Children’s Self-esteem and Moral Self: Links to Parent–Child Conversations Regarding Emotion
Elaine Reese, Amy Bird and Gail Tripp, University of Otago

Abstract
The current study has two aims: (1) to examine associations between the emotional content of parent–child past event conversations and two aspects of children’s self-concept—moral self and self-esteem; and (2) to examine the degree to which talk about past events is uniquely associated with self-concept when compared with talk about ongoing events and situations. Fifty-one five- and six-year-old New Zealand children and their parents discussed four emotional past events and two ongoing conflicts. Children’s moral self, self-esteem and language ability were also assessed. When parents referred to a greater number of positive emotions and evaluations, regardless of conversation type, their children had higher self-esteem. Past event talk also uniquely predicted children’s self-esteem: Parents who used more explanations during conversations regarding past negative emotions, and more explanations and confirmations of past positive emotions, had children with higher self-esteem. We discuss these results with respect to an autobiographical memory approach to self-concept development.

Keywords: autobiographical memory; parent–child interaction; narrative; self-concept

Introduction
Parents and children begin to discuss past experiences almost as soon as children’s developing language skills allow it (Sachs, 1983) and past event narratives quickly become a major focus of parent–child interaction (Miller & Sperry, 1988). Over the last two decades, extensive research has established the importance of past event conversations for children’s developing autobiographical memories. Parents who discuss past events in a more elaborative style have children with better autobiographical recall (Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993; see Reese, 2002b for review). Recent experimental evidence bolsters these longitudinal findings. McGuigan and Salmon (2004) demonstrated that elaborative conversations after an event enhanced preschoolers’ verbal and non-verbal memory for the event compared with elaborative conversations during or especially prior to the event.

Correspondence should be addressed to Elaine Reese, University of Otago, Department of Psychology, PO Box 56, Dunedin, New Zealand. Email: ereese@psy.otago.ac.nz

© Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007. Published by Blackwell Publishing, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA.
More recently, autobiographical memory theorists have begun to consider the wider socio-emotional implications of these conversations. The way parents and children talk regarding past events together is associated with a range of socio-emotional constructs, namely, children’s attachment security (e.g., Fivush & Vasudeva, 2002; Laible & Thompson, 2000), temperament (Bird, Reese, & Tripp, 2006; Lewis, 1999), emotion understanding (Laible, 2004) and theory of mind (Reese & Cleveland, 2006; Welch-Ross, 1997). According to autobiographical memory theorists, children develop a subjective sense of self through conversations regarding specific past events. Specifically, children are thought to internalise a framework for evaluating the personal meaning of experiences by reflecting on past events and past emotions and comparing them to the present self (Fivush, 1993, 2001; Nelson, 1993, 2003; Welch-Ross, 2001). In the process, children eventually learn to connect discrete events into a coherent autobiography. Important to this theory is the assumption that talking about past events, and specifically past emotions, as opposed to talking about ongoing events and emotions, is particularly salient for self development. The argument is that children are better able to reflect on emotions, and hence the personal meaning of an event, when the event and associated emotions are no longer occurring (Fivush, 1993). The aim of the current research is to test two components of this autobiographical memory approach to self-concept development (1) by extending the measurement of a child’s ‘subjective self’ to include their moral self views and their self-esteem and (2) by examining the salience of the past event context for self development in comparison with talk about ongoing events and emotions.

Operationalising the ‘Subjective Self’

A child’s collection of personally meaningful autobiographical memories is thought to form the basis of his/her ‘subjective self’. The measurement of a child’s ‘subjective self’ is especially challenging (Welch-Ross, 2001). Empirical research has conceptualised a child’s autobiographical self primarily in terms of the consistency or coherence of his/her self views (Bird & Reese, 2006; Buckner & Fivush, 1998; Welch-Ross, Fasig, & Farrar, 1999). According to this approach, a child’s knowledge of his/her self is the variable of interest, rather than the specific content of that knowledge. For example, a child with a consistent view of his/her self as achievement-oriented is seen as having an evaluative framework equivalent to that of a child with a consistent view of his/her self as low in achievement orientation. To date, two studies have found an empirical relationship between the emotional and evaluative content of parent–child past event conversations and the consistency of children’s self views (Bird & Reese, 2006; Welch-Ross et al., 1999). One shortcoming of such a global approach, however, is that it does not consider the specific information that children internalise during past event conversations. Although it is important that children develop a clear and coherent understanding of ‘who I am’ across time and space, many would also consider it important for children to internalise desirable values and rules, and to develop positive self views.

