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Echoing Our Parents: Parental Influences on Children's Narration

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INTRODUCTION

There is no such thing as a born storyteller. Rather, narrative skills are shaped by many influences, and one of the most important is the sort of habitual verbal interaction that takes place between parents and children. From the time they are born, children are immersed in a world of narration (Miller, 1994). Parents frequently tell narratives to each other about themselves and about their children. In fact, probably everyone in the child's environment exchanges stories every day about themselves and other people, both present and absent. And as other authors in this book make clear, narratives are characteristic of every stage of a person's life, from early childhood to old age. But parents in particular have an important influence on children's narrative skills because of how much time they spend with their children as well as how strongly attached they are to each other.

One of the most notable observations of those who study narratives is the enormous variation that exists in narrative structure. For example, large differences have been documented in the sorts of stories that are told by people who belong to different cultures, including those of different cultural heritages who reside in the same country (McCabe, 1996). Large differences have also been documented for ethnically similar but economically disparate groups (Peterson, 1994). Of most interest to us in this chapter is the large

individual variation that can be found even within ethnically, culturally, and economically similar groups.

Such large individual variation is not simply of academic interest; evidence is accumulating that narrative skill is one of the most important predictors of children's school success and literacy acquisition (Paul & Smith, 1993). Those who competently construct narratives that are consistent with the expectations of teachers are less likely to be defined as learning disabled (Roth, 1986) and more likely to make the transition to literacy readily (Snow, 1983). In fact, in one large-scale longitudinal study, kindergarten narrative production significantly predicted fourth- and seventh-grade reading comprehension (Tabors, Snow, & Dickinson, 2001).

For more than two decades, we have been studying the development of narrative skills in children, and for much of this time we have attempted to understand and explain individual variation in narrative skill. In this chapter, we first provide examples of the enormous variability that can exist in the narrative skills of preschoolers and then summarize a research program that has attempted to explain such variation. We have focused on the role of parents in fostering their children's narrative skills, and to do this, we studied a group of children (and their parents) longitudinally when children were between 2 and 6 years of age. Relationships between the ways parents engaged their children in narrative conversations and their children's developing competence in a number of narrative skills were explored, including the overall complexity of children's narratives and the development of a number of narrative components, such as contextual orientation, causality, and evaluation. Then we turn to theoretical explanations of why parent-child conversations can play such an important role in fostering the development of child narrative skill, based on Vygotskian theoretical constructs such as scaffolding. Finally, we present an intervention study that explicitly tested the importance of Vygotskian scaffolding in altering children's narrative skills.

Variability in Child Narrative Skill

To provide a sense of how substantial such individual variation can be, we present one of the most sophisticated narratives produced by each of three children at age 3½ years. These children were part of a sample of 10 children whose narrative development was followed longitudinally from age 2 (beginning at 25–27 months of age) until age 6. All of the children were White middle-class children with well-educated parents, living in an ethnically homogeneous community in Canada.

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Example 1: Cathy

- Researcher:** Have you ever gotten stung by a bee?
Cathy: But Mark [her brother] got a big sting when he was just first born.
R: Well, tell me about it. What happened?
C: I, I was walking with him and, and I just and he falled and he didn't know that he falled right on a bee. And he, and his knee was on a bee and stung, he got stung on a bee.
R: He got stung on a bee?
C: Uh-huh. And then I was walking another baby, Randy, and you know what?
R: What?
C: I heard him and me and Randy came running. And you know what?
R: What?
C: Paul, Paul Smith came too.
R: Paul Smith came too.
C: I tried to pick him up but, but he didn't want me to but I had to call my Mommy.
R: You had to call your Mommy, uh-huh?
C: My Daddy and everybody who I knowed who was a grown-up. And then everybody who I knowed and who was a grown-up came. They all came, uh-huh.
R: From my house. And I was walking in the park. They came over after Mark and they wanted, they wanted to see what happened to Mark.
R: They wanted to see what happened to Mark? Uh-huh?
C: And then I, I told them and I looked down at his knee and there it was, stung.
R: And there it was, stung. Looked at his knee and there it was stung, uh-huh?
C: And I tried to pick him up and he wanted me to pick him up right at that minute.

Example 2: Helen

- Researcher:** After that happened I had to go to the hospital. Have you ever been hurt like that?
Helen: We didn't go to the hospital. Cause cause whenever Ward [her brother] gets hurt he cries and cries and one bad one was on on and and and and there was a bee after him and he can't walk very good and he had a fever.
R: There was a bee after him and he can't walk very well and he had a fever?

- H:** Yeah. At at Nana's country place. And we were going in the floor like that and that bee came up and running after Ward.
R: A bee came along and was running after Ward?
H: Yeah. We going home and then the bee came along. I think that bee was terrible. I think that bee is a bite bee.

Example 3: Terry

- Researcher:** Have you ever caught a fish?
Terry: Yes.
R: Oh, you did?
T: It was a great big one, and I, and I lifted 'em off and I lifted 'em up in the boat.
R: And you lifted them off and you lifted them up in the boat?
T: Yes!
R: And you lifted them up in the boat. Uh huh. And?
T: I lift them at the boat.
R: You lift them in the boat?
T: Yes!
R: Uh huh?
T: Lift them at the boat.
R: Yeah?
T: I lift them in the boat.
R: Yeah?
T: And he's a great big one.
R: Uh huh?
T: And he's a yuck one.
R: He's a yuck one?
T: Yes and I sawed him.
R: Uh huh?
T: Purple.

The stories from these three children differ dramatically. Cathy's narrative is well-structured according to the widely recognized tenets of good structure proposed by Labov and Waletzky (1967/1997). She provides orientation to the context of her narrative, that is, the who, where, and when of the story. She develops the action of the story, that is, the succession of events that communicate what happened. She builds her story around an emotional or evaluative high point or crisis event, that is, her brother's bee sting, and she resolves the crisis event before ending the narrative. She also provides considerable emotional evaluation throughout the narrative so that her attitude about the events, her perspective and feelings, are evident to the listener.

