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ABSTRACT

Using a detailed classification of 25 social strategies, this study investigated the relationship between children's sociometric status and their use of social strategies. Subjects were 220 boys, 5 to 7 years of age, who were classified into sociometric status types of popular, average, or rejected. Each subject generated as many responses as possible to four stories depicting different social problems: object conflict, object loss or damage, group entry, and activity conflict. Analysis revealed that popular boys generated more strategies than average boys from the categories of "compromise, take turns, negotiate" and "wait and hover," and fewer strategies from the category "aggress physically." Rejected boys generated more solutions than average boys from the categories "behave in a prosocial but unrealistic manner," "play something else with peer," and "wait and hover." Results also showed that social problem type strongly influenced strategy use. (MM)

Social Strategies and Sociometric Status Within the Context of Social Problem Types

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Abstract

The relation between children's sociometric status and their use of social strategies was investigated using a detailed classification of social strategies (25 codes). Strategy use was examined within the context of social problem type. 220 5-to-7 year-old boys (88 Popular, 51 Average, 81 Rejected) generated as many responses as possible to four types of social problems (Object Conflict, Object Loss or Damage, Group Entry, Activity Conflict). Popular boys generated more strategies from the categories compromise, take turns, negotiate and wait and hover and fewer strategies from the category aggress physically than average boys. Rejected boys generated more solutions from the categories behave in a prosocial but unrealistic manner, play something else with peer, and wait and hover than average boys. Social problem type was found to influence strategy use strongly.

Introduction

Researchers have convincingly argued that the strategies that children use when solving social problems are related to social outcomes, such as sociometric status (e.g., Rubin & Krasnor, 1986). Specifically, investigators have demonstrated that sociometric status is related to both the effectiveness and the prosocial-versus-antisocial valence of strategies chosen (Asarnow & Callan, 1985; Asher & Renshaw, 1981; Rubin & Daniels-Beirness, 1983). While these findings are impressive, even greater understanding of the relation between social strategy use and sociometric status may be possible if two refinements in the level at which these data are examined are made. First, previous researchers have aggregated across distinct social problems that children face; data analyses that take the context factor of problem type into account may serve to increase our understanding of how status type is related to strategy choice in varying situations. Second, in the past, investigators have classified social strategies into a few broad categories (effective/ineffective, prosocial/ antisocial); a more detailed classification of strategies may also provide new insight into the ways that children of differing social status types use social strategies. The purpose of the current study is to test whether these two refinements improve our understanding of the role of social strategies in children's peer relationships.

Method

Subjects were 220 5-to-7 year-old boys, who were classified into the sociometric status types of Popular (N = 88), Average (N = 51), and Rejected (N = 81) using the classification system of Newcomb and Bukowski (1983). The boys were administered a modified version of the Preschool Interpersonal Problem Solving Test (Spivack & Shure, 1974), in which they were asked to generate as many strategies as possible to solve social problems. This test consisted of four pairs of stories, each depicting a different type of social problem. In Object Conflict stories, both the protagonist and a peer desire an attractive object. In Object Loss or Damage stories, the protagonist either loses or accidentally breaks a peer's toy. In Group Entry stories, the protagonist wants to join a group of unfamiliar peers. In Activity Conflict stories, the protagonist and a peer with whom he is playing want to engage in different and incompatible play activities.

Responses to the eight stories were coded into 25 mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories. The overall reliability coefficient (Cohen's kappa) for all strategy coding was .88, with individual reliability coefficients for the 25 categories ranging from .50 to .96. See Table 1 for a description of the strategy categories, along with reliability information. While some of these strategy categories were appropriate for all story types, others were only applicable to a subset of the four types of stories. See Table 2 for a listing of appropriate strategies for each story type.

Results

An ANOVA was performed for each of the 25 strategy categories, yielding a Status effect, a Story Type effect, and a Status x Story Type interaction. These analyses must be considered exploratory in nature, since multivariate analysis across all strategies simultaneously was not feasible due to the number of categories.

An effect for Status was found for five strategy categories. Popular boys generated more strategies from the categories compromise, take turns, negotiate and wait and hover and fewer strategies from the category aggress physically than average boys. Rejected boys generated more strategies from the categories behave in a prosocial but unrealistic manner, play something else with peer, and wait and hover than average boys. See Figures 1 through 5 for illustrations of these effects.

Story Type effects could only be analyzed for the 15 strategy categories that were applicable to more than one story type. However, a strong effect for Story Type was found for each of these 15 strategies. See Table 3 for details of this analysis.

