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SHARING FEELINGS OF ANGER WITH A FRIEND AND PEER SOCIABILITY

by

Robert Washington II

A Thesis

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## **Abstract**

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Managing anger is important for successful peer relations. The present research examined the association between a child telling a friend when they felt angry, how much better they felt after telling, and peer nominated sociability. Children in Grades 3-5 (males = 94, females = 107) participated (IRB approved) with data collected in group, classroom sessions. Peer nominations for sociability behaviors were assessed (unlimited nominations; no self-nominations). Self-reports of extent of telling friends when angry, perceived benefit of telling a friend when angry, and extent of feeling angry over the last month were collected as well as assessment of classroom mutual (reciprocated) friendship nominations. A multigroup (Gender) path analysis was conducted using Mplus 8.0. Number of mutual friends was significantly (positively) related to peer sociability. Gender differences were found in the way sharing anger with friends related to peer sociability. How frequently boys reported feeling angry in a month was significantly (positively) related to peer sociability. For girls, perception of the effectiveness of sharing feelings of anger was significantly related to peer nominated sociability. There was also a significant indirect effect of girls' perception of the effectiveness of sharing feelings of anger and peer nominated sociability with the extent to which girls shared feelings of anger mediating this association. Findings are discussed in terms of how gender differences in the nature of friendship relationships relate to the role of sharing anger with friends and peer sociability.

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## Sharing Feelings of Anger with a Friend and Peer Sociability

During middle childhood, peer relations take center stage. Not only does social acceptability by the peer group and establishing close friendship relationships gain in importance for children, but also the successful navigation of peer social contexts is associated with a wide variety of concurrent and subsequent developmental outcomes (see Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006 for a review). (Clarke-Stewart, Umeh, Snow, & Pederson, 1980). Peer social behaviors, termed sociability behaviors (Matsen, Morison, Pellegrini, 1985) have been shown to be paramount to the process of successfully engaging with peer groups and with establishing friendship relationships. Of interest for the present research is the role of managing anger in relation to peer sociability behaviors. Managing anger within peer social settings is a key component for the development of sociability. As reviewed below, anger is often closely associated with social contexts and with social exchanges and can result in positive and/or negative consequences depending on its management.

The present research focused on children's management of anger in relation to peer group sociability. From Hinde (1992) and Rubin et al. (2006), a guiding framework was the relationship and group levels of social interaction. multiple levels of peer relations, here in terms of behaviors (sociability), and relationships (friendships), should be considered for examining peer social competence. Furthermore, the nature of relationships affects and is affected by the both interactions that led to these relationships and the group that these relationships are imbedded in. Therefore, in line with this theory, in order to accurately analyze the process of sharing anger with a friend, consideration is given to children's perception about these interactions and the cognitions of the peer group to which they belong. Because aspects of social

development, such as sociability behaviors, depend on these early relationships (Hinde, 1992), exploration of this association is necessary.

We examined the association of children's talking to friends about anger to classroom peer nominations of sociability behaviors. Three additional variables were included. We assessed whether children considered the extent to which discussing anger with a friend was effective. It is certainly reasonable to assume that children's evaluation of the benefit and effectiveness of sharing their feelings of anger would: a) relate to the likelihood of them sharing these feelings of anger; and b) relate to their peer sociability behaviors. Second, due to an extensive literature reporting sex differences for peer relations in general (Rubin et al, 2006), and friendship relationships in particular (Rose & Rudolph, 2006), we evaluated gender as a moderator of sharing anger with a friend and peer sociability behaviors. Finally, we statistically controlled for a) the self-perceived frequency of having feelings of anger, and for b) the number of classroom mutual friends.

### **Expressing Anger**

Anger is a prevalent emotion and is unique in that it has been shown to have both benefits and negative consequences. Anger has been shown to organize and regulate physiological and psychological processes related to self-defense and mastery and can appropriately regulate social and interpersonal behaviors (Izard & Kobak, 1991; Lewis, Sullivan, Ramsay, & Alessandri, 1992; Saarni, Campos, Camras, & Witherington, 2006). Anger can also cause/motivate a child to employ multiple problem-solving strategies and intensify children's efforts to overcome obstacles (Campos, Campos, & Barret, 1989).

Although anger can be beneficial, the negative consequences of anger are certainly a cause for concern. Fabes and Eisenberg (1992) found that anger was associated with low social

competence. In the same study, an inverse relation between anger and popularity was also found. In a sample of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders in China, Zhou, Eisenberg, Wang, and Reiser, (2004) found that anger was positively associated with externalizing problems and negatively associated with peer nominated sociability. Rydell, Berlin, and Bohlin (2003) reported that anger for 5-year-olds was positively linked to externalizing problems longitudinally, for example, being associated with easily getting into fights three years later. High anger was also associated with low levels of prosocial behavior. In a study with 5-17-year-olds, anger was positively associated with violence, self-harm, and physical and verbal aggression (Blake & Hamrin, 2007). The overt expression of anger by children has also been shown to be related to peer rejection (Hubbard 2001). The negative consequences of anger highlight the importance of developing skills necessary to properly manage this emotion, which is a complex task.

