Chapter 13

Conflict and Averted Conflict in Preschoolers' Interactions With Siblings and Friends

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Children develop in the context of a network of relationships with adults and other children, both inside and outside the family, that expands and changes as they grow older. In the last two decades, tremendous progress has been made toward understanding how the different types of relationships in this network are themselves related. Hartup's (1979) map of childhood's social worlds continues to be elaborated and refined as researchers explore children's relationships with parents, siblings, and peers, charting the territorial overlaps, boundaries, and bridges between them. The mapping of children's various types of relationships with each other is very much an ongoing process; for example, we know a great deal about the terrain *within* sibling, peer, and friend relationships, but the connections *between* them have been much less clearly delineated.

In this chapter I examine the contrasts and linkages between children's sibling and peer relationships, concluding with a discussion of research my students and I are conducting on young children's conflicts and averted conflicts with their siblings and friends (DeHart, Konchalski, Keogh, & Miller, 1996; DeHart, Richardson, Petrelli, Laliberte, & Haseley, 1993). The unique pattern of cross-relationship similarities and differences between sibling and peer relationships makes them a particularly interesting setting for studying what young children carry from one relationship to another and the extent to which their social skills and interaction strategies are relationship-specific. The conflicts and averted conflicts that occur during children's interactions with siblings and friends can potentially

reveal much about children's social skills and about the structure and quality of the relationships in which they occur.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SIBLING AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Predicting linkages between sibling and peer relationships requires an understanding of the similarities and differences between them—how they compare as contexts for interaction and development, and the extent to which they can serve similar functions. Children's friendships must also be differentiated from general peer relationships; these two types of relationships provide very different interactional contexts, and there is evidence that they are connected to sibling relationships in different ways (Mendelson, Aboud, & Lanthier, 1994; Stocker & Dunn, 1990).

Children's relationships with siblings, peers, and friends vary along three major dimensions—symmetry, closeness, and voluntariness (Laursen, Hartup, & Koplas, 1996). The dimension of symmetry measures the extent to which the partners in a relationship are on an equal footing. At one extreme are *asymmetrical* or *vertical* relationships, such as those between parents and children, which involve mainly *complementary* interactions. At the other extreme are *symmetrical* or *horizontal* relationships, such as those between same-aged peers, which involve predominantly *reciprocal* interactions (Hartup, 1989). Although sibling relationships are more symmetrical and reciprocal than parent–child relationships, they are also *less* symmetrical and more complementary than same-age peer relationships. The age difference between nontwin siblings produces inevitable differences in size, strength, power, knowledge, skills, and developmental status. Sibling relationships are thus a mixture of complementarity and reciprocity, occupying a unique position between adult–child relationships and peer relationships. Rather than being either truly vertical or truly horizontal, they may best be thought of as *diagonal* relationships, with steepness of slope depending on age gap and individual characteristics and gradually changing from nearly vertical in early childhood to nearly horizontal by the end of adolescence.

Through middle childhood, role asymmetry is evident in older siblings' tendency to initiate behaviors, manage, teach, and nurture, and younger siblings' tendency to imitate, be managed, learn, and accept nurturance. In contrast, peer interactions are more reciprocal, with both children initiating, imitating, teaching, and managing to about the same extent (Abramovitch, Corter, Pepler, & Stanhope, 1986; Brody, Stoneman, & MacKinnon, 1982; Whiting & Whiting, 1975). The content of children's interactions with siblings and peers is also affected by these differences in symmetry; for

example, school-aged boys' play with friends often involves competitive physical activity, whereas their play with younger siblings is toy-centered (Stoneman, Brody, & MacKinnon, 1984). As sibling pairs grow older, their relationships become increasingly symmetrical (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990; Vandell, Minnett, & Santrock, 1987). Thus, in terms of symmetry, sibling relationships become more similar to peer relationships over time.

The dimension of closeness involves both psychological intimacy and the frequency and diversity of interactions between relationship partners (Laursen et al., 1996). Frequent, varied interactions form a basis for psychological closeness, although they do not guarantee that it will develop. In early childhood, siblings often spend more time with each other than with their parents or with children outside the family (Dunn, 1983). As a result, siblings are more familiar and predictable than peers, especially for young children—a difference that has many implications for the development and use of skills related to social understanding (Dunn & Munn, 1985). In early childhood, sibling relationships are more physically and psychologically intimate than peer relationships, but by adolescence intimacy is greater with friends than with siblings (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990). In part because of the closeness of their relationship, siblings often have particularly intense feelings toward each other, both positive and negative, resulting in interactions that are qualitatively different from those with peers (Dunn, 1983).

The dimension of voluntariness refers to the extent to which a relationship is chosen and structured by the partners. At one extreme are involuntary or *closed-field* relationships, which children do not choose and which are partially structured for them by law or custom (Berscheid, 1985). At the other extreme are voluntary or *open-field* relationships, which are freely chosen and in which a structure must be worked out by the partners. Although sibling relationships are clearly involuntary, peer relationships vary along this dimension; friendships are voluntary, but many peer relationships, such as those with classmates, are not (Maccoby, 1996). The duration of closed-field relationships is based on factors not controlled by the relationship partners, such as biology, law, institutional practice, and social custom; in contrast, the duration of open-field relationships depends to a large extent on how satisfying they are for the participants. Thus, sibling relationships are by definition more permanent than most peer relationships or friendships. At the same time, children are generally more concerned with maintaining a friendship than with maintaining a sibling relationship, inasmuch as friendships are based on choice and mutual liking, whereas sibling relationships are not. As a consequence, children report more reliable alliances *and* more conflict with siblings than with friends, and they show more prosocial behavior toward friends than toward siblings (Abramovitch et al., 1986; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985a).

