

Abstract

As part of a longitudinal study, we examined sibling and friend conflicts in semi-structured closed-field situations in early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence. We defined averted conflict as an oppositional or provocative behavior that is not immediately reciprocated by the partner, either verbal or behavioral. Our data showed more averted conflicts for sibling pairs than friends at all three periods; there was an increase in averted conflicts from early to middle childhood but a decrease from middle childhood to adolescence.

Introduction

As part of a longitudinal study, we examined sibling and friend-averted conflicts in semi-structured situations from early childhood through adolescence. In previous studies, we found higher rates of conflict between siblings than between friends in early and middle childhood, but not in adolescence. We also found that many sibling-friend differences in conflict characteristics decrease from early childhood to adolescence as friend conflicts became more similar to sibling conflicts. The present study examines averted conflicts between siblings and friends in these age groups to see if these findings hold true in situations where a potential conflict is avoided.

We define conflicts as exchanges containing mutual opposition and averted conflicts as oppositional physical or verbal behavior that the partner does not reciprocate. In extending this study to focus on averted conflicts, we expected that: (1) averted conflicts would be more frequent between friends than between siblings, due to a desire on the part of friends to avoid outright conflict, and (2) sibling and friend averted conflicts would become more similar over time, as sibling relationships become increasingly symmetrical and friendships become more intimate and familiar.

Methods

Participants

- Twelve target children (5 female, 7 male) from white, middle-class American families were videotaped at their homes in separate sessions with a sibling and a friend at ages 4, 7, and 17.
- Siblings were 15-30 months older or younger than the target children; 7 of the siblings were female, 5 male.
- All friends were the same age and gender as the target child.

Procedure

- At ages 4 and 7 (Time 1 and Time 2), children engaged in free play with experimenter-provided toys intended to foster social pretend play.
- At age 17 (Time 3), participants cooked with their sibling and friend, making pizza with one partner, brownies with the other.
- The videotapes were transcribed and coded for averted conflicts.
- We defined averted conflicts as oppositional physical or verbal behavior that is not reciprocated by the partner.

