Observed Conflicts and Mothers' Perceptions of 4-year-olds' Sibling and Friend Relationships

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Abstract

As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we examined 4-year-olds' conflicts with siblings and friends during free play and analyzed connections between observed conflicts and maternal questionnaire responses. Siblings had conflicts more frequently, and these conflicts were more affectively intense. Although asymmetry in sibling relationships was adaptive, asymmetry in friend relationships had negative ramifications for that relationship. Different parent rules for conflict resolution were predictive of different forms of aggression.

Introduction

Differences have been observed in preschoolers' conflicts with siblings and friends, but there has been little research with this age group examining how observed conflicts relate to mothers' perceptions of their children's interactions or to family rules about conflict. Maternal questionnaires are a useful complement to observational research, as they make it possible to examine aspects of relationships not readily observable in brief samples of behavior.

Mothers' perceptions of children's relationships are likely to differ somewhat from observed behaviors, especially in regard to conflicts. Although mothers may be more cognizant of conflicts involving blatant acts of physical aggression, conflicts of lower intensity or those involving less obvious forms of aggression, such as relational aggression, may be less noticeable to mothers.

As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we examined connections between (1) preschool siblings' and friends' conflicts, as observed in brief play sessions, (2) mothers' assessments of their children's relationships, and (3) family rules related to conflict resolution, as reported in questionnaires. Overall, we expected greater concordance between mothers' perceptions and observed behavior for sibling relationships than for friendships, due to mothers' greater familiarity with their own children and more frequent opportunities to observe sibling interactions.

Method

Participants

- 65 white, middle-class 4-year olds living in Western New York.
- Half of the siblings were 15-30 months older than the target child, half 15-30 months younger.
- Half of the target children were female, half male.
- Half of the sibling pairs were same-sex, half mixed-sex.
- A same-age, same-sex friend of each target child also participated in the study.

Procedure

- Target children were videotaped at home in separate 15-minute free play sessions with a sibling and a friend using toys provided by the experimenters.
- While the children were videotaped, mothers completed a 24-item questionnaire regarding the target child's usual behavior with the sibling and friend, designed to assess four dimensions of sibling and friend relationships: asymmetry, intimacy/closeness, harmony/prosocial behavior, and conflict, defined in Table 1, as well as open-ended questions about family rules for conflict resolution.
- The videotapes were transcribed and coded for conflicts.
- Conflicts were defined as exchanges containing mutual opposition, either verbal or behavioral. Once identified, conflicts were further coded for frequency, number of turns, instigator, issue, aggression, and termination strategy.
- The open-ended items on the maternal questionnaires were coded for mentions of various specific policies and practices, including parental intervention, emphasis on sharing, and punitiveness.

Analyses

- Conflict characteristics and maternal ratings of sibling and friend relationships were analyzed using 2 (partner) X 2 (age group) X 2 (target child gender) X 2 (sibling gender) repeated measures ANOVAs .
- To examine connections among conflict characteristics and maternal ratings, separate bivariate correlations were conducted for sibling and friend interactions of older and younger sibling pairs.

	Examples of questionnaire items
Asymmetry	e.g., When [target child] and [sibling/friend] do things together, [target child] tends to take charge. e.g., [Target child] tells [sibling/friend] what to do and tries to take control. e.g., If someone picks on [sibling/friend], [target child] protects or sticks up for him.
Harmony	e.g., [Target child] and [sibling/friend] get along well with each other. e.g., [Target child] helps [sibling/friend]. e.g., [Target child] shares things (for example, food or belongings) with [sibling/friend].
Conflict	e.g., There is a lot of conflict between [target child] and [sibling/friend]. e.g., [Target child] and [sibling/friend] compete with each other for mother's attention. e.g., [Target child] and [sibling/friend] get into physical fights.
Intimacy	e.g., [Target child] and [sibling/friend] enjoy spending time together. e.g., [Target child] is physically affectionate to [sibling/friend]. e.g., [Target child] and [sibling/friend] understand each other's feelings.

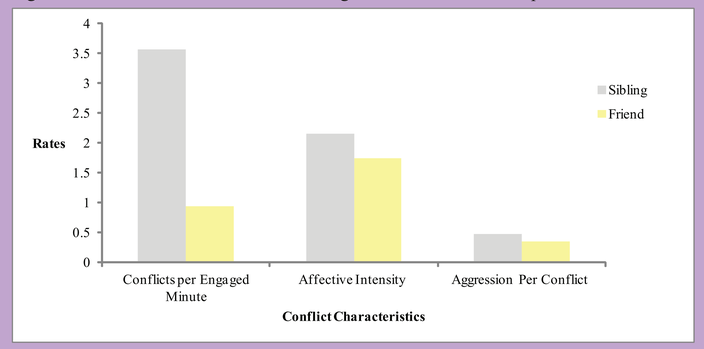
Table 2a. Maternal Perceptions of Sibling Relationships

