Assertive and Affiliative Language in 7-Year-Olds' Interactions with Siblings and Friends

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Abstract

As part of a longitudinal study, we examined 7 year-olds' use of assertive, or goal-oriented, and affiliative, or socially interactive, language during sibling and friend interactions. Our results suggest that specific patterns in assertive and affiliative language use are influenced by partner (sibling versus friend) and gender.

Introduction

Previous research on elementary school children has indicated that girls tend to use more affiliative and less assertive language during interaction than do boys. In addition, boys are more likely to mitigate affiliative language, whereas girls are more likely to mitigate assertive language (Bryant & DeHart, 2005; Leaper & Ayres, 2007). Most research has focused on data collected during interactions with same-sex peers; less is known about how children use assertive and affiliative language with siblings or with opposite-sex partners. Since 7-year-old children do not often have many close friends of the opposite gender, sibling dyads provide a particularly good opportunity to examine mixed-sex interactions. Previous researchers have observed several patterns of gender differences in sibling and friend interactions during early and middle childhood (Laudico et al., 2010; Rabinowitz et al., 2009; DeHart et al., 2007). In addition, it has been found that the gender of a child's sibling affects interactions not only between the siblings, but with friends as well. Finally, the valence of assertive utterances (positive/negative) and the presence or absence of mitigation varies by partner and gender.

In the current study, we extended our past research to examine 7- year-old girls' and boys' use of affiliative and assertive language with siblings and friends. Of particular interest was the impact of partner and gender on mitigation and on rates of positive and negative assertive language.

Method

Participants

- 39 white, middle-class 7-year-olds living in western New York
- Target children were each paired with a sibling and with a same-age friend
- Half of the siblings were 15-30 months older and half were 15-30 months younger than the target child; half were the same sex as the target child, and half were of the opposite sex

Procedure

- 7-year-old sibling and friend dyads were videotaped during 10 minute sessions during which they were asked to play freely with either a train or a village toy set
- Videotapes were transcribed and then coded for the use of assertive and affiliative language
- ***Assertive*** utterances were those used primarily to accomplish one's own goal or objective (e.g., directives or statements of desires, intentions, opinions, or rules)
- ***Affiliative*** utterances were those used primarily to establish or maintain social interaction (e.g., showing support, expressing agreement or inclusion, seeking contact or approval)
- Assertive utterances were further coded as *positive* or *negative*. Negative utterances were those that had negative affect or tone or displayed opposition (e.g., disagreements, negative intonation, frustration). Positive utterances were those that lacked negative affect and were said either neutrally or with positive affect (e.g., simple requests, commands, or statements).
- Assertive and affiliative utterances were further coded as *mitigated* or *unmitigated*. Mitigated utterances were those that softened the impact of the utterance—that made it appear either less assertive or less affiliative (e.g., indirect requests, tag questions, subjunctive forms, sarcasm or jocularity, use of play voice). Sentences that use more than one mitigating technique are coded as multiply mitigated.

Analyses

Relative rates of various types of assertive and affiliative utterances were analyzed using 2 (partner) X 2 (target child gender) X 2 (sibling gender) X 2 (sibling age group) repeated-measures ANOVAs.

Results

Total Utterances

Children produced more total utterances in interactions with friends than with siblings ($F = 17.04$, $p < .001$). As a result, all further analyses were based on percentages of total utterances.

Affiliative Language

For use of affiliative language, there was a three-way interaction of partner X target child gender X sibling gender, the rates of which are seen in Figure 1 ($F = 4.08$, $p = .05$):

- During interactions with siblings, children with a same-sex sibling used more affiliative language than did those with an opposite-sex sibling.
- Conversely, when interacting with friends, children who had an opposite-sex sibling used more affiliative language than those with same-sex siblings.

