

# Sibling Aggression (Relational and Otherwise) from Early Childhood through Adolescence



Ganie B. DeHart  
SUNY Geneseo

# Acknowledgments



NIH AREA Grant R15HD31656 and multiple grants to me and my students from the Geneseo Foundation.

# Sibling-Peer Reseach Group (SPRG) Longitudinal Study



# Why study relational aggression in sibling relationships?

- ◆ Excellent learning environment for social understanding (Dunn)
- ◆ Testing ground for developing social behaviors/strategies
- ◆ Especially suited to relational aggression due to familiarity, intimacy, asymmetry, and ambivalence of most sibling relationships.

# Fundamental research questions:

- ◆ How do sibling and friend relationships compare as developmental contexts?
- ◆ What do children carry between the two types of relationships?
- ◆ How does all of this change with age?
- ◆ Specific aspects of sibling and friend interaction, including physical, verbal, and relational aggression, are examined to address these questions.

# Time 1: Early Childhood

- ◆ 64 sibling pairs with 4-year-old target child (33 male)
- ◆ Siblings either 2 years older or 2 years younger
- ◆ 33 same-sex pairs, 31 mixed-sex
- ◆ Same-sex friend of target child also participated.
- ◆ Videotaped at home in semi-structured free play with experimenter-provided toys.
- ◆ Maternal questionnaires on sibling and friend relationships and child temperament.

# Time 2: Middle Childhood

- ◆ Target children age 7.
- ◆ 46 original families, plus 42 expanded sample families (similar age/gender composition)
- ◆ Videotaped at home doing construction task, unfamiliar board game, and free play.
- ◆ Maternal questionnaires as before.
- ◆ Child interviews on sib and friend relationships

# Time 3: Adolescence

- ◆ Target children age 17.
- ◆ ~ 50 follow-up families.
- ◆ Expanded adolescent sample.
- ◆ Videotaped at home making brownies with one partner (sib/friend), pizza with other.
- ◆ Maternal questionnaires
- ◆ Adolescent relationship questionnaires

# Aggression Coding Scheme

- ◆ Aggression: any behavior or utterance with a clear intent to hurt or bother the partner.
- ◆ Relational Aggression (RA): damaging or threatening to damage a relationship
  - Verbal RA (e.g., gossip, tattling, relational insults)
  - Behavioral RA (e.g., turning away/ disengaging, mocking gestures)
  - Intentional ignoring

# Coding Scheme continued

- ◆ Physical Aggression (PA): aggressive physical contact, destructive behavior, or threatening gestures.
- ◆ Verbal Aggression (VA): non-relational aggressive utterances (e.g., insults, mocking, mean comments).