Developmental theory and research supports the relevance of parent–child interactions for children’s moral views and self-esteem. Many early parent–child discussions focus on a child’s misbehaviour and are a particularly rich source of emotion discussion (Dunn, 1987), personal meaning (Miller, 1994) and conscience development (Laible & Thompson, 2002). Kochanska and Thompson (1997) have further posited that children are likely to develop the emotion understanding and cognitive skills (i.e.,
an understanding of others’ perspectives) required for morality from a variety of past event discussions, not just those that focus specifically on discipline encounters. Yet many of these studies have not differentiated between conversations about past and ongoing emotions (e.g., Dunn, 1987).

Similarly, most theories of self-esteem development posit approval and support from significant others as an important contributor (Cooley, 1902; Harter, 1999). This support can be communicated both verbally (e.g., Mead, 1925) and non-verbally (e.g., Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). Past event conversations may be one important medium in which verbal approval or disapproval is presented. Extrapolating from autobiographical memory theory, children may be more reflective regarding self-relevant aspects of an event when it is no longer occurring. Speculatively, this reflection may lead to internalisation of evaluative information regarding the self. The link between autobiographical memory and self-esteem is probably bidirectional, such that the valence of an individual’s self-esteem may also influence their recall of past events. Self-esteem is often viewed as a ‘theory’ that serves to process and integrate personal experiences (e.g., Story, 1998). Adults with higher self-esteem recall their own emotions associated with past events more positively (Christensen, Wood, & Barrett, 2003). Yet we predict that because parent–child conversations regarding past emotions predate children’s global sense of self-worth in the school years (Harter, 1999), the most likely direction of influence in early childhood is for specific early experiences, and discussions of those experiences, to contribute to children’s self-esteem.

Examining Temporal Context: Are Past Event Conversations Special?

One of the integral assumptions of the autobiographical memory approach to self-concept development is that conversations regarding specific, temporally distant experiences are critical (Fivush, 1993, 2001; Nelson, 1993, 2003). Conversations regarding past emotional experiences are thought to be particularly important as children may be better able to reflect on emotions when they are no longer in the ‘heat of the moment’ (Bretherton, Fritz, Zahn-Waxler, & Ridgeway, 1986; Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1991). These post hoc reflections may provide the first opportunity to experience and understand the personal and emotional meaning of an event: although we may be able to recognise an emotion at the time it is occurring, we are often unable to reflect on broader issues such as the causes and consequences of the emotion, how we might resolve the emotion, and what our experience of the emotion says about who we are (Fivush, 1993). From a developmental perspective, parent–child past event conversations also provide an opportunity for parents to ‘scaffold’ their children’s understanding of how to interpret and cope with emotions (Fivush, 1993; Laible & Thompson, 2000), and for children to compare their representation of the event with another’s and hence understand their own experience as unique (Fivush & Nelson, 2006). In line with this theoretical argument, empirical links between past event narrative style and self-concept are cited as support for autobiographical memory theory. However, no research to date has specifically tested this assumption. It may be that discussion of emotion, irrespective of the temporal context, is linked to self-concept development. In order to examine this tenet, one must consider the relationship between self-concept and emotion talk in an alternative narrative context that is emotionally salient, developmentally appropriate and a common parent–child interaction, without being directed towards specific past events. The discussions regarding ongoing conflicts meet these criteria: parent–child conflicts are an inevitable component of childhood and can have
emotionally charged consequences when not adequately resolved (Klimes-Dougan & Kopp, 1999). Conflict resolution skills developed through parent–child interactions later generalise to conflicts with siblings and peers (Dunn & Herrera, 1997) and are associated with important socio-emotional and cognitive advances (Dunn, Brown, & Maguire, 1995; Laible & Thompson, 2002; Selman & Demorest, 1984).

The Present Study

The aim of the present study is to examine two tenets of the autobiographical memory approach to self-concept development. Firstly, we examine whether the relationship between past emotion talk and self-concept also extends to the content of children’s self views, specifically to their moral self and self-esteem, by the early school years. We predict that children involved in more emotional and evaluative past event conversations will have a more advanced view of their own morality. We also predict that children involved in more positive and supportive emotional past event conversations will have higher self-esteem. Conflict conversations pose an interesting contrast to past event conversations as a forum for parents to discuss ideal and actual behaviour, so it is possible that parent–child emotion talk regarding conflicts will also be linked to children’s moral self and self-esteem.

The second aim of this study is to test the temporal prediction of autobiographical memory theory by examining associations between narrative content and self-concept across two types of parent–child conversations: (1) conversations about specific negative and positive past events; and (2) conversations regarding ongoing conflicts. In accordance with autobiographical memory theory, we expect that emotional talk in the past event context will better predict children’s self-concept scores than will discussion of emotion in the conflict context, which by definition taps into ongoing, unresolved conflicts. We include conflict conversations only as a test of autobiographical memory theory; thus, the narrative variable of interest is emotional and evaluative talk. Clearly, however, there are many aspects of a conflict discussion, other than emotion talk, that could be associated with self-concept development. For example, the degree to which parents are able to resolve conflicts with their children may impact children’s socio-emotional development (Dunn & Brown, 1994). However, consideration of these factors is beyond the scope of this research.