Anger is considered to be a socially instigated state of arousal involving threat or frustration (Averill, 1982). Levine (1995) suggested that anger derives from aversive social conditions. In support of the social aspect of anger, Oolup, Brown, Nowicki, and Aziz (2016) found that 8-and 9-year-old children often noted instances of social interactions as the cause of their anger. Nasir and Ghani (2014), found that 71.3 percent of adolescents reported that their friends were the source of their anger. Because anger is often directed toward a close friend (Averill, 1982), children must learn ways to cope with their anger that will not damage interpersonal relationships. Rose and Asher (1999) found that fourth and fifth graders who indicated that they would resolve a conflict with their friends using hostile strategies had fewer best friends and less supportive friendships than those who had more constructive strategies. In support of this finding, Previous research has shown that students, aged 9 and 10 years, who used

proper anger management strategies were more likely to be liked by peers than children who did not (Rice, Kang, Weaver, & Howell, 2008).

Proper emotion management is a process that develops over time for children. Zeman and Garber (1996) found that 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> graders younger children reported expressing more anger than older children. Six-year-olds were also more likely to express their anger externally, with children able to mask their anger by age 9 (Underwood, 1997; Zeman & Shipman, 1996). Perhaps masking anger allows for spending time to devise a plan that allows them to express their anger and minimize negative social impact. In support of this suggestion, Underwood, Hurley, Johansson, and Mosley (1999) found that second graders expressed more anger and controlled their anger less expertly than fourth and sixth graders. Fabes and Eisenberg (1992) also found that older children were more likely to find ways to deal with anger that did not cause more strain in social relationships. These findings demonstrate that as children develop they come to better understand that the expression of anger is frowned upon (Scheff, 1984).

Findings vary concerning the association of gender to the expression of anger. Research typically has reported larger gender differences during preschool years that seem to dissipate as children become older (Underwood et al., 1999). However, some studies have found gender differences, and other studies have not (Zeman and Shipman, 1996). The differences in findings may be due to variations in methodology and to the specific age groups assessed. For instance, in a study using hypothetical events to gauge gender differences in the expression of anger, Zeman and Shipman (1996) found that girls expressed their anger verbally in a comparable manner as boys. However, in a study using behavior observation, Underwood, Hurley, Johanson, and Mosley (1999) found that girls expressed less verbal anger than boys.



Learning to manage feelings of anger in a close relationship is considered an important social task for friendships (Asher, Park, & Walker, 1996). This likely contributes to children developing a variety of nonaggressive strategies to manage their anger (Averill, 1982; Lemerise & Dodge, 1993). Karniol and Heiman (1987) found that children used passive strategies such as distancing, ignoring, and internalizing when angered by high status provokers. Fabes and Eisenberg (1992) found that children approximately 4.5 years of age tended to cope with anger by venting their angry feelings, active resistance, and defending themselves in nonaggressive manners. Children seem to understand that the overt expression of anger typically results in negative interpersonal consequences (Fabes & Eisenberg, 1992; Lemerise & Dodge, 1993). Children also understand that appropriate emotion expression is related to healthy psychosocial functioning (Saarni, 1988). Due to the potential social implications of the expression of anger, it may make sense for a child to elicit support from their peer group in an attempt to negate the consequences associated with the expression of anger.

### **Sharing Feelings of Anger with Friends**

Research has shown that the complexity and social effectiveness of anger responses increase with age (Von Salisch & Vogelgesang, 2005). Von Salisch and Vogelgesang, (2005) conducted a longitudinal study with children between the ages of 9 and 14, assessing children's anger management strategies. The rate in which children chose to resolve an anger provoking scenario with a friend by way of explanation and reconciliation and humor increased over a five-year period. In the same time span, methods of confrontation, harming, and ignoring decreased. In support of this finding, results from a study conducted by Labouvie-Vief, DeVoe, and Bulka (1989) indicated that young people's understanding of anger and anger control increased over the teenage years. In a study with 3.5 to 6 year olds, Fabes and Eisenberg (1992) found that the older

children were more likely to find ways to deal with anger that did not cause more strain in social relationships. Even when interactions with a friend was the source of the anger, research has shown that a child will continue to talk to their friend about their anger, presumably in an attempt to maintain the friendship relationship (Rivers, Brackett, Katulak, & Salovey, 2007). Clearly anger is evident in friendships, and more importantly for the present research, children must deal with (talk about) anger with their friends.

Although a friend's response to emotion laden conversation can range from supportive to unsupportive (Legerski, Biggs, Greenhoot, & Sampilo, 2015), there is evidence that talking to a friend when angry may be a good anger management strategy for children. Beginning in late childhood and early adolescence, children gravitate towards friends to discuss personal matters and emotions (Buhrmester, 1996). Adolescents are also likely to spend an increasing amount of social time with peers and put more value in the expectations and opinions of peers. (Brown & Larson, 2009). Furthermore, as friendships develop, children tend to exchange more personal information making them the perfect ally for when a child becomes angry (Sullivan, 1953). In short, although not extensively investigated, using a friend to help manage anger may prove to be a very effective strategy. The present study further explored the role of sharing feelings of anger with friends for peer nominations of sociability behaviors and included, as noted, whether children considered the extent to which discussing anger with a friend was effective.

