Family talk about moral issues: The toddler and preschool years

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What part do moral issues play in children’s daily lives and conversations? To what extent are individual differences evident among toddlers and preschool children in their interest in conversations about these topics? Do such differences in moral sensibility show continuity as the children grow from toddlerhood through the preschool period to the school years? What part do differences in parents’ and children’s discussion of what is acceptable and what is not play in children’s growing understanding of their social worlds?

Even before they have many words, children find the rules, roles, and relationships of their family world a source of interest and curiosity, of amusement and teasing. Among the classic studies of children’s conversations at home, there are some striking examples and lessons to be learned about the nature of children’s curiosity and interests. For example, in a study of four-year-old girls who were audiotaped with their mothers in their daily lives at home, Tizard and Hughes (2002) comment on the breadth of the children’s interests:

The children seemed extremely interested in other people’s viewpoints, and in the way in which they are similar to, and different from their own. Interest in other people – both children and adults – was a characteristic feature of most of the children in the study and manifested itself in many different topics: their friends, other members of the family, growing up, birth, illness and death, what people did for their living, and so on. Indeed it is worth remarking on the breadth of children’s interests, and the complexity of the issues which they raised. It is sometimes supposed that children of this age have special, childish interests, mainly to do with mothers, babies, dolls, teddies and animals, and such a view would be reinforced by most of the picture books published for children of this age. The conversations in our study suggest that, on the contrary, all human experience was grist to their mill. (p. 128)

This general point is underlined in the findings of our own research, both in the United Kingdom and the United States. And this breadth of interest includes issues of moral choice and judgment, justifications of what is allowed and what is not, what is fair and what is unfair. We will
draw in this chapter on three longitudinal programs of research based on
naturalistic observations of young children at home with their mothers.
In the first section of the chapter, we focus on the changes and indi-
vidual differences in parent–child interaction and conversations when a
second child is born, and through the infancy of the second child (Dunn
& Kendrick, 1982). In the second section of the chapter, we take up
the story of children’s growing understanding of the moral issues and
principles involved in their family lives, highlighting not solely conversa-
tions that include conflicts between children and their mothers and their
siblings, but the role of self-interest, cooperation, and jokes and humor
in the developmental processes (Dunn, 1988). The longer term issue of
how children’s experiences of these early family conversations relate to
their later understanding of moral issues assessed more formally is dis-
cussed in the third section, and in that section we also draw on an ongo-
ing longitudinal study of children from toddlerhood to the transition to
school (Hughes, 2011).

The arrival of a sibling

This data set was collected from a sample of 40 firstborn children whose
mothers were expecting a second child. The families were followed from
about a month before the sibling’s birth, through the infancy of the
second child; audiotaped recordings of family talk during unstructured
home observations and interviews were made at four time points, with
at least two home visits made at each time point (pregnancy, three weeks
after the sibling’s birth, eight months after the sibling’s birth and then
14 months after the sibling’s birth). The details of the study methods and
findings are reported in Dunn and Kendrick (1982). In terms of parents’
occupation, the sample was largely working class. We were interested in
the developing relationship between the young siblings, as well as each
child’s relationship with mother and father. The age of the firstborn at
the time of the sibling’s birth ranged from 18 months to 43 months, but
over half the sample were between 18 months and 23 months.

In this chapter our focus is on the conversations between the firstborn
children and their mothers, and in particular, discussion of acceptable
and unacceptable behavior. At the visits made before and after the sibling
birth it was clear that in this context, issues of control loomed large for
some families. Mothers were of course concerned about and protective
of their new baby. Firstborn children were often very curious about the
baby, and for some their investigation of the new baby tended to be either
ambivalent or rough, and was a matter of concern for their mothers. It
should be borne in mind that their mothers were frequently tired and
experiencing broken nights; some irritation with the first child was often vividly expressed.

It was not surprising then that the observations showed several marked changes from before to after the sibling’s birth. First, there was an increase in confrontation between child and mother – both verbal and nonverbal. This was particularly evident when the mothers were busy with feeding or bathing the new baby sibling. There was also a drop in the frequency with which mothers helped the firstborn, or made suggestions to them for play, such as verbal or fantasy play; there was a decrease, too, in the frequency of positive comments by mothers on the firstborn’s action. Over the year following the sibling’s birth the frequency of “highlighting” suggestions, in which the mother commented on what the child was doing in a supportive way, dropped significantly from the post-sibling birth observations to the 14-month observations from 5.7 to 3.9 speaker turns per 1,000 10-second observations. In a previous study, we had found that these “highlighting” suggestions were associated with the child responding with a significant increase in attention span (Dunn & Wooding, 1977). Thus in families in which the mothers frequently noticed and commented on what the firstborn was playing with and talking about, the firstborn paid attention to and concentrated on that focus for significantly longer than the children whose mothers did not make such “highlighting” suggestions.