Method

Participants

The participants were 51 New Zealand children (28 males and 23 females) and their primary caregivers (50 mothers and one father) recruited through local primary schools. Information letters were sent home with five- and six-year-old children and interested parents replied with contact details. The participating children were aged between 5;3 and 6;11 (M = 6;2, SD = 5.45 months). Nineteen of the participants were firstborn children. English was the primary language spoken in all homes. With respect to ethnic origin, 44 of the children were of European descent, 3 of Maori descent, 3 of Pacific Island descent and 1 of Asian descent. Based on paternal occupation, families were, on average, of middle socioeconomic status (Elley & Irving, 1976). On average, parents had 14 years of education, ranging from 3 years of secondary to 5 years of tertiary education.
Procedure

The parents and children attended a single session at the university lasting approximately 1.5 hours. The parents provided written informed consent and children’s assent was obtained prior to beginning the session.

The session began with a parent–child conversation: either past event or conflict discussion. The order of discussion, past event or conflict, was counterbalanced across families. All conversations were audiotaped and videotaped. Parents then left the room to complete a family information form. During this time, the experimenter completed a language measure with the children, followed by three self measures. The order of the self measures was counterbalanced. The children had a short break after each self measure (e.g., doing a puzzle, game or drawing). Once both parents and children had completed their separate tasks, approximately one hour later, parents returned to the room and were left alone with their children for five minutes. The session ended with the remaining parent–child conversation. The same female experimenter worked with all participants. All participating children were given a small gift (e.g., a frisbee and a ruler) to thank them for taking part. Parents’ petrol costs were reimbursed.

Measures

Language. The children’s receptive and expressive language was measured using the Test for Early Language Development, Third Edition (TELD-3; Hresko & Hammill, 1999). The TELD-3 was designed as a measure of language comprehension and expression for individuals aged between two and eight years. This measure is individually administered, has no time limits and demonstrates good psychometric properties. Standard scores, averaged across expressive and receptive subscales, were used in all analyses.

Self-concept

Moral Self. The moral self scale developed by Kochanska, Murray, & Coy (1997) was used to assess children’s views of their own morality. This scale contains 37 items designed to assess nine moral self dimensions: confession, apology, reparation, sensitivity to flaws, internalisation of rules, empathy, concern over others’ wrongdoing, affective discomfort and concern over parents’ forgiveness. The moral self scale demonstrates excellent internal consistency and is correlated with other measures of conscience development (Kochanska et al., 1997). In our sample, the Cronbach’s alpha was .88 and the Guttman split-half coefficient was .83.

In accordance with Kochanska et al. (1997), the moral self scale was presented to children on video as a ‘game’, with two puppets endorsing the opposite poles of each item and asking children to choose which option is most like them. Children’s responses to each item were scored as 0 (endorsement of the low response), 1 (children who continued to respond ‘don’t know’ or endorse both options after further prompting), or 2 (endorsement of the high response). The 37 items were summed to give a total moral self score.

Self-esteem. The children’s self-esteem was assessed using the global self-esteem subscale from Harter’s (1982) perceived competence scale for children. This scale was
designed to assess children’s feelings of self-worth in general, rather than their perceived competence in specific domains. It should be noted that a perception of global self-worth in this age group has been questioned. Harter (1999) has argued that during early childhood, children may have a sense of global self-worth that is expressed behaviourally, but that it is not until middle to late childhood (i.e., from about the age of eight onwards) that they have sufficient representational skills (i.e., to form higher-order trait generalisations and to compare their real and ideal self-concepts) to be able to express their experience of global self-worth verbally. Despite this, Cassidy (1988) found that children as young as five and six years old were able to verbally express self-worth using Harter’s (1982) global self-esteem subscale of the perceived competence scale for children.

A gender-specific picture of two children (one happy, one sad) was shown to children alongside each item. For each item, the children were asked to select which of two opposing poles they were most like (e.g., ‘some kids are often unhappy with themselves’ vs. ‘other kids are pretty pleased with themselves’). The children were then asked to qualify their first response (e.g., ‘are you really unhappy or sort of unhappy’ or ‘are you really pleased or pretty much pleased’). Based on children’s responses, each item was given a score of 1 (low self-esteem), 2 (moderately low self-esteem), 3 (moderately high self-esteem) or 4 (high self-esteem). The children’s total global self-esteem score was the total of their responses to each of the items, with a maximum score of 28. We obtained a Cronbach’s alpha of .67, which approaches Nunnally’s (1978) recommended level of .70. Our alpha was only slightly lower than Cassidy’s (1988) alpha of .74 on the global self-esteem subscale with a sample of five- to six-year-olds and Harter’s (1982) alpha of .73 with a sample of third through sixth graders (approximately 8–12 years old). Guttman’s split-half coefficient was .80.