### **Children's Beliefs Concerning the Effectiveness of Sharing Feelings of Anger with a Friend**

The act of sharing feelings of anger with a friend would certainly qualify as an emotion management strategy. The perceived benefits or effectiveness of sharing feelings of anger with a friend would also seem to be an important consideration. Zeman & Shipman (1996) found that children in the fifth grade expected less support and instrumental help for expressing anger than

they did for any other emotion. In addition to expecting less support, fifth graders also voiced an expectation of not feeling any better once they expressed their anger (Zeman & Shipman, 1996). These findings highlight the tension that may exist for children regarding sharing their feelings of anger with friends. On the one hand, children would like to resolve their social conflicts with friends. On the other hand, children may be hesitant to share their feelings of anger out of fear of being viewed negatively by their friends and peer group (Zeman & Shipman, 1996). Certainly the perceived effectiveness of sharing anger with a friend relates to the nature and quality of the sharing interaction. As a beginning for exploring this association, the present research focused on the relation between extent of sharing feelings of anger with a friend and perceived effectiveness.

### **The Present Research**

As noted, an extensive research literature (see, Rubin et al. 2006) documents the considerable importance of children successfully navigating peer relations. Exhibiting appropriate sociability behaviors appears to be critical for establishing and maintaining close peer relationships (i.e., friendships) and for being viewed as socially acceptable by members of the peer group. Poorly managed anger may serve to undermine these adaptations. The present research was designed to evaluate the association of children's (Grades 3 through 5) talking to friends about anger to classroom peer nominations of sociability behaviors and included: a) an evaluation of perceived helpfulness of sharing anger with a friend; b) an examination of sex differences; and c) statistically controlling for the self-perceived frequency of having feelings of anger and for the number of classroom mutual friends.

Two conceptual models were compared and are displayed in Figure 1. Both models were constructed as multigroup (Gender) path analyses. In the left panel of Figure 1, labeled "Conceptual Model," the extent, or frequency of telling a friend when angry was considered as

having a direct effect on peer nominations for sociability behaviors and as a mediating effect between perceived helpfulness of telling a friend when angry and peer nominations for sociability behaviors. Number of classroom mutual friends and self-reported frequency of feelings of anger were included as control variables as shown. A competing model to be tested, labeled “Alternative Model” in the right panel of Figure 1, was identical with one important variation: perceived helpfulness of telling a friend when angry and frequency of telling a friend when angry were reversed in the model. That is, perceived helpfulness of telling a friend when angry was considered as a direct effect on peer nominations for sociability behaviors and as a mediating effect between the extent, or frequency of telling a friend when angry and peer nominations for sociability behaviors.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Children from a university-affiliated public elementary school participated in this study. The sample included 201 students (96 boys and 107 girls; 70 % White, 28% African-American, 2% Other ethnicities) from grades 3-5 (9 classrooms). The participants were from a predominately middle class background, as evidenced by less than 20 percent of the children qualifying for any lunch subsidy.

### **Measures**

The current study included five measures that were part of a larger longitudinal investigation of peer relations. A self-report measure was created to assess both the extent of telling friends when angry and the perceived effectiveness of telling friends when angry. Another self-report measure assessed how often children felt angry over the past month. Number of classroom mutual friends was assessed as well as peer behavior nominations of sociability.

***Friends and Anger.*** Two items assessed self-reports of a) the extensiveness of telling a friend when angry, and b) how often telling a friend when angry was perceived to make the child feel better. The two items were: “When I am angry I find a friend to talk to about my anger”; and “When I talk to my friends when I am angry, it helps me feel better.” Each item was rated on a 4-point scale (Never True, Rarely True, Sometimes True, Always True).

***Frequency of anger.*** How often children felt angry was assessed with a single question: “Over the past month, how often did you feel anger?”. The question was rated on a 5-point scale (Never, Not Very Often, Sometimes, Often, Very Often).

***Mutual classroom friends.*** Children were given a classroom roster and asked to circle the names of all classmates they believed to be their friends. Number of mutual friends was determined as the number of reciprocated nominations between children. To control for differences in class size, total number of mutual friends was standardized by classroom.

***Sociability behavior nominations.*** Using the Revised Class Play procedure (Masten, Morison, & Pelligrini, 1985), children nominated classmates for each of 10 sociability behaviors. The items included: “A person everybody likes to be with;” “A person everyone listens to;” and “Someone who has many friends.” For each item, children were instructed to act as a director of play and to assign classmates that they felt could play each role. Children were allowed to nominate as many classmates as they wanted and were not allowed to nominate themselves. Again, to control for differences in class size, total received sociability nominations were standardized by classroom.