In relation to the increase in confrontation between child and mother, the firstborn children showed an increase in being deliberately naughty as well as demanding to their mothers. The criteria on which we based this category of behavior were conservative: a child’s action was only coded as “deliberately naughty” if the child performed an act that had been explicitly forbidden while we were present, or physically attacked the mother. The results of the observations of incidents of deliberate naughtiness pre- and post-sibling birth were striking. First, there was a threefold increase in such acts after the sibling’s birth, and the incidents of naughtiness were three times more likely when the mother was busy caring for the baby than when she was not. It is possible that the irritation and tiredness of the mothers contributed to this increase in confrontation over acts of deliberate naughtiness; several mothers commented that their patience was exhausted. The elevation of levels of conflict between child and mother was unquestionable. In terms of the children’s moral understanding, these interactions were of much interest, as the acts of naughtiness frequently involved the mothers making explicit comments on the child’s transgression.

A second feature of child–mother conversations that showed interesting changes after the sibling’s birth concerned talk about other people – their
wants, needs, emotions, and desires. Such talk has been shown to be associated with the development of socio-cognitive and moral understandings (De Rosnay & Hughes, 2006; Dunn, Bretherton, & Munn, 1987; Ensor & Hughes, 2008; Hughes, Lecce, & Wilson, 2007; Chapter 5, this volume). With the sibling’s birth, there was a major change in the frequency of discussion of people’s feelings and interests; there is, after the sibling’s birth, the baby sibling – more or less continually present – a person whose feelings, wants, and interests are a key focus of interest for the mothers – and also for some of the firstborns. The presence of the baby sibling for many families involved new aspects of personhood for the first child, such as gender in this example, as well as the issue of “good” and “naughty” behavior:

CHILD: … [inaudible] boy.
MOTHER: She’s not a boy. She’s a little girl.
CHILD: Is she?
MOTHER: You’re a little boy.
CHILD: Is she a girl?
MOTHER: Yes, a little girl.
CHILD: A little girl.
CHILD TO BABY: You messy. Messy.
MOTHER: She’s a messy eater ’cause she’s only a baby.
CHILD TO BABY: Hello little fellow.
MOTHER: She’s not a fellow.
CHILD: She a little girl. A little girl.
MOTHER: Yes she’s a little girl.
CHILD: Brenda good girl, aren’t she?
MOTHER: Yes and you’re a good boy.
CHILD: Yes Brenda good boy.
MOTHER: No, Brenda’s a good girl.
CHILD: Brenda Ann, isn’t she?
MOTHER: Mmm. Brenda Ann.

Tutoring comments about the baby’s capabilities were common, and these also often included references to good or naughty behavior, as in the next example:

MOTHER TO BABY (WHO HAS BEEN CRYING FOR A LONG TIME): I don’t know what we’re going to do, do you?
MOTHER: He’s too little to smack.
CHILD: Smack him.
MOTHER: Can’t smack him ’cause he doesn’t know any better.

The ambivalence shown by many firstborns about their baby sibling was frequently made quite explicit in comments to the mother:
Family talk about moral issues

CHILD TO BABY: Baby ... Baby [caressing her], Monster! Monster!
MOTHER: She's not a monster!
CHILD: Monster!
[Child is standing on the edge of the pram and rocking it]
MOTHER: Don’t stand on there, there’s a good boy, or you’ll tip her out.
CHILD: I want her out!

These three examples highlight features of these conversations that bear directly on the impact of such conversations for children’s growing understanding of moral issues. First, the mothers are explicit about the behavior they want from the child, and the reasoning behind their suggestions. Their messages are clear and unambiguous. Second, the emotional quality of the conversations is clear. These are not neutral exchanges. Third, the children already are becoming clear about explicit moral messages – what is naughty and what is good.

There were notable differences between families in the extent to which mothers talked to the firstborn children about the baby’s wants, wishes, and feelings in the early weeks. Some mothers commented frequently on what the baby’s crying might mean: Was he hungry? Tired? They drew the firstborn’s attention to the baby’s interest in the firstborn, and talked about what the baby enjoyed and what might cheer him up. Here are some examples of mothers’ comments to their firstborn:

“She likes looking at you!” “Is he cross at being woken up?” “I think he’s watching you. Can you see him looking? I think he’s watching you.” “She likes you to kiss her face like that.” “He won’t smile when you’re yelling ’cause it makes him a bit upset.” “Listen to little Jamie; he wants his bottle.”

Other mothers very rarely made comments about the baby as a person to their two-year-olds. There were also substantial differences in how the mothers talked about caring for the baby to their firstborn. Some of these conversations sounded as if the mothers were sharing responsibility for caring for the baby with their first child. What follows is a quote from a mother with a two-year-old boy Tim, and his younger brother who has been fussing unhappily:

MOTHER: Tim, do you reckon he’s hungry? Or is he just waiting for his bath? ... Shall we roll him over and see if he likes going on his tummy? ... Oh what shall we do with him? I think we’d better hurry up and bathe him anyway. Let’s give him a bath. Can you help me with the bath water?

