# SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD ACROSS THREE TASKS

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## Abstract

As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we examined 7-year-olds' social engagement during free play, game, and construction tasks. Thirty-two White, middle-class children were videotaped at home in separate sessions with siblings and friends. Across all three tasks, peer pairs were more highly engaged than sibling pairs. The highest levels of engagement were found in the game task. It seems that when given more structured tasks, 7-year-olds are better able to maintain higher levels of social engagement.

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 on children's social engagement suggests that both partner and task make a difference in the types of engagement exhibited during various tasks. There is reason to suspect that structured play, such as construction and game tasks, contributes to the observed differences between sibling and friend engagement.

Examining the influences of task structure 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 longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we examined 7-yearolds' social engagement during free play, game, and construction tasks.

# Method

### **Participants**

• 32 white, middle-class children (18 male, 14 female) were videotaped in separate semi-structured sessions with a sibling and with a same-sex friend at age 7.

• Roughly half of the siblings were male and half female.

#### Procedure

• 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. • Each pair participated in:

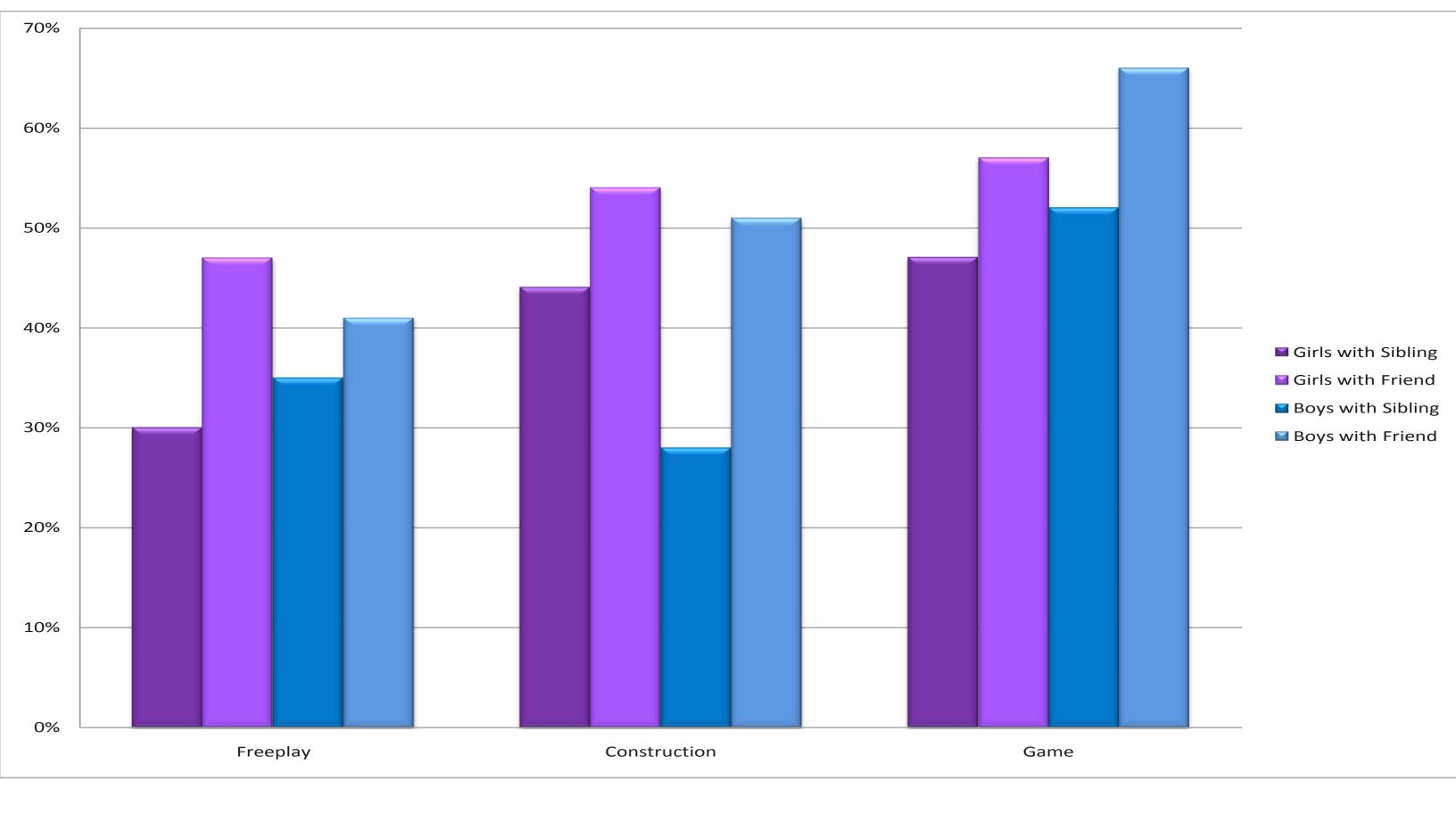
- o A semi-structured free play session using toys selected to foster interactive play
- o A construction task in which the children were asked to duplicate a model
- o A game task in which the children competed against each other to win

