The Role of Evaluator-Victim Relationships in Children’s Evaluations of Peer Provocation

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Abstract

Second-, third-, fifth-, and sixth-grade children evaluated two hypothetical target peers in three provocation scenarios which differed as to the intent of a provocative act (Ambiguous, Accidental, Hostile). In addition to age and gender, evaluator–victim relationship was manipulated with children portrayed as being in a best friend, an acquaintance, or an enemy relationship with the victim, while the agent of the provocation was an unfamiliar peer. Evaluations were assessed in terms of attributions of aggressor’s intentions, behavior response of the victim, evaluator’s liking for victim, and evaluator’s affect. Results indicated that older children evaluated aggressor’s intentions and victim’s behavior response more negatively than did younger children. Further, attributions of aggressor’s intent significantly predicted the victim’s subsequent behavioral response. Evaluator’s affect was reported to be more negative when evaluating hostile provocation compared to accidental or ambiguous provocation and evaluators in acquaintance and enemy relationships with the victim reported liking the victim more after the provocation than before it occurred. Results are discussed in terms of the social relational and social situational influences on children’s evaluations of peer interactions and the need to integrate these contextual factors in children’s person perception research.

Keywords: Peer conflict; peer relationships; victim; person perception

Peer conflict in general, and aggression in particular, do not operate in a social vacuum; there are observers and third-party participants who witness and evaluate these situations. Certainly the evaluations of observers influence not only future interactions between aggressors and victims, but also influence interactions of the children with the observers as well as the atmosphere of the peer group. Research investigating aggressors and their victims have found that children generally dislike both aggressors and the victims of aggressive behaviors (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). But what is the influence of the prior social relationship between the observer and the children engaged in the aggressive episode? The current study manipulated the dyadic social relationship (best friends, acquaintances, enemies) between the evalua-
tor (observer) and victim. In addition, we manipulated the type of conflict situation in terms of the portrayed intent of the aggressor (hostile, ambiguous, accidental).

Models of children’s social-information processing (e.g., Crick & Dodge, 1994) assume that how a child conceptualizes and evaluates the social information of a given social situation determines in part how that child will react or behave towards others. Darley, Klosson, and Zanna (1978) and Rule, Nesdaile, and McAra (1974) found that a child’s attribution of another child’s intentions influenced subsequent behavior. If attributions of intent were positive the subsequent behavior response was positive and if attributions of intent were negative the behavior response that followed also was negative. Further, Dodge and his colleague (e.g., Dodge & Frame, 1982; Dodge, Pettit, McClaskey & Brown, 1986) have shown that deviations or deficiencies in children’s processing of social information are linked to subsequent inappropriate social behaviors. The enactment of these behaviors are, in turn, evaluated by others (peers) as socially acceptable or socially unacceptable. Evaluations of behavior by the peer group facilitates the development of a social reputation or social status. Once formed, a social reputation influences other’s evaluations of future behaviors and thus maintains particular behavior patterns (Hymel, Wagner & Butler, 1990). In short, and consistent with Crick and Dodge’s (1994) social information processing model, the interpretation of current social cues will be influenced by prior knowledge about the participants.

Investigating the attributional processes second-, fourth-, and sixth-grade children engaged in when evaluating negative outcomes of a peer, Dodge (1980) reported a bias in children’s evaluations of a target peer’s behavior depending on the aggressive reputation of the target. Aggressive targets were evaluated more negatively than their nonaggressive counterparts with regard to intentions behind their behavior. Further, aggressive children were perceived to be acting in a hostile manner while nonaggressive children were not, when performing similar, ambiguous as to intent, behaviors. Hymel (1986) reported that children varied their evaluation of social information as a function of prior affect (liking vs. disliking) towards the target peer and valence of the target’s behavior (positive vs. negative). Children perceived positive behaviors performed by liked targets as more stable than positive behaviors performed by disliked targets. Further, negative behaviors performed by disliked targets where perceived as more stable than when the same behavior was performed by a liked target. Liked targets where perceived as being more responsible for positive as opposed to negative behaviors, whereas disliked targets were held equally responsible for both positive and negative behaviors. Interestingly, both perceptions of the actual behavior and attributions of intentions were dependent on the social reputation of the target. Investigating dyadic relationships, Ray and Cohen (1995; 1997) reported that children evaluated conflicts between best friends more positively than conflicts between enemies, particularly when intentions of the peer aggressor were unclear (ambiguous). From these studies on social-information processing it appears that what matters to children evaluating the interactions of others is not only the behavioral act itself but also the social reputation of the target and the situational context in which the behavior occurs.

