

Relational, Verbal, and Physical Aggression in 7-Year-Olds' Sibling and Friend Interactions During Free Play, Game, and Construction Tasks

Kathryn Leinung, Daria Seifert, Carmela Taylor, Toria Herd, Anna Katomski, Brian Penly, & Ganie B. DeHart, Ph.D

Abstract

Children's physically, verbally, and relationally aggressive behavior with siblings and friends were examined while playing a board- game, participating in a construction task and a free-play session. The results suggest that, although task influences levels of children's aggression and how it is displayed, other aspects of the interaction context—specifically, gender and partner—matter as well.

Introduction

Various forms of aggression have been extensively studied in middle childhood, mostly via self-report and parent or teacher questionnaires. However, observational research on children's aggression during those years has been limited. Most observational studies have examined peer aggression in school settings, and have generally focused on physical aggression. Surprisingly, little is known about individual children's use of aggression when interacting with different partners, or about their relative use of different forms of aggression, such as verbal and relational aggression. For these reasons, the research is limited on the normative development of aggression during middle- childhood. To further understand childhood aggression we examined three types of tasks: free play, game, and construction. The free-play task was unstructured, the game task was meant to evaluate aggression in a competitive environment, and the construction task was designed to provide structure and encourage cooperation. Examining the trends of aggression by task should provide more insight into children's social and cognitive development. We were specifically interested in the following issues:

- The roles of partner, age, and gender in rates of relational, verbal, and physical aggression.
- The role of task in rates of relational, verbal, and physical aggression.

Method

As part of a longitudinal study of sibling and friend relationships, we conducted an exploratory analysis of relational, physical, and verbal aggression during sibling and friend interactions.

Participants

- A community sample from western New York consisting of 74 7-year-olds (37 females, 37 males), plus one sibling and one same-sex, same-age friend for each target child.
- Approximately half of the siblings were two years older ($N = 38$) than the target children and half were two years younger ($N = 36$)

Procedure

- At age 7 the target children were videotaped at home with a sibling and a friend in separate semi-structured free play, game, and construction sessions.
- The construction session asks children to cooperate in building a replica of one of two given toys (counterbalanced), the game session includes children playing one of two board games (counterbalanced), while the free-play task was unstructured time to play with a wooden farm or train set.
- The videotapes were transcribed; transcripts were coded for the presence of aggression.
- Aggression was defined as any behavior with a clear intent to hurt or bother the partner
- Episodes of aggression were classified as *relational* (damaging or threatening to damage a relationship), *physical* (physical acts or physical threats of force), or *verbal* (non-relational aggressive utterances). Episodes of aggression were further coded for duration, affective intensity, and interactional context.
- Social engagement was coded at 10-second intervals, and rates of aggression were adjusted to account for variation in session length and the extent to which members of dyads were *engaged* (mutually attending to each other) or *semi-engaged* (only one partner attending to the other).

Analyses

- Rates of verbal, physical, and relational aggression per engaged and semi-engaged minute were analyzed using separate 2 (partner) x 2 (task) x 2 (target child gender) x 2 (sibling gender) x 2 (age group) repeated measure ANOVAs.

