



5

Conclusions

What is the function of parent–child argumentation? This chapter intends to answer the main research question that has guided the study presented in this volume and open a discussion for future research on this topic. In the first part, the chapter provides a detailed overview of the main findings of the analysis of parent–child argumentative discussions during mealtime. The role played by parents and children in the inception and development of argumentation, and the types of conclusions of their argumentative discussions are described. Subsequently, two educational targets achieved by parents and children through their argumentative interactions are presented and critically discussed. In the last part, new open questions that should guide future investigation to expand our knowledge of the role and function of argumentation between parents and children are proposed.



16

5.1 Main Findings of This Study

17 In this volume, we have analyzed parent–child argumentation during
18 mealtime with the aim to understand the function of this type of inter-
19 actions. Why is it important that parents and children engage in argu-
20 mentative interactions with each other? In an attempt to answer this
21 question, this study has tried to consider all the relevant aspects that
22 characterize parent–child argumentative interactions. In a first phase, the
23 focus was directed to investigate the initial phase of the argumentative
24 discussions with the aim to identify the types of issues that lead to the
25 beginning of an argumentative discussion between parents and children
26 during mealtime. The research question leading this phase of the analy-
27 sis was the following: “On what types of issues do parents and children
28 engage in argumentative discussions?” (*Question 1*). Subsequently, the
29 focus of the analysis was directed to investigate how parents and chil-
30 dren contribute to the development of their argumentative discussions.
31 The research question leading this phase of the analysis was the follow-
32 ing: “What are the types of argument adopted most often by parents and
33 children to convince the other party to accept their opinions?” (*Question*
34 *2*). Finally, the last phase of the analysis was aimed to single out the most
35 frequent types of conclusions of the argumentative discussions between
36 parents and children during mealtime. The research question leading this
37 phase of the analysis was the following: “How do parents and children
38 conclude their argumentative discussions during mealtime after they
39 started and engaged in them?” (*Question 3*). At this juncture, it seems
40 appropriate to take stock of the main findings of this study.

41 The findings of the investigation of the initial phase of the argumen-
42 tative discussions between parents and children during mealtime indi-
43 cate that the argumentative discussions unfold around two general types
44 of issues: parental directives and children’s requests. The issues gener-
45 ated by parental directives are strictly bound to the specific situational
46 activity parents and children are involved in, i.e., the activity of meal-
47 times. In most cases, in fact, the issues generated by parental directives
48 frequently concern feeding practices. For example, it is common to
49 observe discussions in which the parents do not want their children to
50 eat a particular food or more than a certain amount of a particular food,



51 or in which the children want to ask for different food. Examples of
52 parental directives related to feeding practices include: “Should Stefano
53 eat the rice?”, “Should Manuela eat the meat?”, and “Should Gabriele
54 eat the tortellini?” These findings are in line with previous studies on
55 family discourse at mealtimes (Arcidiacono & Bova, 2015; Bova &
56 Arcidiacono, 2015, 2018; Capaldi & Powley, 1990; Delamont, 1995;
57 Ochs, Pontecorvo, & Fasulo, 1996; Wiggins, 2004; Wiggins & Potter,
58 2003). However, parental directives did not pertain exclusively to feed-
59 ing practices, but, also, to children’s social behavior within and outside
60 the family context, e.g., the teaching of correct table manners and the
61 child’s behavior at school with teachers and schoolmates. Examples
62 of parental directives related to children’s social behavior include:
63 “Can Gabriele watch TV on the couch during mealtime?”, “Should
64 Giorgia invite all her schoolmates to her birthday party?”, and “Should
65 Francesco apologize with his schoolmate Antonio?”

