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The Initial Phase of the Argumentative Discussions Between Parents and Children

This chapter examines the initial phase of parent–child argumentative discussions during mealtime. The conceptual tool adopted for the analysis of the initial phase of parent–child argumentative discussions is based on the pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004). The types of issues leading parents and children to engage in argumentative discussions during mealtime as well as the contribution that parents and children provide to the inception of argumentation are described and discussed. The analysis of the initial phase of parent–child argumentative discussions also considers the role played by the specificity of the parent–child relationship and the distinctive features of the activity of family mealtime for the beginning of an argumentative discussion. Exemplary argumentative sequences that bring to light the results obtained through the qualitative analysis of a larger corpus of argumentative discussions between parents and children are presented and discussed.



19 3.1 Types of Issues Leading Parents 20 and Children to Engage 21 in Argumentative Discussions

22 Parent–child mealtime conversations are unpredictable events as they
23 are characterized by substantial—but not total—freedom about the
24 issue that can be tackled (Blum-Kulka, 1997). The topics discussed
25 during mealtime are, in fact, often entirely unforeseen by all fam-
26 ily members. However, not all topics are open for discussion at meal-
27 time. For instance, money, politics, and sex are usually viewed as less
28 suitable themes for mealtime conversations, above all in the presence
29 of young children, because even when no guests are present, the pres-
30 ence of children affects the choice of what is acceptable and what can
31 be mentioned at mealtime. The next extract, for example, shows how an
32 Italian mother explicitly invites her husband, who was commenting on
33 a political news item, to move from this topic to a different one because,
34 according to her opinion, politics is not an appropriate topic for meal-
35 time (line 2 and line 4):

36 Excerpt 3.1

37 Swiss family I. Dinner 3. Family members: father (DAD, 41 years),
38 mother (MOM, 38 years), Luca (LUC, 6 years and 8 months), and
39 Luisa (LUI, 3 years and 11 months). All family members are eating,
40 seated at the meal table. DAD sits at the head of the meal table. MOM
41 and LUI sit on the right-hand side of DAD, while LUC sits on their
42 opposite side.

1. *DAD: ma ti rendi conto? ((rivolgendosi a MOM))
but can you believe it? ((talking to MOM))
- *DAD: ci sono anche persone che hanno il coraggio di votare uno
come questo qui
*there are even people who have the courage to vote for a
person like him*
2. *MOM: no no, ora cambiamo argomento
no no now we change the subject
3. *DAD: ma hai sentito cosa ha detto oggi?
did you hear what he said today?



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4. *MOM: no no, ma ora cambiamo argomento, non parliamo di questo a tavola
no no, but now let us change the topic, do not discuss this at the meal table
5. *DAD: ah:: va bene, hai ragione
ah:: OK, you are right

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46 Because of the variety of topics discussed by parents and children dur-
47 ing mealtime conversations, it is, therefore, crucial to identify the issues
48 leading them to begin an argumentative discussion. Are there specific
49 types of issues leading to argumentation, or parents and children dis-
50 cuss argumentatively on all the topics addressed during mealtime? What
51 emerges through the analysis of the corpus of parent–child argumentative
52 discussions during mealtime is that they unfold around two general types
53 of issues: *parental directives* and *children's requests*. In the following sections,
54 how these two different types of issues lead to the beginning of argumen-
55 tative discussions between parents and children will be described and dis-
56 cussed by means of the presentation of some argumentative sequences.

57 3.1.1 Issues Generated by Parental Directives

58 In most cases, the issues leading them to engage in argumentative discus-
59 sions are generated by parental directives. The issues generated by parental
60 directives are strictly bound to the specific situational activity children are
61 involved in, i.e., the activity of mealtimes. In line with previous studies on
62 family mealtime conversations, the issues generated by parental directives
63 frequently concern feeding practices (Arcidiacono & Bova, 2015; Bova,
64 2015; Bova & Arcidiacono, 2015; Capaldi & Powley, 1990; Delamont,
65 1995). For example, it is common to observe discussions in which the
66 parents do not want their children to eat a particular food or more than a
67 certain amount of a particular food, or in which the children want to ask
68 for different food (Arcidiacono, 2011; Bova & Arcidiacono, 2014; Ochs,
69 Pontecorvo, & Fasulo, 1996). In these situations, as observed by Kent
70 (2012), it is complicated for children to resist parental directives without
71 initiating a dispute. The why and the wherefore of this difficulty can be
72 traced looking at the definition of directives done by Craven and Potter



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73 (2010). According to these authors, directives embody no orientation to
74 the recipient's ability or desire to perform the relevant activity, and this
75 lack of orientation to ability or desire is what makes them recognizable
76 as directives. In these cases, accusations and related actions assume both
77 a retroactive value because they concern violations (actions on the part of
78 the defendant and oppositional moves) and a proactive one when they are
79 projected to initiate and maintain dispute sequences. The common aspect
80 of these discussions is that in both cases parents and children engage in
81 argumentative discussions around the topic of food and in which they
82 put forward arguments to convince the other party that their standpoint
83 is more valid and therefore deserves to be accepted. The following discus-
84 sion between a father and his 8-year-old son, Gabriele, offers an illustra-
85 tion of how a parental directive related to feeding practices can trigger the
86 beginning of an argumentative discussion during mealtime:

87 **Excerpt 3.2**

88 Italian family IV. Dinner 3. Family members: father (DAD, 38 years),
89 mother (MOM, 34 years), Gabriele (GAB, 8 years and 5 months), and
90 Daniele (DAN, 5 years and 4 months). All family members are eating,
91 seated at the meal table. DAD sits at the head of the meal table. MOM
92 and GAB sit on the left-hand side of DAD, while DAN sits on their
93 opposite side.

