think that talking about ‘days’ is not okay with – is just not okay with me” […] I just got really angry and 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? 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. 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?

In her initial account, Natalie describes her own comment to Kelly and Joleen as being very hurtful. However, she also clearly negatively evaluates her friends’ exclusionary behavior (“Talking about ‘days’…is just not okay with me”), acknowledges her anger at the injustice (“I just got really angry”), and notes her friends’ insensitive response to her criticism (“they said…maybe you should just like move to a different school”). Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that her mother’s response to this account implicitly underscores the acceptability of Natalie’s resistance to her friends’ actions, even though it resulted in their hurt feelings. That is, Natalie’s mother helps her to coordinate her evaluation of her own behavior with the broader relational context in which it is occurring. More specifically, she emphasizes the role that Natalie’s friends played in causing the conflict, and suggests that Natalie should seek out relationships with people who are more appreciative of her company.

As argued elsewhere, it is understandable that mothers occasionally respond to their children’s acts of harm by minimizing their blameworthiness, as they wish to protect their children’s positive self-views and to prevent them from becoming overwhelmed by guilt, especially in situations when mothers recognize factors that mitigate the blameworthiness of
their children’s actions (Miller, 2014; Recchia & Wainryb, 2014). That is, parents do not appear to believe that children should necessarily feel guilty every time that someone’s feelings get hurt directly or indirectly by their actions. By the teenaged years, youth may share this perspective (Wainryb & Recchia, 2012), but preschool and early school-aged children tend to emphasize the moral dimensions of complex social experiences, often at the expense of other dimensions (Shaw & Wainryb, 2006). This may partially explain mothers’ desire to be protective, particularly with their younger children. Thus, mothers’ efforts to promote children’s understanding of factors that might mitigate their responsibility (in this case, the inappropriate and hurtful nature of the friends’ comments) may help children to reason about their own hurtful acts in ways that recognize the complexities of these social experiences, and thus support their ability to reason flexibly across different types of events. Nevertheless, if such protective responses were used consistently and exclusively by parents, this would become problematic inasmuch as it could undermine children’s moral agency by minimizing their sense of responsibility for their own behavior and their consideration of the effects of their actions on others.

With age, children become increasingly able to consider the complexity of their morally-laden experiences, and their conversations with mothers also reflect these developmental shifts. For example, consider the following conversation between 11-year-old Laura and her mother:

CHILD: Okay so, one day, back in {city}, with Jenny, we were walking to do a lap in school, and we were just walking together and Melanie was behind us, and all of a sudden Kristen walks past, and I say to Jenny and I said "Do you still like Kristen, um 'cause she's really rude to me and I don't like her." So Jenny thought that was offensive and so she just, she said, "Well I like um Kristen, and you shouldn't be saying that about her." So she walked up with Kristen and then Melanie came up with me, and then just walked with me for the rest of the way. […]

MOTHER: So were you just talking about other things and then all of a sudden Kristen passed you

CHILD: Mm hmm

MOTHER: and then you just said that out of the blue?

CHILD: Well not out of the blue because we were kind of talking about Kristen, and so,
and so then she passes by and I just say that. 'Cause she like she like passed by pretty much, and like, um bumps Jenny.

MOTHER: Oh, okay.
CHILD: So that's what brought it up, kind of
MOTHER: Did Jenny say something first?
CHILD: mm mm
MOTHER: Or you just brought it up?
CHILD: I just brought it up.
MOTHER: That was a hard situation
CHILD: yeah
MOTHER: back there, huh? […] Um… (long pause) Are you glad that you said it?
CHILD: I think so-
MOTHER: Or do you wish you hadn't said it?
CHILD: 'Cause now now she knew how I felt about Kristen, so then um, later if she doesn't like Kristen then she can say, "Oh, well Laura doesn't like her either, so I'm not going to bring her up."

MOTHER: (nods) […] Let's see… did you learn anything from it?
CHILD: I learned that I shouldn't say things about other people to people that I don't know if they really don't like the person or if they do, and I just don't know it.
MOTHER: It's hard to know what to say because you kinda wanna be open but
CHILD: you don't at the same time so you can be, still be friends with them if they like the person and you don't…
MOTHER: Anything else?
CHILD: (child shakes head no) Do you have anything else?
MOTHER: But friends you're supposed to be able to talk to,
CHILD: Yea
MOTHER: but yeah it's kind of hard with girls, and
CHILD: mm hmm. Because one minute they don't like the person, then the next minute they like them but you don't know.