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This organization of a narrative, based on the prototype described by Labov and Waletzky (1967/1997) was termed a "classic" narrative by Peterson and McCabe (1983), who traced the development of this structural pattern in a large group of 3½–9½-year-old children. They also described several developmental precursors of this sophisticated pattern, such as an "end-at-the-high-point" narrative which has all of the other components of a classic narrative except that the narrator cuts the story off at the high-point or crisis event and omits a resolution. "Chronological" narratives are lists of successive events, rather like a laundry list of things that happened, with no overall coherent organization. These are often produced when children list the various things they did at a party or on a trip. "Leapfrog" narratives leap around from event to event in a confusing fashion, and "impooverished" narratives have too few events to be described structurally. These are minimal narratives that provide little information.

In comparison to the "classic" narrative provided by Cathy, Helen's narrative about a virtually identical event is confusing. Although Helen orients the listener to important contextual information (where events occurred), she doesn't develop the action or build her story around an evaluative high point or crisis event. In fact, she never explicitly states the crisis event, that is, whether or not her brother actually got stung by the bee or merely chased. Her narrative is an example of a "leapfrog" narrative.

Terry's narrative is quite different again; it is simply "impooverished." During this narrative (one of the longest he produced), he provides no contextual information and describes only one actual event or action which he repeats five times, namely lifting a fish into the boat. Although he provides a bit of description of the fish and an evaluation of it, there is little else in this minimal narrative. Thus, these three narratives, one showing idealized "classic" form, one a "leapfrog" narrative and one a "one-event impooverished" narrative, from children who have similar cultural and economic backgrounds and who are the same age, illustrate the sorts of differences in narrative skill that piqued our interest.

How can one account for such divergent narrative skills? In our research we have been focusing on parent-child interactions that revolve around narrative talk. Most parents reminisce with their children about events that have occurred in the children's lives—what they did that morning, their visit to a friend's the previous day, their trip to their grandparents' last week, and so on. Considerable variation has been documented in how parents engage in narrative talk with their children, not only cross-culturally (McCabe, 1996; Minami & McCabe, 1995), but also within culturally and economically homogeneous samples.

For example, Fivush and Fromhoff (1988) described differences in how White middle-class mothers structure conversations about past events with their preschool-aged children that they termed *elaborative* versus *repetitive*. Elaborative mothers talk more about past events, and provide considerable elaborative detail as well as prompt their children for the provision of such detail. In contrast, repetitive mothers talk less, ask fewer questions, and are more likely to simply repeat prior questions if they did not get an answer. McCabe and Peterson (1991) also found substantial differences in parental styles of conducting conversations about past events. One style (similar to the elaborative style of Fivush and Fromhoff) was termed a *topic-extending* style. These parents extended their children's talk about each past event by means of additional questions and comments, and they attempted to elicit from their children a lot of information about each event being recalled. *Topic-switching* parents, in contrast, asked a few, often formulaic, questions about each past event and then abruptly changed the topic to another event. Thus, their children were given little opportunity to construct an extensive narrative or to elaborate on what they did recall. In addition, McCabe and Peterson described a repetitive style that is similar to that described by Fivush and Fromhoff.

Given the substantial differences in parental styles of narrative elicitation, the next question is whether such differences are predictive of children's development of narrative competence. So we began a longitudinal project with parents and children. Ten middle-class children were recruited at 25–27 months of age and their parents (both mothers and fathers) were provided with a tape recorder at 1- or 2-month intervals for 18 months (until their child reached 3½ years) and asked to record conversations in which they talked to their children about past events. In order to have an independent measure of children's narrative skill, a researcher also regularly interviewed children in a standardized way. They were given art materials or other similar activities in order to minimize self-consciousness, and the researcher told a number of short narratives and then prompted the child to provide ones too (“Did anything like that ever happen to you?”). While the child was telling a narrative, the researcher only responded with simple encouragement like “uh huh,” or “really?” rather than asking specific questions that might affect what the child said next. Thus, the narratives children told were self-structured rather than structured by listener questions. These techniques have been found to be very successful at eliciting narratives from children (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). Children were interviewed monthly during the first 18 months of the study and every 6 months thereafter when they were 3½ to 6 years of age.

COMPLEXITY OF CHILDREN'S NARRATIVES

Although all parents agreed to participate, they differed substantially in how much data they provided. Table 2.1 presents the number of tapes provided by the parents, combining those from both mothers and fathers (taken from McCabe & Peterson, 1990). The parents who provided us with the most tapes were those of Cathy, one of whose narratives can be found in Example 1 above. The two families who provided us with the least included that of Terry (who produced Example 3 above). We had to help Terry's parents figure out times for taping, because they claimed that they seldom engaged in narrative conversations, and even so, we got few tapes. Another child from whose parents we got few tapes was Sally; her mother said that she almost never talked to Sally one-on-one, as we required. She even rejected our offers to babysit her other children so that she could talk with Sally by herself because she didn't engage in such conversations with Sally. We assume that both the willingness parents had of talking with their children one-on-one and their cooperation in providing tapes of those conversations reflect habitual parent-child interaction in the home.

The differing parental styles of talking with their children about past events were related to what children produced. First, we selected two time periods in which we had tapes from all of the parents, namely when their children were 27 months and 31 months of age. The type of narrative questions and comments that are most helpful for children is what has been termed *topic-extension* by McCabe and Peterson (1991) or *elaboration* by Fivush and Fromhoff (1988). The number of these utterances in the parental tapes from these two ages was tabulated and related to how long children's self-structured narratives were (i.e., elicited by a researcher) at the end of the parent-taping sessions, namely when the child was 3½ years old. There was a significant ($p < .05$) positive relationship between the number of propositions in the longest three narratives that 3½-year-old children told to the researcher and the number of topic-extending statements made by parents when the children had been 27 months ($r = .66$) and 31 months ($r = .53$), as well as the number of one form of topic-extending question asked by parents at 31 months ($r = .63$). In contrast, the number of parental questions introducing new topics at 27 months was inversely correlated with the length of their child's three longest narratives at 3½ years ($r = -.60$ —data from McCabe & Peterson, 1991). Thus, children told longer narratives to a researcher if their parents, many months earlier, had engaged in topic extension and minimized topic-switching. These results are similar