# Social Engagement Coding

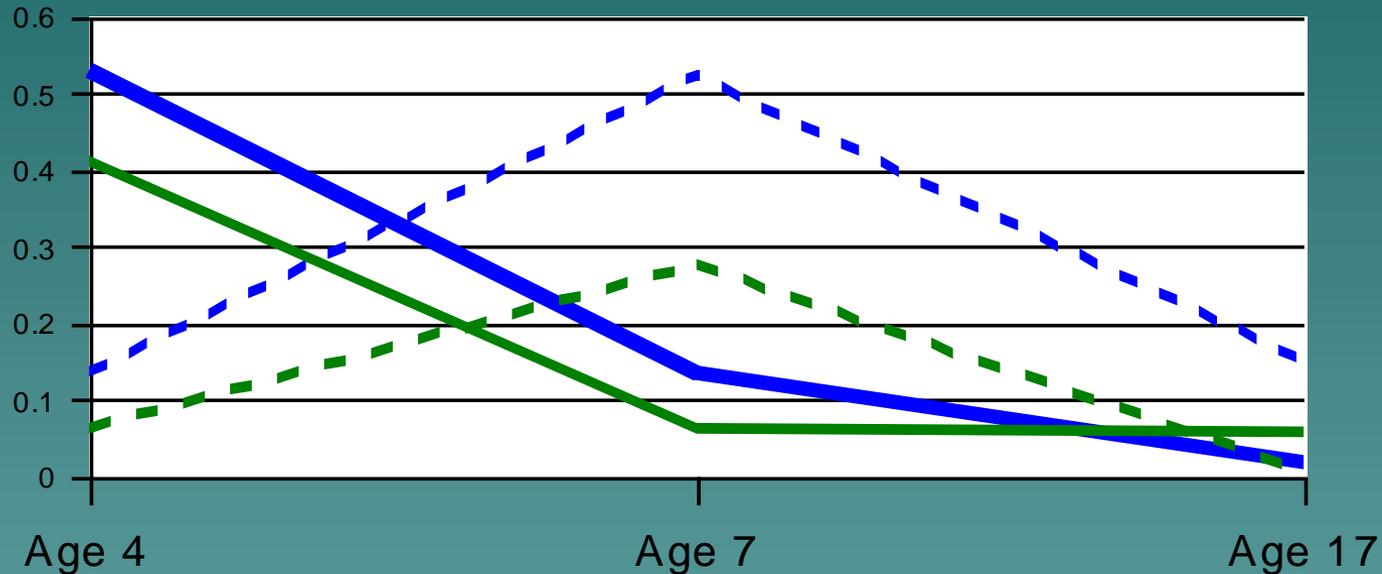
- ◆ Variability in time spent in social engagement during taping sessions.
- ◆ Adaptation of Parton's play coding scheme (Associative, Cooperative, Solitary, Onlooker, Unengaged).
- ◆ Each dyad coded at 10-second intervals.
- ◆ Combinations collapsed into Engaged, Unengaged, and Semi-engaged.

# Preliminary Results

- ◆ Based on free-play data at ages 4 and 7 – board game and construction tasks from Time 2 not included.
- ◆ Based on partial adolescent data – not all sessions have been coded and analyzed.
- ◆ Girls overrepresented in adolescent data that have been analyzed so far.