## **Procedure**

Data were collected in the fall semester as part of a larger longitudinal study. The children were administered questionnaires in two 50-minute group, classroom sessions. Children

were assured that their responses were confidential and that only the researchers would see any answers. The sessions were led by at least two graduate students and additional graduate and undergraduate research assistants were also present. A session leader read the instructions aloud and the other researchers gave individual assistance as needed. At the beginning of each data collection session, children were informed about the purpose of the research, confidentiality, and their right to refuse or discontinue participation at any time with no penalty. No child declined to participate. Children were instructed to work quietly and not to discuss their answers with classmates. At school enrollment, parents provided consent to allow their children to participate in a range of studies, each of which they were given specific information about, as well as the opportunity to decline participation for their children; six parents, across all classrooms, declined to have their children participate. A university IRB approved the research protocol.

### **Results**

Data were screened following guidelines established by Tabachnick and Fidell (2001). As preliminary analyses, correlations among study variables, means, and standard deviations were performed. In addition, we performed a Grade Level x Gender MANOVA on study variables to assess possible grade and gender overall mean differences. For the primary analyses, based on theoretical assumptions and empirical work, a multigroup (Gender) path analysis was conducted using Mplus 8.0. Using a path analysis allowed regression equations of the model to be analyzed and considered simultaneously. The model was designed to assess how children's number of mutual friends, how often a child feels angry, children's self-evaluation of the effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry, and the act of talking to a friend when angry related to peer sociability behavior nominations. This path analysis explored both direct and indirect effects using the act of telling a friend when angry as a mediator.

## Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 provides correlations, means, and standard deviations for all study variables separated by gender. For boys, number of mutual friends was significantly and positively correlated with peer nominated sociability behaviors ( $r = .255, p < .05$ ), the extent of telling a friend when angry ( $r = .226, p < .05$ ), and perceived effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry ( $r = .268, p < .05$ ). Boys' perceived effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry was also significantly and positively correlated with the extent of telling a friend when angry ( $r = .601, p < .01$ ). Peer nominated sociability behaviors was also significantly and negatively correlated with how frequently a child felt angry in a month ( $r = -.255, p < .05$ ). For boys, self-reports of feeling angry did not correlate significantly with any of the other measures.

For girls, number of mutual friends was only significantly and positively correlated with peer nominated sociability behaviors ( $r = .314, p < .01$ ). Peer nominated sociability behaviors was also significantly and positively correlated with the extent of talking to a friend when angry ( $r = .244, p < .05$ ) and with perceived effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry ( $r = .233, p < .05$ ). As with boys, girls' perceptions of the effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry was significantly and positively related to the likelihood of talking to a friend when angry ( $r = .810, p < .01$ ). How frequently a child felt angry was significantly and negatively correlated to girls' perception of the effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry ( $r = -.346, p < .01$ ).

In sum, gender similarities and differences emerged in the patterns of correlations. For both boys and girls, the correlation between peer nominated sociability and classroom mutual friends and the correlation between the extent of talking to a friend when angry and perception of the effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry were both significant and positive. Extent of anger in a month was significantly related to different variables by gender. The frequency of

children's anger in a month was negatively correlated with peer nominated sociability for boys and negatively correlated with perceptions of the effectiveness of talking to a friend for girls. Unique correlations by gender were also discovered. For boys only, number of classroom mutual friends was significantly and positively correlated with the likelihood of talking to a friend when angry and to self-perceptions of the effectiveness of talking to a friend. For girls only, sociability was significantly and positively correlated with the extent of talking to a friend and the perceived effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry.

Grade and gender effects were analyzed using a 3 (Grade: 3,4,5) x 2 (Gender) MANOVA. Results indicated significant multivariate effects for Grade, multiple  $F(10,354) = 1.861, p < .05$ , Wilks lambda = .903, and for Gender, multiple  $F(5,177) = 2.995, p < .05$ , Wilks lambda = .992. The Grade x Gender interaction was not statistically significant. Univariate ANOVAs and Newman Keuls post hoc tests were used to determine specific sources of differences.

Grade level differences were revealed for the extent of talking to a friend when angry and a child's perceived effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry,  $F(2, 187) = 3.71, p < .05$ . Follow up post hoc Newman Keuls tests revealed that children in grade 3 ( $M = 1.862, SD = .164$ ) were least likely to talk to a friend when angry with no statistically significant difference for children in grade 4 ( $M = 2.53, SD = .152$ ) and grade 5 ( $M = 2.35, SD = .157$ ). Children in Grade 3 ( $M = 2.306, SD = .165$ ) showed lower perceived effectiveness of telling a friend when angry,  $F(2, 187) = 3.462, p < .05$ . than children in Grade 5 ( $M = 2.882, SD = .158$ ). There were no differences between children in Grades 3 and 4 ( $M = 2.463, SD = .153$ ) or Grades 4 and 5 on this measure.



Gender differences were revealed for the extent of talking to a friend when angry,  $F(1, 186) = 3.710, p = .001$  (boys,  $M = 1.90, SD = 1.22$ ; girls,  $M = 2.60, SD = 1.29$ ) and for perceptions of the effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry,  $F(1, 186) = 6.099, p = .014$  (boys,  $M = 2.33, SD = 1.27$ ; girls,  $M = 2.83, SD = 1.28$ ). Gender was not statistically significantly related to sociability. Girls talked to friends when angry more than boys, and girls felt that talking to friends when angry was more helpful than did boys.