Past Event Conversations. In order to elicit emotional and evaluative discussion, Fivush’s (1991) emotion event paradigm was adopted. The parents and children were given four cards, each with a different emotion printed on it, and were asked to ‘discuss a specific time in the past year when (child’s name) has felt (angry, sad, scared, happy)’. Past research suggests that parents and children may disagree on how a child feels regarding an event (particularly for scared and angry feelings; Levine, Stein, & Liwag, 1999); therefore dyads were asked to select past events together. The cards were presented in the order to be discussed and the order of negative emotions was counterbalanced. For ethical reasons, dyads were always asked to discuss the happy event last to ensure that conversations ended on a positive note. Dyads were instructed to discuss the events as they usually would for as long as they wished. On average, past event conversations were 45.39 turns in length (SE = 3.27).

Conflict Conversations. We presented parents and children with a list of 13 common parent–child interaction issues selected from the Issues Checklist (Robin & Foster, 1989; see Appendix). This checklist was originally designed to be used with adolescents, but the same issues are the source of parent–child conflict with younger children as well (e.g., bedtimes and fighting with siblings). Dyads were asked to choose two issues that were an ongoing problem in their household over the last two weeks. If none of the issues listed had arisen, they were asked to discuss another ongoing issue of their choice. Parents and children were asked to discuss the two issues and come up with a
practical solution. They were asked to talk about the issues as they would usually for as long as they wished. On average, conflict conversations were 44.10 turns in length (SE = 3.39).

Conversational Coding

All past event and conflict conversations were transcribed from audiotapes verbatim. Gender and other identifying information (such as the name of the child or siblings) were removed. Transcripts were coded in two passes. Firstly, we isolated emotional and evaluative terms; secondly, we coded the way the dyads discussed past emotions and ongoing conflicts. Conversational codes were identical across the two types of conversations: past event and conflict. We did not code talk during the process of event/conflict selection.

Identification of Emotional and Evaluative Terms. We first identified all emotional and evaluative terms in an adaptation of Fivush’s (1991) scheme. Positive talk included all parent and child references to children’s positive emotions and positive evaluations of the child. Positive evaluations of the event or issue (‘The party was fun’) were included in this category. Negative talk included all parent and child references to children’s negative emotions, negative evaluations of the child, and negative evaluations of the event or issue (‘It’s not good when you fight with your brother’). References to others’ emotions and evaluations of others occurred rarely and were excluded from analyses.

Quality of Discussion. In a second coding pass, we focused on the way in which dyads discussed past emotional events and ongoing conflicts. We identified propositions in each conversation in which a past emotion or conflict was mentioned without any ensuing discussion of causes or consequences (attributions). An example of a simple attribution in the past event conversations was ‘Were you scared?’ and in the conflict discussion was ‘You fight with your brother in the morning’. In contrast, in other propositions, the parent or child explained the past emotion or conflict in terms of causes or consequences (explanations). An example of an explanation in the past event context was ‘Cause you got hurt and that made you feel real sad’. An example of an explanation in the conflict context was ‘Why do you think mum doesn’t like fighting?’ The child replied, ‘Because it messes up the room’ to which the mother returned, ‘No, it hurts people’. Finally, we also coded parents’ and children’s confirmations during discussion of past events or ongoing conflicts. An example of a parent’s confirmation in the past event context occurred when a mother asked ‘What made you happy on your birthday?’ and the child replied ‘Having so much fun’ and the mother confirmed ‘Having so much fun’. In the conflict context, a mother asked ‘How would you solve the problem of fighting with your brother?’ The child answered ‘Get you or dad’ and the parent confirmed ‘Yeah’.

Two coders independently coded 25 percent of the transcripts. Reliability estimates (kappa) were calculated separately for parent and child for each of the four past event conversations and the two conflicts. The average kappas for parents and children across all codes ranged from .80–.94 for the past event conversations and from .73–.93 for the conflict conversations. One of the coders coded the remaining transcripts.
Results

Data Reduction

One child did not complete the self-esteem measure. Another dyad’s conflict conversation was missing due to a technical failure. We inserted group means for these missing variables for analyses (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2000).