66 Like the issues generated by parental directives, also the issues gener-
67 ated by children’s requests concern activities not only related to meal-
68 times but also children’s social behavior within and outside the family
69 context. In particular, one question asked by children to their parents,
70 more than others, has a significant role from an argumentative perspec-
71 tive: the Why-question. By asking this type of question during meal-
72 time conversations, the children challenged their parents to justify their
73 rules and directives, which, in most cases, were frequently implicit or
74 based on rules not initially known by or previously made explicit to
75 them. After asking a Why-question to their parents, children assumed
76 a waiting position before accepting, or casting doubt, on the parental
77 directive (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2013). Examples of issues leading to
78 argumentative discussions between parents and children triggered by
79 children’s requests include: “Can Alessandro use that eraser?”, “Can Dad
80 sing along with Marco?”, and “Can Francesco whisper in his Dad’s ear?”

81 Furthermore, the findings of the analysis of the initial phase of the
82 argumentative discussions between parents and children during meal-
83 time have brought to light the typical dynamics characterizing this
84 phase of parent–child argumentation. On the one hand, parents, more
85 often than children, advanced arguments to support their standpoints,
86 i.e., accepting the burden of proof, while children often did not provide



87 arguments to support their standpoints, i.e., evading the burden of
88 proof. On the other hand, children assume the role of active antagonist
89 in the argumentative discussions with their parents because, through
90 their questioning, they encourage their parents to justify their rules and
91 directives. These typical dynamics characterizing the initial phase of the
92 argumentative discussion reveal that argumentation between parents
93 and young children is a co-constructed activity¹ in which children play
94 a role which is equally fundamental to that of their parents. Their pres-
95 ence and involvement in family conversations favors the beginning of
96 argumentative discussions and represents a stimulus factor, inducing
97 parents to reason with their children.

98 After having reconstructed all the relevant aspects characterizing the
99 initial phase of parent–child argumentation during mealtime, we can
100 now move to the findings of the analysis of how parents and children
101 contribute to the development of their argumentative discussions. The
102 types of arguments most often used by parents in argumentative discus-
103 sions with their children can be ascribed to four categories: quality and
104 quantity, appeal to consistency, authority, and analogy. The arguments
105 that refer to the concepts of quality and quantity were frequently used
106 by parents when the discussion they engage in with their children was
107 related to food. Moreover, when parents used the argument of quality
108 or the argument of quantity, they often adapted their language to the
109 child’s level of understanding. For example, if the parents’ purpose was
110 to feed their children, the food was described as “very good” or “nutri-
111 tious,” and its quantity is “too little.” On the contrary, if the parents’
112 purpose was not to feed the children further, in terms of quality the
113 food was described as “salty” or “not good,” and in terms of quantity
114 the food was described as “it is quite enough” or “it is too much.” The
115 second type of argument most often used by parents was the appeal
116 to consistency argument. This argument refers to the consistency with
117 past behaviors, and can be described through the following question:

¹The notion of co-construction referred to in the present study was developed by neo-Piagetian psychologists in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Doise & Mugny, 1984; Perret-Clermont, 1980) to describe processes in which more than one person is involved in the construction of new knowledge.



118 “If you have explicitly or implicitly affirmed it in the past, why do not
119 you maintain it now?” By using the appeal to consistency argument, it
120 seems that the parents aim to teach their children to defend their opin-
121 ions through reasonable and consistent argument since our past actions
122 are essential to justify our present actions. The argument from author-
123 ity was the third type of argument most often used by parents in argu-
124 mentative discussions with their children. This type of argument refers
125 to a right to exercise command or to influence, especially concerning
126 rulings on what should be done in certain types of situations, based on
127 a recognized position of power. Interestingly, when parents used argu-
128 ments from authority with their children, the authority always proved
129 to be an adult. In particular, in most cases, the parents referred to them-
130 selves as a source of authority and not, instead, to a third party such as
131 a family friend, the grandfather or a teacher. The fourth type of argu-
132 ment most often used by parents was the argument from analogy. This
133 type of argument assumes that perceived similarities are used as a basis
134 to infer some further similarity that has yet to be observed. Parents, in
135 most cases, used the argument from analogy in argumentative discus-
136 sions concerning children’s social behavior, e.g., in the school context
137 with teachers and peers.

