

Observed and Perceived Relational Aggression in Adolescent Sibling and Friend Relationships

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to compare observational data of relational aggression in adolescent sibling and peer relationships with questionnaire data of the perceived rates of relational aggression in the relationship. Sixty white, middle-class 17 year olds were videotaped at home in separate 15-minute cooking sessions with a sibling and a friend. The videotapes were transcribed and coded for relational aggressive and compared to questionnaire data from the target, the sibling, the friend, and sibling's mother regarding the sibling and peer relationship. Results indicated no significant differences in rates of relational aggression observed during sibling and peer sessions. However, targets perceived their sibling relationships as more relationally aggressive than their friendships. Mothers also perceived the friendships as more relationally aggressive than the adolescents themselves did.

Introduction

Various forms of aggression have been extensively studied in childhood and adolescence, mostly via self-report and parent or teacher questionnaires. However, observational research on aggression during those years has been limited. Most observational studies have examined peer aggression in school settings, and have generally focused on physical aggression. Surprisingly, little is known about individual's use of relational aggression when interacting with different partners. For these reasons, the research is limited on the normative development of aggression during adolescence. To further understand relational aggression in adolescents, we observed sixty adolescents during a 15-minute cooking session with both a sibling and a friend. Questionnaires were then completed by the target, sibling, friend, and mother concerning the nature of the sibling and peer relationships. Examining the differences in observed and perceived rates of relational aggression in both the sibling and friend relationship should provide more insight into adolescents' social development.

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 from western New York consisting of 60 17 year-olds, plus one sibling and one same-age friend for each target child.
- Approximately half of the siblings were two years older ($N = 38$) than the target children and half were two years younger ($N = 36$)

Procedure

- At age 17 the target adolescents were videotaped at home with a sibling and a friend in separate semi-structured cooking sessions.
- The cooking session asks children to cooperate in creating one of two food items (counterbalanced). The task requires several decisions to be agreed upon.
- The target, the sibling, the friend, and the siblings' mother completed questionnaires about the sibling and friend relationships. The questionnaires used 5-point rating scales to assess five aspects of the relationships: asymmetry, intimacy, harmony, conflict, and relational aggression.
- The videotapes were transcribed; transcripts were coded for the presence of relational 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 duration, affective intensity, and interactional context.

