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Peplak, Joanna
Klemfuss, J Zoe

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Fact- and emotion-focused conversations elicit differential patterns of reporting and distress in children

Joanna Peplak,

J. Zoe Klemfuss

Department of Psychological Science, University of California, Irvine, CA, USA

Abstract

We examined the role of emotion- versus fact-focused conversations in the details children reported about a stressful event and whether the details provided were prompted or spontaneously offered. We also tested how these conversational strategies, in conjunction with children's emotion regulation skills, influenced children's event-related distress. Children ($N = 100$ 8- to 13-year-olds) experienced a stressor in the laboratory and were randomly assigned to participate in a fact-focused conversation (prompted about objective event elements) or an emotion-focused conversation (prompted about subjective reactions to the event) with an unfamiliar adult. Caregivers reported on children's emotion regulation skills. Children reported more overall prompted and spontaneous details in the fact-focused condition, but reported *proportionally* more spontaneous details than prompted detail in the emotion-focused condition compared to the fact-focused condition. Children with lower emotion regulation skills found the emotion-focused conversation (but not the fact-focused conversation) about the laboratory stressor significantly less distressing than children with high emotion regulation skills (when controlling for initial distress about the task). We propose that combining both fact- and emotion-focused conversational techniques may be most effective for encouraging detailed disclosures from children and for providing a respite from distress for children with emotion-regulation difficulties.

Keywords

Adult–child conversations; event recall; disclosure; distress; emotion regulation

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From toddlerhood and on, children engage in conversations about past events with adults– conversations that vary in their goals and content-focus (Van Bergen & Salmon, 2010). Though, little is known about the direct influence of various conversational strategies on children's recall and in-the-moment distress. In this study, we experimentally tested the role of two conversational strategies on children's recall of a personally experienced social stressor and their post-event subjective distress. We focused on fact-focused conversational

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strategies (i.e. prompting children to directly recount factual details of an event) and emotion-focused conversational strategies (i.e. prompting children to recount affective and cognitive reactions to the event and their underlying causes) because adults naturally use these approaches when discussing events with children (Slonecker & Klemfuss, 2020) and because these tactics have been found to differentially affect children's disclosures and stress responses (Klemfuss & Musser, 2020; Van Bergen & Salmon, 2010).

Conversational strategies and recall of stressful experiences

Fact-focused conversations can elicit detailed recall from children and may be particularly helpful for children who have difficulty in recalling details of an event on their own (Lamb et al., 2007). However, a pitfall of directly prompting a child about specific event details is that this strategy may introduce questioner bias – for example, the questioner may include details about what they *believe* happened within their questions. This bias can decrease the accuracy of children's reports as children may modify their responses in line with interviewer questioning (Lamb et al., 2007). Thus, it is beneficial for interviewers to elicit spontaneous recall from children as it is less likely to reflect the interviewer's perspective about the event and expectations regarding the child's responses. The details children spontaneously recall may also shed light on the event elements that children find most personally salient, which may elucidate the child's subjective experience.

Emotion-focused conversations may be effective for eliciting spontaneous details from children. Emotion-focused conversations engender subjective content (i.e. thoughts and feelings) that reflects children's memory and recall for *how* they experienced an event rather than *what* they experienced. Emotion-focused conversational strategies provide children with the opportunity to express their internal states while simultaneously offering related, but not directly prompted, factual content. Indeed, conversations about past non-stressful events that include emotional content ameliorate children's recall of subjective experiences and prompt spontaneous disclosures of factual content (Van Bergen & Salmon, 2010). This may be, in part, because subjective experiences cue the factual aspects of the event that evokedthose experiences. Here, we compare the effects of emotion-focused conversations with fact-focused conversations on children's reports of a personally experienced, stressful event.