To summarize, sibling relationships are less symmetrical and voluntary than peer or friend relationships, but similar to friendships in closeness, especially in early and middle childhood. General peer relationships are similar to friendships in symmetry, but not as close as friend or sibling relationships, and they vary in voluntariness. Friendships are the most voluntary of the three relationships and by adolescence the closest.

The complex pattern of differences and similarities among children's sibling, peer, and friend relationships suggests that they are not functionally equivalent for children. Instead, they are connected but distinct relationships with the potential for some overlapping functions. Interaction patterns based on the asymmetry of sibling relationships are not likely to transfer to more symmetrical relationships with peers. Behaviors that are acceptable in sibling relationships may be tolerated in some involuntary relationships with peers, but not in dealings with friends. Functions that require interpersonal closeness may be fulfilled by relationships with siblings or friends, but not by general peer relationships. Thus, the connections between sibling and peer relationships are likely to be different from those between sibling relationships and friendships.

LINKAGES BETWEEN SIBLING AND PEER RELATIONSHIPS

In the past 10 years, researchers have expressed heightened interest in linkages between relationships, both within families and between family and peer systems (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1988; Parke & Ladd, 1992). However, most of the attention has been focused on links between parent–child and peer relationships and between parent–child and sibling relationships. Less attention has been paid to links between sibling and peer relationships, even though sibling relationships are often assumed to provide a training ground for peer interaction or a bridge between parent–child and peer relationships (Hartup, 1979; McCoy, Brody, & Stoneman, 1994).

Past researchers have suggested several ways children's relationships with siblings, peers, and friends might be connected (Dunn, 1993). The simplest possibility is *behavioral continuity*, with similarity of behaviors or interaction strategies across the three relationships. Behavioral continuity could be produced either by transfer of behaviors learned in one relationship to another (Bank, Patterson, & Reid, 1996; McCoy et al., 1994), or by temperamental or personality characteristics that remain relatively constant across situations (Caspi & Elder, 1988).

A second possibility is *qualitative continuity*, in which quality is consistent across relationships but specific behaviors are not (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988). Qualitative continuity could result from the transfer of social skills across

relationships, from the operation of social cognitive factors, such as Bowlby's (1982) internal working models, or from the development of overall social competence in one relationship and its subsequent application in others.

It is also reasonable to hypothesize *discontinuity*, with highly relationship-specific behavior, little cross-relationship carryover, and the possibility of qualitative independence (Mendelson et al., 1994). Given the differences among sibling, peer, and friend relationships, many behavior patterns and interaction strategies that develop in sibling relationships may not readily transfer to relationships with peers.

A particular form of discontinuity is *compensation*, with quality varying inversely between relationships and little cross-relationship transfer of behaviors (Stocker & Dunn, 1990). Compensation can involve a positive relationship taking on the functions of a negative or missing relationship; for example, negative sibling relationships, or having no siblings, may push children to associate intensely with peers and to form close friendships. Conversely, warm, close sibling relationships may sometimes develop because other playmates are unavailable. However, inversion of quality between sibling and peer relationships does not necessarily imply compensatory effects. This type of discontinuity may also reflect interference between relationships; warm, close sibling relationships may make the formation of close peer relationships less likely, or the increasing importance of peers and the formation of close, lasting friendships in middle childhood and adolescence may push sibling relationships aside and negatively affect their quality.

Research on Sibling–Peer Linkages

The first evidence of connections between sibling and peer relationships came from studies comparing firstborns and laterborns or children with and without siblings on various measures of social competence and peer interaction. Miller and Maruyama (1976) found birth-order differences in others' perceptions of children's social competence, with laterborns rated as more popular by peers and more sociable and friendly by teachers than firstborns. Pepler, Corter, and Abramovitch (1982) found no differences in the day-care classroom and playground *behaviors* of preschoolers with and without older siblings, but some differences in other children's *reactions* to them. Specifically, more agonistic behaviors were directed to only children and more prosocial behaviors to children with older siblings. These findings suggest that having an older sibling can enhance a child's relationships with peers, but they provide no evidence for whether this enhancement involves transfer of specific behaviors or of more general social skills.

Studies focusing on direct carryover of specific behaviors from sibling to peer relationships have found limited evidence of continuity. In one

home observation study (Abramovitch et al., 1986), 4- to 8-year-olds showed no carryover of prosocial, agonistic, or imitative behaviors between interactions with siblings and with peers. Another study of preschoolers (Berndt & Bulleit, 1985) found continuity between behavior at home with siblings and behavior in preschool with peers only for aggressiveness and time spent in unoccupied or onlooker behavior. However, children with siblings close to them in age also showed carryover of prosocial behavior and imitation, suggesting that behavior is more readily transferred to peer relationships from sibling relationships that are relatively symmetrical and therefore peer-like.

