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AUTHOR Vespo, Jo Ellen  
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## ABSTRACT

Individuals first learn about conflict as children, within relationships with parents, siblings, and peers. Sibling and peer interaction may be contexts within which children learn how to manage conflict successfully with members of both the same and opposite sex. The goals of this study were to provide normative data on sibling and peer conflict during middle childhood and to explore linkages between sibling and peer relationships. Target children were observed separately with siblings and peers. Conversations were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded for conflict episodes, precipitating events, and final resolution strategies. In general, conflicts were verbal rather than physical in nature. Children most often simply dropped conflict and resumed harmonious interaction. Children had fewer, shorter, and less physical conflicts with peers than with siblings. Sibling configuration and relationship type affected final resolution strategy. Concession occurred more often in families with older sisters as opposed to older brothers. However, in peer interaction, concession occurred more often with children from families with younger brothers rather than younger sisters. Inspection of the data showed that choice of resolution strategy may be related to success of the strategy within a particular relationship. (Contains 13 references.) (Author/EV)

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**The Nature of Sibling Conflict During Middle Childhood****Jo Ellen Vespo****Utica College of Syracuse University****Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, April, 1997**

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**Abstract**

The goals of this study were to: provide normative data on sibling and peer conflict during middle childhood and explore linkages between sibling and peer relationships. Target children were observed separately with siblings and peers. Conversations were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded for conflict episodes, precipitating events, and final resolution strategies. In general, conflicts were verbal rather than physical in nature. Children most often simply dropped conflict and resumed harmonious interaction. Children had fewer, shorter, and less physical conflicts with peers than siblings. Sibling configuration and relationship type affected final resolution strategy. Concession occurred more often in families with older sisters as opposed to older brothers. However, in peer interaction, concession occurred more often with children from families with younger brothers rather than younger sisters. Inspection of the data shows that choice of resolution strategy may be related to success of the strategy within a particular relationship. Moves within conflicts will be reviewed next for management strategies throughout conflict.

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## Introduction

Developmental psychologists have noted a need for data on social development during middle childhood (Hartup & Laursen, 1993; Kraut, 1994). In addition, it has been argued that researchers must assess the mutual influences of components of children's social networks on social development (Ladd, 1991; Salzinger et al., 1988). Researchers have also been challenged to study social development within the natural social context (Corsaro, 1985). Conflict is inherent in any close relationship. How conflict is resolved can make or break a relationship. Indeed, research has shown that the best predictor of marital success is the ability to manage conflict (Notarius & Markman, 1993). Researchers have suggested consistent differences in the way males and females handle conflict. Females seek to resolve conflict through collaboration and explanation while males tend to avoid conflict, or use insistence and threats to separate as means to resolve conflict (Goodwin, 1990; Hartup & Laursen, 1993; Notarius & Markman, 1993; Sheldon, 1990). However, other research suggests that individuals modify their behavior depending on the sex of the partner (Vespo et al., 1995).

Individuals first learn about conflict as children, within relationships with parents, siblings, and peers. Sibling and peer interaction may be contexts within which children learn how to manage conflict successfully with members of both the same and opposite sex. Behavior in conflict may be affected by the configuration of the sibling dyad, the relationship type, and sex of both the target and the partner. The goals of this study were to: provide normative data on sibling and peer conflict during middle childhood and explore linkages between sibling and peer relationships.

## Method

### Subjects

Sibling dyads (N=27) and their peers (N=127) were identified through schools, before/after school programs and a parenting program. Permission for participation was granted by approximately 50% of the parents contacted. The sample was diverse in socioeconomic status (19% were single parents, 60% of which were unemployed; 55% of working parents were professionals with 45% being nonprofessionals), geographic region (26% urban, 41% suburban, 33% rural) and ethnicity (85% Caucasian, 15% mixed-race). The average ages of the younger and older siblings were, respectively, 7.16 (range 3.72-9.85) and 10.13 years (7.73-13.42). The dyad combinations were: 8 sister-sister, 5 brother-brother, 5 younger brother-older sister and 9 younger sister-older brother pairs.

