

# Telling tales can be a good thing

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The act of talking is not an area where ability is usually considered along gender lines. However, a new study published in Springer's journal *Sex Roles* has found subtle differences between the sexes in their story-relating ability and specifically the act of reminiscing. The research by Widaad Zaman from the University of Central Florida and her colleague Robyn Fivush from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, discusses how these gender differences in parents can affect children's emotional development.

Previous research in this area has concluded that the act of parents reminiscing with their children enables children to interpret experiences and weave together the past, present and future. There is also evidence that parents elaborate less when talking to sons than daughters.

The primary objective of Zaman's study was to compare the reminiscing styles of mothers and fathers with their pre-school daughters and sons. This included how they elaborated on the story and the [extent](#) to which their children engaged with the story while it was being told.

The researchers studied 42 families where the participating children were between four and five years old. Parents were asked to reminisce about four past [emotional experiences](#) of the child (happy, sad, a conflict with a peer and a conflict with a parent) and two past play interactions they experienced together. The parents took turns talking to the child on separate visits.

The researchers found that mothers elaborated more when reminiscing

with their children than fathers. Contrary to previous research, however, Zaman's study found no differences in the extent to which either parent elaborated on a story depending on the sex of the child. Mothers tended to include more emotional terms in the story than fathers, which they then discussed and explained to the child. This increased maternal engagement has the effect of communicating to the child the importance of their own version, perspective and [feelings](#) about the experience.

The authors contend that through their increased interaction with the child, mothers are helping their children work through and talk about their experiences more than fathers, regardless of the type of experience. This may reflect the mother's efforts to try and help her child deal with difficult emotions, especially about negative experiences, all of which is related to better emotional well-being.

The authors conclude that "these results are intriguing, and a necessary first step to better understanding how parents socialize gender roles to girls and boys through narratives about the past, and how girls and boys may then incorporate these roles into their own narratives and their own lives."

**More information:** Zaman, W. and Fivush, R. (2013). Gender differences in elaborative parent-child emotion and play narratives. *Sex Roles*. DOI [10.1007/s11199-013-0270-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-013-0270-7)

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