Researchers have argued that totals, rather than proportions, should be used when dyads are specifically asked to discuss emotional events (e.g., Fivush, Berlin, Sales, Mennuti-Washburn, & Cassidy, 2003). In this context, conversation length is essentially a measure of how long dyads spend discussing emotion and may itself be a meaningful variable. We follow in this tradition in our use of frequencies of different types of emotional talk in the past event and conflict discussions. We analysed positive past events separately from negative past events because parent–child conversations differ as a function of a past event’s emotional valence (Ackil, Van Abbema, & Bauer, 2003; Sales, Fivush, & Peterson, 2003). Parents’ and children’s use of the five narrative categories was correlated across conversations regarding sad, angry and fearful events (67 percent of parents’ codes and 42 percent of children’s codes), so we created averages for each code across the three negative past events, as well as across the two conflicts. All dyads discussed angry and happy events, but two dyads failed to discuss a sad event and one dyad failed to discuss a fearful event. For these three dyads, we averaged their talk across the two existing conversations regarding negative emotions.

Most of the narrative variables in all the three types of conversations (negative past event, positive past event and conflict) were positively skewed and were transformed using logarithmic transformations. Untransformed data were used for analyses testing differences across contexts, which are typically seen as more robust to skewness, and transformed data were used for correlational analyses (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2000). Figures 1 and 2 contain descriptive statistics for parents’ and children’s conversational variables in the three conversation types.

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics were calculated for self measures. The distribution of moral self ($M = 54, SD = 12.7, \text{ range} \ 16–72$) and self-esteem ($M = 20.98, SD = 3.48, \text{ range} \ 14–28$) scores was comparable to past research with children of similar ages (Cassidy, 1988; Kochanska et al., 1997).

We first wished to verify that the conflict conversations were qualitatively different from the past event conversations in their focus on ongoing events. We counted the number of references to specific past events during conflict conversations by noting the number of times parents and children used the past tense to describe a conflict. Parents and children rarely mentioned specific past events when discussing conflicts (a total of 19 instances across 2200 conversational turns). Therefore, conflict conversations were distinct from the past event conversations in their focus on ongoing issues, which were almost entirely discussed in the present tense (e.g., ‘We’re going to talk about fighting with your brothers’).

Next, we wished to determine if the parents and children talked about emotions and evaluations differently as a function of conversation type. We conducted one-way repeated-measures ANOVAs with conversation type as the within-subjects factor on
parents’ and children’s use of the five types of utterances. All ANOVAs for parental variables were significant at \(p < .001\). We also obtained significant differences as a function of conversation type for children’s positive and negative talk, explanations and confirmations (all \(ps < .01\)), but children’s use of attributions was not significantly different across the three types of conversations (\(p > .06\)). We followed up the significant ANOVAs with a series of paired \(t\)-tests to examine specific differences in parents’ and children’s use of the different narrative variables across the three types of conversations. Table 1 contains the results of these analyses, and Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the mean differences as a function of conversation type for parents and children, respectively. Due to the high number of comparisons, we only discuss differences that were significant at \(p < .01\).

Compared with conversations regarding negative past events, conversations regarding positive past events included fewer parental explanations and less negative talk, but a greater amount of parents’ and children’s positive talk and parental attributions. Conversations regarding positive and negative past events were similar in terms of children’s attributions and parents’ and children’s confirmations. Compared with conversations regarding positive past events, conflict conversations included less parent and child positive talk and fewer explanations, but a greater amount of negative talk and confirmations. Parents were similar in their use of attributions during conversations regarding positive past events and conflicts. Compared with conversations regarding negative past events, conflict conversations included fewer parent and child explanations and less negative talk, but a greater number of parent and child confirmations, parent attributions, and a greater amount of parents’ positive talk.

Next, we calculated Pearson correlation coefficients between children’s age and the narrative and self variables. Older children made more emotion attributions in the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Utterance Type</th>
<th>Negative vs. Positive</th>
<th>Positive vs. Conflict</th>
<th>Negative vs. Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive talk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>7.74**</td>
<td>3.93**</td>
<td>5.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>4.37**</td>
<td>3.07**</td>
<td>2.06*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative talk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>12.65**</td>
<td>6.85**</td>
<td>3.96**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>6.36**</td>
<td>4.00**</td>
<td>2.40*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>2.68*</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>3.01**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>2.43*</td>
<td>2.68*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>6.47**</td>
<td>5.63**</td>
<td>9.99**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>2.01*</td>
<td>4.49**</td>
<td>8.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>4.84**</td>
<td>5.61**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>4.60**</td>
<td>4.75**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(* p < .05, \,** p < .01.*
negative past event conversations, $r = .32, p < .05$. Age was not significantly correlated with children’s moral self or self-esteem scores, or with any variables in the positive past event or conflict conversations. We did not consider age in further analyses.

Reese (2002a) identified children’s language skill as a predictor of individual differences in past event narrative style. The children’s language scores were not significantly correlated with self-esteem scores, but the children’s moral self scores were significantly correlated with their language, $r = .41, p < .01$. The children’s language

---

**Figure 1.** Parents’ Emotion Talk in Three Conversational Contexts.

**Figure 2.** Children’s Emotion Talk in Three Conversational Contexts.
also correlated positively with parents’ and children’s negative talk and attributions in
the conversations about negative past events (significant rs ranged from .29 to .31,
ps < .05) and with the parents’ negative talk in the conflict conversations (r = .30,
p < .05). The children’s language scores were not significantly correlated with either
parents’ or children’s narrative variables during conversations about positive past
events. Boys and girls did not differ significantly in their language scores.

