

# Gender Composition and Quality of Preschoolers' Social Engagement with Siblings

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## Abstract

The goal of the present study was to examine quality of social engagement in preschool sibling dyads of varying gender composition. We found gender differences in overall valence of engagement (positive/negative/neutral), as well as when both quality and form of engagement were considered.

## Introduction

Qualitative aspects of children's sibling and friend relationships, such as asymmetry, intimacy, harmony, and conflict, seem likely to be reflected in the extent and nature of social engagement during their interactions. We have previously examined connections between observed social engagement and questionnaire-based indicators of sibling and friend relationship characteristics in early childhood; the present study extends our research into middle childhood.

## Method

### Participants

- As part of a longitudinal study, we examined quality of the interactions of 20 4-year-old middle-class American sibling dyads.
- 10 sibling pairs were same-sex, while 10 of the sibling pairs were mixed-sex.

### Procedure

- Each target child and their sibling was videotaped at home in free-play sessions using toys selected to foster interactive play.
- The videotapes were transcribed and coded for social engagement and quality of engagement at 10-second intervals. Each child's behavior was coded separately, using six interaction categories (Cooperative, Associative, Parallel, and Solitary Play, Onlooker, and Unoccupied) and three quality categories (positive, negative and neutral).
- For the current analysis, cooperative and associative play were considered *Social Engagement*, combinations involving onlooker behavior were considered *Semi-Engagement*, and parallel play and combinations without onlooker behavior were considered *Unengagement*. These three code categories were assigned quality codes (positive, negative, neutral) and when one sibling's quality of engagement different from the other, the quality was labeled as mixed.

### Analyses

- To examine the effects of partner, age composition, and gender on social engagement, we ran 2 (partner) x 2 (target child gender) x 2 (older sibling gender) x 2 (younger sibling gender) repeated-measures ANOVA s with the three categories of social engagement as the dependent variables.
- To examine connections between relationship qualities and social engagement, we conducted Pearson bivariate correlations between questionnaire dimensions and the three categories of social engagement behavior.

## Results

### Rates of Social Engagement

- There was a significant main effect of partner for social engagement ( $p < .001$ ), such that target children spent more time socially engaged with their friends than with their siblings.
- There was also an interaction between older sibling gender and younger sibling gender for social engagement ( $p < .001$ ). Target children with opposite-sex siblings spent more time socially engaged with both siblings and friends than those with same-sex siblings did.
- Rates of semi-engagement and unengagement did not differ significantly across gender composition categories.

### Correlations Between Social Engagement and Relationship Qualities

- Sibling engagement was positively correlated with mothers' ratings of sibling intimacy ( $r = .362, p = .015$ ), harmony: ( $r = .411, p = .005$ ), and conflict: ( $r = .341, p = .022$ ).
- Sibling unengagement was negatively correlated with mothers' ratings of sibling intimacy ( $r = -.342, p = .021$ ), harmony ( $r = -.403, p = .006$ ), and conflict ( $r = -.304, p = .042$ ). In contrast, friends' social engagement, semi-engagement, and unengagement were not significantly correlated with mothers' assessments of any of the dimensions of friendship quality.

## Discussion

Both partner and gender composition made a difference in the extent of social engagement during children's play sessions. Not surprisingly, the children seemed more interested in playing with their friends, who they may see only sporadically, than with their siblings, who are available for interaction every day. The heightened rates of engagement with both siblings and friends for children with opposite-sex siblings was unexpected; it is possible that interaction with an opposite-sex sibling requires greater attention and engagement, which then carries over in some form to interactions with friends.

The connections we found between observed social engagement and mothers' assessments of sibling and friend relationships in middle childhood were different and less extensive than those we previously found in early childhood. For example, perceived conflict was negatively correlated with social engagement at both ages, but the correlation between asymmetry and social engagement changed from positive at age 4 to negative at age 7. For preschool siblings, asymmetry is indicative of a developmentally appropriate relationship, with one sibling noticeably more advanced than the other; by middle childhood, a two-year age gap has become less significant, and relationship symmetry is more developmentally appropriate. As children grow older, mothers are less involved in day-to-day interactions with siblings and friends and may become less accurate in their assessments of their children's relationships.

