WHAT PARENTS ARE SAYING TO THEIR CHILDREN

Ronald L. Mullis, Ann K. Mullis, and Cheryl Riley

There is much evidence that mother and fathers interact differently with their children (Belsky, 1979; Golinkoff & Ames, 1979; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). When children are infants, mothers provide more care for the child, e.g., feeding, bathing, changing, than do fathers. Fathers, however, provide more novel play activities for infants. As a result of differences in activities, infants learn to respond somewhat differently to their mothers and fathers (Belsky, 1979).

When children develop language, additional differences are noted between mothers and fathers. Mothers have been found to be more verbally responsive to children than are fathers. Mothers seem to initiate more conversations and to respond to their children verbally. Fathers, on the other hand, seem to use imperatives and more controlling language with their children (Golinkoff & Ames, 1979).

This suggests that fathers' use speech for a somewhat different purpose than do mothers. Although we can describe some differences in language used with young children, relatively little is known about the communication styles of mothers and fathers with older children.

The purpose of this article is to examine differential communication patterns of fathers and mothers with their school-age children. Research by McLaughlin, Schutz, and White (1980) has indicated that fathers use more controlling speech with their preschool sons and daughters, so it was expected that fathers of school-age children would follow this same pattern and produce a higher proportion of controlling language with their sons and daughters than mothers.

Studies of verbal interactions between mothers and fathers with their sons and daughters have reported sex-of-child difference (Cherry & Lewis, 1976; Golinkoff & Ames, 1979; McLaughlin, Schutz, White, 1980). Fathers in these studies were found to use more controlling language with their preschool sons than with their preschool daughters. It would be expected that this pattern would continue with school-age children; fathers would use more controlling language with their school-age sons than their school-age daughters.

Ronald L. Mullis and Ann K. Mullis are both associate professors, Department of Child Development and Family Relations, College of Home Economics. Cheryl Riley served as a graduate assistant on this project.

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Method

A total of 32 families, 16 with first-born boys (mean age = 9 years, 3 months) and 16 with first-born girls (mean age = 9 years, 6 months) participated in this study. The participating families were chosen from those who had been involved in a larger study of parent-child relationships. Families reported themselves as middle-class. The average father and mother reported some college education (14.1 years of school for fathers, 13.42 for mothers).

Procedure

The entire procedure was conducted in the family's home at a time convenient to the family. Two problem-solving tasks (nine and 16-block designs) were completed by each parent-child pair. The problem-solving tasks involved the use of 25 pattern blocks. The blocks were 1½ inch cubes each having four sides of different color, plus two diagonally divided sides of two colors. A videotape recorder, camera, and microphone were used to record the interactions.

The parent and child were seated at a table on which two problem-solving tasks were placed. The first problem-solving task consisted of organizing nine pattern blocks to match a stimulus card. Each parent and child pair was instructed to take turns placing one block at a time to construct the design.

Following completion of the nine-block design, the parent and child were asked to construct a 16-block design. Instructions were the same as for the nine-block design. The same procedure was used for each child's interaction with his/her mother and father. Typically, the parent-child pair took six to seven minutes for the nine-block design and eight to ten minutes for the 16-block design.

Coding of Parent Verbal Interactions with Child

Based on previous research (McLaughlin, Schutz, & White, 1980), parents' interaction was coded into six predetermined categories. Controlling utterances of parents were determined by the following behaviors: (a) **Imperatives:** A request for an object or an action in the form of a command or order (e.g., "Give me that block"); (b) **Direct Suggestion:** Any word, phrase, or sentence that gives advice about how to complete the task (e.g., "We need an all-white block for this corner"); (c) **Indirect Suggestions:** An attempt, in the form of a question, to give advice about how to play the game (e.g., "How many block do each of use need to complete the design?"); (d) **Prompting Questions:** An attempt, in the form of a question, to encourage the child to provide an answer to a question where it appears the parent has the answer in mind (e.g., "If this corner is all red, which color block needs to go there?"); (e) **Information Question:** An attempt, in the form of a question, to request information from the child where it appears the adult does not have a definite answer in mind (e.g., "Have you put a block design like this together before?"), and (f) **Rule Clarification:** Any mention on the part of the parent of a rule of the game (e.g., "Remember, we are to take turns putting the block design together."). These six behavioral categories have been classified as either More Directly Controlling or Less Directly Controlling Utterances. For purposes of this study, the imperative, direct suggestion, and prompting question behaviors were used as **More Directly Controlling Utterances**, and the indirect question, information question, and rule clarification behaviors were used as **Less Directly Controlling Utterances.**

Results and Discussion

Table 1 contains percentages of controlling utterances used by parents with their children for each block task. A significant difference was found for mothers and fathers use of controlling utterances. Fathers used **More Directly Controlling Utterances** more often than mothers. Mothers tended to produce more of **Less Controlling Utterances** than fathers. Additionally, there was a significant effect for sex-of-child. Fathers and mothers used a higher percentage of **More Directly Controlling Utterances** with daughters than sons. Generally, both mothers and fathers tended to use a greater proportion of **More Directly Controlling Utterances** as the difficulty of the task (from nine to 16 block design) increased.