We then conducted one-way ANOVAs to examine possible gender differences in
the self and narrative variables. Although there were no significant differences in the
self measures for boys and girls, there was a tendency for girls to score higher on
the moral self measure than boys (Ms = 57.39 vs. 51.21; F(1, 49) = 3.13, p = .08).
The boys made more confirmations than did girls in conversations regarding negative
past events, F(1, 47) = 6.32, p < .05, and positive past events, F(1, 50) = 4.61,
p < .05, but for all other narrative variables, there were no differences between boys
and girls, including all of the conflict conversation variables (see Bird & Reese,
2006, for an examination of gender differences by type of negative emotion). Finally,
children with higher self-esteem scored higher on the moral self measure, r = .36,
p < .01.

Main Analyses

Emotional Conversations and Self-concept Content. We then conducted analyses to
examine differential links with self-concept for the different types of conversations.
Table 2 contains correlations between the parent–child conversational variables and
the two self-concept measures. The strongest patterns emerged between parent–
child discussions of past events and children’s self-concept. During conversations
regarding negative past events, higher moral self scores were associated with
parents’ use of positive talk and children’s use of explanations. Parents who pro-
duced more positive talk, negative talk and explanations in this context also had
children with higher self-esteem scores. Parents who produced more positive talk,
explanations and confirmations in the context of positive past events also had chil-
dren with higher self-esteem scores. In contrast, not a single parent variable in the
conflict conversation was significantly correlated with children’s moral self, and only
parents’ use of positive talk was positively correlated with children’s self-esteem
scores.

Differential Prediction of Self-concept. Next, we conducted a series of hierarchical
regression analyses to compare fully the differential prediction of the three different
conversation types for children’s moral self and self-esteem. Our question here, in line
with autobiographical memory theory, was whether the same utterance type would be
uniquely predictive of children’s self-concept when it occurred during a past event
conversation as opposed to a conversation regarding an ongoing conflict. When pre-
dicting moral self, we entered children’s language and gender in a first step as control
variables because of their correlations with moral self. When predicting self-esteem,
we entered children’s language in a first step as a control variable because of its
correlation with the narrative variables. In a second step in each regression, we entered
any parent and child uses of the relevant utterance that were significantly or marginally
correlated with the relevant self-concept measure. We did not conduct regression
analyses on attributions because there were no significant zero-order correlations
between this variable and children’s self-concept; nor did we test the role of
confirmations in children’s moral self, again due to the absence of zero-order correlations between this variable and moral self. These criteria resulted in three regression analyses predicting moral self (for positive talk, negative talk and explanations) and four regression analyses predicting self-esteem (for positive talk, negative talk, explanations and confirmations).

In predicting children’s moral self, each of the three regression models was significant overall. However, most of the variance in moral self was accounted for by the children’s language and gender. Parents’ use of positive talk during negative past events, parents’ use of negative talk during positive past events and children’s explanations during negative past events were only marginally predictive of children’s moral self once gender and language were taken into account. The results of these regression analyses are contained in Table 3.

In a second set of hierarchical regressions, we predicted children’s self-esteem from positive talk, negative talk, explanations and confirmations across the different conversations (see Table 4). Although parents’ use of positive talk in each conversation type was predictive of children’s self-esteem if entered separately, when parents’ use of positive talk in all three conversation types were entered in a single step, none was uniquely predictive of children’s self-esteem. Parents’ negative talk during negative past events was marginally predictive of children’s self-esteem after language was taken into account. Parents’ explanations and confirmations during conversations regarding positive past events, however, uniquely predicted children’s self-esteem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Utterance Type</th>
<th>Moral Self</th>
<th>Self-esteem</th>
<th>Moral Self</th>
<th>Self-esteem</th>
<th>Moral Self</th>
<th>Self-esteem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive talk</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.34*</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.25†</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative talk</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>.25†</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.26†</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>.25†</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attributions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explanations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.30*</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>.32*</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confirmations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.25†</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05, ** p < .01, † p < .10.
We demonstrated that parent–child discussions regarding past negative and positive events and ongoing conflicts are all emotionally laden conversations but in different ways. Conversations about positive past events contained the highest amount of positive emotional and evaluative talk regarding the child, but conflict conversations, somewhat surprisingly, also contained moderate amounts of positive talk and a high number of confirmations. Often, these mentions of positive talk in the midst of a conflict discussion consisted of a parent reassuring the child that the issue was not major, and that in general, the child was behaving well. For instance, one parent ended a discussion regarding the child’s lying by saying, ‘but you’re getting better at [sic: it], you’re, you don’t lie very much now, do you?’ Yet conflict conversations were primarily regarding negative emotions and evaluations, although they were not as negative as the negative past event discussion. Perhaps, most importantly, the negative talk in conversations regarding ongoing conflicts was not accompanied by the high amounts of