CHILD TO BABY: Baby! Baby!
MOTHER: That’s right. You talk to him and cheer him up.

In these families the firstborn often took a practical part in caring for the baby sibling. Their pleasure in their own competence was often directly expressed to the baby sibling.
CHILD TO MOTHER: Got make his wind. [burp]
MOTHER: Got make his wind?
CHILD: Yeah.
MOTHER TO BABY: Come on, Harry!
CHILD: [laughs]
MOTHER: Are you going to come and help me? I’m not doing very well am I?
CHILD: [pats baby, who gives a slight grunt] Ooh!
MOTHER: That was just a grunt.
CHILD TO BABY: Hello Harry! Hello Harry! [Baby looks at Child. Child turns to observer in triumph]
CHILD TO OBSERVER: Look!
MOTHER TO CHILD: He gave us a smile yesterday, didn’t he?
CHILD TO BABY: Give me a smile.
MOTHER TO BABY: Give us a smile.
CHILD TO BABY: Whee! [kisses baby]
MOTHER: He’ll eat your nose if you’re not careful, won’t he?
CHILD TO MOTHER: He eat nose. [smiles]
MOTHER TO CHILD: Is he eating your nose? Or giving you a kiss?
CHILD TO MOTHER: Giving a kiss.

In sum, these conversations demonstrate that mother–child exchanges about younger siblings’ capacities and characteristics provide rich opportunities for children to further their moral and psychological understandings of both themselves and others.

Follow-up observations when the baby siblings were 14 months and three years old

The examples presented in the previous section imply that mother–child exchanges are linked to striking individual differences in the nature of the firstborn children’s early reactions to their baby siblings. Our data also allow us to determine whether these individual differences were maintained over time, and the extent to which they were ultimately reciprocated by younger siblings. For simplicity of presentation we will describe the relationship between the firstborn and their baby siblings at 14 months in terms of two summary measures of the behavior of the children and their baby siblings toward each other: friendly social behavior and hostile negative behavior.

Three issues stand out when the continuity in children’s behavior is examined. The first is that the firstborn who had been showing interest in the baby and affection toward him or her in the first weeks after the birth, showed a continuing pattern of friendliness over the next year. They were significantly more likely to show friendly behavior to their young sibling than the other firstborns who had been less interested and affectionate to the baby in the early weeks. Individual differences in less friendly
Sibling behavior were also maintained over time. Specifically, when first-born children reacted with withdrawal in the first 2–3 weeks after the arrival of the baby sibling, this was linked to more unfriendly sibling behavior 14 months later. Similar patterns were observed for younger siblings. In particular, the baby siblings of the firstborns who had been interested and affectionate toward their newborn baby siblings (rather than withdrawn) were at 14 months also particularly friendly to their older siblings.

This issue of interest and friendliness shown toward siblings is central to the notion of moral action. Children who showed real concern for their sibling when s/he was distressed, and thought about how to distract them or cheer them up were showing real empathy. The next example is of 30-month-old Jay, who is concerned about his older brother Len, who is crying because his mother scolded him and refused to comfort him after he had bitten his younger brother. Jay, although the injured party, is quite concerned about his brother’s distress and tries a number of different ways to stop his crying – first trying to get their mother to comfort him, then patting him, then helping him, speaking to him with an affectionate diminutive and attempting to distract him, and finally mimicking his mother’s threat to smack him if he doesn’t stop crying.

Sibling is crying

CHILD (30 MONTHS) TO SIBLING: Len, don’t cry. Stop crying, mate. Stop it crying.
MOTHER TO SIBLING: Do you want me to smack you?
SIBLING TO MOTHER: No.
MOTHER: Then just stop it please.
SIBLING TO MOTHER: I’m trying to. [sobs]
CHILD TO SIBLING (WHO IS STILL CRYING): Stop crying, Len. Smack your bottom.

Our data also provide direct evidence supporting the significance of mother–child conversations in explaining such individual differences. As we have seen, some mothers often referred to the baby as a person with needs, wants, likes, and dislikes; they explained what they thought the baby wanted, and frequently drew attention to the baby’s interest in the older child. Already by the third and fourth weeks after the sibling’s birth, the firstborn children in these families were much more likely to comment on the baby as someone with needs and wants than the children whose
mothers did not discuss the baby with them in this way (see Figure 2.1). Thus, mothers’ scaffolding of children’s understandings of their younger brothers and sisters as psychological beings appeared to be linked to friendly and prosocial interactions between siblings over time.

