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ABSTRACT

To determine the extent to which toddlers are aware of their friends' qualities, mothers of two groups of toddler preschoolers were interviewed about which of her child's classmates is talked about at home and what her child typically says about his or her peers. The children had been observed for several months prior to the interviews to identify reciprocal patterns of interaction. A total of 8 girls and 9 boys with a mean age of 35 months and their mothers participated in study 1. In study 2, children had a mean age of 28.5 months and six of the total of 16 were girls. Mothers' reports indicated that nearly all of the children in both studies talked regularly about their preschool peers. When, in study 1, sample verbalizations were rated and compared, children in reciprocal relationships were found to differ from those without reciprocal partners in the mode used to describe peers. This difference did not emerge in study 2. Mothers of children in the first study were able to correctly identify their children's preschool friends. Mothers in study 2 were not. Findings indicate that the study of toddler friendships can involve dimensions beyond the identification of interaction patterns, if approached in a way that takes into account the capabilities of children of that age. (RH)

WHAT TODDLERS TALK ABOUT WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT FRIENDS

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ABSTRACT

Studies of toddler friendships have been limited to an examination of interaction preferences among toddlers in a group and other dimensions of the friendship relationship, such as awareness of a friend's unique qualities, have been neglected. In order to determine the extent to which toddlers are aware of these qualities, mothers of two groups of toddler. preschoolers were interviewed about which of her child's classmates is talked about at home and what her child typically says about his or her peers. The children had been observed for several months prior to the interviews to identify reciprocal patterns of interaction. 8 girls and 9 boys with a mean age of 35 months were the children of the mothers in Study 1. In Study 2, children had a mean age of 28.5 months and 6 of the total 16 were girls.

Mothers' reports indicated that nearly all of the children in both studies (94% in Study 1 and 80% in Study 2) talked regularly about their preschool peers. When sample verbalizations were rated and compared, there were differences, in Study 1, in the mode used by children in reciprocal relationships and those without a reciprocal partner to describe their peers. This difference did not emerge in Study 2. Mothers of the children in the first study were able to correctly identify their children's preschool friends. The mothers in Study 2 were not.

The findings indicate that the study of toddler friendships can involve dimensions beyond the identification of interaction patterns if approached in a way that takes into account the capabilities of children of that age.

In recent years the social relationships of infants and toddlers has again become a focus of research among developmental psychologists. Since initial work in this area had been carried out in the 1920's and 30's, there had been a shift away from studying these early peer interactions and the assumption prevailed that very young children do not have friends in the way that one encounters them among older children. This assessment was, in part, based on methods used to study friendship that required children to articulate the concept of "friend" or "friendship." Because toddlers do not generally have the verbal or cognitive facility to do this, they tended to be excluded from studies and theories of friendship development. It is the purpose of the present study to investigate the phenomenon of friendship among toddlers in a way that takes into account the capabilities and limitations specific to this age group.

It has been demonstrated that toddlers exhibit many of the same behaviors that characterize the social exchanges of older children (Eckerman, Whatley & Kutz, 1975; Mueller & Vandell, 1979) and that peers are objects of social interaction for toddlers (Rubenstein & Howes, 1976). The specific question of friendship among toddlers has been addressed in work done by Vandell (1980) and Howes (1983). Despite the limitations of small sample size, these investigators were able to make a case for the presence of toddler friendships defined in terms of reciprocal interaction preference.

Ross (Note 1) has aptly pointed out that a relationship between two individuals involves more than interacting preferentially in one setting. For example, two individuals may spend all of their coffee break time at work together and, if one were making observations in that setting, they would, as

a result, be identified as friends. These individuals may, in fact, have no relationship beyond the coffee break situation. Previous studies of toddler friendship have failed to demonstrate whether children who make up a reciprocal interaction dyad have any significance for each other outside the playgroup setting.