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( B )</td>
<td>( SE )</td>
<td>( \beta )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Positive talk model**

**Step 1:**
- Language: .38 .12 .39*
- Gender: 6.55 3.12 .26*

**Step 2:**
- Parents’ positive talk: negative past event: 6.19 3.51 .23†
- Children’s positive talk: positive past event: 1.72 3.24 .07

\( R^2 = .31** \)

**Negative talk model**

**Step 1:**
- Language: .35 .13 .36*
- Gender: 7.82 3.16 .31*

**Step 2:**
- Parents’ negative talk: negative past event: 2.98 4.21 .10
- Children’s negative talk: negative past event: 1.93 4.09 .07
- Parents’ negative talk: positive past event: 12.05 7.19 .22†

\( R^2 = .32** \)

**Explanations model**

**Step 1:**
- Language: .36 .13 .37**
- Gender: 6.77 3.12 .27*

**Step 2:**
- Children’s explanations: negative past event: 5.48 3.32 .21†

\( R^2 = .29** \)

**Note:** Final \( \beta \) weights are reported throughout.
* \( p < .05 \), ** \( p < .01 \), † \( p < .10 \).

**Discussion**

We demonstrated that parent–child discussions regarding past negative and positive events and ongoing conflicts are all emotionally laden conversations but in different ways. Conversations about positive past events contained the highest amount of positive emotional and evaluative talk regarding the child, but conflict conversations, somewhat surprisingly, also contained moderate amounts of positive talk and a high number of confirmations. Often, these mentions of positive talk in the midst of a conflict discussion consisted of a parent reassuring the child that the issue was not major, and that in general, the child was behaving well. For instance, one parent ended a discussion regarding the child’s lying by saying, ‘but you’re getting better at [sic: it], you’re, you don’t lie very much now, do you?’ Yet conflict conversations were primarily regarding negative emotions and evaluations, although they were not as negative as the negative past event discussion. Perhaps, most importantly, the negative talk in conversations regarding ongoing conflicts was not accompanied by the high amounts of
explanatory talk that occurred in the context of discussions about negative past events. Thus, conflict conversations fell in between the two types of past event conversations in terms of overall emotionality, but emotions, attributions and behaviours were not often explained during these discussions.

This study contains the first empirical demonstration of a link between talk regarding past events and the content of children’s self-concept, specifically children’s self-esteem, with conversations regarding negative and positive about past events being important in different ways. The conversations about negative past events, in particular parents’ references to the child’s negative emotions and to negative evaluations of the child and event, were uniquely related to children’s self-esteem. This finding at first seems counter-intuitive but must be interpreted in light of the high number of explanations of negative emotions that occurred in this context. Bird & Reese (2006)

Table 4. Predicting Children’s Self-esteem from Parent–Child Conversations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive talk model</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ positive talk: negative past event</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ positive talk: positive past event</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ positive talk: conflict</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$R^2 = .18^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negative talk model</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ negative talk: negative past event</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>.27***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$R^2 = .08$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explanation model</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ explanations: negative past event</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.25***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ explanations: positive past event</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$R^2 = .18^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confirmation model</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ confirmations: positive past event</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.32*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s confirmations: positive past event</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$R^2 = .17^*$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Final β weights are reported throughout.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .10$. 

© Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2007
Social Development, 16, 3, 2007
demonstrated that explaining negative emotions, as opposed to simply attributing them without explanation, in the context of a past event conversation is positively related to the consistency of children’s self-concept. Perhaps the open discussion of children’s negative emotions helps children develop a realistic view of their strengths and weaknesses, and hence, a more positive self view. Alternatively, it is possible that parents feel more comfortable talking regarding past negative emotions with children who have a more positive view of themselves.

The strongest finding in the study was a link between conversations regarding positive past events and children’s self-esteem. Specifically, parents’ explanations and confirmations during conversations regarding positive past events were uniquely linked to children’s self-esteem. This finding is in line with Christensen et al. (2003) who found that adults with higher self-esteem recalled the positive aspects of past events more strongly. From an autobiographical memory perspective, it is possible that a child who is learning to evaluate past experiences positively is also learning to evaluate his/her self more positively. Although we cannot conclude a causal role of past event talk from this study, a possible mechanism for the unique importance of past event talk is that children are encouraged to reflect on positive emotions when they are no longer occurring, and as such may be better able to incorporate these specific positive feelings into a more global sense of self-worth. Lagattuta & Wellman (2002) noted in a naturalistic study that parents discussed past negative events more often than they discussed past positive events with their children. As in the present study, compared with conversations regarding negative past events, conversations regarding positive past events also contain fewer explanations of emotions and events (Ackil et al., 2003; Sales et al., 2003). Although infrequent, an explanation of a positive emotion may help to make the emotion more salient and self-relevant for children. Moreover, parents who confirm children’s emotions in this context are validating the child’s subjective experience, and in this way, may be contributing to a child’s sense of overall self-worth.

