
“IT’S A LITTLE FREAKY”: BOYS’ MITIGATION OF VERBAL EXPRESSIONS OF AFFECTION AND AFFILIATION

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When Judy’s older son Sam was seven, he came home one day and asked whether he was supposed to hug and kiss her. His friend Nicholas, it turned out, had told him that this was not appropriate behavior for boys. Sam’s concern about this issue ultimately sparked our interest in exploring the extent to which young boys share Nicholas’s beliefs about expressing affection.

Our review of the literature proved to be of little help in elucidating the issue. A great deal has been written about expressions of negative emotions such as anger. Girls, but not boys, are socialized to mask or mitigate expressions of anger in early childhood (e.g., Brody, 1993; Denham, 1998; Saarni, 1999; Saarni & Weber, 1999).

In contrast, little has been written on expressions of more positive emotions such as affection and affiliation. The small literature suggests that boys tend to mitigate this behavior, in much the same way that girls tend to mitigate expressions of negative emotion. For example, Pollack (2000) interviewed boys and young men across the United States. Their comments led him to conclude that, “Society is pushing [boys] to be just one kind of person, nudging them at a very young age to disconnect from their loved ones and to sacrifice that part of themselves that is genuinely loving, caring, and affectionate” (p. 5). Public displays of affection toward mothers or friends, boys reported, were often punished by teasing and ridicule from peers. Boys receive mixed messages, Pollack asserted, about male friends. On the one hand, the media celebrate the notion of boys having good buddies. On the other hand, boys “see the fear in people’s eyes when two guys appear to be getting a little bit too ‘mushy’ or too close” (p. 266). Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman’s (2002) interviews with 11- to 14-year-old London schoolboys revealed similar findings.

Many researchers have found that, when interacting with peers, young boys tend to use more controlling speech and less collaborative speech than do girls (see,

for example, DeHart, 1999; Leman, Ahmed, & Ozarow, 2005). In their meta-analytic review, Leaper and Smith (2004) found that boys also use affiliative speech less than girls do. They operationalized affiliative speech as "language used to establish or maintain connections with others" (p. 993). This language includes, for example, praise, expressions of agreement, acknowledgment of others, and elaborations on others' previous speech. They concluded that girls are more likely than boys to use language to connect to others.

Gender differences in the expressions of affection seem more apparent in adulthood. Women report that they express more positive emotions in interpersonal relationships than do men (Brody, 1999). According to Seidler's (1989) experiences and sociological observations and Coates's (2003) analyses of men's conversations, men believe that expressing warmth makes them appear vulnerable, weak, and unmasculine.

Although there appear to be clear gender differences in expressions of affection and affiliation, Saarni (2001) and Brody (1993, 1996, 1997, 1999) caution that these behaviors are contextually sensitive. That is, differences may vary in magnitude across situations (Leaper & Smith, 2004) and may not appear at all in some. For example, in Frosh et al.'s (2002) study, boys described affection for pets in individual but not group interviews. Furthermore, Leman et al. (2005) observed greater gender differences in the use of collaborative and controlling communication in mixed-gender than same-gender pairs of 8-year-olds playing a mathematical problem-solving game.

Verbal expressions of affection have not been investigated sufficiently in either the language development or the emotional development literatures. Von Salisch (2001) called for more research on verbal expressions of positive emotions and speculated that opportunities for boys to display them become more restricted with age.

We conducted two studies to explore possible age and gender differences in verbal expressions of affection and affiliation. Study 1 was an experiment in which children reported and gave reasons for the ways they would sign cards to different recipients: Study 2 was drawn from longitudinal, semi-naturalistic observations of children's play with siblings and peers. Both designs allowed us to consider whether communicative context interacts with gender in influencing verbally affectionate and affiliative behavior.