The role of emotion-focused conversations in regulating distress

Fact-focused and emotion-focused conversations about stressful events are also expected to differentially support children's regulation of distress. By encouraging children to talk about their emotions and helping them interpret the causes of subjective content, emotion-focused conversations help children interpret and regulate event-related stress (Fivush & Sales, 2006; Klemfuss & Musser, 2020), and thus, potentially decrease their subjective distress thereafter. Similarly, emotion scaffolding has been shown to promote the development of emotion regulation abilities over time (Hoffman et al., 2006). Emotion regulation is a major developmental task and vast improvements in emotion regulation (in parallel with the development of language, the understanding of emotion display rules, and improved cognitive and affective control) occur across the childhood years (Schweizer et

al., 2020). Scant research exists on how emotion-focused conversations may help children to regulate their distress *in-the-moment*. The extent to which emotion-focused conversations are beneficial for decreasing in-the-moment distress may depend on individual differences in emotion regulation skills (i.e. monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions to accomplish one's goals; Thompson, 1994). It is possible that children with difficulties in emotion regulation may especially benefit from emotion-focused conversations following stressful events because these conversations may facilitate reappraisal of experiences and prompt event-related meaning-making – regulatory processes that these children struggle with employing on their own.

The present study

This study had two aims. First, we assessed how questioning children about the factual elements of a stressful event (fact-focused condition) compared to engaging children in a conversation about their thoughts, feelings, and underlying causes of those thoughts and feelings (emotion-focused condition) would differentially impact how children provided event details. We hypothesised that children would provide a higher proportion of accurate prompted details in the fact-focused condition, but would provide a higher proportion of accurate spontaneous details in the emotion-focused condition (i.e. factual details about the event that were not directly prompted). Our second goal was to examine how fact- versus emotion-focused conversations and emotion regulation skills would influence children's distress following the stressful event. We predicted that distress from the event conversation would be significantly lower for children in the emotion-focused condition compared to children in the fact-focused condition. We expected this effect to be especially strong for children with relatively low levels of emotion regulation skills. We examined these questions in children ages 8–13 years given that this period entails increasing sensitivity to social stressors and advances in emotion regulation skills (Kopp, 2009; Rubin et al., 2015).

Method

Participants

Participants were 100 children ages 8–13 years (M_{age} = 10.13 years, SD = 1.27, 56% girls) and their primary caregivers from a metropolitan region in southeastern United States. A post hoc power analysis was conducted in G*Power (i.e. multivariate analysis of variance with two groups; linear regression with 6 total predictors and R^2 increase). The sample size had adequate power (> 0.80) to detect small-medium effects (Cohen's f^2 > .10) for both analyses (see Klemfuss & Musser, 2020). Children were racially/ethnically diverse (64% Latinx; 16% African American; 8% Caucasian; 1% Native American; 11% missing). Twenty-five percent of caregivers completed college.

Procedure

The study was approved by the institutional research ethics board where the study took place. Participants arrived at the laboratory for a one-time, ~60-minute session. Following consent and child assent, children engaged in a stressful event (lasting 15–20 min) followed by an interview with an unfamiliar trained research assistant in a separate private room

(lasting approximately 10 min). Expressive vocabulary was assessed at the end of the interview. Caregivers completed a questionnaire in the waiting area while their child completed the tasks. Participants were paid and children were provided with a small gift.

Stressful event

Participants engaged in the Trier Social Stress Test–Modified (TSST–M) – an engaging event that reliably elicits stress in youth (Yim et al., 2010). In a laboratory room, two unfamiliar research assistant observers were seated at a table and instructed children to prepare and perform a 5-min speech about themselves followed by an age-adjusted oral math test.

Event conversations

Children were randomly assigned to participate in the fact-focused event conversation ($n = 53$) or the emotion-focused event conversation ($n = 47$). Participants in the emotion-focused condition were asked how they felt and what they thought during the TSST–M, and what they perceived to be the underlying causes of their feelings and thoughts. Each participant was asked four questions about various TSST–M tasks (e.g. what were you feeling when you had to [TSST–M task]?) The fact-focused condition followed a similar structure to the emotion-focused condition; however, children were asked four questions about factual elements (e.g. what happened during [TSST–M task]?). Children were asked the same questions within each condition. Details about the prompts can be found in Table 1 of the Supplementary Online Material.

