Preschoolers' Differential Conflict Behavior with Friends and Acquaintances

Jo Ellen Vespo & Marlene Caplan

To cite this article: Jo Ellen Vespo & Marlene Caplan (1993) Preschoolers' Differential Conflict Behavior with Friends and Acquaintances, Early Education and Development, 4:1, 45-53, DOI: 10.1207/s15566935eed0401_4

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15566935eed0401_4

Published online: 08 Jun 2010.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 21

View related articles

Citing articles: 9
Preschoolers' Differential Conflict Behavior with Friends and Acquaintances

Jo Ellen Vespo  
*Utica College of Syracuse University*

Marlene Caplan  
*University of London*

This study examined the nature of social conflict occurring spontaneously during children's play. Preschoolers' (mean age = 53.9 months) differential conflict behavior with their friends and acquaintances was analyzed by use of relationship status as a within-subjects factor. Children behaved differently when interacting with their friends than they did with acquaintances. Conciliatory gestures (e.g., compromise, apology) were used more often with friends than with acquaintances. Conciliatory gestures were more likely than yields to lead to peaceful outcomes. However, yields were used most often by the children. Yet, no matter what resolution strategy was used, friends were more likely to remain together after conflict than acquaintances were. Because friendships are important to them, children must learn ways to maintain interaction despite conflict. Conflict resolution strategies among peers begin to emerge in the preschool years, first within friendly relationships. It is suggested that rather than using direct intervention, teachers should indirectly facilitate the development of such strategies.

During the preschool years emerging friendships are characterized by increased time spent together, cooperation, and reciprocity (Hartup, Laursen, Stewart, & Eastenson, 1988). Friendship provides a socialization context within which concepts and behaviors of cooperation, mutual respect, and interpersonal sensitivity develop (Piaget, 1965; Sullivan, 1953; Youniss, 1980). However, sociologists have argued that conflict is also part of any close relationship (Coser, 1956), and Gottman (1983) has documented that young children’s friendships are characterized by disagreement as well as agreement. Young children report that disagreements are an obstacle to friendship (see Hartup, 1988) and that separation is distressing to friends (Hartup, 1983); thus, friends must learn to manage their conflicts if the relationship is to survive. Sociologists argue that conflict has constructive and positive functions and that, if managed successfully, conflict can enhance unity within the relationship rather than lead to separation (see Coser, 1956).

This study was supported by a Sigma Xi Scientific Research Grant. We want to thank the children, parents, and teachers of the Early Childhood Learning Center and the State University of New York Preschool in Long Island, New York, for their cooperation.

Reprint requests should be sent to Jo Ellen Vespo at Utica College of Syracuse University, Division of Behavioral Studies, Burrstone Road, Utica, NY 13502.
Shantz (1987) argued that conflicts are social problems for children, and she challenged developmental psychologists to discover the social learning that occurs within conflict. Because conflicts are likely to occur within them, friendships are a good context within which to study conflict. Shantz also speculated that conflicts between pairs of friends and pairs of acquaintances are qualitatively different. Resolution strategies may affect the likelihood of remaining together after conflict. Therefore, friends and acquaintances may use different strategies. Shantz noted the lack of studies exploring such qualitative differences.

Sackin and Thelen (1984) systematically studied the nature of resolution strategies used by preschoolers and their effects on interaction. They defined two major types of resolution strategies. Subordinate strategies included behaviors such as crying, withdrawing from the activity, and yielding one’s object or position. Conciliatory gestures included cooperative propositions, apologies, symbolic offers, and sharing of objects. Although children most often used subordinate strategies, they were more likely to continue interacting following conciliatory gestures (Sackin & Thelen, 1984). Based on this evidence we hypothesized that friends are more likely than acquaintances to use conciliatory gestures because of their greater success in leading to peaceful outcomes.

One study investigated qualitative differences between conflicts of friends and conflicts of acquaintances (Hartup et al., 1988), but did not directly test the proposed hypothesis. Hartup et al. observed three groups of children: mutual friends, unilateral associates, and neutral associates. As part of their study, four types of resolution strategies were defined: standing firm (insisting on the original goal), negotiation (modifying one’s position or suggesting an alternative), disengagement (mutual turning away), and intervention by a third party. The strategies used most and least often by all groups were standing firm and negotiation, respectively. Mutual friends used disengagement more frequently than neutral associates did. A review of the data shows that although used infrequently, mutual friends used negotiation on more occasions than unilateral or neutral associates did. It was also found that no matter what strategy was used, mutual friends were more likely to continue interacting following conflict than any other group. Thus, qualitative differences in resolution strategies were found. However, the relationship context also affected the outcome.

