



Aggression in Middle Childhood Sibling and Peer Relationships: A Comparison of Social Context and Goal of Aggressive Behavior



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Abstract

As part of a longitudinal study, we examined social contexts and goals of aggression by siblings and friends at ages 4 and 7. Relational, physical, and verbal aggression served different functions in early and middle childhood; gender differences were most evident for verbal aggression at age 7.

Introduction

Observational research on children's aggression has focused mainly on preschoolers; middle childhood aggression research has relied heavily on questionnaires. Surprisingly little is known about boys' and girls' normative use of aggression when interacting with different partners. More information is also needed about their relative use of physical, verbal, and relational aggression, and more fine-grained aspects of aggressive behavior, such as social context and goal. As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we examined the social contexts and goals of relational, physical, and verbal aggression during sibling and friend interactions. A community sample of 65 middle-class children were videotaped at home in separate play sessions with siblings and friends at ages 4 and 7. The videotapes were transcribed and coded for relational, verbal, and physical aggression. Episodes of aggression were further coded for immediate social context (response to partner vs. unprovoked) and goal (hostile vs. instrumental).

Method

As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we conducted an exploratory analysis of relational, physical, and verbal aggression during sibling and friend interactions.

Participants

- A community sample of 65 Caucasian middle-class children from Western New York were videotaped at home in separate sessions with siblings and with same-aged, same-sex friends at ages 4 and 7.
- Approximately half of the siblings were two years older than the target children and half were two years younger.

Procedure

- At ages 4 & 7 the target children were videotaped at home with a sibling and a friend in separate free play sessions.
- The free-play task was unstructured time playing with a wooden farm or train set.
- The videotapes were transcribed; transcripts were coded for the presence of aggression.
- Aggression* was defined as any behavior with a clear intent to hurt or bother the partner.
- Episodes of aggression were classified as *relational* (damaging or threatening to damage a relationship), *physical* (physical acts or physical threats of force), or *verbal* (non-relational aggressive utterances). Episodes of aggression were further coded for social context and goal of aggression.
- Social context was defined as either a response to partner or unprovoked. An aggressive behavior was coded as response to partner if it was an immediate response to the behavior of the victim. In contrast, an aggressive act was coded as unprovoked if the aggressive behavior was not a response to something the victim just said or did.
- The goal of aggression was defined as being either hostile or instrumental. The primary goal of hostile aggression was to hurt or bother the victim. Instrumental aggression was a pre-meditated aggressive action carried out to achieve a specific goal.
- Social engagement was coded at 10-second intervals, and rates of aggression were adjusted to account for variation in session length and the extent to which members of dyads were *engaged* (mutually attending to each other) or *semi-engaged* (only one partner attending to the other).

Analyses

- Rates of verbal, physical, and relational aggression per engaged and semi-engaged minute were analyzed using separate 2 (partner) x 2 (target child gender) x 2 (sibling gender) x 2 (age group) repeated measure ANOVAs.