#### Analyses

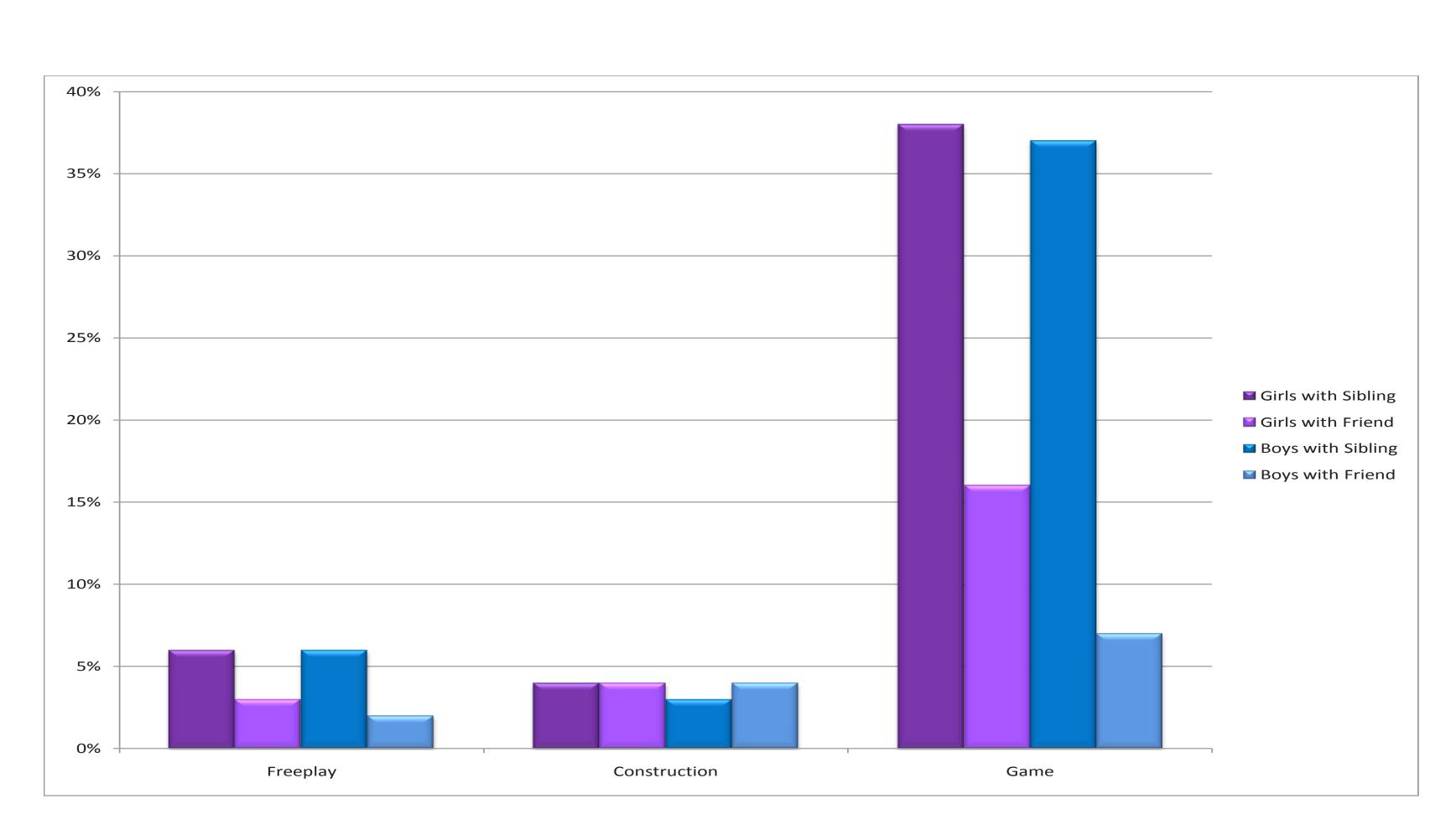
• Percentages of time spent in social engagement, semi-engagement, and unengagement were analyzed using separate 2 (partner) by 3 (task) repeated measures ANOVAs.