# Relational Aggression

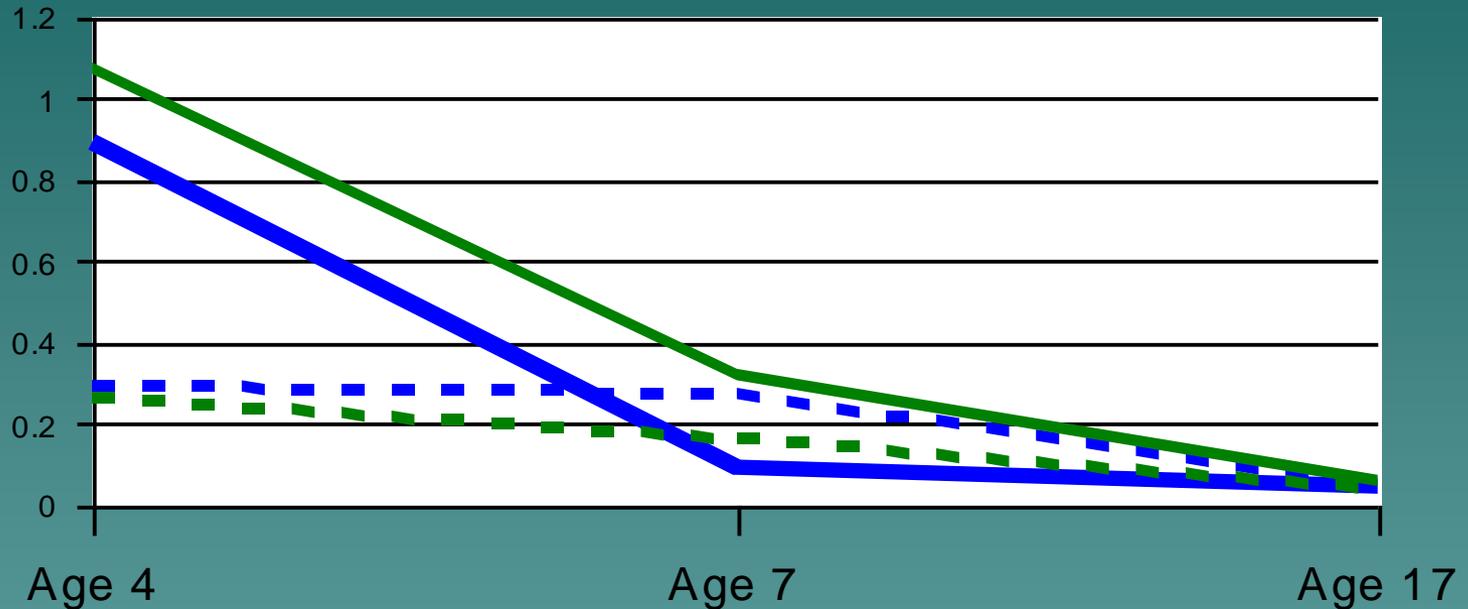
Rate per engaged & semi-engaged minute



- Girls toward sibs
- - - Girls toward friends
- Boys toward sibs
- - - Boys toward friends

# Physical Aggression

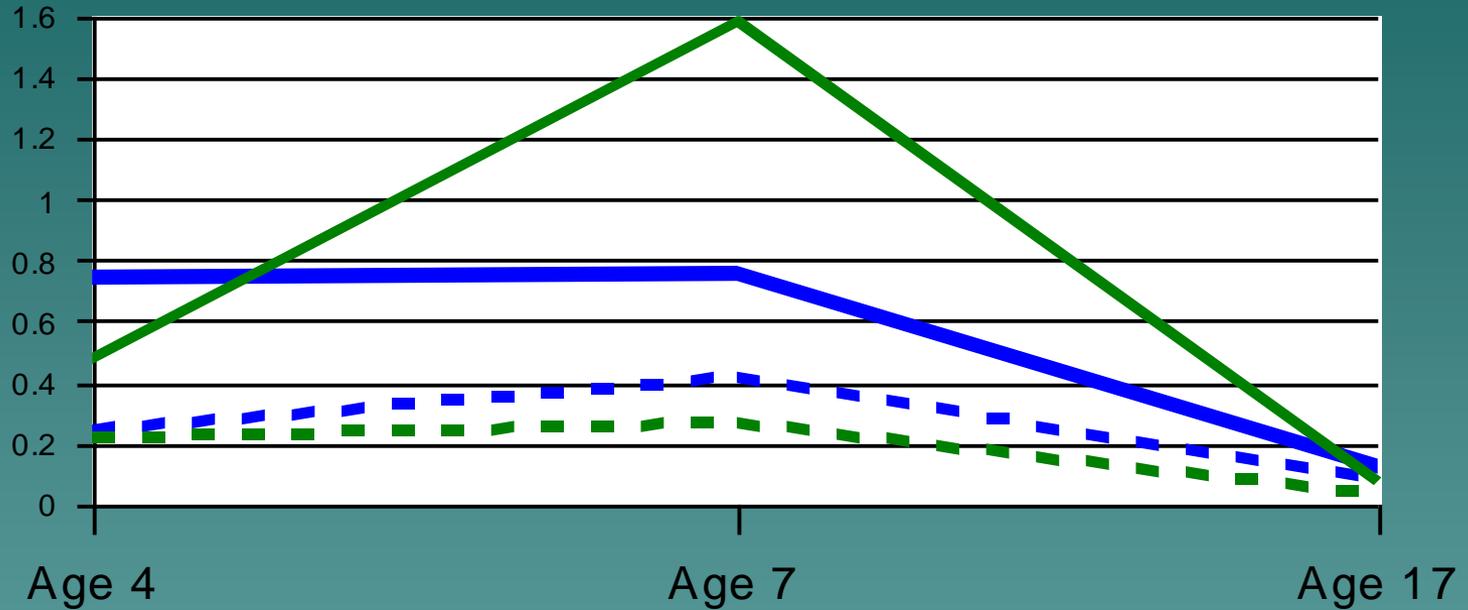
Rate per engaged & semi-engaged minute



- Girls toward sibs
- Girls toward friends
- Boys toward sibs
- Boys toward friends

