

# Assertive and Affiliative Language in 7-Year-Olds and 17-Year-Olds' Interactions with Siblings and Friends

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## **Abstract**

As part of a longitudinal study, we examined 7-and-17-year-old girls' and boys' use of affiliative and assertive language with siblings and friends. Our results suggest that gender-typical language patterns become more pronounced as children develop. However, other variables such as the relationship of the partner to the target child and sibling gender also significantly affected the target children's use of assertive and affiliative language.

#### **Introduction**

Previous research on preschoolers and elementary schoolers has indicated that girls tend to use more affiliative and less assertive language during interaction than do boys. In addition, boys are more likely to mitigate affiliative language, whereas girls are more likely to mitigate assertive language (Bryant & DeHart, 2005; Leaper & Ayres, 2007). However, most research has focused on data collected during interaction with same-sex peers at single time points during early or middle childhood. Relatively little is known about how boys' and girls' use of affiliative language, assertive language, and mitigation may change over the course of development, across interactions with different partners, or during mixed-sex interactions.

Sibling relationships provide an interesting context for examining children's and adolescents' use of assertive and affiliative language, for several reasons. First, they provide a very different social context for language use and emotional expression than peer relationships do and may offer different opportunities for the use of assertive and affiliative language. Second, they provide a setting in which naturally occurring mixed-sex interactions can be readily observed.

In past studies of early and middle childhood, we have found different patterns of gender differences in sibling interactions than in friend interactions during early and middle childhood (Laudico et al., 2010; Rabinowitz et al., 2009; DeHart et al., 2007). In addition, we have found that the gender of a child's sibling made a difference in his or her interaction with a friend as well as with the sibling. Finally, gender differences depended somewhat on the valence of assertive utterances (positive/negative) and on the presence or absence of mitigation.

In the current study, we extended our past research to examine 7-and-17-year-old girls' and boys' use of affiliative and assertive language with siblings and friends. We were particularly interested in examining the prevalence of mitigation, possible differences between positive and negative uses of assertive language, and the impact of partner gender.

## Method

## Participants

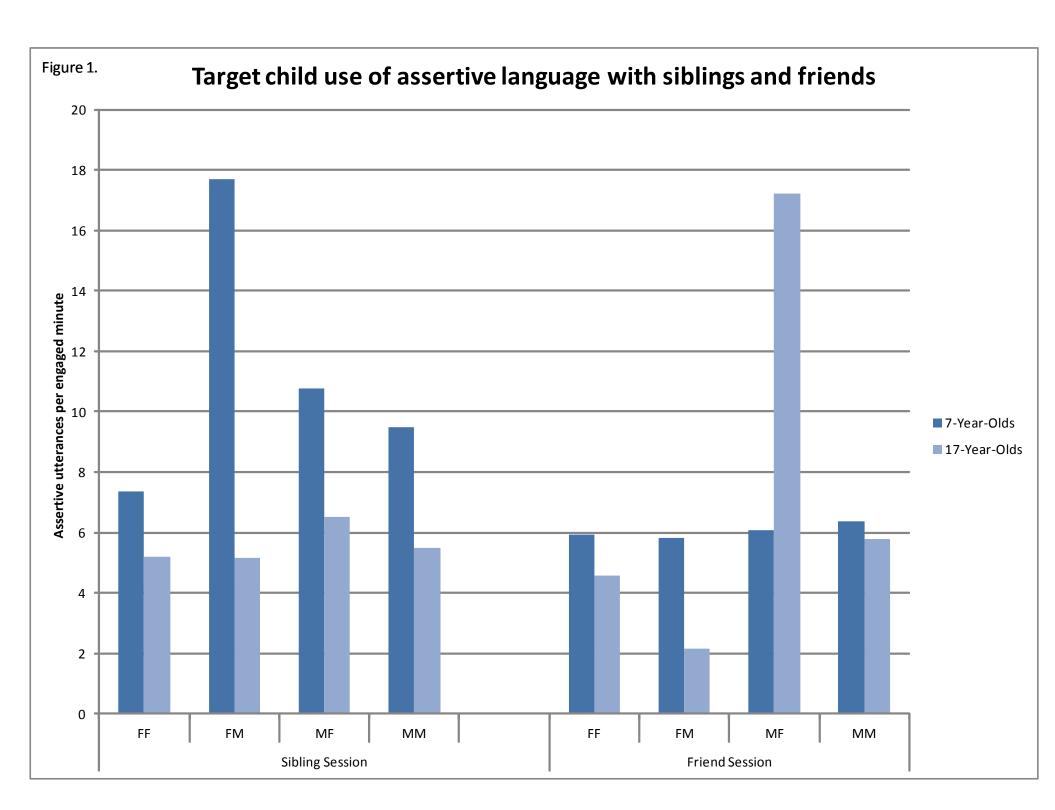
- 32 white, middle-class 7-and-17-year-olds living in western New York.
- Target children were each paired with a sibling and with a same-age, same-sex friend.
- Half of the siblings were 15-30 months older and half were 15-30 months younger than the target adolescent; half were the same sex as the target child, and half were of the opposite sex.