- %sit: *GAB sta bevendo una bibita gassata
 GAB is drinking a soft drink
1. *DAD: basta bere XXX ((nome della bibita gassata)) Gabriele!
 stop drinking XXX ((name of the brand of the soft drink)),
 Gabriele!
- *DAD: adesso ti do il riso.
 now I will give you some rice.
2. *GAB: no, non voglio altro: ((sedendosi sulla sedia))
 no, I do not want anything else: ((sitting on the chair))
- *GAB: per favore, niente. [!: facendo cenni di negazione col capo]
 please, no more. [!: shaking his head in refusal]
3. *DAD: no:: non hai mangiato abbastanza.
 no:: you have not eaten enough.
4. *GAB: no:::
 no:::
- *GAB: no:: sono pieno:
 no:: I am full:



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- %act: GAB guarda verso DAD e inizia a bere nuovamente la bibita gassata
GAB looks towards DAD and starts drinking the soft drink again
5. *DAD: ti ho detto:: Gabriele basta bere questa roba ((la bibita gassata).
I told you:: Gabriele stop drinking this stuff ((the soft drink))
- %act: DAD prende il bicchiere di GAB e lo porta in cucina
DAD takes GAB's glass and takes it to the kitchen

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97 The excerpt is opened, in line 1, by a father's directive that can be
98 interpreted as implicitly condensing a standpoint and a justification. In
99 the analytical reconstruction of argumentation, the father's claim concerns
100 an invitation to the child ("you should eat some food"), followed
101 by a justification ("because you are drinking too much"). It is in line
102 2 when a difference of opinion between Gabriele and his father arises.
103 The child's intervention constitutes the beginning of the argumentative
104 discussion, as the child replies to the father that he does not want to
105 eat anything else. From an argumentative perspective, what is interesting
106 is the fact that Samuele does not consider that he must stop drinking,
107 but immediately focuses on the main claim of the parent, i.e., to
108 convince the child to eat the rice. Gabriele's refusal to accept his father's
109 proposal determines the orientation of the discussion exclusively around
110 the food. The father ratifies this specific direction of the argumentative
111 discussion in line 3, as he advances an argument based on the quantity
112 of food (no:: you have not eaten enough). However, as we can observe
113 from Gabriele's answer in line 4, this argument is not effective enough
114 to convince the child to accept the father's standpoint. The opposition
115 by Gabriele ("no:: no:: I am full") determines a change of strategy
116 in the father's position. The adult turns back to the first directive
117 (to stop drinking) to make explicit the fact that Gabriele cannot discuss
118 the parental issue anymore. The father's directive is advanced again
119 using the expression "I told you:: Gabriele," in line 5, and through the
120 action of taking the soft drink away from Gabriele. From the father's
121 perspective, this last intervention is a way to reconduct the discussion
122 to the first level, giving as an argument the inappropriate conduct of
123 Gabriele who is drinking instead of eating. What could be interpreted
124 as an imposition could turn out to be a constructive move aiming at



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125 teaching the value of argumentation as a rational way to solve differ-
126 ences of opinion. The analytical overview of the argumentative discus-
127 sion between the child, Gabriele, and his father is summarized below:

<i>Issue</i>		Should Gabriele eat some rice?
<i>Standpoints</i>	(DAD)	Yes, you must
	(GAB)	No, I do not want to
<i>Argument</i>	(DAD)	You have not eaten enough
	(GAB)	I am full

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129 Parents and children frequently engaged in argumentative discussions
130 because of parental directives related to having to eat a particular food.
131 Other examples of parental directives related to feeding practices trig-
132 gering the beginning of an argumentative discussion during mealtime
133 between parents and children include: *Should Stefano eat the rice? Should*
134 *Manuela eat the meat? Should Silverio eat the salad? Should Gabriele eat*
135 *the tortellini?* These results are in line with previous studies on family
136 discourse at mealtimes (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2018; Wiggins & Potter,
137 2003). However, parental directives did not pertain exclusively to feed-
138 ing practices, but also, frequently, the teaching of correct table manners.
139 The following example, a discussion between a mother and her 8-year-
140 old son, Gabriele, clearly illustrates these dynamics:

141 **Excerpt 3.3**

142 Italian family IV. Dinner 2. Family members: father (DAD, 38 years),
143 mother (MOM, 34 years), Gabriele (GAB, 8 years and 5 months), and
144 Daniele (DAN, 5 years and 4 months). All family members are eating, seated
145 at the meal table. DAD sits at the head of the meal table. MOM and DAN
146 sit on the left-hand side of DAD, while GAB sits on their opposite side.