The present study is an effort to extend what is known about the interaction patterns of toddlers in a playgroup and to take the notion of toddler friendship a step beyond interactive exchanges alone. An attempt will be made to assess whether a primary interaction partner has any importance for a given child outside of the preschool setting. Because the children are too young to discuss their friendships as such, mothers will be interviewed in an effort to determine whther the child talks about his or her dyad partner at home, if the child talks about any classmates, what they say about another child and whether the mother is aware of a relationship which she would define as friendship between her child and any of that child's peers. Both Lewis et al. (1975) and Rubenstein and Howes (1976) found maternal reporting of their children's favorite playmates to be reliable. These reports may, in part, be based on what their children have said about specific peers. There is some indication that the communicative abilities of toddlers have been underestimated. Some researchers have suggested that toddlers tend to communicate with adults rather than peers because of the greater likelihood of their being understood (Wellman & Lempers, 1977). How much more likely it would be, then, that they would communicate with their mothers.

Information concerning the spontaneous verbalizations that toddlers make about their playmates will provide at least some indication of the extent to which toddlers engage in the social cognition that Ross (Note 1) sees as an

important part of a child's ability to be in a relationship with a peer. These abilities include recognition of specific peers and knowledge of what differentiates one peer from another. The toddler must also be able to remember a peer's specific qualities in order to orient his or her behavior appropriately. In the present study, information from mothers about what her child says about peers will demonstrate, to some degree, the extent to which toddlers are aware of the unique qualities of their playmates.

METHOD

The children in four toddler preschool classes at the University Preschool, State University of New York at Stony Brook, New York, were the focus of the present study. Two classes met in Spring of 1981 and the remaining two in Spring of 1982. Because of minor differences between the two groups, the investigation done in Spring of 1981 is referred to as Study 1 and the second investigation as Study 2.

The Children

The children of the mothers interviewed for the first study were 17 preschoolers with a mean age of 35 months (ranging in age from 29 to 40 months) at the time of the study. Eight of the children were girls. These children were enrolled in either two- or three-morning per week programs. Each class consisted of ten children. The children had been enrolled for 8 months at the time of the study.

The children of the mothers in Study 2 were enrolled in one of two 2-day per week programs. There were 8 children in each class. The mean age of the children was 28.5 months (ranging in age from 26 to 31 months) at the time the study was conducted.

Of the 31 mothers, 21 had completed at least four years of college and,

at the time of the studies, 10 were engaged in work outside the home. Mothers and children came from middle- to upper middle-class SES and, with the exception of two Oriental families, were white.

Observations

For several months prior to maternal interviews, the interaction patterns of the children in the preschool classroom were observed and reciprocal interaction dyads were established on the basis of these observations. These data have been reported elsewhere (Krawczyk & Sternglanz, Note 2). The designated reciprocal dyads were compared to maternal reports.

Maternal Interviews

Mothers of the children were interviewed concerning the out-of-school social experiences of their children. In Study 1 the interviews were conducted in person by the investigator and one assistant. Interviews took place during the final week of the preschool year. This procedure was altered somewhat for Study 2. Based on feedback from mothers in the first study, who stated that they would have liked more time in which to consider some of the questions, the procedure was revised and written questionnaires were used. These questionnaires were identical in format to the interviews. As in Study 1, this took place during the final week of the preschool year. Three written questionnaires were not returned, so, these mothers were contacted by telephone and an interview was conducted.

Mothers were asked whom her child plays with at least once each week (e.g., siblings, neighborhood children, children from the preschool) and were asked to speculate what percent of her child's playtime is spent with each playmate. Mothers were also asked which child (or children) her child talks about at home, give an example of what her child is apt to say and to predict which, if any, of the children from the preschool might be considered her child's

special friend. Questions about siblings and education and occupations of parents were also asked.