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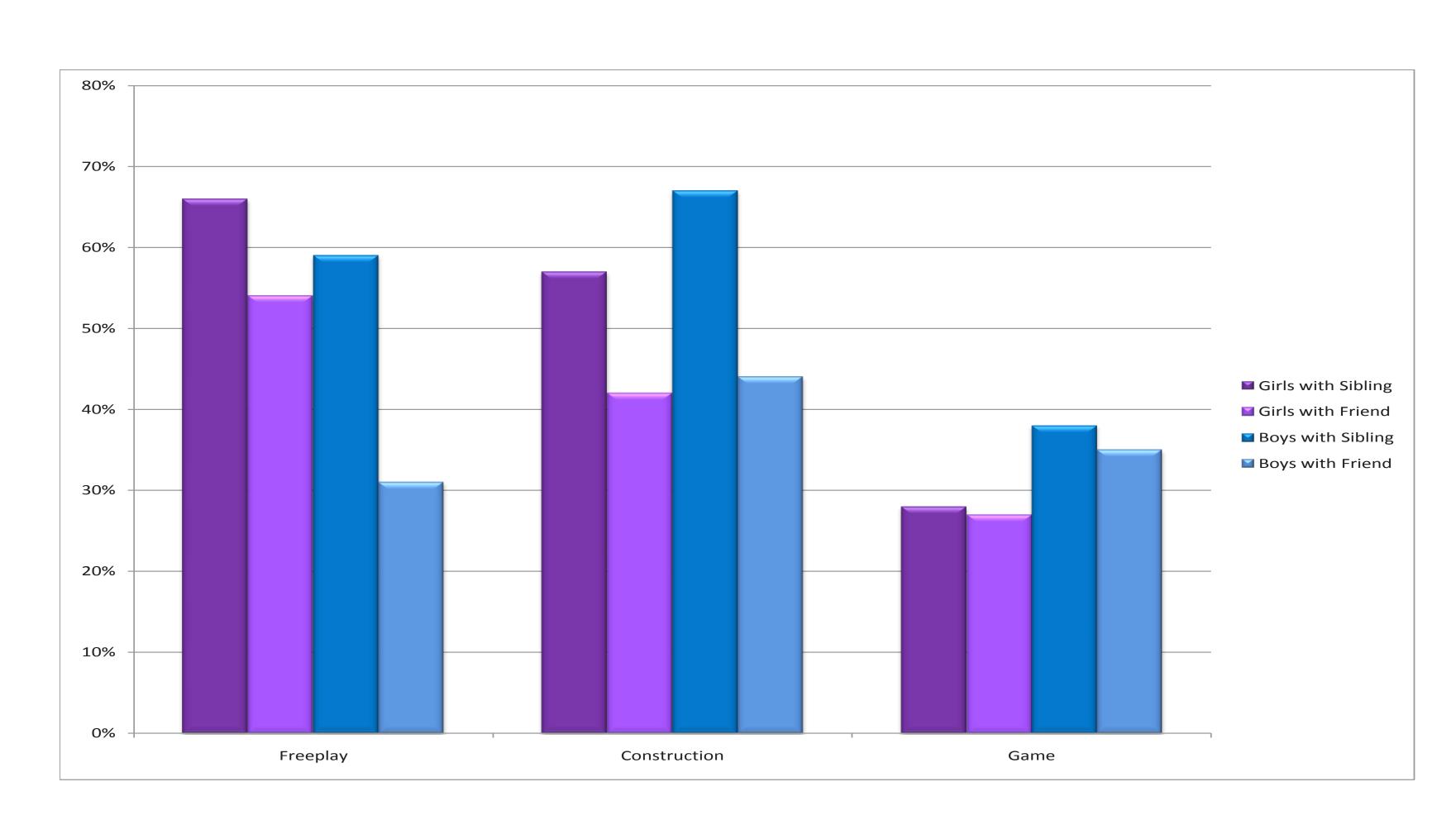