### **Primary Analyses**

Based on theoretical assumptions and preliminary analyses, a multigroup (Gender) path analysis was conducted using Mplus 8.0. Initially, two conceptual models were analyzed and compared using the four fit indices recommended by Kline (2007): model chi square, Bentler comparative fit index, Steiger-Lind root mean square error of approximation, standardized root square mean residual, to determine the model with the best fit to these indices. A fit statistic comparison of the models can be found in Table 1. After comparison, the model with the best fit (Model 1, Conceptual Model in left panel in Figure 1) was chosen. In this model, the extent, or frequency of telling a friend when angry, was considered as a direct effect on peer nominations for sociability behaviors and as a mediating effect between perceived helpfulness of telling a friend when angry and peer nominations for sociability behaviors. Number of classroom mutual friends and self-reported frequency of feelings of anger were included as control variables. In addition to assessing direct and indirect associations, mean level differences between paths for boys and girls were assessed. The path analysis tested in the present research may be found in Figure 2.

Maximum Likelihood with robust standard errors (MLR) was used as the estimator in the primary analyses since MLR is robust in relation to non-normality and non-independence of

observations (Muthen & Muthen, 1998-2012). Fit statistics examined were: model chi square, Bentler comparative fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1990), Steiger-Lind root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA; Steiger, 1990), and the standardized root square mean residual (SRMR). These fit indices are recommended by Kline, (2005). The Model chi-square tests the null hypothesis that the model is correct, is sensitive to sample size, assumes a perfect fit of the model, and is a badness of fit test. RMSEA reflects the lack of fit of the researcher's model to the population covariance matrix per degrees of freedom. An RMSEA of  $\leq .05$  indicates a close approximate fit. Values between .05 and .08 suggest reasonable error of approximation. An RMSEA  $\geq .10$  suggests poor fit (Brown & Cudeck, 1993). The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) ranges from 0 to 1 with higher values indicating better fit. CFI values greater than approximately .90 indicates an adequate fit of the researcher's model (Hu & Bentler, 1999), and values  $\geq 0.95$  indicate an excellent fit. The CFI compares the fit of the target model to the fit of an independent model that assumes all variables to be uncorrelated. The CFI represents the extent to which the target model is better than the independent model. The SRMR is a measure of the mean of absolute correlation residual and the overall difference between the observed and predicted correlations. Values of the SRMR less than .10 are generally considered to indicate a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Analysis of the four indices of fit statistics indicated an excellent fit to the data.  $\chi^2(2, 187) = 1.120; p = .5712$ ; comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.00 (0.00 – 0.173); standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.009.

For boys, peer nominations of sociability behaviors were significantly and negatively related to how frequently he felt angry in a month ( $\beta = -0.261, p < .05$ ) and was significantly and positively related to number of mutual friends ( $\beta = .070, p < .05$ ). The extent of talking to a

friend when angry was significantly and positively related to children's perceived effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry ( $\beta = 0.566, p < .05$ ). Boys' number of mutual friends was significantly and positively related their perceived effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry ( $\beta = 0.097, p < .05$ ).

For girls, peer nominations for sociability behaviors was significantly and positively related to the extent of talking to a friend when angry ( $\beta = 0.146, p < .05$ ) and was significantly and positively related to number of mutual friends ( $\beta = 0.090, p < .01$ ). As with boys, the extent of talking to a friend when angry was also significantly and positively related to girls' perceived effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry ( $\beta = 0.857, p < .01$ ). The frequency girls felt angry in a month was significantly and negatively related to perceived effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry ( $\beta = -0.409, p < .01$ ).

Indirect paths were analyzed for the association between the extent of talking to a friend when angry, perceived effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry, number of mutual friends, frequency children felt angry in a month, and peer nominated sociability for both boys and girls. Analysis indicated one significant indirect path. The association between children's perceived effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry and peer nominations for sociability behaviors through the extent of talking to a friend when angry was significant and positive for girls only ( $\beta = 0.146, p < .05$ ).

As a final analysis for the multigroup model, we explored potential mean level differences between boys and girls by using model constraints in which the structural paths were made equal between groups. The constrained multi-group model yielded significant differences between boys and girls on one parameter. The association between the extent of talking to a

friend when angry and a child's perceived effectiveness of talking to a friend when angry was statistically stronger for girls ( $\beta = 0.857, p < .01$ ) than boys ( $\beta = 0.566, p < .01$ ).

### **Discussion**

Peer relations are critical to children's current and subsequent adjustment and successfully using sociability behaviors are a critical factor to establish good peer relations (Rubin et al., 2006). Anger, as a socially instigated phenomenon, must be managed, and the thesis of the present research is that sharing feelings of anger with a friend may aid in this. The present research, with children in grades 3 through 5, evaluated the association of talking to friends about anger to classroom peer nominations of sociability behaviors. Included in the path analyses tested were: a) an evaluation of perceived helpfulness of sharing anger with a friend; b) an examination of sex differences; and c) statistically controlling for the self-perceived frequency of having feelings of anger and for the number of classroom mutual friends.