Figure 1. Relational Aggression Across Three Tasks

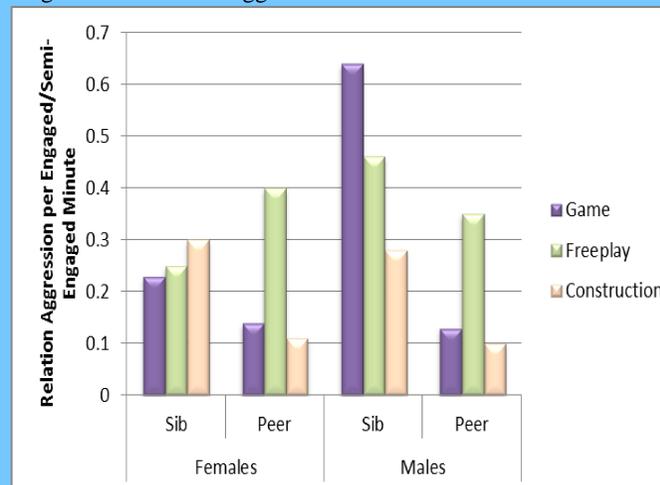


Figure 2. Verbal Aggression Across Three Tasks

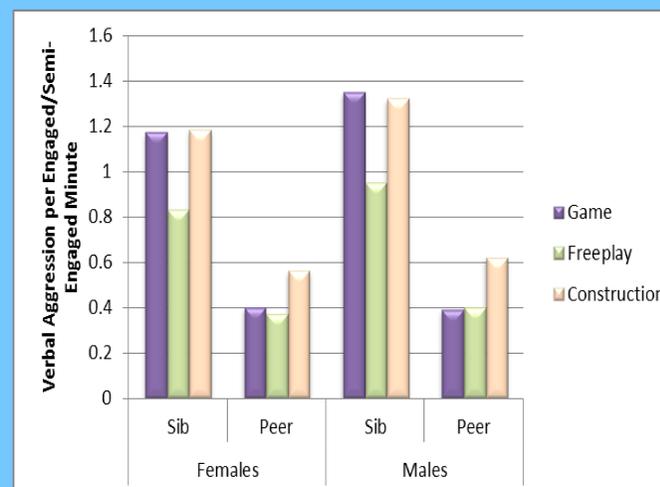
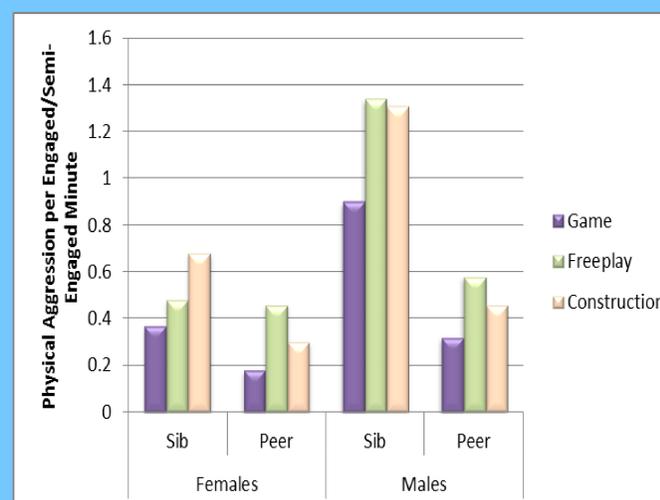


Figure 3. Physical Aggression Across Three Tasks



Results

Relational Aggression (Figure 1)

- Significant partner by task effect such that siblings during the game session had the most relational aggression and peers during the free play had the most relational aggression. Both partners had the least aggression during the construction task ($p=.02$)

Verbal Aggression (Figure 2)

- Significant partner by task effect such that siblings during the free play had the least verbal aggression and peers during the construction task had the most aggression ($p=.02$).

Physical Aggression (Figure 3)

- There was a main effect of gender such that males displayed more physical aggression than females ($p<.01$).
- Significant partner by task effect such that siblings during the game session had the least physical aggression and peers during the free play had the most physical aggression ($p<.001$).

Discussion

Overall, through all three tasks, siblings displayed more relational, physical, and verbal aggression than with their peers. Our results match the generally reported tendency for aggression, specifically physical aggression, to be more prominent among boys than among girls. This could be due to girls', more advanced social cognitive development in their choice of favoring more verbal means to hurt or bother their partner as opposed to boy's more physical tendencies.

For relational aggression the partner by task effect suggest that during the game task, which was meant to examine children in a competitive environment, siblings displayed more aggression than in any other task. Peers displayed the most relational aggression during the free play task, suggesting that a lack of structure with peers allowed children to freely express their feelings of aggression more so than in the other structured tasks. Both the sibling and peer pairs displayed the least aggression in the construction task. This suggests that an activity that creates a common goal for children may tend to lessen their relational aggressive tendencies towards one another.

In analyzing physical aggression results indicated that siblings showed the least physical aggression during the game task. The game task gave the children structure and guidelines on how the task was to be performed, which may have led to less physical altercations and a common understanding of how the game was to be played. Peers showed the most physical aggression during the free play session. This could be because of the lack of structure within this task, which may have allowed children to get off task and engage in physical altercations.

For verbal aggression siblings displayed the least verbal aggression in the free play task. This could be because the lack of structure of the free play task could allow siblings to not have to engage in verbal interactions if they preferred not to. The peers displayed the most verbal aggression during construction. This could be because the common goal created by the construction task may have led each child to have a different method on how to reach that goal. This could lead to them verbally expressing their opinions in an aggressive manner.

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