Conflicts and Averted Conflicts in Middle Childhood Across Two Tasks

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Abstract

As part of a longitudinal study, 73 white, middle-class, American families participated in a longitudinal study of children's interactions with siblings and same-sex friends at age 7. Children were videotaped at home in separate semi-structured free play and construction sessions with a sibling and with a friend. Task and gender composition of the sibling pairs both influenced the characteristics and issues of conflicts and averted conflicts.

Introduction

Relationships with siblings and friends provide important but differing contexts for social interaction and social development in middle childhood. In particular, both relationships provide plentiful occasions for oppositional behavior and opportunities for learning to manage interpersonal differences. Differences have been observed in preschoolers' and elementary schoolers' conflicts and averted conflicts with siblings and friends. However, little is known about the effects of task on the rate and nature of oppositional interactions.

As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we examined conflicts and averted conflicts in semi-structured closed-field settings as a function of gender, partner, and task. In past studies, we found that siblings had more conflicts than friends during free play and that the gender composition of sibling pairs made a difference in the nature and frequency of both sibling and friend conflicts and averted conflicts. More structured tasks, such as construction, might make a difference in the appearance of conflicts and averted conflicts since these tasks require children to work together more than a free play task does. This creates more opportunities for oppositional interactions and may produce differences in conflicts and averted conflicts.

Methods

Participants

Study participants were 73 white, middle-class sibling pairs living in western New York. The target child in each sibling pair was seven years old; 36 of the siblings were approximately two years older than the target, and 37 were approximately two years younger. Thirty-six of the target children were female, and 43 of the sibling pairs were same-sex (20 male, 23 female). A same-age, same-sex friend of each target child also participated in the study.

Procedure

- The target child was videotaped at home in separate 10-minute semi-structured free-play and construction sessions with a sibling and a same-sex friend.
- The videotapes from both sessions were transcribed and coded for conflict, averted conflict and social engagement.
- Conflicts were defined as exchanges containing mutual opposition, either verbal or behavioral, at least two turns in length. Once identified, conflicts were coded further for frequency, turns, affective intensity, and issue.
- Averted Conflicts were defined as oppositional behavior that was not immediately reciprocated by the partner. Once identified, averted conflicts were coded further for frequency, turns, affective intensity, and issue.
- **Social engagement** was coded at 10-second intervals. For the purposes of the present analysis, social engagement was collapsed into three categories: *engaged* (partners were mutually participating in an activity or engaged with each other), *semi-engaged* (one partner was watching or trying to engage the other), and *unengaged* (partners were not socially engaged with each other).

Analyses

Conflict and averted conflict rates and characteristics were analyzed using separate 2 (partner) x 2 (task) x 2 (family type) x 2 (target child gender) repeated measure ANOVAs. Conflict and averted conflict issues were analyzed using 2 (partner) x 2 (task) x 2 (family type—same-sex vs. mixed-sex) x 2 (target child gender) repeated measure MANOVAs, with issue types as dependent variables.