%act: GAB si alza da tavola e sta per andare a sedersi sul divano
GAB gets down from the meal table, and he is about to go and
sit on the couch

1. *MOM: Gabriele, non puoi andare a guardare la TV sul divano
Gabriele, you cannot go to watch TV on the couch

%act: GAB torna a sedersi a tavola
GAB comes back to sit at the meal table

2. *GAB: ma io voglio guardare la TV sul divano!

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3. *MOM: *but I want to watch TV on the couch!*
Gabriele, quando si mangia non ci si alza da tavola
Gabriele, during mealtimes you cannot get down from the meal table
4. *GAB: perché no?
why not?
5. *MOM: perché è maleducato farlo
because it is ill-mannered to do it
- *GAB: mmm
mmm
- %act: GAB continua a mangiare rimanendo seduto a tavola
GAB remains seated at the meal table and continues to eat

This sequence starts with the child, Gabriele, who leaves the meal table and is about to go and sit on the couch to watch TV. The mother disagrees with her son's behavior and makes her standpoint explicit in line 1 (Gabriele, you cannot go to watch TV on the couch). However, the adult's directive, in its actual form, does not provide any reasons. Gabriele interprets the fact that he is not allowed to go watch TV as a directive against his wish. In fact, in line 2, the child, who came back to sit at the meal table, disagrees with his mother and advances his standpoint using the adversative conjunction "but" to mark the different position concerning the adult statement (but I want to watch TV on the couch!). In argumentative terms, the sequence that goes from line 1 to line 2 represents the confrontation stage of the ideal model of a critical discussion, as the mother's standpoint meets with the child's opposition. In this phase of the discussion, the issue leading the mother to engage in an argumentative discussion with her son is related to the teaching of correct table manners. However, to understand the issue discussed in the presented sequence, the circumstances in which the argumentation takes place must be considered. In the present case, the possibility of watching TV is not a topic of discussion per se, but it is the fact that family rules, at least for this family, imply finishing dinner before going engaging in other activities (including watching TV on the couch). The implicit accusation made by Gabriele (the impossibility of going to watch TV despite his wish, "I want...") requires the parent to give a justification. The discursive interventions by Gabriele have played a crucial role in this sense since



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175 his mother has been challenged to defend her standpoint. In other
176 words, the mother has been forced, by Gabriele, to specify the reasons
177 of her directive (line 3: *Gabriele, during mealtimes you cannot get down*
178 *from the meal table*). The question is whether and how the participants
179 use the potential of dissent to handle the critical question argumenta-
180 tively. Finally, after the unilateral directive, the mother, in line 5, offers
181 a strong dissent preventing the possibility of continuing the debate
182 (because it is ill-mannered to do it). As already Gruber (2001) put it,
183 in family conversations, when social rules are violated or fail to meet
184 expectations, an argumentative discussion can occur with the aim to
185 solve situational accusations.

186 The reconstruction of the argumentative discussion between the
187 child, Gabriele, and his mother is summarized below:

<i>Issue</i>		Can Gabriele watch TV on the couch during mealtime?
<i>Standpoints</i>	(GAB)	Yes, I can
	(MOM)	No, you cannot
<i>Argument</i>	(MOM)	Because it is ill-mannered to do it

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189 The issues leading parents to engage in argumentative discussions
190 with their children were generated by parental directives that pertain
191 also to the behavior of children in social interactions outside the fam-
192 ily. The following example is an illustration of how an issue related to
193 the child's behavior in the school context leads a father to engage in an
194 argumentative discussion with his 8-year-old son, Silverio:

Excerpt 3.4

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196 Italian family I. Dinner 3. Family members: father (DAD, 38 years),
197 mother (MOM, 38 years), Silverio (SIL, 8 years), and Gabriele (GAB,
198 5 years and 4 months). All family members are seated at the meal table.
199 DAD sits at the head of the meal table. MOM and GAB sit on the
200 right-hand side of DAD, while SIL sits on their opposite side.

1. *SIL: oggi, la maestra non mi ha fatto andare al bagno
today, the teacher did not let me go to the bathroom
2. *DAD: devi ascoltare le regole della maestra!
you must listen to the teacher's rules!



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3. *SIL: perché diceva, che possiamo andare solo alla fine della lezione
because *she said, that we can only go at the end of the lesson*
- *SIL: quando: suona la campanella
when: *the bell rings*
- 4 *DAD: e tu cosa hai fatto?
and *what did you do?*
5. *SIL: io le ho detto che non era giusto
I told her that it was not right
6. *DAD: non devi rispondere male alla maestra, devi ascoltare quello
che ti dice!
*you should not talk back to the teacher, you must listen to
what she says!*
7. *SIL: ma io dovevo andare in bagno
but I had to go to the bathroom
- 8 *DAD: è maleducato rispondere alla maestra, lo sai?
it is bad manners to talk back to the teacher, you know?
9. *SIL: sì, lo so.
yes, I know.
10. *DAD: e allora non lo fare più!
so do not do it anymore!
11. *SIL: mmm:: ((con un'espressione triste))
mmm:: ((with a cheerless expression on his face))