Study 1

In Study 1, thirty-nine 5- to 10-year-old children (17 boys, 22 girls) participated in a structured interview. Children were drawn from a summer camp program, an after-school program, and the researchers' suburban neighborhoods in a large metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. They represented a mix of ethnic backgrounds, although most of the children were Caucasian. Only chil-

dren who reported prior experience sending or receiving cards or letters were allowed to participate in the study. Interviews were conducted individually. First, we asked the children how they would sign birthday cards to a teacher, same- and opposite-sex friends, and a relative, and why they would sign in those ways. They were also asked how they would interpret different closings (e.g., "from[name]", "love[name]", only[name]) for birthday cards received from those individuals. Only data from the first part of the study are reported here.

Virtually all the children (87%) reported that they would sign at least one of the cards with an expression of affection (typically "love" and, in one case, simply "your friend"). All of the boys and most of the girls (86%) were also contextually sensitive, varying the ways they signed across recipients. The following tables show the percentage of children in each group who reported that they would sign "love," "your friend," or something else (e.g., "from," "sincerely," just their name) to the different recipients. Quantitative analysis of these results is difficult because of empty cells; for each recipient, one or more of the responses was either always or never selected by one or more of the groups of children. However, qualitative analysis reveals some overall patterns in the children's responses.

The vast majority of children agreed that they would sign "love" on cards to relatives; "love" was the modal response for all groups. Fewer reported that they would sign "love" to their teachers. Everyone except the older girls showed a preference for more neutral forms on cards to teachers; the older girls were about equally likely to choose „love" or a neutral form.

Preferred responses for friends depended both on the age and gender of the child being interviewed and on the gender of the hypothetical friend. Girls were more likely to say they would sign „love" on cards to same-sex friends than on cards to opposite-sex friends; however, they preferred either „your friend" or other forms on cards to same-sex friends. For opposite-sex friends, girls rejected using „love" entirely and showed a particular preference for more emotionally neutral forms. The younger boys were more likely to endorse using „love" with an opposite-sex friend than with a same-sex friend, but they overwhelmingly preferred other forms for both types of friends. None of the older boys said they would sign „love" on cards to *any* friends, same-sex or opposite-sex. For same-sex friends, they were equally likely to choose „your friend" or other forms; for opposite-sex friends, they preferred other forms over „your friend."

Responses for Relatives

	Younger boys	Older boys	Younger girls	Older girls
"love"	89%	100%	71%	67%
"your friend"	0	0	0	7%
other forms	11%	0	29%	26%

Responses for Teachers

	Younger boys	Older boys	Younger girls	Older girls
"love"	44%	25%	29%	47%
"your friend"	0	0	0	7%
other forms	55%	75%	71%	46%

Responses for Same-sex Friends

	Younger boys	Older boys	Younger girls	Older girls
"love"	22%	0	29%	20%
"your friend"	0	50%	0	40%
other forms	78%	50%	71%	40%

Responses for Opposite-sex Friends*

	Younger boys	Older boys	Younger girls	Older girls*
"love"	38%	0	0	0
"your friend"	0	25%	0	17%
other forms	72%	75%	100%	83%

* It should be noted that three of the older girls asserted that they had no opposite-sex friends and so are not included in these figures.

Even more interesting than the forms the children advocated using for each relationship are the socially-based explanations they provided for their responses. Not surprisingly, only half of the younger children (5- to 7-year-olds) offered such explanations, whereas two-thirds of the older children (8- to 10-year-olds) did. Some of the youngest children and most of the older children indicated that they would only sign "love" to individuals such as relatives and best friends about whom they cared a great deal. That is, depth of relationship determined how comfortable they were explicitly expressing affection – or, as one 10-year-old boy noted, "Love' is more like a relationship thing."

Both age and gender differences emerged in children's explanations of decisions about signing cards "love," especially on cards to friends. One younger and three older boys, but only one 5-year-old girl, expressed reservations about writing "love" to same-sex friends. Nearly 8-year-old Stu explained, "They might laugh." According to 10-year-old Allen, signing "love" "would be too weird. ... It's a little freaky" and the friend might think he meant "love love." Similarly, Anthony (9;8) said that, in this context, "love' sounds too freakish." Roger (8;11)

asserted that his male best friend "wouldn't like the 'love' part; he doesn't like the word. It'd be OK. I just wouldn't write it." Although these boys were writing to close friends, they were reluctant to express affection so overtly. The only girl who reported such concerns, Amy (5;8), said that using "love" could be "scary and embarrassing."