Two further points about the significance of the findings about mother–firstborn child conversations about the baby should be noted. First, were these differences in mothers’ talk about the baby related in any simple way to other aspects of their conversational style? We examined this in some detail (see Dunn & Kendrick, 1982); here we will simply summarize the main points. Mothers who referred to the baby as a person in the first-month observations, and who encouraged the firstborn to take part in discussion of caregiving, were also more likely to give justifications for their actions when they were attempting to control the firstborn, to discuss other people’s motives and intentions, and to use language for complex cognitive purposes (the categorization coding derived from Tough [1977], which codes comparisons, similarities, differences, conditionals, generalizations, definitions, logical reasoning, and inferences). They were also more likely to enter the children’s pretend games.

Figure 2.1 Association between mothers’ references to baby and children’s friendly approaches
These aspects of the mothers’ language were correlated, and they reflect a particular style of relating to a young child, which suggests we should not look for a simple link between any one aspect of the conversational measures and the later behavior of the children, but rather acknowledge the association of a maternal style of interacting with the children’s later behavior. However, we should also take seriously the implication that our 2–3-year-old children were capable of a degree of reflection about the baby as a person that was quite beyond what would have been presumed in previous years.

Overall then, these findings highlight, first, the pattern of stability in the quality of siblings’ relationships over time, and second, the possible role that conversations between mothers and children may play in the developmental processes in the quality of their relationships. In the second section of this chapter we focus on the nature of the children’s grasp of moral principles, and how they use this understanding in their family lives; we then summarize the evidence that sequelae of these early conversations are found in the children’s understanding of moral issues more formally assessed.

### Understanding moral issues

In this program of research, we conducted a series of observational studies over the second and third years (Dunn, 1988). Naturalistic observations were conducted in the children’s homes, and conversations were audiotaped. During the second year, children became increasingly assertive and resistant toward their parents; these changes suggest that children increasingly engaged in behaviors that provided opportunities for exchanges surrounding moral (as well as social-conventional and prudential) issues. Specifically, between 18 and 36 months, conflicts in which children protested at their mothers’ actions, resisted their requests, or repeated what they had just been forbidden to do nearly doubled in frequency (on average there were nine such exchanges for each two hours of observation). Displays of anger were also frequent. But anger was not the only emotion shown. With increasing frequency during the second year the children smiled and laughed during confrontation with their parents (Dunn & Munn, 1985). There was a teasing quality to many of these incidents, as the next example illustrates:

[Elly aged 18 months, sitting on Mother’s knee, pulls her mother’s hair hard.]

**Mother:** Don’t pull my hair! Madam! Don’t pull hair. No. It’s not nice to pull hair, is it?

**Child:** Hair.
MOTHER: Hair, yes, but you mustn’t pull it, must you?
CHILD: Yes!
MOTHER: No! No!
CHILD: No!
MOTHER: No. No. It’s not kind to pull hair, is it?
CHILD: Nice! [smiles]
MOTHER: No, it isn’t.
CHILD: Nice!

The pleasure and excitement that children showed as they repeated forbidden actions was notable. Their grasp of the link between their own action and another person’s pain was clear:

[Ann aged 24 months, sitting on Mother’s knee, kicks her.]
MOTHER: Don’t kick because that hurts.
CHILD: More hurt. [repeats kick]
MOTHER: No!
CHILD: More hurt! [repeats kick]

By 18 months every child in the studies had been observed to draw his/her mother’s attention to a forbidden action, or their possession of something previously prohibited. The interest the children showed in moral issues was very clear. These findings underscore the extent to which children themselves were spontaneously engaged in constructing and testing the boundaries of the moral domain. A second common pattern following a prohibition was deliberate evasion of the mother, for example hiding behind the settee when picking at a forbidden plaster, and, as in the next example, attempts to deceive the mother, where Elly at 21 months, in the bathroom, attempts to get possession of the soap she wants to play with. She pretends to need a diaper change in order to get hold of the soap:

MOTHER: Have a bath later, shall we?
CHILD: Ba.
MOTHER: You put it in the bath, ready then?
CHILD: [does so]
MOTHER: There you are. Now it’s ready for you later when you have a bath. Come on.
CHILD: [points to soap] Ba.
MOTHER: No, we’re not taking it. I said you can get in the bath later.
CHILD: [lies down on floor in position for a diaper change and gestures to diaper]
MOTHER: No, I’m not taking it off.
CHILD: Cack! [word for dirty diaper]
MOTHER: No you haven’t.
CHILD: Cack!
MOTHER: No, you haven’t.
From 14 months onward, the children in our studies showed increasing interest in untidiness or objects that were out of place, and an interest in possession rules (see Kagan, 1981). The mothers in the study frequently commented on these “out-of-place” objects. In the next example, the mother of a 16-month-old (sitting in his high chair in the kitchen) commented when he threw a biscuit on the floor:

[John, aged 16 months, throws biscuit on the floor.]
**MOTHER:** What’s that? Biscuit on the floor? Where biscuits aren’t supposed to be? Isn’t it?
**CHILD:** [looks at mother and nods]
**MOTHER:** Yes. Now what’s all this? [points to toothbrush and toothpaste on the kitchen table] Who brought that downstairs?
**CHILD:** [looks at M and smiles]
**MOTHER:** Yes, you did. Where does that live?
**CHILD:** Bath.