When behavioral continuity does occur, it often reflects a lack of social competence, as in aggressive or socially withdrawn behavior (Bank et al., 1996; Berndt & Bulleit, 1985). Social competence is assumed to produce flexibility and appropriate responses to different situations and interaction partners, whereas one mark of low social competence is inflexibility and persistence in inappropriate behavior across situations. Dunn (1993) notes that transfer of controlling behavior from sibling to peer relationships has been found in studies including secondborns, but not in those limited to firstborns. She suggests that controlling behavior toward siblings is the norm for firstborns, but if they are socially competent they will not carry it over to interactions with friends. For secondborns, however, controlling behavior toward siblings is atypical and may reflect a generally problematic interaction style that is likely to be generalized to other partners.

Research focusing on qualitative aspects of relationships and transfer of general social skills has uncovered more evidence of continuity between children's sibling relationships and their relationships with peers and friends. Vandell and Wilson (1987) observed that the quality of 6-month-olds' interactions with older siblings predicted the quality of their interactions at 9 months of age with unfamiliar peers; specifically, the more they initiated interaction and maintained coordinated interaction with their older siblings, the more they did so later with peers. Continuity between sibling and peer relationships has also been observed in the opposite direction; Kramer and Gottman (1992) found that the quality of 3- to 5-year-olds' play and conflict management with their best friends predicted the quality of later interactions with infant siblings.

Qualitative continuity has also been found between preschoolers' peer relationships and their relationships with siblings beyond infancy. In several studies, warmth and closeness in sibling relationships were positively correlated with cooperation and negatively correlated with conflict and disruptiveness in interactions with friends and other peers. Sibling conflict was negatively correlated with positive affect in friendships, and high sibling conflict was associated with being without friends or having no same-age friends (Graham-Bermann & Hartup, 1991; Gruys, Park, & Kelleher, 1992).

In one study of 4- to 6-year-olds (Dunn, 1993, this volume), children showed continuity across sibling and friend relationships in connected communication and conflict management style, but not in amount of positive or negative affect expressed.

In middle childhood, warmth in sibling relationships tends to be positively correlated with warmth in friendships and with teacher ratings of emotional control (Stocker, 1994; Stormshak, Bellanti, Bierman, et al., 1996). In contrast, high sibling conflict, especially when combined with low warmth, has been associated with poor best friendships and with teacher ratings of high aggression and low social competence (Graham-Bermann & Hartup, 1991; McCoy et al., 1994; Stormshak et al., 1996).

It is, of course, possible that both behavioral and qualitative continuity can be ascribed to stable characteristics of individuals, rather than influences between relationships. Indeed, there is some evidence that temperament contributes to continuity across relationships. Certain aspects of temperament are related to the quality of both sibling relationships and friendships; children rated by parents as having difficult temperaments report less warmth and more conflict in their sibling relationships and lower quality of best friendships than other children do (McCoy et al., 1994). Children's emotionality, as rated by their mothers, partially accounts for similarity in their rate of conflict with siblings and friends (DeHart, Laliberte, Strazza, & Keogh, 1995).

More complex connections among sibling, peer, and friend relationships have also been found. In a study of firstborn elementary schoolers, Stocker and Dunn (1990) found continuity in mothers' reports of positive aspects of children's sibling relationships and friendships (e.g., affection and nurturance), but not negative aspects (e.g., aggression, competition, and conflict). There was no connection between the quality of these children's sibling relationships and teacher reports of the quality of their general peer relationships. However, children observed to be competitive and controlling toward siblings were reported by their mothers to be high in peer leadership and to enjoy particularly close, positive friendships. As Dunn (1993) has pointed out, these results may actually reflect continuity in social competence, since control and competition toward younger siblings are appropriate behaviors for firstborns.

In a study of kindergartners, Mendelson et al. (1994) found that gender composition made a difference in how sibling relationships were connected to peer popularity and friendships. Positive feelings and identification with opposite-gender siblings were directly related to popularity with both opposite-gender and same-gender peers, but were unrelated to quality of same-gender friendships. Positive feelings and identification with *same-gender* siblings were directly related to same-gender popularity and unrelated to opposite-gender popularity. However, the quality of same-gender sibling

relationships, indicated by extent of positive feelings and conflict, was *inversely* related to the quality of same-gender friendships. These findings suggest that positive sibling relationships foster skills that lead to popularity, especially with peers of the same gender as the sibling. But these skills may not lead directly to successful friendships, perhaps because a close same-gender sibling relationship at this age may minimize the need to form close friendships.

Two studies have uncovered evidence of compensatory effects between sibling and peer relationships. East and Rook (1992) found that socially isolated sixth graders who reported low social support from school friends also reported *higher* than average social support from their favorite siblings. In turn, high sibling social support was associated with lower anxiety and immaturity for socially isolated children, but not for aggressive or average children. Thus, a positive sibling relationship appeared to compensate in some ways for lack of close friendships. Stocker (1994) found that second graders who reported low warmth in both sibling relationships and friendships also reported more misbehavior than children who reported high warmth from both siblings and friends or low warmth from one and high warmth from the other. This result suggests that a satisfying relationship with *either* a sibling or a friend can make up for a lack of warmth in the other type of relationship—or possibly that the children who had unsatisfactory relationships with *both* siblings and friends were simply the least socially competent.

