

Background

Why talk about the past?

A large body of research has demonstrated the important role that parents play in scaffolding their children's remembering and how this shapes children's autobiographical memory ability (Fivush et al., 2006). Here we ask whether parents also influence how much their children value talking about the past.

Adults vary in how important they consider thinking and talking about their past experiences to be (Kulkofsky et al., 2010). Importantly, this is also related to the kinds of goals and behaviors they show when reminiscing with their children (Kulkofsky & Koh, 2009; Kulkofsky, 2011). Through joint reminiscing, children may not only learn *what* to remember and *how* to remember it, but also *why* they should remember. Some children may come to highly value the past and initiate conversations about it often, while others may not.

Very little research has examined child-initiated talk about the past. In one diary study, most children started spontaneously mentioning past events between 14 and 32 months and at 32 months children made about 15 spontaneous references to the past per week (Reese, 1999). Beyond this, we do not know how often or in what contexts children of different ages choose to talk about the past.

Our aim was to examine children's initiation of these conversations at different ages and to provide preliminary evidence that this may be related to parental goals during joint reminiscing.

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References

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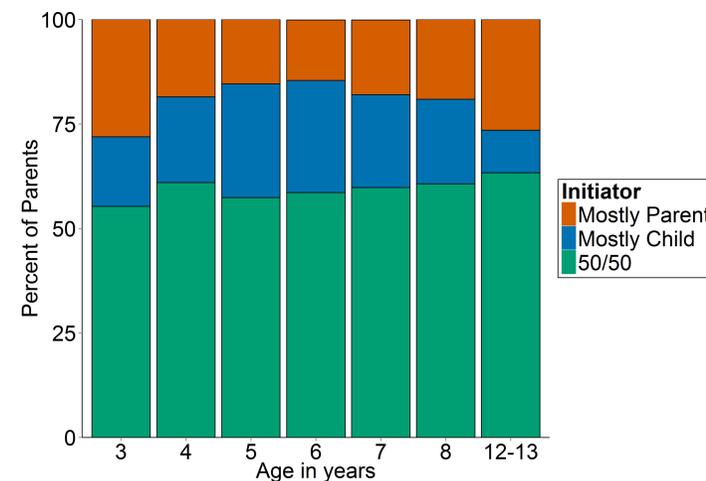
Procedure & Results

Participants were 1,089 parents with children 3 to 13 years old in the Washington D. C./Baltimore area.

Parents completed a questionnaire about their conversations about the past with their children:

When you talk with your child about the past, who typically initiates the conversation?

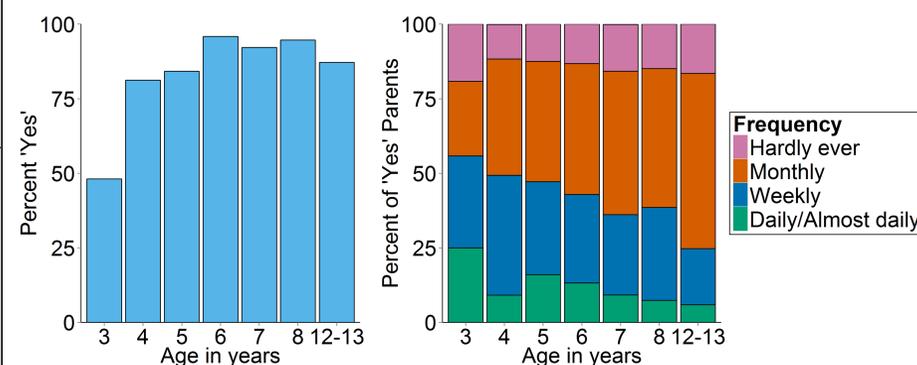
almost always initiated by adult	most frequently initiated by adult	initiated by adult and child 50%/50%	most frequently initiated by child	almost always initiated by child
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Across age groups, 75% of parents or more reported that their child initiated at least half of their conversations about the past.

Does your child ask you to talk about your own past (i.e., to tell stories about "when you were little")? If Yes, how frequently?

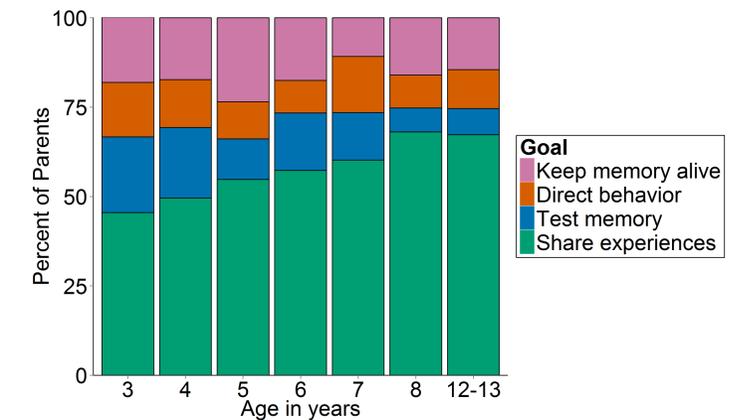
hardly ever	once of twice a month	once or twice a week	almost daily	more than once daily
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The proportion of children asking about their parent's past increased from young to middle childhood while the frequency for those who did ask decreased.

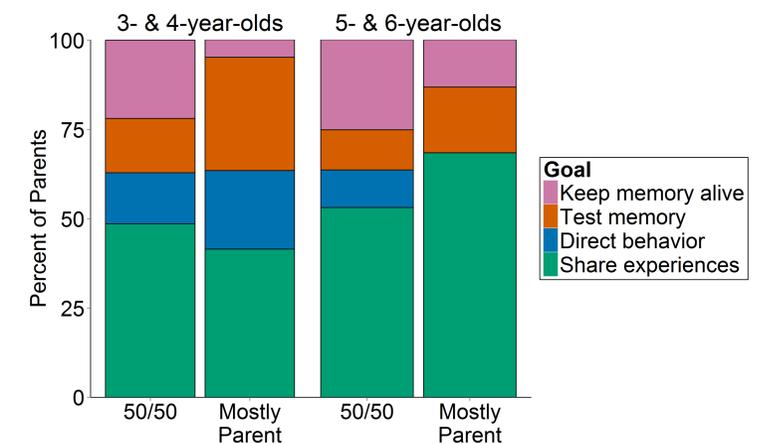
When you talk about the past with your child, what is your major goal?

to share personal experiences	to teach or instruct about appropriate behavior	to help keep the memory alive	to see what things your child remembers about the past	to see how well your child remembers the past
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Many parents reported reminiscing with their children to share experiences, and the ratio of this goal to other goals increased with age.

Relationship between Initiator and Major Goal



Parents who initiated talk about the past equally often as their 3- to 4-year-old children were more likely to say their goal was to keep memories alive or share experiences than were parents who primarily initiated conversations themselves. Parents with social goals may particularly value talking about the past and instill this in their children, leading children to initiate more conversations about the past.

In order to better understand children's interest in the past and why they talk about it, future research could explore the content and context of child-initiated conversations and further examine the link with parental goals.