Mothers' and Children's Perceptions and Observed Aggression and Rough-and-Tumble Play in 7-Year-Olds' Sibling Relationships

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to compare mothers' and children's perceptions of sibling relationships with observed aggression and rough-and-tumble play (RTP). 64 White, middle-class 7-year-olds were videotaped performing three separate tasks with their siblings. Coded videotapes of the three tasks and questionnaires were used to collect data about perceived and observed aggression and RTP. Results suggest that the accuracy of mothers' and children's perceptions vary.

Introduction

Past research on mothers' perceptions of children's sibling relationships have investigated overall relationship quality. These studies have suggested that there may be a discrepancy between maternal and child perceptions of sibling relationships. A study by Graham-Berhann (1994) demonstrated differences between mothers', childrens', and researchers' perceptions of sibling dyads. They found that although mother and researcher interpretations of behavior indicate existing sibling relationship qualities, the subjective interpretation of behaviors from the child may be the most accurate perspective on the relationship. Based on these findings, sibling perspectives should be accounted for, as being a participating member in a relationship could reflect the most accurate perspective on relationship quality. The present study observed how maternal and child perceptions of sibling relationships may differ in terms of aggression and rough-and-tumble play (RTP) for three different tasks. The researchers expected to see differences between maternal perspectives and observed child aggression. They also expected to see a task effect, reflecting stronger correlations between maternal perceptions and observed aggression for the game task as the context encourages competition, giving aggressive behavior opportunities to be exhibited in a natural setting that mothers would expect to see aggression between siblings.

Methods

Participants

- A community sample of 64 White, middle-class 7-year-olds were videotaped performing three separate tasks with their siblings.
- 33 sibling pairs were same-sex, 31 mixed-sex.

Procedures

- Questionnaires were given to target children and mothers to collect information about their perceptions of the sibling relationship. Each questionnaire consisted of 24 items describing 4 dimensions (asymmetry, intimacy, harmony, and conflict) of the relationships.
- Target children were videotaped at their home in three 10-minute segments with their sibling, engaging in tasks provided by the experimenters.
- Sibling pairs participated in a construction task (C), a period of freeplay (F), and a board game (G).
- Videotaped sessions were transcribed and transcripts were coded for instances of aggression and RTP.
- Verbal aggression (VA) was defined as any utterance with a clear intent to hurt or bother the partner.
- Verbal RTP (XV) was defined as verbal interactions that have the surface appearance of verbal aggression but lack obvious intent to hurt the partner.
- Physical aggression (PA) was defined as any physical act aimed at the partner, or objects in the partner's possession, with the intent to hurt or bother.
- Physical RTP (XP) was defined as physical acts that have the surface appearance of physical aggression but lack obvious intent to hurt the partner.
- Relational Aggression (RA) was defined as any behavior with a clear intent to hurt or bother another by damaging or threatening to damage a relationship, or by using a relationship to hurt or bother the partner.
- Relational RTP (XR) was defined as any behavior with a surface appearance of relational aggression but lacking obvious intent to hurt the partner.

Analysis

Pearson bivariate correlations were used to examine the relationships between the four dimensions on the maternal and child questionnaires and observed aggression and RTP in the child dyads. Observed aggression and RTP were converted into rates of observed aggression or RTP as a function of socially engaged and semi-engaged minutes.

Table 1: Maternal Questionnaire and Observed Sibling Aggression

Variables	Perceived Asymmetry	Perceived Intimacy	Perceived Harmony	Perceived Conflict
CVA	.228	-.268	-.252	.427**
CPA	.344*	-.188	-.095	.324*
CRA	.299	-.199	-.191	.529**
FVA	.199	.072	.080	.096
FPA	.305	.158	.246	-.050
FRA	.066	-.122	-.139	-.021
GVA	.003	-.200	-.297	.312*
GPA	.095	-.029	-.116	.255
GRA	.020	-.278	-.358*	.166

Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

Table 2: Maternal Questionnaire and Observed Sibling RTP

Variables	Perceived Asymmetry	Perceived Intimacy	Perceived Harmony	Perceived Conflict
CX_V	.337*	.037	.084	.224
CX_P	.163	-.017	.050	.101
CX_R	.383*	.100	.091	.132
FX_V	-.020	-.012	-.058	.206
FX_P	.332*	.102	.144	.087
FX_R	-.006	-.077	-.071	-.236
GX_V	.125	.056	.071	.147
GX_P	.039	-.026	.263	-.161
GX_R	-.351*	.095	.122	-.055

Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

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Results

Analyses of the target child and maternal questionnaires showed limited agreement; the only significant correlation was a negative one between target child ratings of harmony and maternal ratings of conflict [$r(62) = -.302$, $p < .05$]. There were no significant correlations between target child questionnaire data and observed aggression and RTP. As shown in Table 1, maternal ratings of sibling conflict were positively correlated with VA [$r(62) = .427$, $p < .01$], PA [$r(62) = .324$, $p < .05$], and RA [$r(62) = .324$, $p < .01$] for the construction task and positively correlated only with VA for the game task [$r(62) = .312$, $p < .05$]. Significant negative correlations were found for maternal ratings of sibling asymmetry and PA for the construction task [$r(62) = -.344$, $p < .05$], as well as maternal ratings of harmony and RA for the game task [$r(62) = -.358$, $p < .05$]. As shown in Table 2, analyses further revealed significant positive correlations between maternal ratings of sibling asymmetry and X_V [$r(62) = .337$, $p < .05$] and X_R [$r(62) = .383$, $p < .05$] for the construction task, and with X_P for the free play task [$r(62) = .332$, $p < .05$]. However, maternal ratings of asymmetry were negatively correlated with X_R for the game task [$r(62) = -.351$, $p < .05$].

Discussion

Maternal and child perceptions and observed behavior show mixed results in terms of aggression and RTP. An expected task effect between mothers' ratings and the game task showed ratings of conflict were positively correlated with verbal aggression and ratings of harmony were negatively correlated with relational aggression. The game task was expected to encourage aggression through competition. Mother's ratings of conflict seemed to accurately reflect aggression, and their ratings of harmony accurately reflected relational aggression. Updegraff et al. (2005) found that RA is more frequent in sibling relationships with low emotional support and high negativity, reflecting low harmony in a sibling relationship and supporting mothers' accuracy of relationship quality in this task.

Furthermore, an unexpected task effect between maternal perceptions and the construction task emerged; mothers' ratings of sibling conflict were positively correlated with VA, PA, and RA and ratings of asymmetry were positively correlated with PA. These results suggest that mothers had accurate ratings of conflict and asymmetry for the construction task. Construction tasks require cooperation between siblings, giving conflictual siblings an opportunity to be aggressive towards each other. If mothers view the sibling relationship as asymmetrical in power, they may expect to see PA in a cooperative task.

No significant correlation between child perceptions and observed RTP was found. This suggests that children at this age are able to differentiate between RTP and aggression. In terms of maternal perceptions and observed RTP, mothers seem to perceive asymmetry in the sibling relationship for most instances of RTP and across most tasks. Mothers may be confusing sibling RTP with aggression. Previous research suggests that parents attribute difficulties in their child's sibling relationship to conflict and rivalry (Kramer and Baron, 1995). Our findings are congruent to the previous finding, further suggesting that sensitivity to conflict can elicit inconsistencies in perception of the true quality of the sibling relationship. Interestingly, mother's perceptions of asymmetry were negatively correlated with RA in the game task. This suggests that mothers may be more accurate in interpreting RTP in a competitive setting. Game tasks require an element of competition, while the other tasks require cooperation. In this sense, instances of RTP are more commonplace for this type of task.

The implications of our findings can generalize to the field of child development and parenting. Context is an important factor that may be vital for perceiving sibling relationships accurately and predicting how siblings will behave. Mothers seem to interpret dynamics of sibling relationships more accurately in some contexts than in others; specifically, some contexts seem to encourage aggressive behavior in asymmetrical sibling relationships but encourage RTP in symmetrical relationships. Future studies should investigate maternal and child perceptions of sibling relationships and compare behavioral expectations in a variety of contexts for accurate perceptions of sibling relationships.

References

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