Figure 1. Verbal Aggression per Engaged/Semi-Engaged Minutes

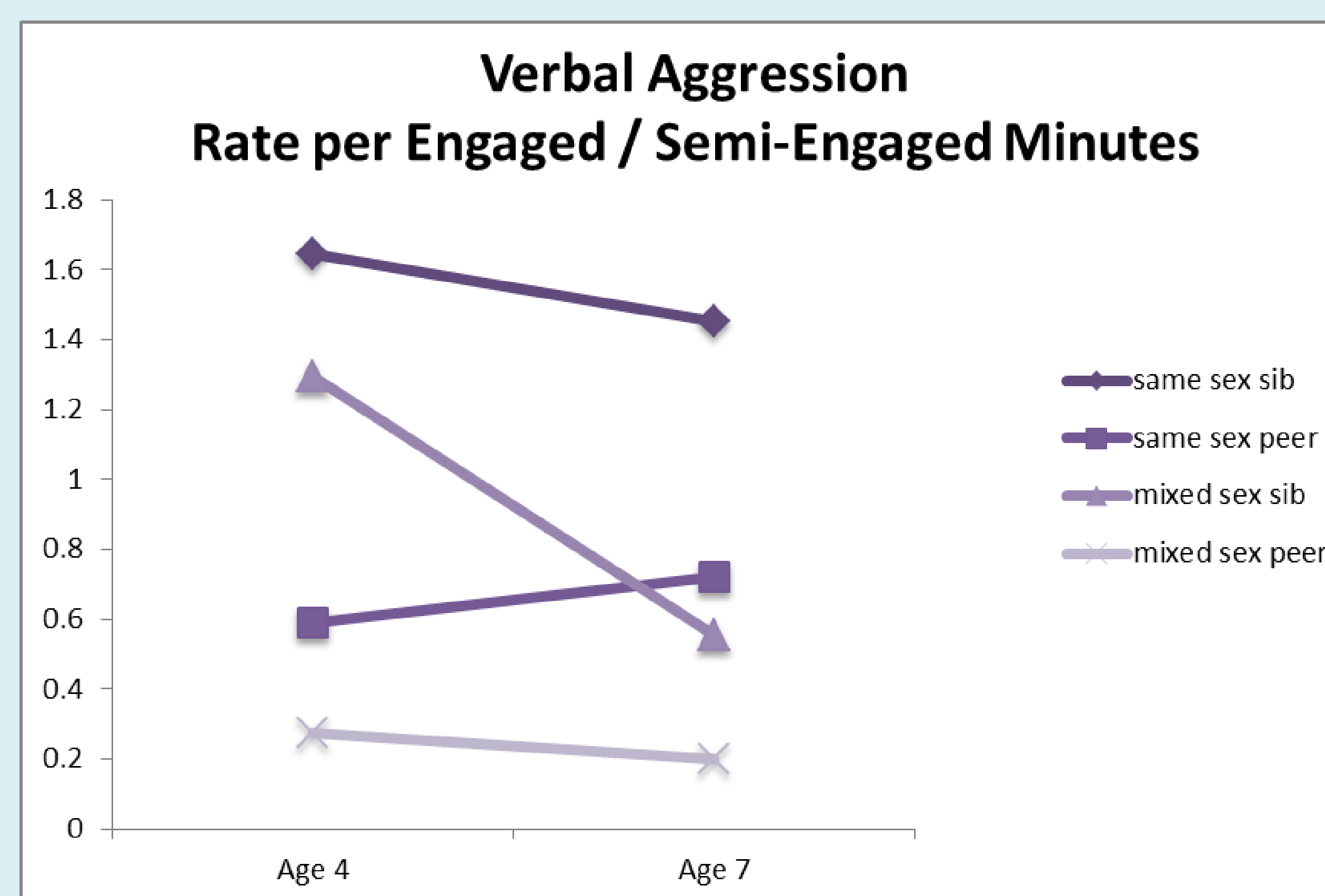


Figure 2. Physical