

# SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH SIBLINGS AND FRIENDS IN CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

Jessica D. Wade, Anna C. McDonough, Dave K. Liesegang, Shelby I. Przybylek, Mike P. Hanss, & Ganie B. DeHart, Ph.D

*Abstract*

Sibling and friend relationships provide different contexts for interaction and development, in part because of differences in social engagement. As part of a longitudinal study, we examined sibling and friend social engagement in early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence. Overall, social engagement increased with age, while unengagement and semi-engagement decreased. However, partner and gender also played roles in these changes.

*Introduction*

Sibling and friend relationships provide distinctly different contexts for interaction and development, in part because of differences in the extent and nature of siblings’ and friends’ social engagement. Previous research suggests that preschoolers engage in more sustained social engagement with friends than with siblings, probably because friends are more novel and more interesting interaction partners. However, there is reason to expect that patterns of social engagement change as children move through childhood and into adolescence, and that boys and girls may differ in their patterns of social engagement with siblings friends.

Examining the influences of age, interaction partner, and gender on social engagement provides a more complete context for many aspects of sibling and friend interaction, such as conflict, aggression, and prosocial behavior. As part of a larger longitudinal study of sibling and peer relationships, we examined a group of children’s social engagement with siblings and friends in early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence.

*Method*

*Participants.*

- \* 22 white, middle-class children were videotaped in separate semi-structured sessions with a sibling and with a same-sex friend at ages 4, 7, and 17.
- \* Half of the target children were male, half female; roughly half were taped with a same-sex sibling, half with an opposite-sex sibling.

*Procedure.*

- \* At the 4-year-old and 7-year-old visits, the children engaged in free-play with experimenter provided play sets (a toy farm, village, and train).
- \* At the 17-year-old visit, they completed cooking tasks, making brownies with one partner and pizza with the other.
- \* The videotapes were transcribed and coded for social engagement at 10-second intervals.
- \* Each partner’s behavior was coded separately, using six main interaction categories (cooperative, associative, parallel, solitary, onlooker, and unoccupied).
- \* Intervals in which either partner interacted with the experimenter or the nature of their interaction could not be determined were excluded from the analysis.
- \* For the current analysis, cooperative and associative interaction were considered social engagement, combinations involving onlooker behavior were considered semi-engagement, and parallel behavior and combinations without onlooker behavior were considered unengagement.

*Analyses.*

- \*Percentages of time spent in social engagement, semi-engagement, and unengagement were analyzed using separate 2 (partner) by 3 (age) by 2 (gender) repeated measures ANOVAs.