TABLE 2.1
Number of Tapes Provided by Parents When Children Were
2-3½ Years Old, and Frequency (and Percentage) of Each Narrative
Structural Pattern Produced by Children at Younger (Y = 3½-4½ Years)
and Older (O = 5-6 Years) Ages

Child	Parent Tapes	Structural Patterns of Child Narratives													
		Impoverished			Leapfrog			Chronology			End-at-bt-pt			Classic	
		#	M	%	M	%	M	%	M	%	M	%	M	%	Total Child Narr.
Cathy	Y	18	25	53	7	15	9	19	2	4	4	8	4	8	47
	O		14	34	5	12	11	27	1	2	10	24	4	8	41
	total		39	44	12	14	20	23	3	3	14	16	8	16	88
Carl	Y	11	28	80	3	9	0	0	0	0	4	11	3	5	35
	O		13	41	2	6	11	34	1	3	5	16	3	5	32
	total		41	61	5	7	11	16	1	1	9	13	6	10	67
Paul	Y	16	22	73	2	7	2	7	2	7	2	7	2	7	30
	O		13	38	1	3	8	24	5	15	7	21	3	9	34
	total		35	55	3	5	10	16	7	11	9	13	6	10	64
Leah	Y	8	28	70	2	5	6	15	1	2	3	7	3	7	40
	O		26	50	8	15	12	23	0	0	6	12	5	10	52
	total		54	59	10	11	20	22	1	1	9	10	8	12	92
Ned	Y	11	23	57	3	7	11	27	1	2	2	5	4	10	39
	O		15	38	1	3	18	46	1	3	4	10	3	7	40
	total		38	48	4	5	29	37	2	2	6	8	7	10	79
Helen	Y	11	29	74	5	13	5	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	39
	O		17	41	2	5	16	39	2	5	4	10	4	10	41
	total		46	58	7	9	21	26	2	2	4	5	4	10	80
Kelly	Y	10	20	80	2	8	2	8	0	0	1	4	2	5	40
	O		11	33	2	6	16	48	2	6	2	6	3	5	58
	total		31	53	4	7	18	31	2	3	3	5	5	10	98
Sally	Y	3	28	87	0	0	4	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	32
	O		17	65	2	8	6	23	0	0	1	4	2	6	33
	total		45	78	2	3	10	17	0	0	1	2	2	6	65
Gary	Y	8	34	85	3	8	3	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	40
	O		22	81	0	0	3	11	2	7	0	0	0	0	27
	total		56	84	3	4	6	9	2	3	0	0	0	0	67
Terry	Y	4	21	75	6	21	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	28
	O		15	88	1	6	1	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	17
	total		36	80	7	16	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	45

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to those of a longitudinal study by Fivush (1991). She found that the degree of topic elaboration by parents (measured by the number of propositions per turn at talk) when their children were 2½ years of age was highly correlated with how elaborative their own children were when they talked with a researcher a year later.

But more than narrative length and elaboration are important. Table 2.1 also shows the number of narratives of each structural pattern that children produced when they talked with a researcher at biannual intervals between 3½ and 6 years of age (data from McCabe & Peterson, 1990). There was a strong relationship between the number of tapes provided by parents when their children were between 2 and 3½ years of age, and the structure of their children's narratives over the successive 3 years. The more tapes parents provided, the higher the percentage of their children's narratives that were classically structured ($r = .84, p < .01$) and the lower the percentage of impoverished narratives ($r = -.79, p < .01$). In addition, the total number of topic-extending questions and statements made by parents in all of their tapes was positively related to the number of classic narratives their children produced ($r = .79, p < .01$). Thus, it seems that more parental input in terms of engaging the child in narrative conversations, and more utterances that extend or elaborate topics, are related to children developing more advanced narrative skill. In contrast, the differences between children in narrative competence were not related to their syntactic competence or verbal intelligence, as measured by their Mean Length of Utterance at 27 and 31 months of age and their scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) at ages 4 and 5 years ($p > .4$).

There is another striking pattern in Table 2.1. If one compares the narratives of each child at younger (Y) and older (O) ages, namely at 3½-4½ years versus 5-6 years, there is substantial developmental progression for most children. In particular, the proportion of primitive narratives that fit the impoverished pattern decreases, and the proportion of the most sophisticated pattern, the classic one, increases. Notably, only three children's narratives at 5-6 years are still mostly impoverished: Terry and Sally (whose parents provided few tapes), and Gary. Although Gary's parents provided more tapes, they were extremely short, seldom even 5 minutes in length. Gary and Terry showed no developmental improvement over this 3-year time span in narrative structure and still produced no classic narratives by the end of the study. Sally produced only one classic narrative. In contrast, fully 24% of Cathy's narratives conformed to the classic narrative pattern and only a third of her narratives were impoverished when she was 5-6 years of age.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NARRATIVE COMPONENTS

Narratives consist of a number of components, all of which must be knitted together into coherent wholes. We have explored the development of many of these narrative components, including the provision of contextual information, such as where and when events took place, the identification of causal relationships among events, and children's evaluation of narrative events. We turn to these next.

Orientation to Context

Narratives are fundamentally a verbal recounting of past experiences, but in order for such accounts to be comprehensible to a listener, they must be embedded within a spatial-temporal context. Such orientation to context plays a key role in making narratives comprehensible to listeners (Labov & Waletzky, 1967/1997; Polanyi, 1985). Eisenberg (1985), among others, has suggested that one reason the narratives of children are often so difficult to understand is that they lack such contextual embedding. Furthermore, the ability to provide context for there-and-then events is an important component of the decontextualized language skills that seem to be so essential for literacy acquisition (Snow, 1983).