The two competing models evaluated may be found in Figure 1. More statistical support was found for the model where the extent, or frequency of telling a friend when angry was considered as a direct effect on peer nominations for sociability behaviors and as a mediating effect between perceived helpfulness of telling a friend when angry and peer nominations for sociability behaviors. The Alternative Model switched the placement of perceived helpfulness of telling a friend when angry and frequency of telling a friend when angry. In short, perceived benefit related to frequency of telling rather than the other way around. Thus children appeared to consider the outcome of sharing anger with a friend as a guide to adopting the strategy of sharing anger with a friend. This distinction could potentially guide child's anger management intervention by focusing on a child's internal evaluation of the effectiveness of potential strategies as a means for promoting a desirable course of action.

For both boys and girls, self-perceived effectiveness of telling a friend about feeling angry was significantly and positively related to the extent of telling a friend when angry. Simply put, the more children believed talking to a friend about their anger was beneficial, the more likely they were to do it. Model constraints conducted as part of the primary analysis confirmed that this finding was significantly stronger for girls, consistent with previous research that indicates girls reported feeling better more often than boys after expressing their emotions (Zeman & Shipman, 1996).

An additional consistent gender finding was that the more mutual friends a child had the more the child was seen as sociable by their peers. The lack of gender differences for this parameter may indicate that, regardless of gender, children benefited socially from having mutual friendships. This supports previous literature that has identified the numerous benefits that having a mutual friend can provide (Bukowski, Laursen, & Hoza, 2010; Sullivan, 1953). However, with regards to the present study it should be noted that mutual friends were not significantly associated with the extent to which children shared their feelings of anger with a friend. This may highlight the difficult choice that children have to make with regards to sharing their feelings. As previous research has shown, children are typically hesitant to share their feelings of anger out of fear of the potential negative social consequences (Hubbard, 2001).

Many of the findings were found to be moderated by gender in the multigroup model. The association between the extent of sharing feelings of anger with friends and peer nominations of sociability behaviors was significant (positive) for girls only. Furthermore, the MANOVA conducted on study variables found that girls were more likely to share their feelings of anger with friends than boys were. This latter finding supports previous research which has indicated that girls are more likely to share intimate information than boys (Berndt, 1982). In

addition, girls have been reported to seek out social support at a higher rate when attempting to manage their emotions than boys (Belle & Longfellow, 1984). This willingness to seek out peers to share information with may contribute to girls being viewed as more sociable by peers than boys. Perhaps this reflects a social norm that girls are expected to be more open to discussing their emotions than are boys. The more open girls appear to be, the more favorably they are viewed by their peers. Additional research is needed to fully understand the role that gender may play in this association.

Previous research has indicated that the more children felt angry, the less they were liked by their peers (Hubbard, 2001; Rice, Kang, Weaver, & Howell, 2008). For the present research, for boys, the frequency of self-reported anger was significantly (negatively) associated with peer nominated sociability behaviors. It is interesting to note the lack of a significant relation for girls. It is important to recall that no significant difference in the frequency of anger was found between boys and girls in the MANOVA. Perhaps the manner in which anger is expressed is important. Boys consistently report higher levels of aggressive responses to anger (Underwood et al., 1999) which could in turn lead to lower sociability. Girls may express anger in a way that is more socially acceptable (Pullen, Modcrin, Mcguire, Lane, Kearnelly, & Engle, 2015). Also, previous research has reported girls to be more socially competent than boys and more socially competent children tend to manage their anger in ways that would minimize further damage to social relationships (Fabes and Eisenberg, 1992).

Additional gender differences emerged for children's perceived effectiveness of sharing feelings of anger with a friend. For girls, perceived effectiveness was significantly (negative) related to their self-report of how frequently they felt angry. The more girls felt angry the less

they felt talking to a friend was effective. Perhaps getting angry frequently diminishes the effectiveness of the friend. Why this would not be true for boys is unclear.

For boys, and not for girls, number of mutual friends was positively related to self-perceptions about the effectiveness of sharing feelings of anger with a friend. Recall that girls tend to prefer more intimate relationships in which they can share information and gain support from (Belle and Longfellow, 1984). Perhaps then, girls don't need an extensive friendship network to believe that friends are helpful for sharing anger with. Likewise, perhaps boys with larger networks are better able to find someone who will be helpful for sharing anger than boys who have a smaller network of friends.