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204 The sequence begins with the child, Silverio, who is telling his
205 father that at school that day, the teacher had not permitted him to
206 go to the bathroom. In line 2, the father immediately makes his stand-
207 point explicit, telling Silverio that he must follow the teacher's rules,
208 thus opposing the child's standpoint. The father is not asking Silverio
209 to account for the teacher's prohibition. He is immediately appeal-
210 ing to the authoritative role of the teacher to reply to the child. The
211 father's position is orienting the exchange toward the rule that the
212 teacher's directions must be respected. In line 3, Silverio provides the
213 reasoning that the teacher used to justify the prohibition ("because she
214 said, that we can only go at the end of the lesson"). The father seems
215 to be more interested in finding out how his son behaved ("and what
216 did you do?") than in judging the reasoning underlying the teacher's
217 prohibition. This intervention opens the ground for the child to add
218 some elements in support of his initial complaint about the prohi-
219 bition of the teacher. It is a way to enlarge Silverio's response duties,
220 calling him to argue on an equal footing with his father. Silverio can



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221 express his point of view concerning the teacher's veto. In line 5, the
222 child tells his father that he told the teacher that the prohibition was,
223 according to him, not right.

224 However, the father continues to show more interest in the argument
225 advanced by the teacher than in his child's opinion about the prohibi-
226 tion. In line 6, the father explicitly disapproves his son's behavior ("you
227 should not talk back to the teacher, you must listen to what she says"),
228 appealing to a general rule at school, i.e., that it is not possible to dis-
229 agree with the teacher's directives. By doing so, the father is recalling
230 the rule positioned at the beginning of the sequence, asking the child
231 to align with his argument based on the authority of the teacher. The
232 father's intervention can be interpreted as an opposition turn involving
233 a comment upon what was said in the prior turn, but the appeal to the
234 general assumption and principle connected to the institutional value of
235 the teacher's role can also be intended as a way of avoiding further dis-
236 cussions. Following the father's orientation, there is no way to debate the
237 teacher's rules at school. However, the intervention by the child, Silverio,
238 in line 5, puts the father in the position to add some further arguments
239 sustaining his standpoint. Moreover, by his intervention in line 7 ("but
240 I had to go to the bathroom"), the child starts to repair a potential mis-
241 understanding (his physiological need instead of the choice of answering
242 back the teacher).

243 The argumentative discussion between the child, Silverio, and his
244 father is particularly interesting because there is a confrontation stage
245 where the father's standpoint (*you must listen to the teacher's rules*) meets
246 with the child's opposite view (*I told the teacher that it was not right*). By
247 focusing on this phase of the discussion, we can highlight that the issue
248 leading the father to engage in an argumentative discussion with his
249 son is related to the behavior of the child in the school context, and not
250 to the appropriateness of the teacher's prohibition. The child, Silverio,
251 tries to justify his reaction on the assumption that the teacher's prohibi-
252 tion was not right, while the father uses the argument of authority ("it
253 is bad manners to talk back to the teacher, you know?") to underline
254 that at school it is not possible to disagree with the teacher's directives.
255 In this sense, we can observe how during mealtime family members



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256 can deny the opponent's status/behavior by challenging the position
257 put forward in the confrontation stage. In line 10, the father ends the
258 sequence ("so do not do it anymore!") by commanding Silverio not
259 to repeat the same mistake in the future. The father's final statement
260 suspends the topic as a subject of discussion: the pragmatic device "so"
261 presents his position as a generally accepted norm that is not open to
262 discussion. The child accepts this intervention of the father, although
263 with a cheerless expression on his face. In agreement with what
264 Goodwin (2006) already observed analyzing a dispute between a father
265 and his son who is just entering adolescence, in the argumentative dis-
266 cussion between the child, Silverio, and his father it seems that both
267 parties, in their orientation to future actions, are willing to negotiate
268 in a macro-perspective, i.e., the future behavior of Silverio at school.
269 We can reconstruct the argumentative discussion between the child,
270 Silverio, and his father, as follows:

<i>Issue</i>		Does Silverio have to respect the teacher's rule?
<i>Standpoints</i>	(SIL)	The teacher's rule was not right
	(DAD)	You must listen to what the teacher says
<i>Argument</i>	(SIL)	But I had to go to the bathroom
	(DAD)	It is ill-mannered to answer back the teacher

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272 The argumentative discussion between the child, Silverio, and his father,
273 is not the only case of argumentative discussion triggered by an issue
274 related to the social behavior of children. Other issues leading to argumen-
275 tative discussions between parents and children related to the same type of
276 issues are, for example, the following: *Should Giorgia invite all her school-*
277 *mates to her birthday party? Should Francesco apologize with his schoolmate*
278 *Antonio? Should Manuela lend her crayons to her friend Valentina?*

279 3.1.2 Issues Generated by Children's Requests

280 The second type of issues leading parents and children to engage in
281 argumentative discussions were generated by children's requests. This
282 type of issues concerns activities not only related to mealtimes, such as