Coding and reliability

Children's factual details in the conversations were coded for accuracy (correct or incorrect), spontaneity (spontaneously offered or in direct response to the interviewer's prompt), and whether the details were novel or repeated using the proposition coding approach (only novel details were included in analyses). Any novel accurate event information that was in direct response to the interviewer's questions was considered a *prompted detail*. Any novel accurate event information beyond what was asked for by the interviewer was considered a *spontaneous detail*. Here are two examples of prompted and spontaneous details in each condition: Interviewer Prompt [fact condition]: "Who was there when you were preparing for the speech?", Child's Response: "There were two people [prompted detail]. One of them was a girl, one of them was a boy [spontaneous detail]"; Interviewer Prompt [emotion condition]: "What made you feel like you didn't have enough time to prepare this?", Child Response: "Because I'm only going to be in here one hour [prompted detail], […] it was only going to be like 2–3 min to prepare this, and it was actually 2 min [spontaneous detail]". Two raters independently coded the data (Cohen's $\kappa = .75$). Discrepancies were discussed and resolved for the final coding. Correct prompted and spontaneous responses were converted to proportion scores for analyses by dividing the number of details by the total correct details provided (novel prompted + novel spontaneous + repeated details).

Perceived distress

Children responded to 10 items that assessed their distress, task difficulty, effort, and performance (e.g. "When I did the speech, I felt stressed") on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all*) to (*extremely*) (see Yim et al., 2010). The first assessment asked about children's distress regarding the TSST-M, and the second asked about their distress in response to the conversation about the TSST-M. Both scales were conducted immediately after the respective task. Scale reliability was good (Cronbach's a = .76 for TSST–M distress and a = .79 for event conversation distress).

Emotion regulation

Caregivers reported on their children's emotion regulation via the Emotion Regulation Checklist (Shields & Cicchetti, 1997). Higher scores indicated greater adaptive regulatory capacity. The 12-item, 4-point (1 = never to 4 = *almost always*) subscale has been used in children ages 6–12 years and has high internal consistency and reliability (Cronbach's a = .83, Cronbach's a in current sample = .88; example item: *He/She recuperates fast when experiencing an episode that causes discomfort or stress;* Shields & Cicchetti, 1997).

Expressive vocabulary (covariate)

Children completed a productive language assessment (Expressive Vocabulary Test–Second Edition; Williams & Williams, 2007) because children's ability to discuss past events has been related to language skills (Klemfuss, 2015). Standard scores were used for analyses.

Manipulation check

To ensure that children engaged in more psychological processing during the emotion-focused conversation compared to the fact-focused conversation as intended, we assessed the various emotional, cognitive, and structural linguistic components present in children's responses using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC2015) software (Pennebaker et al., 2015). The target variables were *affective terms* (i.e. the percentage of words used that reflect affective processes such as negative emotion terms) and *cognitive terms* (i.e. the percentage of words used that reflect cognitive processes such as insight and causation). We also used LIWC2015 to measure overall word count.

Data analytic plan

Following descriptive analyses, a MANCOVA was conducted using SPSS 26 to test whether there were differences in children's prompted and spontaneous details by condition (emotion-focused versus fact-focused conversation). Next, a multiple regression was conducted in M*plus* (version 8.5; Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017) to assess the effects of condition, emotion regulation, and the interaction between the two, on children's conversation-related distress (controlling TSST-M-related distress). We controlled for gender, age, and expressive vocabulary in our analyses as these variables are associated with children's autobiographical memory, disclosure, and emotion regulation (Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Zeman et al., 2006).

Missing data

Data were missing for accuracy and emotion regulation ($ns = 14$), perceived stress ($n = 13$ following the TSST-M and $n = 14$ following the event conversation), word count, affect terms and cognitive terms ($ns = 14$), and expressive vocabulary ($n = 7$) due to technical errors, and incomplete sessions and responses. Missing data were handled using full-information maximum-likelihood (FIML) estimation in our regression analysis as supported by Little's (1988) missing completely at random (MCAR) test, $\chi^2 (71) = 72.18$, $p = .439$.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations and bivariate correlations across study variables. Results from our manipulation check show that children reported a higher percentage of affective and cognitive terms in the emotion-focused condition than the fact-focused condition, Welch's $t(59.98) = 4.91$, $p < .001$ and $t(84) = 8.60$, $p < .001$, respectively, confirming successful condition manipulations. We did not find a significant difference in word count across conditions, $t(84) = 1.06$, $p = .294$, suggesting that children talked a similar amount within both fact- and emotion-focused conversations. When assessing the percentage of inaccurate details out of all details children provided, results showed that children rarely reported incorrect details ($M_{incorrect\ details} = 0.20\%$, $SD = 0.70\%$, range = 0.00% to 5.00%). As such, we included only correct details within subsequent analyses. Condition differences revealed that children provided more correct details overall in the fact-focused condition than in the emotion-focused condition, $t(45.80) = 5.95$, $p < .001$, and emotion regulation skills were higher in children in the emotion-focused condition than in the fact-focused condition, $t(84) = 2.91$, $p = .005$. No differences in age, gender, parental education, nor ethnicity were found across conditions. No significant correlations between age and our study variables were found.

