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Observed Conflict Behavior and Mothers' and Adolescents' Perceptions of 17-year-olds' Sibling and Friend Relationships

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Introduction

Adolescents' conflicts with siblings and friends have been studied in a variety of ways. However, there is little research examining how adolescents' observed conflicts with siblings and friends relate to mothers' or adolescents' perceptions of the relationships.

Mothers' opportunities to observe their adolescent children's interactions with siblings, and especially with friends, are more limited than during earlier phases of development. As a result, their perceptions of adolescents' relationships seem likely to be less in line with observed behavior than the adolescents' own perceptions.

Connections between perceptions of relationships and observed conflicts are particularly interesting to explore because conflicts seem likely to reveal multiple aspects of relationships, potentially both positive and negative. Examining conflicts that are averted may provide additional insights into positive aspects of both sibling and friend relationships.

Hypotheses

1. Mothers' perceptions of the sibling relationships would be more coherent and more strongly correlated with targets' perceptions than would their perceptions of the friendships.
2. Mothers' perceptions of the sibling relationships would be strongly correlated with observed conflict behavior than would their perceptions of the friendships.
3. Adolescents' perceptions of the two relationships would be equally correlated with their conflict behavior.

Method

Participants

- Thirty-five target adolescents (sixteen female, nineteen male) from white, middle-class American families

Procedure

- Adolescents were videotaped during cooking tasks with a sibling and a friend.
- Videos were transcribed and coded for conflict and averted conflict.
- Adolescents and mothers completed questionnaires rating the sibling and friend relationships on asymmetry, conflict, relational aggression, prosocial behavior/harmony, and intimacy

Data Analysis

- Relationships between observed conflict behavior, maternal questionnaire data, and target adolescent questionnaire data were analyzed using Pearson bivariate correlation coefficients.

Results

Mothers' & Targets' Perceptions of Sibling & Friend Relationships (Table 1):

- Sibling
 - Mothers' perceptions of harmony in sibling relationships were positively correlated with targets' perceptions of other positive dimensions (harmony and intimacy), and negatively correlated with targets' perceptions of conflict.
 - Mothers' perceptions of conflict were positively correlated with targets' perceptions of conflict, and negatively correlated with targets' perceptions of harmony.
 - Mothers' and targets' perceptions of intimacy were positively correlated.
 - Mothers' perceptions of relational aggression were negatively correlated with targets' perceptions of positive relationship characteristics (intimacy and harmony).
- Friend
 - No significant correlations between mothers' and targets' perceptions.

Table 1. Correlations between mothers' and targets' perceptions of sibling relationships

		Mothers' Perceptions				
Targets' Perceptions		Asymmetry	Harmony	Conflict	Intimacy	Relational Aggression
	Asymmetry	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
	Harmony	<i>ns</i>	$r = .454 (p < .001)$	$r = -.272 (p = .042)$	<i>ns</i>	$r = -.319 (p = .018)$
	Conflict	<i>ns</i>	$r = -.296 (p = .027)$	$r = .321 (p = .016)$	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
	Intimacy	<i>ns</i>	$r = .497 (p < .001)$	<i>ns</i>	$r = .507 (p < .001)$	$r = -.266 (p = .050)$
	Relational Aggression	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>

Correlations between Sibling Conflict Behaviors and Mothers' Perceptions

- ❖ Conflicts per Engaged Minute & Perception of Conflict
 - $r = .394 (p = .042)$
- ❖ Conflicts per Engaged Minute & Perception of Relational Aggression
 - $r = .451 (p = .018)$
- ❖ Percentage of Conflicts with Aggression & Perception of Asymmetry
 - $r = .588 (p = .002)$
- ❖ Mean Affective Intensity (Averted) & Perception of Relational Aggression
 - $r = .494 (p = .009)$

Correlations between Sibling Conflict Behaviors and Targets' Perceptions

- ❖ Averted Conflicts per Engaged Minute & Perception of Asymmetry
 - $r = .408 (p = .015)$
- ❖ Averted Conflicts per Engaged Minute & Perception of Intimacy
 - $r = -.411 (p = .014)$
- ❖ Percentage of Conflicts with Aggression & Perception of Asymmetry
 - $r = .385 (p = .043)$
- ❖ Mean Affective Intensity (Averted) & Perception of Asymmetry
 - $r = .371 (p = 0.40)$

Correlations between Friend Conflict Behaviors and Mothers' Perceptions

- ❖ Conflicts per Engaged Minute & Perception of Harmony
 - $r = -.397 (p = .041)$
- ❖ Conflicts per Engaged Minute & Perception of Conflict
 - $r = .392 (p = .048)$
- ❖ Conflicts per Engaged Minute & Perception of Relational Aggression
 - $r = .433 (p = .034)$

Correlations between Friend Conflict Behaviors and Targets' Perceptions

- ❖ Percentage of Averted Conflicts with Aggression & Perception of Asymmetry
 - $r = .698 (p < .001)$

Discussion

All three hypotheses were supported to some extent. The results suggest that adolescents' insight into their own relationships may be more limited and that mothers' perspectives on their adolescent children's relationships may be more grounded in reality than expected. However, there are more significant correlations related to mothers' perceptions of sibling relationships, suggesting that mothers have a more accurate perception of their children's relationships with their siblings than of their relationships with their friends. Additionally, adolescents may be more aware of conflict in their sibling relationships than in their friendships, possibly because sibling relationships have more conflict in general.