283 eating behaviors and teaching of correct table manners by parents, but
284 also to children's social behavior within and outside the family context.
285 In particular, one question asked by children to their parents, more than
286 others, seems to have a significant role from an argumentative perspec-
287 tive: the *Why-question*.¹

288 Children's Why-questions have long held the attention of many
289 scholars in diverse research fields, but above all in developmental and
290 cognitive psychology and linguistics. The first studies date back to the
291 early twentieth century. Stern (1924), who was interested in investigat-
292 ing the essential sides of children's minds as they develop as far as their
293 sixth year, in his seminal work "Psychology of early childhood" divided
294 the development stages in which questions usually emerge into two
295 periods. The first, named *naming period*, concerns the names of objects
296 and occurs at the end of children's second year. During this period, the
297 questions that children produce refer to objects that are present or to
298 actions related to an ongoing activity. The second period, named *when*
299 *and why period*, typically occurs between 3 and 4 years. In this period,
300 children begin to form questions about absent objects or people, or
301 events with no immediate connection with the present. According to
302 Piaget (1929) however, children begin to ask Why-questions because
303 of a specific developmental need. He observed that children ask
304 questions—in particular, Why-questions—to obtain more information
305 to fill gaps in their knowledge. Following Piaget, Isaacs (1930) argued
306 that the need to ask Why-questions arose when the child must deal with
307 anomalies, deviations, contrasts, or differences which stimulate a sense
308 of unease or unsettledness.

309 More recent studies have shown that the ability of children to answer
310 as well as ask Why-questions, and to clarify the reasons on which
311 their answers are based, increase rapidly between the ages of 2 and
312 5 years (Loukusa, Ryder, & Leinonen, 2008; Valian & Casey, 2003).
313 This aspect plays a vital role in the development of children's verbal

¹In Italian, the word "perché" is used both to ask "why" and as a response, like the English word "because." In attempting to identify all Why-questions asked by children to their parents, I did not consider each instance of "perché" used by children when speaking with their parents but only those with an interrogative function.



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314 skills and therefore in their capacity to interact with adults and peers.
315 According to Chouinard, Harris, and Maratsos (2007, p. vii), “asking
316 questions allows children to gain information they need to move their
317 knowledge structures closer to an adult-like state.” By focusing on pre-
318 school-aged children (aged 2–5 years), the authors observed that when
319 parents do not provide, or cannot provide satisfactory answers to a
320 child’s question, the child perseveres in asking his/her question to gain
321 the requested information. Chouinard and her colleagues also observed
322 that during the development children learn to formulate Why-questions
323 more efficiently to gather the information they want to find out. In the
324 authors’ view, the ability to ask this type of questions constitutes an
325 efficient cognitive development mechanism. In a recent work focused
326 on preschool children aged 2–4 years, Frazier, Gelamn, and Wellman
327 (2009) examined children’s Why-questions and their reactions to the
328 answers they received in conversations with adults. Like what was found
329 by Chouinard et al. (2007) and Bova and Arcidiacono (2013), they
330 observed that children agree and ask further questions following adult
331 explanations. On the contrary, children keep asking Why-questions and
332 provide their explanation following inadequate or nonexistent explana-
333 tions by parents.

334 Altogether, this concise review of the most relevant literature on
335 children’s Why-questions indicates that what drives children to ask
336 Why-questions to their parents is primarily the need to acquire new
337 information. In most cases, the studies so far realized bring attention
338 to the explanatory function of children’s Why-questions, i.e., how this
339 type of question allows children to ask for knowledge of the reasons that
340 have caused an event. Hitherto, less attention has been paid to the argu-
341 mentative function of children’s questions, i.e., the action of putting
342 into doubt the standpoint advanced by another person.

343 Concerning the specific role of Why-questions, Walton (2004,
344 p. 72) well explains the difference between the argumentative and explan-
345 atory function of Why-questions. The explanatory Why-questions aim
346 to gain an understanding of the causes of an event already ascertained
347 and acknowledged by discussants. The explanation moves from an ascer-
348 tained fact and aims not to justify—as facts require no justification—but



349 to identify the reasons why the fact is true, or the event occurred. In
350 contrast, the argumentative Why-questions presuppose a difference of
351 opinion between two or more parties, as argumentation starts from a
352 controversial thesis, and ideally ends with conclusive proof². In line with
353 the previous studies on children's Why-questions, in most cases, the chil-
354 dren asked Why-questions to their parents to acquire an explanation of
355 an event with an immediate connection to the present. The explanatory
356 function of the Why-question can be clearly observed, for example, in the
357 following dialogue between a father and his 6-year-old son, Francesco:

358 Excerpt 3.5

359 Swiss family V. Dinner 2. Family members: father (DAD, 37 years),
360 mother (MOM, 37 years), Francesco (FRA, 6 years and 3 months), and
361 Michele (MIC, 4 years and 2 months). All family members are eating,
362 seated at the meal table. DAD sits at the head of the meal table. MOM
363 and MIC sit on the right-hand side of DAD, while FRA sits on their
364 opposite side.