At 16 months, John has little language yet, but he engages in the conversation with his mother, and shares in the understanding of where bathroom things are supposed to be. Bathroom things in the kitchen are a matter for comment, the breaking of a shared rule of the family that he recognizes, and this knowledge he can use in his teasing and jokes. This concern with what is allowed and what is not includes matters of danger, as in the next example:

[Mary, at 16 months, reaches for plugged-in iron.]
**MOTHER:** Leave it Mary. You mustn’t pull it out, must you?
**CHILD:** [shakes head]

By 18 and 20 months, the children took part explicitly in these conversations, teasing, contradicting, and insisting on their own point of view and their own actions. In conflicts with their mothers, they gave reasons for their acts, and justifications and excuses more and more frequently. A focus on these justifications and the children’s attempts to avoid blame reveals their moral intuitions – their idea of harm to others, of responsibility, of what excuses can be offered, for failure to “keep the rules,” and whether blame can be shifted to someone else. Their pleasure and amusement in such disputes highlights the ways in which they use their growing grasp of the shared rules of the family in their relationships. The idea of harm to other people is not yet elaborated or differentiated – yet the principle is understood, and is a foundation for understanding moral rules in the family world.

During their third year, the children often gave reasons for the actions that had been prohibited. Figure 2.2 shows that the most frequent justifications they gave were those that referred to the child’s own feelings,
Justifications for action by mother and child at 36 months

- Own feelings
- Others’ feelings
- Social rules
- Material consequences

Justifications for action by sibling and child at 36 months

- Own feelings
- Others’ feelings
- Social rules
- Material consequences

Figure 2.2 Percentage of conflict incidents in which different justifications used
wants, or needs. As the figure shows, excuses and reasons in terms of the material consequence of the actions were next in frequency, and references to rules of sharing, turn-taking, or fairness were also made. But foremost were excuses that concerned the child’s own welfare.

In contrast to the children, the mothers referred most frequently to the material consequences of the child’s action. The propensity of young children to make moral judgments in terms of the material consequences of the act, rather than in terms of the intentions of the actor has been noted in other studies (e.g., Smetana, 2006), and is seen as a sign of the immaturity of the child. Is this maternal focus on material consequences a sign of the sensitivity of the mothers to their children’s way of thinking? Possibly. But in terms of children’s experience, this may well contribute to their way of judging actions. Trouble for children is often the result of the material consequences of their actions.

As two- and three-year-olds, the children understood that rules did apply to other family members as well as to themselves, and they understood that certain excuses meant that rules did not apply. Babyhood was an excuse that got children out of trouble, and incapacity too. During the observations they used the excuse that other adults – such as the parents or the observer – also performed the action that the mother had prohibited. In the next example Jay, aged 33 months, claims, without basis, that the observer Penny makes the same noise in drinking that he has just been forbidden to make:

Jay at 33 months is drinking noisily, filling his mouth and saying “Aah!”

MOTHER: Stop it!
CHILD: Penny do that.

In the second half of the third year, direct questioning of rules increased in frequency. The “Why” questions that begin in the third year have been well established in studies of language acquisition. What our studies show is that their appearance is often directed to the mothers’ attempts to control the children, indicating that this context of conflict over children’s goals is an important forum for the development of children’s ability to ask for reason or cause.

**Strategies in confrontation with the mothers**

In addition to their use of justification in disputes, in the months when the children are rising three-year-olds, they start to use a range of other strategies when their wishes are blocked, strategies that reflect their new understanding of family roles and relationships. In the next example, 33-month-old Jay uses the threat that he will tell his Daddy to come back
home, and also refers to “what (the observer) Penny would like,” in his attempts to get his way:

[Mother is trying to get Jay to get off the settee on which he is standing. He begins by denying that he is “on the telly.”]

CHILD: I’m not on the telly.
MOTHER: Get down!
CHILD: I’m not – [pretends to cry]. Mummy – off! I’ll tell my Daddy come back home.
MOTHER: Tell your Daddy.
CHILD: Hmm?
MOTHER: I don’t care.
[Child now attempts to climb on M’s lap].
CHILD: I can’t get up Mum.
MOTHER: I don’t really want you.
CHILD: Please. Penny like me getting there. Help me up.

What we see in the conflict conversations during the third year are defensive moves such as threats, bargains, and denial of future possible states. As negotiation moves these are hardly refined psychological weapons, but they demonstrate that children are attempting to take account of possible future states and moves by others in an effort to mitigate blame or justify their behavior.