Of the evaluator’s characteristics that influence children’s processing of social information, those receiving the most attention have been age of evaluator, sex of evaluator, and social reputation of the evaluator. Crick and Dodge (1994) claim that children’s social knowledge base changes as children get older. Research has shown that children’s ability to use social information and trait dispositions in reasoning
about others in social situations develops significantly during the elementary school years (Shantz, 1983). For example, Hymel (1986) reported no differences between second- and fifth-grade students’ evaluations of peer behavior. However, a tenth-grade sample evaluated disliked target peers’ behaviors as being more internally caused than similar behaviors performed by liked peers. Investigating second-, fourth- and sixth grade children, Waas and Honer (1990) reported older boys to be more negative than younger children in their evaluations of sociometrically defined rejected status children and to be more likely to personally reject the peer and blame them for future negative interactions. Further, Dodge (1980) as reviewed above, reported that while the bias to perceive aggressive children more negatively than non-aggressive children was evident in all children, the bias was strongest with older children. Thus, in a general sense, children’s perceptions and evaluations of others’ behavior become increasingly critical as they get older.

Children’s evaluations of others’ behavior also varies as a function of gender of the evaluator. Waas (1991) reported that girls were more likely than boys to attribute the cause of a negative social event to stable patterns of behavior. That is, girls were more likely to view conflict situations as resulting from stable behavior patterns while boys viewed conflict as internally caused and unjustified. Further, when making dispositional evaluations of targets, boys were more negative than girls. Whalen, Henker, Dotemoto, & Hinshaw (1983) reported that girls were generally more positive in their assessment of hypothetical peers (normal and atypical targets) than were boys and perceived greater behavioral differences between the different types of targets than did boys. Whalen et al., (1983) speculated that these gender differences resulted from girls tendency to view non-normative behavior less negatively than boys. More recently, Ray and Cohen (1995) reported that when attributing intentions to a target peer’s behavior, girls evaluated the target’s intent as less negative than did boys. Together, these finding may reflect a more general pattern evident in the adult literature (e.g., Gurwitz & Dodge, 1975) showing females as having more positive attitudes about others than males.

Another interesting variable influencing children’s evaluations of others is the evaluator’s reputation (group standing) within the peer group. In general, first- through fifth- grade sociometrically defined rejected children (Feldman & Dodge, 1987), second- through eighth- grade aggressive children (Dodge, 1980; Dodge et al., 1986), and kindergarten- through eighth- grade aggressive-rejected children (Dodge & Frame, 1982; Sancilio, Plumert, & Hartup, 1989; Waas, 1988) reason about certain social situations differently (labeled ‘hostile attribution bias’) than other children. When presented with an ambiguous provocation (i.e., intentions that are neither clearly accidental or clearly intentional) by a peer they were more likely than other children to interpret the provocation situation as hostile. As a consequence of this hostile attribution bias, these children were more likely to react with an aggressive act of their own. In comparison, nonaggressive popular status children attributed the intent of an ambiguous provocation as accidental and reacted in a non-aggressive manner.

Children’s social reputations at the dyadic (e.g., friendship) relationship level have also been investigated (e.g., Ray & Cohen, 1995; 1997; Sancilio et al., 1989). Sancilio et al. (1989), found that third- and fifth grade children reported that the friendship between a child and the target being evaluated had no influence on the attribution of that target peer’s intentions or behavioral response. That is, children evaluated the intentions and behavior of friends and nonfriends similarly. Sancilio et al. (1989)
suggested this finding of no difference may result because friends were clearly liked by the evaluator, but nonfriends were not clearly disliked. They noted further that while no differences emerged between children evaluating a friend or a nonfriend in various ambiguous situations, unambiguous provocative behavior may serve as a better setting to highlight conflict related differences in children’s evaluations of friend and nonfriend behavior. The present study directly addresses this issue by investigating the influence of positive (e.g., best friend), neutral (e.g., acquaintance), and negative (e.g., enemy) evaluator-target relationships on children’s evaluations of peer provocation in both ambiguous and unambiguous (e.g., accidental and hostile) situations.

