We examined the relationship between prosocial behavior and conflicts in 4-year-old interactions with siblings and friends. We found positive correlations between rates of prosocial and conflictive behaviors for both siblings and friends, suggesting that the two types of behavior may be influenced by common underlying relationship characteristics. Participant age composition, and social symmetry all made a difference in the connections between prosocial and conflictive behaviors.

Introduction

Preschoolers’ relationships with siblings and friends are dynamic and include both positive and negative interactions, often occurring together within the same situation. We have previously found that preschoolers exhibit higher rates of both conflict and prosocial behavior with siblings than with friends. In the present study, we turned our attention to possible connections between prosocial behavior and conflict in preschoolers’ interactions with siblings and friends. Although prosocial behavior and conflict might seem to fall at opposite ends of the same dimension, they may not in fact be mutually exclusive.

As part of a longitudinal study, we examined connections between prosocial behaviors, conflicts, and averted conflicts in 4-year-old’s interactions with siblings and friends. Prosocial behaviors were defined as any voluntary behavior intended to benefit the other party. Conflict was defined as exchanges containing mutual oppositional verbal or behavioral. Averted conflict was defined as oppositional or provocative behavior that was not immediately reciprocated by the partner. We hypothesized that prosocial behavior would be negatively correlated with observed conflict between siblings, but not for friends. We hypothesized that: (1) young prosocial behavior might actually be positively correlated with conflict in preschoolers’ interactions, due to the roles of familiarity and intimacy in both types of behavior, and (2) prosocial behavior might be even more strongly associated with averted conflict.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 65 Caucasian, middle-class 4-year-olds from western New York.

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• 33 of the target children were male.

• 33 of the target children were observed with a same-sex sibling, 32 with an opposite-sex sibling.

• Approximately half of the siblings were 15-30 months older than the target child, half 15-30 months younger.

• A same-sex, same-age friend of each target child also participated.

Procedure

• Target children were videotaped at home in separate 15- to 20-minute free-play sessions with their sibling and friends.

• Videotapes were transcribed, and each session was coded separately for prosocial behavior and conflicts.

• Prosocial behavior was further categorized as complementary dominant (child producing the behavior in a position of superior status or power), complementary subordinate (child producing the behavior in a position of subordinate status or power), or reciprocal (interactions in which the partners’ behavior is similar and interchangeable), depending on the nature of the interaction.

• Videotapes were coded for social engagement at 16-second intervals. Social engagement was coded into three categories: engaged (partners participating in an activity or engaged with each other), semi-engaged (one partner observing or trying to engage the other), and unengaged (partners not socially engaged with each other).

Analysis

• Analyses focused on dyadic data, and did not examine target and partner behaviors separately.

• To examine rates of prosocial behavior, conflict, and averted conflict across age and gender composition, three 2 (partner) X 2 (age group) X 2 (child target gender) X 2 (sibling gender) repeated measures ANOVA were conducted.

• To examine connections among prosocial behavior, conflict, and averted conflict, Pearson bivariate correlations were conducted separately for sibling and friend interactions using rates of prosocial behavior, conflict, and averted conflict per engaged minute.

Results

Mean Rates of Overall Prosocial Behavior (Figure 1)

• There was a highly significant partner effect (F = 35.94, p < 0.00) for overall prosocial behavior; sibling interactions included more prosocial behavior than friend interactions.

• A significant partner by age group interaction was also found (F = 3.98, p < 0.05), the difference between siblings and friends held true only for children from younger sibling dyads.

Mean Rates of Conflict and Averted Conflict (Figures 2 and 3)

• For both conflict and averted conflict, there were highly significant partner effects (F = 22.57, p < 0.001; F = 14.54, p < 0.001, respectively). Sibling interactions included more conflicts and averted conflicts than friend interactions.

• For averted conflicts, there was also a significant partner by age group interaction (F = 5.84, p = 0.02), once again, the difference between sibling and friend interactions held true only for children from younger sibling dyads.

Correlations between Prosocial Behavior and Conflict (Table 1)

• Sibling prosocial behavior was positively correlated with sibling conflict (r = 0.41, p = 0.01) and averted conflict (r = 0.32, p = 0.016).

• Friend prosocial behavior was positively correlated with friend conflict (r = 0.30, p = 0.019), but not with averted conflict.

Correlations between Social Symmetry of Prosocial Behavior and Conflict

When social symmetry was considered, the pattern of correlations between prosocial behavior and conflict changed somewhat:

• Reciprocal: Sibling reciprocal prosocial behavior was positively correlated with sibling conflict (r = 0.29, p = 0.022) and averted conflict (r = 0.55, p < 0.001).

• Friend reciprocal prosocial behavior was positively correlated with friend conflict (r = 0.30, p = 0.019), but not averted conflict.

• Complementary Subordinate: For both siblings and friends, complementary subordinate prosocial behavior was positively correlated with conflict (r = 0.44, p < 0.001; r = 0.26, p = 0.043, respectively), but not averted conflict.

Discussion

Relationship partner makes a difference in young children’s rates of prosocial behavior, conflict, and averted conflict, especially for children from entirely preschoool sibling dyads. Siblings’ higher rates of both prosocial and conflictive behavior may be explained by the greater familiarity and intimacy in sibling relationships compared to friendships at this age. That advantage may be diminished for sibling dyads in which the older child has started school and therefore spends less time with the younger sibling.

Overall, prosocial behavior was positively correlated with conflict, for both siblings and friends. However, the social interactions examined were more likely to be characterized by pro-social interactions, especially for siblings. Relationships that involve more egalitarian-like interactions may foster both helping behaviors and mutual opposition. Complementary prosocial interactions were associated with sibling and friend conflict; only when they were subordinate; complementary dominant prosocial behaviors were not associated with conflict or averted conflict. Partners who are in a subordinate position may use prosocial behaviors as a means of diffusing, resolving, or avoiding conflict. More fine-grained analysis of the contexts in which prosocial behavior and conflict occur is needed.

Our results suggest that prosocial behavior and conflict do indeed co-occur and may be influenced by some of the same underlying relationship characteristics. It is possible, for example, that similar levels of intimacy and familiarity are required to support both types of behavior. Prosocial behavior and conflict may also both be indicators of the level of involvement or intensity in a relationship; dyads that are more connected to each other may be more likely to help each other but also more likely to find themselves in odds than dyads that are more loosely connected.

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