Status x Story Type interactions were found for three strategy categories. For the strategy disrupt peer's play by taking toy, popular and rejected boys generated fewer responses than average boys for the Activity Conflict stories, but not for the other story types ($p < .1$). See Figure 6 for an illustration of this effect. For the strategy initiate play with peer without explanation, popular boys generated more responses than average boys for the Group

Entry stories but not for the other story types ($p < .05$). See Figure 7 for an illustration of this effect. For the strategy leave or play with someone or something else, popular and rejected boys generated fewer responses than average boys for Activity Conflict stories but not for other story types ($p < .01$). This effect is shown in Figure 8.

Discussion

Recently, investigators in the area of children's peer relations have begun to examine the role that contextual factors play in determining children's social behavior. For example, social behavior has been studied within the context of groups with certain behavioral norms or within the context of specific relationships. These studies are the result of a growing belief that social competence cannot be characterized by describing a simple set of behaviors that are appropriate across all situations, but instead that social competence is defined by concepts such as relevance, flexibility, and adaptability.

In the current study, context has been studied in a more microanalytic way than in the examples given above. Specifically, children's use of social strategies was studied within the context of different types of social problems that children commonly encounter (Story Type). Consistent with previous findings on the effect of context on children's actual social behavior, the results of this study support the important role that context plays in children's social problem solving skills. Children were found to use social strategies differentially when faced with different social problems (main effects for Story Type). For example, children considered aggression to be most appropriate in Object Conflict situations, asking another child to play to be most appropriate in Group Entry situations, and compromising and expressing one's own wishes to be most appropriate in Activity Conflict situations.

There were some sociometric status differences in how children matched strategies with social problems (Status x Story Type interactions). Popular children suggested initiating play with a peer without explanation more frequently in Group Entry situations than did average children. This finding is in line with those of Putallaz (Putallaz, 1983; Putallaz & Gottman, 1981), who found that popular children entered peer groups more easily than other children, largely due to their tendency to watch and evaluate their peers before attempting entry into the group. The findings for the other two interactions are harder to interpret, due to the fact that average children suggested a strategy more frequently for a certain social problem than did either popular or rejected children. We hypothesize that this effect is the result of average children frequently choosing a strategy that involves a moderate level of competence, while popular children instead chose more competent strategies and rejected children suggested less competent strategies.

In spite of these strong context effects, some social strategies were found to be associated with children of varying levels of social competence across all social problems. For example, popular children were most likely to suggest strategies that involved compromise and least likely to suggest physical aggression, regardless of the social problem with which they were faced. Conversely, rejected children were most likely to offer strategies involving unrealistic solutions or strategies in which social problems are avoided by engaging in a different play activity.

Table 1
Strategy Categories and Reliability Information

Strategy	Kappa
1. Aggress physically or threaten to do so	.91
2. Aggress verbally	.78
3. Ask for help from an authority figure	.93
4. Ask for help from a peer	.83
5. Ask to play alone with toy without reason	.96
6. Ask to play alone with toy with reason	.71
7. Ask to play desired activity alone	.89
8. Ask to play together	.95
9. Behave in an antisocial but unrealistic manner	.59
10. Behave in a prosocial but unrealistic manner	.50
11. Compromise, take turns, negotiate	.92
12. Disrupt peer's play by taking toy	.88
13. Express own wishes	.82
14. Give or request information	.91
15. Initiate play with peer without explanation	.86
16. Leave or play with someone or something else	.90
17. Offer social comfort	.88
18. Play alone without explanation	.86
19. Play peer's desired activity	.88
20. Play something else with peer	.94
21. Replace, repair, or find toy	.96
22. Take responsibility for toy loss or damage	.90
23. Take initiative to enter group	.83
24. Trick, sneak, bribe	.85
25. Wait and hover	.88

Table 2
Appropriate Strategy Categories for Story Types

Strategy	Object Conflict	Object Loss/Damage	Group Entry	Activity Conflict
#1	X	X	X	X
#2	X		X	X
#3	X	X	X	X
#4	X	X	X	X
#5	X			
#6	X			
#7				X
#8	X		X	X
#9	X	X	X	
#10	X	X		
#11	X		X	X
#12	X		X	X
#13	X		X	X
#14			X	
#15	X		X	X
#16	X	X	X	X
#17		X		
#18				X
#19				X
#20	X			X
#21		X		
#22		X		
#23			X	
#24	X	X	X	X
#25	X		X	

Table 3
Main Effects for Story Type

Strategy	Means			
	Object Conflict	Object Loss/Damage	Group Entry	Activity Conflict
#1	1.01_a	$.05_b$	$.14_c$	$.14_c$
#2	$.14_a$	----	$.05_b$	$.10_a$
#3	$.40_a$	$.30_b$	$.55_c$	$.13_d$
#4	$.05_a$	$.04_{ab}$	$.02_b$	$.01_c$
#8	$.12_a$	----	1.02_b	$.63_c$
#9	$.06_a$	$.00_b$	$.02_c$	----
#10	$.12_a$	$.01_b$	----	----
#11	$.36_a$	----	$.04_b$	$.91_c$
#12	$.79_a$	----	$.41_b$	$.10_c$
#13	$.06_a$	----	$.02_b$	$.60_c$
#15	$.34_a$	----	$.33_a$	$.20_b$
#16	1.14_a	$.25_b$	$.44_c$	$.36_c$
#20	$.01_a$	----	----	$.15_b$
#24	$.54_a$	$.40_b$	$.10_c$	$.30_b$
#25	$.58_a$	----	$.42_b$	----

