Assertive and Affiliative Language in 4-Year-Old Girls' Interactions with Siblings and Friends

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Abstract

As part of a longitudinal study, we analyzed assertive and affiliative language in 4-year-old girls' sibling and friend interactions. The role of gender in their use of assertive and affiliative language was not straightforward; partner, sibling gender, and sibling age all made a difference.

Introduction

Previous research has indicated that 4-year-old girls use more affiliative and less assertive language during interactions with their friends than boys do, and that they are more likely to mitigate expressions of negative affect and self-assertion. However, it is not clear whether these gender differences carry over to sibling interactions since relationships with siblings and friends are qualitatively different in a number of ways.

In addition, most previous research has examined gender differences in same-sex interactions; little is known about girls' use of assertive and affiliative language in interactions with boys. However, sibling relationships provide a particularly good opportunity for observing mixed-sex interactions.

Based on previous findings about preschool sibling and friend interactions, we hypothesized that:

- Girls would use more affiliative language, less assertive language, and more mitigation with friends than with siblings;
- Girls would use more affiliative language, less assertive language, and more mitigation with sisters than with brothers;
- Sibling gender would make a difference in friend interactions; for example, girls who have sisters, rather than brothers, would use less assertive language, more affiliative language, and more mitigation with friends.

Method

Participants

- 48 white, middle-class, 4-year-old girls living in western New York.
- Target children were each paired with a sibling and a same-age, same-sex friend.
- Half of the siblings were 15-30 months older and half were 15-30 months younger than the target child; half were the same sex as the target child and half were of the opposite sex.

Procedure

- Sibling and friend dyads were videotaped engaging in 15-minute free-play sessions that took place at the target child's home.
- Videotapes were transcribed and then coded for use of assertive and affiliative language.
- *Assertive* utterances were those used primarily to influence or control others' thoughts or behaviors (e.g, directives, assertions of desires, intentions, opinions, or rules).
- *Affiliative* utterances were those used primarily to establish or maintain contact with others (e.g., showing support, expressing agreement or inclusion, seeking contact or approval).
- *Assertive* utterances were further coded as *mitigated* or *unmitigated,* and *positive* or *negative.*
- *Mitigated* utterances were those that softened the impact of the utterance (e.g., indirect requests, tag questions, subjunctive forms).

Analyses

- Relative rates of various types of assertive and affiliative utterances were analyzed using separate 2 (partner) by 2 (sibling age) by 2 (sibling gender) repeated measures ANOVAs.

Table 1

4-Year-Old Girls' Use of Affiliative and Assertive Language by Sibling Age and Session

	Total Affiliative Utterance Percentage		Total Assertive Utterance Percentage	
	Sibling Session	Friend Session	Sibling Session	Friend Session
Sibling Age				
Younger	0.20	0.34**	0.42	0.32
Older	0.25	0.30**	0.38	0.41

Table 2

4-Year-Old Girls' Use of Positive and Negative Assertive Language by Sibling Gender and Session

	Positive Assertive Utterance Percentage		Negative Assertive Utterance Percentage	
	Sibling Session	Friend Session	Sibling Session	Friend Session
Sibling Gender				
Female	0.09	0.23	0.10	0.11
Male	0.06	0.31	0.27*	0.10
Overall Use	0.07	0.27**	0.18*	0.10

Table 3

4-Year-Old Girls' Use of Negative Mitigated Assertive Language by Sibling Age, Sibling Gender and Session

	Negative Mitigated Assertive Utterance Percentage	
	Sibling Session	Friend Session
Sibling Age		
Younger	0.06*	0.03
Older	0.03	0.03
Sibling Gender		
Female	0.04	0.04
Male	0.04	0.02

Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .001$

Results

As shown in *Table 1,* partner made a difference in girls' use of affiliative, but not assertive, language:

- Girls used more total affiliative language with friends than with siblings ($F = 13.16$, $p < .001$).

However, as shown in *Table 2,* partner did make a difference when *positive* and *negative* assertive utterances were examined separately:

- Girls directed more *positive* assertive utterances toward friends than toward siblings ($F = 38.26$, $p < .001$).
- Girls directed more *negative* assertive utterances toward siblings than toward friends ($F = 6.52$, $p < .05$).
- There was also a partner x sibling gender effect ($F = 7.55$, $p < .05$), accounted for by the disproportionately high rate of *negative* assertive utterances directed toward brothers.

As shown in *Table 3,* there were some differences in how girls used *mitigated* assertive utterances:

- There were no significant effects for *mitigated positive* assertive utterances.
- There was a significant partner x sibling age effect ($F = 4.16$, $p < .05$) for *mitigated negative* assertive utterances. Girls directed more of these utterances toward younger siblings than toward older siblings or friends.

Discussion

This study provided evidence that 4-year-old girls' use of assertive and affiliative language is complex; it was found that partner, sibling gender, and sibling age all impacted their interactions with siblings and friends.

Partner Effects:

These effects can be attributed to the fact that, while sibling relationships are permanent, friend relationships are chosen. Therefore, there is more risk associated with friendships, which results in girls' increased use of affiliative language and decreased use of oppositional language with friends. However, this does not deter girls from using *positive* assertive utterances with friends.

Partner x Sibling Gender Effects:

This pattern of results may occur because it is easier for same-sex dyads to communicate. In general, members of same-sex dyads are socialized similarly, which results in complementary communication styles. Members of mixed-sex dyads, on the other hand, are socialized differently, which leads to conflicting communication styles that are likely to elicit more frustration and negativity.

Partner x Sibling Age Effects:

Partner and sibling age impacted the use of *mitigated negative* assertive utterances. A possible explanation is that older sisters may find that softening oppositional language makes it more effective in influencing younger siblings' behavior. On the other hand, younger sisters are probably less in control of interactions with older siblings, which may make them less likely to soften oppositional language.

The findings of the present study suggest that 4-year-old girls' use of assertive and affiliative language varies by partner, sibling gender, and sibling age. The complexity of the results alludes to the fact that girls, even at age 4, recognize that different kinds of language are appropriate for different situations. These results have the potential to be transferred to other contexts as children age. Future studies should focus on older children and how their language patterns evolve over time. Additionally, in order to strengthen future findings, an increased sample size and the addition of boys as target children are necessary.