

Gender and Task in 7-Year-Olds' Assertive and Affiliative Language with Siblings and Friends

Molly O'Brien, Mikaela Freeman, Shreya Mishra, Emily Salvemini, Aria Elling & Ganie DeHart
State University of New York at Geneseo

ABSTRACT

Early childhood is a crucial time for understanding the social development of youth. As part of a longitudinal study which follows sibling and peer interactions at ages four, seven, and 17, we focused on the use of assertive and affiliative language at age seven. Children were taped during a free-play task with a same-age sibling and friend. Tapes were coded to examine gender differences in valence and use of mitigation within assertive and affiliative language. Significant interactions between partner, dyad gender, valence, and mitigation are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Research on children's use of assertive and affiliative language has focused primarily on gender. Previously, it was thought that girls use more affiliative language than boys overall, whereas boys would have higher rates of assertive utterances (Lamb, 1978; Leaper & Ayres, 2007). More recently, there is evidence to suggest that the relationship between language and gender is more nuanced over the lifespan of a person. Some research into the nature of online communication suggests that women are more likely to use indirect speech as they grow (Park et al., 2016). Relatively little research has been done to examine these nuances in the speech of young children under different contexts, such as when they are with siblings or friends.

Siblings shape the social environment and development of young children in many cultures, as they are the first peers that children are exposed to. Friends, on the other hand, accomplish different goals in terms of developing a child's expectations for socially acceptable behavior outside of the home. It has been suggested that toddlers with same-sex siblings engage in more social behavior than those with opposite-sex siblings (Dunn & Kendrick, 1981). Little research exists, however, that attempts to explore differences or connections between speech with siblings and friends.

As part of a longitudinal study examining the assertive and affiliative language use of 4-year-olds, 7-year-olds, and 17-year-olds, we focused on the language of 7-year-olds during a free play task with their siblings and their friends. Specifically, we looked for differences in mitigation and valence of assertive and affiliative utterances with respect to gender and partner.