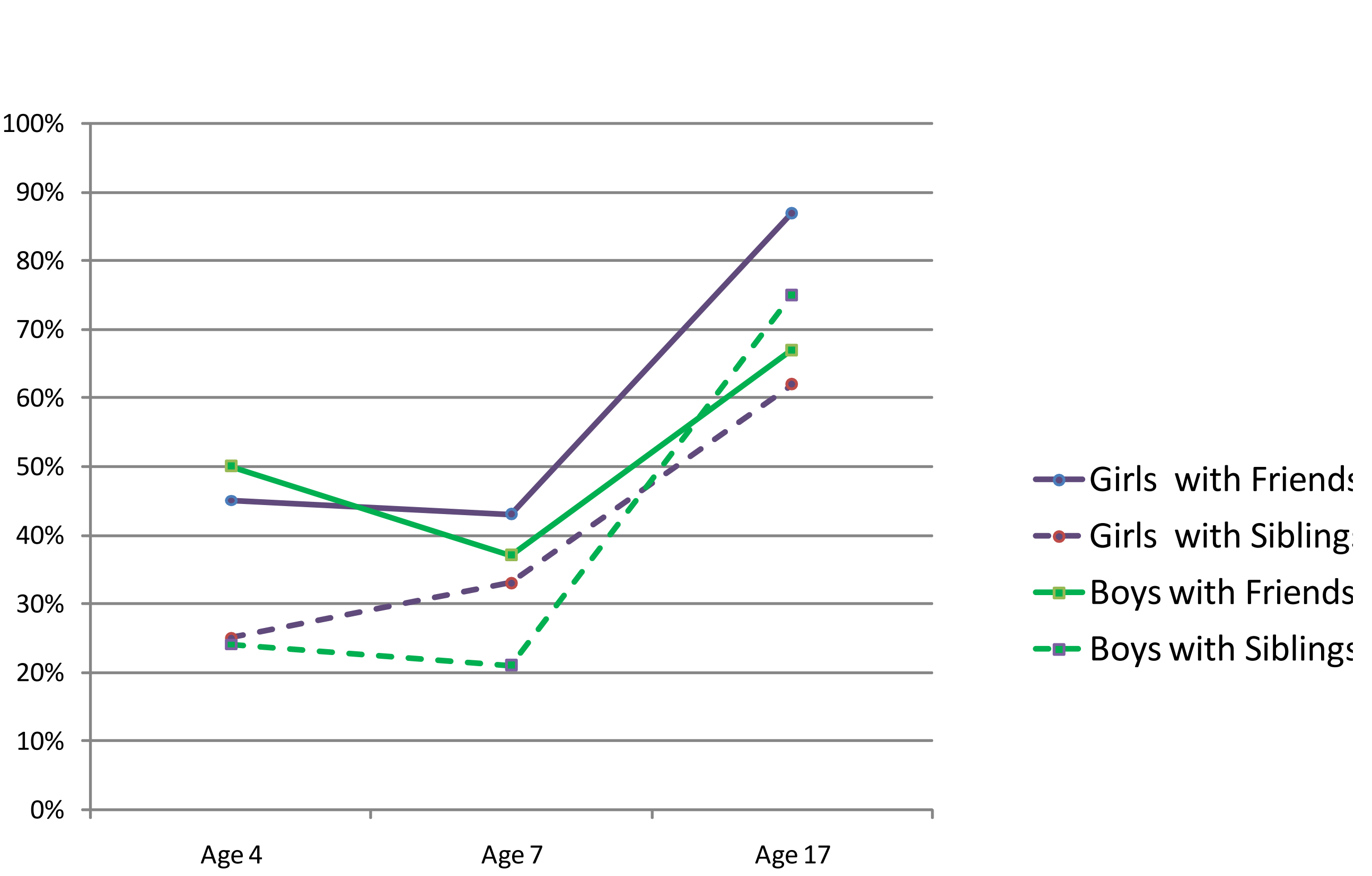


Figure 1. Time spent socially engaged.

