Observed Conflicts and Mothers' Perceptions of 7-year-olds' Sibling and Friend Relationships

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Abstract

As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we examined 7-year-olds' conflicts with siblings and friends during free play, construction, and game tasks. Characteristics of observed conflicts and averted conflicts were compared with maternal questionnaire responses.

Introduction

Differences have been observed in conflicts with siblings and friends during middle childhood, but there has been little research with this age group examining how observed conflicts relate to mothers' perceptions of their children's interactions. 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) siblings' and friends' conflicts in middle childhood, as observed in brief play sessions, and (2) mothers' assessments of their children's relationships. 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. Furthermore, we expect the more symmetrical and intimate the mothers perceived the relationship between the target child and sibling or peer, the more conflicts that will be observed. However, we expect the more harmonious the mothers perceived this same relationship, less conflicts will be observed.

Method

Participants

- One hundred and six white, middle class American target 7-year olds.
- Half of the target 7 year olds were observed with a sibling who was 15 to 30 months younger, half with a sibling who was 15 to 30 months older.
- Half of the target children were female, half of the target children were male.
- Half of the sibling pairs were same-sex , half of the sibling pairs were 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 a total of six separate 15-minute sessions, three with their sibling and three with their peer, using materials provided by the experimenters.
- While the children were videotaped, mothers completed a 24-item questionnaire regarding the target child's usual pattern of behavior with the sibling and friend. Mothers rated characteristics of symmetry, harmony, intimacy, and conflict within the target child's relationship with the sibling and friend, as defined in Table 1.
- The videotapes were transcribed and coded for conflict and averted conflicts.
- Conflicts were defined as *exchanges containing mutual opposition, either verbal or behavioral.*
- Averted conflicts were defined as *oppositional behaviors, physical or verbal, that are not reciprocated by the partner.*
- Once identified, conflicts and averted conflicts were coded for frequency, duration, number of turns, instigator, issue, aggression, and affective intensity. Conflicts were also coded for termination strategy and outcome, while averted conflicts were coded for response of partner.

Analyses

- Relationships between conflict, averted conflict, and verbal irony were analyzed using Pearson bivariate correlation coefficients.
- Incidence of conflict and averted conflict were analyzed using separate 2 (partner) x 2 (target child gender) x 2 (sibling gender) repeated-measures MANOVA.

Table 1. Example of Questionnaire Items

	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.

Figure 1. Conflict Characteristics of Sibling and Friend Relationships

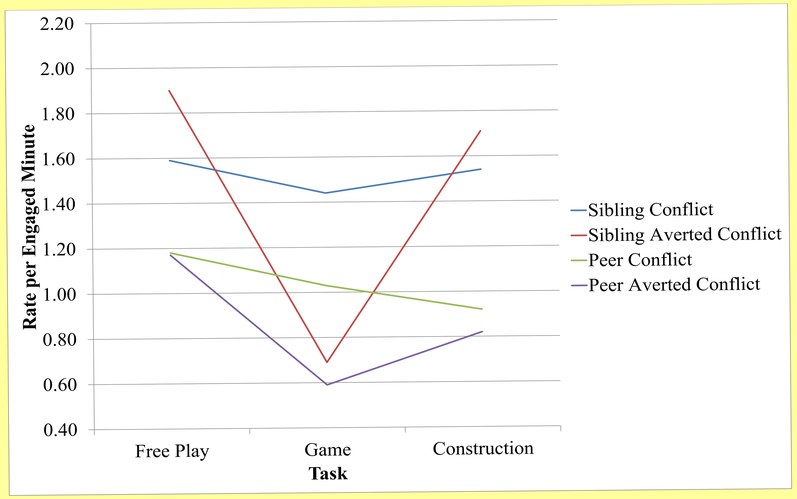

Table 2. Maternal Perceptions of Friend Relationships

	Free Play	Game	Construction
Asymmetry	Physical Oppositional Behavior in Conflict, $r(38) = .408$, $p < .05$ Physical Oppositional Behavior in Averted Conflict, $r(40) = -.456$, $p < .01$	*ns*	*ns*
Harmony	*ns*	*ns*	*ns*
Conflict	*ns*	*ns*	Conflict Frequency, $r(40) = -.317$, $p < .05$ Conflict Duration, $r(35) = .350$, $p < .05$
Intimacy	*ns*	*ns*	*ns*