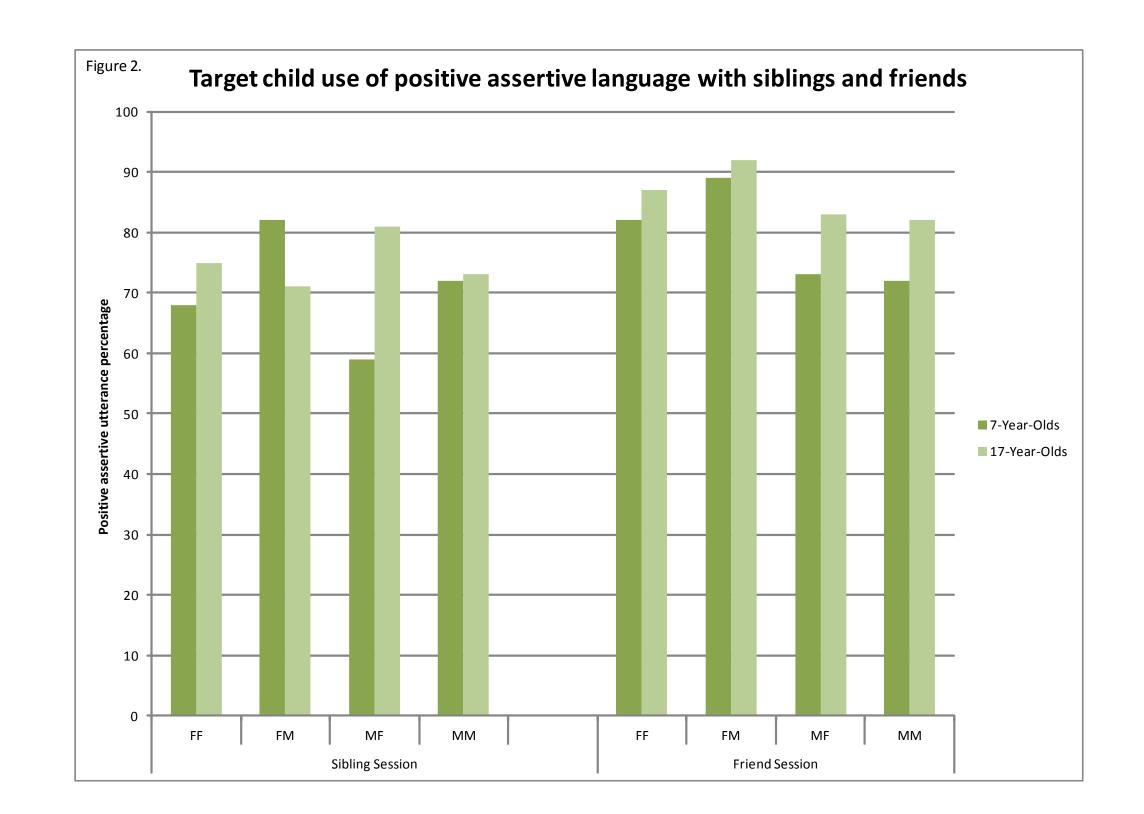
## Procedure

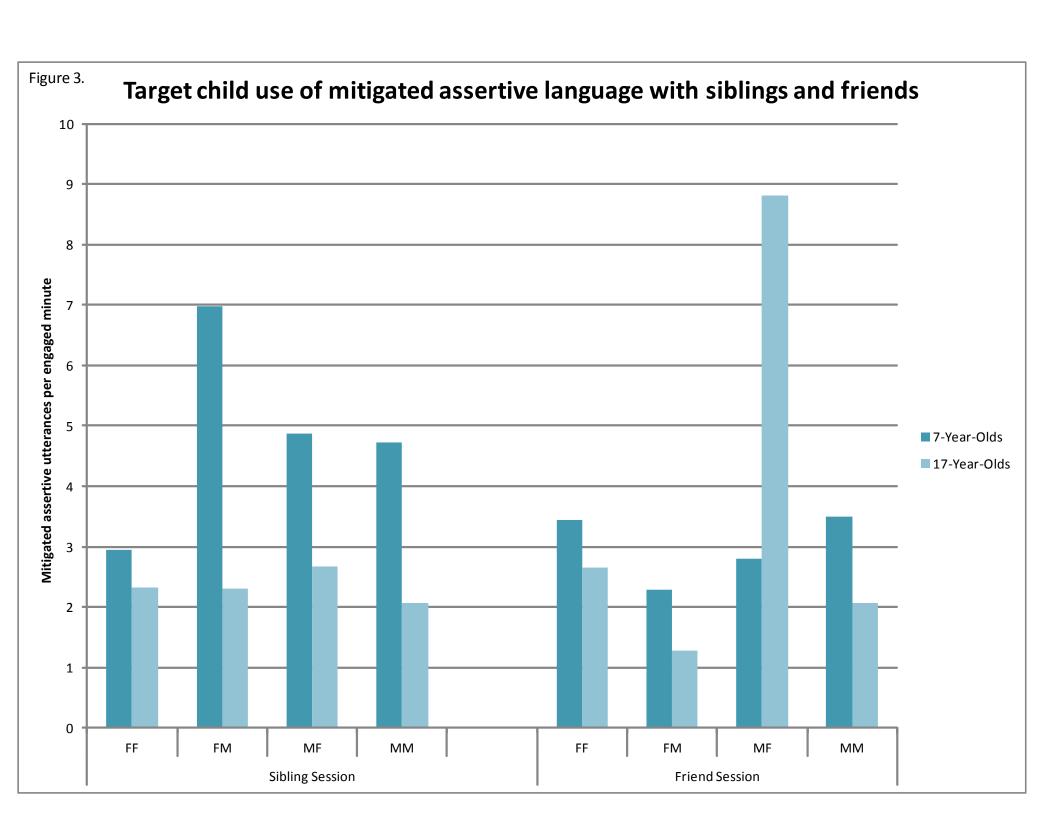
- 7-year-old sibling and friend dyads were videotaped during 10-to-15-minute sessions during which they were asked to complete a construction task.
- 17-year-old sibling and friend dyads were videotaped during 15-to-25-minute sessions during which they were asked to either bake brownies or make a pizza together.
- Videotapes were transcribed and then coded for the use of assertive and affiliative language.
- Assertive utterances were those used primarily to influence or control others' thoughts or behaviors in order to accomplish a goal (e.g, directives or assertions of desires, intentions, opinions, or rules).
- Affiliative utterances were those used primarily to establish or maintain social interaction with oth