Figure 1. Mean Rate of Conflicts per Minute of Social Engagement

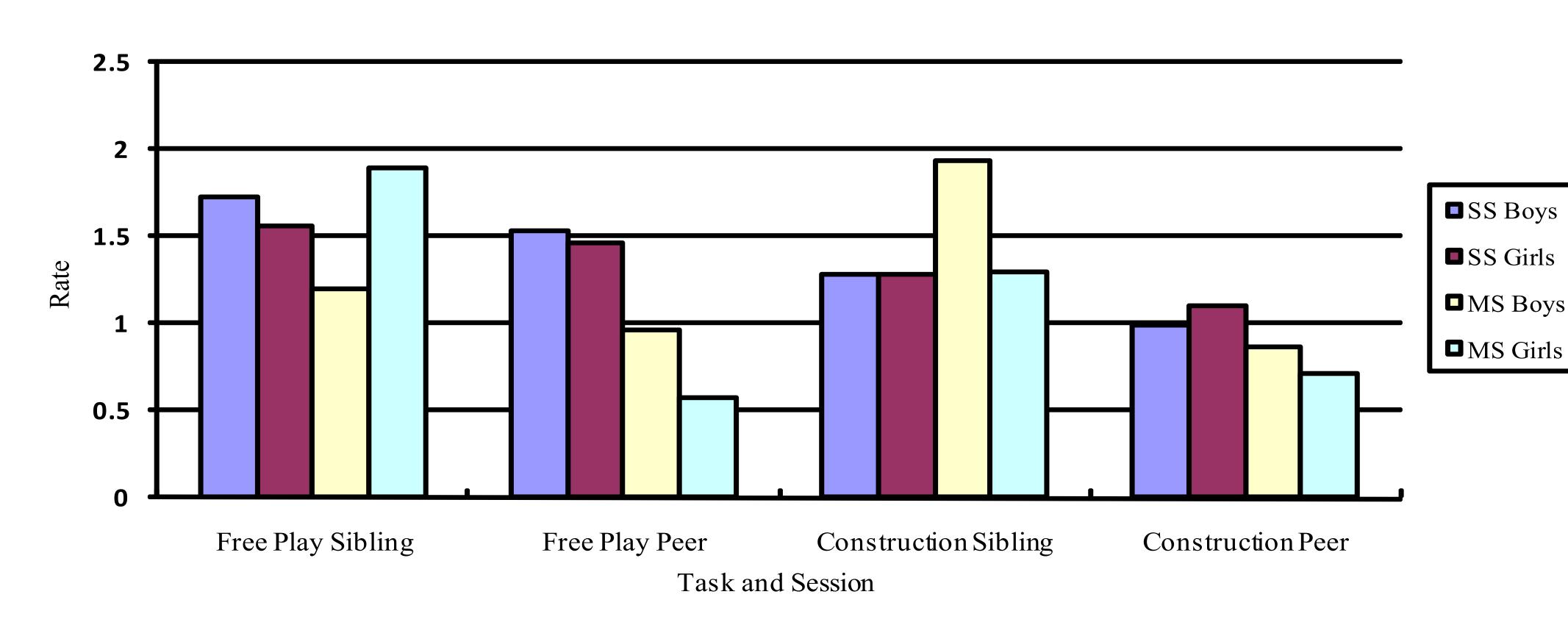


Figure 2. Mean Rate of Averted Conflicts per Minute of Social Engagement

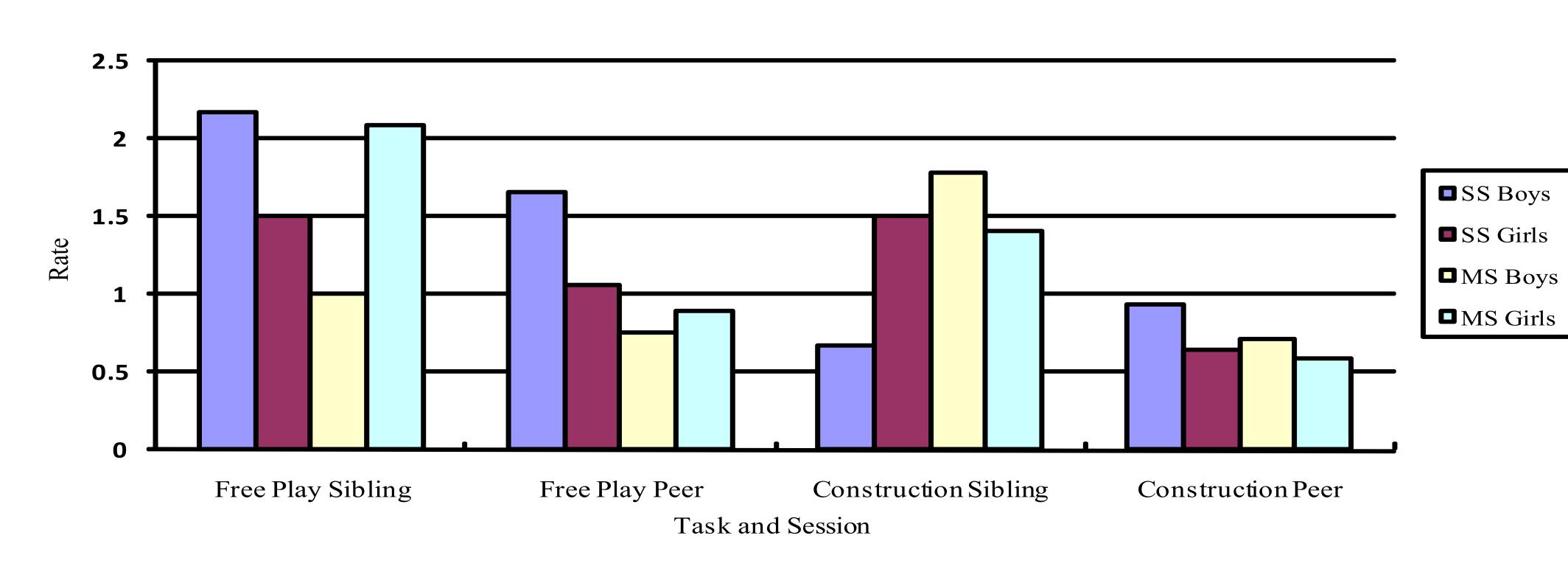


Table 1. Conflict Characteristic Means Construction Sibling Sibling Friend Friend Girls Boys Boys Boys Total Turns 6.2 6.0 6.0 **Conflict Oppositional** Turns/Conflict **Affective Intensity** (on a 5-point

	Free Play				Construction			
	Sibling		Friend		Sibling		Friend	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boy
Total Turns/	2.3	2.6	2.5	2.4	3.0	2.5	2.8	2.9
Averted Conflict				,				
Oppositional	1.1	1.3	1.1	1.2	1.5	1.1	1.4	1.2
Turns/Averted Conflict								
Affective Intensity	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.1	1.0	1.0	1.0
(on a 5-point scale)								

Results

Conflict and Averted Conflict Rates of Occurrence (Figures 1 & 2)

- For both tasks, siblings had higher rates of both conflicts (p < .001) and averted conflicts (p < .01) per minute of social engagement than friends did.
- There was a significant four-way interaction: task x partner x target child gender x family type. During friend free play, sibling construction, and friend construction tasks, target boys with sisters had higher rates of conflict than anyone else (p < .05). During sibling free play, target children with brothers had higher rates of conflicts than those with sisters (p < .05).
- For averted conflicts, there was a significant three-way interaction: task x family type x target child gender. For both tasks, target boys with brothers had the highest rate of averted conflicts per minute of social engagement compared to all other sessions and gender compositions (p < .05).

Turns (Tables 1 and 2)

- For conflict, there were no significant effects for total turns. However, sibling conflicts that occurred during free play had more *oppositional* turns than any other category of conflicts (p < .01).
- Overall, averted conflicts had more total turns during the construction task than during free play (p < .05). However, the opposite was true for averted conflicts during boys' sibling sessions (p < .01).