Earlier, we stressed the importance of a topic-extending or elaborative parental style of reminiscing with children, but parents who are classified similarly as topic-extending may nevertheless differ in their emphasis on contextual orientation. For example, two mothers in our longitudinal sample were classified as highly topic-extending or elaborative, and Table 2.2 shows how many utterances they provided per narrative topic before changing to a different topic (data taken from Peterson & McCabe, 1992). The data are broken down into the first 6 months of the longitudinal collection of data from parents (when children were 27-32 months), the second 6 months (33-38 months), and the last months (39-44 months). Although both mothers were topic-extending, they differed in the techniques they used and in what they were elaborative about. Helen's mother was very concerned about her daughter providing the context for the events that were being talked about, and her conversation was filled with questions about *who*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *what object*. Cathy's mother, although she also asked questions about context, was relatively more concerned about the action of the events being related, that is, *what happened*. The ratio of questions that request context information from their daughters versus questions requesting information about action is

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TABLE 2.2
Properties of Mothers' Narrative-elicitation Style
and the Percentage of their Children's Self-Structured Narratives
to a Researcher that Provide Orientation to Context

	Cathy			Helen		
	27-32 mo	33-38 mo	39-44 mo	27-32 mo	33-38 mo	39-44 mo
Mother's narrative elicitation Utterances/narrative	16.7	16.5	19.4	25.8	26.6	14.7
Ratio of context questions to action questions	1.4:1	1.6:1	1.5:1	2.7:1	2.6:1	2.6:1
Ratio of content questions to yes/no questions	2.8:1	4.0:1	4.4:1	1.5:1	2.2:1	1.6:1
Children's self-structured narratives						
% clearly specified <i>who</i>	85%	90%	88%	83%	92%	95%
% with <i>where</i> (all narratives)	40%	43%	46%	25%	42%	58%
% <i>where</i> (away-from-home narrative)	24%	47%	54%	38%	56%	70%
% with <i>when</i>	19%	38%	40%	0%	19%	60%
% with <i>why</i>	2%	5%	12%	0%	7%	21%

Note. Table adapted from Peterson and McCabe (1992).

shown in Table 2.2 (adapted from Peterson & McCabe, 1992), and Helen's mother asks almost twice as many context questions relative to action questions as does Cathy's mother. There is another difference between the mothers: Throughout the 18 months, Helen's mother asked a large percentage of yes/no questions. These make few demands on children in that they do not require an elaborated, content-rich answer. Cathy's mother, in contrast, asked relatively few of these non-demanding yes/no questions, except early on when Cathy's inability to answer a content-rich question often led to rephrasing the question into a simplified yes/no format. As Cathy's ability to answer content-rich questions increased, the frequency of yes/no questions decreased.

Also shown in Table 2.2 are the percentages of children's self-structured narratives that included clear specification of *who* and identification of *where*, *when*, and *why* events took place (from Peterson & McCabe, 1992). For *where*, narratives are further broken down into those that describe events taking place at locations other than home (where specification of location is essential for comprehension of the story) as well as in all narratives regardless of location. Although both children are comparable during the first 6 months of the study, Helen's likelihood of providing contextual embedding is considerably higher a year later. Because Helen's mother stresses the importance of

contextual orientation in her questions, Helen has learned that this is important information that should be included in her narratives.

But contextual embedding is not enough. A narrative that is well-structured, conforming to the classic narrative pattern, must have a cogent development of the action of the narrative, which Cathy's mother emphasizes. Cathy's mother also demands more elaborative and information-rich responses to her questions. As Table 2.1 shows, this emphasis on action or on *what happened*, as well as on content information, is reflected in Cathy's earlier mastery of classic narrative structure.

The case study of two mothers just described was extended to an analysis of the types of questions asked by all of the parents in our longitudinal study (Peterson & McCabe, 1994, 1996). Questions were classified as context questions (divided into *wh*-context and *yes/no*-context) or questions about other content, such as actions. These questions about other content were also divided into *wh*-questions and *yes/no* questions. As well, clarifying questions and statements were tabulated. This was done for the recorded parent-child conversations that took place during the three 6-month periods of our 18-month collection of taped parent-child conversations, that is, when children were at Age 1 (26–31 months), Age 2 (32–37 months) and Age 3 (38–43 months old). In addition, the provision of *when* and *where* context was assessed in the children's self-structured narratives elicited by a researcher during these same three periods.

There was little relationship between the types of questions parents asked in the first or second time period and the child's provision of spatial-temporal context in the same time periods. That is, almost all correlations between parent and child at Age 1 or Age 2 were nonsignificant. However, there were a number of significant relationships between the sorts of questions parents emphasized during the first year of the study and the amount of contextual orientation that children provided in the last 6 months of the study. These significant correlations are shown in Table 2.3 (taken from Peterson & McCabe, 1996). Note that there are a total of eight correlations between earlier parental context questions at Ages 1 and 2 and child performance at Age 3, and of these, fully seven were significant. That is, the number of context questions that parents asked both a full year, as well as half a year, earlier predicted how well their children provided spatial-temporal context when they were 3 years of age. An interesting comparison is the contrast between these earlier parental context questions (of which seven out of eight were significant) and synchronous context questions, that is, context questions asked by parents at Age 3 and their children's contextual orientation at Age 3. Only two of the four synchronous correlations between parent and child at Age 3

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were significant. Thus, it seems that parents' context questions at an earlier point in time are more important than those questions asked concurrently, despite the fact that common sense would have predicted a relationship between questions asked and information provided at any given point in time. Another important contrast is between the role of parental context questions and other sorts of parental questions and utterances. There was virtually no relationship between the number of other sorts of parental questions during the first year of the study and children's later propensity to include spatial-temporal information in their narratives during the final 6 months of the study. Of a total of 72 possible correlations between questions about other

TABLE 2.3
Significant Correlations Between Frequencies of Questions About Context and Children's Provision of *Where* and *When*

Parent Behavior	Child Performance		
	Age 1	Age 2	Age 3
Wh-context questions			
		<i>where</i>	
Age 1	-.65, $p = .020$	—	—
Age 2	—	—	.54, $p = .024$
Age 3	—	—	.68, $p = .015$
		<i>when</i>	
Age 1	—	—	.57, $p = .042$
Age 2	—	—	.69, $p = .013$
Age 3	—	.74, $p = .007$.66, $p = .019$
Yes/no context questions			
		<i>where</i>	
Age 1	—	—	.76, $p = .005$
Age 2	—	—	.57, $p = .042$
Age 3	—	—	—
		<i>when</i>	
Age 1	—	—	.64, $p = .022$
Age 2	—	—	.78, $p = .004$
Age 3	—	—	—

Note. Table reprinted from Peterson and McCabe (1996).

content (both *wh-* and *yes/no* questions), clarifying questions, or statements and children's provision of either *where* or *when* context, only three were significant—a result that is probably due to chance.

