Observed Prosocial Behavior and Mothers' Perceptions of 4-Year-Olds' Sibling and Friend Relationships



Kelly C. Seibert, David O. Cheng, Andrea S. Pratt, Eleanor J. McGrath, Brittany A. Hartnett, and Ganie B. DeHart

State University of New York at Geneseo

Abstract

As part of an ongoing longitudinal study, connections between four-year-olds' observed prosocial behavior toward siblings and friends and mothers' perceptions of their children's relationships were examined. Observed prosocial behavior was significantly correlated in various ways with mothers' perceptions of asymmetry, intimacy, harmony, and conflict in their children's relationships.

Introduction

There is evidence that, because of their intimacy and familiarity, sibling relationships provide early opportunities for children to develop social understanding and to display prosocial behavior. However, there has been little research systematically comparing positive social behaviors between siblings to similar behaviors between friends, examining how mothers' perceptions of their children's interactions relate to actual sibling and friend behaviors, or exploring connections between prosocial interactions and other aspects of sibling and friend relationships.

Maternal questionnaires are a useful complement to observational research, as they make it possible to examine aspects of relationships that may not be readily observable in brief samples of behavior. However, mothers' perceptions of their children's sibling and friend relationships are likely to differ from observed behaviors, for several reasons. Mothers are not necessarily aware of everything that happens in their children's relationships, and children may behave differently toward their siblings and friends when their mothers are present than when they are not. Mothers may have a deeper understanding of their children's sibling relationships than of their friendships, due to the greater amount of time spent with the sibling pair. Finally, mothers' reports, especially concerning sibling relationships, may be subject to social desirability, in an effort to portray their children in the most positive light.

As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we examined connections between siblings' and friends' prosocial behavior as observed in brief play sessions, and mothers' perceptions of their children's relationships as reported in questionnaires. Overall, we expected greater concordance between mothers' perceptions and observed behavior for sibling relationships than for friendships, due to mothers' greater familiarity with their own children and more frequent opportunities to observe sibling interaction. However, we also expected that other aspects of sibling and friend relationships might be related to prosocial behavior in somewhat different ways, in part due to the asymmetry of sibling relationships in early childhood.

Methods

Participants

- Sixty-one 4-year-olds (27 female, 34 male) from white, middle-class families in Western New York were observed interacting with a sibling and a same-sex, same-age friend.
- Twenty-four of the target children were observed with a sibling who was 15-30 months younger, 37 with a sibling who was 15-30 months older.
- Thirty-three of the children had a same-sex sibling; 28 had an opposite-sex sibling.

Procedure

- Each target child was videotaped at home in separate 15-minute free-play sessions with the sibling and the friend.
- During the videotapings, target child mothers completed questionnaires about the sibling and friend relationships. The questionnaires included 24 items designed to assess four relationship dimensions: asymmetry, intimacy, harmony, and conflict. All questionnaires used a 5-point Likert-type rating scale ranging from 1 (not characteristic of the relationship) to 5 (very characteristic of the relationship).
- The videotapes were transcribed, and each child was coded separately for prosocial behavior (behavior intended to benefit another party). Prosocial behavior was further classified as complementary dominant, complementary subordinate, or reciprocal, depending on the relative symmetry of the interaction partners' roles. Each instance of prosocial behavior was also coded for affective intensity, on a 3-point scale.
- The videotapes were coded for social engagement 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).

Analysis

Bivariate correlations were conducted using rates of target child and partner complementary dominant, complementary subordinate, and reciprocal prosocial behavior, target and partner prosocial affective intensity, and mothers' ratings of sibling and friend asymmetry, intimacy, harmony, and conflict. Because relative sibling age was expected to make a difference in type of prosocial behavior, separate correlation matrices were generated for target children with older siblings and those with younger siblings.

Results

Target children with older siblings

Results for target children with older siblings included a number of strong correlations between the questionnaire and observational data:

- Mothers' ratings of sibling asymmetry were negatively correlated with target child complementary dominant behavior toward both siblings (r = -.503, p < .05) and friends (r = -.360, p < .05).
- Mothers' ratings of friendship intimacy were positively correlated with overall prosocial behavior of both target children and siblings (r = .491, p < .05, and r = .367, p < .05, respectively). Friendship intimacy was also positively correlated with reciprocal prosocial behavior by the target (r = .467, p < .05) and the sibling (r = .346, p < .05).
- Mothers' ratings of friendship harmony were positively correlated with overall target and sibling prosocial behavior, (r = .307, p < .1; r = .413, p < .05, respectively). Friendship harmony was also positively correlated with target and friend reciprocal prosocial behavior (r = .347, p < .05; r = .439, p < .05, respectively).

• Mothers' ratings of sibling conflict were positively correlated with overall sibling prosocial behavior (r = .333, p < .05) and sibling reciprocal prosocial behavior (r = .361, p < .05).

Target Children with younger siblings

A different pattern of correlations was found for target children with younger siblings:

- Mothers' ratings of sibling intimacy were positively correlated with overall sibling prosocial behavior (r = .455, p < .05) and sibling reciprocal prosocial behavior (r = .435, p < .05).
- Mothers' ratings of sibling intimacy were positively correlated with affective intensity of target children's prosocial behavior (r = .481, p < .05).
- Finally, mothers' ratings of sibling harmony were positively correlated with affective intensity of sibling prosocial behavior (r = .524, p < .01).

Discussion

The results suggest that, overall, mother's perceptions of their child's relationships were most consistent with observed prosocial behaviors of the target children with older siblings; interestingly, this was especially true of behaviors toward friends. This may be due in part to the fact that mothers have had a longer time to gauge the nature of relationships involving older sibling pairs. Additionally, the older sibling's more developed personality may make the relationship more predictable.

Maternal questionnaire ratings of friend intimacy and friend harmony correlated with overall acts of prosocial behavior for both the target child and the older sibling, and reciprocal acts for both the target child and the older sibling. This indicates that a relationship with high ratings of intimacy and harmony between the target child and the friend (as reported by the mother) may also be conducive to creating a positive relationship between the target child and the older sibling-- or vice versa.

Similar findings were found with target children having younger siblings as well, as mother's reports of sibling intimacy were significantly correlated with overall sibling prosocial behavior. This reinforces the role of intimacy and harmony in establishing prosocial behavior in a relationship.

Social desirability may have played a stronger role in mothers' ratings of sibling relationships than in their ratings of friendships, possibly reducing variability in the sibling ratings and limiting significant correlations. Mothers may be anxious to portray both of their own children in a positive light, but may be less concerned about how the friend relationship is perceived. As a result, mothers' ratings of their children's friendships may be less subject to social desirability bias.

One limitation of the study is that low variability in our observed measures resulted in a decreased chance of finding significant correlations between question-naire and observational data. In the future, more fine-grained aspects of sibling and friend interactions that show more variability could be included in the analyses--for example, goals of prosocial behaviors and duration of prosocial interactions.