Analyses

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

Figure 1. Relational Aggression Across Three Tasks

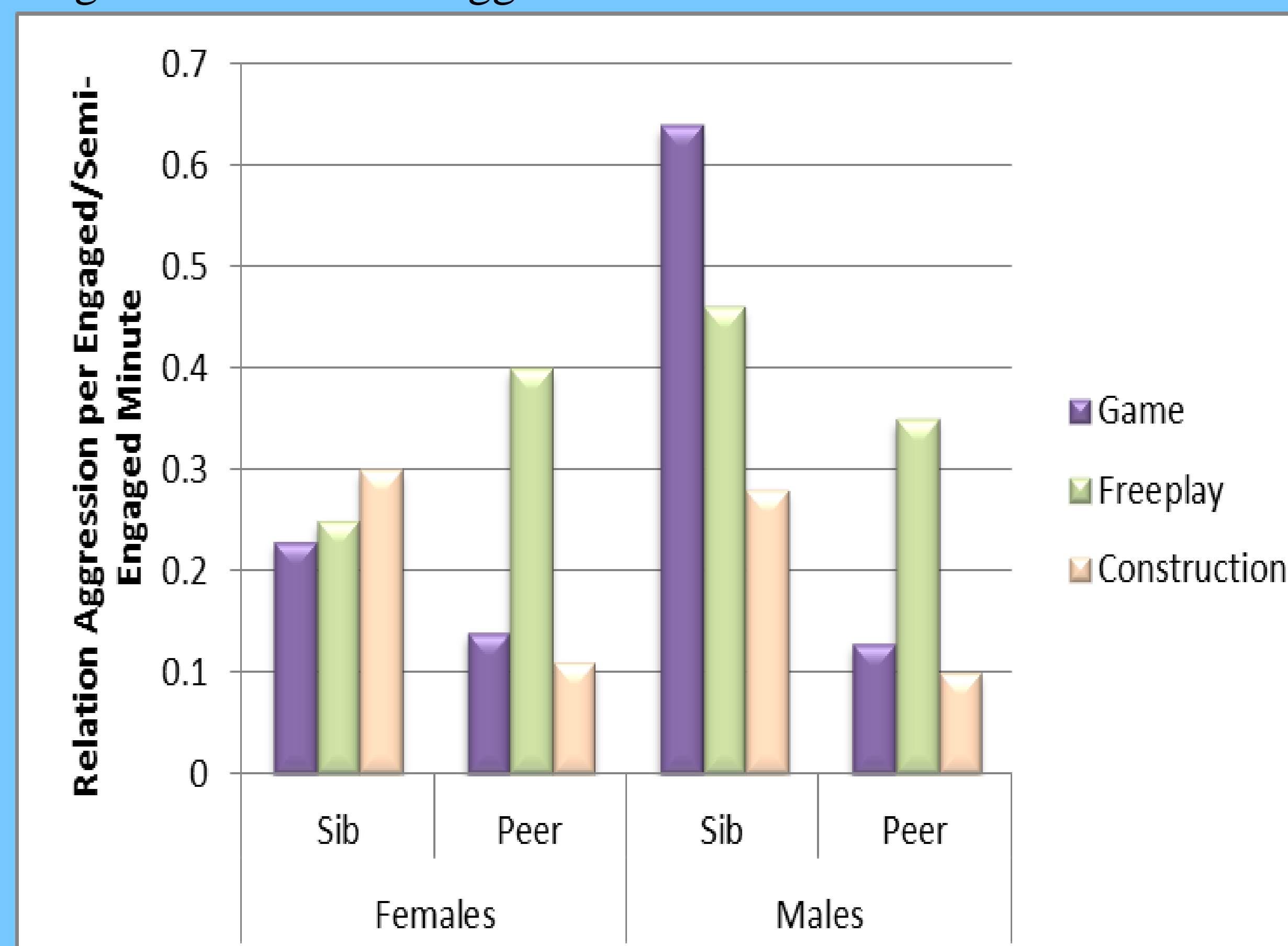