Figure 3. Time spent unengaged.

As shown in Figure 1, time spent engaged varied depending on task and partner:

• Across all tasks, time spent engaged was higher among friends than siblings (p < .001). • There was a linear effect for task, with the highest engagement during the game task, followed

by the construction task and then the free play task (p < .001).

• A marginally significant quadratic partner x task interaction was found; the linear effect held true for friends, but there was no difference between engagement during free play and construction tasks for siblings (p < .89).

• A significant quadratic effect was found for task in that the free play and construction tasks had

As shown in Figure 2, time spent semi-engaged varied depending on task and partner: similarly low levels of semi-engagement when compared to the game task (p < .001). • Significant linear and quadratic effects were found for the partner by task interaction (both p < d.001):

o The linear effect was found only for the friend sessions, with free play tasks having the lowest percentage of semi-engagement, followed by the construction task and the game task.

ing a lower percentage of semi-engagement than the free play and games tasks. • A significant partner by task by gender interaction was found in that for the sibling sessions with a female target child the game task had the highest percentage of semi-engagement while the percentages for the construction and free play tasks were equal (p < .05).

As shown in Figure 3, time spent unengaged varied depending on task and partner:

• Across all tasks time spent unengaged was higher among siblings than among friends (p < .05). • A significant quadratic effect for task was found indicating that levels of unengagement were similarly high during the free play and construction tasks, while the game task had a lower percentage of unengagement (p < .05).

Across all three tasks, peer pairs were more highly engaged than sibling pairs. The lowest levels As expected, levels of semi-engagement across tasks were significantly higher for the game task

of engagement were found in the free play task and the highest levels of engagement were found during the game task. This indicates that a more structured task facilitates higher levels of engagement among siblings and friends, though the effect is more consistent for friends. This suggests that differences in task structure matter less for sibling engagement; however, this result was only marginally significant and should be interpreted with caution. Furthermore, the exact nature of this engagement is unknown; we do not know if sibling and friend social engagement is equally positive. but levels were similar for both the free play and construction tasks. Since the nature of a competitive game requires taking turns to play, it seems that children spend higher percentages of their time watching each other during this task. Moreover, levels of unengagement across tasks were higher for siblings than friends. Since levels of unengagement were similar during the free play and construction tasks but lower during the game task, it appears that levels of unengagement drop as task structure increases.

It seems that when given more structured tasks, 7-year-olds are better able to maintain higher levels of social engagement. Future research might examine: (1) differences between same- and mixedsex sibling pairs; the small size of the current sample did not permit this level of analysis; and (2) the nature of the en¬gagement, as we currently do not know to what extent each task elicits positive and negative interactions.

# Results

o The quadratic effect was found only for the sibling sessions, with the construction task hav-

# Discussion