These data argue strongly that it is not simply talking with children about past events nor asking questions about any sort of content that is important for children to learn how to embed their narratives within a spatial-temporal context; rather, children who are asked a lot of questions about context come to increasingly include contextual information in their self-structured narratives. In other words, children learn the components of a narrative that are important because of what parents emphasize in parent-child conversations about past events. Similar relationships between earlier parental questions about orientative context and later child skill in providing such contextual embedding have been found by others as well (e.g., Fivush, 1991).

General Evaluation

From the beginning, narrative researchers have emphasized the importance of emotional evaluation (Labov & Waletzky, 1967/1997). A good story not only tells a listener what happened, it also tells the listener what those events meant to the narrator. That is, it embeds the events within a context of personal meaning, of emotional reaction. It informs the listener about the narrator's perspective on those events. In essence, evaluation is the heart of narration.

There are a number of ways in which narrators can evaluate the events in their narratives, including specifying affect ("I was sad"), their cognitions or perceptions ("I got confused"), repetition for effect ("The needle went up and down and up and down"), elaboration of details ("My chin bled. It bled on my mitten."), gratuitous terms ("very," "really," "some," as in "I was some happy"), negation ("I didn't do it"), exclamation ("Was I mad!"), attention getters ("And then know what?"), comparison ("Crying like a madman"), intensifiers and qualifiers ("stupid," "fun," "silly"), reported speech ("She said that she was happy"), compulsion words ("Mommy made us come in then"), words that are evaluative *per se* ("squished," "finally" as in "We finally got him to do it"), exaggeration ("I ran as fast as a deer"), objective judgments ("Ten dollars is a lot of money for a kid"), and subjective judgments ("That was okay").

In longitudinal assessments of parental evaluation in parent-child reminiscing, parents have been shown to be relatively consistent (Haden, 1998; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993). That is, some parents are highly evaluative and others are much less so during parent-child conversations about past events. Parents also seem to be more evaluative when talking with their girls

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than boys, in that they talk more about emotions (and a wider variety of emotions) to daughters (Cervantes & Callanan, 1998; Dunn, Bretherton, & Munn, 1987; Fivush, 1998). Some researchers have found gender differences in children's presentation of emotion in their narratives (Buckner & Fivush, 1998; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997); others have found few differences in children's use of most other forms of evaluation (Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Peterson & Biggs, 1998, 2001) with the exception of the evaluative device of reported speech. Girls include more reported speech than do boys (Ely & McCabe, 1993).

Parents who have an elaborative reminiscing style are likely to use more evaluation (Reese & Fivush, 1993), and we were curious about whether there are more specific relationships between parental and child evaluation. That is, does evaluation show the same sort of specificity effect that has been previously found for orientation? To answer this, we assessed total parent evaluative input in our longitudinal sample when children were 27, 31, and 34 months, as well as total child evaluative output in their researcher-elicited narratives at 27, 31, and 34 months, as well as at 4½ years (McCabe & Peterson, 2000). In addition, we assessed the role of overall topic-extending input by parents in all of the tapes that they provided us.

Two major findings emerged from this study. First, there was no direct relationship between parental and child evaluation. The rank of parents in terms of the evaluative input they provided at 27, 31, and 34 months did not correlate with the rank of children in terms of providing narrative evaluation to an experimenter at those ages and when 4½ years old. On the other hand, there was a relationship between how topic-extending a parent was and how much evaluation children provided. That is, when parents were ranked, those who were more topic-extending during parent-child reminiscing had children who had higher ranks in terms of how much evaluation they included in their self-structured narratives ($r_{ho} = .52, p < .05$). Thus, it seems that it is general parental interest in extending discussion about the past that is important, not specific parental attention to evaluation. Parents who are interested in a child's past experiences, and who are elaborative and topic-extending during parent-child reminiscing, have children who are more likely to evaluate their experiences when narrating.

Our sample size was small, however, and this may well be the reason that relationships between parental and child use of evaluative talk did not prove to be significant. Several studies with sample sizes over 40 found concurrent relationships between parent and preschooler emotion language in picture description (Denham, Cook, & Zoller, 1992) and autobiographical narration (Farrar, Fasig, & Welch-Ross, 1997) and longitudinal relationships in parent

and toddler references to feeling states in non-narrative free conversations recorded at home (Dunn et al., 1987). Most relevant is work by Haden, Haine, and Fivush (1997) that found a longitudinal relationship between maternal emphasis on evaluations in personal narrative talk at 3½ and child provide relatively more evaluative information to a neutral experimenter at 3½ years was also predictive.

The fact that we found significant componential relationships in a small sample for orientation but not for general evaluation may mean that the strength of the relationship in the latter case is weaker than that of the former, something less likely to be detected in a small sample. Provision of information about what a personal experience means is complex and, by definition, subjective, and parents are often quite surprised to find out that, for example, the favorite part of a child's trip to Disneyland was not seeing Mickey Mouse or any particular ride but rather finding real geode rocks in a planter outside the rest rooms. In other words, parents are less able to directly scaffold children in articulating what an event meant than they are when and where it happened. This interpretation is bolstered by the finding we report later in this chapter that an intervention experiment had a significant impact on provision of orientation but not of evaluation.

Causal Relationships

Events in our lives are often highly inter-related, and one important form of inter-relationship is causality. Some events cause other events to happen or set up necessary preconditions. For example, falling on a nail can cause a cut on the leg, pulling on a cat's tail can cause the cat to scratch, or hitting another child can cause that child to hit back. Explicitly informing a listener about causal relationships in narrated events leads to narratives about those events being perceived as more coherent and comprehensible (Buckner & Fivush, 1998; Fivush, 1991). Thus, learning to describe causal relationships between events is another component skill involved in competent narration.