The results of this study suggest that parents communicate with their school-age children in many of the same ways parents communicate with preschool-age children. Fathers were found to produce a higher percentage of **More Directly Controlling Utterances**, such as "Put it here.", "Try it this way." and "Pay attention to the model." This may suggest that fathers carry their stereotypical role as family disciplinarian into teaching situations. There may be fewer options when the child interacts with the father, but these directly controlling interactions may be efficient in terms of completing a specific task quickly and correctly.

Table 1. Percentage of Controlling Utterances used by Parents with Their Children for the Block Tasks.

Type of Utterance	Parents (N = 32)			
	Fathers		Mothers	
	Sons	Daughters	Sons	Daughters
9-Block Design				
More Directly Controlling Utterances	64	68	52	59
Less Directly Controlling Utterances	36	32	48	41
16-Block Design				
More Directly Controlling Utterances	69	78	60	65
Less Directly Controlling Utterances	31	22	40	35

The interaction style of mothers, that of using fewer controlling utterances with their children **(Less Directly Controlling Utterances)**, may allow children to attempt a wider variety of problem-solving strategies. Mothers were likely to say things like, "I wonder what would happen if you tried this." or "Do you remember the rules of the game?" Unlike fathers, mothers seemed to use a more open-ended approach to solving problems. Thus, children may be exposed to at least two different styles of problem-solving with their parents which may teach children about the need for flexible problem-solving strategies, that different strategies "work" under different conditions.

Fathers and mothers responded differently to sons and to daughters. Generally, fathers tended to speak in longer sentences and initiated more conversations with their sons than with their daughters. In contrast, mothers spoke in longer sentences and initiated more conversations with their daughters. Somewhat contrary to earlier research using preschool children (e.g., McLaughlin, Schutz, & White, 1980), fathers and mothers used a higher percentage of **More Directly Controlling Utterances** with daughters than sons. More than likely, this finding suggests a more sophisticated and complex pattern of parent-child interactions as the child reaches school-age. That is, older daughters and sons are probably more verbal and competitive on problem-solving tasks with their parents, thereby eliciting differential responses from them based partially, at least, on the child's sex.

In sum, it seems clear that mothers and fathers verbally communicate differently with school-age sons and

daughters. These differences have been identified in a problem-solving context. A child who receives verbal instruction from two different sources (mothers and fathers) may develop more flexible verbal and problem-solving strategies which would be beneficial in a variety of educational settings.

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Table 1. The yield and thousand kernel weight of virus free and WSMV infected spring and durum wheat cultivars in field trials at Fargo, ND, 1984.

Cultivar	Yield bu/A virus free control	Yield bu/A WSMV inoculated	Yield reduction %	1000 K W (gm) virus free control	1000 K W (gm) WSMV inoculated	Weight reduction %
SPRING WHEAT						
Butte	59.2	40.4**	32 a[1]	29.5	26.6**	10 a[1]
Oslo	61.0	40.4**	34 a	31.0	26.2**	15 b
PR 2369	64.9	35.5**	45 b	29.4	25.0**	15 b
Olaf	56.0	29.6**	47 bc	31.2	28.2**	10 a
Guard	63.3	32.9**	48 bc	30.7	27.4**	11 a
Marshall	54.4	26.3**	52 bc	25.1	20.8**	17 bc
Alex	65.4	28.5**	56 bc	30.9	28.5*	8 a
Stoa	67.0	28.5**	58 c	29.3	24.1**	18 c
	LSD for yield 5% - 10.2 1% - 13.9			LSD for Kernel weight 5% - 1.89 1% - 2.557		
DURUM WHEAT						
Ward	65.4	50.8**	22 a[1]	38.9	36.0**	3 a[1]
Vic	66.4	47.5**	29 a	44.5	40.5**	4 a
Cando	63.3	36.2**	43 b	39.6	35.2**	4 a
Lloyd	70.0	26.6**	49 b	30.8	26.6**	4 a
	LSD for yield 5% - 7.5 1% - 10.6			LSD for Kernel weight 5% - 1.98 1% - 2.774		

[1] Means separated by a different letter differ significantly (P = .05).

*,** Significant at the .05 and .01 level, respectively, as indicated by the paired t test.