Aggression per Engaged/Semi-Engaged Minutes

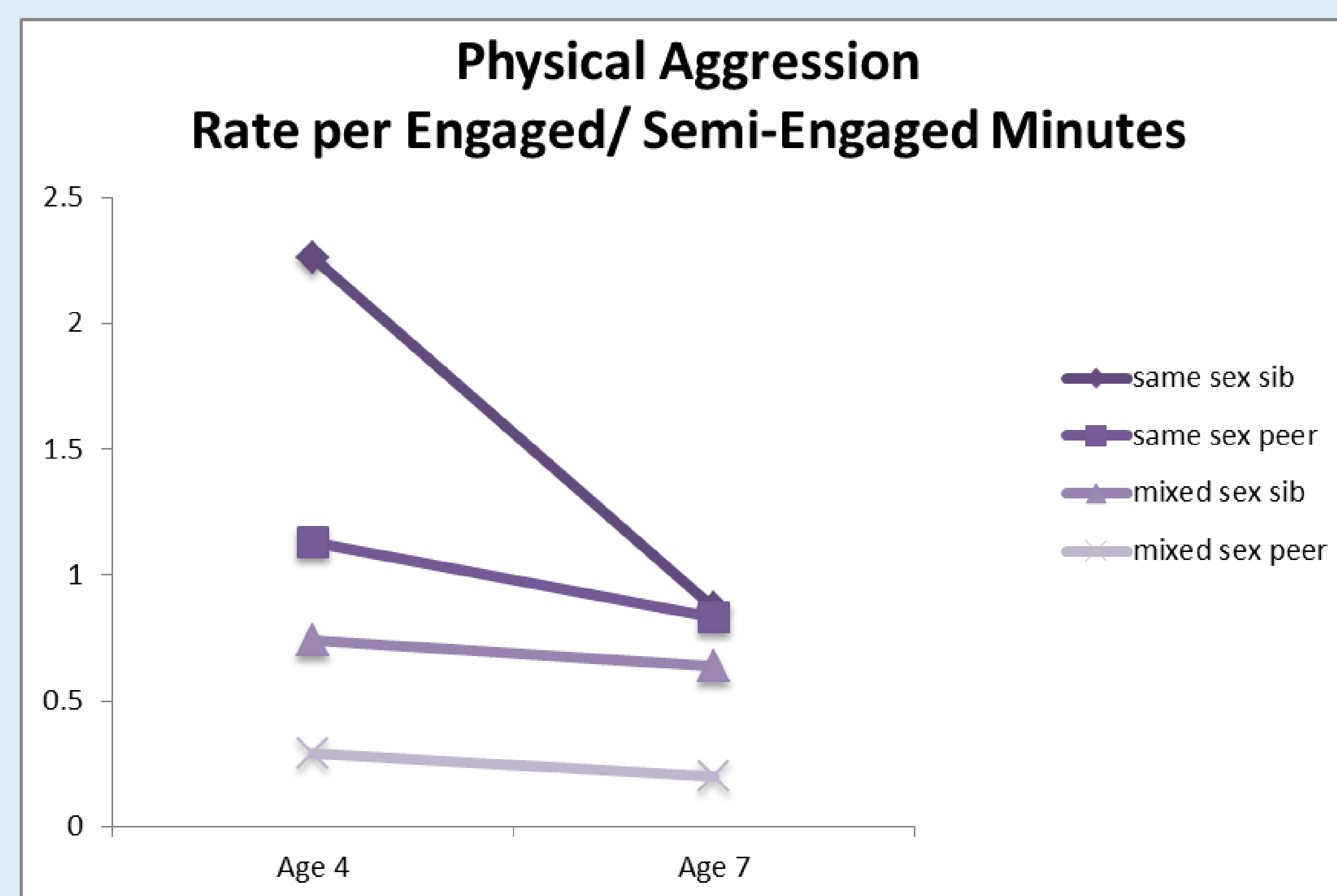
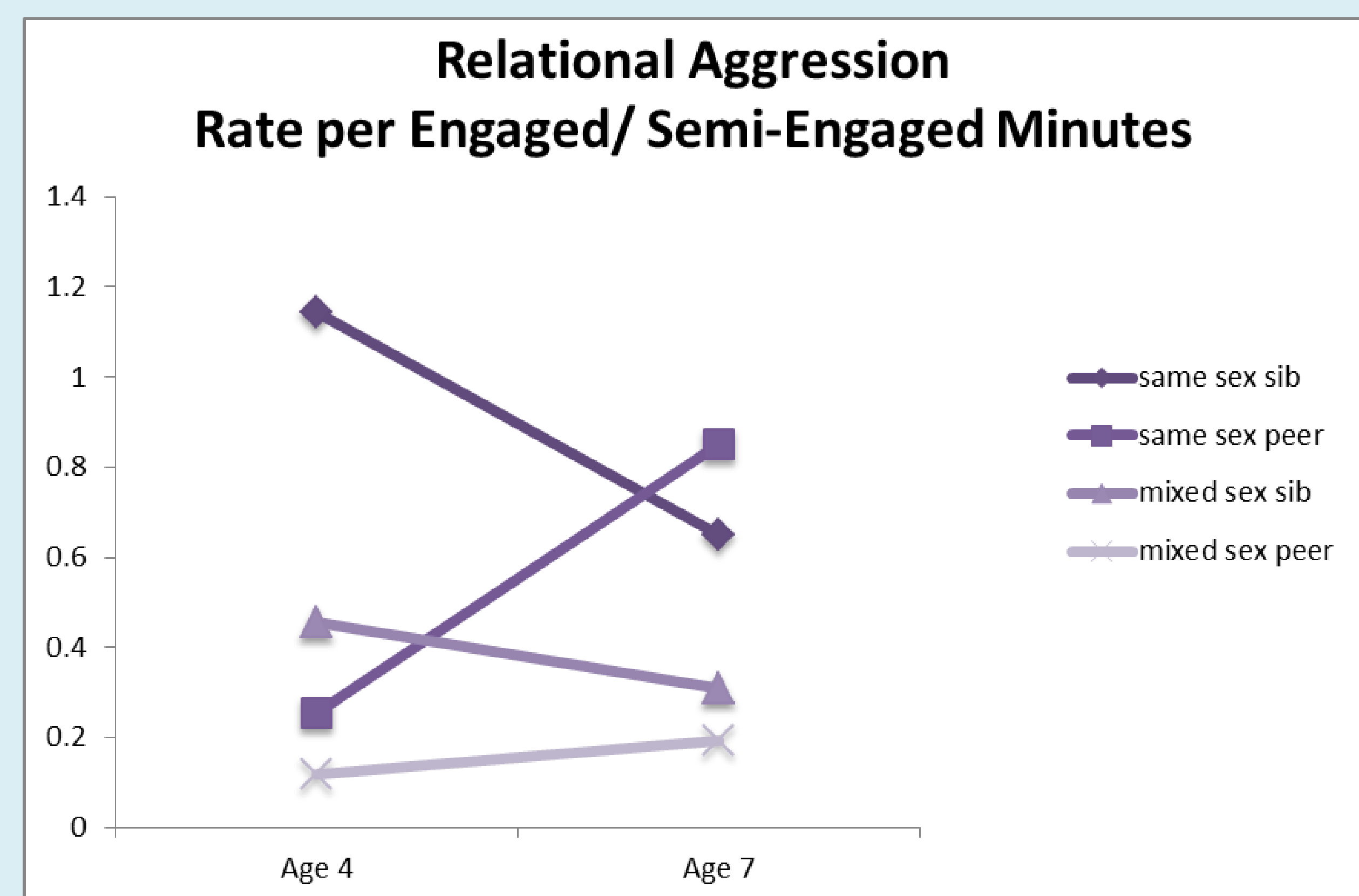