Figure 1. Percentage of Time Spent Socially Engaged

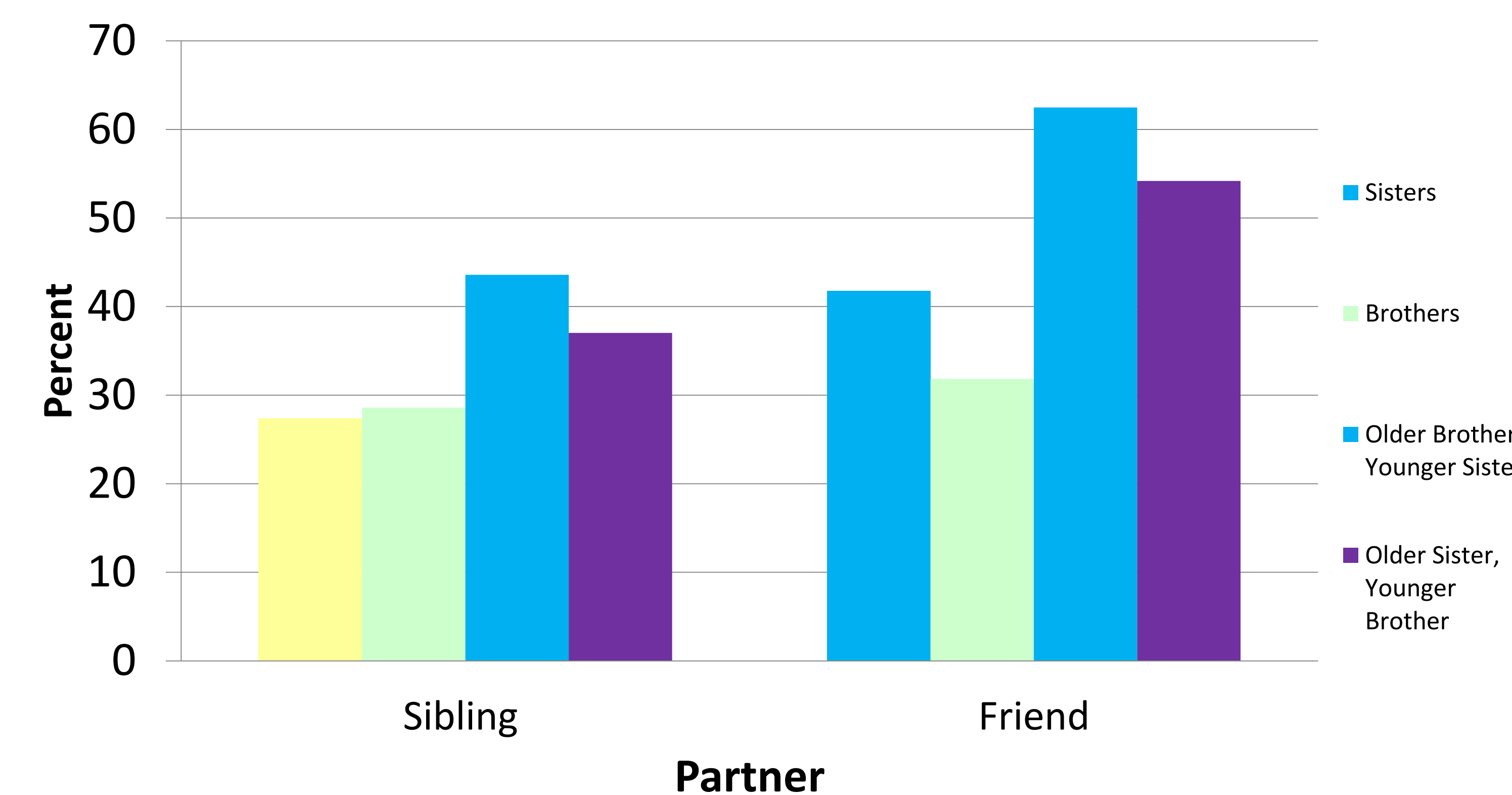


Figure 2. Percentag