METHOD

Participants

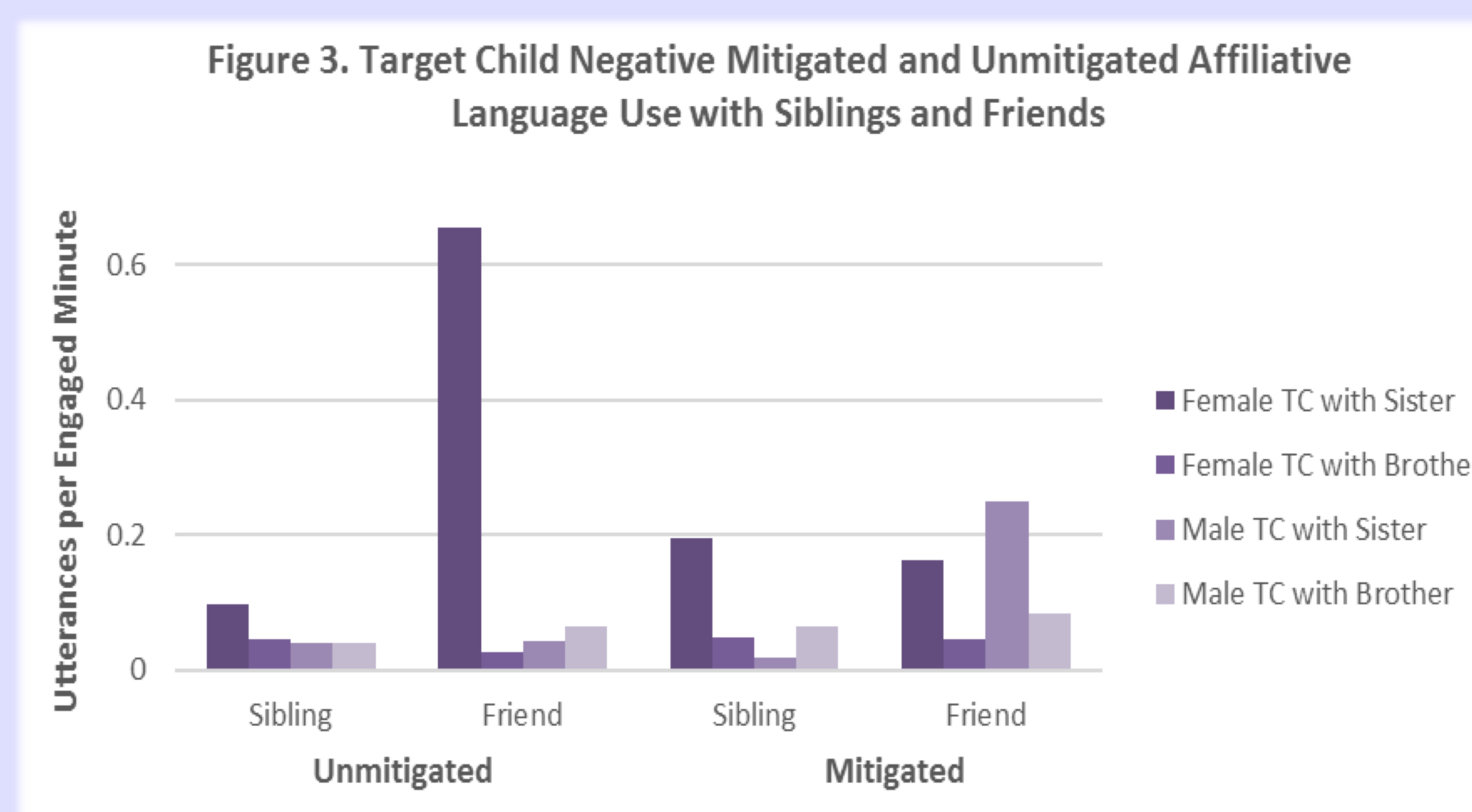
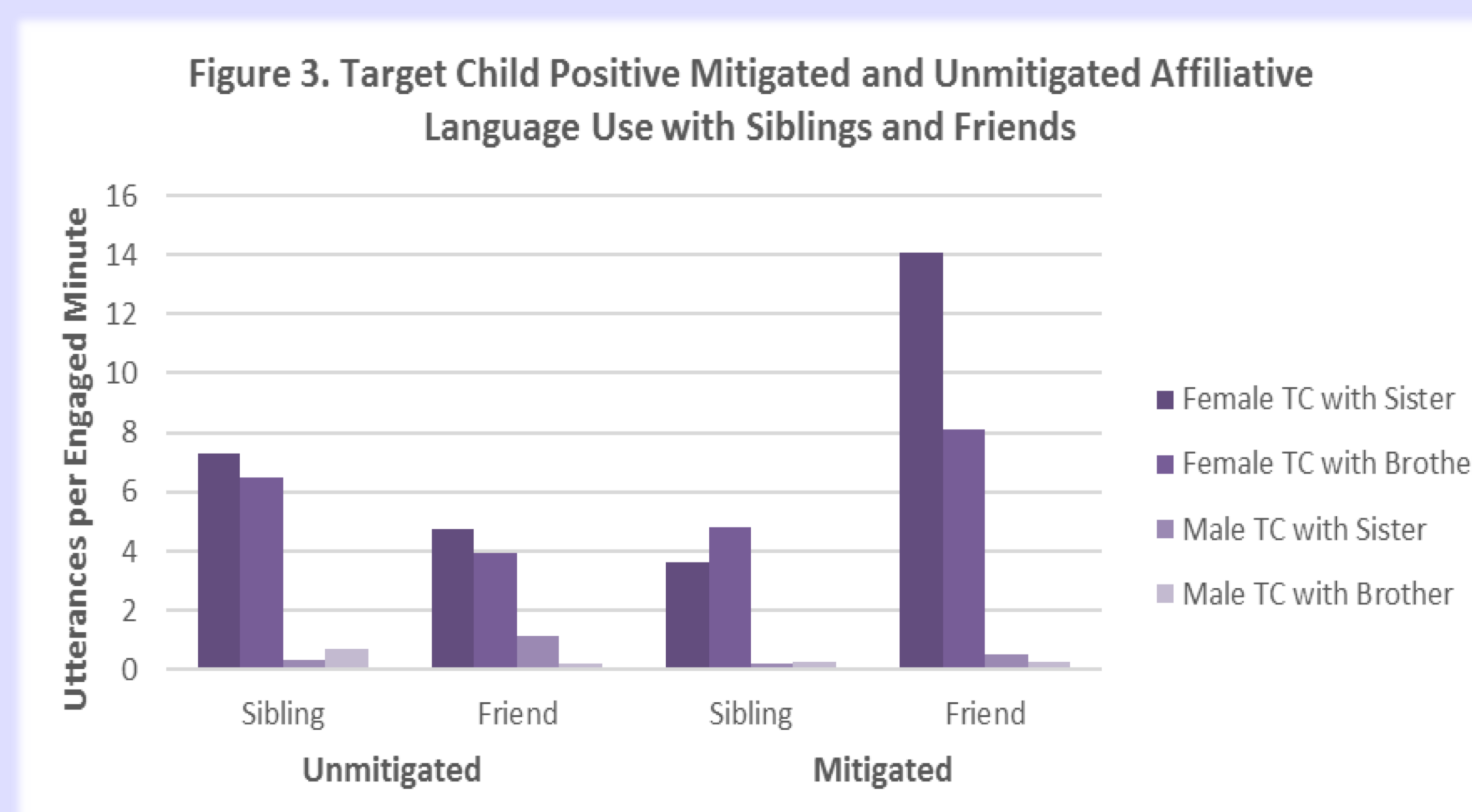
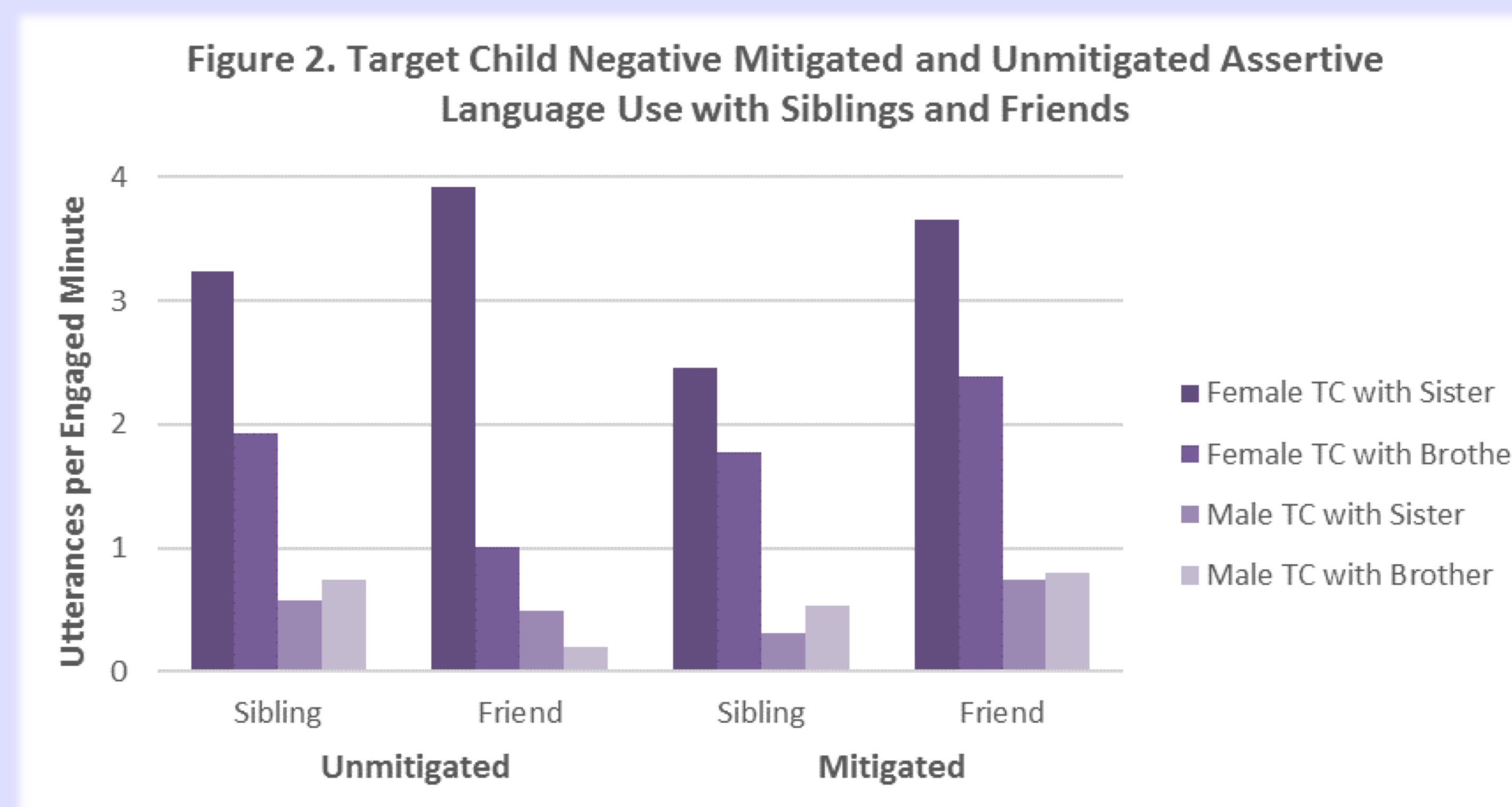
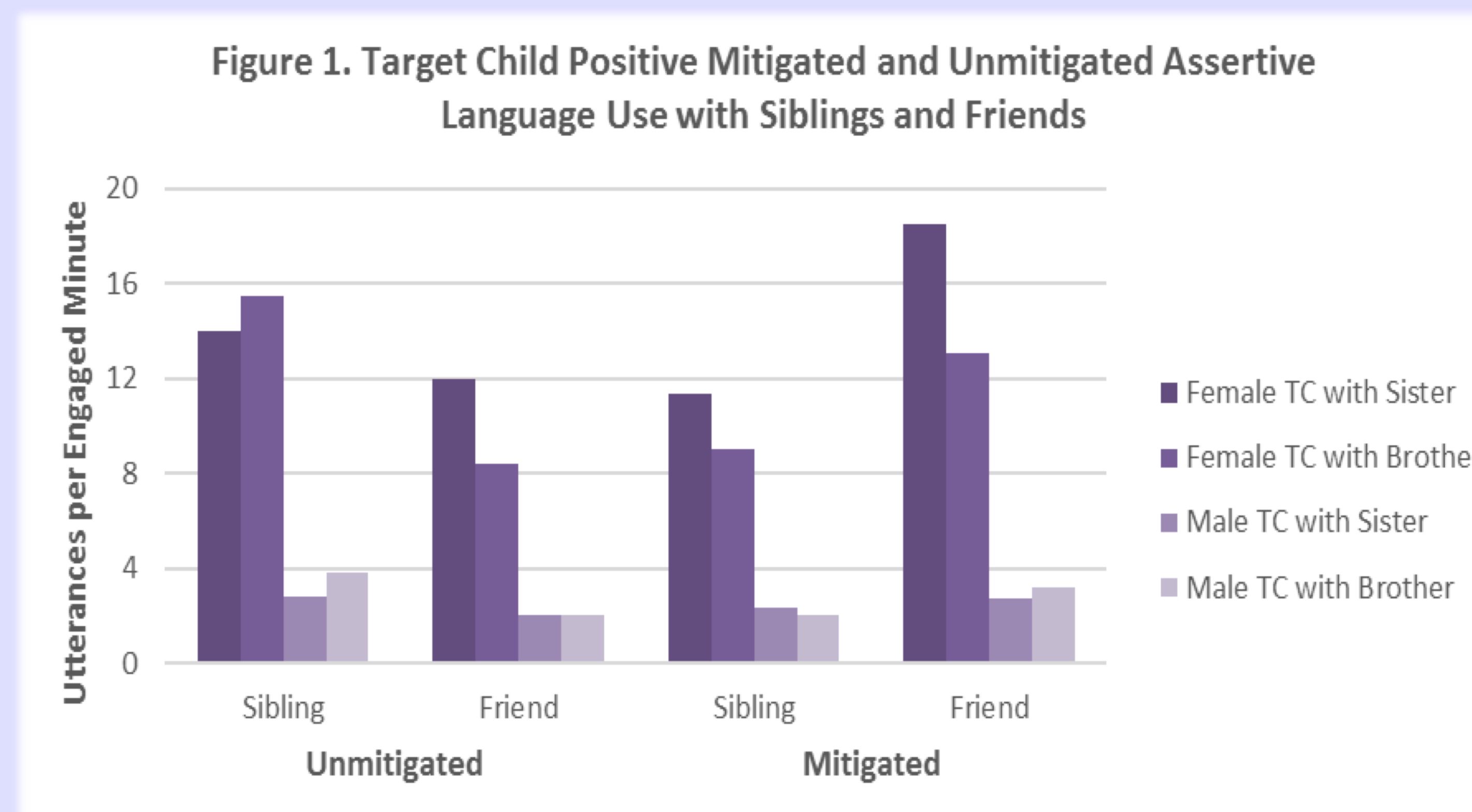
- 69 white, middle-class 7-year-old children living in Western New York
- Dyads were composed of a target child who was paired with both a sibling (within 15-30 months age difference) and a friend of the same age.
- Of the sibling pairs, nearly half were same-sex and half were mixed-sex; half of the target children had an older sibling, half a younger sibling.