An important question is whether parental practices during narrative elicitation *vis-à-vis* specifying causality are related to children's acquisition of skill in describing causal relationships between events. To answer this, we first combed through the researcher-elicited narratives of children in our longitudinal sample and we found that the age when children first included a spontaneous expression of causality varied widely, from 30 to 66 months of age (McCabe & Peterson, 1997). Next, we analyzed the parent-child conversations, and we found remarkable consistency in parental behavior. In con-

versations that took place more than 6 months prior to children's first spontaneous expression of causality, parents almost never mentioned causality. For example, at 7 months prior to a child's first independent causal statement, there were 0.08 mentions of causality per narrative topic by parents. However, parents consistently increased their discussion of past causality with their child approximately 6 months prior to their child's first spontaneous production of causal language. At 6 months prior to a child's first causal expression (regardless of the child's age at that time), parents talked about causality 0.21 times per narrative, and at 5 months prior, there were 0.52 causal mentions per narrative, and in the next few months it remained equivalently high. Thus, a half year prior to a child's first spontaneous expression of causality, parents began to emphasize causality in their narrative conversations. Children began responding to these parental prompts about causality, and all children were able to respond to at least some parental scaffolds about causality at least a month prior to the time when they could produce causal language spontaneously, and on average 5 months prior. Thus, a consistent pattern was found: rare references to causality by parents, a sudden increase in parental prompts about causality 6 months prior to children's first spontaneous production of causal language, children increasingly responding to scaffolded interactions about causality, and finally, spontaneous production of causality by children.

Other investigators have also found a relationship between parental conversations about causality and children's inclusion of causality in their narratives. For example, in a longitudinal investigation, Fivush (1991) assessed the number of references to causal or conditional relationships in maternal language and the number of such references in their children's narratives to a researcher a year later. There was a strong positive correlation between the two frequencies ($r = .78$); mothers who talked about causality more when their children were 2½ years old had children who talked more about causality a year later, at age 3½.

Reported Speech

Causal linkage between events has often been considered to be one form of evaluation (Labov & Waletzky, 1967/1997), and as we have seen, it shows specific parent-child effects. But another form of evaluation, other than causality, also has been found to yield specific effects. In a different study in which dinner-time conversations were recorded for 22 middle-class families that had a child between 2 and 5 years of age, Ely, Gleason, Narasimhan, and McCabe (1995) found that mothers used more of the evaluative device of

reported speech than did fathers. Of most interest here is that there was a significant correlation between the amount of reported speech by mothers and children ($r = .63, p < .005$), but not between fathers and children ($r = .16$). Thus, children seem to resemble their mothers in the use of this device. When reported speech was investigated in the Peterson and McCabe (1992) longitudinal study, mothers of 2- to 3½-year-old children again were found to use substantially more prompts for reported speech (i.e., 100 of 107 observed prompts for reported speech were made by mothers), and mothers themselves made almost all observed reports of past speech (50 of 55 observations). By the time their children were 5, girls' attention to past speech was double that of boys' (Ely, Gleason, & McCabe, 1996).

The value of reporting speech has been documented to be gendered. Tannen (1990) put it best when she quoted one very representative complaint by a woman about her husband, "Men don't tell the whole story—who said what," and another who said, "It's like pulling teeth to get him to tell me, 'What did she say?' 'What did he say?'" (p. 116). She goes on to note that men see such emphasis on reported speech as attention to unimportant details. Tannen was writing about adults, of course, but what we have seen is that such divergent values have a very early onset in the preschool years.

Gender

The eventual impact of such gender differences in adult preferences for narrative components eventuates in replication of gender differences in their offspring. Moreover, parents of both sexes may set aside their own preferences in the interest (albeit probably not conscious) of fostering what they see as gender-appropriate narration. For example, both fathers and mothers alike talk in distinctively different ways to their young daughters versus their young sons (see Fivush, 1998, for a review).

Gender differences in adults' narrative preferences added to increasingly observable gender differences in children, and the well-known fact that mothers tend to talk substantially more with their children than do fathers can be fit into the sociocultural framework that we have adopted. Such a sociocultural framework would lead us to expect more congruence between the narrative styles of mothers and their daughters than between any other pairing (e.g., fathers and daughters or mothers and sons), and we have found evidence that such is the case.

Recently, we have independently collected self-structured narratives from both parents and children about the same events. This research differs from prior research in our laboratory in that parents narrated to a researcher rather than engaged in parent-child reminiscence, and they were asked to narrate

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about a target event, the same one as the child. This event was a highly salient one in children's lives, namely an injury serious enough to require hospital emergency room (ER) treatment. Families were recruited from the ER and visited at home several days later, and their memory for the injury and subsequent hospital treatment was assessed as part of other research. Prior to memory probing, self-structured narratives were elicited ("Tell me about when you/your child got hurt."). There were 137 preschool-aged children (2–5 years) and 98 school-aged children (8–13 years) and their parents (154 mothers and 81 fathers) who participated.

The parents' and children's narratives were assessed on a range of narrative measures, including two measures of *length* (number of words and number of clauses), two measures of *elaboration* (number of descriptors and number of new units of information), one measure of *cohesion* (number of inter-clausal connectives), two measures of *coherence* (number of temporal and of causal/conditional linguistic links), and two measures of *contextual embedding* (number of references to time context and spatial context). As well, new units of information were sub-categorized in terms of whether they referred to people, location, activities, objects, or attributes. In all, there were 14 measures of narrative properties.

There is, of course, enormous individual variation in the narratives of both parents and children, with some individuals stressing the importance of contextual embedding, others stressing the importance of descriptive elaboration, and so on. We computed correlations between parents and children, with children categorized as preschool- or school-aged, and both parents and children separated by gender. The patterns of correlations that we found are shown in Table 2.4 (taken from Peterson & Roberts, 2003). Strikingly, the narratives of older daughters and their mothers are highly similar in at least one measure of all five narrative properties, that is, length, elaboration, cohesion, coherence, and context-setting. Specifically, fully 10 of the 14 measures comparing mothers and older daughters are significant at the $p < .004$ level. In contrast, none of the correlations between older daughters and their fathers are significant. There is no relationship between older sons' narrative measures and those of either parent. (Very few of the correlations between preschoolers and their parents were significant, probably because their narratives were so short.)