Effect of conversation condition on prompted and spontaneous details

Results revealed an overall effect of condition on correct details, Wilk's $\lambda = .87$, F(2, 71) = 5.54, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$. Specifically, we found that children provided a significantly higher proportion of prompted details in the fact-focused condition than the emotion-focused condition, $F(1, 72) = 9.01$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$, $M_{diff} = 0.21$, and conversely, they provided a higher proportion of spontaneous details in the emotion-focused condition than the fact-focused condition, $F(1, 72) = 4.41$, $p = .039$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, $M_{diff} = 0.10$. No effects of gender, age, or expressive vocabulary were found. Proportion of details by condition and prompt are provided in Table 2 in the Supplementary Online Material.

Role of conversation strategy and emotion regulation on distress

Overall, children reported significantly less distress about having a conversation about the TSST-M (i.e. conversation-related distress) compared to doing the TSST-M (task-related distress), $t(85) = 7.806$, $p < .001$. When testing the role of condition and emotion regulation on children's conversation-related distress (while controlling for initial levels of task-related

distress), contrary to hypotheses, no significant main effect of condition nor emotion regulation were found (see Table 2). Nevertheless, a significant condition by emotion regulation interaction emerged (see Figure 1 in Supplementary Online Material for graph displaying both types of distress by emotion regulation levels across conditions). Simple slopes analysis revealed that, within the emotion-focused conversation condition, children with relatively lower emotion regulation skills (-1 SD) experienced lower conversation-related distress ($M_{distress} = 3.11$) than those with higher emotion-regulation skills ($+1$ SD; $M_{distress} = 3.89$), b = 0.94, $SE = 0.35$, $p = .007$, 95%CI [0.57, 1.51], after accounting for task-related distress (see Figure 1). This effect was non-significant for children in the fact-focused condition (low emotion regulation $M_{distress} = 3.68$; high emotion regulation $M_{distress} = 3.64$), $b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.35$, $p = .88$, [-0.63, 0.53]. When investigating the effect of condition on distress specifically in children with relatively low emotion regulation skills, results showed marginally lower conversation-related distress in the emotion-focused condition than fact focused condition amongst these children, $b = -0.57$, $SE = 0.33$, $p = .085$, [-1.12, -0.03]. No differences in conversation-related distress were found amongst children with high emotion-regulation skills across conditions, $b = 0.25$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .335$, [$-.26$, $.76$].

Discussion

This study provided insight into how different conversational strategies influenced children's accounts of a stressful event and their perceived distress when talking about the event. The experimental design allowed us to hold children's stressful experience constant and systematically test the functions of two conversational techniques. We found that fact-focused conversations yielded more event-related details than emotion-focused conversations, but that emotion-focused conversations allowed children to provide *proportionally* more spontaneous details (compared to prompted details) than child in the fact-focused condition. Children with lower emotion regulation skills found emotion-focused discussions about the TSST-M significantly less distressing than children with high emotion regulation skills (this effect was not found in the fact-focused condition).

Regarding event detail reporting, children rarely provided incorrect details about the stressful event across conversation conditions, likely due to the lack of substantial time delay between the event and interview. We found that children's responses were of similar length across conditions and that, unsurprisingly, children in the fact-focused condition provided more objective details (prompted and spontaneous). This was expected because the fact-focused interviewer specifically prompted for factual content, whereas the emotion-focused interviewers prompted for subjective reactions (i.e. how they felt and what they were thinking during the stressful task). Children in the emotion-focused condition reported a higher *proportion* of spontaneous details to prompted details compared to the fact-focused condition, showing that children naturally embedded factual content within their discussions about their subjective experiences – likely reflecting event-related processing. Although less effective in providing interviewers with many event-related details immediately after the stressful experience, emotion-focused conversations may help children provide more event-related details at longer delays (see Van Bergen & Salmon, 2010). Future research

should examine the effect of fact- and emotion-focused conversations on children's recall patterns of stressful events over time.