### **Limitations**

Certain limitations of the present research should be noted. It would be important for future research to consider the relations examined here with an older sample of children. Different patterns of effects may be uncovered with adolescents and how they use friends to manage anger. Another area for future research would be to investigate the role of friendship quality for the sharing of anger with a friend. It may be that higher quality friendships offer more benefits than friendships of lower quality. Previous research has indicated that higher levels of intimacy, self-disclosure, and support are aspects of higher quality friendships (Cuadros & Berger, 2016). This may indicate that high quality friendships not only provide more support for children, but also impact their decision to self-disclose. Evidence has also shown that children who have high quality friendships are more likely to solve conflicts in a more positive manner (Hartup, 1996; Berndt & Murphy, 2002). This may explain the gender differences found in the current study. As mentioned earlier, girls tend to prefer more intimate friendships than boys. This preference for intimacy may lead to girls developing higher quality friendships which allow girls

to self-disclose at a higher rate and also reap the benefits from self-disclosing more often than boys. Finally, future research should evaluate the nature of the conversations children have with their friends about their anger. Capturing the intricacies of this interaction may lead to a better understanding of the benefits that friends can provide. As stated earlier, friends can respond to a child's anger expression in a number of different ways (Legerski, Biggs, Greenhoot, & Sampilo, 2015). Understanding how each of these responses relate to children's social competence may provide a blueprint for clinical intervention. Pinpointing the most beneficial responses that a friend can make will help provide a better understanding of the type of support that is needed from a friend in these instances of self-disclosure.

## **Conclusion**

Sociability behaviors are essential for children's peer relations. The present research indicates that the process of sharing feelings of anger with friends relates to children's sociability. Importantly, gender moderated this relation. The present study indicates that girls tended to share their angry feelings more and benefit from the disclosure more than boys. These findings support other studies that have explored gender differences in friendships. The present study adds to the literature by examining children's perception of the effectiveness of their choice to disclose information to their friend and how it relates to their peer nominated sociability. Understanding how children feel about their emotion management strategies can help to better understand the impact that these strategies may have on their social competence.



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## Appendix A: Tables and Figures

Table 1.  
Fit statistics for comparing competing models shown in Figure 1.

	$\chi^2$	RMSEA/CI	CFI	SRMR	BIC
Conceptual model	1.120 $p = 0.5712$	0.00/ 0.00-0.173	1.00	0.009	1700.846
Alternative model	0.562 $p = 0.4532$	0.00/0.00-0.247	1.00	0.023	1720.612

Table 2.

Correlations, means, and standard deviations of study variables, separated by gender. Correlations for girls are above the diagonal; correlations for boys are below the diagonal.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	Mean	SD
						Girls	Girls
1. Feel Better	--	.810**	.233*	.134	-.346**	2.83	1.28
2. Tell a Friend	.601**	--	.244*	.129	-.178	2.60	1.30
3. Peer Sociability	.208	.178	--	.314**	-.034	.079	.901
4. Mutual Friends	.268*	.226*	.255*	--	-.082	3.74	3.17
5. How Angry	-.116	-.039	-.255*	-.052	--	2.56	1.05
Mean Boys	2.33	1.90	-.089	4.09	2.43		
SD Boys	1.27	1.22	1.06	3.47	.980		