The present study was designed to directly test the hypothesis that friends are more likely than acquaintances to use conciliatory gestures in resolving conflict. We used categories similar in operational definition to those used by Sackin and Thelen (1984): conciliatory gestures (negotiation or cooperative proposition, apology, offer of compensation or exchange, and affectionate behavior) and yielding (explicit and/or implicit submission, such as giving up a toy or one’s physical position, agreeing with the partner, moving away, ceasing to protest, and changing topics). Consistent with Sackin and Thelen (1984) we expected yields to be used more often than conciliatory gestures. However, we also expected children to be more likely to remain together following concilia-
Preschoolers' Conflicts

...tory gestures than following yields. Finally, because of the salience of the relationship, as Hartup et al. (1988) found, we expected friends to be more likely than acquaintances to remain together following conflict.

Past research comparing friends with acquaintances has been subject to two major criticisms. First, relationship status is often confounded with familiarity. For example, some studies compare friends with newly acquainted peers. Thus the friends have known each other for a longer period of time than the acquaintances have. As a result, familiarity may account for differences found. Second, between-subjects designs confound relationship status with social competence (Berndt, 1987; Gottman, 1983). Since socially competent children are more likely to have friends (Gottman, 1983), the pool of acquaintances may consist of children who lack competent social skills. In this case social competence, as opposed to the nature of the relationship, may account for differences found.

We overcame these problems in the following ways. First, we studied relationships in preschool classrooms that had been meeting regularly for at least 4 months. Thus the children were familiar with one another. Second, we used relationship status as a within-subjects factor to examine each child's behavior with his or her friends and acquaintances. Thus the competence of the target child was controlled across groups. This design makes our study different from that of Hartup et al. (1988).

Method

Design

The data presented in this study are part of a larger study concerning social interactions of best friends, associates, and acquaintances. The previous study used a within-subjects design to compare a child's behavior with a best friend, associates, and acquaintances on measures of interaction, conflict (nonharmonious interaction), fantasy play, social comparison, and self-disclosure. A team of eight primary coders, blind to the hypotheses and the relationship status of the children, coded the dependent variables. Details of the original procedures for selecting targets and observing and coding behaviors are provided elsewhere (Vespo, 1986, 1991); therefore, these procedures will be described briefly below. For the present study the identified conflicts were reexamined for resolution strategies and outcomes. The within-subjects factor comparing a child's behavior across relationship levels was maintained in the present study.

Subjects

Observations took place in seven classrooms in two different preschools (enrollment = 126). The size of classes ranged from 14 to 22 children, with a mean of 17.9. The preschools were in predominantly white, middle class neighborhoods. The average age of the children was 53.9 months. The classes had been meeting regularly for 4 months prior to the beginning of observation.

As recommended by developmental psychologists, the relationship status
of the children was determined through convergent methods of identification (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariépy, 1988; Hartup et al., 1988). Therefore, parents, teachers, and children were interviewed independently concerning children’s relationships. For the children, a picture sociometric technique was used (McCandless & Marshall, 1957). Best-friend dyads were selected using the following criteria: (a) the children in the dyad reciprocally chose each other on the sociometric; and (b) the teacher indicated that the children in the dyad were friends; and (c) the parents of at least one of the children in the dyad indicated that the children were friends. Twenty-two best-friend dyads were identified by this method. Then, for each dyad identified, a target child was chosen randomly. For this target child the sociometric record was reviewed, and all those classmates chosen by, or who chose the target were defined as the target child’s associates. All other classmates were defined as the target child’s acquaintances.

Nine of the targets were female and 13 were male. Each target child had one best friend and an average of 4.1 associates and 13.6 acquaintances in the class. Two cross-gender best-friend pairs were identified. The majority of the associates (81.1%) and acquaintances (77.9%) were of the same gender as the target. There was a mean of 3.1 target children per class (range = 1-5).

Procedure

Observations. Observations took place in each classroom during the natural, ongoing interactions occurring in free play. Order of observation across targets within a classroom was determined randomly. Each target child was observed for three separate 5-minute periods per day, once a week, for 6 weeks, resulting in 90 minutes of observation per target. Observations were made using a specially modified, portable video camera that allowed for unobtrusive observation. A mirror was fitted over the lens, so that the camera could be pointed away from the target, while the camera person stood next to the target. The target’s interactions were reflected onto the mirror, and the mirror images were recorded by the camera. There was also a hidden microphone (see Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1971, for a complete description). The method indeed proved to be unobtrusive. Children continued to play near the camera person without interruption. Each observation was divided into 15-second intervals and within these intervals videotapes were transcribed for participants in the interaction, verbatim conversations of the participants, and a description of the ongoing activity.