Figure 3. Relational Aggression per Engaged/Semi-Engaged Minutes



Results

Verbal Aggression (Figure 1)

- Significant partner effect such that siblings displayed more verbal aggression at four and seven years old than peers ($p=.003$).
- Significant target child by sibling gender effect such that same-sex siblings displayed more verbal aggression than mixed-sex siblings, regardless of age and partner ($p=.045$).
- In terms of social context, there was a significant time x partner x target child gender effect, such that 7-year old girls used verbal aggression as a response to their partner more when with their sibling than with their peer ($p=.008$).

Physical Aggression (Figure 2)

- There was a main effect of partner such that siblings displayed more physical aggression than peers ($p=.005$).
- Significant time effect such that 4-year olds displayed more physical aggression than 7-year olds ($p=.05$).
- Significant partner by time effect such that siblings displayed more physical aggression at age 4 than age 7. ($p=.043$).
- In terms of goal of aggression, there was a significant effect of gender such that same sex siblings used more hostile aggression than mixed sex siblings ($p=.02$).

Relational Aggression (Figure 3)

- Significant partner by time effect such that siblings displayed more relational aggression than peers at age four ($p=.01$).
- Significant target child by sibling gender effect such that same-sex siblings displayed more relational aggression than mixed-sex siblings, regardless of age and partner ($p=.02$).
- In terms of goal of aggression, sibling dyads including an older sister displayed more hostile relational aggression than all other dyads. In contrast, sibling dyads with an older brother displayed the least amount of hostile relational aggression
- In terms of social context, brother dyads displayed more unprovoked relational aggression than all other dyads.

Discussion

Overall, children displayed more verbal, physical, and relational aggression when with their sibling than with their peer. The partner effect for verbal and physical aggression indicates that a higher level of familiarity among siblings allows for an increase in these types of aggression. The main effect of social context in 7-year old girls can also be explained by familiarity with siblings. The target child by sibling gender effect for verbal and relational aggression shows that children are more aggressive if they have a same-sex sibling instead of a mixed-sex sibling, regardless of who they are interacting with.

The partner by time effect in physical aggression among siblings indicates that children mature as they get older, which leads to a decrease in physical aggression. However, this decrease in physical aggression did not apply to peers. This may be because as children age, the relationships held with their peers becomes less inhibited. The main effect of gender in terms of goal of physical aggression can be explained by social norms, which discourage physical acts between males and females.

In analyzing levels of relational aggression, there was a partner by time effect. Siblings display more relational aggression at a younger age because of higher comfort levels among siblings. For example, young children tend to feel more comfortable tattling on a sibling than on a peer. However, as children mature, levels of relational aggression decrease among siblings. Overtime, relational aggression increases among peers because of changing relational dynamics. The main effect of goal of aggression indicates that girls are more hostile in their use of relational aggression. This can be explained by the tendency of girls to express their frustration using words that have the potential to harm a relationship, but not necessarily with the intention of reaching a specific goal. The main effect of social context in brother dyads can be explained by boys having a more competitive and aggressive nature overall, leading them to use relational aggression even in an unprovoked situation.