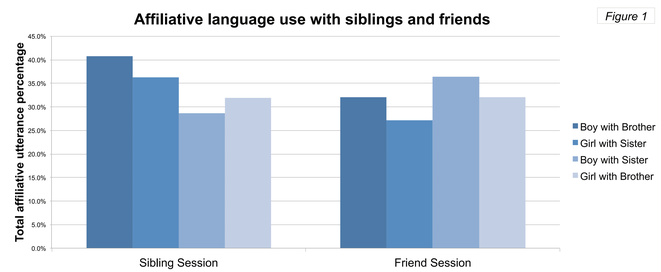

Figure 1

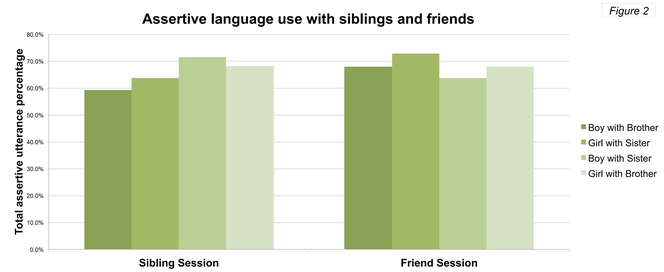

Figure 2

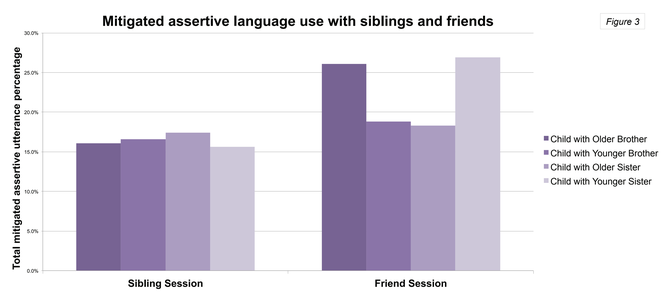

Figure 3

Assertive Language

Total Assertive

For total use of assertive language, there was a three-way interaction of partner X target child gender X sibling gender, as seen in Figure 2:

- Target children with same-sex siblings used more assertive language toward friends than toward siblings ($F = 4.08$, $p = .05$).
- Boys with sisters, but not girls with brothers, were more assertive toward their siblings than toward their friends.

Unmitigated Assertive

There was a main effect of partner; children used more negative unmitigated assertive language with siblings than with friends ($F = 9.36$, $p < .01$).

Mitigated Assertive

- Overall, children used more mitigated assertive language with friends than with siblings ($F = 11.63$, $p < .01$).
- However, there was also a three-way interaction of partner X age X sibling gender. Specifically, children with younger sisters and children with older brothers used more mitigated assertive language with friends than with siblings, as seen in Figure 3 ($F = 6.30$, $p < .05$).
- When *multiply mitigated assertive language* was analyzed discretely, the partner effect and three-way interaction remained significant ($F = 8.92$, $p < .01$; $F = 4.57$, $p < .05$, respectively).
  - A main effect of gender emerged specific to this category, such that girls used more multiply mitigated assertive language than did boys ($F = 4.76$, $p < .05$).

Valence

- When valence was considered, the partner effect and interaction trends held for positive mitigated assertive language, but not for negative mitigated assertive language.
- In general, children used more positive mitigated assertive language with friends than with siblings ($F = 12.70$, $p = .001$). This main effect of partner was found for both singly mitigated assertive language ($F = 10.56$, $p < .01$) and multiply mitigated assertive language ($F = 10.46$, $p < .01$).
- The three-way interaction seen for total mitigated assertive language remained significant for positive mitigated assertive utterances. Again, children with younger sisters or older brothers used less positive mitigated assertive language with siblings than with friends. This interaction was significant for both singly mitigated ($F = 7.52$, $p = .01$) and multiply mitigated utterances ($F = 8.08$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

Some of our results replicate previous findings of gender effects, but when considered across partner, more complex interactions emerge. Variables such as the relationship of the partner to the target child and the gender and age composition of the sibling dyad significantly affected the target children's language patterns. For instance, children use more mitigated assertive language with friends than siblings, but this effect was most pronounced among those with younger sisters or older brothers.

Whether a child's gender matches that of his or her sibling complicates conventional understanding of gendered language use. Interestingly, sibling gender effects extended to interactions with friends. Having a same-sex sibling, regardless of a child's gender, is associated with using more assertive language with friends and more affiliative language with siblings. Boys with sisters, in contrast to boys with brothers, tend to be more affiliative towards friends and more assertive towards their sisters. These trends that run counter to the findings of previous research may be influenced by the compatibility of play styles between same-sex versus mixed-sex dyads.

Acknowledgments

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