In summary, there is more evidence for qualitative continuity than for behavioral continuity in children's relationships with siblings, peers, and friends. Behaviors are for the most part *not* simply learned in sibling relationships and transferred to dealings with peers (or vice versa), but the level of broader social competence does seem to carry over, in quality and extent of coordinated interaction and conflict management. Some apparent discontinuity between relationships may actually reflect continuity in social competence. The extent and nature of continuity between sibling, peer, and friend relationships varies, depending on age, sibling age gap, gender composition of sibling and peer pairs, and degree of similarity between relationships. Compensatory connections between sibling, peer, and friend relationships seem to be the exception, but compensatory effects are sometimes seen, especially for socially isolated children.

SIBLING AND PEER CONFLICT

Children's conflicts are an interesting setting for examining contrasts and linkages between sibling and peer relationships because they are a significant context for the development of social understanding and social skills

(Dunn, 1988; Shantz, 1987; Shantz & Hartup, 1992). Although we know a fair amount about peer and sibling conflict, there has been surprisingly little research directly comparing the two types of conflict; there is more observational data comparing conflicts between friends and nonfriends. However, based on the similarities and differences among the relationships, some predictions can be made about sibling, peer, and friend conflicts.

The relative asymmetry of sibling relationships is expected to foster conflicts, especially those involving issues of dominance, and to result in relatively one-sided conflicts, resolved by force and insistence, with inequitable outcomes. On the other hand, the symmetry of peer and friend relationships is expected to facilitate give-and-take, producing longer conflicts, more negotiation, and more equitable outcomes (Katz, Kramer, & Gottman, 1992; Vespo, Pedersen, & Hay, 1995). The intimacy of sibling relationships also may foster conflicts and heighten their affective intensity, especially because siblings must share space, possessions, and parents on a daily basis (Shantz & Hobart, 1989). Finally, the involuntary nature of sibling relationships is expected to reduce the risks inherent in conflict and the motivation to preserve interaction, making siblings less motivated to avoid or mitigate conflict than peers or friends are.

Existing research evidence is equivocal as to whether there is a general difference in the amount of conflict between siblings, peers, and friends (Shantz & Hobart, 1989). Observational studies of 4- to 10-year-olds have found no difference between siblings' and peers' rates of agonistic behavior (Abramovitch et al., 1986; Hartup & Laursen, 1993; Stoneman et al., 1984), and preschoolers observed in both laboratory and home settings have shown rates of sibling conflict similar to those typically seen for peers (Dunn & Munn, 1985; Vespo et al., 1995). However, Vespo et al. found that siblings spent more time in conflict than peers did. Conflicts between preschool friends and nonfriends in open-field playground situations do not differ in frequency or length (Hartup, Laursen, Stewart, & Eastenson, 1988), but conflicts between school-aged friends in closed-field situations are more frequent and last longer than those between nonfriends (Hartup, French, Laursen, Johnston, & Ogawa, 1993). One questionnaire study found that parent ratings of preschoolers' sibling conflict levels were higher than teacher ratings of the same children's peer conflict levels (Graham-Bermann & Hartup, 1991). Questionnaire studies have found no consistent difference between sibling and peer conflict rates for young school-age children, but older children report more conflict with siblings than with peers or friends (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985b; Graham-Bermann & Hartup, 1991; Hartup & Laursen, 1993). Adolescents' reports of naturally occurring conflicts put their incidence for siblings and friends higher than for other peers (Laursen & Collins, 1994).

Affect is generally more intense in sibling conflicts than in peer conflicts (Hartup & Laursen, 1993). Preschoolers' conflicts with friends are less intense than those with nonfriends, at least in open-field situations (Hartup et al., 1988), but conflicts between school-aged friends in closed-field situations are more intense than those between nonfriends (Hartup et al., 1993). Adolescents report the greatest negative affect in conflicts with family members and peers, with relatively little negative affect in conflicts with friends (Laursen & Collins, 1994).

In early childhood, object possession is the most common issue in both sibling and peer conflicts. By age five, issues of social control have become about as common (Shantz & Hobart, 1989); Hartup et al. (1988) found that about 60% of preschoolers' conflicts with both friends and nonfriends involved behavioral control. There is some evidence that preschoolers' conflict issues vary depending on interaction partner, with children more likely to start conflicts centered around object possession, facts, or name-calling with younger siblings than with older siblings or peers (Phinney, 1985). One common issue in preschool sibling conflicts that has no analog in peer conflicts is access to mother (Hartup & Laursen, 1993), and it is often assumed that rivalry is a latent issue in all sibling conflicts (Shantz & Hobart, 1989). Conflict issues for school-age siblings and peers are similar, but they become quite different in adolescence, with siblings continuing to argue about possessions and friends arguing about trust and loyalty (Hartup & Laursen, 1993; Vandell & Bailey, 1992).

Regardless of interaction partner, preschoolers tend to use rather unsophisticated conflict resolution strategies, with insistence the most common and negotiation rather uncommon (Shantz & Hobart, 1989). Preschoolers' conflicts with peers are more elaborate than those with siblings, and compromise and concession, though rare, are used more often with peers (Phinney, 1985). Parents and teachers report preschoolers are less likely to talk out problems and more likely to "fight it out" and rely on third-party intervention with siblings than with friends (Graham-Bermann & Hartup, 1991). Preschoolers use softer conflict resolution strategies, such as disengagement, with friends than with nonfriends, and conflicts with friends are more likely to end in compromise (Gottman, 1983; Hartup et al., 1988). School-age children tend to end sibling conflicts by withdrawing or ignoring each other, rather than by actively resolving them; with friends, they show more give-and-take (Vandell & Bailey, 1992). In adolescence, coercion, physical aggression, withdrawal, ignoring, and third-party intervention continue to be common sibling conflict resolution strategies, whereas friends are more likely to use compromise and less likely to use submission or disengagement (Hartup & Laursen, 1993; Vandell & Bailey, 1992). Peers use submission as a resolution strategy more than friends do, but they use compromise more and disengagement less than siblings do (Laursen & Collins, 1994).