Figure 2. Verbal Aggression Across Three Tasks

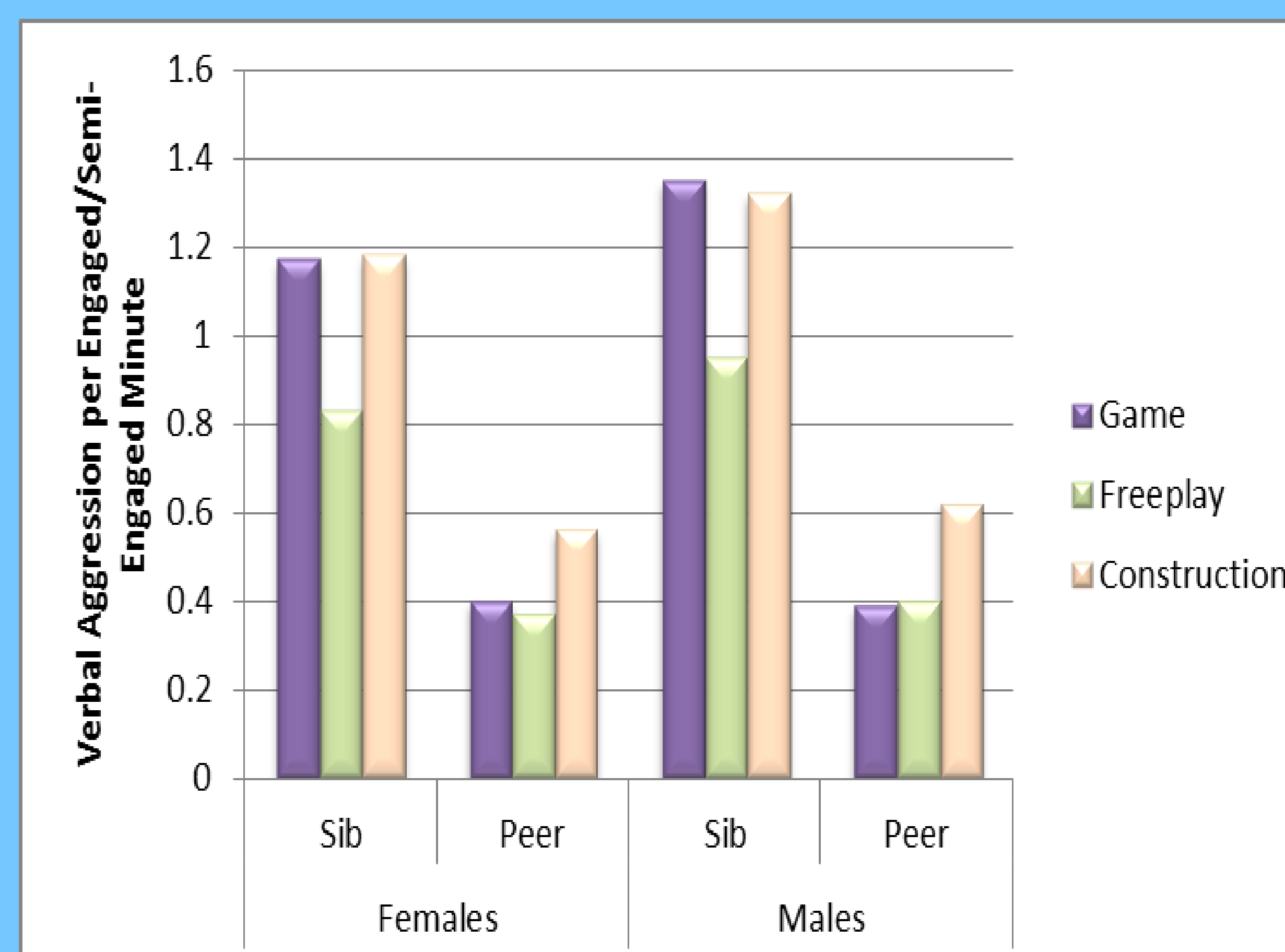
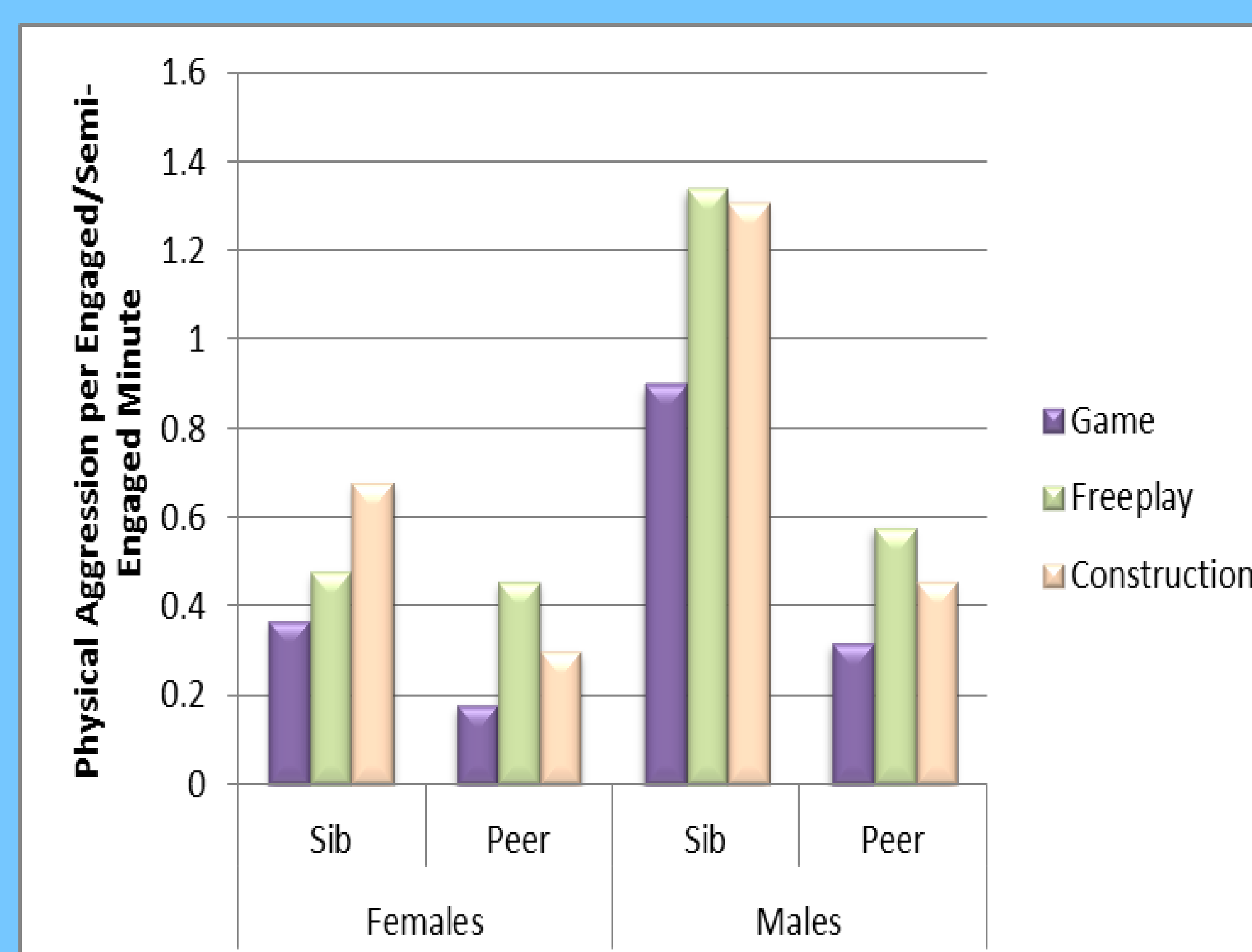


