



Individual Differences in How Parents and Children Discuss Future Concepts



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Introduction

- Rapid increases in future thinking across early childhood (Atance & O’Neill, 2001) raise the question of what mechanisms underlie its development. One candidate mechanism is parent-child conversation (Shin, Leech & Rowe, 2020).
- Most research on parent-child memory-related conversations focuses on past rather than future events (e.g., Reese, Haden & Fivush, 1993). Although past- and future- language are linguistically similar due to their abstract focus, less is known about whether parents use similar scaffolding (e.g., elaborations) when talking about the future.
- Further, because future concepts vary in the extent to which they require one to simulate, predict, form intentions, and plan (Szpunar et al., 2014), the nature of parent-child conversation may also vary when these features are manipulated.
- Study goal: Examine variation in future-oriented language between parent-child dyads and across discrete future concepts.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do parents and children vary in their talk about the following five discrete future concepts: simulation (near-future and distant-future), prediction, intention formation, and planning (Szpunar et al., 2014)?
2. To what extent do parents and children vary in how elaborative they are when talking about discrete future concepts?
3. Across discrete future concepts, are there differences how parents and children draw on past event knowledge?

Method

Participants

- N=70 parents and their 4- to 5-year-old children (57 females and 43 males) living in central North Carolina
- All parents had a least a four-year college degree and spoke English primarily at home

Procedure and Coding

- Dyads talked about five future-oriented prompts in a counterbalanced order for 1-2 minutes each (Table 1)
- Conversations were recorded and all language was transcribed verbatim using CHAT conventions (MacWhinney, 2000)
- Transcripts were coded for number of total utterances and number of utterances which referenced the future or past (Table 2)
- A second layer of coding categorized future and past utterances as elaborative or non-elaborative (Table 2)

Table 1. Example conversation prompts

Taxonomy of future thought	Conversation prompt
Simulation – near future	What are we doing tomorrow?
Simulation - distant future	What is something special you are excited about in the next few weeks?
Prediction	When you grow up do you think you will like coffee or juice more? Why?
Intention Formation	What is something you want to get better at?
Planning	What steps will you take to get ready for bed tonight?

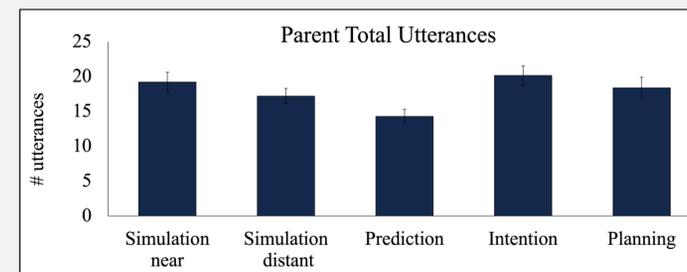
Table 2. Parent and child language coding scheme

Category	Definition	Examples
Future	Utterances in which the speaker references something that will or might happen in the future, including hypotheticals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Next week is three days from now. • Are you more excited about getting together with Chris again this week? • To get better I will read recipes and practice.
Past	Utterances in which the speaker references something that previously happened	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has this ever happened at our house? • What happened? • Last time I got a shot.
Elaborations	Provision of or request for new information for utterances that received a future or past code (Melzi et al., 2011; Shin et al., 2020)	(Past) Have you ever tasted coffee? (Future) Do you think that will be the same when you are a grown-up? (Past) They messed up all the things they did! (Future) We’ll get to all be together.

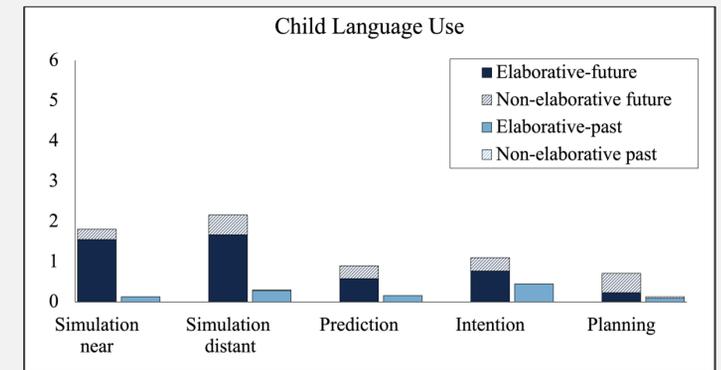
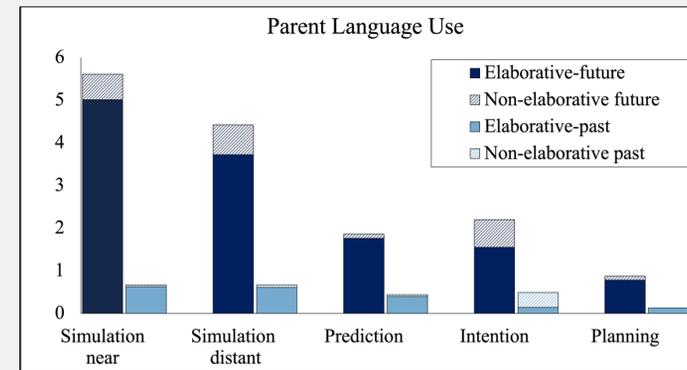
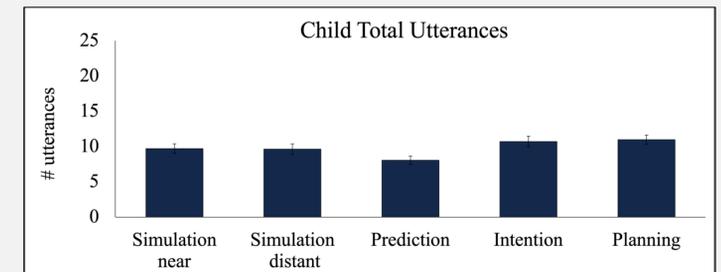
Results

- Prompts which elicited the most utterances were: intention (parents and children), planning (parents and children) and near-future simulation (parents only).
- Parents and children used significantly more future utterances during simulation conversations compared to other conversations. Dyads used the fewest future utterances during planning conversations.
- Significantly more future utterances were coded as elaborative than non-elaborative across conversations.
- Past utterances were infrequent but were more likely to occur within conversations containing more future utterances.

Parent Results



Child Results



Conclusions and Future Directions

- Variation in parent-child future conversation is present across dyads and across discrete future concepts
- Simulation-focused discussions evoke the most future references; this pattern may reflect the types of conversations dyads frequently engage in at home
- Similar to past-event conversations, elaborations appear to be a strategy for scaffolding children’s participation in future-event conversations

Future Directions:

- Include a more diverse sample of families to understand full breadth of variation in future-oriented conversations
- Conduct longitudinal studies to understand change in children’s future language use over time
- Examine associations between conversation variables and behavioral measures of children’s future-oriented cognition

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