In contrast, a different gender effect emerged when children discussed signing cards to opposite-sex friends. Two younger and five older girls, but only one older boy, expressed hesitation about signing "love" on these cards. The one boy, 10-year-old Allen again, said he would not sign "love" on a card to a girl because "I don't like her, not that way." From the girls came the following examples:

Vanessa (5;9): *'Love'? No way! ... Because that would mean he's my boyfriend.*

(comments accompanied by profuse giggling).

Theresa (8;2): *He would think that I'm his girlfriend, but I'm not.*

Sarah (9;4): *No 'love' period. [It would mean] that I would like him.*

Karen (9;9): *We're just friends.*

All these children demonstrate a growing appreciation of the social messages conveyed through language. The boys showed the fear of ridicule by friends that has been noted in the literature, especially the fear of being labeled homosexual. In contrast, girls seemed more concerned about potential confusion between friendship and romantic love.

Study 2

Study 2 is drawn from a longitudinal investigation of children's sibling and friend relationships. Sixty-three children were videotaped in play with a sibling and with a friend at age 4 and again at age 7. Thirty-three of the children had same-sex siblings (17 brother-pairs, 16 sister pairs), and 30 had opposite-sex siblings (14 older sister-younger brother pairs, 16 older brother-younger sister pairs). Roughly half of the siblings were 15-30 months older than the target child, and roughly half were 15-30 months younger. Each family in the study selected a friend of the target child to participate. Ideally, the friend was to be: (1) a frequent playmate of the target child, (2) the same age as the target child, and (3) the same gender as the target child. In most cases, all of these criteria were met, but in four cases (three boys with older sisters, one boy with a younger sister) an opposite-sex friend participated. All of the children came from white, middle-class families in small towns and suburbs near a medium-sized city in the northeastern United States

Each target child was videotaped at home in separate semi-structured free-play sessions with the sibling and with the friend. During each session, the children played

with a different set of experimenter-provided toys (wooden farm, village, and train sets), selected to foster interactive pretend play. Affiliative and affectionate communicative behaviors were coded using Leaper's operationalizations.

In the conversations recorded when the target children were 4, there were no noticeable gender differences in the children's use of affiliative and affectionate utterances. However, by the time the target children were 7, the boys had become much more likely to mitigate affiliative or otherwise positive utterances. Consider 7-year-old Tony, playing with his friend Joey:

- Tony: *When I was little, we almost got in a car accident.*
 Joey: [continues playing, doesn't look at Tony] *Oh my dear lord.*
 Tony: [agitated] *We did! Ask my dad!*
 Joey: [not looking at Tony] *Oh my dear lord.* [switches to play voice] *You're gonna die! I don't want you to die!*

In this example, Joey's expressions of concern for his friend were mitigated both by his use of a play voice and by his avoidance of eye contact.

We found no examples of girls mitigating affiliative utterances. Girls were much more likely than boys to use unmitigated forms for affiliative or otherwise emotionally positive messages, as in the following two exchanges between pairs of 7-year-old girls:

Example 1

- Maggie: *Oh, I'm gonna put someone on the sailboat.* [Puts toy person on sailboat]
 Kristy: *Yeah, that would be a neat idea.*
 Maggie: *And, um, and then I'm gonna put in another person, um, swimming with the ducks.*
 Kristy: *Yeah. You do good ideas.*

Example 2

- Jenny: [lining up boats] *The blue's going to be ahead because it is my favorite. It's going to be in the line of my favorite colors. First blue, then yellow, then red.*
 Carrie: *Mine, too!*
 Jenny: *But they aren't my favorite colors, but they're my, you know...*
 Carrie: *Out of those.*
 Jenny: *Yeah.*

In the first example, Kristy is quite direct in praising Maggie's idea and in making it clear that not only is the idea "neat," but Maggie herself comes up with

good ideas. In the second example, Carrie's exclamation simultaneously expresses agreement and affiliation, and the sense of implied intimacy is deepened in her next utterance when she finishes Jenny's sentence for her.

