

Quality of Social Engagement Between Siblings and Friends During Early and Middle Childhood

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the quality of interactions between siblings and friends at ages 4 and 7 during free play. The quality of their social engagement depended on their age and their play partner.

INTRODUCTION

As part of an ongoing longitudinal study, we examined the amount and quality of social engagement during sibling and friend interaction on freeplay tasks in early and middle childhood. Past research has established that children generally spend a greater proportion of time actively engaged with friends than with siblings; however, the amount of engagement does not tell the whole story. Some sibling and friend pairs spend the most of their time engaging with each other positively, while others are engaged but arguing or otherwise negatively interacting. Relationships change as children grow, and we wanted to investigate whether age and gender affect siblings' and friends' tendencies to engage positively, negatively, or neutrally. Investigating these concepts further allows us to learn more about the complexity of sibling and friend relationships as children develop.

METHOD

Participants

We analyzed the interactions of 40 white, middle-class American children with siblings and friends at ages 4 and 7. All sibling pairs were 15-30 months apart in age; half were same-gender, half opposite-gender.

Procedure

For both age groups, dyads were videotaped at home in semi-structured situations during separate sibling and friend visits. To foster social interaction, children were given either a village or farm scene to play with as they saw fit.

The videotapes were transcribed and coded for social engagement at 10-second intervals. Intervals during which the children were socially engaged were further coded for quality of engagement (positive, neutral, or negative). For this study, only intervals during which the children's quality of engagement matched were included; that is, both children's engagement had to be coded as positive, neutral, or negative.

Data Analysis

Relative occurrence of positive, negative, and neutral engagement was analyzed using separate 2 (time) x (partner) x 2 (target child gender) x 2 (sibling gender) repeated-measures ANOVAs.

Figure 1a. Social Engagement Quality at Time 1.

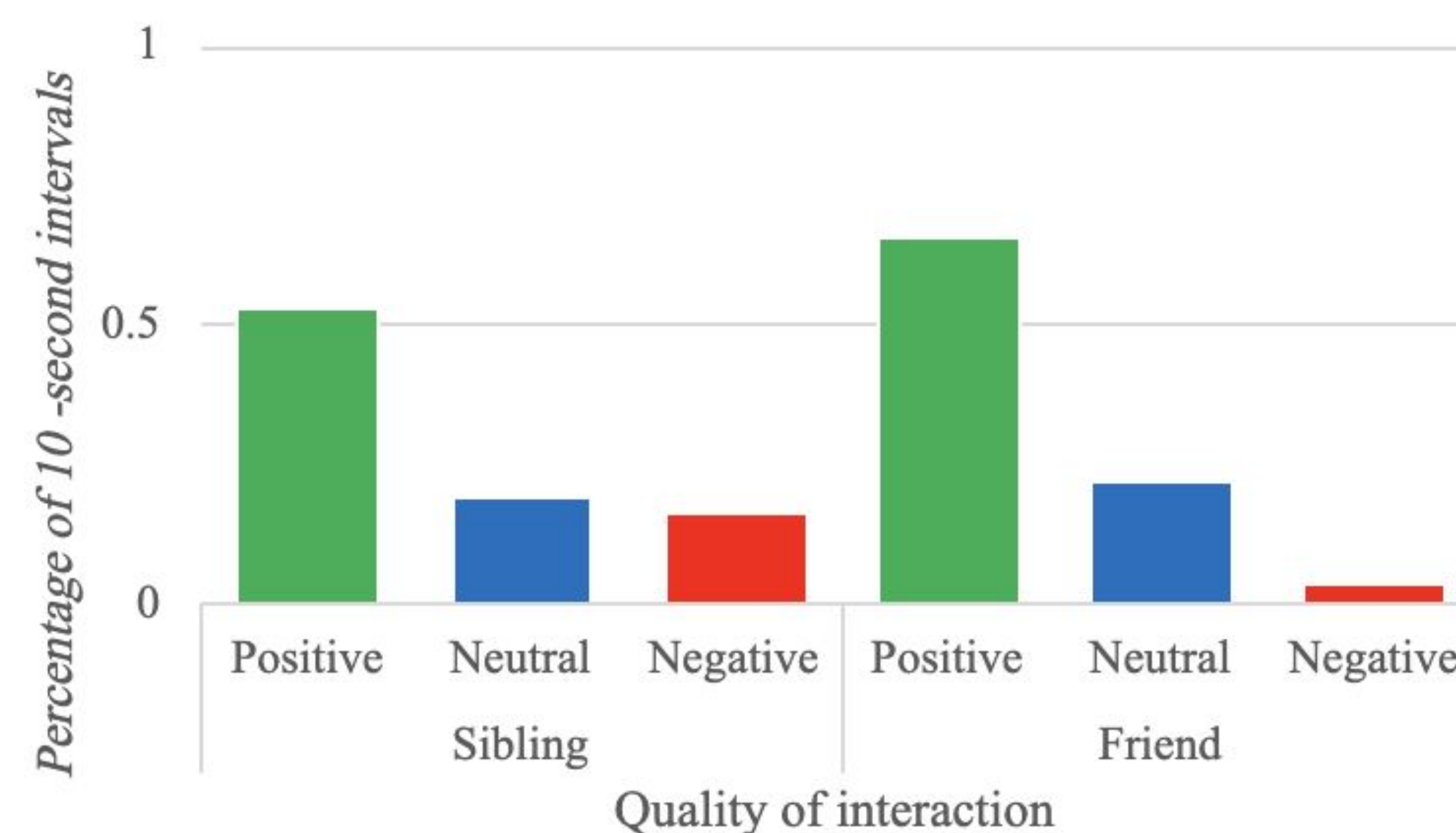
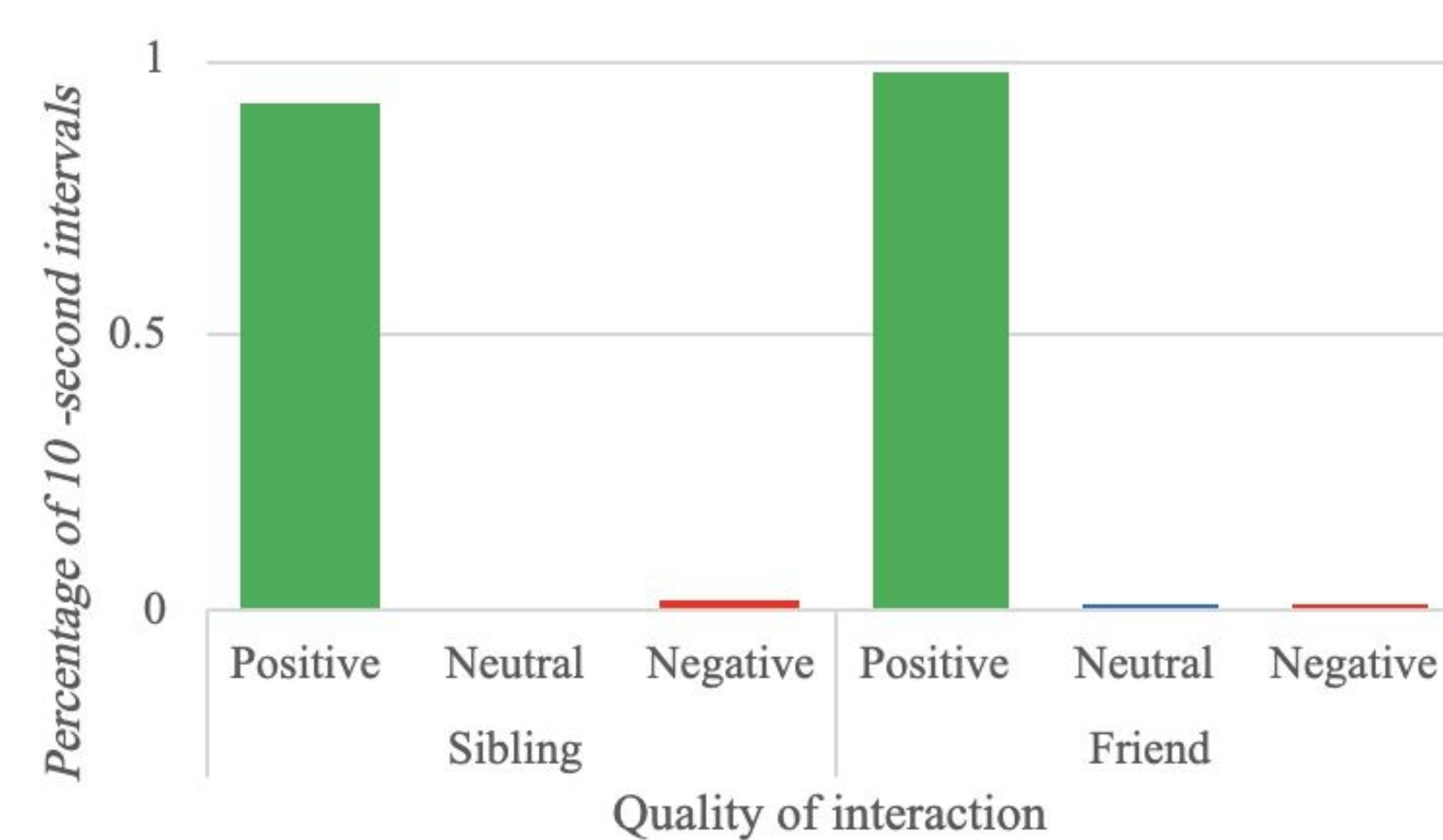