Figure 3. Physical Aggression Across Three Tasks



Results

Relational Aggression (Figure 1)

- Significant partner by task effect such that siblings during the game session had the most relational aggression and peers during the free play had the most relational aggression. Both partners had the least aggression during the construction task ($p=.02$)

Verbal Aggression (Figure 2)

- Significant partner by task effect such that siblings during the free play had the least verbal aggression and peers during the construction task had the most aggression ($p=.02$).

Physical Aggression (Figure 3)

- There was a main effect of gender such that males displayed more physical aggression than females ($p<.01$).
- Significant partner by task effect such that siblings during the game session had the least physical aggression and peers during the free play had the most physical aggression ($p<.001$).

Discussion

Overall, through all three tasks, siblings displayed more relational, physical, and verbal aggression than with their peers. Our results match the generally reported tendency for aggression, specifically physical aggression, to be more prominent among boys than among girls. This could be due to girls', more advanced social cognitive development in their choice of favoring more verbal means to hurt or bother their partner as opposed to boy's more physical tendencies.

For relational aggression the partner by task effect suggest that during the game task, which was meant to examine children in a competitive environment, siblings displayed more aggression than in any other task. Peers displayed the most relational aggression during the free play task, suggesting that a lack of structure with peers allowed children to freely express their feelings of aggression more so than in the other structured tasks. Both the sibling and peer pairs displayed the least aggression in the construction task. This suggests that an activity that creates a common goal for children may tend to lessen their relational aggressive tendencies towards one another.

In analyzing physical aggression results indicated that siblings showed the least physical aggression during the game task. The game task gave the children structure and guidelines on how the task was to be performed, which may have led to less physical altercations and a common understanding of how the game was to be played. Peers showed the most physical aggression during the free play session. This could be because of the lack of structure within this task, which may have allowed children to get off task and engage in physical altercations.

For verbal aggression siblings displayed the least verbal aggression in the free play task. This could be because the lack of structure of the free play task could allow siblings to not have to engage in verbal interactions if they preferred not to. The peers displayed the most verbal aggression during construction. This could be because the common goal created by the construction task may have led each child to have a different method on how to reach that goal. This could lead to them verbally expressing their opinions in an aggressive manner.

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