MOTHER: Right
CHILD: So you never know
MOTHER: You don't want people getting mad.
CHILD: But like people like Melanie (giggles) you always know.
MOTHER: You always know with Melanie.
CHILD: Mm hmm

In Laura’s account, she describes openly expressing her animosity towards Kristen, who has been unpleasant to her in the past. Her friend Jenny takes offense at her confession and chastises her for gossiping about Kristen. We don’t get a clear sense from this initial telling about how Laura evaluates her own behavior. And ultimately, the predominant impression conveyed in this conversation is that it is difficult to unequivocally evaluate Laura’s actions as
either the right or the wrong thing to do. Laura acknowledges that she was glad she told Jenny about her feelings regarding Kristen, as it resulted in her friend becoming aware of her perspective and potentially taking it into account in future interactions. Yet she also speaks of the potential pitfalls of sharing one’s perspective with others when you don’t know where they stand. Building on this, she and her mother conclude that being open with others can be a double-edged sword, especially with some kids of girls who are hard to predict. They then conclude with some insights about friendship, implying that some kinds of people are simply more difficult to maintain relationships with. These nuanced psychological insights, lessons about relationships, and acknowledgement of complexity are features of conversations that become characteristic of discussions with the child’s increasing age, as children become more sophisticated in their understandings of the social and psychological world (Recchia et al., 2014).

In addition to age-related changes in the content of conversations, this example also highlights developmental shifts in their process. In particular, a salient facet of this conversation is the extent to which the emerging insights are jointly constructed: Laura literally finishes her mother’s sentences on various occasions. Thus, while both parties are elaborating on each other’s contributions, the conclusions about the complexity of the situation and its implications for navigating friendships emerge from the conversation. That is, both Laura and her mother seem to reach new understandings of this experience that neither would have necessarily drawn on her own. Such conversational synchrony may be a fruitful context for moral learning, inasmuch as children may feel highly supported and thus more willing to participate and to take risks. Indeed, establishing shared meanings in conversations about challenging events has been shown to predict various indicators of moral development over time (e.g., Laible & Murphy, 2014).

Specifically with respect to developmental changes, younger children’s contributions are
more often prompted and scaffolded by their mothers, whereas older children make more spontaneous contributions to discussions (Recchia et al., 2014). By the teenaged years, mothers often act as a sounding board for their children’s independent narrations, asking occasional questions and offering insights but otherwise allowing children to structure experiences independently. Thus, this conversation reflects a middle ground between patterns with younger and older children, in that mothers and children are equally contributing to the discussion.

As one last example, to demonstrate how these conversations continue to shift in adolescence, we present excerpts from a discussion between 16-year-old Rita and her mother:

CHILD: […] Thomas 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 … how do you think 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 when she’s so rude to me all the time?”

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 hmm. 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 saying 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?
CHILD: No. No, I think everyone is over that stage at this point of like, I mean there is certainly different groups but there aren’t like shunning one person, like at this age so I, we don’t really run into that problem.

We see in Rita’s initial narration that she highly capable of reflecting on the psychological and evaluative dimensions of her experience on her own, without any scaffolding from her mother. She describes engaging in hurtful exclusionary behavior due to feeling pressured by others, and then also her remorse in the aftermath, leading to her attempts at reparation. Although adolescents may still need some support in understanding psychological dimensions of experiences when they are particularly complex or opaque (Recchia & Wainryb, 2014), this conversation is typical of age-related changes in youths’ social-cognitive capacities.

Her mother is largely responsive to Rita’s initial framing of her actions; she builds on various dimensions of her child’s account by exploring her motivations and the emotional effects of her actions in more depth, as well as relational implications of the event. As is characteristic of conversations with teenagers, she subsequently helps her daughter to explore self-related implications of her behavior and draw conclusions about the kind of person she wants to be and how she perceives that she has grown and changed since this experience. Adolescence is a particularly appropriate time for parents to explore these issues with their children, as it is during this period that youth are beginning to explore broader self-related meanings emerging from their life experiences and forming identity-related commitments (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012).