Identifying conflicts. A conflict was determined to be in progress when one child objected to, resisted, or retaliated against an action or verbalization by another child (Hay, 1984). A conflict endured from the protested event to the last protest in a sequence of protests involving the same issue, followed by two successive 15-second intervals in which protests did not occur (or until the observation period ended, whichever came first). This 30-second criterion is consistent with that used by Hay and Ross (1982). In cases where the conflicts identified involved more than two children, the conflict was defined as includ-
Preschoolers' Conflicts

ing the target and the first child who either opposed the target or engaged in an action opposed by the target (Hartup et al., 1988). Coder reliability was checked against a secondary coder on 25% of the transcripts, chosen randomly. The kappa coefficient for coder reliability was .79.

Resolution strategies and outcomes. For the present study two coders checked the conflicts for resolution strategies and outcomes. They checked coder reliability against each other on 25% of the transcripts, chosen randomly. The resolution strategy was defined by reviewing the sequence of moves from the last protest through the interval immediately following the last protest. A global assessment was made according to two broad categories. Conciliatory gestures included attempts to make amends or appease the other partner, such as negotiation or cooperative propositions, an apology, an offer of compensation or exchange, and affectionate behavior. Yielding included explicit and implicit submission, such as giving up a toy or one's physical position, agreeing with the partner, moving away, ceasing to protest, and changing topics (Sackin & Thelen, 1984). The kappa coefficient for coder reliability was .73.

The outcome was defined by examining the interaction state of the participants during the two successive 15-second intervals following the interval in which the resolution occurred. This time criterion corresponds to the criterion used by Sackin and Thelen (1984). In these intervals it was determined whether the children involved in the conflict were together (interaction at any time during this period) or separate (no interaction during this period). Interaction included any of the following: talking to partner, engaged listening, cooperative activities, and physical interaction (Vespo, 1986, 1991). The kappa coefficient for coder reliability was .88.

Results

Preliminary analyses revealed no differences in patterns for best friends and associates; therefore, best friends and associates were collapsed into one category of associates. The analyses discussed below are 2 (relationship status: associates versus acquaintances) by 2 (gender of target) mixed designs, with relationship status as the within-subjects factor. Gender of target was maintained as a factor because preliminary analyses revealed that gender affected some aspects of conflict. For the qualitative measures (resolution, outcome) data were transformed to percentages to control for base rates and to make meaningful comparisons across groups. Percentages are reported in the paper. However, arcsine transformations were conducted before all analyses were performed. The arcsine transformation is recommended for percentages to create more homogeneous variance across groups (Alder & Roessler, 1972).

Frequency, Duration, and Rate of Conflict

A total of 585 conflicts were reported. On the average males had 18.5 conflicts with associates and 12.0 with acquaintances. Females had an average of 13.6 conflicts with associates and 7.4 with acquaintances. An ANOVA re-
revealed a main effect for relationship status, \( F(1,20) = 12.08, p < .01 \). More conflicts occurred when children were with their associates \( (M = 16.4) \) than with their acquaintances \( (M = 10.1) \). However, an ANOVA performed on adjusted rate of conflict (the number of conflicts per 15-second interval spent together), which controls for amount of time spent together, showed no differences between the groups. The average rate of conflict was .11 per interval together. The mean duration of conflict for the sample was 1.69 intervals (i.e., on average, less than 25 seconds). Again, an ANOVA revealed no differences in mean duration between the groups. Thus, rate and duration of conflict were equal for associates and acquaintances, indicating that associates had more conflicts due to the greater amount of time spent together.

Resolution Strategies and Outcomes

Coders were able to determine resolutions and outcomes for 83.2% and 81.2% of the conflicts, respectively, which are included in the following analyses. Resolutions and outcomes for the other conflicts could not be determined because a third party intervened or the observation period ended before the conflict was resolved.

The distribution of conciliatory gestures and yields is shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Status*</th>
<th>Associates</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Acquaintances</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Males**</td>
<td>Females**</td>
<td>Males**</td>
<td>Females**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conciliatory gestures</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yield</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>89.4</td>
<td>96.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that, in general, children most often used yields to resolve conflicts. The ANOVA on conciliatory gestures revealed main effects for relationship status, \( F(1,20) = 5.77, p < .02 \) and gender, \( F(1,20) = 6.28, p < .05 \). Conciliatory gestures were more likely to occur in conflicts with associates \( (M = 17.4\%) \) than in conflicts with acquaintances \( (M = 8.1\%) \). These conflicts were further reviewed to determine who initiated the conciliatory gesture, the target or the partner. Separate ANOVAs were performed for target and partner, neither of which had significant effects. Thus, within the context of friendly relations both partners contributed to the use of conciliatory gestures. It was also found that conciliatory gestures were more likely to occur in conflicts with male targets \( (M = 16.4\%) \) than in conflicts with females \( (M = 7.4\%) \).

