

Abstract

As part of a longitudinal study, 7- and 17-year-olds' use of assertive and affiliative language was examined during sibling and friend interactions. Gender, relationship, and age all made a difference in rates of assertive and affiliative language use. Gender effects did not match previous peer findings at either age.

Introduction

Research on gender differences in children's use of affiliative and assertive language has focused primarily on naturalistic observation of interactions with same-gender peers. Studies (e.g. Leaper & Ayres, 2007) have suggested that boys use more assertive language than girls do, and that girls tend to use more affiliative language. More recent studies have also observed that assertive and affiliative language use may depend more on context and interpersonal relationships than on gender alone (Merrill, N., Gallo, E., & Fivush, R. (2015). Past studies in our lab have suggested that gender differences observed in peer interactions are not always seen in sibling interactions.

Method

Participants:

66 white, middle-class children living in western New York. The target children were filmed participating in tasks separately with a friend of the same age and with a sibling, at age 7 and age 17. Half of the sibling pairs were same-gender dyads and the other half were mixed-gender dyads.

Procedures:

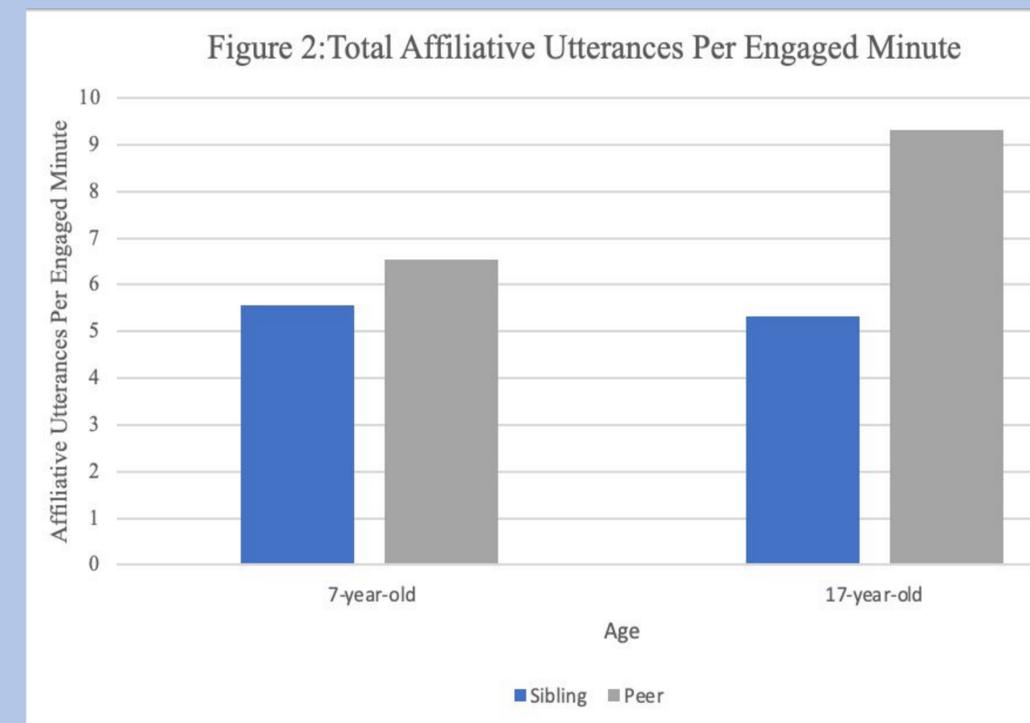
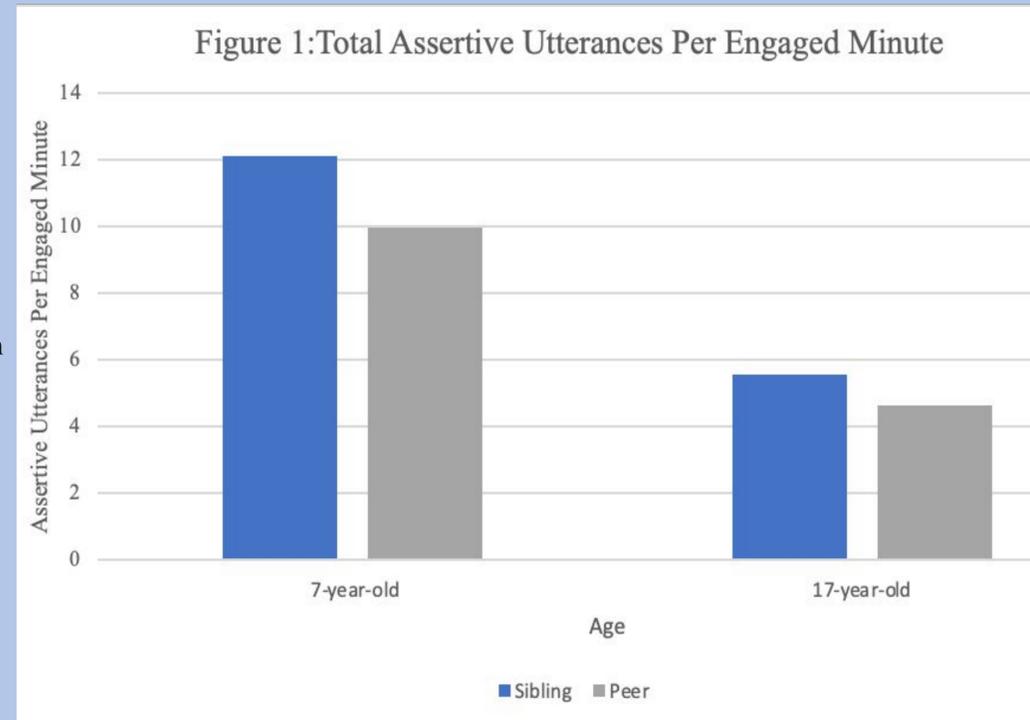
The 7-year-olds were filmed doing a construction task. The 17-year-olds were filmed doing a cooking task (making brownies or pizza). These videos were transcribed and coded for assertive and affiliative language. *Assertive utterances* were defined as those used primarily to accomplish a goal. *Affiliative utterances* were those intended primarily to establish or maintain contact with others. Utterances were further coded as positive or negative, and as mitigated (softer directives) or unmitigated.