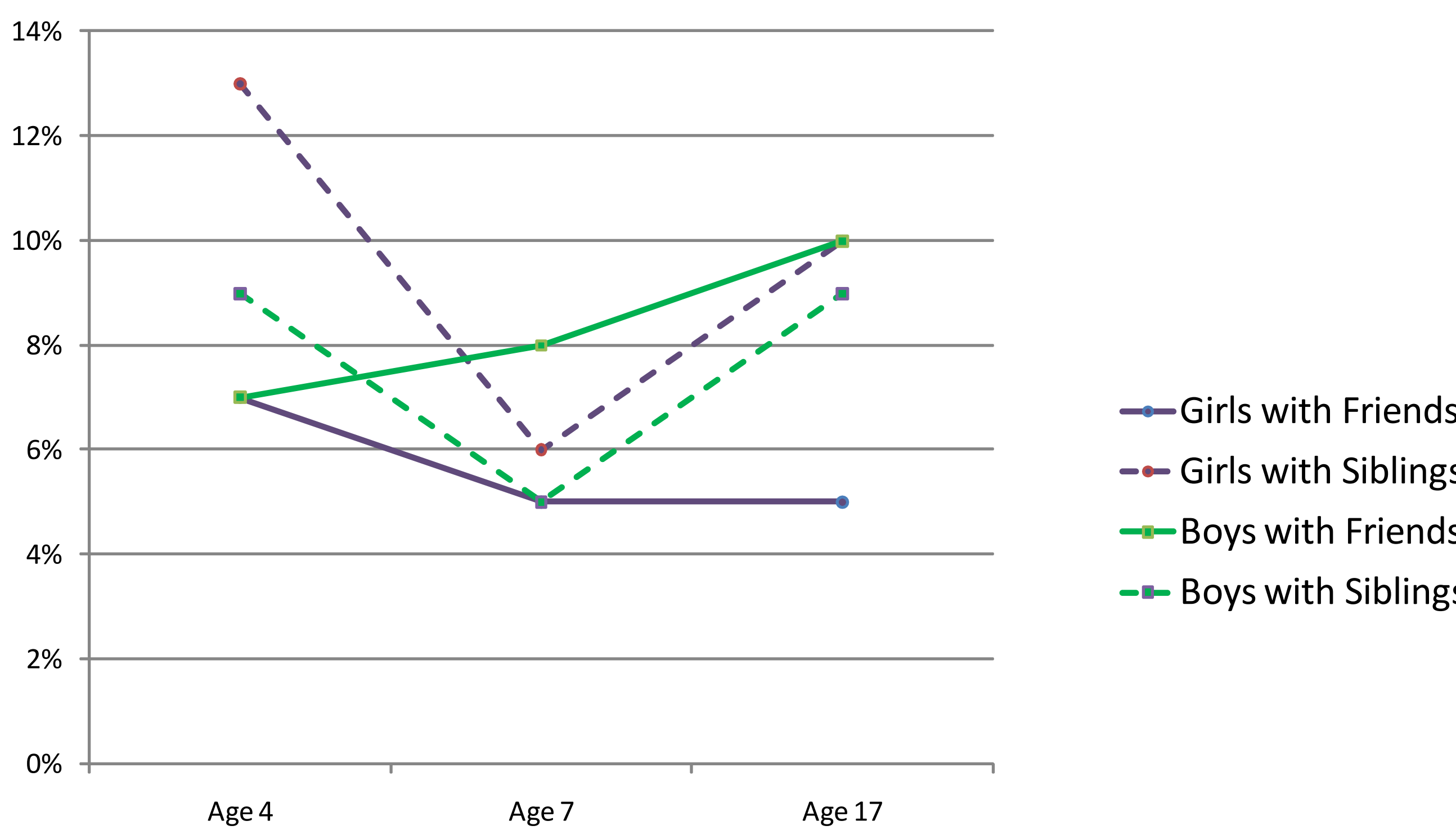


Figure 2. Time spent semi-engaged.