The high degree of similarity in how mothers and their school-aged daughters linguistically represent events in their narratives supports suggestions of a special status for mother-daughter dyads, in comparison with mother-son, father-daughter, or father-son dyads (Russell & Saebel, 1997). In their review of research regarding the distinctness of the four types of parent-child dyad, Russell and Saebel stated that although evidence was limited, there seemed to

TABLE 2.4
Significant Correlations Between Child-Parent Dyads,
with Bonferroni Correction ($p < .004$)

Measure	Parent-Daughter Dyads				Parent-Son Dyads			
	Younger Kids		Older Kids		Younger Kids		Older Kids	
	Mom	Dad	Mom	Dad	Mom	Dad	Mom	Dad
Length:	N=51	N=15	N=25	N=16	N=48	N=23	N=30	N=27
Clauses	—	—	0.76*	—	—	—	—	—
Words	—	—	0.72*	—	—	—	—	—
Elaboration:	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Descriptors	—	—	0.74*	—	—	—	—	—
Unique units	—	—	0.64*	—	0.41*	—	—	—
Person	—	—	0.52*	—	—	—	—	—
Location	—	—	0.54*	—	—	—	—	—
Object	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Activity	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Attribute	—	—	0.74*	—	—	—	—	—
Cohesion:	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Connectives	—	—	0.77*	—	—	—	—	—
Coherence:	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Causal/cond.	—	—	0.66*	—	—	0.82*	—	—
Temporal	0.39*	—	—	—	—	0.69*	—	—
Context:	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Time context	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Spatial context	—	—	0.77*	—	0.47*	—	—	—

Note. Table from Peterson and Roberts (2003). Copyright © 2003 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission.
* $p < .004$.

be greater affective closeness or emotional cohesion between mothers and their daughters than between parents and children in other dyad compositions. We suggest that narrative exchanges between mothers and their daughters are a key aspect of such affective closeness and emotional cohesion, and that the correspondence in narrative structure embodies both.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

To reiterate, we and others have shown repeatedly that there is a relationship between how parents reminisce with their children and their children's devel-

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opment of narrative skills. Parents who use a topic-extending, elaborative style have children who become skilled narrators at earlier ages. Topic-extending, elaborative parents have children who tell longer narratives and who are likely to demonstrate more sophisticated narrative structure such as the classic narrative pattern. But there are more direct relationships than this between what parents do and how child narrative skill develops. For example, the sort of questions that seem to be crucial for children's developing skill at embedding their narratives within an appropriate spatial-temporal context are those that specifically prompt the child to provide contextual information. Asking any sort of question will not do; rather, context orientation skill in children is related to parental questions specifically about context orientation. Furthermore, there seems to be a time-lagged relationship between such parental prompts and child skill development.

Data such as these support a Vygotskian theoretical framework. Vygotsky's (1978) theory proposes that social interactions (i.e., inter-psychological processes) give rise to internal (intra-psychological) processes. In particular, the theory emphasizes the importance of adults or other knowledgeable individuals scaffolding the early attempts of a beginner who is acquiring a new skill. Adults regulate how a task is done as well as provide extensive guidance and feedback to a child learner, thus providing the structure and much of the content of the task. Essentially, adult feedback and questions serve as a scaffold for the child's skill acquisition. The repeated information about what to do that is contained in the scaffold becomes internalized over time, and thus the child's own inner speech takes over the functions that previously were filled by the external scaffolds provided by parents and others. Another important concept is the zone of proximal development. This is the difference between what children can do on their own and what they can accomplish with adult scaffolding. Good scaffolding by an adult is sensitive to the child's level of accomplishment in a particular type of task, and as children become more proficient, the scaffold is decreased. Some recent formulations, however, have emphasized the bidirectionality of parent and child influences, proposing a spiral model of increasing task sophistication by parents as child competence increases (Haden et al., 1997; Reese et al., 1993). Specifically, these authors suggest that adult scaffolds may be primitive when child skill levels are very low, and as children become more competent at the task, the adult scaffold increases in sophistication. Essentially, feedback from children about increasing skill competence leads to more elaborate concepts being scaffolded, so that both partners are engaged in increasingly complex task-related behavior. Children have been shown to acquire many cognitive skills through the help of adults' provision of effective scaffolds (McLane, 1987; Rogoff & Gardner, 1984).

Parent-child discourse has been highlighted as an important source of parental scaffolding (Peterson & McCabe, 1994), and in terms of children's acquisition of narration, Vygotskian theory would hypothesize that the specific sorts of narrative interactions engaged in by parents and children would play a key role in facilitating children's narrative skills. Parents who provide a narrative scaffold that is rich in questions and statements about orientative context essentially teach their children the importance of including this sort of information in their narratives, as well as show them how it should be incorporated. Thus, over time children begin to spontaneously provide contextual information in *anticipation of habitual parental prompts for it*. We have also seen that parental prompts about causality precede in a regular way children's ability to linguistically express such relationships spontaneously. That is, there is a progression from little prompting for causality in adult narrative scaffolds to increasing questions about *why* by parents accompanied by an increasing incidence of children responding to such prompts appropriately, and finally children being able to spontaneously produce linguistic causal connections in their self-structured narratives. This is consistent with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development: Parents provide virtually no prompting about causality when children are not yet capable of appropriate response, but as children acquire the ability to respond to causal prompts, their frequency increases sharply even though children still cannot provide causal information unassisted by parental prompting. Finally, children are able to independently include causality in their narratives. Vygotsky's theory would posit that through parental scaffolding, children learn narrative properties, and that variation in the scaffolds that parents construct vis-à-vis narration will be related to variation in child narrative skill.

An Intervention Study: Teaching Effective Scaffolding

Although there have been numerous demonstrations of time-lagged relationships between earlier parental reminiscing style and later child narrative skill, these have been correlational in nature. And, of course, even time-lagged correlation does not mean causation. A more powerful research design is required, namely an experimental intervention. This has been done (Peterson, Jesso, & McCabe, 1999). We recruited 20 economically disadvantaged families with 3½-year-old children, all of whom were on Canadian social assistance (equivalent to welfare in the U.S.), and randomly assigned them to either an intervention or a control group. The mothers' styles of eliciting narratives from their children were assessed at the beginning of the study by leaving a tape recorder with them to record reminiscing, as was the children's

skill at constructing self-structured narratives to a researcher using our standard narrative-eliciting procedures. Children's language skills were also assessed by the PPVT. Subsequently, a researcher talked with the intervention mothers about the sorts of narrative interactions that seem to foster children developing the narrative skills that help them to "fit in" with school.