Procedure

- 7-year-olds were videotaped during approximately 10-minute free play sessions, during which they played with either a farm or a village toy set.
- Tapes were transcribed and each utterance was coded for assertive and affiliative language use.
- Assertive language is goal-directed speech (e.g., intentions, directives, or rules), while affiliative language tends to be socially-oriented (seeking approval, continuing contact, or showing support).
- Within these categories, assertive and affiliative utterances could also be classified as positive or negative.
- Furthermore, some utterances were coded as mitigated, meaning that the speaker made the utterance softer or less direct.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Dr. Ganie DeHart for making this opportunity possible and for all of her guidance during the course of this study. Support for data collection was provided by the Geneseo Foundation.



RESULTS

Assertive Language

- There was a main effect of partner such that target children use more assertive language with their sibling than with their friend ($F = 4.071, p = .048$)
- There was an interaction between partner and mitigation; target children used more unmitigated assertive language with siblings than with friends and slightly more mitigated language with friends than with siblings ($F = 136.389, p < .001$).
- There was a four-way interaction between valence, mitigation, target child gender, and sibling gender. Target children with same-sex siblings produced more positive unmitigated utterances than target children with opposite-sex siblings. In addition, target children with same-sex siblings produced more negative mitigated utterances than children with opposite-sex siblings ($F = 4.851, p = .031$).

Affiliative Language

- There is a main effect of partner such that across all forms of affiliative language, target children used more affiliative language with siblings than with friends ($F = 4.093, p = .047$).
- There was a five way interaction of partner, valence, mitigation, target child gender, and sibling gender ($F = 4.833, p = .031$). While siblings use more affiliative language with siblings than friends, there are several exceptions. For female target children with female sisters, mitigated positive affiliative is used more frequently with friends than siblings. When female target children have brothers, they use more negative mitigated affiliative language with friends than with siblings. When male target children have sisters, their patterns are nearly opposite of the other children; they use more affiliative language with friends than with siblings, except for negative unmitigated affiliative.

DISCUSSION

Our results suggest that children use different types of language depending on the partner that they are interacting with. Furthermore, the fact that target children used more unmitigated assertive language with siblings compared to friends suggests that children are more direct in sibling interactions compared to friend interactions. These children may be more comfortable around their siblings and feel less obligated to be overly polite.

The four-way interaction between valence, mitigation, target child gender, and sibling gender suggests that children with same-sex siblings use more positive assertive language, and when they are negative, they are socialized to be less direct. Prior findings within this longitudinal study have indicated that having a same-sex sibling prepares a child more adequately for future interactions with same-sex friends. That is, if a child has an opposite-sex sibling, they are less equipped to interact with same-sex friends.

The five-way interaction between partner, valence, mitigation, target child gender, and sibling gender suggests that for each type of dyad except for boys with brothers, the amount of affiliative language used varies, depending on mitigation and valence. This result may suggest that boys with brothers are more attuned to interaction with male friends, which is reflective of the fact that the male relationship becomes more harmonious by age seven. This may boil down to the male tendency to play in groups, whereas females are more likely to interact one on one. As such, males may be more affiliative, since there is less necessary negotiation throughout the task.

REFERENCES

- Dunn J. & Kendrick, C. (1981). Social behavior of young children in the family context: Differences between same-sex and different-sex dyads. *Child Development, 52*, 1256-1273.
- Lamb, M. (1978). The development of sibling relationships in infancy: A short-term longitudinal study. *Child Development, 49*(4), 1189-1196.
- Leaper, C., & Smith, T. E. (2004). A meta-analytic review of gender variations in children's language use: Talkativeness, affiliative speech, and assertive speech. *Developmental Psychology, 40*(6), 993-1027.
- Park, G., Yaden, D. B., Schwartz, H. A., Kern, M. L., Eichstaedt, J. C., Kosinski, M., Stillwell, D., Ungar, L. H., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2016). Women are warmer but no less assertive than men: Gender and language on Facebook. *PLOS One, 11*(5), 1-26.