Clearly one’s social reputation within a given peer group, whether at the general peer group standing level (social status) or at the dyadic social relationship level (friendship), influence children’s evaluations in two important ways. Not only does one’s social reputation influence how others view them, it also influences how they, as observers, perceive and evaluate others. Research investigating the influence of the target’s social reputation on children’s evaluations of social interactions as reviewed above is well developed at the general, peer group standing level (e.g., Dodge, 1980; Hymel, et al., 1990) and to a lesser degree at the dyadic friendship level (Ray & Cohen, 1995; 1997). Further, there is mounting evidence that one’s social reputation at the peer group standing level influences evaluations made about others (Dodge, 1980; Dodge & Frame, 1982; Dodge et al., 1986). However, little research has investigated how one’s reputation at the dyadic relationship level influences children’s perceptions and evaluations of others.

The Present Study

The main purpose of the present study was to investigate the influence of social relationships on children’s evaluations of peers in potential conflict situations. To address this issue, the social relationship between the evaluator (participants in the study) and the victim in the peer provocation situations was manipulated. Extending research documenting how affect can bias perceptions of social behavior (e.g., Hymel, 1986; Ray & Cohen, 1995; 1997), type of evaluator-victim relationship was predicted to influence children’s evaluations of peer provocation. The more positive the evaluator-victim relationship (e.g., best friends) the more positive the evaluations of the victim’s behavior and evaluator’s liking for victim. However, when evaluating the aggressor, the more positive the evaluator-victim relationship the more negative the evaluation of aggressor’s intentions and the more negative children’s liking for the aggressor.

A second goal of the present study was to investigate the influence contextual-setting cue differences (e.g., intentions) had on children’s evaluations of social behavior. Previous research (e.g., Dodge, 1980; Dodge & Frame, 1982; Sancilio et al., 1989) has documented that children’s evaluations of peer conflict vary as a function of the type of intention cues given. In the present study, we predicted that children would evaluate benign provocation situations (e.g., accidental) in a nonhostile, nonthreatening manner and evaluate negative provocation situations (e.g., hostile) in a negative deliberately way. Further, we predicted that the ambiguous provocation situation would be evaluated positively. There is evidence (e.g., Ray & Cohen, 1995; 1997) that children’s evaluations of peers are influenced by a combination of the social relationship between targets being evaluated and type of provocation.
situation. Thus it was hypothesized that evaluations of the victim who was best friends with the evaluator in the hostile scenario would be perceived as positive and evaluations of the victim who was an enemy with the evaluator would be seen as negative during the accidental scenario.

Lastly, due to the developmental trend in the literature documenting older children having more negative evaluations of social behavior (El-Sheikh & Cheskes 1995; Waas & Honer, 1990) we predicted that 11-year-old children’s evaluations of target peers would be more negative than 8-year-old children’s evaluations.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 59 boys and 78 girls from grades 2 and 3 ($n = 66$; mean age = 8 years, 8 months) and grades 5 and 6 ($n = 71$; mean age = 11 years, 5 months). All children attended a public elementary school. Approximately 60% of the sample was European American, and 40% was African American. Families of these children were predominantly middle class socioeconomic status. Written parental consent was obtained for all participants. Participating children also gave written consent. All participants were told that while we appreciated their help, they did not have to participate if they did not want to and could stop at any time.

**Materials**

*Evaluator-Victim Relationship Type Vignettes.* Three audiorecorded Evaluator-Victim Relationship Type (Best Friend, Neutral Acquaintance, Enemy) vignettes were constructed (see Appendix A). The Best Friend vignette focused on trust and intimacy and behavioral reciprocities between evaluator (participants in the study) and victim such as sharing and cooperation that distinguish best friends from other types of social relationships (Hartup, 1983). The Neutral Acquaintance vignette presented the evaluator and victim as unacquainted, having not formed a judgment of each other; thus, they neither liked nor disliked one another. For Enemies, the vignette focused on the evaluator and victim not liking one another, and actually disliking one another. The vignette made explicit that each child was aware of the other’s negative evaluations.