	4-year-olds with older siblings	4-year-olds with younger siblings
Asymmetry	# of object conflicts $r(34) = -.325$, $p < .06$	ns
Harmony	conflicts per engaged minute $r(35) = -.381$, $p < .03$	# of plans for play conflicts $r(23) = .405$, $p < .05$
Conflict	conflicts per engaged minute $r(35) = .333$, $p < .05$	# of ideas/facts conflicts $r(23) = .405$, $p < .05$
Intimacy	ns	ns

Table 2b. Maternal Perceptions of Friend Relationships

	4 year-olds with older siblings	4 year-olds with younger siblings
Asymmetry	# of behavioral and physical conflicts $r(32) = .355$, $p < .04$	#of object conflicts $r(20) = .441$, $p < .05$
Harmony	#of behavioral and physical conflicts $r(32) = -.407$, $p < .02$	ns
Conflict	family rules for compromise $r(32) = .420$, $p < .02$	ns
Intimacy	# of behavioral/ physical conflicts $r(32) = -.460$, $p < .007$	conflicts per engaged minute $r(22) = .369$, $p < .08$

Figure 1. Conflict Characteristics of Sibling and Friend Relationships



Results

Conflict Characteristics (Figure 1)

- Siblings had more conflicts per engaged minute ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 2.09$) than friends ($M = .93$, $SD = .77$).
- Sibling conflicts also had a higher affective intensity ($M = 2.16$, $SD = .92$) than friend conflicts ($M = 1.74$, $SD = .52$).
- Sibling conflicts had more overall aggression per conflict ($M = .48$, $SD = .34$) than friend conflicts ($M = .34$, $SD = .30$).

Maternal Perceptions of Sibling and Friend Relationships

- Maternal ratings of relationship conflict were higher for siblings ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 2.77$) than for friends ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.81$).
- Maternal ratings of conflict for siblings were positively correlated with sibling conflicts per engaged minute, $r(61) = .254$, $p < .05$. However, the relationship between maternal ratings of conflict for friends and friend conflicts per engaged minute was nonsignificant.
- **Sibling Pairs (Table 2a.)**
  - For 4-year-olds with older siblings, maternal ratings of harmony were negatively correlated with conflicts per engaged minute.
  - Maternal ratings of sibling asymmetry were marginally negatively correlated with the number of conflicts over the use of an object. For 4-year-olds with younger siblings, maternal ratings of sibling conflict were positively correlated with the number of conflicts regarding ideas and facts. Maternal ratings of harmony were marginally negatively correlated with conflicts about plans for play.
- **Friend Pairs (Table 2b.)**
  - Maternal ratings of friend asymmetry were marginally positively correlated with the number of conflicts with aggression, $r(54) = .202$, $p < .07$.
  - Maternal ratings of friend conflict were marginally negatively associated with target relational aggression, $r(54) = -.191$, $p < .08$, and friend relational aggression, $r(54) = -.185$, $p < .09$.
  - For 4-year-olds with older siblings, maternal ratings of friend asymmetry were positively correlated with the number of behavioral and physical conflicts.
  - For 4-year-olds with younger siblings, maternal ratings of friend asymmetry were positively correlated with the number of conflicts over use of an object.

Family Rules for Conflict Resolution and Aggression

- **Sibling Pairs**
  - For siblings, parental rules for conflict resolution did not significantly predict aggression from the target child or sibling.
- **Friend Pairs**
  - Family rules for sharing were negatively correlated with total verbal aggression in friend conflicts, $r(51) = -.257$, $p < .04$.
  - Family rules for punitive intervention (e.g., time-outs, removing toys, etc.) were also marginally negatively correlated with total verbal aggression, $r(50) = -.216$, $p < .07$.
  - However, family rules for punitive intervention were marginally positively correlated with relational aggression, $r(50) = .204$, $p < .08$.

Discussion

- These findings support the hypothesis that maternal perceptions of sibling conflicts would correspond with observed behavior to a greater extent than maternal perceptions of friend conflicts. Mothers rated the sibling relationships as higher in conflict than friend relationships, which was supported by our observations regarding rates of conflict per engaged minute. Additionally, maternal ratings of conflict were associated with conflicts per engaged minute for siblings only. These results are unsurprising, given that mothers have more opportunity to observe sibling conflict. In regard to friend relationships, mothers seem particularly unaware of the occurrence of relational aggression. In friend relationships in which mothers reported fewer conflicts, there was actually a higher rate of relational aggression.
- Furthermore, mothers' punitive intervention into conflicts was associated with more relational aggression as well, possibly because the mother is modeling relational aggression in these interactions.

For the targets with older siblings versus the targets with younger siblings, maternal perceptions of sibling relationships had different implications for characteristics of the conflict. This could be due to the fact that conflict characteristics vary by age composition and cognitive capabilities.

- Many of the significant findings related to maternal perceptions of asymmetry. For siblings, an asymmetrical relationship was associated with fewer conflicts regarding the use of an object. However, for friends, an asymmetrical relationship was associated with more conflicts with aggression, more conflicts over the use of an object, and more behavioral and physical conflicts. These results suggest that in early childhood an asymmetrical sibling relationship may developmentally appropriate at this age, whereas an asymmetrical friend relationship is problematic.