Friends are more likely than siblings to report continued interaction and positive feelings after a conflict; tactics used in conflicts between friends, such as compromise, mitigate conflict's disruptive effects on interaction, whereas tactics used in sibling conflicts, such as submission, exacerbate them (Hartup & Laursen, 1993; Laursen & Collins, 1994). Sibling *relationships* are less vulnerable to negative effects of conflict than friendships are, perhaps because the involuntary nature of sibling relationships heightens tolerance of negative affect (Hartup & Laursen, 1993; Katz et al., 1992). Isolated conflicts seem to have little impact on sibling relationships or friendships, but they may damage relationships with other peers. Frequent, repeated conflict is more likely to have negative effects on all relationships (Laursen & Collins, 1994).

Although sibling and peer conflicts differ in a number of ways, conflict is involved in the linkages between sibling and peer relationships. As already mentioned, high sibling conflict is associated with low friendship quality (Graham-Bermann & Hartup, 1991; Gruys et al., 1992; McCoy et al., 1994). However, what carries over across relationships may not be propensity for conflict, but rather level of conflict management skills (Dunn, 1993). Kramer and Gottman (1992) found that frequency of preschoolers' conflict with friends was not associated with quality of sibling interactions, but frequency of *unmanaged* conflict was. Sibling relationships have been identified as an important context in which young children learn how to manage conflict (Dunn & Munn, 1985; Katz et al., 1992; Shantz & Hobart, 1989), but the specific conflict-related skills learned in sibling relationships may not transfer well to interactions with friends or other peers. As we have seen, though, broad skills related to social understanding and conflict management do transfer across sibling and peer relationships, despite the differences between them.

There are several gaps in the research base on preschoolers' sibling and peer conflict. The most important is the lack of observational studies examining the same children's conflicts with siblings and friends. What we know about similarities and differences between preschoolers' sibling and peer conflicts is based on results of separate studies. To complicate the comparisons, different research approaches have been used in studying preschoolers' sibling and peer conflicts; peer conflict has mostly been studied in laboratory and nursery school observations, and sibling conflict has mostly been studied with questionnaires and home observations, often with the mother present (Shantz & Hobart, 1989). Although differences in interaction settings contribute to the distinctions between sibling and peer relationships, there are some settings that are common to both, such as playing together at home. Our understanding of sibling and friend conflicts would be expanded by observing children with their siblings and friends in these common settings.

We also know relatively little about unilateral conflict, or unreciprocated opposition, between siblings and friends and how it compares to mutual opposition. There has been considerable disagreement about what constitutes a full-blown conflict, with some researchers including unilateral oppositions in their definition (e.g., Hartup et al., 1988; Laursen & Hartup, 1989) and others counting only episodes of mutual opposition (e.g., Maynard, 1985; Shantz, 1987). Laursen and Hartup (1989) compared episodes of unilateral and mutual opposition between preschool peers and found that they differed in intensity, resolution strategy, and probability of prior and continuing social interaction, suggesting that it is reasonable to treat them as separate phenomena. One way of differentiating between mutual and unilateral oppositions is to regard mutual oppositions as conflicts and unilateral oppositions as *averted* conflicts—situations in which a potential for conflict is created by one child's oppositional behavior, but the other child does not reciprocate. The term *averted* is not meant to imply that the interaction partners *intentionally* avoid a conflict; oppositional behavior could go unreciprocated for various reasons, including inattention and lack of interest. In any case, the differences between sibling and friend relationships suggest that friends might be less likely than siblings to reciprocate an oppositional behavior, in an attempt to minimize conflict and maintain interaction.

A STUDY OF SIBLING AND FRIEND CONFLICT AND AVERTED CONFLICT

As part of an ongoing longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships in early and middle childhood, my students and I have examined preschoolers' conflicts and averted conflicts with siblings and friends. We have looked at differences in rate, nature, and context of conflicts and averted conflicts between siblings and friends in comparable closed-field situations, and we have begun to explore linkages between sibling and friend interactions and what the target children in the study carry between the two interaction contexts (DeHart et al., 1993; DeHart et al., 1996).

Thirty-two same-gender sibling pairs, 16 male and 16 female, participated in the study. Each pair included a target child who was approximately 4½ years old at the beginning of the study; half of the pairs included a sibling about 2 years older than the target, half a sibling about 2 years younger. Participants also included 32 same-gender friends of the target children. Each target child was videotaped at home playing for 15 minutes with the sibling on one day and for 15 minutes with the friend on another day. Both times the children played with experimenter-provided toys intended to provide opportunities for joint pretend play—on one visit, a toy

farm; on the other, a toy village. Each of these sets had numerous pieces for the children to divide between them, with some particularly attractive pieces that created a potential for conflict.