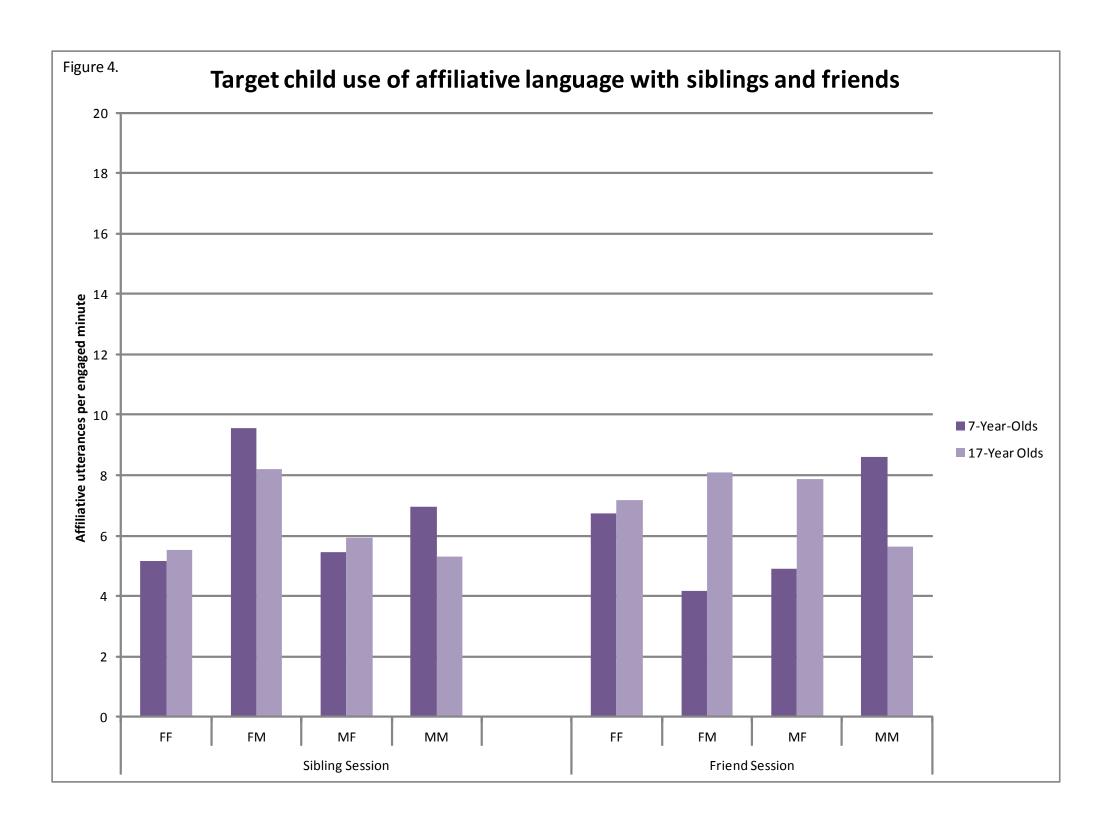
ers (e.g, showing support, expressing agreement or inclusion, seeking contact or approval).

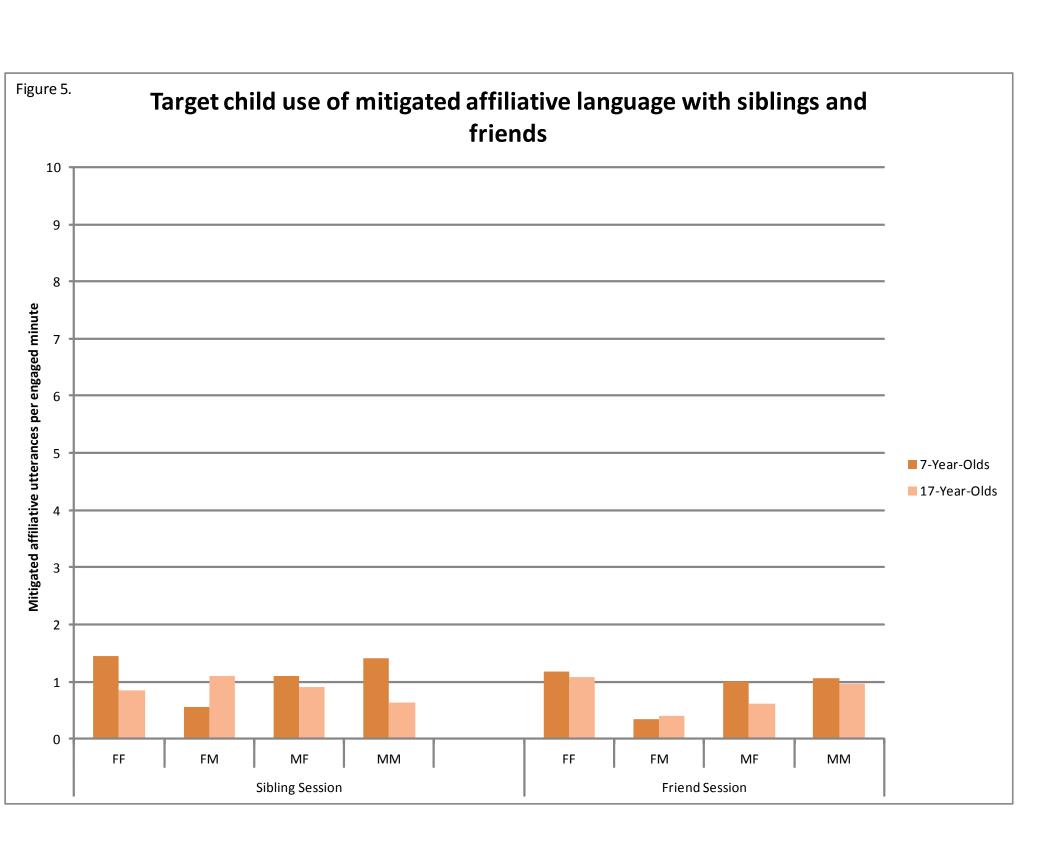
- Assertive utterances were further coded as positive or negative. Negative utterances were those that had negative affect or tone, or displayed opposition (e.g., disagreements, negative intonation, frustration). Positive utterances were those that lacked negative affect and were said either neutrally or with positive affect (e.g., simple requests or commands, telling stories, friendly utterances).
- Assertive and affiliative utterances were further coded as mitigated or unmitigated. Mitigated utterances were those that softened the impact of the utterance—that made it appear either less assertive or less affiliative (e.g., indirect requests, tag questions, subjunctive forms, sarcasm or jocularity, use of play voice).
- Social engagement was coded at 10-second intervals.