In addition to the audiorecorded vignettes, drawings were used for each Evaluator-Victim Relationship Type. The drawings were matched to the sex and race of the participants. In the drawings, the target was always a character figure and the evaluator was always an outline of a figure with no details. There were 12 drawings total: three male and three female for African Americans, and three male and three female for European Americans. For Best Friends, the drawings were of two boys/girls standing close together, facing one another and smiling. For Neutral Acquaintances the drawings were of two children standing beside each other with neutral facial expressions and facing forward. The Enemy drawings displayed two children standing close to each other but not facing each other, with frowns.

*Response to Provocation Scenarios.* Three audiorecorded Response to Provocation Conflict Scenarios were created: Accidental, Ambiguous, & Hostile (see Appendix B). In the Accidental scenario, two children were working independently building toy block towers when one child accidentally knocked the other child’s tower over.
In the Ambiguous scenario, one child knocked the other child’s tower over, but it was not clear whether the child knocked the tower over on accident or whether it was knocked over on purpose. For the Hostile scenario, one child threw a toy block at the other child’s tower knocking the child’s tower over. In all scenarios, the provocation was between two children: the target child depicted above in a particular type of relationship with the evaluator and a unacquainted unfamiliar child.

In addition, the Response to Provocation scenarios were accompanied by a drawing of the same two children depicted in the Response to Provocation Scenarios. Thus there were 4 drawings total: one girl and one boy drawing of African American and European American children. The Response to Provocation drawing was represented by two tables close to each other, with one child seated at a table with toy blocks scattered around and a second child standing between the tables. On the second table was a tower of toy blocks.

Peer Provocation Evaluation Questionnaires. Children’s evaluations of peer provocation were obtained from three questionnaires corresponding to the three Response to Provocation Scenarios. Intentions of the aggressor (e.g., Why did Chris knock over Lee’s Blocks?), the Behavior Responses of the victim (e.g., What is Lee going to do next?), Evaluator’s Affect (e.g., How would watching this happen make you feel?) and Evaluator’s Liking of the Victim (e.g., How much do you like Lee?), were all assessed following Sancilio et al. (1989) and Ray and Cohen (1997). Children made either forced choice or Likert scale responses to all questions.

Procedure

Each child was interviewed individually by an experimenter in a 15–20 minute session. Each child listened to a total of 4 audiorecorded scenarios: one for a particular level of Evaluator-Victim Relationship Type and three delivering the three different Response to Provocation Scenarios. First, a particular Evaluator-Victim Relationship Type vignette (either Best Friend, Acquaintance, or Enemy) and corresponding picture was presented. The particular Evaluator-Victim Relationship Type picture remained in full view for the entire interview. After administration of the Evaluator-Victim Relationship Type scenario, the first Response to Provocation Scenario and corresponding picture were presented. Upon completion of the first Response to Provocation Scenario, children filled out the corresponding questionnaire. Children filled out each questionnaire immediately following each Response to Provocation Scenario. After completing the first questionnaire, the child was presented with the next Response to Provocation Scenario and subsequent questionnaire. All children followed the same procedure in completing the third and final Response to Provocation Scenario and corresponding questionnaire. All participants were presented with the Ambiguous scenario first, the order of presentation of the remaining two scenarios (Accidental, Hostile) were counterbalanced across children. Children were instructed at the beginning of each scenario, ‘Instead of that happening, let’s pretend that this is what happened.’

Results

For all three questionnaires, responses to question 1, pertaining to evaluator’s attributions of aggressor’s intentions, were coded as 1 (negative) if the evaluator attributed hostile or negative intent, (e.g., To upset Lee and hurt his/her feelings), 2
(neutral), if the evaluator attributed benign intent (e.g., Chris was just playing around and didn’t know the tower would fall over), or 3 (positive), if the evaluator thought Chris was acting in a friendly manner (e.g., Chris was trying to help Lee by giving some more blocks). Question 2 assessed children’s predictions about the victim’s behavioral response and was coded as negative (e.g., Knock over Chris’s tower), neutral (e.g., Lee stops building the tower and does something else), or positive (e.g., Ask Chris why they did that) following Sancilio et al. (1989) and Ray and Cohen (1997). Questions 3, pertaining to the evaluator’s own affective state while evaluating the provocation was coded as 1 (angry, mad, scared, & sad), 2 (o.k.), or 3 (happy) following Cirino and Beck (1991) and Ray and Cohen (1997). Questions 4 and 5, assessing evaluator liking for victim (before conflict, after conflict) ranged along a 5-point Likert scale with 5 being most positive.