Regarding children's distress, we found that children who had relatively lower levels of emotion regulation skills reported less distress when talking about the TSST-M compared to children with high emotion regulation skills following adult assistance with emotionally processing the stressful experience. The emotion conversation likely served as a respite from stress for children with low emotion regulation skills. This study extends previous work that has shown positive associations between parent–child emotion conversations and children's dispositional emotion regulation by providing evidence that emotion-focused conversations may also serve in-the-moment regulatory functions. Emotion conversations may aid in lowering distress through the process of meaning-making, such that asking questions about children's thoughts and feelings may allow them to draw meaning from their experience and better understand their psychological state (Thorne et al., 2004). Children with difficulties in emotion regulation may be less able to engage in the effortful process of meaning-making on their own; thus, being helped through this process may have resulted in a substantial relief from distress. For children with relatively high emotion regulation skills, it is possible that our emotion conversation manipulation did not provide them with strategies beyond those they were already employing, and thus may not have been perceived as substantially less of a stressor than the event itself.

It is important to note, however, that emotion-focused conversations may sometimes crystallize affect (see Nook et al., 2021), and thus prompt continued distress and rumination. Indeed, whether these conversations help largely depends on contextual, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors (e.g. type of stressor, sufficient adult support, age, personality; Fivush et al., 2007; McLean & Mansfield, 2011). Thus, much care should be taken to first gage the context, one's ability to provide appropriate support, and the child's intrapersonal characteristics prior to engaging in emotion-focused conversations. Future experimental research may benefit from explicitly testing how emotion labelling and cognitive appraisals prompt regulation in children who receive varying levels of support within conversations (see Klemfuss et al., 2013).

Implications

These findings have implications for professionals who work with children such as clinicians, teachers, and forensic interviewers who are motivated to learn about what happened in a child's past in the child's own words and do not have access to ground truth about the event. Both conversational strategies resulted in unique patterns of reporting and thus, their benefits likely depend on the interviewer's goals and the interviewing context. For instance, interviewers who are seeking to elicit many details (both prompted and spontaneous) about a recently experienced event from a child may choose to focus on directive questions (e.g. in initial forensic interviews). On the other hand, an interviewer may wish to engage in a more emotion-focused conversation if their goal is to understand how children subjectively experienced an event (which may be concurrently helpful for children who cannot regulate their emotions well) and to glean insight into the event details that are salient to the child (e.g. clinical contexts). In a court setting, both fact- and

emotion-focused questioning may be important to implement in order for children to provide many accurate details about an event, but also to provide subjective interpretations of their experience in order to be viewed as credible by jurors and legal professionals (Newman & Roberts, 2014).

Limitations and future directions

This study has limitations to consider for future research. First, we only measured children's accounts of the stressor immediately after experiencing it. Future work should consider longer delays, particularly because children often delay reporting important life events like victimisation (Ceci et al., 2007). Second, we did not consider family-level variables such as how often caregivers employ emotion-focused and fact-focused conversational strategies in their day-to-day interactions. It would be beneficial to understand differences in how social experiences shape event appraisals and emotion regulation skills using a social ecological approach. Finally, we only assessed children's conversations with an unknown adult interviewer – future work should consider examining how these conversations function across targets.

