

The Role of Task in 7-Year-Olds' Conflicts with Siblings and Friends Tacianna Oliver, Hillary Rich, Andrew Frohn, Jordan Russell, and Kelsey Quest, & Ganie B. Dehart State University of New York, at Geneseo

Abstract

Abstract: As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we examined 7-year-olds' conflicts with siblings and with friends during construction tasks, board game play, and free play. Partner, gender, age composition, and task all made a difference in various aspects of the conflicts observed during the sessions.

Introduction

Relationships with siblings and friends provide important but differing contexts for social interaction in childhood and adolescence. As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships from early childhood through adolescence, we examined 7-year-olds' conflicts with siblings and friends in semi-structured closed-field interaction situations. Differences have been observed between elementary schoolers' conflicts with siblings and peers, but little is known about how these oppositional interactions may change depending on the tasks the children are asked to perform together. Variations in structure, materials available, and the degree to which the task fosters either competition or cooperation might be expected to make a difference in conflict rate, length, and structure.

Methods

Participants

- 73 white, middle-class American 7-year olds living in Western New York.
- Half of the siblings were two years older than the target child, half two years younger.
- Half of the target children were female, half male.
- Half of the sibling pairs were same-sex, half mixed-sex.
- A same-age, same-sex friend of each target child also participated in the study.

Procedure

- Target children were videotaped at home in separate 30-minute sessions with sibling and friend.
- Each taping session was divided into three segments of approximately 10 minutes each: a construction task, a board game, and a free-play session with toys provided by the experimenters.
- The videotapes were transcribed and coded for conflicts.
- *Conflicts* were defined as exchanges containing mutual opposition, either verbal or behavioral. Once identified, conflicts were further coded for *frequency*, *number of turns*, *instigator*, *issue*, *and termination strategy*.
- Social engagement was coded at 10-second intervals. For the purposes of the present analysis, social engagement was collapsed into three categories: engaged (partners mutually participating in the activity or engaged with each other), semi-engaged (one partner watching or trying to engage the other), and unengaged (partners not socially engaged with each other).

Analyses

Conflict rates and characteristics were analyzed using separate 2(partner) x 3(task) x 2(target child gender) x 2(sib gender) x 2(age group) repeated measure ANOVAs and MANOVAs.

Table and Graph Key

- FF=female target, female sibling
- FM=female target, male sibling
- MF=male target, female sibling
- MM=male target, male sibling

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



Figure 2. Turns per Conflict During Sibling and Friend Sessions



Figure 3. Conflict % Target Instigated



Table 1: Conflict Issues (Percentage of total conflicts)				
	Game	Freeplay	Construction	
Behavioral	.64	.52	.47	
Plans for Play	.01	.14	.18	
Ideas or Facts	.34	.26	.19	
Object	.01	.08	.16	

Table 2: Conflict Termination Strategies (Percentages of total conflicts)				
	Game	Freeplay	Construction	
Standing Firm	.60	.44	.51	
Negotiate	.03	.02	.02	
Surrender	.33	.41	.39	
Distract	.01	.05	.03	
Disengage	.02	.08	.04	
Third Party	.01	.00	.01	

Conflict Rates (Figure 1)

- friend difference during free play.

Turns (Figure 2)

Conflict Instigation (Figure 3)

There was a significant task x age x target child gender x sibling gender interaction (p = .01) for who was most likely to instigate conflicts. During the game, boys with older sisters were most likely to instigate conflicts. During free play, it was girls with younger brothers. During construction, it was boys with older sisters.

Issue (Table 1)

There were task effects for behavioral, plans for play, and ideas or facts issues (p < .001). Issues about behavior and ideas or facts were most prevalent during game sessions, followed by free-play sessions and then construction sessions. Issues about plans for play were equally prevalent during free-play and construction sessions, and significantly less prevalent during game sessions.

Termination Strategy (Table 2)

There were significant task effects for standing firm and surrender (p < .001). Standing firm was most prevalent during the game, followed by construction, followed by free play. On the other hand, surrender was more prevalent during free play and construction than during the game.

Task was found to have an effect on all aspects of conflicts covered by our coding scheme, although partner and gender/age composition of sibling dyads had impacts as well. Some of the differences may be attributable to the degree of structure in each task. For example, the highest rate of conflicts occurred during free play sessions, perhaps because it was the least structured task and therefore provided the most opportunities for contrasting opinions and oppositional interactions.

The extent to which each task fostered either competition or cooperation also seemed to play a role. Game sessions, which were intended to be competitive, elicited conflicts about game rules (ideas/facts or behavior), whereas the construction task, designed to foster cooperation, produced conflicts about how to jointly proceed with the task (plans for play). The highly structured, competitive game task seemed to foster the use of standing firm as a way to end conflicts, whereas the less structured, more cooperative tasks seemed to leave children more willing to give in to their partners' wishes

Task also interacted with other variables in interesting ways, most notably in who instigated the conflicts. Children responded to the tasks differently, depending on the age and gender composition of their sibling dyad.



Results

• Overall, siblings had a higher rate of conflicts than friends did (p < .001).

There was a significant partner x task x target child gender interaction (p = .042). The partner effect held true for dyads with female targets across all three tasks. For dyads with male targets, there was no sibling/

Sibling conflicts had more turns than friend conflicts during game and free-play sessions, while friend conflicts had more turns during construction sessions (p = .05).

There was a significant task x target child gender x sib gender interaction for turns (p = .05). For game and free-play sessions, same-sex pairs had more turns than mixed-sex pairs. On the other hand, mixed-sex pairs had more turns than same-sex pairs during construction sessions.

Discussion