1. *FRA: papà, perché non piove oggi?
Dad, why is not it raining today?
2. *DAD: perché oggi, le nuvole sono piene d'acqua
because today, the clouds are full of water
- *DAD: ma la vogliono tenere tutta per loro, ancora un po'!
but they want to keep it just for themselves, a little longer!

365
366 This sequence starts with the child, Francesco, who notes, looking
367 out the window, that, unlike previous days, it is not raining. The child,
368 in line 1, asks his father why it is not raining. Through his straight-
369 forward question, the child seeks to know the cause of a nonevent. In
370 responding to his child's Why-question, the father, in line 2, provides
371 an explanation, adapting the content and language of his answer to the
372 child's level of understanding. It is important to observe that there is
373 not a difference of opinion between father and child, as they both agree
374 that the event, i.e., today is not raining, is true.

²For a detailed study on the differences between argumentation and explanation, see also Rigotti and Greco Morasso (2009) and Snoeck Henkemans (1999, 2001).



375 Another example that allows us to clarify the explanatory function
376 of children's Why-question further is the following dialogue between a
377 mother and 6-year-old daughter, Giorgia:

378 Excerpt 3.6

379 Italian family II. Dinner 3. Family members: father (DAD, 34 years),
380 mother (MOM, 33 years), Giorgia (GIO, 6 years and 6 months), and
381 Clara (CLA, 3 years and 10 month). All family members seated at the
382 meal table. DAD sits at the head of the meal table. CLA sits on the left-
383 hand side of DAD, while GIO plays with MOM seated on MOM's legs.

- %act: GIO gioca con MOM seduta sulle gambe di MOM
GIO plays with MOM seated on MOM's legs
1. *MOM: Alessia è coccolata da tutti a scuola ((scuola materna))
Alessia is coddled by everyone at school ((kindergarten))
2. *GIO: perché è coccolata da tutti?
why does everyone coddle her?
3. *MOM: perché è piccola [: ridendo]
because she is a baby [: laughing]
4. *MOM: è proprio piccola [: ridendo]
she is really a baby [: laughing]
- %act: MOM e GIO ridono
MOM and GIO laugh
5. *MOM: non è vero?
is not it?
6. *GIO: sì certo [=sorridente].
yes sure [: smiling]

384

385 This sequence starts, in line 1, with the mother saying to her older
386 daughter, Giorgia, that everyone at kindergarten coddles her young
387 sister, Clara. In the meanwhile, Clara is playing seated on her moth-
388 er's legs. The mother's expression appears to be a way to keep playing
389 with her young daughter. Giorgia, in line 2, replies to her mother by
390 advancing a request of explanation: Why does everyone at kindergar-
391 ten coddle Clara? In this case, there is no difference of opinion between
392 the mother and her older daughter Giorgia. In fact, by asking a Why-
393 question, Giorgia is not casting doubt on the fact that everyone at kin-
394 dergarten coddles her younger sister, but she manifests her interests to
395 know why. As in the previous example, i.e., the dialogue between the



396 child, Francesco, and his father, also in this case the parent's standpoint
397 is not put into doubt by the child.

398 In the corpus, children asked Why-questions not only to know
399 the reasons of events already ascertained but also to put into doubt the
400 validity of the reasons on which the parents' opinions are based. The
401 Why-questions characterized by an argumentative function were less
402 frequently observed than those with an explanatory function. Typically,
403 this second type of children Why-questions were followed by arguments
404 advanced by parents which justify their opposition to the child's stand-
405 point. An example that illustrates this aspect is the following dialogue
406 between the 7-year-old daughter, Manuela, and her father:

407 Excerpt 3.7

408 Swiss family III. Dinner 1. Family members: father (DAD, 39 years),
409 mother (MOM, 34 years), Manuela (MAN, 7 years and 4 months),
410 Filippo (FIL, 5 years and 1 month), and Carlo (CAR, 3 years and
411 1 month). All family members are eating, seated at the meal table. DAD
412 sits at the head of the meal table. MOM and CAR sit on the left-hand
413 side of DAD, while FIL and MAN sit on their opposite side.

- 414 1. *MAN: questo poco di pasta lo posso lasciare? ((sollevando legger-
mente il suo piatto per mostrarne il contenuto al papà))
*can I leave this little bit of pasta? ((slightly raising the plate to
show the contents to the father))*

415 Here the expression *this little bit* aims to obtain a concession. The
416 father, on the contrary, replies with a prohibition:

- 417 2. *DAD: no, non puoi
no, you cannot

418 At this point, Manuela, interested in challenging the parental prohi-
419 bition, asks:

- 420 3. *MAN: perché papà?
why Dad?