138 Even if parents and children have opposite opinions during their argu-
139 mentative discussions, they often use the same type of arguments. Like
140 their parents, children, in most cases, used arguments that refer to the
141 concepts of quality and quantity. Children used arguments of quality or
142 arguments of quantity when the argumentative discussions they engage
143 in with their parents were related to food. What distinguishes parents’
144 and children’s opinions is a different evaluation of the quality or quan-
145 tity of food. The second type of argument most often used by children
146 was the argument from expert opinion. This type of argument that I
147 renamed “argument from adult-expert opinion,” is essentially an appeal
148 to expertise, or expert opinion, and can be described through the fol-
149 lowing statement: “The adult X told me Y; therefore, Y is true.” The
150 reason of the reference to the adult expertise is that the children when
151 they referred to a third person as a source of expert opinion, the expert
152 always proved to be an adult such as a teacher, a grandparent or a friend
153 of the father, and not another child. The appeal to consistency argument



154 is the third type of argument most often used by children in argumenta-
155 tive discussions with their parents. Like their parents do with them, chil-
156 dren ask their parents to conform to their previous behavior, as the past
157 actions are important to justify the present actions. The appeal to con-
158 sistency argument, in fact, can be described through the following ques-
159 tion: “If you have explicitly or implicitly affirmed it in the past, then why
160 do not you maintain it now?” The construction of the appeal to con-
161 sistency argument requires a level of logical skills that were observed, in
162 some cases, in the older children. This type of argument was never used,
163 instead, by the younger children. The appeal to consistency argument—
164 like the argument from adult-expert opinion, and unlike the argument
165 of quality and the argument of quantity—is not exclusively based on
166 children themselves, but it is based on someone else. This aspect is rele-
167 vant in terms of argumentative competences and conversational practices
168 because it implies, for the child, the capacity to decentrate from his/her-
169 self to create new contexts above and beyond sentences.

170 After having reconstructed all the relevant aspects characterizing the
171 initial phase of parent–child argumentation and described how par-
172 ents and children contribute to the development of their argumentative
173 discussions, the findings of the last phase of the analysis permits us to
174 answer to the third research question: “How do parents and children
175 conclude their argumentative discussions during mealtime, after they
176 started and engaged in them?” Four different types of conclusions of the
177 argumentative discussions between parents and children were observed.
178 The two most frequent types of conclusions can be defined as dialectical
179 because, in these two cases, one of the two parties accepted or rejected
180 the others’ standpoint. The most frequent type of conclusion is when
181 the child accepted the parent’s standpoint. The differences in roles, age,
182 and competences between parents and children have certainly played a
183 relevant role in leading to this type of conclusion of their argumenta-
184 tive discussions. Even though challenging the parents’ standpoint could
185 be feasible for the children, it was not always possible as they were the
186 parents who decided the extent to which their standpoint was discussa-
187 ble. Moreover, in some cases, it seemed that the choice of continuing to
188 object the parents’ standpoints appeared to be perceived by children as



189 more demanding and, accordingly, less convenient than accepting the
190 parents' standpoints. The second most frequent type of conclusion is
191 when the parent accepts the child's standpoint. This type of conclusion
192 is strictly related to the issue discussed by parents and children because
193 it only occurred when it was related to food. Instead, it never occurred
194 that the parents accepted the children's standpoint when the issues lead-
195 ing to argumentative discussions were related to children's social behav-
196 ior, both within and outside the family context. Accordingly, these
197 findings indicate that the food-related issues can be discussable during
198 mealtime, whereas when the issues leading to argumentative discussions
199 were related to children's social behavior, the parents were not amenable
200 to changing their opinions.