RESULTS

Study 1

Maternal interview data indicated that the subjects did talk about their preschool playmates at home. All but one of the children (94%) were reported to talk about others from their class on a regular basis. Among those children who talk about their peers at home it was almost invariably the case that the children talked about were among the three most frequent interaction partners of each. Of the four children who made up two reciprocal dyads (two children each being the most frequent interaction partner of the other), three talked to their mothers regularly about their interaction partner. It was also reported that these children tended to have contact with their dyad partner outside the preschool. The members of one dyad were close neighbors and the girls were constantly together. The members of the other dyad were brought together by their mothers twice weekly. Children who were not members of reciprocal dyads did not tend to see one another outside the preschool. Mothers of the children in reciprocal dyads were 100% accurate in their predictions about which of the other children was her child's primary interaction partner in school.

Some of the mothers provided examples of what their children typically say about preschool peers. These sample statements were categorized along two primary dimensions by two independent raters. One of these dimensions is termed "descriptive" and includes statements that involve reporting about another child, such as, "Erika has a purple snowsuit." A second dimension is termed "differentiated" and includes statements which indicate a child's actual or desired active involvement with another child. An example of such a statement is, "I want to

show Connie my new book." A third, miscellaneous, category was included for those statements which cannot be classifies along the dimensions outlined above. The inter-rater reliability in classifying the statements was 100%.

Only 11 mothers gave examples of what her child typically says about another. The statements typical of children in reciprocal dyads were compared to those of other children in terms of the categories outlined above. Because of the different numbers of children making up the comparison groups, frequency counts were transformed into ratios with the numbers of children in reciprocal dyads and children not in reciprocal dyads as the base rates. Children with reciprocal partners were more likely to use a differentiated mode than a descriptive one when talking about their playmates, while, children not involved in these dyads were as likely to use one mode as another ($\chi^2(2) = 88.91$, $p < .001$). Only one statement was classified as miscellaneous. (See Table 1)

Study 2

Maternal questionnaire indicated that the children in Study 2, like those in the first study, tended to talk about their preschool playmates at home. It was reported that 80% of the children talked about preschool peers on a regular basis. Of the children who made up reciprocal pairs, only 2 of the total 8 talked regularly about the other member of the pair. Unlike the children in Study 1, these children in reciprocal dyads did not see each other outside the preschool.

Only 7 of the 14 mothers indicated which of the other children they thought might be the preferred interaction partner of their children. Of these 7, not one was accurate in her prediction. This is in direct contrast to the mothers in Study 1 who were able to accurately predict preferred partners.

The sample statements of the children were classified by two independent

raters along the dimensions outlined earlier in this report. Again the inter-rater reliability was 100%. Of the 12 mothers who indicated their children talked regularly about peers, 11 provided sample statements. Again, frequency counts were transformed into ratios before comparisons were made between the statements made by children in reciprocal dyads and others. There were no differences in the mode used by children in reciprocal pairs and children without reciprocal interaction partners. The statements of both were as likely to be descriptive as differentiated. (See Table 2)

DISCUSSION

An aim of the present study was to determine whether a child's interest in another is evident beyond the preschool setting. This was assessed by asking mothers to report on the spontaneous verbalizations their children make about peers. Almost all of the subjects in both samples were reported to talk about their peers on a regular basis. One mother of a boy just two years old said that her child would often relate to her quite lengthy accounts of incidents that had occurred in the preschool. Often these episodes did not involve her child directly, but, he was nonetheless able to recount what had taken place, with dialogue included. When the mother related this to the teacher, the mother found her child's account to have been completely accurate. The teacher in these classes has, in fact, noted that parents are quite well informed about what goes on in school largely as a result of their children's reporting.

This rudimentary form of gossip among the toddlers raises some issues about the ways the communication abilities of two-year-olds have been viewed and assessed. Perhaps those methods that involve recording what children say in a laboratory setting don't result in the most accurate picture of how well these young children are able to communicate. Like any of us, toddlers need something

to talk about. What goes on in the preschool provides a topic and in the mother we have an interested listener who knows enough about the idiosyncracies of her child's speech to make communicating an easier task for the child.