Notes.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$



Conceptual Model

Alternative Model

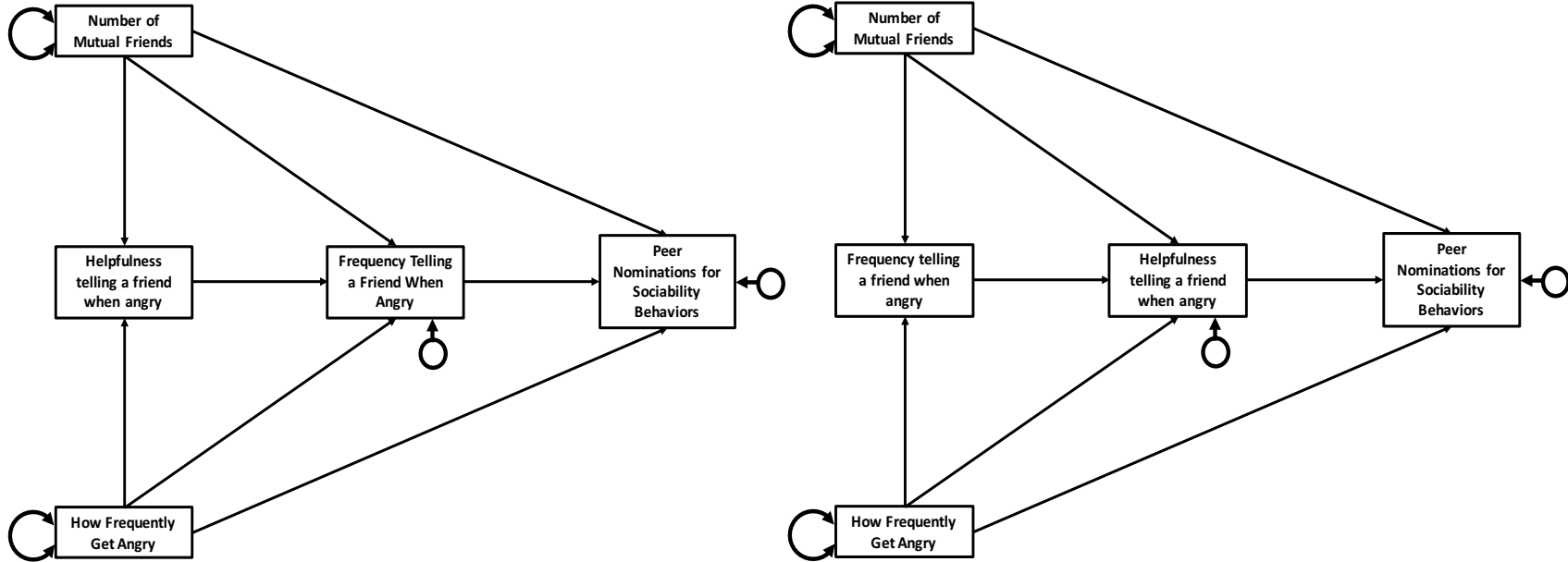


Figure 1. Conceptual and Alternate models of the association of children’s number of mutual friends, frequency of getting angry, perceived helpfulness of telling a friend when angry, frequency of telling a friend when angry, and peer nominations for sociability behaviors

Fit Statistics  
 $\chi^2 = 1.120, p = 0.5712$   
 RMSEA = 0.00, C.I. = 0.00 - 0.173  
 CFI = 1.00  
 SRMR = 0.009

Boys

Girls

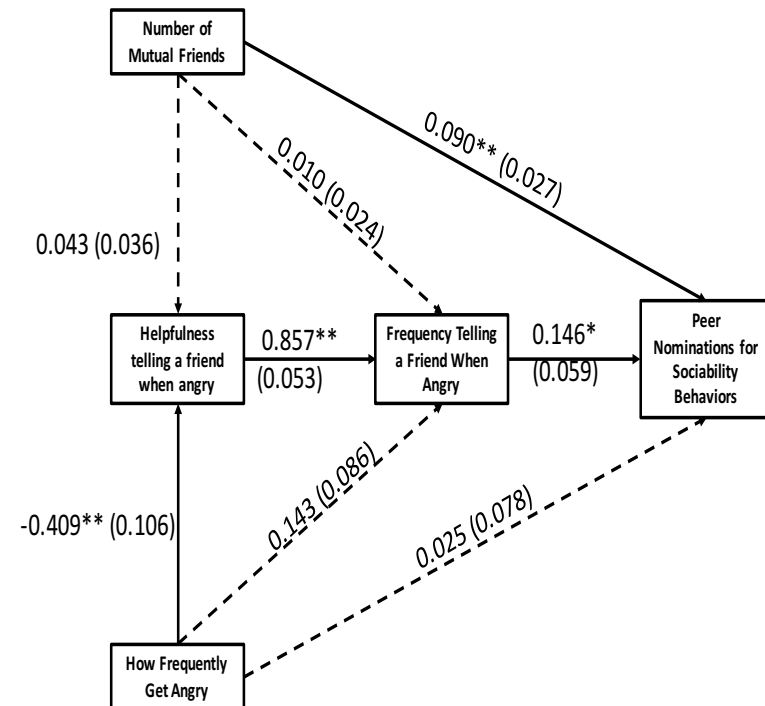
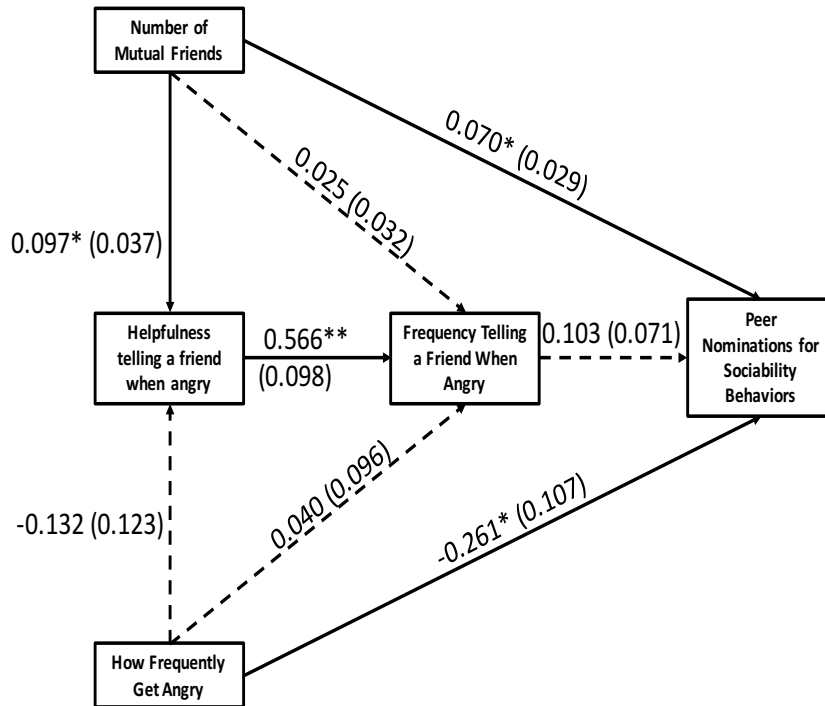


Figure 2. Multi-group (Gender) path analyses of the association of children's number of mutual friends, frequency of getting angry, perceived helpfulness of telling a friend when angry, frequency of telling a friend when angry, and peer nominations for sociability behaviors. Significant paths are indicated with solid lines.

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