The Conversations: Failures of Coordination between Children’s and Mothers’ Contributions

Thus far, we have presented examples that demonstrate the ways in which mothers’ contributions appear to be generally responsive to children’s initial framings of events. However, there are also instances in our data when mothers and children appear to be “talking past each other”, so to speak, in the sense that mothers’ contributions do not follow directly from the ways
in which their children frame their conflict experiences. Consider the following example, involving a conversation between 16-year-old Todd and his mother, about a situation in which he harmed his younger sibling:

MOTHER: So what'd you do to Richard? (laughing)
CHILD: Uh... well it's happened multiple times, but it's just like me calling him stupid or slow when he, like asks me for help on his homework and he like didn't understand it. I'll just be like "how did you not understand that, that's extremely easy" and he just doesn't understand it cuz I guess it doesn't come as easy to him and I just I guess maybe I got to like got him a little down cuz I called him stupid or something and he maybe understands it, he doesn't under- get everything, but then coming from his older brother saying that makes it that much worse. So...

MOTHER: Cuz he looks up to you. But do you know why that doing these things hurts his feelings and makes him upset?
CHILD: Yea, that's why I haven't been doing it at all.
MOTHER: Okay I mean he… cuz he looks up to you. And besides those are the, those are words that are hurtful to anybody and make them feel bad. You know, belittle them. You know. So now you understand why we get so mad at you.
CHILD: Well, it hasn't happened in a while.
MOTHER: Alright, but now you know why we get so mad because of words. When you put somebody down like that it shuts their self-esteem down and could affect them in the long, you know, in the long run and so it's just extremely hurtful …you know?
CHILD: Yea (softly).
MOTHER: It doesn't get, you don't build them up. You should build somebody up, not always cutting them down, but sometimes you do that. (points at child with thumb)
CHILD: Alright.

Initially, Todd describes hurting his brother repeatedly by saying that the brother should succeed more easily on schoolwork. However, he also clearly underscores his understanding of the negative impact that his actions had on his brother, and implies a negative evaluation of his own actions (“coming from his older brother saying that makes it that much worse”). Shortly afterwards, he notes that he has stopped engaging in the behavior after reflecting on the harm it has caused. Thus, in many ways, this is the kind of narration we would hope to see in the aftermath of harm, reflecting Todd’s view of himself as imperfect in his understanding of others’ needs and his capacity to perspective-take, but also capable of trying to do better.

Given these features of Todd’s account, his mother’s contributions are somewhat jarring,
in that she paraphrases what her son has said (“cuz he looks up to you”) without acknowledging that he himself had reached these conclusions. She also emphasizes her anger and suggests that Todd has a tendency to behave in hurtful ways, implying that his actions are reflective of broader negative moral characteristics (“you should build somebody up, not always cutting them down, but sometimes you do that”). This leaves little room for more positive, redemptive lessons to be learned from this experience. It is worth noting that we do not have information about the larger history between Todd and his brother that may be leading his mother to respond in this way. Her initial query in the conversation (“so what did you do to Richard?”) hints at her initial stance with respect to Todd’s relationship with his brother, and it is clear from the conversation that this specific harm event is part of a series of recurring incidents. Nevertheless, Todd’s mother’s response to his account seems to be incongruent with Todd’s description of his own perspective on events, and not likely to support Todd’s emerging capacity to forgive himself (and perhaps others) in the aftermath of harm.

What follows is a second conversation between a 16-year-old boy (Ben) and his mother, also in which the mother’s contributions seem to be out of synch with her child’s narration:

CHILD: We were at the fireworks thing, me and Michael, my friend. And we were sneaking in the bounce houses cuz the person charged way too much. And we were at the slide and he kept pushing me. And it would make me mad, so one time, I pushed him and he got mad and then he called me a name, and then I called him a name. And I hit him in the mouth.
MOTHER: (pause) You did? (very surprised)
CHILD: It hurt me more than it hurt him, my fist. Cuz he had braces on and he cut my wrist.
MOTHER: Wow, I di- you never told me about that.
CHILD: (Shrugs) I don't know, it was just dumb and then we just laughed about it the next day and we were friends again. […]
MOTHER: So, ww-what way could you have solved the problem, without calling each other names and doing that?
CHILD: uh, I could have said "stop pushing me please." […]
MOTHER: And he could have too, right? So you both kinda were in the wrong.
CHILD: Yeah.
MOTHER: What did you learn?
CHILD: Ahh, not to hit people unless, not to, to say to say something nice, instead of hitting somebody, like say "please don't push me" instead of calling each other names and hitting me, and hitting him in the mouth.
MOTHER: (nods) Cuz then everybody feels bad, huh?
CHILD: Yeah.
MOTHER: That’s, you know it's a good thing that, that in humans we feel bad like that. That we have a conscience.
CHILD: Yeah.
MOTHER: Cuz otherwise, I guess society wouldn't be the way it is.
CHILD: Yeah! Uh-
MOTHER: It means you have a heart of gold, you know that?
CHILD: yeah.
(Mom smiles and then child smiles back)