**Disputes involving the sibling**

Disputes involving siblings are frequent in many families. During the third year, children increasingly blame the sibling for things they themselves are in trouble over, and deny their own actions and responsibilities. They use reasons and justifications as often in their disputes with the siblings as with their mothers, and as with conflicts with mothers, the children’s own wishes are most often referred to (see Figure 2.2). References to social rules – especially possession, sharing, taking turns – as well as to the material consequences of the action, are common as well. In sibling quarrels, children increasingly frequently draw their mothers’ attention to their siblings’ transgressions and moral failings. And judgmental comments are also made, often labeling actions as “naughty” or “bad.” Thus, these findings reveal that, similar to the early years, triadic family conversations with mothers and siblings may serve as fascinating contexts for the development of moral understandings.

[Sibling shows Mother that she has drawn on a piece of jigsaw puzzle.]
SIBLING TO MOTHER: Look.
MOTHER TO SIBLING: You aren’t supposed to draw on them, Clare. You should know better. You only draw on pieces of paper. You don’t draw on puzzles.
SIBLING TO MOTHER: Why?
MOTHER TO SIBLING: Because they aren’t pieces of paper.
CHILD: Naughty.
MOTHER: Yes that is a naughty thing to do.

In the next example, the girl Jan, aged 24 months, is very fond of her older brother Tim; her aggressive action surprises her mother very much:

[Mother and Tim are arguing over whether he has eaten his mother’s cookie. Dispute continues over five speaker turns. The child, Jan, picks up a block and throws it at Tim, hitting him on the forehead.]
MOTHER: Jan! Why did you do that?
CHILD: – cry!
MOTHER: What do you say to Tim? What do you say to him? Why did you smack him?
CHILD: Bad boy.
MOTHER: Because he’s been a bad boy?
CHILD: Yes.

It is not clear what Jan’s motivation for her action is. She might have been concerned that her brother had upset her mother, and wished to punish him on her mother’s behalf. She might have been angry with her brother for other reasons, and used the opportunity to give vent to her hostility. She might have wanted to draw attention to herself and to interrupt the interaction of mother and brother. Regardless, this excerpt demonstrates the ways in which these conversations may provide opportunities for children to apply their understandings of moral concepts such as “good” and “bad.”

The next example is an incident in which Polly, aged 26 months, passes judgment on who is at fault in a dispute between her older sister Helen and their mother. Again the motivation is open to question, but Polly uses terms denoting moral judgment quite “appropriately.”

[Mother and Helen, the sibling, are arguing over whether TV should be turned off.]
MOTHER TO SIBLING: Switch it off.
SIBLING TO MOTHER: I don’t want you to switch it off! No! [repeated eight times]
CHILD TO SIBLING: No!
SIBLING TO MOTHER: No! [repeats five times] Naughty Mummy!
MOTHER TO SIBLING: Hey! Come on.
SIBLING TO MOTHER: No! [repeated three times]
CHILD TO SIBLING (HOLDING MOTHER): Not naughty. Naughty Helen. [hits Sibling]

The sophistication of the claims made to the mother in the context of a dispute with the sibling were sometimes remarkable, as the next
example illustrates. The older sibling, David, and his sister, Megan, aged 36 months, are disputing who can play with a toy vacuum cleaner. It belongs to Megan, but David has just managed to repair it. He is playing with it, she attempts to get it back. Both children appeal to their mother.

**Sibling to mother:** I wanted to do it. Because I fixed it up. And made it work.

**Mother to sibling:** Well you’ll have to wait your turn.

**Sibling to mother:** — switched.

**Mother to child:** Are you going to let David have a turn?

**Child to mother:** I have to do it. *Ladies do it.*

**Mother to child:** Yes, ladies do it. Yes, and men do it sometimes. Daddy sometimes does the hoovering, doesn’t he?

**Child to mother:** But I do it sometimes.

**Mother to child:** Yes, but Daddy does it sometimes so you let David do it.

Megan’s concern to get her vacuum cleaner back was so urgent that she made a claim to their mother about gender role differences – a claim of remarkable maturity for her age.

We also analyzed the children’s responses to disputes between their siblings and their mothers, to examine whether the children were responding to the emotion the antagonists were expressing, or whether it was the topic of the conflict that was important to the younger child. The details are given in Dunn (1988). The results showed that the emotions expressed by the pair in confrontation were important, and so too was the topic of the dispute. Specifically, if either mother or sibling expressed anger or distress, the children watched or attempted to support one of the antagonists. They rarely laughed. If, however, their sibling laughed in the incident, the children laughed or imitated the action of the sibling. What the children of 18 or 24 months responded to is an event in which two important features are combined: a transgression of a rule is explicitly discussed, and a display of emotion by someone with whom the child has a close and complex relationship.