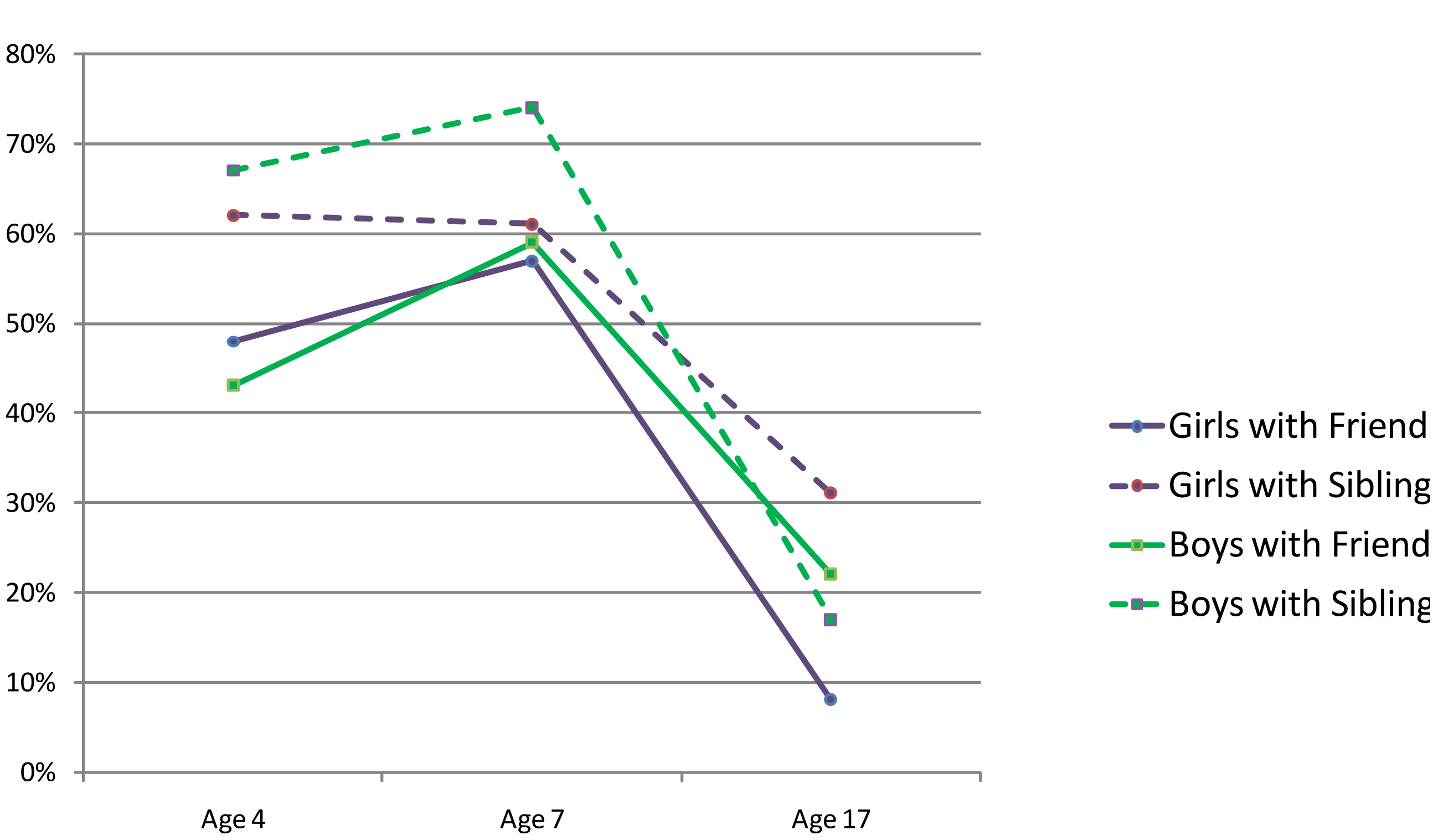


Figure 3. Time spent unengaged.

*Results*

As shown in Figure 1, time spent in social engagement varied depending on both age and partner:

- There were both linear and quadratic time effects for percentage of time spent in social engagement. Overall, social engagement increased from age 4 to age 17 ( $p < .05$ ). However, collapsing across gender and partner, engagement decreased slightly between ages 4 and 7 and then increased dramatically by age 17 ( $p < .05$ ).
- At all three ages, more time was spent in social engagement during friend interactions than during sibling interactions ( $p < .05$ ). However, this was not true for boys at age 17 ( $p < .05$ ).

As shown in Figure 2, there was a quadratic time effect for time spent semi-engaged ( $p < .05$ ); semi-engagement was lowest at age 7.

As shown in Figure 3, time spent unengaged varied with age and partner:

- There were linear and quadratic time effects for percentage of unengaged time. Overall, unengagement decreased from age 4 to age 17 ( $p < .05$ ). However, it increased between ages 4 and 7 before decreasing sharply by age 17 ( $p < .05$ ).
- At all three ages, siblings spent a higher percentage of time unengaged than friends did ( $p < .05$ ).
- There was also a partner x gender interaction effect ( $p < .05$ ); in contrast to the overall quadratic effect, girls’ unengagement with friends remained stable from age 4 to age 7.

*Discussion*

Overall, social engagement with both siblings and friends increased from early childhood to adolescence, while time spent semi-engaged or unengaged decreased. As children grow older, their ability to sustain social engagement with partners increases, potentially allowing for increasingly complex social interactions, both positive and negative. At the same time, the difference between sibling and friend interactions diminishes, with the level of social engagement during sibling interactions approaching that found during friend interactions, especially for boys.

Future research might examine: (1) differences between same- and mixed-sex sibling pairs; the small size of the current sample did not permit this level of analysis; and (2) the nature of the engagement, as we currently do not know whether there is a difference between positive and negative interactions.



Data collection for this project was supported by NIH Area Grant #R15 HD31656 and by a Geneseo Presidential Summer Fellowship.