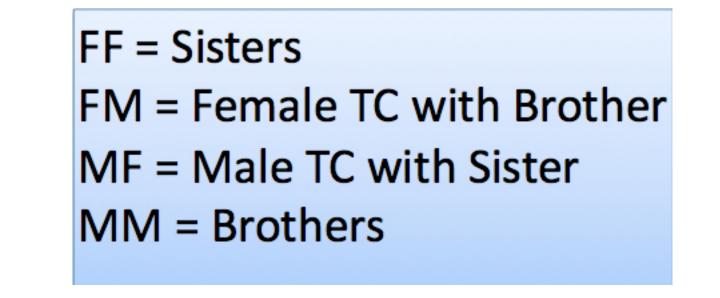












#### **Acknowledgments**

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#### Analyses

For the purposes of the current poster, we focused on assertive and affiliative language use by the target children in the study. Relative rates of various types of assertive and affiliative utterances were analyzed using 2 (partner) X 2 (target gender) X 2 (partner gender) X 2 (age) repeated measure ANOVAs.

## **Results**

### Assertive Language

#### Rate

- As shown in Figure 1, there was a time x target child gender effect. Boys produced more assertive utterances/engaged minute than did girls at age 17, but this effect was not seen at age 7 (F = 4.31, p < .05).
- There was also a time x partner interaction. Siblings, but not friends, showed a higher level of total assertive utterances/engaged minute at age 7 than at age 17 (F = 5.77, p < .05).

## Valence

- As shown in Figure 2, 17-year-olds used more positive assertive language than 7-year-olds did (F = 4.37, p < .05).
- There was also a partner effect, with target children using more positive assertive language to ward friends than toward siblings (F = 5.12, p < .05).
- Finally, there was a target child gender effect; girls used more positive assertive language than boys did (F = 8.54, p < .05).

#### Mitigation

- As shown in Figure 3, analyses of mitigated assertive language also showed a time x partner interaction; 7-year-old target children used more affiliative language with siblings than friends, while the opposite effect was found with 17-year-old target children (F = 5.55, p < .026).
- Results indicated a partner x sibling gender interaction. Target children with sisters used more mitigated assertive language with their friends than with their siblings, whereas those with brothers used more mitigated assertive language with their siblings than with their friends (F = 4.31, p < .05).
- There was also a time x sibling gender interaction in which 7-year-old target children with brothers used more mitigated assertive language than target children with sisters, while the opposite effect was found in 17-year-old target children (F = 5.54, p < .05)

## Affiliative Language

- Analyses of affiliative language indicated a marginal time x target child gender x sibling gender interaction. 17-year-olds used more affiliative language than 7-year-olds in each target-partner dyad except boys with male siblings (F = 3.46, p < .10).
- Analyses of mitigated affiliative language showed no significant effects.

#### **Discussion**

Some of our results replicate previous findings of gender effects, but when considered across time, more complex interactions emerge. Variables such as the relationship of the partner to the target child and gender of both target child and sibling significantly affected the target children's language patterns.

What is interesting about these findings is they demonstrate that children's language usage with their siblings and friends does not remain consistent over time. Rather, as children develop, so does the way they communicate with different interaction partners. Further, the way gender influences language usage is different at age 7 than it is at age 17, suggesting that gender-typical language patterns become more pronounced as children develop.