of Time Spent Semi-Engaged

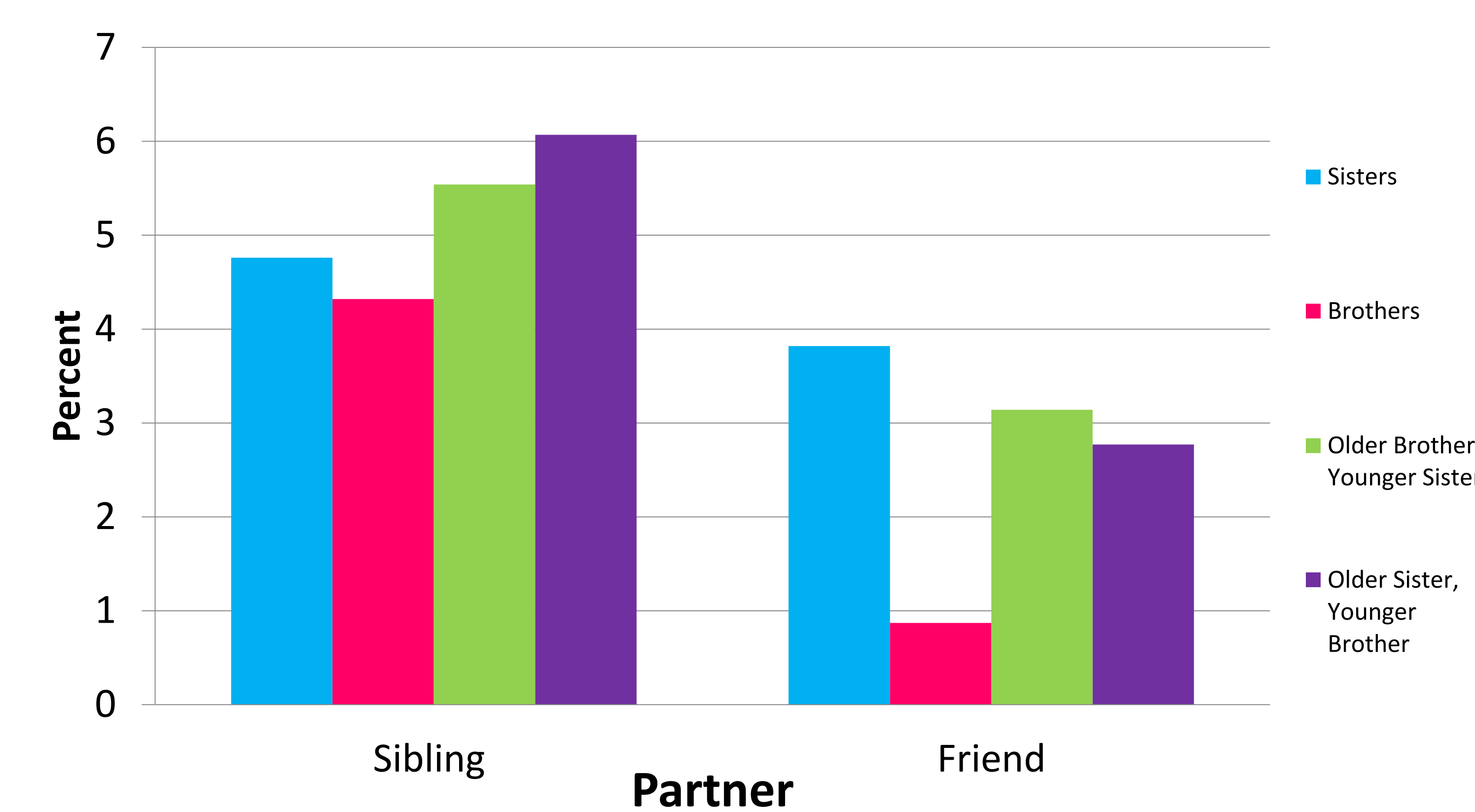


Figure 3. Percentage of Time Spent Unengaged