201 However, the parent-child argumentative discussions during meal-
202 time did not always reach a dialectical conclusion, i.e., one of the two
203 parties accepted or rejected the others' standpoint. The most frequent
204 type of non-dialectical conclusion is when the parent shifted the focus
205 of the conversation. In such a case, there was not a real conclusion but,
206 rather, a clear interruption of their conversation because the parents
207 avoided continuing the argumentative discussion with their children.
208 This type of non-dialectical conclusion happened when the parents
209 considered the issues not appropriate for discussion during mealtime or
210 when they wanted their children to focus on eating rather than engag-
211 ing in an argumentative discussion during mealtime. The second type
212 of non-dialectical conclusion of the parent-child argumentative discus-
213 sions is when the parent, or the child, after a pause of a few seconds,
214 changed the topic of the discussion. Differently from the previous type
215 of non-dialectical conclusion, i.e., when the parent shifts the focus of
216 the conversation, in these cases, both the parent and the child appeared
217 to be not interested in continuing the argumentative discussion and,
218 accordingly, they started a new conversation on a different topic. This
219 second type of non-dialectical conclusion is, among all the four types
220 of conclusions observed, the less frequent, as children often asked ques-
221 tions, in particular, Why-questions, to find out the reasons on which
222 their parents' directives were based and, accordingly, the parents must
223 continue the argumentative discussion.



224
225

5.2 The Educational Function of Parent–Child Argumentation

226 At this point, we have a sufficient number of elements to answer the
227 main research question guiding this study: “What is the function of
228 parent–child argumentation?” The findings of the analysis of the argu-
229 mentative discussions between parents and children during mealtime
230 indicate that the function of this type of interactions is educational.

231 Through parent–child argumentation, two distinct, but strictly
232 related, educational targets are achieved. First, argumentation is an
233 instrument that permits parents to teach their children values and
234 behaviors considered, by parents themselves, as correct and appropriate.
235 During mealtime, in fact, the parents’ standpoints in argumentative dis-
236 cussions with their children are often directive. The parents argue with
237 their children because they want to teach them how to behave appro-
238 priately not only at the meal table but also in all situations in which
239 their children are in contact with other people outside the family con-
240 text. Accordingly, the argumentative interactions during mealtime open
241 to parents and children a common space for thinking that is not lim-
242 ited to activities related to the meal. From an argumentative perspective,
243 though, the role of children is not less important than the role of their
244 parents. Through their continuous questioning, children show their
245 desire to find out the—often implicit—reasons on which their parents’
246 directives are based. Therefore, while the parents often play the role of
247 “teachers” during the argumentative discussions with their children,
248 their children often play the not less important role of “active learn-
249 ers.” The following dialogue between the 4-year-old Alessandro and his
250 mother, an example we have already discussed in Chapter 3, is a clear
251 illustration of how the mother and her child play the role, respectively,
252 of teacher and active learner during the argumentative discussion:

253 Excerpt 5.1

254 Swiss family IV. Dinner 1. Family members: father (DAD, 36 years),
255 mother (MOM, 34 years), Stefano (STE, 8 years and 5 months), and



256 Alessandro (ALE, 4 years and 6 months). DAD sits at the head of the
257 meal table, MOM and STE sit on the left-hand side of DAD, while
258 ALE is walking around the meal table.

- %sit: ALE tocca e guarda il contenitore delle medicine
ALE touches and looks at the container with the medicine
1. *ALE: io: me la prendo una di queste qui (pillole).
I am: going to take one of these (pills).
- *ALE: sì!
yes!
2. *MAM: non puoi, Alessandro!
you cannot, Alessandro!
3. *ALE: che?
what?
4. *MOM: non puoi. [!: scuote la testa]
you cannot. [!: shakes his head]
5. *ALE: perché no?
why not?
6. *MOM: perché i bambini, devono prendere delle medicine speciali
because children, have to take special medicine
- *MOM: non possono prendere le medicine degli adulti
they cannot take medicine for adults
- *MOM: altrimenti, si sentono male.
otherwise, they will get sick.