Figure 1b. Social Engagement Quality at Time 2.



RESULTS

For the sake of clarity, social engagement quality data for Time 1 are displayed in Figure 1; those for Time 2 are displayed in Figure 2. Data analyses were conducted across both times.

Positive social engagement

- Overall, interactions between friends were significantly more positive than sibling interactions ($p < .001$).
- For both siblings and friends, interactions at Time 2 were significantly more positive than interactions at Time 1 ($p = .011$).
- However, there was also a partner x time effect; friend interactions were more positive than sibling interactions only at Time 1

Negative social engagement

- Overall, sibling interactions were more negative than friend interactions ($p = .004$).
- For both siblings and friends, interactions at Time 1 were significantly more negative than interactions at Time 2 ($p = .001$).
- However, there was also a partner x time effect; sibling interactions were more negative than friend interactions only at Time 1 ($p = .012$).

Neutral social engagement

- Because of empty cells, it was not possible to conduct an analysis of variance for neutral social engagement.
- However, neutral social engagement was only present to any extent at Time 1; at that time, siblings and friends were equally likely to engage in neutral social engagement.
- At Time 2 neutral engagement was very rare for friends, and siblings did not show any neutral engagement at all.

DISCUSSION

As expected, the majority of interactions between both siblings and friends were positive. This is especially apparent at Time 2; at Time 1, the quality of interactions is about half positive and half negative or neutral. By middle childhood, interactions are almost entirely positive.

The increased positivity at Time 2 could be due to increased social competence, but it is also possible that social desirability plays a role in interactions that are captured on video. Seven-year-olds may be more conscious of the camera and are likely to be both more aware of what is socially acceptable and more able to control their behavior while on camera.

Overall, our research highlights the complexity of friendships and sibling relationships and emphasizes how crucial it is to look at both the volume and quality of social contacts in order to comprehend how children develop socially.



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