Total	7.40_a	6.54_b	6.04_c	6.02_c

Note: In all cases, $p < .005$.
Note: Means with different subscripts differ significantly.
Note: Strategies that are appropriate for only one story type are not included.
Note: Dashes indicate strategy categories that are not appropriate for a particular story type.

Figure 1
Aggress Physically or Threaten to Do So

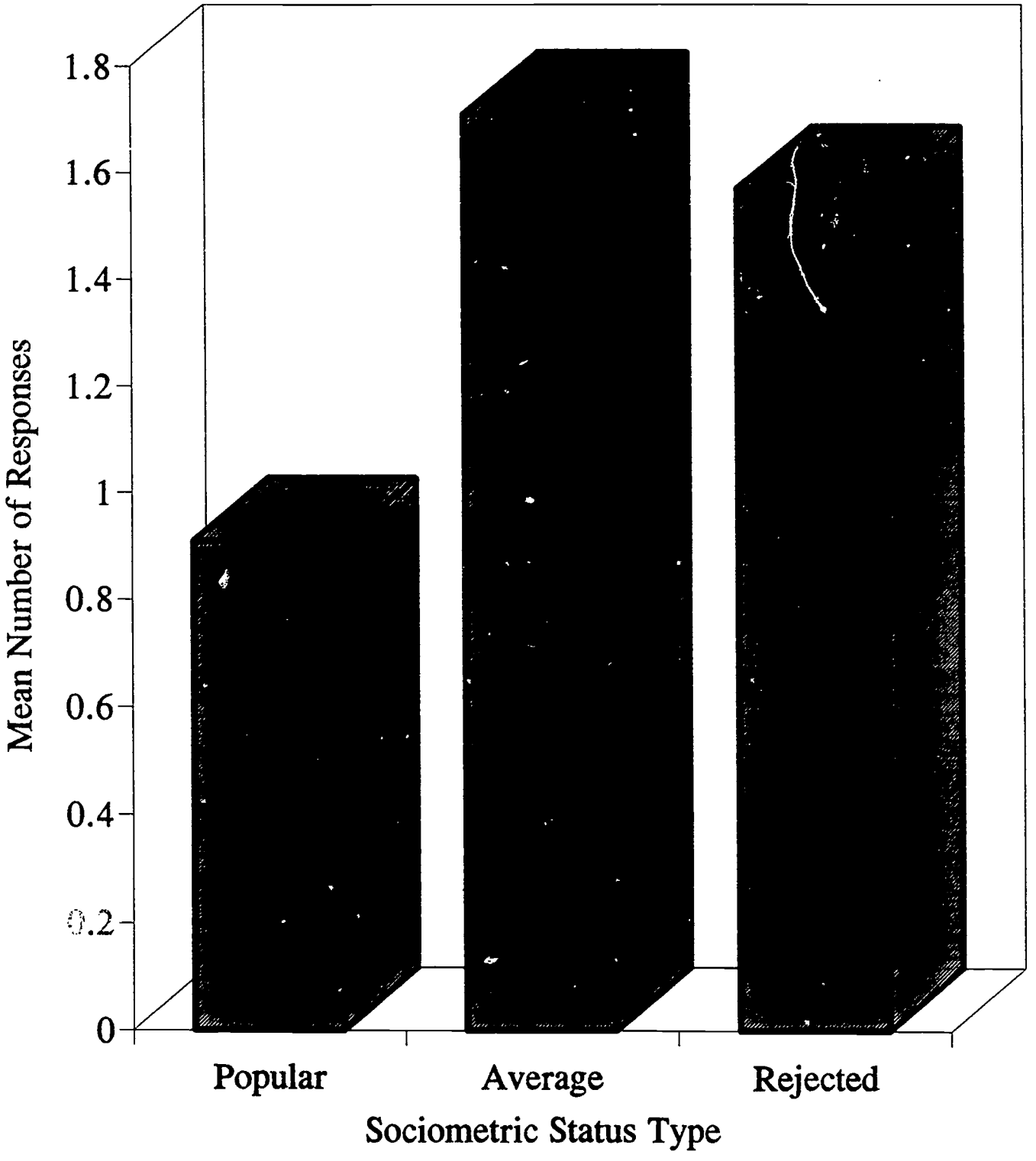

Figure 2
Behave in a Prosocial but Unrealistic Manner

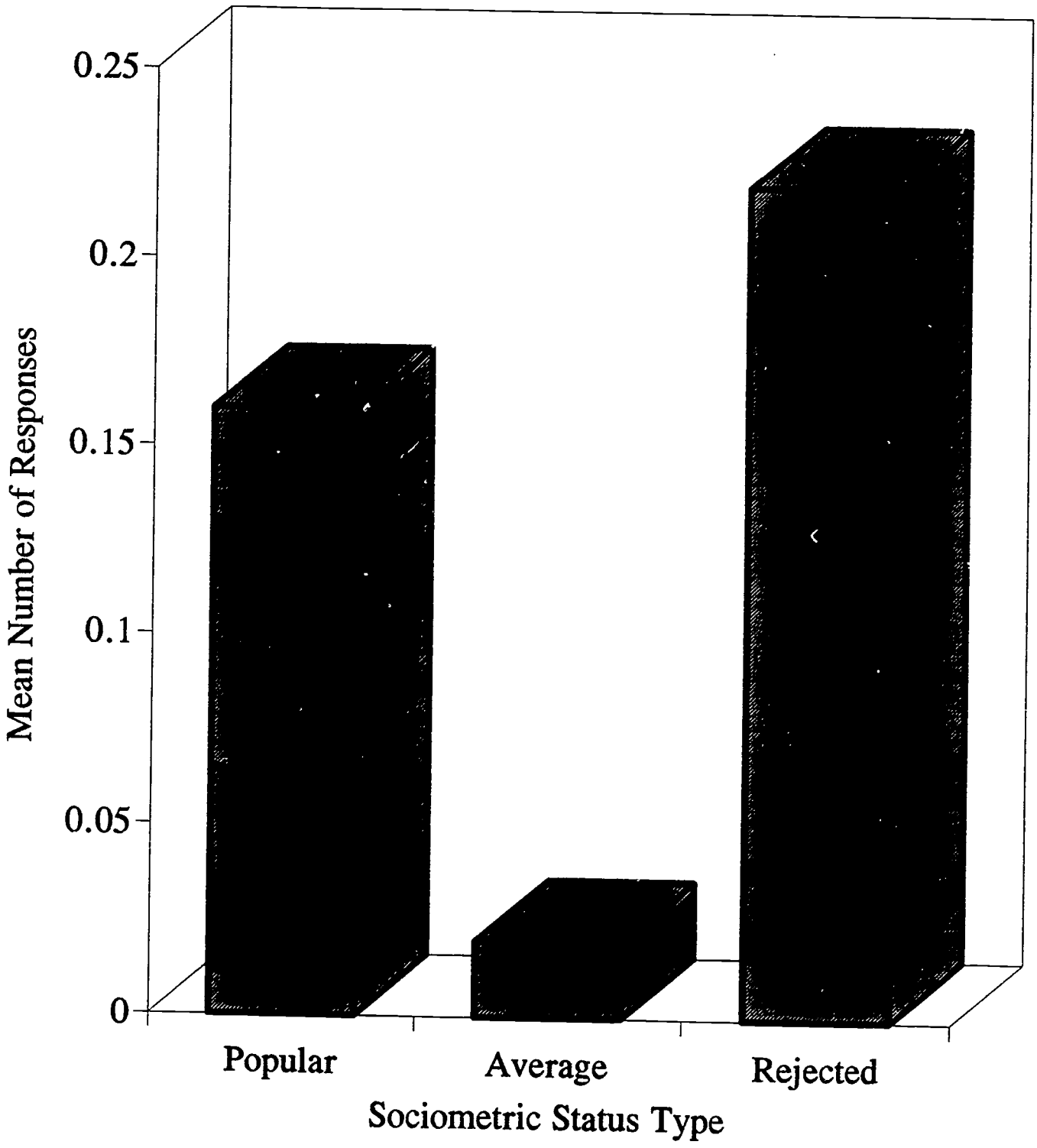