Conclusion

Fact- and emotion-focused conversations following a stressful experience elicit differential responses – while fact-focused conversations allow children to report proportionally more prompted details, emotion-focused conversations lead to proportional higher reports of spontaneous details. Emotion-focused conversations may also assist distress management in children who lack the capacity to do so independently. This research may inform the design of interview techniques in educational, clinical, and legal settings to help professionals gather complete and credible accounts of children's experiences while simultaneously minimising children's distress.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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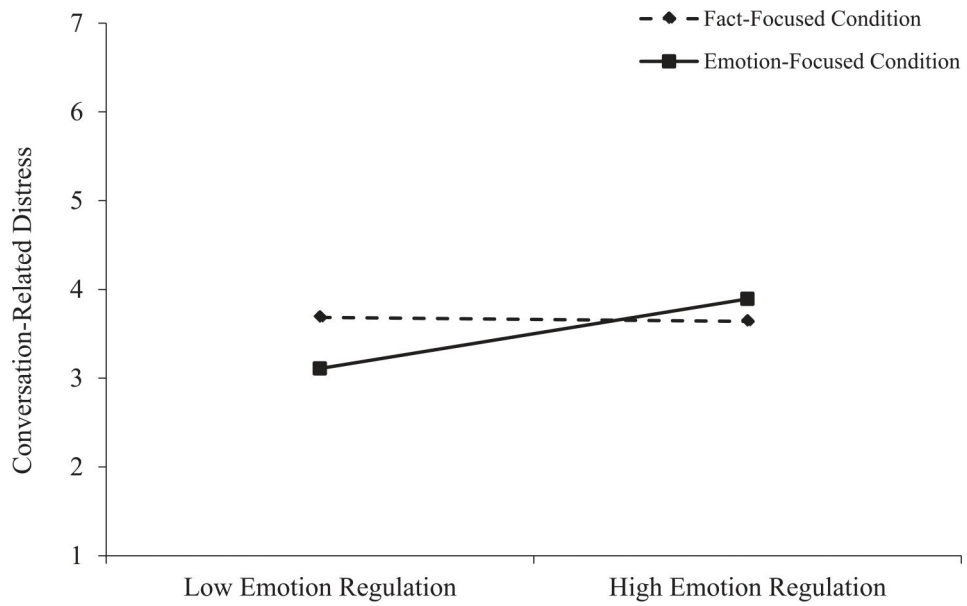
Figure 1.

Emotion regulation by condition interaction in predicting conversation-related distress.
Note: Fact-focused condition: $n = 53$, emotion-focused condition: $n = 47$. The emotion-focused condition slope is significant at $p = .007$. Lower values indicate less distress. Low emotion regulation was calculated at one standard deviation below the mean and high emotion regulation was calculated at one standard deviation above the mean.

Table 1.

Means (standard deviations) and bivariate correlations across study variables.

Variable	Observed Range	Overall M (SD)	Fact-focused condition (n = 53) M (SD)	Emotion-focused condition (n = 47) M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Word count	36–1983	484.76 (356.58)	513.59 (372.54)	452.42 (340.57)	–							
2. Total verifiable details	0–507	56.50 (39.00)	96.28 (85.79)	16.72 (18.27)	.62***	–						
3. Prompted details	0–1.00	0.58 (0.32)	0.70 (0.17)	0.46 (0.39)	–.19	.08	–					
4. Spontaneous details	0–0.93	0.16 (0.22)	0.10 (0.11)	0.22 (0.28)	.38***	.02	–.33**	–				
5. Distress post TSST-M	1.60–6.50	4.44 (0.97)	4.43 (0.92)	4.46 (1.03)	.13	.01	.06	–.07	–			
6. Distress post EC	1.00–6.20	3.44 (1.15)	3.44 (1.21)	3.43 (1.07)	.10	–.06	.05	–.11	.40***	–		
7. Emotion regulation	2.13–4.00	3.31 (0.42)	3.19 (0.43)	3.45 (0.36)	.10	–.06	–.10	.04	–.18	.00	–	
8. Expressive vocabulary	67–137	97.96 (11.60)	97.98 (9.02)	97.93 (14.25)	.06	.10	–.17	.13	.00	–.23*	–.01	–
9. Age	8.00–12.92	10.13 (1.27)	10.22 (1.32)	10.03 (1.22)	.02	.07	.02	.01	.20	–.07	.00	–.13

Note: TSST–M = Trier Social Stress Test–Modified. EC = event conversation. Prompted and spontaneous details are proportional scores.

*
$p < .05$

**
$p < .01$

***
$p < .001$.

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Table 2.

Regression analysis predicting children's conversation-related distress.

Variables	R^2	β	B	SE	p	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
Covariates	0.26						
Age		-0.191	-0.014	0.007	.028	-0.027	-0.002
Gender		-0.147	-0.338	0.197	.086	-0.725	-0.048
Expressive vocabulary		-0.204	-0.020	0.009	.027	-0.038	-0.002
Task-related distress		0.537	0.639	0.109	<.001	0.425	0.852
Main Predictors	0.04						
Condition		-0.071	-0.161	0.213	.449	-0.579	0.256
Emotion regulation		-0.019	-0.054	0.353	.879	-0.745	0.638
Emotion regulation × condition		0.216	0.995	0.505	.049	0.006	1.985
Total R^2	0.30						

Note: Gender was coded as 0 = boys, 1 = girls. Condition was coded as 0 = fact-focused, 1 = emotion-focused.