



Children's evaluative skills in informal reasoning: The role of parenting practices and communication patterns



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ABSTRACT

Good reasoning skills are integral to the ability to think reflectively, critically and effectively. Research is scarce on the role of family, specifically parents, in the shaping of children's evaluative reasoning skills in everyday problems. The aim of this study is therefore to first investigate the role of two parenting practices, namely autonomy-support and control, on children's evaluative reasoning. The second goal is to investigate if family communication patterns of conversation- and conformity-orientations are significant mediators between parenting dimensions and reasoning skills. The data consisted of questionnaire measures given to 1300 participants (fifth-graders and their parents), as well as tests to assess children's informal reasoning. In line with theoretical assumptions, results revealed significant associations between both parenting practices and children's skills in evaluating reasons. However, the mediation role of family communication patterns was confirmed only for conformity-orientation. The implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Kuhn (2005) states that present day education has to be for thinking, and that at its core should lie skills of argument and inquiry since active and frequent engagements in authentic arguments, be it collaborative discourses or solitary reflections, enriches individuals both individually and collectively. To think and reason well is to "confer an unlimited capacity and inclination to learn and to know" (Kuhn, 2005, p. 179). These capabilities can enable individuals to develop more effective decision-making skills for informed judgment (Bradley & Corwyn, 2000) and to achieve a greater sense of self-efficacy and agency (Perkins, Faraday, & Bushey, 1991). Moreover, good argument skills are central to successful educational careers and outcomes (see Kuhn, 1991; Voss & Van Dyke, 2001).

Informal reasoning consists of reasoning processes applied to ill-structured problems, commonly of an everyday nature, that have shifting uncertain premises. It is "a goal-dependent process that involves generating or evaluating (or both) evidence pertaining to a claim or conclusion... [which] assumes importance when information is less accessible, or when problems are more open-ended, debatable, complex or ill-structured, and especially when the issue requires that the individual builds an argument to support a claim" (Means & Voss, 1996, p. 140). In contrast to formal reasoning processes which often result in definite conclusions deduced from well-structured premises of the problem, informal reasoning is more reliant on background knowledge and experience that may not result in a single solution. Sadler (2004) noted that due to the complex nature of informal reasoning, "research from a variety of disciplines supports the notion that studying argumentation serves as an effective means of accessing an individual's informal reasoning" (p. 516).

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Empirical work on argumentative reasoning has utilized both oral and written methods to elicit and measure reasoning. Responses in these methods are often coded into the different components of (formal) arguments, such as the generation of reasons, clarification, counterarguments, rebuttals and justifications. This classification, however, does not always fit the characteristic of ill-defined problems typically addressed in informal reasoning. Moreover, these ways of measuring argumentative reasoning are often time- and labor-intensive, and thus are consequently applied to the analysis of data from smaller samples. In contrast, the current work refers to data that was collected within a longitudinal project utilizing a large sample (997 students from 29 schools). Due to time constraints imposed by the schools on data collection, the measure for argumentative reasoning had to be both time effective and easy to administer. Therefore, we adapted the methodology of Means and Voss (1996) by using a story-based measure to elicit children's informal reasoning and evaluated their reasoning skills by examining their ability to differentiate between reasons and to provide justifications in arguments. Children were presented with an informal problem of an everyday nature and were asked to rank the given responses on a scale from the best to the worst. Further details will be presented in the *Method* section.

Moshman (1994) postulated that two likely mechanisms could lead to developmental change in children's reasoning: (1) children's introspective reflection about their reasoning experiences and (2) social learning in interaction with adults. We focused on the latter aspect in this study. From this perspective, parents are perceived as more experienced figures that hold important roles in nurturing argumentative skills and in providing the necessary structure and support to facilitate and refine children's learning and mastery (Day, French, & Hall, 1985) through direct (e.g. instructional) and indirect teaching (e.g. modeling, supporting and demanding interactive practices and feedback).