259

260 In this dialogue, we can observe a difference of opinion between the
261 child, Alessandro, and his mother, since they have two opposing stand-
262 points: Alessandro, in line 1, tells his mother that he wants to take the
263 pills from the medicine container, while the mother, in line 2 and line
264 4, tells his child that she does not want him to do it. Through his Why-
265 question, in line 5, Alessandro makes it clear to his mother that he
266 wants to know—or, rather, to learn—the reason why he cannot take the
267 pills from the medicine container. As a matter of fact, by asking a Why-
268 question, the child shows his desire to find out the implicit reasons on
269 which his mother's prohibition is based. The mother, in line 6, does not
270 avoid clarifying—or, rather, to teach—to his child the reason why he
271 cannot take the pills from the medicine container.

272 The second educational target achieved through parent-child
273 argumentation is promoting children's argumentative attitude, i.e.,



274 inclination to provide arguments in support of their opinions, requests
275 and, also, desires. Although the purposes for which parents and chil-
276 dren may engage in an argumentative discussion with each other may
277 be various, argumentation always requires at least one argument in sup-
278 port of a certain standpoint. It is by discussing with their parents that
279 children, day by day, begin to learn how to produce arguments to sus-
280 tain their standpoints in verbal interactions with others. As observed by
281 Pontecorvo (1993), learning to argue is a critical element of children's
282 language socialization,² i.e., the process of learning, by means of ver-
283 bal interactions, through which children construct and transform their
284 structure of knowledge and their competence. Parent–child argumenta-
285 tion, though, favors not only the language socialization but also the cul-
286 tural socialization of children. The argumentative discussions between
287 parents and children, in fact, are not intended to be mere conflictual
288 episodes that must be avoided, but opportunities for children to learn
289 the reasons on which the behaviors, values, and rules typical of their
290 culture are based. The following dialogue between a mother and her
291 6-year-old son, Luca, an example we have already discussed in its more
292 extended and complete version in Chapter 4, is a clear illustration of
293 how the mother explains to her son the reason why his behavior, i.e.,
294 whispering things in his Dad's ears, is not correct:

295 Excerpt 5.2

296 Swiss family I. Dinner 2. Family members: father (DAD, 41 years),
297 mother (MOM, 38 years), Luca (LUC, 6 years and 8 months), and
298 Luisa (LUI, 3 years and 11 months). All family members are seated at
299 the meal table. DAD sits at the head of the meal table. MOM and LUI
300 sit on the right-hand side of DAD, while LUC sits on their opposite
301 side.

²The term “language socialization” stems from Sapir’s classic 1933 article “Language” in the Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, in which he states (quoted in Sapir, 1949, p. 15): “Language is a great force of socialization, probably the greatest that exists.”



- %sit: PAO si avvicina a DAD e gli dice qualcosa parlandogli
nell'orecchio
PAO goes towards DAD and whispers something in his ear
1. *MOM: non si dicono le cose all'orecchio, Luca
Luca, you cannot whisper things in people's ears
2. *LUC: perché?
why?
3. *MOM: dobbiamo ascoltarla tutti.
because everyone must hear it

[...]

302

303 In this dialogue, in line 1, the mother says to the child that he cannot
304 whisper in his father's ear, and the child, in line 2, asks his mother to
305 explain the reason why he cannot whisper in his Dad's ears. The argu-
306 ment used by the mother, in line 3, clarifies the reasons why the child's
307 behavior is not appropriate and, accordingly, the child does not have to
308 repeat that behavior: "because everyone must hear it." In this case, the
309 difference of opinion with her son is an opportunity used by the mother
310 to teach him a behavior that until that moment he did not know or, at
311 least, he did not know very well: to not whisper in people's ears.

312 5.3 Directions for Future Research 313 on Parent–Child Argumentation

314 This volume wants to be a starting point for a research path which
315 should be continued in the years to come. In order to complete the
316 work started with this study, future research on parent–child argumen-
317 tation should be focused on the following issues.