**3 The Initial Phase of the Argumentative Discussions ... 55**

421 In his answer, the father rebuts the daughter's argument based on *this*
422 *little bit*:

423 4. *DAD: non ne hai mangiato per niente, Manuela
you have eaten nothing, Manuela

424 In this dialogue, there is a difference of opinion between the child,
425 Manuela, and her father. Manuela wants to leave a little bit of pasta that
426 is still on her plate, while the father, in line 2, disagrees with her daugh-
427 ter ("no, you cannot"). By asking a Why-question, in line 3, the child
428 challenges her father to justify the reasons on which his prohibition is
429 based. At this point, in line 4, the father puts forward an argument in
430 support of his standpoint ("you have eaten nothing, Manuela"). We can
431 reconstruct the argumentative discussion between the child, Manuela,
432 and her father as follows:

<i>Issue</i>		Can Manuela leave a little bit of pasta (and not eating all of it)?
<i>Standpoints</i>	(MAN)	Yes, I can
	(DAD)	No, you cannot
<i>Argument</i>	(DAD)	You have eaten nothing

433

434 The following dialogue between the 4-year-old child, Alessandro, and
435 his mother is a good illustration of an additional feature of children's
436 Why-questions with an argumentative function:

Excerpt 3.8

438 Swiss family IV. Dinner 1. Family members: father (DAD, 36 years),
439 mother (MOM, 34 years), Stefano (STE, 8 years and 5 months), and
440 Alessandro (ALE, 4 years and 6 months). DAD sits at the head of the
441 meal table, MOM and STE sit on the left-hand side of DAD, while
442 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).

443
444



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- *ALE: si!
 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.

445

446 The sequence begins when the child, Alessandro, tells his mother
447 of his intention to take the pills from the medicine container. The child
448 announces his action with a pre-sequence—“*I am going to...*”—and
449 reinforces his position by concluding his remark with “*yes*” (line 1). The
450 mother disagrees with the child’s behavior, twice repeating, in line 2 and
451 line 4, “*you cannot.*” After, in line 5, Alessandro asks his mother why he
452 cannot take the pills from the medicine container (“*why not?*”). In doing
453 so, the child makes no effort to defend his position by putting forward
454 arguments on his behalf; instead, he challenges his mother to explain why
455 he cannot take the pill from the medicine container. The mother, in line 6,
456 does not avoid justifying her prohibition, putting forward her argument:
457 “*because children have to take special medicine.*” The subject of the moth-
458 er’s claim is no longer her son, but the broader category of children, “*they*
459 *cannot take [...] they will get sick.*” Accordingly, this intervention evokes a
460 general rule—*children have to...*—to which Alessandro is also subject.

461 In this dialogue, we can observe a difference of opinion between the
462 child, Alessandro, and his mother, since they have two opposing stand-
463 points. Through his Why-question, Alessandro makes it clear that he
464 wants to know the reason why he cannot take the pills from the med-
465 icine container, i.e., the reason for the prohibition imposed by his
466 mother. From an argumentative perspective, by asking a Why-question,
467 the child assumes a waiting position before accepting or putting into



468 doubt the parental directive. As a matter of fact, by asking a Why-
469 question, the child challenges his mother to justify her standpoint.
470 Moreover, the child shows his desire to find out the—often implicit—
471 reasons on which his parents’ standpoint is based. Accordingly, the
472 Why-question reflects Alessandro’s desire to know and find out what is,
473 until that point, unknown to him. The reconstruction of the argumen-
474 tative discussion between the child, Alessandro, and his mother is sum-
475 marized below:

<i>Issue</i>		Can Alessandro take the pills from the medicine container?
<i>Standpoints</i>	(ALE)	Yes, I can
	(MOM)	No, you cannot
<i>Arguments</i>	(MOM)	a) Because children cannot take medicine for adults b) Otherwise, they will get sick

476
477 Other examples of issues leading to argumentative discussions
478 between parents and children triggered by children’s requests include:
479 *Can Alessandro use that eraser? Can Dad sing along with Marco? Can*
480 *Alessandro take the crayon? Can Francesco whisper in his Dad’s ear?*

481 3.2 Parents’ and Children’s Contribution 482 to the Beginning of Argumentative 483 Discussions

484 This chapter has been devoted to the investigation of the initial phase
485 of parent–child argumentative discussions. We have seen the argumen-
486 tative discussions unfold around issues that are generated by paren-
487 tal directives and children’s requests. Parental directives often concern
488 activities related to mealtime, such as having to eat a particular food or
489 adopting correct table manners, while children’s requests refer to a wide
490 range of topics, from issues closely related to mealtime to issues more
491 generally related to children’s daily life.

492 After having identified the types of issues leading parents and chil-
493 dren to engage in argumentative discussions during mealtimes, from
494 an argumentative perspective is important to understand the specific



495 contributions that they both provide to the inception of argumentation.
496 The findings of the analysis indicate that parents and children have two
497 distinct but equally crucial functions in the beginning phase of an argu-
498 mentative discussion. To accurately reconstruct the specific role of par-
499 ents and children in the inception of argumentation during mealtimes
500 crucial is the moment at which they accept the need to defend a stand-
501 point by providing arguments to support it. According to the model of
502 a critical discussion, the notion of burden of proof implies that when a
503 party advances a standpoint, she/he commits her/himself to defend her/
504 his position by putting forward, at least, one argument in its support.
505 When she/he does, she/he assumes the burden of proof; when she/he
506 does not, she/he does not accept to assume the burden of proof (van
507 Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2002). The investigation of the initial phase
508 of parent–child argumentative discussions during mealtime shows that
509 parents regularly assume the burden of proof in argumentative discus-
510 sions with their children. The children, instead, often but not always,
511 evade the burden of proof, by not being expected to provide any rea-
512 soning to support their standpoints. The following dialogue between an
513 8-year-old child, Marco, and his mother allows to clearly illustrate these
514 dynamics:

515 Excerpt 3.9

516 Italian family V. Dinner 1. Family members: father (DAD, 42 years),
517 mother (MOM, 40 years), Marco (MAR, 8 years and 6 months), and
518 Leonardo (5 years and 7 months). All family members are seated at the
519 meal table. DAD sits at the head of the meal table, MOM and LEO sit on
520 the right-hand side of DAD, while MAR is seated on their opposite side.

1. *MAR: Mamma [! a bassa voce]
Mom [! a low tone of voice]
2. *MOM: eh
eh
3. *MAR: voglio parlare [! a bassa voce]
I want to talk:: [! a low tone of voice]
- *MAR: ma non è possibile [! a bassa voce]
but it is not possible [! a low tone of voice]
- *MAR: perché la mia voce è brutta [! a bassissima voce]
because my voice is bad [! a very low tone of voice]



3 The Initial Phase of the Argumentative Discussions ...

59

4. *MOM: no assolutamente!
absolutely not!
- *MOM: no::
no::
5. *MAR: dai:: ((col tono di chi dice una cosa evidente))
please Mom:: ((with the tone of someone who says something obvious))
6. *MOM: perché?
why?
- *MOM: io non penso proprio.
I do not think so
- *MOM: una bella voce, da uomo
a beautiful voice, [the voice] of a man
- *MOM: grossa bella.
big beautiful
7. *MAR: no:
no:
8. *MOM: stasera:: se si sentirà il rumore del pane chioccarello [!:
sorridendo]
tonight:: if we hear the sound of crisp bread ((the noise when crisp bread is being chewed)) [! smiling]
9. *MAR: bene, ma adesso mica fino a questo punto!
fine, but not to this point!

523

524 The sequence, in line 1, begins with Marco's negative assumption
525 ("I want to talk, but it is not possible because my voice is bad").
526 However, the child does not defend his initial assumption by provid-
527 ing arguments, refusing to assume the burden of proof since, for him,
528 his assumption needs no defense (*please Mom::*). The mother, instead,
529 provides arguments to defend her different standpoint and, therefore,
530 accepts to assume the burden of proof. Moreover, by providing an argu-
531 ment in support of her standpoint, the mother assumes the decision to
532 begin the argumentative discussion.

533 Despite the burden of proof is mostly on parents, children play an
534 equally crucial argumentative role, since, through their questioning,
535 they lead their parents to justify the reasons on which parental rules
536 and prohibitions are based. In this regard, the Why-question asked by
537 children to their parents appears to have an important role. The chil-
538 dren's Why-questions appear to be a linguistic indicator of the begin-
539 ning of an argumentative discussion between parents and children



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540 during mealtime conversations. Asking this type of question, the
541 children challenged their parents to justify their rules and directives,
542 which were frequently implicit or based on rules not initially known
543 by or previously made explicit to them. During mealtime conversa-
544 tions, the presence of children seems to favor the beginning of argu-
545 mentative discussions and represents a *stimulus factor*, inducing parents
546 to reason with their children. Through the Why-questions, children
547 manifested their desire to know the reason behind the parents' direc-
548 tives, and through an argumentative discussion, they try to achieve
549 their purpose. For example, we have seen how, in Excerpt 3.8, the
550 Why-question asked by the child, Alessandro, produces the effect of
551 eliciting the explication of the rule on which the parental directive is
552 based:

4. *MOM: non puoi. [!:! scuotendo 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.

553

554 Furthermore, by asking Why-questions, children assume a waiting
555 position before accepting or casting doubt on the parental directive.
556 The child, Alessandro, for example, wants to know the reason why he
557 cannot take the pills from the medicine container; by asking a Why-
558 question, the child is implicitly saying to his mother: "I am waiting to
559 hear your reasons. Only after that will I be able to evaluate if your pro-
560 hibition is proper or not." Alessandro's behavior does not mean that he
561 will decide whether to obey the mother's directive only after listening to
562 his mother's answer. Instead, it means that Alessandro puts himself in a
563 waiting position before deciding if the mother's directive is acceptable to
564 him or not.

565 The observed dynamics characterizing the initial phase of parent-
566 child argumentative discussions reveal that argumentation is a



567 co-constructed activity in which children play a role that is equally fun-
568 damental to that of their parents. Argumentative interactions should
569 be viewed as a bidirectional process of mutual apprenticeship (Bova
570 & Arcidiacono, 2017; Pontecorvo, Fasulo, & Sterponi, 2001), where
571 parents affect children and are simultaneously affected by them. By
572 their mutual engagement in conflictual discussions, parents and chil-
573 dren jointly produce and transform the social order and their positions
574 within the family frameworks, through the formatting and sequencing
575 of actions and their responses.

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