Figure 3
Compromise, Take Turns, Negotiate

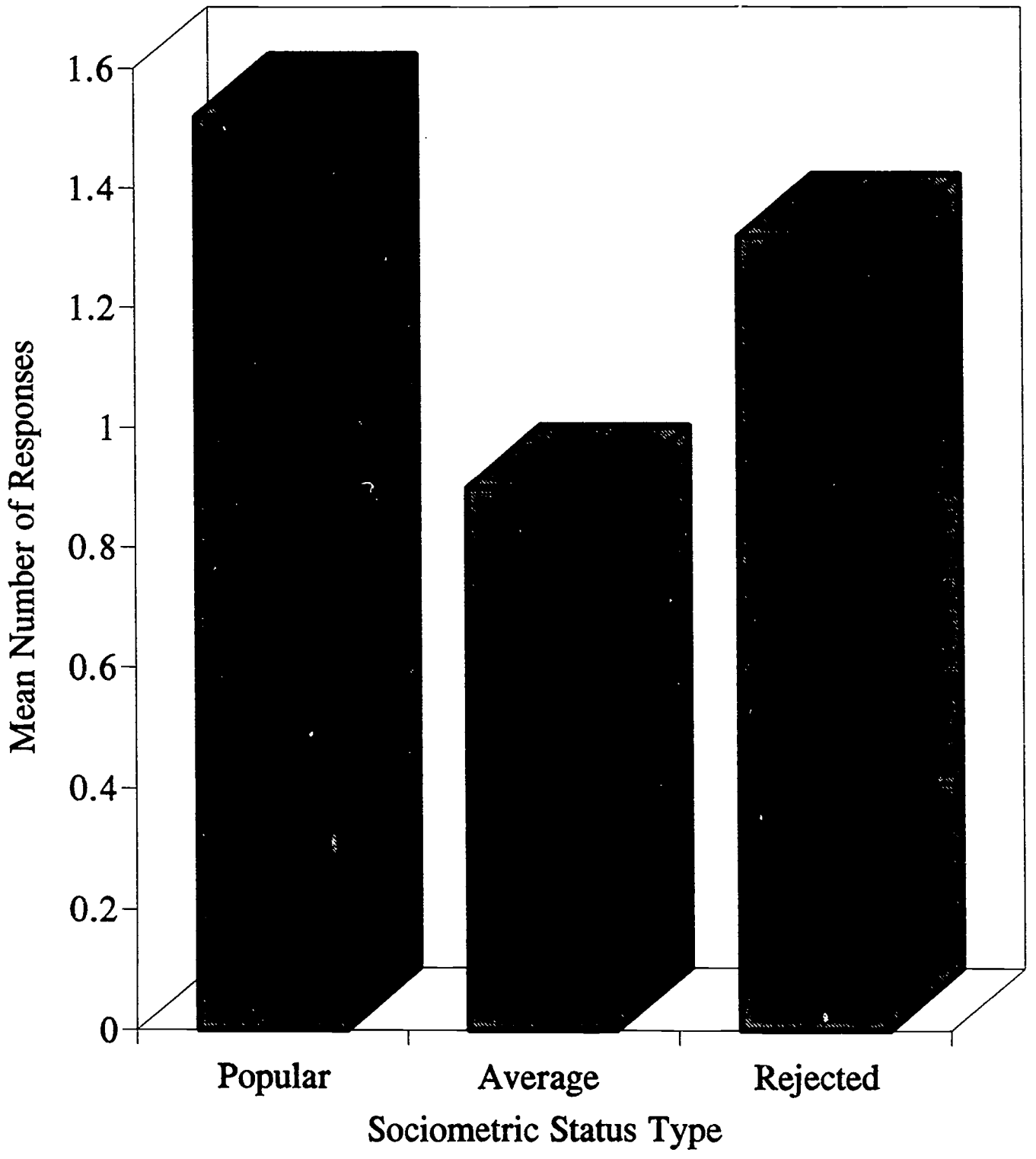

Figure 4
Play Something Else With Peer

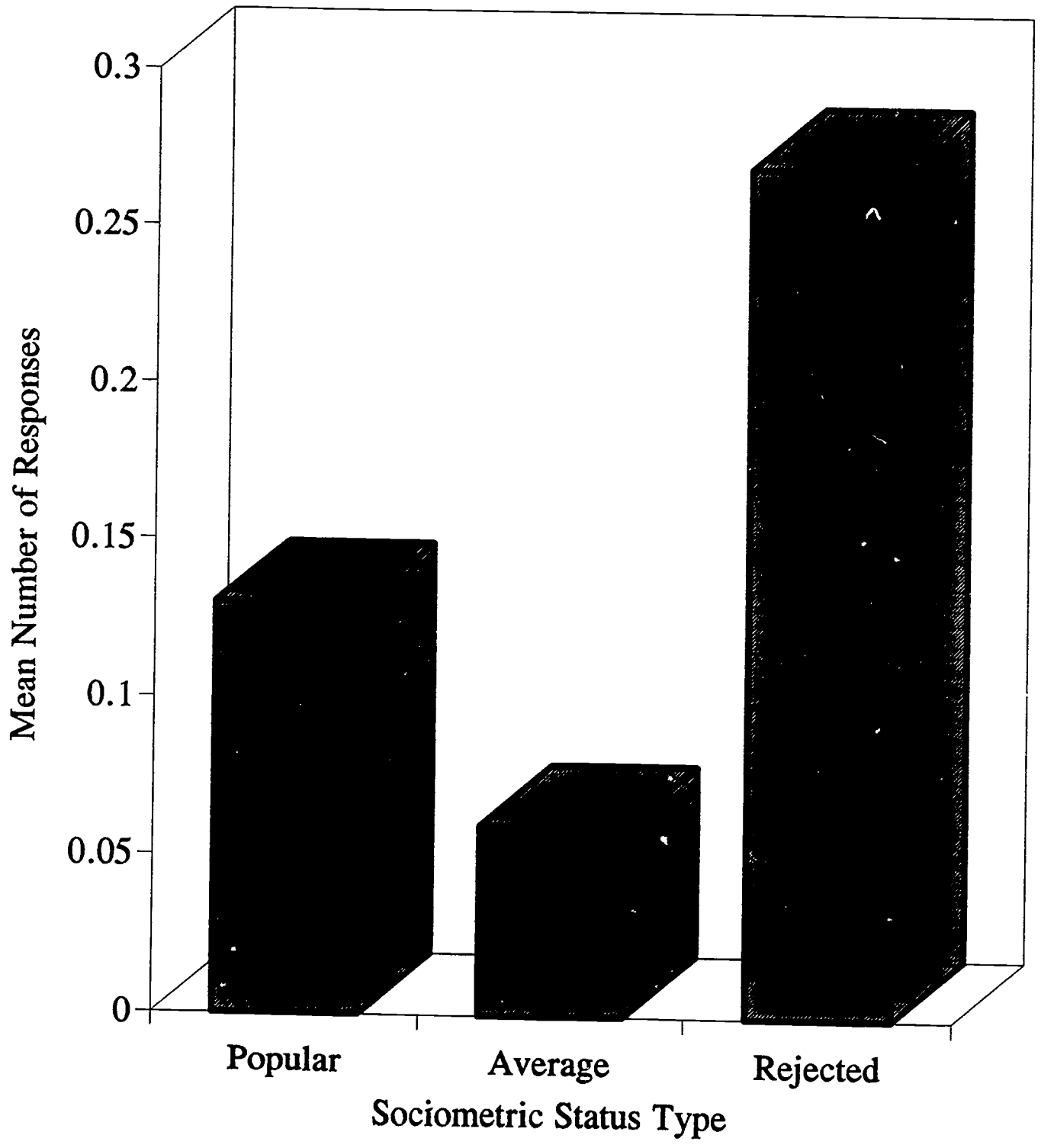