Four dependent variables were analyzed: aggressor’s intentions, victim’s behavior response, evaluator’s affect and evaluator liking for victim. Chris was always the name of the child who knocked over the other child’s blocks (‘aggressor’). Lee, for whom the relationship manipulation to the evaluator pertained, was always the name of the child who had his/her blocks knocked down (‘victim’). Repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used and followup tests to statistically significant interactions were conducted as tests for simple effects followed by Newman Keuls post hoc tests ($p < .05$) to determined sources of differences where appropriate. For all analyses, Grade, Sex, and Evaluator-Victim Relationship Type were between subjects measures. There were also two within subjects variables. For analyses on Aggressor’s Intentions, Victim’s Behavioral Response and Evaluator Affect, Scenario (Ambiguous, Accidental, and Hostile) was a repeated measure. An additional within subjects variable, Time (Before Conflict, After Conflict) was used for analysis of Evaluator Liking for Victim.

**Intentions of aggressor.** Analysis revealed a significant Grade x Scenario interaction, $F (2, 250) = 7.59, p < .001$, as shown in Figure 1. For the Ambiguous and Accidental scenarios, children of both age groups perceived aggressor’s intentions as positive. All children perceived the aggressor’s intentions to be negative in the Hostile scenario, with older children reporting aggressor’s intentions as being more negative than did younger children (8-year-olds, $Ms$ and $SDs =$ 2.83, .54, 2.80, .56, 1.58, .81; 11-year-olds, $Ms$ and $SDs =$ 2.94, .29, 2.91, .42, 1.28, .48 for the Ambiguous, Accidental, and Hostile scenarios, respectively). Thus, older children were more extreme in their negative judgments of aggressor’s intentions when the intent of the provocation was clearly negative.

**Behavioral response of victim.** Analysis revealed a significant Grade x Scenario interaction, $F (2, 250) = 6.57, p < .01$, as shown in Figure 2. All children predicted the victim to respond in a positive way after both the Ambiguous and Accidental intention scenarios. After the Hostile Scenario, older children predicted the victim would respond in a negative way and younger children predicted that the victim would react in a neutral/positive way to the aggressor’s behavior (8-year-olds, $Ms$ and $SDs =$ 2.56, .81, 2.74, .64, 2.08, .96; 11-year-olds, $Ms$ and $SDs =$ 2.66, .75, 2.63, .74, 1.59, .91 for the Ambiguous, Accidental, and Hostile scenarios, respectively).

While attributions about aggressor’s intentions and predictions about the victim’s subsequent behavioral response were analyzed separately, there emerged an interesting intention-response match with regard to how children evaluated peer provocation. If children attributed positive intentions to the aggressor’s actions they also predicted the victim to respond in a positive manner. Likewise, if children perceived
Evaluator–victim relationships

Figure 1. Intentions of the Aggressor: Grade X Scenario Interaction.

Figure 2. Response of the Victim: Grade X Scenario Interaction.
the aggressor’s intentions as negative, they also predicted that the victim would respond in a negative way. Thus, the finding, that older children predicted the victim would respond in a more negative manner in the hostile Scenario compared to younger children, is understandable in light of the previous finding that older children perceived the aggressor’s intentions as being more negative in the hostile Scenario than younger children. Further, as expected, a pattern emerged with respect to the valence of the various conflict scenarios and the valence of children’s evaluations of aggressor’s intentions and victim’s behavioral response. That is, the more positive the Scenario (e.g., Accidental) the more positive were the evaluations. Similarly, the more negative the situation (e.g., Hostile) the more negative the evaluations.

Linkages between Intentions and Behavioral Responses. To formally test the relationship between attributions of the aggressor’s intent and the subsequent behavioral response of the victim, separate hierarchical regression analyses were performed for each of the three different victim-target relationship types (Best Friends, Acquaintances, Enemies) in each of the three provocation scenarios (Ambiguous, Accidental, Hostile) for a total of 9 analyses. For each regression analysis, Grade was entered on step 1, Gender was entered on step 2, and Attributions of Intent was entered on the third and final step. For evaluator-victim best friend relationships, attributions of aggressor’s intentions significantly predicted children’s evaluations of the victim’s subsequent behavioral response in the Ambiguous and Hostile Scenarios. For evaluator-victim enemy relationships, attributions of aggressor’s intent significantly predicted the subsequent behavioral response of the victim in the Hostile Scenario only. Interestingly, attributions of intent failed to predict the victim’s behavioral response when the evaluator and victim had little social history (Acquaintances). Thus, when the social relationship between evaluator and victim was well established (Best Friends, Enemies), type of provocation was influential in determining whether or not attributions of aggressor’s intent predicted the subsequent behavioral response of the victim.