Parent–child emotion talk was also linked to children’s moral self, particularly in the conversations regarding negative past events, but this context did not emerge as uniquely predictive of children’s moral self once language and gender were taken into account.

Our results also demonstrate ways that parent–child emotion talk in general is linked to children’s self-concept. Note that parents’ references to children’s positive emotions and evaluations were linked to children’s self-esteem regardless of conversation type, even in the conversations regarding ongoing conflicts. Parents’ overall emphasis on positive aspects of experiences may create a climate in which children experience an overall sense of self-worth.

Although the associations found in the current study between past event narrative style and self-concept content make conceptual sense, they should be interpreted with caution. A third unmeasured variable may in fact underlie the associations observed between narrative and self-concept content. Perhaps parents’ level of education is associated both with their emotion talk during past events and with children’s self-esteem. Otherwise, perhaps the content of parent–child past event talk indexes some more fundamental aspect of the parent–child relationship that is more directly linked to self-esteem. For example, attachment security has been associated both with children’s self-esteem (Cassidy, 1988) and with the emotional and evaluative content of past event conversations (Newcombe & Reese, 2004). Finally, the children in our sample were developing typically. Parent–child conversations regarding emotions, and
resulting links with self-concept, may be quite different for children from atypical samples, such as children with behaviour problems.

Another interesting direction for future research would be to examine past event conversations more specifically linked in theme to the dimension of self-concept being measured. For example, children may internalise evaluative information from a discussion regarding a past visit to a friend’s house into their self-view of peer acceptance. Although Buckner and Fivush (1998) failed to find relationships between children’s self-dimensions and related narratives, they examined the structure of both constructs. Further research is needed examining relations between the content of both self-concept dimensions and related narratives. Finally, given the cautions regarding the ability of young children to verbalise global self-worth (Harter, 1999), the current findings should be replicated with children older than eight years before a link between past event narrative style and self-esteem can be concluded with certainty. Alternatively, global self-worth could be assessed behaviourally in young children (e.g., using Harter’s (1990) Behaviorally Presented Self-esteem Scale for Young Children).

We are not asserting that the paucity of correlations between narrative variables in the conflict discussions and children’s moral self scores implies that conflict discussions are an unimportant parent–child interaction. It may be that the types of strategies adopted to resolve conflict (e.g., compromise, clarification, threat or reasoning; Reese-Weber 2000) better predict children’s morality. For example, Dunn and Herrera (1997) found links between conflict resolution methods and moral understanding. However, no research has examined links between conflict resolutions and children’s views of their own morality. Although this was beyond the scope of the current study, it would be an interesting next step in the conscience development literature.

In conclusion, the current findings support and extend the autobiographical memory approach to self-concept development. The findings of the present study suggest that a child who is learning to evaluate events, particularly past events, in a positive way, is also learning to evaluate his/her self positively. The current findings also support the previously untested assumption from autobiographical memory theory that past event conversations may play a unique role in the development of self-understanding.

References


Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Dunedin Primary Schools and all the families who participated in this research. Thanks also to Sarah Valentine for coding.

Notes

1. Parents also completed two child temperament questionnaires. We discuss the relationship between temperament and past event narrative content in Bird et al. (2006).
2. The coherence of children’s self views was also measured using Eder’s (1990) children’s self view questionnaire. We discuss the relationships with past event narratives in Bird and Reese (2006).
3. We designed this brief separation in accord with Cassidy’s (1988) attachment security measure for older children.
4. We also coded for mothers’ and children’s use of compulsion terms (e.g., should, supposed, allowed, let, must, had to and could). The children’s use of compulsion terms during negative past events and conflict discussions was correlated with their moral self scores, but these correlations disappeared once the children’s language and gender were taken into account.
5. The only narrative variables that were not positively skewed were parents’ attributions, explanations, and confirmations in the negative past event conversations, and mothers’ positive emotions in the positive past event conversation.

Appendix

Issues Checklist
Time for going to bed
Getting up in the morning on time
Taking care of books, toys, etc.
Table manners
Cleaning up bedroom
Pocket money
Messing up the house
Lying
Watching TV
Getting into trouble at school
Making too much noise
Talking back to parents
Fighting with brothers or sisters