In contrast, when boys did use unmitigated forms to praise something their partner had done, they tended to comment on the product, not the partner's behavior (e.g., „Cool train.”). They also often used distancing techniques, such as not looking at their partners while they talked to them. These gender differences were more pronounced during interactions with friends than with siblings, paralleling results found in a previous analysis of gender differences in mitigation of negative emotional expression (DeHart, 1996).

Discussion

These findings contribute to the literatures in both language development and emotional development and reinforce the importance of considering communicative context in exploring gender differences in language use (Brody, 1993, 1996, 1997, 1999; Leaper & Smith, 2004; Saarni, 2001). In terms of language development, they reflect children's increasing sensitivity to rules for socially appropriate communication in a range of relationships. Even 5-year-olds show some awareness that different relationships call for different forms of communication, but this understanding intensifies and becomes refined as children move through elementary school. At the same time, gender differences become increasingly apparent, especially in communication with friends.

Both boys and girls show sensitivity to context in their expressions of affection and affiliation, varying the extent and forms of these expressions, along with their explanations for their choices, across different relationships. Boys do not mitigate expression of positive emotion equally in all relationships, nor do girls show unmitigated expression of positive emotion with all types of interaction partners. In middle childhood, both boys and girls still seem quite willing to express affection to relatives, at least when signing cards to them. The most interesting gender differences involve exactly where boys and girls place limits on their expressions of affection and affiliation. Girls are quite willing to express affection toward same-sex friends, but show caution in expressing affection toward opposite-sex friends. For boys, however, the danger zone for expressing affection and affiliation is different; they show the greatest caution in interactions with same-sex friends.

The gender differences observed in our studies appear to involve the *expression* of emotion – display rules – more than the actual *experience* of emotion. What children seem to be learning is how to manage their emotional expression and how to present themselves to others in a variety of relationship contexts. As von Salisch (2001) has noted, children's ability to control their emotional expressions becomes more refined during the school years; in the process, children learn

to conform their expression of emotions to the gender-based standards of their culture. The exact nature and strictness of standards for emotional expression vary across cultures; for example, Japanese children must learn to conform to particularly strong rules against display of negative emotions (Ekman, 2003).

Our results suggest that children show particular sensitivity to gender norms for emotional communication in the context of peer relationships. Past research indicates that peers are stronger socializers of gendered behavior than are siblings (DeHart, 1996). In particular, Saarni (2001) suggests that peers play a strong role in socializing "emotion norms" during middle childhood.

Young boys' and girls' methods for expressing emotion have implications for the relationships they form with others. It may be that girls' more explicit expressions of affection and affiliation help them develop and maintain greater intimacy. This intimacy, then, contributes to the smaller, closer peer groups that characterize girls' friendships, in contrast with boys'

larger, more hierarchically organized groups that emphasize competition (see, for example, Brody, 1993). Differences in the expression of positive emotion may also influence the way boys and girls interact with and relate to their teachers as well as the expectations teachers have of their male and female students.

In conclusion, it is important to note that boys' expressions of affection and affiliation do not disappear in middle childhood; instead, the ways in which they express positive emotions, especially to peers, change. Just as girls find indirect, mitigated ways to express conflict and negative emotion (e.g., Sheldon, 1993), boys find indirect, mitigated ways to express affection and affiliation. At the time we were reviewing the literature, we read the following excerpt, which appeared in a Midwestern American newspaper. It reminded us of the exchange between friends Tony and Joey. "Two first grade boys were playing together. Giggling, scuffling. The usual lively boy bonding. Finally, one child was ready to say something important. 'My mother died,' he said. 'Butthead!' the other boy exclaimed with an air of shocked recognition. 'So did mine.' Their tragedy. Their language" (Pulfer, 2003). Ironically, this anecdote opened a story entitled "A public display of affection" – as indeed it was, in the somewhat disguised, mitigated form that seems to be typical of elementary school-aged boys.

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