After transcribing the observational sessions, we coded them for conflict, averted conflict, and social engagement. We defined *conflicts* as exchanges containing mutual opposition, either verbal or behavioral, and *averted conflicts* as exchanges containing unreciprocated oppositional behavior. *Social engagement* was coded at 10-second intervals, using categories based on Parten (1932)—associative play, cooperative play, parallel play, solitary play, onlooker, unoccupied, and indeterminate. These categories can be collapsed into three superordinate categories—engaged (associative and cooperative play), semiengaged (solitary/onlooker, unoccupied/onlooker), and unengaged (parallel play, combinations without onlooker).

Sibling-Friend Contrasts

As shown in Fig. 13.1, there were clear differences in extent of social engagement during sibling and friend sessions. Children were socially engaged a greater percentage of the time during sessions with their friends than during sessions with their siblings. Although sibling and friend sessions both represented closed-field situations, with no choice of interaction partner, children still were able to choose whether or not to interact with the partner who was available; during sibling sessions, they often chose not to interact. This suggests that the children's motivation to keep an interaction going was greater with their friends than with their siblings.

Both conflicts and averted conflicts occurred at roughly the same overall rate per minute for siblings and for friends (see Table 13.1). Our rates of conflict were higher than those reported in past studies, probably because of the closed-field setting (Hartup et al., 1993). When social engagement was taken into account, differences between siblings and friends became apparent. As we had expected, siblings had more conflicts per minute of social engagement than friends did; in fact, some sibling pairs became socially engaged only during conflicts. We were surprised to discover that siblings also had more *averted* conflicts per minute of social engagement than friends did; we had expected friends to have a higher rate of averted conflicts. Instead, siblings had a higher rate of oppositional behavior overall, whether reciprocated or unreciprocated. We compared the likelihood that an oppositional behavior would be reciprocated during sibling and friend sessions and found no difference; in both sibling and friend sessions, about half of all oppositional behaviors were reciprocated. Thus, it was *not* the case that one oppositional behavior was more likely to turn into a conflict between siblings than between friends. However, the *nature* of averted conflicts differed for siblings and friends. In many averted conflicts

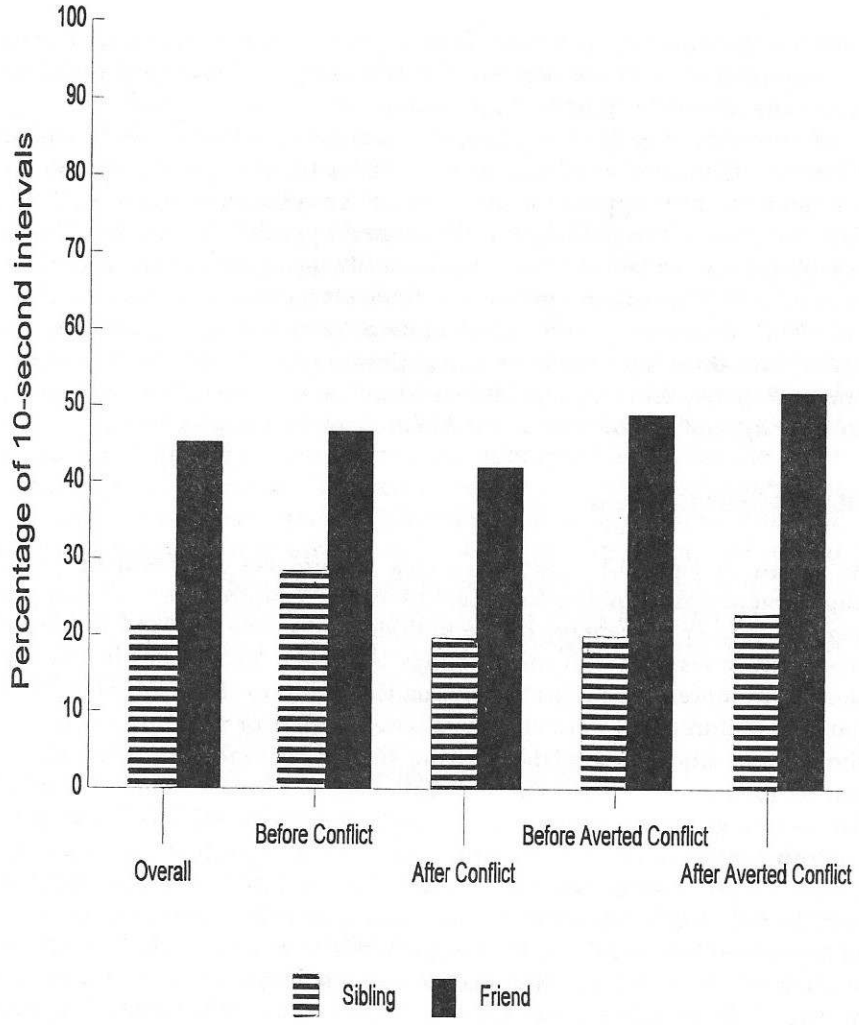

FIG. 13.1. Social engagement during sibling and friend play sessions.

between siblings, one child, often the younger sibling, did something obnoxious to get the attention of the other child but was ignored or responded to only briefly. Averted conflicts between friends were more likely to involve a conciliatory or forgiving response to an oppositional behavior.