In his initial narration, Ben tells a different type of story from the one Todd told in the previous example. Ben describes an escalating conflict in which he and his friend mutually retaliated multiple times, culminating in him punching his friend in the mouth. However, rather than describing the hurt caused to his friend, Ben concludes that “it hurt me more than it hurt him”. Although his mother appears to be understandably shocked by this event, her responses do not seem particularly in line with the relatively insensitive way in which her son narrated the experience. That is, she chooses not to challenge (or even directly acknowledge) his statement minimizing the harm he caused to his friend. Furthermore, after emphasizing the reciprocal nature of the harm, she also quickly shifts to noting the importance of remorse, and concludes that her son has a “heart of gold”. It is difficult to see how the mother’s conclusion emerges from Ben’s contributions to the conversation, and indeed, seems largely based on her own suggestions rather than his own. We suggest that this exchange may be unlikely to support Ben’s authentic experience of responsibility for his hurtful actions, in that this mother’s redemptive conclusions are largely disconnected from her son’s apparent perspective on the event.

We suggest this lack of coordination may lead to missed opportunities for moral growth. Certainly, all parents will occasionally misattribute intentions, dismiss emotions, or gloss over
nuances. However, we suggest that these mistakes become especially problematic if they are characteristic of how mothers and children consistently talk about these issues. In some ways, they suggest failures of intersubjectivity, and may thus impede the contributions of parent-child conversations to children’s moral learning (e.g., Laible & Murphy, 2014). From a relational perspective, consistent errors of this type are also problematic, in the sense that children may increasingly feel that their voices are not being heard or understood, and thus these failures may erode children’s trust in their caregivers and their willingness to share openly in conversation.

Even so, it is possible that under some circumstances, when parents do not get things right, this may actually create the space for other dimensions of moral agency development (Wainryb & Recchia, 2014a; see also Nucci, 2014). While parents are generally more knowledgeable and more sophisticated than their children, they are not infallible (in either the moral or informational sense). We speculate that, rather than being “disasters”, these imperfections in parents’ understandings may be a crucial part of the give-and-take process of conversation. When parents occasionally get things a little bit “wrong”, this provides opportunities for children to push back against the parent’s perspective, elaborate on their own understandings of moral concepts, as well as to carve out their distinct stances on their experiences. More broadly speaking, children’s gradual recognition of their parents’ subjectivity and fallibility may constitute a crucial facet of the process of individuation. Nevertheless, to date, this represents a largely untested possibility that may be a useful direction for future research.

The Conversations: Children Respond in Varied Ways to their Mothers’ Contributions

Thus far, we have shown that mothers’ contributions to conversations are often (but not always) framed and guided by children’s constructions of meanings about their experiences. In turn, mothers’ suggestions, comments, and explanations are among the stuff that children take in,
test, push against, make their own, reject, and build on. In this section, we expand on this latter facet of parent-child conversations – that is, the ways in which children agree with and elaborate on vs. reject or dismiss their parents’ contributions to discussions.

In general, the moral socialization literature might lead us to assume that, ideally, children will internalize their parents’ guidance. Presumably, this is especially the case in the moral domain, inasmuch as children from a young age tend to endorse moral concepts such as welfare and fairness, and thus would be expected to largely agree with their parents on these issues. Furthermore, research suggests that children tend to accept the legitimacy of their parents’ authority in regulating behavior in the moral domain (Smetana, 2011). Nevertheless, the examples above illustrate that it is not a straightforward task for mothers and children to jointly construct understandings children’s hurtful actions, and that given the complexity of these experiences, there is a considerable heterogeneity in how individuals attend to, understand, and prioritize various facets of these events. And indeed, our data do not suggest that mothers are necessarily focused on teaching a specific value or expecting perfect (or even imperfect) compliance with their own view of things. Rather, both mothers and their children seem to be authentically engaged in making sense of what happened, what the child’s role was, and what the child can learn from that event.