Figure 5
Wait and Hover

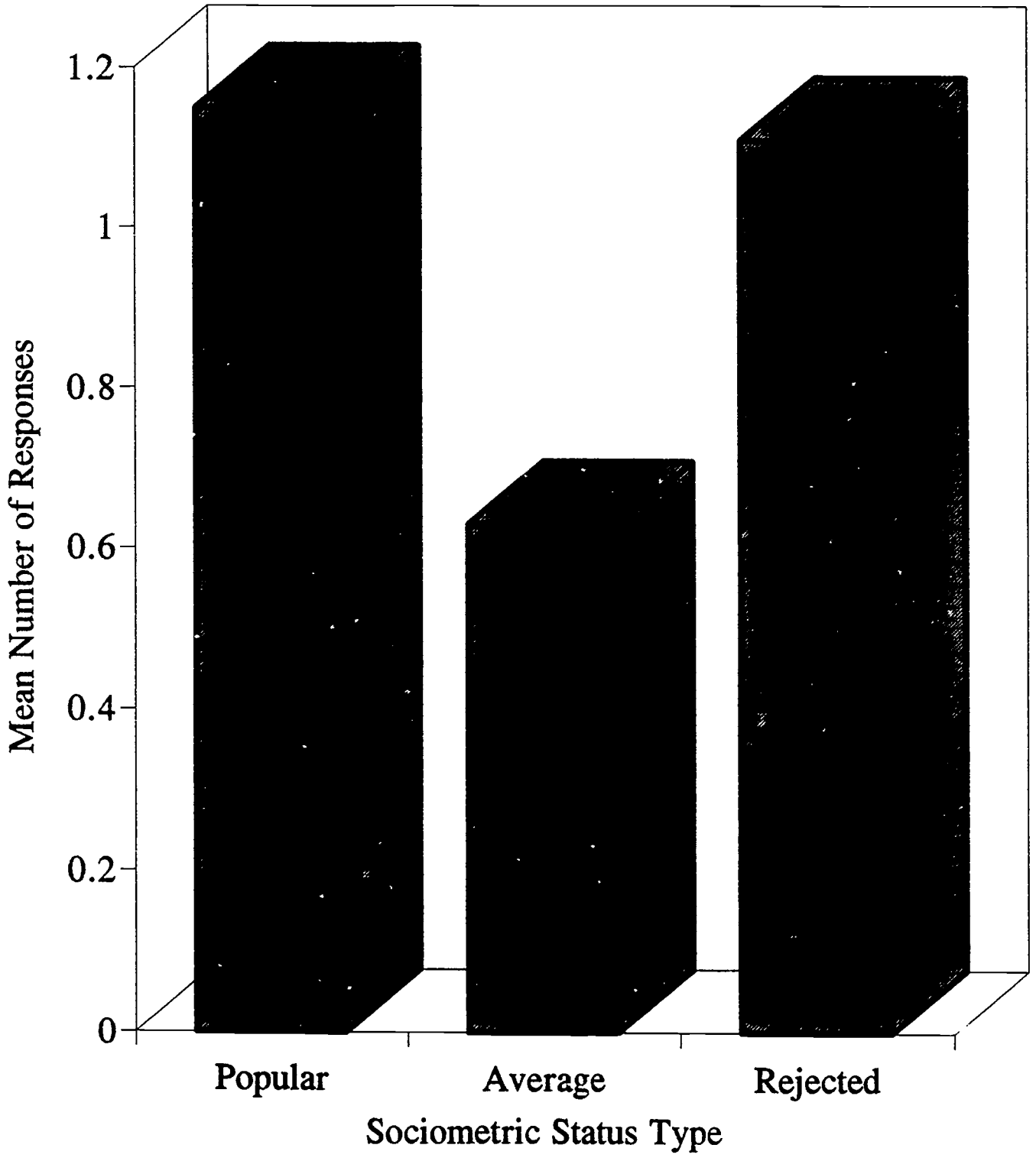

Figure 6
Disrupt Peer's Play by Taking Toy

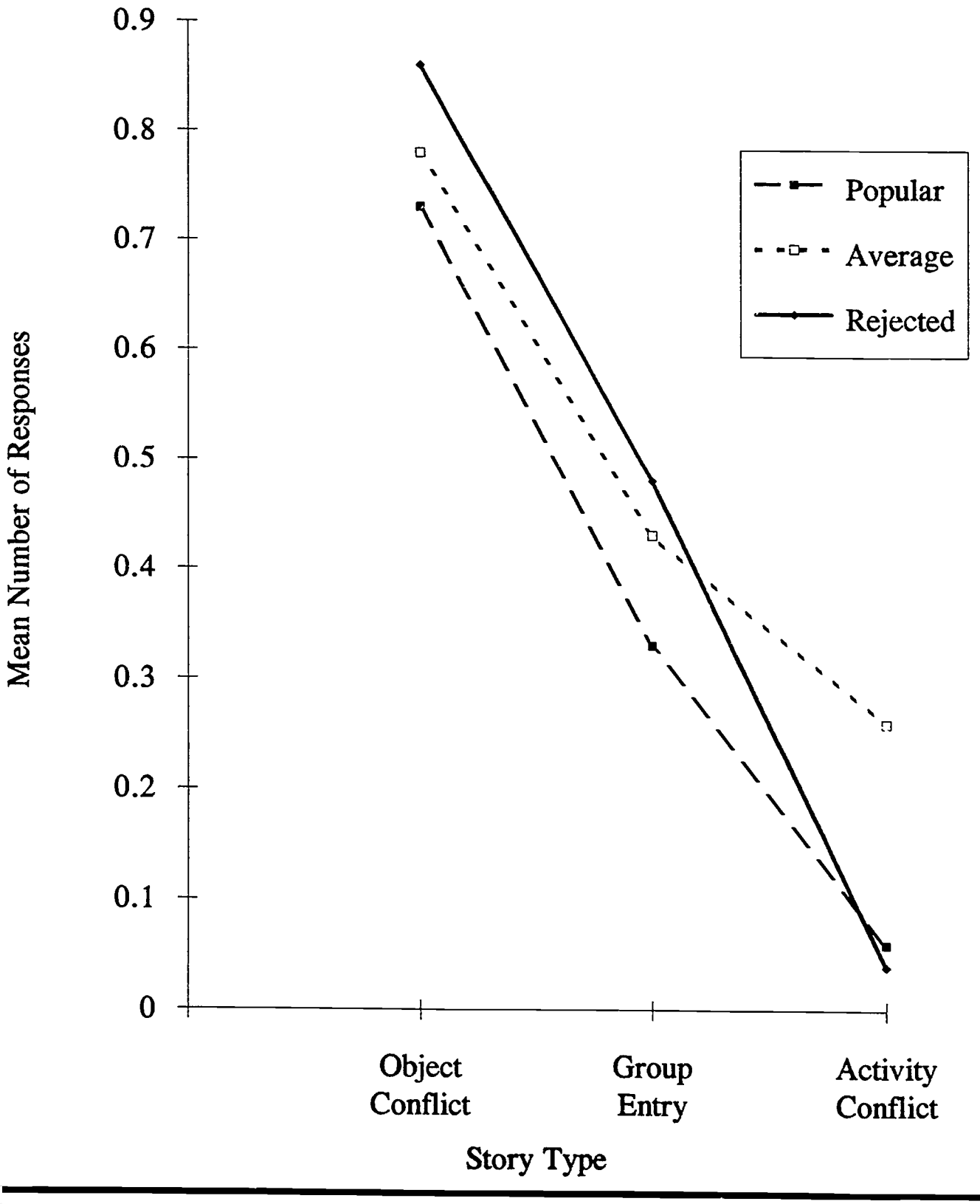