### Procedure

Sibling dyads were observed interacting at home. A target child (N=24, average age =8.98 years) from each family was observed with his/her peers. The target was chosen based on availability of peers. Due to lack of parental consent it was not possible to obtain peer participation for three of the sibling dyads. Two children were observed at home with peers. All other children were observed during lunch/recess at school or free-play at the after school program. The average number of peers interacted with was 4.96 (range 1-8). Observations lasted about 1 hour ( $M=55.5$  minutes, range =36-60). The target wore a portable microphone so he/she could move freely while the observer audiotaped the conversations while keeping a running narrative of behavior. Audiotapes were transcribed by the observer and checked against an independent observer for any meaningful discrepancies on 11% of the transcripts (median agreement 83%). Agreement for other codes was checked on 25% of transcripts. Dialogue was segmented into speaking turns (median agreement 99%). (see Hartup et al. 1993 for similar coding and reliability procedures for transcripts and turns). Conflict episodes involving protest, opposition, disagreement, resistance, or retaliation were identified ( $kappa=.71$ ). The precipitating event, just prior to the initial protest, was coded as a descriptive verbalization (statements, questions), instrumental verbalization (commands, requests), or actions ( $kappa=.75$ ). The final resolution strategy was coded as drop (fails to pursue, changes topic), concede (agrees, complies, gives up object/position), or conciliatory (explains, apologizes, bargains) ( $kappa=.85$ ).

## Results

A series of 2(sex of older sibling) by 2(sex of younger sibling) by 2 (partner: sibling or peer) mixed-model ANOVAs with partner as the within-subjects factor was used to analyze the data. Chi-square analyses were used to analyze distributions across categories for precipitating events and resolution strategies. Although percentages are reported in the paper, arcsine transformations were used in the analyses.

1. **Rate and length.** Conflicts with siblings were more frequent (rate = .35 vs. .21 per minute,  $F(1,20)=14.93$ ,  $p=.001$ ) and longer (7.28 vs. 4.13 turns,  $F(1,20)=19.15$ ,  $p=.001$ ) than with peers. Between siblings, those with younger brothers had more conflicts (.40 per minute) than those with younger sisters (.30),  $F(1,20)=4.20$ ,  $p=.051$ .
2. **Precipitating Events.** For interaction with peers, only precipitating events made by the target were included. Whether with siblings ( $\chi^2(2)=61.69$ ,  $p<.001$ ) or peers ( $\chi^2(3)=34.44$ ,  $p<.001$ ) children were most likely to oppose descriptive verbalizations. (see Table 1) For descriptive verbalizations, a main effect for sex of older ( $F(1,17)=6.35$ ,  $p=.021$ ) was qualified by an interaction with partner ( $F(1,17)=9.65$ ,  $p=.006$ ). In peer interaction, conflicts involving children from families with older brothers as opposed to older sisters were more likely to begin conflict with descriptive verbalizations (73% vs. 37%). For instrumental verbalizations, a main effect for sex of older sibling ( $F(1,17)=6.13$ ,  $p=.002$ ) was qualified by an interaction with partner ( $F(1,17)=7.38$ ,  $p=.014$ ). In peer interaction, children from families with older sisters as opposed to older brothers were more likely to begin conflict with instrumental verbalizations (45% vs. 22%). A main effect for younger sibling ( $F(1,17)=7.23$ ,  $p=.014$ ) was qualified by an interaction with partner ( $F(1,17)=5.87$ ,  $p=.025$ ). In peer interaction, children from families with younger brothers as opposed to younger sisters were more likely to begin conflicts with instrumental verbalizations (40% vs. 28%). A main effect of partner on action showed that children were more likely to oppose actions of siblings than peers (24% vs. 10%,  $F(1,17)=12.90$ ,  $p=.002$ ). A three-way interaction showed that when interacting with siblings, children in sister-sister pairs were least likely to oppose physical actions, but when with peers, they were most likely to oppose actions ( $F(1,17)=3.54$ ,  $p=.07$ ). (see Table 2)
3. **Final Resolution Strategy.** Whether with siblings ( $\chi^2(2)=246.11$ ,  $p<.001$ ) or peers ( $\chi^2(2)=102.23$ ,  $p<.001$ ) children were most likely to drop conflict (see Table 3). In general, dyads with older sisters as opposed to older brothers were less likely to drop conflict (52% vs. 71%,  $F(1,219)=5.24$ ,  $p=.032$ ) with someone being more likely to concede (31% vs. 18%,  $F(1,19)=3.70$ ,  $p=.066$ ). In peer interaction, children from families with younger brothers as opposed to younger sisters were less likely to drop conflict (49% vs. 76%,  $F(1,19)=9.28$ ,  $p=.006$ ) with someone being more likely to concede (31% vs. 12%,  $F(1,19)=5.77$ ,  $p=.025$ ). Inspection of the data shows that children from families with younger brothers were more successful in getting peer partners to concede than children from families with younger sisters (in 50% vs. 35% of conflicts).