Many of the excerpts in the preceding sections illustrate conversations in which children seemed to accept their mothers’ suggestions, using them as a springboard for elaborating their understandings of events. For example, although Laura and her mother are generally on the same page across the entire conversation, her mother helps her broaden her view of the advantages and disadvantages of being honest with peers, and she ultimately draws a conclusion about friendship that she may not have reached without her mother’s support. Similarly, Rita responds to her
mother’s questioning about identity-related implications of her experience by reflecting on her own personal commitments and self-improvement since the event. More generally, then, as children take in and reflect on their mothers’ guidance in conversations, they may be learning to understand or recognize unfamiliar or opaque aspects of their experiences; to make sense of emotionally arousing experiences in which it is difficult for children to think things through and make reasonable decisions; and to make sense of their own transgressions in ways that help them forgive themselves, repair relationships, and make better decisions in the future.

Even so, there is also the potential for children to push back against their mothers’ guidance, to make counterarguments, or to dismiss their mothers’ perspectives. For instance, although children and their mothers almost certainly agree that it is wrong to harm others, there is nevertheless the potential for them to disagree markedly with respect to children’s responsibility and culpability for their hurtful behavior. These disagreements can take various forms. As a first example, consider a conversation between 7-year-old Beatrice and her mother:

CHILD: I was looking at his coloring book.
MOTHER: Oh, was he mad at you?
CHILD: Yeah, because I accidentally ripped the page and then he got really mad […]
MOTHER: But didn't you guys both have the same coloring book?
CHILD: No
MOTHER: Did you think it was your coloring book?
CHILD: Yeah, I thought it was mine. I- I forgot that I left it at grandma's house.
MOTHER: Oh, well that's not your fault if you thought it was yours! You thought it was your coloring book.
CHILD: uh huh
MOTHER: Yeah, well then that's fine.
CHILD: But then he got really really mad at me.
MOTHER: Oh, Josh got mad at you? Oh, what'd he do? Did he pull your hair again?
CHILD: mm mm (no)
MOTHER: no? oh.
CHILD: He just got mad at me. He said he would never talk to me again.
MOTHER: He said he would never talk to you ever again?!
CHILD: Yeah, but he's still talking to me.
MOTHER: (laughs) Ohh, well that's good.
Beatrice initially describes her destruction of her brother’s property as accidental. Her mother goes on to explore Beatrice’s reasons for taking the coloring book, establishing that it was a misunderstanding (she had thought it was hers). As a result, her mother absolves her child of responsibility (“oh, well, that’s not your fault if you thought it was yours”; “then that’s fine”). However, despite Beatrice’s initial mitigation of her responsibility, she resists this absolution by emphasizing her brother’s anger as a result of her actions. Thus, Beatrice’s goal seems to shift in the course of the conversation, moving away from mitigating her fault and towards highlighting the negative emotional effects of her actions on her brother. Interestingly, her mother also uses this statement as an opportunity to suggest that her brother also contributed to the conflict (“oh, what’d he do? Did he pull your hair again?”), and Beatrice once again does not accept this characterization of events (“he just got mad at me”).

This example shows that children do not uncritically accept their parents’ interpretations of their hurtful behavior even when such interpretations might absolve them of responsibility. In this example, the conclusion that appears to be drawn is that the siblings’ relationship can withstand situations in which the child angers her younger brother; this conclusion seems to emerge more from the child’s own contributions to the discussion than from those of her mother. Indeed, this conversation may also have served to give Beatrice’s mother a new perspective on Beatrice’s capacity to consider her own and her brother’s needs in the context of sibling conflict.

Evidently, when conversations about harm reflect disagreements between mothers and children about the child’s culpability for hurting others, it is not always the case that children perceive their own actions as more blameworthy than their mothers do. Thus, as a last example, consider the following conversation between 16-year-old Quentin and his mother:

CHILD: The story was, we were upstairs, this is when you were yelling at us to go take a shower. Just non-stop yelling about taking a shower. […] I got in the shower first,
Zach was playing the Xbox. I got out of the shower and he was still playing the Xbox. I basically called him, uh, I think I said, "Hey grease ball why don't you get in the shower?" and, you know how he is about his hair, and so he threw a controller at me, or headphones. [...] He felt bad about it, and-

MOTHER: Yeah, well yeah you torture him. You always put him down! You called him a grease ball. But he did need to be thrown in the shower probably.