Siblings and friends consistently differed in likelihood of social engagement before and after conflicts and averted conflicts. Friends were much more likely to have been socially engaged before a conflict or averted conflict, and they were much more likely to remain engaged after it was over (see Fig. 13.1). Oppositional behaviors between friends tended to

TABLE 13.1
Characteristics of Sibling and Friend Conflicts and Averted Conflicts

	Conflicts		*Averted Conflicts*	
	Sibling	*Friend*	*Sibling*	*Friend*
Rate per minute	.34	.40	.36	.38
Rate per minute of social engagement	2.22	1.03	2.92	.93
Proportion unprovoked	.50	.34	.42	.38
Proportion with aggression	.40	.26	.13	.18
Mean aggressive acts	1.32	.56	.25	.26
Mean affective intensity (5-point scale)	2.26	1.89	1.34	1.39

occur in the context of ongoing social interaction, as in the following averted conflict between a girl and her friend:

(Target child and friend dividing up pieces from village set.)
Friend: Oh, here's another biddy bed for me.
Target: Yeah, you got a biddy biddy bed.
Friend: There's two biddy beds for me, for the daddy and the mommy.
Target: No, that one is mine. I dropped it.
Friend: Whoops. Oh yeah. It's yours. *(Gives piece to target child.)*
(Target child and friend continue dividing up toys and talking.)

In contrast, sibling social interaction often was initiated with an oppositional behavior and ended when the conflict or averted conflict did. The difference in preconflict social engagement is also reflected in the fact that sibling conflicts were more likely to be unprovoked (50.4%) than conflicts between friends were (34.2%). That is, the opposition that started a sibling conflict was less likely to be a direct response to something a partner said or did. The following sibling conflict is an example of an unprovoked conflict without prior or subsequent social engagement:

(Target child and older brother playing with farm. Brother sets up corral and plays with animals in it; target child wanders around singing "Farmer in the Dell.")
Target: Dropping in! *(Drops animal into brother's corral.)*
Dropping in stinko! *(Drops another animal.)*
Brother: Stop!
Target: Dropping in a big lump of poop! *(Drops piece of silo into corral, laughs.)*
Brother: Don't! *(Takes silo piece, puts it behind his back.)*
(Target starts to drop roof piece into corral.)
Brother: Don't, Kyle! Don't drop any more in! You're not doing it the way I want you to! *(Grabs roof piece from target child.)*
(Target child turns away.)

TABLE 13.2
Conflict Termination Strategies and Averted Conflict Partner Responses

	Conflicts		*Averted Conflicts*	
	Sibling	*Friend*	*Sibling*	*Friend*
Termination Strategies/ Partner Responses				
Stand Firm	56.3%	49.7%		
Ignore			46.2%	34.1%
Surrender	10.2%	21.4%	42.0%	49.3%
Disengage	16.9%	15.4%	2.3%	4.0%
Distract	3.6%	2.0%	0.3%	1.4%
Negotiate	5.4%	6.5%	5.0%	8.8%
Third Party	2.3%	0.8%		
Indeterminate	5.3%	4.3%	4.1%	2.4%

As shown in Table 13.1, conflicts between siblings were more likely to include aggression than those between friends, the rate of aggressive acts per conflict was much higher for siblings than for friends, and sibling conflicts were more affectively intense than friend conflicts. In contrast, sibling and friend averted conflicts were about equally likely to include aggression, averaged the same number of aggressive acts, and had about the same affective intensity.

There were no significant differences between siblings and friends in conflict issues. Partner behavior was the most common issue (over 50%) in both conflicts and averted conflicts, whether siblings or friends were involved, with disputes over objects the next most common (over 25%). These rates are similar to those reported for preschool friends by Hartup et al. (1988). The consistency in issues across sibling and friend sessions may be partly due to the semistructured play sessions; the experimenter-provided toys and the task of setting them up fostered some types of conflicts and minimized others. For example, both sibling and friend conflicts frequently centered on where pieces belonged in the farm or village.

However, there were differences between siblings and friends in termination strategies for conflicts and in partner responses for averted conflicts, as shown in Table 13.2. Siblings were more likely than friends to appeal to a third party, usually the experimenter, and friends were more likely than siblings to end a conflict by surrendering, as in the following example:

(Target child and friend setting up farm.)
Friend: But there's no space.

Target: Oh, no, no, no. There is. We gotta move this. *(Target moves piece of fence.)*
Friend: Don't take the gate away. We need to keep the gate there.
(Target puts fence piece back.)

In averted conflicts, siblings were more likely than friends to respond to a partner's oppositional or provocative behavior by ignoring it, as in the following example:

(Target child and younger brother playing with the village set. Younger brother looking for horses in pile of pieces, target child watching.)
Target: Daniel, say yellow.
Brother: Lellow.
Target: Daniel says lellow. *(Throws piece at brother, narrowly missing him.)*
(Brother ignores target child, continues to look for horses.)
Target: Lellow is yellow, right? *Yellow . . .*
Brother: *Hey,* another horse. Horse. Four horses. There four horses. Four horsies.
(Picks up horse and walks off camera.)

In most cases, as in this example, it was not clear whether the child was *intentionally* ignoring the sibling or was simply engrossed in an ongoing activity and not paying attention. Many of the oppositional or provocative moves that were ignored, however, were repeated or highly obtrusive, suggesting that some of the ignoring was intentional.