Affective Intensity (Tables 1 and 2)

- Conflicts and averted conflicts that occurred during free play had higher affective intensity than those that occurred during construction tasks (p < .001).
- During free play, conflicts between siblings had higher affective intensity than conflicts between friends (p < .05).

Issues

- Conflicts were more likely to be about behavior (M = .49) than about objects (M = .20) or ideas/facts (M = .21), (p < .001).
- Averted conflicts were also more likely to be about behavior (M = .52) than about objects (M = .18) or ideas/facts (M = .15), (p < .001).
- However, issue and gender did matter for averted conflicts (p < .05):
- O Averted conflicts about objects or behavior were more common during construction than during free play for children with brothers; the opposite was true for children with sisters.
- O Averted conflicts about ideas or facts were more common during free play than during construction for everyone except boys with brothers.

Discussion

Task was found to have an effect on all variables associated with conflicts and averted conflicts, but partner and gender had impacts as well. Siblings engaged in more oppositional interactions than friends did, especially during free play. Children with brothers were found to behave differently than children with sisters, in some cases even when interacting with their friends.

Task was believed to influence these variables because of the structured nature of the construction task when compared to the free-play task. Since free-play tasks are more open-ended, they allow for more opportunities for oppositional interactions. Partner impacted these variables as well, possibly due to greater familiarity with siblings compared to friends. Because of that familiarity sibling pairs were more likely to engage in oppositional interactions. Children with brothers had an increased likelihood to be oppositional, which could be the result of the gender socialization that leads boys to be more aggressive and possibly more annoying to their siblings.