CHILD: Yeah he's disgusting. You've seen his-

MOTHER: Well he's your brother, you hurt his feelings.

CHILD: (makes mocking noises) It's initiative. I'm teaching him how to be man.

MOTHER: How is that teaching him to be a man?

CHILD: Well I don't know, when he gets older and he's working at McDonald's and he has his gross hair and his boss is like, "Zach go take a shower" and he's like, “No!”

MOTHER: His boss first of all wouldn't tell him to go take a shower, but (laughs)

CHILD: His girlfriend might.

MOTHER: his girlfriend might. [...] He's always filthy.

MOTHER: But you're always putting him down [...] He shouldn't have thrown the controller at you.

CHILD: He shouldn't have! (emphatically) It hurt (whispers).

MOTHER: It hurt? So what did you do to him?

CHILD: I think I, I think I just smacked him upside the head.

MOTHER: Okay, you started the fight, and then you ended it by hitting him?

CHILD: (pause) Isn't that, isn't that what everyone does? That's what governments do, that's what countries do.

MOTHER: Oh please

CHILD: Oh please. Don't get in this-

MOTHER: (laughs) Quentin, can you not throw things and hit him? You torture him, he looks up to you and you just torture him constantly. Not just that one time (laughs) but constantly you say things to him.

CHILD: Well it's cuz he deserves it.

MOTHER: No he does not deserve it. And you know he doesn't.

CHILD: Last night he flipped me off for no reason.

MOTHER: (pauses) There had to be a reason. Think of one reason.

CHILD: Oh you're right, remember it was the popsicles. He was like, "what flavor is that?" and I got it wrong and he flipped me off. Then I got it right- he flipped me off.

MOTHER: Yeah that was kind of ridiculous. He's feeling picked on. Let's just try not picking on him. And next time you get out of the shower don't call him a grease ball instead say, "it's your turn, mom's upstairs screamin'." [...] Will you try and just tell him without insulting him?

CHILD: No. It's impossible. 'Cause most of the time he starts it. [...] What's something you like and you don't want anyone else touching?

MOTHER: I'm the mother, there's nothing.

CHILD: Exactly. Let's say, let's say your car.

MOTHER: No, you guys drive my car.

CHILD: Let's say, no let's say even when you're at work, let's say when you're driving the car, I'm always calling you and I'm always asking, "can I just drive your car? I'm
just gonna drive it for a minute." That's, that's him and my Xbox. [...] 

In this conversation, it is clear that Quentin evaluates his own actions less negatively than does his mother, as he vociferously argues in his own defense. For her part, his mother is also inclined to “tell it like she sees it”, and does not mince words when she disagrees with Quentin’s point of view. It should be noted that this is an unusually contentious conversation that seems to reflect a jocular style characteristic of the relationship between Quentin and his mother. And yet, neither Quentin nor his mother seems particularly troubled by the relentless disagreement. We suggest that a relatively high level of trust and warmth between parent and child may be a necessary condition for this level of comfort with disagreement and criticism. There is evidence of such warmth even in this combative conversation: for example, Quentin’s mother tempers her strong criticisms of his sibling-directed behavior (e.g., “you torture him constantly”) with her acknowledgement of the validity of some of his arguments (e.g., his brother probably did need to be thrown in the shower) and her self-deprecating humor (e.g., “mom’s upstairs screamin’”).

In an otherwise positive relationship, children’s willingness to engage in conflict with their parents may serve adaptive developmental functions (Adams & Laursen, 2007). Regardless of whether children conceive of their own harmful behaviors as more or less blameworthy than do their mothers, these moments of disagreement may serve as important contexts for moral learning, inasmuch as they highlight for children the multiplicity of concerns that can be brought to bear on complex social events. Indeed, conflicts surrounding morally-laden events serve as a crucial contexts for supporting children’s consideration of alternative viewpoints, their empathy for others’ divergent perspectives, and their ability to find solutions to problems that take into account competing goals (Nucci, 2001; Wainryb & Recchia, 2014b).