These studies of children’s participation in family talk with their mothers and their siblings highlight their growing grasp of the principles of positive justice, and their developing understanding of moral issues and notions of rights, which are evident in their interactions with all family members. The processes by which these ideas take hold begin very early. Parents and siblings talk to children about the social world from their infancy, these family members also talk to each other, and children monitor and often comment on these interactions between other family members (Dunn & Shatz, 1989). Children’s understanding of their social world is used by them as an instrument in their relationships, they draw attention to transgressions,
and make jokes about other people’s behavior, and this understanding grows, differentiates, and becomes increasingly subtle.

**Assessments of moral sensibility**

In addition to charting the age-related patterns in family conversations about moral issues, we also used standardized assessments of moral understanding to examine the longitudinal associations of individual differences in moral sensibility. These assessments enable us to focus on the marked individual differences between children in their moral sensitivity, and to see how these differences are related to other characteristics of the children, such as their language ability, their mind-reading skills, and their emotion understanding, as well as their conversational experiences with their parents, siblings, and friends. For instance, in the first study in Pennsylvania in which we investigated links with later moral development, we found that scores on children’s emotion understanding at 40 months were significantly correlated with measures taken at six years of their moral orientation and completion of moral stories (Dunn, Brown, & Maguire, 1995). Parallel findings of links between early emotion understanding and later moral understanding have also been found in a study of a larger sample of four-year-olds (N=128) growing up in London, in neighborhoods of considerable urban deprivation (Dunn & Hughes, 1998). In contrast, children’s explanations of the causes of their own emotions, and the emotions of those with whom they had close relationships (mother and friends), were related to their justifications concerning moral transgressions involving their friends. Those who gave articulate and mature accounts of what made their mothers, friends, and selves happy, angry, sad, or scared were more likely to justify their views on victim and violator in transgressions in ways that reflected an interpersonal orientation. It was children’s understanding of inner states that flourished in families in which mothers and children engaged in talk about why people feel the way they do, and it was this understanding, rather than their social/educational background, that was correlated with the moral orientation in which reference to feelings, interpersonal relations, and welfare were reflected. The quality of the children’s friendships was important too. Children whose friendships had been particularly close and intimate, with shared imaginative worlds and infrequent conflict, were more likely to talk about moral issues in terms of the feelings, welfare, and interpersonal relationships of the people involved.

Of course we cannot draw conclusions about the direction of causal influence from these correlational findings. It cannot be inferred either that the quality of the friendship contributed to the growth of moral
sensibility, or that friendship between preschool children is more likely to flourish if the children themselves are sensitive to the moral concerns of their friends. However, the longitudinal results from the follow-up study of these children at age six years, after their transition to school, are of interest (Dunn & Hughes, 2001). Indeed, the results of this project converge with other studies to imply prospective effects of close, intimate friendships and sibling relationships as four-year-olds and children’s subsequent moral sensibility as six-year-olds (Dunn, Brown, & Maguire, 1995; Dunn, Cutting, & Demetriou, 2000; Hughes & Dunn, 2000). Specifically, the children who scored high on verbal development, on quality of friendship assessed by teachers, and on shared imaginative pretend play at four years tended to be relatively advanced in their moral sensibility at six years. Such shared pretend play has been highlighted as significant in the development of mind reading in a number of studies (Dunn & Cutting, 1999; Gottman, 1983, 1986; Howe et al., 2002).

Recent findings from an ongoing longitudinal study in Cambridge, UK (the Toddlers Up study described fully in Hughes, 2011) offer three additional insights and challenges. First, while young children’s interactions with peers predicted unique variation on a moral sensitivity task, the quality of their interactions with their mothers showed overlapping associations with both moral sensitivity and verbal ability. This finding suggests that skills related to language ability are likely to mediate maternal influences on children’s awareness of moral issues. One such skill is emotion understanding; indeed, path analysis of the longitudinal study Toddlers Up has shown that age-three emotion understanding mediated the relation between mother–child mutuality (i.e., eye contact, responsivity, shared positive affect, and cooperation) at age two, and peer-directed prosocial behavior at age four (Ensor, Spencer, & Hughes, 2011).

Second, parenting may play a more important role in children’s prosocial behavior in some family settings/types than in others. For example, in the Toddlers Up study, parenting quality at age two was a particularly strong predictor of children’s willingness to share at age four for the subset of 44 children living in “young mother” families (Ensor & Hughes, 2010). Here it is worth noting that although children from “young mother” and “older mother” families were matched on markers of socio-economic status (maternal education and head of household’s occupational status), “spillover” effects of socio-economic deprivation such as financial worries or low self-efficacy appear particularly pronounced for young mothers (Moffitt & E-Risk Study Team, 2002). Consistent with this view, maternal support from friends predicted variation in parenting quality, but only for young mothers (Ensor & Hughes, 2010).
together, these findings suggest that parenting is both more challenging and particularly crucial for young mothers and their toddlers.