Figure 7
Initiate Play With Peer Without Explanation

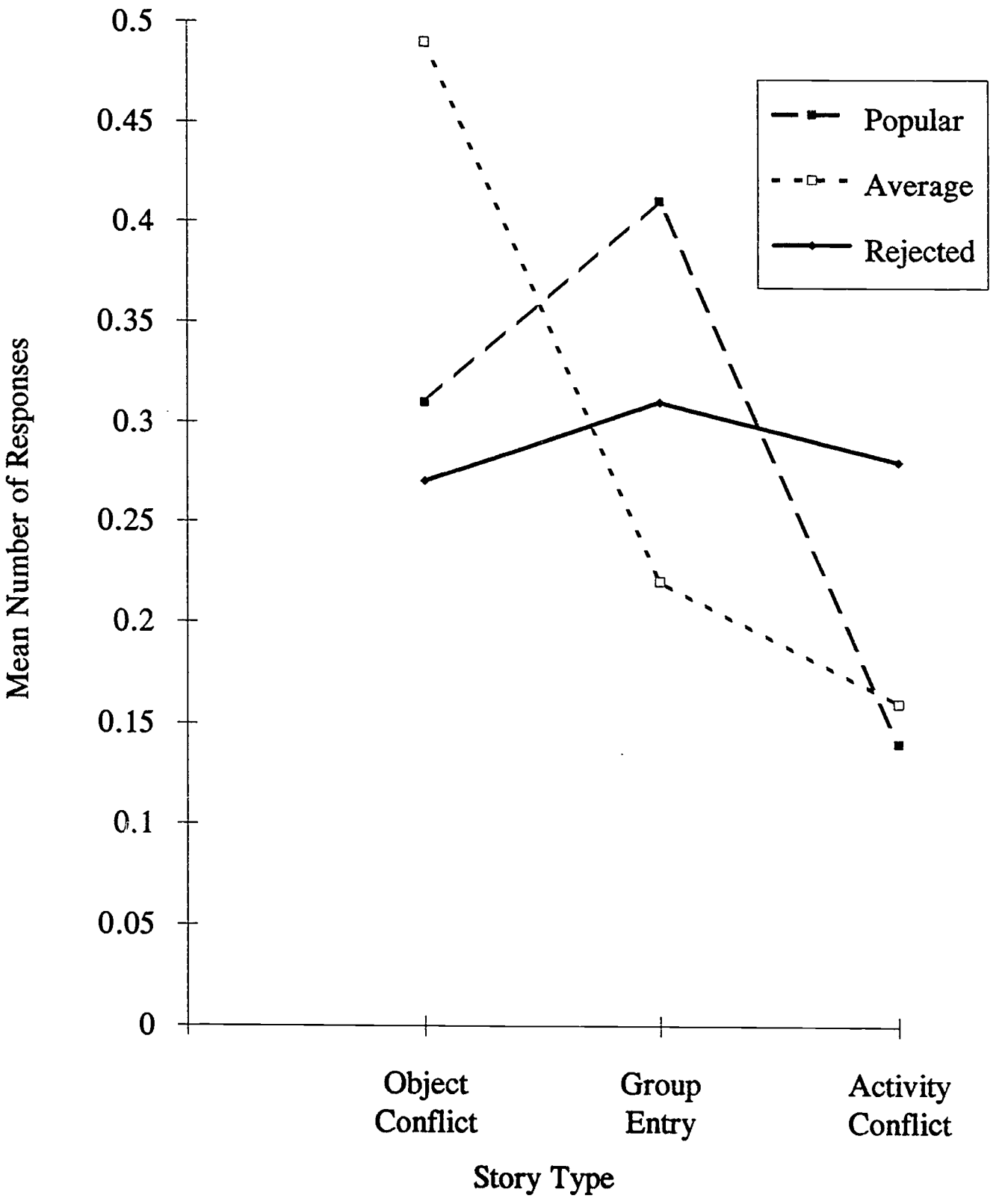

Figure 8
Leave or Play With Someone or Something Else