Previous studies on families have suggested that parents may shape children's reasoning through family conflicts, casual conversations, and their communication orientations (see Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Ladd, Profilet, & Hart, 1992; Stein & Albro, 2001). Moderate family conflict interchanges enable children to acquire conflict resolution strategies and to learn mutual regard for and understanding of others. These interactions influence children's reasoning and thinking skills and children's subsequent strategies in constructive and effective social interchanges (Stein & Albro, 2001). Additionally, parents who often engage children in casual family talks that can occur during leisure moments such as dinner, after school, before bedtime or during travel, help to prepare children to face future social dilemmas, for example, over ways to dissuade a bully or to mend a friendship (Ladd et al., 1992). Nevertheless, previous studies suggest that engagement in conflictual conversations within the family is supportive only to the degree to which there is reciprocity in conversational participation, high quality of advice, good listening skills and emotional warmth (Profilet & Ladd, 1996 in Hart, Newell, & Olsen, 2003). In line with these findings, parental engagement reflecting authoritative connection and autonomy-supportive features has been positively associated with increased socio-communicative competence in children (Profilet & Ladd, 1996; Steinberg, 2001).

Family communication orientations, namely conversation- and conformity-orientation, have also been shown to influence reasoning strategies and cognitive development (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Children of families high in conversation-orientation, defined as the degree of unrestrained open family interactions on a wide range of topics, are more influenced by the quality of an argument (i.e., structure and quality of supporting evidence) than children of families high in conformity-orientation, defined as the degree of homogeneity of attitudes, values and beliefs in the family, who are more influenced by the social status of the message source (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994). Furthermore, children of families high in conversation-orientation demonstrate better developed communicative and problem-solving skills, which allow them to better negotiate their roles and expectations with others and to be more resilient in difficult environments (Fitzpatrick & Koerner, 1996 in Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). In contrast, families high in conformity-orientation perform less well in both social and problem-solving skills, are more conflict avoidant (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997 in Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002), and are unable to respond flexibly to changing situations or to solicit help from their social environment.

The present study contributes to the relevant literature by seeking to explore the role of parenting and family communication patterns in shaping children's reasoning skills. In particular, we will look at two parenting dimensions – autonomy-support and control – that have been found to exert significant influence on children's cognitive and social development.

Autonomy-support refers to parental encouragement of children's self-initiated expressions and actions, and to parental provision of meaningful rationales and choices (Joussemet, Koestner, Lokes, & Landry, 2005). This is the active encouragement of parents to foster autonomous self-regulation rather than mere compliance in their children. This form of support is vital for the greater internalization and integration of important but not so interesting activities, such as homework and cleaning up (see Joussemet, Koestner, Lokes, & Houliort, 2004; Joussemet, Landry, & Koestner, 2008). Parental support of autonomy impacts across various domains such as children's school performance, social competence and job-seeking (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005). Kochanska, Coy, and Murray (2001) showed that when mothers used autonomy-supportive methods of reasoning, polite requests, positive comments, suggestions and distractions, children of autonomy-supportive mothers displayed higher levels of "committed compliance" across various tasks, that is, the reflection of a genuine adoption of the mother's agenda, which is considered a preliminary form of internalization and self-regulation. Joussemet et al. (2005) also found that early experiences of parental autonomy-support had sustained beneficial effects on children's academic and social achievement.

In contrast, while autonomy-supportive practices are related to positive child and adolescent development, control has consistently been found to have detrimental effects on child development (see Barber, Bean, & Erickson, 2001; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). Control refers to parental acts which are harsh, intrusive and manipulative with the sole goal of obtaining child compliance while maintaining adult authority (Ryan, 1982; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010) and is characterized by parental hostility and negative affect. The use of parental control has been linked to both internalizing and externalizing problems in children (Barber & Olsen, 1997; Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009; Silk, Morris, Kanaya, & Steinberg, 2003). In family communication, control is found to lead to less task-oriented persistence and mastery motivation in children (Grolnick, Frodi, & Bridges, 1984),

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