The intervention emphasized the following points (from Peterson et al., 1999):

1. Talk to your child frequently and consistently about past experiences.
2. Spend a lot of time talking about each topic.
3. Ask plenty of "wh" questions and few "yes/no" questions. As part of this, ask questions about the context or setting of the events, especially where and when they took place.
4. Listen carefully to what your child is saying, and encourage elaboration.
5. Encourage your child to say more than one sentence at a time by using backchannel responses or simply repeating what your child has just said.
6. Follow your child's lead. That is, talk about what your child wants to talk about.

The researcher illustrated each of these points and both showed the parent transcripts of other parents reminiscing with their children and played them tapes of these interactions. These provided concrete examples of parents using or failing to use the types of prompts and interaction style we were fostering. Then the researcher engaged in role playing with the parent, to help them learn these techniques. Subsequently, families were visited every other month and interim telephone calls were made to remind and encourage the mothers. The intervention lasted for a year. Control mothers were told that we were interested in learning more about how children develop narratives. At the end of the year-long intervention, post-test data were collected: Parents were again given tape recorders and asked to record parent-child reminiscing, children were interviewed again by a researcher, and the PPVT was re-administered. A year later, when the children were approximately 5½ years old, 14 of the children (half in each group) were found and a researcher elicited more narratives from the children for a follow-up assessment. Comparisons of families who could not be found with those that remained in the study showed that these two groups did not differ in parental or child variables in pretesting. Attrition was attributed to families in poverty being more likely to move or have disconnected telephones.

TABLE 2.5
Mean Number of Parent Measures
(and Standard Deviations) at Pre-Test and Post-Test

Measure	Time of Test	
	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Open-ended prompts		
Control Group	11.3 (6.4)	11.7 (4.1)
Intervention Group	9.7 (5.5)	14.4 (4.2)
Wh-context questions		
Control Group	6.4 (4.2)	6.8 (4.1)
Intervention Group	4.5 (3.5)	8.5 (2.6)
Back-channeling		
Control Group	3.8 (2.9)	3.2 (2.7)
Intervention Group	3.0 (1.8)	4.9 (2.5)
Total of above 3		
Control Group	21.5 (7.2)	21.7 (6.9)
Intervention Group	17.2 (5.8)	28.2 (4.0)*
Yes/no questions		
Control Group	9.2 (3.2)	10.2 (3.2)
Intervention Group	7.5 (3.7)	8.8 (2.7)

Note. Table reprinted from Peterson et al. (1999).

* $p < 0.05$ for the Group \times Time interaction.

An analysis of the parental tapes showed that the intervention mothers indeed altered their reminiscing style in ways consistent with our intervention. Table 2.5 (from Peterson et al., 1999) shows that intervention-group mothers, relative to controls, increased the number of open-ended prompts, context-eliciting questions using wh- questions, and back-channel supportive responses over time. If one combined these three types of utterances, there was a significant Group \times Time interaction. Specifically, the two groups did not differ at the pre-test assessment, but intervention mothers significantly improved and included more of these in their conversations than did control mothers by the time of the post-test assessment. There was little difference between the two groups of parents in the frequency of yes/no questions.

In terms of child changes, intervention children's PPVT scores significantly improved over the course of the 1-year intervention, relative to the control children's scores (see Table 2.6, adapted from Peterson et al., 1999). But there was as yet limited change in children's narrative skills. It seems

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that vocabulary can be influenced over the course of relatively short-term intervention (consistent with the findings of others such as Whitehurst & Valdez-Menchaca, 1988), but more complex narrative skills may take longer to influence.

The story was different a year later, however, during the follow-up assessment. Two important characteristics of narratives are orientation to spatial-temporal context and informativeness. Table 2.6 shows the total amount of spatial and temporal context-setting information and the number of new or unique units of information, that is, how informative the narratives were, for each child's three longest narratives during pre-test, post-test, and follow-up assessments. Intervention children substantially increased the amount of spatial-temporal context as well as the informativeness of their narratives. Control children, in comparison, showed no improvement in context-setting and less dramatic improvement in informativeness.

Overall, this study lends strong support to the important causative role of parental reminiscing styles. Parents who were taught to scaffold contextual information in their narrative interactions had children who substantially improved in their skill at embedding their narratives within a spatial-temporal context. Parents who were taught to encourage children to provide more information and to elaborate on what they had said had children who produced more informative, elaborated narratives. In other words, teaching parents different ways of scaffolding their children's narratives worked.

TABLE 2.6
Outcome Language (PPVT) and Narrative Measures (Amount of Context-Setting Information and Unique Units of Information) for Children at Pre-Test, Post-Test, and Follow-up Assessments

Measure	Time of Test		
	Pre-test	Post-test	Follow-up
ppVT			
Intervention group	52.5	59.0	—
Control group	54.1	55.5	—
Total context-setting information			
Intervention group	11.0	11.7	25.8
Control group	9.1	13.5	11.3
Unique units of information			
Intervention group	31.4	27.9	170.4
Control group	33.6	36.1	117.9

Note. Table adapted from Peterson et al. (1999).

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, children's narratives reflect numerous aspects of their lives. Children echo their parents in a general predilection for talking at length about past events (or not), but also in many specific ways. Parents' concern for descriptive detail predicts their children's provision of such detail. Parents' discussion of what causes what predates children's provision of such information by half a year. Parents' general interest in what has happened to a child, as indicated by their tendency to talk at length about this, predicts a child's evaluation of such experience, though the nature of that evaluation very much derives from the child's own perspective. Not only does parental interest in the past predict children's narrative ability, it also causes such ability to develop, as we demonstrated in an experimental intervention that involved random assignment of parents and successful increment in vocabulary and, eventually, narrative ability in the experimental group. Through parents, children learn general values regarding the form of narrative valued by the culture. Finally, daughters, especially, mirror their mothers when talking about traumatic events. In all these ways, then, storytellers are made, not born.

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