318 One aspect that has been discussed in this volume is how the level of
319 knowledge/experience of parents and children affect their argumentative
320 discussions since the level of knowledge/experience between parents and
321 children was not similar: the parents were more knowledgeable or more
322 experienced than their children. The asymmetry—real or perceived—of
323 knowledge and experience between participants in an argumentative dis-
324 cussion is a much debated and controversial object of research. The find-
325 ings of the study presented in this volume have the merit of highlighting



two of the reasons why the asymmetry between parents and children can be an element that favors the beginning of their argumentative discussions: on the one hand, the participants with more knowledge or experience, i.e., the parents, can promote the beginning of an argumentative discussion since their aim is to facilitate the transmission of knowledge; on the other hand, the participants with less knowledge or experience, i.e., the children, can promote the beginning of an argumentative discussion by manifesting their interest in understanding the reasons—often implicit—on which parental directives are based. In both cases, we have seen that the asymmetry between parents and children can promote learning and socialization processes. These results, however, open the way for a new research question, not addressed in this volume: Is the asymmetry of knowledge and experience between parents and children something that remains stable during the argumentative discussion or, instead, can it change? To answer this new research question, in my opinion, it would be useful to consider how the asymmetry of knowledge and experience between parents and children can modify within the argumentative stages as described in the ideal model of a critical discussion, i.e., confrontation stage, opening stage, argumentation stage, and concluding stage. Like two sides of the same coin that are closely related although they are different, both dimensions (the argumentative stages and the symmetric/asymmetric nature) ought to be necessarily considered in the analysis of parent–child argumentation. A twofold reason is in support of this claim: first, the fact that the nature of the relationship among discussants affects each stage of the argumentative interaction, its beginning, its development, and its resolution; second, the fact that, during each stage of an argumentative interaction, the nature of the relationship among discussants might slightly change, emphasizing certain aspects and hiding others.

A further aspect that has been highlighted in this study is children's curiosity to understand the reasons behind their parents' standpoints. In particular, we have seen that children manifest their curiosity through their questions, e.g., the Why-Questions. The curiosity to understand and learn is, therefore, a distinctive feature of parent–child argumentation. This aspect, however, is limited to the argumentative interactions between parents and young children (between 3 and 9 years) because



362 the nature of the interactions between parents and children evolves and
363 changes during development. Is it possible to extend the validity of this
364 consideration—the curiosity to understand and learn is a distinctive fea-
365 ture of parent–child argumentation—to the argumentative interactions
366 between parents and older children, for example, adolescents? A study
367 aimed at investigating the argumentative interactions between parents
368 and adolescent children would allow us to respond to this new research
369 question. Moreover, it would allow us to understand better whether and
370 how the function of parent–child argumentation changes according to
371 the age of children.

372 Finally, despite the corpus of data on which the present study is based
373 was constituted of families of two different nationalities, i.e., Italian
374 and Swiss, a cultural comparison aimed at singling out differences and
375 similarities between the two sub-corpora from an argumentative point
376 of view was not a goal of this study. All the Swiss-families come from
377 Lugano, the largest city in the southernmost canton of Switzerland, the
378 canton of Ticino, which is the only canton in Switzerland where the sole
379 official language is Italian. Therefore, all the families participating in the
380 study were Italian-speaking. However, even in the presence of certain
381 similarities between Italian and Swiss families, some cultural differences
382 between them cannot be denied. The consideration regarding the cul-
383 tural differences between Italian families and Swiss families opens the
384 way for a new research question, not addressed in this volume: How can
385 cultural differences between families from different geographical areas be
386 considered and evaluated with reference to the argumentative dynam-
387 ics between parents and children? To try to answer this question, in my
388 opinion, we should start from a more general question: What indicators
389 of cultural differences should be considered in the reconstruction and
390 analysis of argumentative discussions between parents and children?

391 The research directions mentioned above are open questions that
392 deserve further investigation. In order to expand our knowledge of the
393 argumentative dynamics between parents and children, it is crucial to
394 go ahead through this path. This volume has been a step to draw a new
395 and exciting research track: as the road is traced, from now on, we must
396 go forward and continue with determination and passion toward novel-
397 ties in the field of argumentation.



398

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