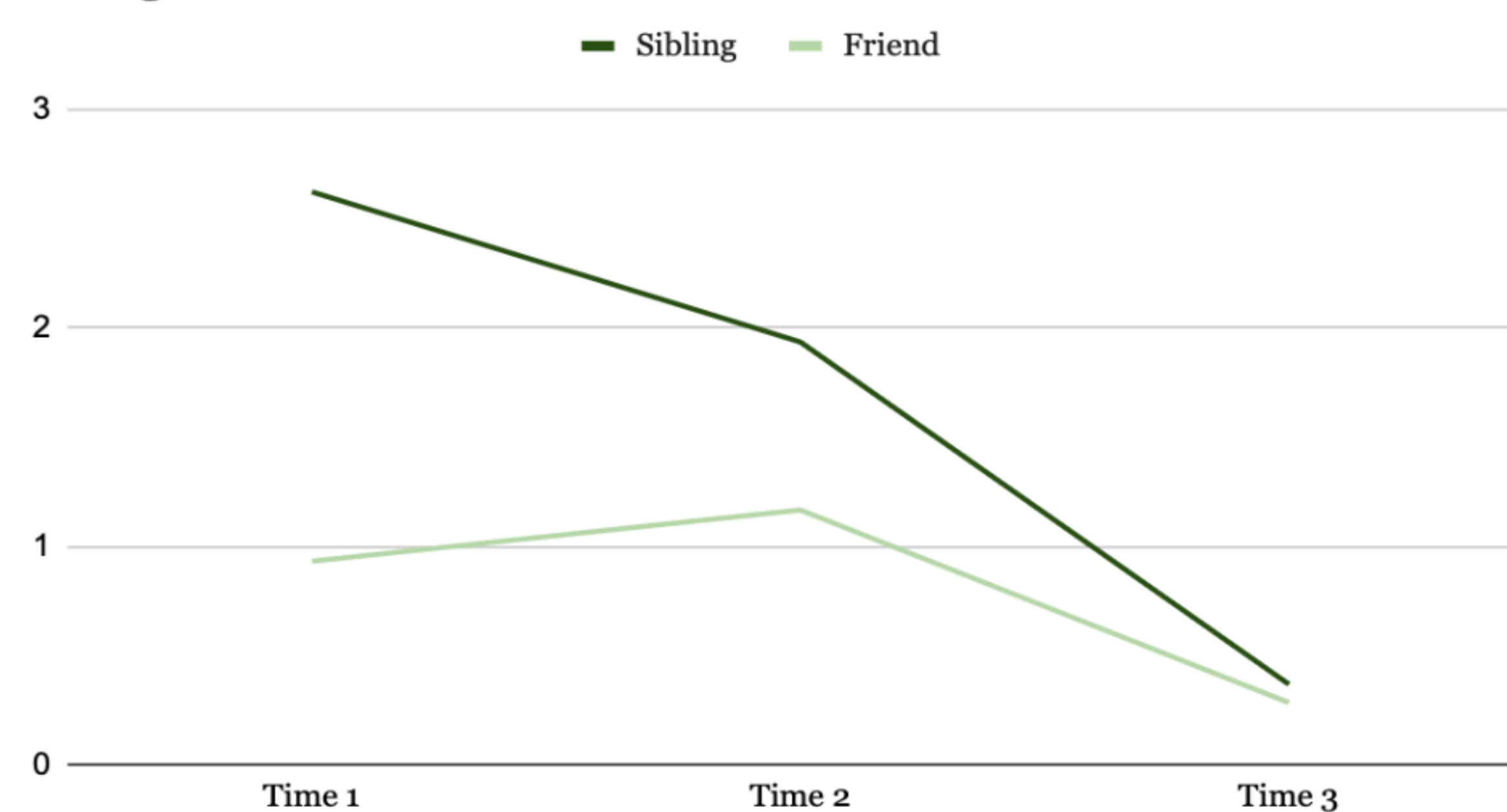
Methods cont'd

- Once averted conflicts were identified, they were coded for issue (object possession, behavior, plans, and ideas or facts) and response of partner (non-response, surrender, disengagement, distraction, and negotiation).

Data Analysis

Rate and characteristics of averted conflict were analyzed using separate 2 (partner) x 3 (time) x 2 (target child gender) x 2 (sibling gender) repeated-measures ANOVAs.

Sibling and Friend



	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	Sibling	Friend	Sibling	Friend	Sibling	Friend
% Object Possession	24.09%	21.74%	21.48%	13.57%	0.52%	0.00%
% Total Behavior	59.83%	51.99%	49.30%	47.99%	81.62%	77.08%
% Plans for Play	8.70%	8.92%	13.13%	14.79%	6.12%	2.09%
% Ideas or Facts	6.72%	14.84%	20.77%	22.90%	11.17%	19.73%

Table 1. Averted Conflict Issues

	Time 1		Time 2		Time 3	
	Sibling	Friend	Sibling	Friend	Sibling	Friend
% No Response	41.50%	34.09%	3.01%	43.98%	61.01%	52.62%
% Surrender	41.66%	42.92%	1.69%	51.84%	36.92%	41.18%
% Disengagement	2.95%	5.51%	2.57%	1.41%	0.000%	0.0041%
% Distraction	1.72%	1.22%	44.25%	1.44%	0.000%	0.00%
% Negotiation	3.21%	5.65%	48.48%	2.63%	2.08%	4.86%

Table 2. Averted Conflict Termination Strategies

Results

Rate of averted conflict per engaged minute (Figure 1):

- Across all three ages, siblings engaged in more averted conflicts than friends ($p = .002$)
- There was a time-by-partner effect where siblings engaged in more averted conflicts than friends at time 1 and time 3 but not at time 2 ($p = .05$)

Averted conflict issues (Table 1)

- Both siblings and friends had more averted conflicts involving object possession at Time 1 than at Time 2, and none at all at Time 3.

Results cont'd

- For both siblings and friends, averted conflicts involving the partner's behavior decreased marginally from Time 1 to Time 2, but increased from Time 2 to Time 3 ($p = .056$). There was also a time x target child gender effect ($p = .005$); girls had more averted conflicts involving their partner's behavior than boys did at Time 2, but not at Time 1 or Time 3.
- At all three times, siblings had more averted conflicts involving plans than friends did ($p = .013$). However, there was also a significant partner x target child gender effect ($p = .013$); the partner difference held true only for target girls.
- Friends had more averted conflicts involving ideas or facts than siblings did at all three times ($p = .05$).

Averted conflict response of partner (Table 2)

- Siblings were more likely to end averted conflicts with non-response than friends were ($p < .001$).
- At Time 1 and Time 3 siblings were more likely to end averted conflicts by surrendering than friends were ($p < .001$); at Time 2 friends were more likely to use surrender. However, there was also a partner by time by target child gender effect ($p = .048$). At Time 1, only boys were more likely to use surrender with siblings than with friends; at Time 3 only girls were.
- There were no significant effects for disengagement.
- For distraction, there was a partner effect ($p < .001$) and a time effect ($p < .001$), but there was also a time by partner effect ($p < .001$). At Time 1, there was no difference between siblings' and friends' use of distraction; at Time 2, siblings used distraction much more than friends, and at Time 3, neither pair used distraction.

Discussion

In essence, this study illuminates the multifaceted nature of conflict resolution in sibling and friend relationships, providing valuable insights into the developmental trajectories and contributing factors that shape these dynamics over time. Contrary to our expectations, siblings were found to engage in more averted conflicts than friends. It is possible that the rate of averted conflicts is higher for siblings simply because oppositional behaviors, whether reciprocated or not, are more common during sibling interactions. Further analysis to examine this possibility is needed. Interestingly, a time-by-partner effect was observed, suggesting variations in conflict resolution strategies over time. Gender differences also played a role, with variations in averted conflicts between male and female participants across different time points.

Moreover, termination strategies differed between siblings and friends, with siblings resorting more to non-response and surrender tactics. These findings contribute to our understanding of conflict resolution dynamics within sibling and friend relationships and underscore the importance of considering developmental and gender factors in such interactions.