In Quentin’s case, the level of openness in this relationship means that it is possible for
him to test out contentious ideas in a safe context. For example, he makes the claims that his hurtful behavior is “showing initiative” and “teaching his brother to be a man”; he also draws analogies between his aggressive behaviors and the actions of governments. Although his mother challenges and even scoffs at these suggestions, she effectively creates a space for her son to test his ideas and receive honest and informative feedback. Thus, through resisting, disagreeing with, and arguing against parents’ perspectives, children may be furthering their understandings of their own unique stances on experiences, as well as their abilities to articulate those perspectives in dialogue with others. In turn, parents are also learning something new about their children’s points of view, and likely developing richer understandings of their children’s experiences and ongoing relationships with others. The result then, when these conversations go well, is that both mothers and children construct new understandings of children’s morally-laden actions.

Conclusions

The conversational excerpts discussed in this chapter illustrate the myriad of meanings that children and their mothers construct about children’s hurtful experiences as well as the bidirectional and co-regulated nature of the process. We have noted the marked heterogeneity in children’s initial framings of their own experiences, as well as the varied ways in which mothers address their children’s accounts and children respond to their mothers’ contributions.

As suggested by these excerpts, along with related analyses (Recchia & Wainryb, 2014a; Recchia et al., 2014), there is often a close relation between mothers’ goals and contributions to the conversations and the specific meanings that their children had constructed about their transgressive experiences. For example, in some cases mothers’ suggestions emphasized their children’s wrongdoing, often by highlighting the negative effects of children’s actions on others. Mothers’ use of this strategy seemed especially likely (and also particularly appropriate) when
children’s accounts of their own actions suggested a lack of concern for the other (e.g., because the harm was repeated or ruthless in nature). In other cases, mothers responded to their children’s accounts by minimizing their children’s wrongdoing or mitigating their responsibility for their actions. Mothers seemed most likely to use this strategy with young children, especially when their children appeared to be “overmoralizing” complex situations and overlooking other legitimate considerations. Finally, mothers also found ways to help children reconcile their hurtful behavior with a positive self-view. For instance, with younger children, mothers scaffolded children’s capacity to anchor the harm in a particular context, by exploring children’s psychological perspectives that explained their hurtful behavior in a given situation. With older children and adolescents, mothers engaged in strategies that helped their children explore connections between their morally-laden actions and their broader identity-related commitments.

Although we underscored the many ways in which mothers often built on children’s explanations of their own experiences, we also noted this was not invariably the case. In some instances, mothers’ responses seemed to be out of synch with children’s own accounts. We also noted cases in which mothers and children seemed to be responsive to one another, but were nevertheless in disagreement about children’s culpability. We demonstrated that children do not unreflectively accept their mothers’ interpretations and sometimes openly resist them; this was true not only at times when mothers stressed their children’s wrongdoing, but even on occasions when mothers tried mitigate their children’s responsibility. These instances of open resistance on the part of children surely reflect only a small subset of children’s noncompliant attitudes; research (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006) indicates that children’s unwillingness to adopt parental views often takes more covert forms, such as when children engage in passive noncompliance or when they privately or internally reject or ignore a parent’s proposition.
When socialization is conceived of as parents teaching and children conforming, it is relatively easy to ascertain the success or failure of parents’ socialization attempts in terms of the match between the two perspectives. Understanding socialization as a bidirectional and co-regulated process that implicates the interpretive capacities of both parents and children requires, instead, a fine-grained microgenetic exploration of communicative exchanges. Our excerpts illustrated of the varied ways in which mothers and children, in conversation, framed their own understandings of events, considered the views and interpretations presented by the other, and engaged in fruitful give-and-takes that resulted in children, and sometimes also mothers, reaching new, more complete or nuanced, understandings of the events they were discussing.

Importantly, because this perspective on socialization does not aim for the child’s submission to the parent’s view, disagreements and conflicts do not necessarily signal a problem in the socialization process. Indeed, far from reflecting calamitous failures in socialization, moments of disagreement and conflict—whether they be instances when mothers’ and children’s contributions to a conversations do not seem well harmonized, when mothers miss their children’s clues or misinterpret their mood or intentions, or when children reject mothers’ suggestions or interpretations—may create space for children to ‘flex their own muscles’ so to speak, pushing back against the parent, standing their grounds, and finding their own voice. Therefore, it is not only those moments of attunement and synchrony that undergird and promote children’s construction of more complex moral understandings; asynchrony and conflict may also usher in new moral learning. Ultimately, the constructive process embedded in conversation serves as an inimitably important crucible for moral development inasmuch as it provides support for children’s ability to reflect on and make sense of their own morally-laden experiences.
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