In contrast, friends were more likely than siblings to respond to an oppositional behavior by suggesting an alternative, which we coded as negotiation, as in the following averted conflict:

(Target child and friend setting up village.)
Target: A tree in the water. Let's put it right there. *(Puts tree on lake.)*
(Friend removes tree from lake.)
Target: Now when he sawed down the tree, it can go in the water down the waterfall.
Friend: Hey, maybe we can put an island around that. *(Puts block on lake and tree on top of block.)*

For conflict outcomes, there were no overall differences between siblings and friends. Over 80% of both sibling and friend conflicts had a clear winner, and on the whole it was about equally likely to be the target child and the partner. However, target children with younger siblings won a much higher percentage of sibling conflicts than those with older siblings did—a straightforward reflection of the asymmetrical nature of sibling relationships.

Conflict-Averted Conflict Contrasts

The exchanges we coded as conflicts differed from those we coded as averted conflicts in several ways. With social engagement taken into consideration, averted conflicts occurred at a higher rate than conflicts for both siblings and friends. Compared to conflicts, averted conflicts were much less likely to include aggression, averaged a lower number of aggressive acts, and were lower in affective intensity. This may indicate that the children felt more strongly about the specific issues involved in conflicts than in averted conflicts or simply that acts of aggression were unlikely to go unanswered. Surrender was more likely to be used as a response in an averted conflict than in a conflict, and disengagement was more likely to be used in a conflict than in an averted conflict. Conflicts and averted conflicts were about equally likely to be unprovoked and to occur in a context of prior and continuing social interaction.

In the only previous study to compare episodes of unilateral and mutual opposition, Laursen and Hartup (1989) similarly found that those involving unilateral opposition were less intense. They also found that unilateral conflicts were more likely to be resolved by insistence, which probably includes our category of surrender. In contrast to our results, their unilateral conflicts were more likely to occur in a context of ongoing social interaction—a difference that may reflect the open-field setting in which their data were collected.

Sibling–Friend Linkages

We have some very preliminary evidence on linkages between sibling and friend conflicts and averted conflicts, based on correlations for dyadic interactions and for target child behavior across the sibling and peer sessions. Given the many differences we have identified between sibling and friend conflicts and averted conflicts, it is perhaps not surprising that we have so far found very little evidence of continuity across interaction partners.

At the dyad level, the only significant correlations between sibling and friend sessions were for number of turns per conflict ($r = .36$) and number of aggressive acts per conflict ($r = .39$). The target children showed significant correlations between sibling and peer sessions for aggressive acts per conflict ($r = .55$) and for the use of surrender in averted conflicts ($r = .65$). These findings are in accord with previous evidence that broad social competence, such as the ability to engage in connected interaction or the tendency to use aggression, shows continuity between sibling and friend relationships, but that specific behaviors show little cross-relationship continuity.

CONCLUSION

Sibling relationships and friendships provide substantially different interaction contexts for young children and require them to use different social skills and strategies for managing conflict. Siblings tend to be less motivated to maintain interaction with each other than friends are, and their interactions contain more oppositions, both mutual and unreciprocated, than friends' interactions do. Oppositional behavior often serves as a means of socially engaging a sibling, whereas it arises in the course of ongoing interaction between friends. Conflicts between siblings are more affectively intense than those between friends and more likely to include aggression. Friends are more likely to use conflict resolution strategies that prolong interaction, such as negotiation and conciliation, while siblings are more likely to use strategies that disrupt interaction, such as ignoring the partner and appealing to a third party.

Many of the specific interaction strategies that are useful in sibling conflicts would be inappropriate in conflicts with friends; however, even young children manage to adjust to the demands of each relationship and to interact appropriately with both siblings and friends. It is important to note that interactions with siblings and friends do not require separate repertoires of social skills; instead, certain strategies, such as negotiation, are used more frequently with friends, and others, such as aggression, are used more frequently with siblings. The trick for children is recognizing the demands of a particular interaction setting and responding appropriately.

Because of the many differences between sibling and peer relationships, connections between them do not emerge primarily from transfer of relationship-specific social behaviors from one setting to another, but rather from the flexible application of more general social understanding across interaction contexts. Dunn (1988) has argued that sibling relationships provide a particularly favorable context for the development of social understanding—the ability to understand and respond appropriately to another's thoughts and feelings. If this is the case, it makes sense that links between sibling relationships and other relationships would take the form of continuity of skill or flexibility in responding to others, not continuity of specific behaviors or interaction strategies. Indeed, children who develop the greatest social understanding in the context of their sibling relationships may actually show the *least* direct transfer of specific behaviors or interaction strategies from sibling relationships to peer relationships.

Mapping the links between sibling and peer relationships poses a challenging task for researchers because behavioral flexibility is more difficult to trace than behavioral continuity. Making predictions about what form this flexibility might take is further complicated by the lack of a common

theory of what constitutes a well-functioning sibling relationship and how that might change over the course of development. We have nothing comparable to attachment theory to generate predictions about children's functioning across sibling and friend relationships and, indeed, no generally agreed-upon way to measure quality in sibling relationships. Given the great diversity in qualitative and structural characteristics of sibling and peer relationships, it seems clear that no one pattern of linkage will hold true for all children's relationships with siblings and peers. Charting the terrain that connects sibling and peer relationships and exploring the various routes children take over that terrain is a task that will occupy researchers for years to come.

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