Overall, children continued to interact after the resolution of 61.1% of the conflicts. Collapsing across all children, as expected, a together outcome was more likely following a conciliatory gesture \( (90.1\%) \) than following a yield \( (60.0\%) , \chi^2(1) = 27.45, p < .001 \). However, the ANOVA revealed a main effect of relationship status on outcome, \( F(1,20) = 4.59, p < .05 \). Children were more likely
to continue interacting after conflicts with their associates ($M = 74.7\%$) than after conflicts with their acquaintances ($M = 49.2\%$).

**Discussion**

This study shows that when resolving conflicts preschoolers behaved differently with friends than with acquaintances. Children were more likely to use conciliatory gestures with friends than they were with acquaintances. Consistent with Sackin and Thelen (1984), we found that conciliatory gestures were more likely to lead to peaceful outcomes than yields were. Thus, when with friends, children acted in ways to maximize the likelihood that the relationship would continue. The use of a within-subjects design allowed us to eliminate confounding factors of familiarity and competence in interpreting the data. Clearly, children differentiated their behavior across partners.

Although conciliatory gestures were used more often with friends than with acquaintances, the overwhelming majority of conflicts were resolved using yields. This finding is consistent with Sackin and Thelen’s (1984) finding that preschoolers most often use subordinate gestures in resolving conflicts. Our results are not directly comparable to Hartup et al.’s (1988) findings, however, in that their category of disengagement included distractions as well as mutual turning away. We did not analyze any conflicts ended through distraction (such as time to go to snack) because we felt that some outside agent was involved, interfering with the resolution reached by the two children. However, moving away was included in our definition of yielding. If Hartup et al.’s categories of standing firm (if one partner stands firm the other must eventually yield or turn away) and disengagement are combined, then our findings are similar: Yielding is most often used by the children, but when negotiation occurs it occurs more often between friends than between acquaintances.

If conciliatory gestures lead to peaceful outcomes, then why weren’t most of the conflicts between friends resolved by conciliatory gestures? Several speculations can be raised. First, friendship serves as a context within which newly emerging skills are practiced and refined (Piaget, 1965; Sullivan, 1953; Youniss, 1980). Conciliatory gestures are sophisticated strategies requiring advanced social skills, such as social-perspective taking and reaching mutual agreement (Shantz, 1987). Sackin and Thelen’s (1984) findings suggest that preschoolers are just beginning to develop these conciliatory strategies. Thus, they don’t occur often, but when they do occur they occur in friendships, where the children are challenged to maintain interaction despite conflict.

Second, it is important to consider the developmental phase of the relationship itself. Gottman (1983) found disagreement and conflict to be particularly threatening in the early phases of a developing relationship. Perhaps it is at this time that conciliatory gestures are most effective in maintaining interaction. A longitudinal study of conflict resolution in developing relationships would shed light on this issue. As time goes on the partners may become more tolerant of conflict. In both our study and Hartup et al.’s (1988) the children had
known each other for several months prior to observation. In these established relationships children were highly likely to continue interacting with friends following conflict, no matter what resolution strategy was used. Thus, the relationship itself influences the outcome of conflict. Perhaps, as Hay (1984) found, these young children are unlikely to hold grudges, especially when they are emotionally invested in the relationship.

One gender difference emerged in this study. Why conciliatory gestures were used more often among males than among females is unclear. Although the difference was not statistically significant, inspection of the data shows that males were involved in more conflicts than females were. Perhaps males had more opportunity to practice conciliatory gestures. To date, very little is known about gender differences in conflict (Hay, 1984; Shantz, 1987). Hartup et al. (1988) did not find any gender differences in their study. Our findings may be a function of the particular males studied. Therefore, without further evidence, we are cautious in drawing any conclusions concerning this finding. More systematic study of gender differences is warranted considering the data on socialization differences reported in the literature (Huston, 1983).

These findings hold important implications for professionals working with young children. Conflict should be viewed as part of the natural, ongoing interaction of peers. In general, conflict occurs infrequently, is of brief duration, and is resolved without adult intervention. Despite its low rate of occurrence, conflict is an important part of social interaction. If not resolved successfully, conflict can lead to the dissolution of the relationship; however, it is probably best to allow children to resolve conflicts on their own as often as possible. Through conflict resolution, children learn to take another's perspective, tolerate differences, and negotiate. These are important social skills. Adults need to consider indirect ways, such as role-modeling, explanation, and exploration of alternate problem-solving strategies, to facilitate the development of social skills. These skills seem to emerge in the preschool years, so this is a particularly salient time for such training. Finally, adults must respect the importance of friendships to young children. Clearly, these are special relationships promoting cognitive, social, and emotional development.

References


Preschoolers' Conflicts