# Verbal Aggression

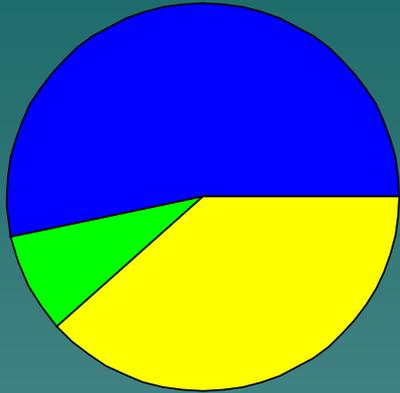
Rate per engaged & semi-engaged minute



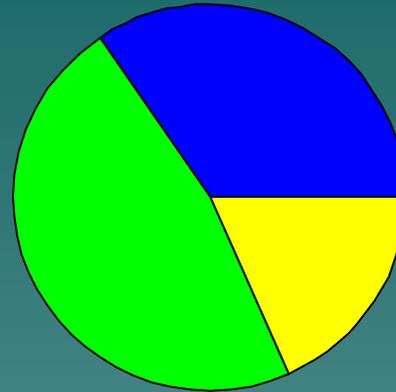
- Girls toward sibs
- Girls toward friends
- Boys toward sibs
- Boys toward friends

# Type of RA: 4-year-olds

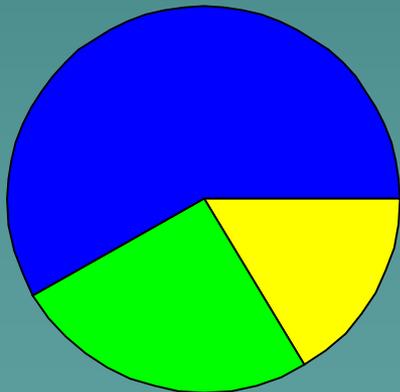
■ Verbal    ■ Physical    ■ Ignoring



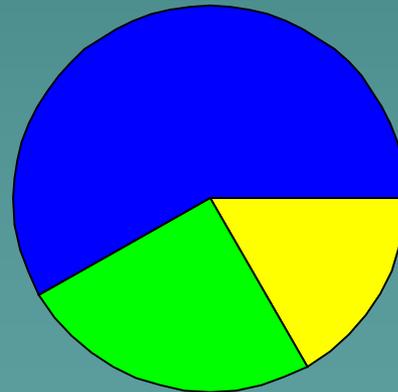
Girls w/ sibs



Girls w/ friends



Boys w/ sibs



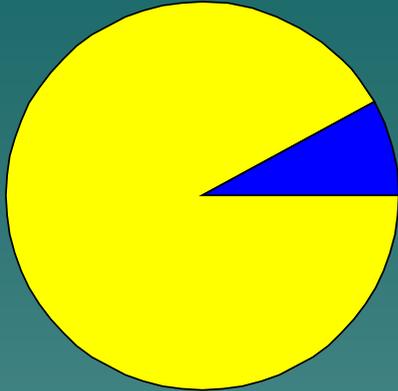
Boys w/ friends

# Type of RA: 7-year-olds

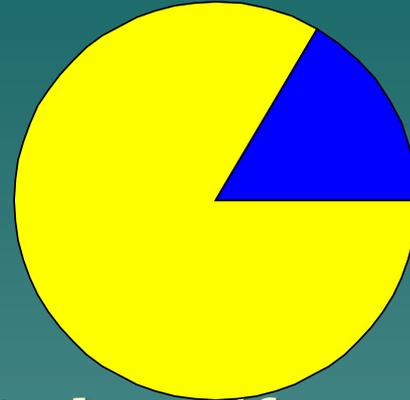
Verbal

Physical

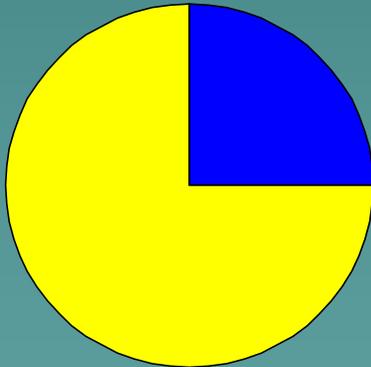
Ignoring



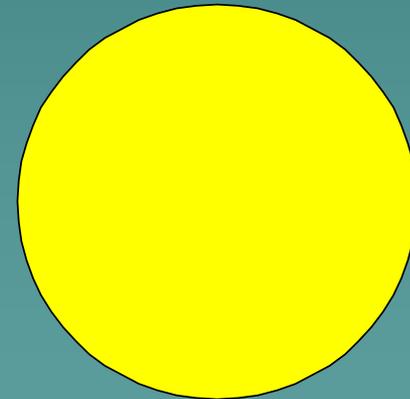
Girls w/ sibs



Girls w/ friends



Boys w/ sibs



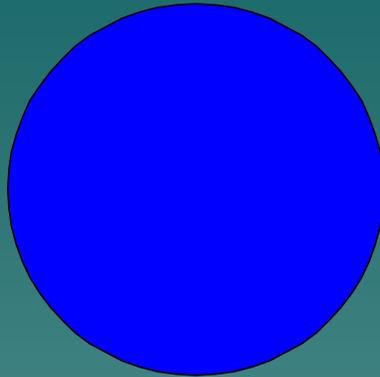
Boys w/ friends

# Type of RA: 17-year-olds

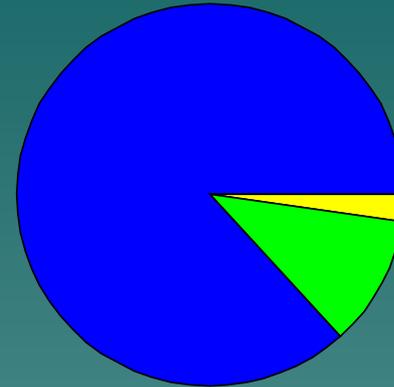
Verbal

Physical

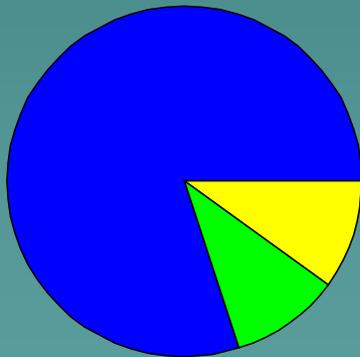
Ignoring



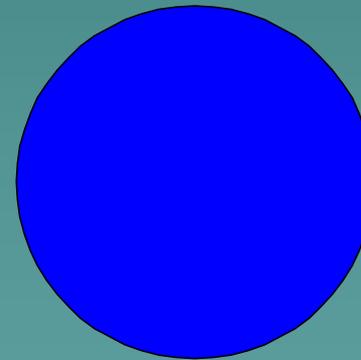
Girls w/ sibs



Girls w/ friends



Boys w/ sibs



Boys w/ friends

# Preliminary Conclusions

- ◆ Overall, decline in all types of aggression over time, but some types spiked in middle childhood.
- ◆ More similarities than differences between boys' and girls' behavior.
- ◆ Gender differences more noticeable during friend interactions than during sibling interactions.
- ◆ Sibling and friend interactions became more similar over time.

# Issues/Limitations

- ◆ Key time point missing: early adolescence.
- ◆ Small N – more suited to capturing normative development than individual differences.
- ◆ Low incidence behaviors -> data analysis issues.
- ◆ Social context of observational sessions.
- ◆ Limited access to RA involving third parties.
- ◆ Only a small sample of behavior.
- ◆ Reactivity & social desirability issues
- ◆ Problem of developmental equivalence of tasks and coding schemes over time.

# Adolescence-specific Issues

- ◆ Increasingly covert nature of aggression
- ◆ Self-consciousness about being observed
- ◆ Resurgence of rough-and-tumble play, perhaps with new meanings
- ◆ Gender-specific meaning of aggressive behaviors in adolescence
- ◆ Relevance of gender of coders as well as gender of participants
- ◆ Sarcasm!