Third, the relationship between parenting and child outcomes should be considered from a temporally dynamic perspective. Using latent growth models of both maternal depressive symptoms and mother–child mutuality, Ensor, Roman, Hart, and Hughes (2012) have demonstrated that while both measures show strong stability from toddlerhood to early school age, initial variation in mother–child mutuality was a significant independent predictor of variation in preschool problem behaviors. These findings highlight the toddler years as a “critical period” for family influences on children’s later behavior.

The examples given below illustrate how mothers in their conversations often focus on emotions as a way of fostering their children’s sensitivities to moral issues. The first two extracts come from the same mother–child dyad, discussing a couple of ambiguous vignettes that were included as part of the age-six home visit. The first vignette involves a toy that goes missing, and the second involves a bicycle accident.

**MOTHER:** So I think when they were packing up all the toys before they went to dinner, they all got muddled up. Or maybe Peter put it away on purpose, do you think? Cos he wanted that car didn’t he? Mm. Perhaps he hid it in all the toys. Um. What do you think Max was thinking when he stood at his cubby hole and it wasn’t there. Do you think he was sad?

**CHILD:** He was sad and he probably he was going to cry, look, it looks like he’s going to cry.

**MOTHER:** Yeah, he did look sad, didn’t he?

**CHILD:** Sad and his nose and his eyes look gloomy. Horrible.

**MOTHER:** I think the reason she fell off her bike was because she was going too fast to start with.

**CHILD:** No, the boy jumped out at her.

**MOTHER:** Yeah, but she was still going too fast, wasn’t she? I don’t think he did it on purpose, do you? What do you think she thought after she fell off her bike?

**CHILD:** Um.

**MOTHER:** She got sore knees.

**CHILD:** Sad and hurt.

Note that in both vignettes the mother starts by offering a neutral (i.e., nonhostile) explanation for the negative event – toys get muddled up, and accidents happen when children cycle too fast. And in the first vignette, the mother appears only to consider the hostile alternative (the toy was stolen) as a way of drawing attention to the victim’s feelings. Not all mothers were able to offer such nuanced appraisals of the vignettes however, and some mothers were quite emphatic that negative events can be deliberately intended:
MOTHER: Now, I think when Max’s friend, Peter, saw the car and it was time to put the toys away, that perhaps he thought, “Well, I could have this car ’cause I really want it. I like Batman and perhaps I want the Batmobile, and no one would notice if I took it away.”

MOTHER: I think that Sam jumped out at Maggie deliberately ’cause they had had a fight, and he was a bit upset with Maggie originally, and this was his way of getting back at her, ’cause he knew if she fell off her bike, she’d fall and hurt herself.

Moreover, other mothers found it very challenging simply to discuss the motivations and feelings of story characters and offered very few appraisals (either positive or hostile). Thus there were clear individual differences in how mothers talked about ambiguous scenarios (typical of the commonplace ambiguities in everyday social life) that could easily contribute to variation in children’s understanding of moral situations. The difficulty here is in teasing apart the specific processes involved, as these individual differences in mothers’ talk are likely to co-vary with individual differences in other aspects of parenting that may also matter for children’s moral development, as we saw in the above findings concerning maternal styles of interacting (e.g., Nix et al., 1999).

Conclusions

How far do the findings we have described begin to give us answers to the questions with which this chapter began? First, there is the issue of how discourse about moral issues arises in families with toddlers and preschool-aged children. Although the children studied were growing up in very different environments – ranging from rural and small-town Pennsylvania, through middle-class academic and working-class England, to families in deprived inner-city London – some common messages emerge. Even in the toddler years, children living in these widely different circumstances were interested in and actively curious about moral issues, and this interest was reflected in their participation in talk about what is acceptable and what is not. Their growing understanding of moral issues was used with relish in their family interactions, to tease, to blame, to evade discipline, and to joke. Appreciating the moral issues faced within the family is not simply a matter of learning the rules, but of becoming able to tease, mock, and joke together with other family members about what is allowed and what is not.

A second issue concerned individual differences in children’s moral sensibility. These were evident from the early years, and were relatively stable through the preschool years until the ages of six and seven.
Across the various studies, some common themes emerge about these early correlates of the individual differences in the children’s sophistication. First, in all the studies, skills related to language were closely related to the development of moral understanding. The processes here are not yet clear; for instance the evidence from the Toddlers Up study indicated that language skills were implicated in maternal influence on peer relations. Second, in all the studies referred to, early emotional understanding was also closely linked to early development of moral understanding, whether the children were growing up in the United States or the United Kingdom, with or without siblings. These provocative findings highlight the importance of further research on early emotion understanding and its links with language, if we are to make progress in understanding in detail the processes involved in the growth of moral sensibility. The evidence for the significance of emotional loading in the key interactions is clear, and the search for further clarity in which communicative processes between children and their parents are implicated is likely to be rewarding, and to involve an appreciation of the significance of children’s emotional experiences from early in their preschool lives.

REFERENCES


Family talk about moral issues