## Discussion

Despite differences in relationship type, sibling configuration, and background of the children some general findings regarding conflict during middle childhood emerge. Most interaction was harmonious with conflicts being brief in duration. As Shantz (1987) suggested, most conflict was verbal as opposed to physical in nature. Statements describing activities were more often opposed than attempts to influence a partner, such as commands or requests. Conflicts simply were dropped and harmonious interaction resumed.

However, relationship type also affected conflict behavior. As others have suggested (Vandell & Bailey, 1992) conflict was more intense, in terms of being more frequent, longer, and more physical with siblings than peers. Perhaps when children have no option to leave a relationship conflict occurs more frequently. Indeed, the two children who were observed at home with their peers had higher rates of conflicts with the peers than most other children.

Conflict was also affected by an interaction between sex of the target and relationship type. Different patterns of final resolution strategies were found for sibling and peer interaction depending on sibling configuration. Use of a strategy may be associated with its success within a particular relationship. To further delineate the effects of sibling configuration, relationship type, and sex of child on conflict behavior the conflicts will be reviewed for management strategies throughout the conflict.

Some caution may be needed in interpreting the results due to the small sample size. Because of difficulty obtaining parental permission it was not possible to obtain a larger sample. The sample is, however, comparable in size to samples used in other studies of sibling dyads (see Kramer & Gottman, 1992). Also, the diversity of the sample is a strength of the study. The findings are robust across children from many backgrounds, lending support to the generalizability of the findings.

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**Table 1**  
**Percentage of Precipitating Events in Each Category**

Relationship	Category		
	Desc. Verb.	Instrumental Verb.	Action
Sibling	48	28	24
Peer	59	31	10

Descriptive verbalization is the most frequent category.

Children oppose more physical actions in sibling than peer interaction.

**Table 2**  
**Percentage of Action Precipitating Events**

Sibling Pair	Interaction With:	
	Siblings	Peers
YSOS	20	24
YSOB	29	4
YBOS	32	0
YBOB	21	5

Children from YSOS pairs remain consistent in opposition to actions across relationships, all other groups oppose more physical actions with siblings than peers.

YSOS - sister-sister; YSOB - younger sister-older brother

YBOS - younger brother-older sister; YBOB - brother- brother

Table 3

Percentage of Resolution Strategies in Each Category

Relationship	Category		
	Drop	Concede	Conciliatory
Sibling	65	27	8
Peer	68	21	11

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Children are most likely to drop conflict.





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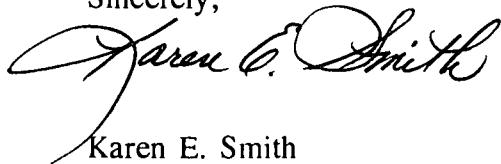
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