More to the point of the present research, that these young children observed each other so closely and are aware of situations that do not always involve them directly, indicates an interest on the part of these toddlers in their peers. The question which arises, then, is whether a more specific interest, like friendship, can be discerned on the basis of these communications. Each mother reported that her child tended to talk about one or two children more than any others. The extent to which the children talked about their primary interaction partners varied between samples. The children in Study 1 were more apt to talk about their interaction partners than were those in the second study.

The ages of the children in the two samples might well be a factor in these differences. The older children, who made up Sample 1, were, perhaps, better able to communicate their interest in a specific child with greater clarity. There were, within Sample 1, differences between children with reciprocal partners and those without in the nature of what they were likely to say about a playmate. Children with reciprocal partners were more likely to use a mode indicating either past or anticipated future interaction with their partners than they were to simply describe the other child. This difference was not evident among children without reciprocal partners. Peevers and Secord (1973) have similarly reported qualitative differences in the descriptions older children were likely to make about liked and disliked peers. One element that was characteristic in discussions about liked peers was that of personal involvement. The children with reciprocal partners in Study 2 did not show any greater likelihood of employing one mode over another. A cautionary note is in order

here. These data are based on a small number of sample statements provided by the mothers. While one should hesitate in drawing conclusions, these data do raise an interesting empirical question.

Another difference between the samples studied emerged from mothers' reports. The friends who were identified in Study 1 were brought together outside the preschool. This was not true among the comparable group of children in the second study. Zaslow (1980) has reported that "focused relationships" that appear among Kibbutz children at the end of their first year tend to be between children who shared the same bedroom and whose parents were friends. It was also reported that, among the children in that study who could talk, they were likely to express a desire to see their friends. It appears that parents can do much to encourage the formation of friendships by increasing their children's opportunities for peer interaction.

The data obtained from the maternal interviews have both conceptual and methodological implications for the study of friendship. First, it is evident that one can look at "relationships" among toddlers that involve more than rates of interaction alone. Based on mothers' reports, it is evident that toddlers recognize qualities specific to individual peers and remember these qualities to the extent of being able to talk to their mothers about them. These abilities have previously been discussed as prerequisites for the involvement of toddlers in "relationships." The problem has traditionally been one of assessing these abilities in children who cannot talk about their friendships as such. Use of maternal interviews indicates that sociometric techniques can still be quite useful, as Hallinan (1981) has maintained, particularly when used in conjunction with other [illegible]es.

There are, however, limitations to the usefulness of this technique. Because mothers are reporting on the basis of what they recall their children

saying about another child they may be inadvertently selecting sample statements based on other knowledge they have about their children's friendships. A more rigorous technique might be to ask mothers to keep a record indicating when her child talks about a peer and what is said. This would eliminate some of the problems associated with relying on memory. However, even if reports do differ somewhat from behavior, the mothers' perceptions of their children's experiences may be almost as important as what their children actually do. They certainly have implications for the children's future interactions.

The overall impression which results from this research is that the social capabilities of toddlers may have been underestimated. While these very young children may not have the abilities to view their relationships in an abstract way and call it friendship, the things they say and do show that in many ways it is not so different for them than it is for us.

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Table 1

Percentages of Types of Statements by Children in Reciprocal and Nonreciprocal Relationships

Study 1

Statement Type	Reciprocal	Nonreciprocal
Descriptive	0	55
Differentiated	67	55
Miscellaneous	33	0

Note. Total number statements = 11, N = 11

Table 2

Percentages of Types of Statements by Children in Reciprocal and Nonreciprocal Relationships

Study 2

Statement Type	Reciprocal	Nonreciprocal
Descriptive	50	33
Differentiated	50	50
Miscellaneous	0	0

Note. Total number of statements = 11, N = 11