Analyses:

Behaviors were analyzed using separate 2 (partner) x 2 (task) x 2 (target child gender) x 2 (sibling gender) repeated measures analyses of variance.

Results

- For total rate of assertive utterances, there was a partner effect ($p = .002$), with siblings using more assertive language than friends.
- For total rate of affiliative utterances, there was a partner x time interaction ($p = .05$), with friends using more affiliative language than siblings at age 17 but not at age 7. There was also a significant partner x time x target child gender interaction ($p = .016$). Girls used more affiliative language with their friends at age 17, whereas boys used more affiliative language with siblings at age 7.
- For mitigated assertive utterances, there was a significant partner effect ($p < .001$); friends were more likely to use mitigated assertive language than siblings were.



References

- Leaper, C., & Ayres, M. M. (2007). A meta-analytic review of gender variations in adults' language use: Talkativeness, affiliative speech, and assertive speech. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 11(4), 328–363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868307302221>
- Merrill, N., Gallo, E., & Fivush, R. (2015). Gender differences in family dinnertime conversations. *Discourse Processes*, 52(7), 533–558. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163853X.2014.958425>

Results Cont.

- Similarly, there was a significant partner effect for mitigated affiliative utterances ($p = .002$), with friends using more mitigated affiliative language than siblings.
- For positive assertive utterances, there was a significant partner x sibling gender effect ($p = .033$). Friends used more positive assertive language with target children who had brothers, whereas siblings used more positive assertive language with target children who had sisters.

Table 1. Percentage of Positive Assertive, Mitigated Assertive, and Mitigated Affiliative Utterances

	7-year-old		17-year-old	
	Sibling	Friend	Sibling	Friend
% Positive Assertive Utterances	0.5534	0.5085	0.551	0.584
% Mitigated Assertive Utterances	0.1118	0.1645	0.4241	0.5173
% Mitigated Affiliative Utterances	0.0158	0.0253	0.0614	0.0737

Discussion

Contrary to much previous research, gender played a relatively minor role in children's use of affiliative and assertive language. Overall, partner and age were more important variables. Both target child gender and sibling gender were significant only in interaction with partner and/or time. These results disagree with past research, but highlight that research can not make blanket statements about gender influence without accounting for other important variables and context.

Context is extremely important in determining what language friends and siblings use. The construction task for the 7-year-olds and the cooking/baking task for the 17-year-olds could also have influenced participants' language use; for example, both tasks may have particularly favored the use of assertive statements.