Results

Conflict by Task Characteristics (Figure 1)

- Construction
  - Siblings had more conflicts per engaged minute ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 1.25$) than friends ($M = .92$, $SD = .53$).
  - Siblings had more averted conflicts per engaged minute ($M = 1.70$, $SD = 1.68$) than friends ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 1.25$).
- Free-Play
  - Siblings had more conflicts per engaged minute ($M = 1.60$, $SD = 1.17$) than friends ($M = 1.18$, $SD = .84$).
  - Siblings had more averted conflicts per engaged minute ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.67$) than friends ($M = 1.19$, $SD = .92$).
- Game
  - Siblings had more conflicts per engaged minute ($M = 1.44$, $SD = .97$) than friends ($M = 1.03$, $SD = .64$).
  - Siblings had more averted conflicts per engaged minute ($M = 1.91$, $SD = .45$) than friends ($M = .59$, $SD = .48$).

Maternal Perceptions of Sibling and Friend Relationships (Table 2)

- Construction
  - Mothers accurately predicted conflict duration for construction tasks with siblings, $p < .350$, but inaccurately predicted conflict frequency for construction tasks with siblings, $p < -.317$.
  - Mothers accurately predicted peer averted conflict duration in construction, $p < .333$
  - Mothers' ratings of peer harmony were negatively correlated with peer averted conflict duration in construction tasks, $p < -.386$.
- Free-Play
  - Mothers' ratings of sibling symmetry were positively correlated with physical oppositional behavior in conflicts with sibling during free play tasks, $p < .406$.
  - Mothers' ratings of sibling symmetry were negatively correlated with physical oppositional behavior in averted conflicts with sibling during free play tasks, $p < -.456$.
  - Mothers accurately predicted peer averted conflict duration in free play, $p < .348$.
  - Mothers' ratings of peer symmetry were positively correlated to averted conflict frequency and duration in free play, $p < .370$; $p < .367$.
- Game
  - Mothers' ratings of peer intimacy were positively correlated with peer conflict duration in game tasks, $p < .334$.
  - Mothers accurately predicted the number of peer averted conflicts with aggression in game tasks, $p < .354$.

Discussion

The results partially supported our hypothesis; mothers more accurately predicted conflict duration between siblings than peers across all tasks. However, mothers were not able to accurately predict conflict frequency between siblings during construction tasks. In terms of averted conflicts, mothers were able to predict peer averted conflict duration in construction and free play, as well as the number of peer averted conflicts with aggression in game tasks.

Our results support our hypothesis that mothers' ratings of sibling symmetry reflect the amount of physical oppositional behavior present in conflicts with siblings during free play tasks. Similarly, mothers' ratings of peer symmetry predicted averted conflict frequency and duration during free play tasks. In contrast, perceptions of sibling symmetry did not correctly predict the amount of physical oppositional behavior in sibling averted conflicts during free play tasks. In addition, mothers' ratings of peer intimacy were positively correlated with peer conflict duration in game tasks. Mothers' ratings of peer harmony were negatively related to peer averted conflict duration in construction tasks. Overall, our results suggest that mothers' perceptions of children's sibling and friend relationships are not particularly concordant with overall rate of conflict. However, their perceptions do predict certain qualitative aspects of children's conflict behavior.

These results could be explained by the notion that mothers may be tuned into high-intensity or long-lasting conflicts, particularly those involving aggression or physical opposition and fail to recognize low intensity oppositional behaviors. Furthermore, it is possible that mothers may be more attuned to conflict and averted conflicts in peer relationships than in sibling relationships to avoid embarrassment as a result of their child's misbehavior with an individual outside of the family. In future studies, researchers could examine if mothers' perceptions of their child's behavior decrease in accuracy as the child ages.