Evaluator Affect. Analysis revealed a significant Scenario main effect, $F(2, 250) = 12.40, p < .001$. Children’s affect when evaluating ambiguous and accidentally provoked peer interactions did not differ ($Ms$ and $SDs = 1.48, .62$ and $1.55, .59$ respectively) and was higher than when evaluating hostile with regard to intent interactions ($M = 1.31, .54$). It was interesting that children reported no differences in their own affect when evaluating a best friend, an acquaintance, or an enemy in potential conflict situations.

Evaluator’s Liking for Victim. Analysis revealed a significant Relationship Type by Time interaction, $F(2, 125) = 16.10, p < .001$, as shown in Figure 3. Generally, children in a best friend relationship with the victim reported liking the victim more than children in acquaintance relationships with the victim who, in turn, reported liking the victim more than children in enemy relationships with the victim (before conflict $Ms$ and $SDs = 4.83, .52, 3.09, 1.13, 1.44, .88$; after conflict $Ms$ and $SDs = 4.62, .68, 3.56, .1.15, 2.30, 1.22$ for Best Friends, Acquaintances, and Enemies, respectively). Children evaluating a best friend reported no difference in liking for the victim before or after the peer interaction, while children in either acquaintance or enemy relationships with the victim reported liking the victim more after the provocation than before the provocation occurred.
Discussion

The present study examined children placed in the role of evaluators of peers in potential conflict situations, to investigate the influence of evaluator-victim social relationship and contextual-setting cues on children’s evaluative processes. Specifically, we systematically examined the influence of positive (best friend) neutral (acquaintance) and negative (enemy) evaluator-victim social relationships. The design also included three different response to provocation scenarios varying as to intent of the ‘aggressor’ (Ambiguous, Accidental, Hostile) known to be difficult social contexts for children. Children’s evaluations of peers were assessed in terms of attributions of aggressor’s intentions, predictions of the behavioral responses of the victim, the evaluator’s affect and evaluator’s liking for the victim.

As predicted, the valence of the evaluator-victim social relationship had a significant influence on children’s evaluations of peer provocation. Children unfamiliar with the victim (acquaintances) or who disliked the victim (enemies) reported liking the victim more after the provocation had occurred than before it happened, while no temporal differences emerged for children watching a best friend respond to provocation. This extends previous research (e.g., Menesini et al., 1997) documenting children’s sympathetic affect towards the victim of an aggressive act. In the present study, the temporal effect of evaluating the victim more positively after a provocation situation compared to before the situation occurred influenced children’s evaluations, but only when the evaluator was in a neutral or negative social relationship with the victim. Perhaps children simply ‘identified with the victim’ or were sensitive to the
‘plight of the victim’ resulting in a more positive evaluation of the victim after the provocation occurred. Further, children in either neutral or negative relationships with the victim might have reported liking the victim more after the provocation simply because the victim was no longer purely a ‘neutral’ acquaintance or ‘negative’ enemy but instead someone who had been victimized. Lastly, that no temporal effect emerged for liking when the evaluator and victim were best friends is consistent with work (e.g., Ray, Cohen, Secrist, & Duncan, 1997) reporting no significant relationship between measures of mutual friendship and peer perceptions of victimization and aggression. Thus, while children may generally dislike victims in their peer group (Perry, et al., 1988), witnessing a particular best friend in conflict does not negatively affect their liking for that best friend. Similarly, observing a particular acquaintance or even an enemy in conflict with an aggressor increases liking by the evaluator. It should be noted that the finding of no difference in liking for evaluator-victim best friends could have been the result of a ceiling effect.

Analyses on the intention-response match of children’s evaluations was consistent with previous research (Dodge et al., 1986) showing that positive evaluations of intent are followed by positive behavioral responses, and, unique to the present study, this intention-response match was evident when children were evaluators of peer in potential conflict situations. Thus, whether children are directly involved in the social interaction as shown in past research (e.g., Darley et al., 1978), or evaluating the interactions of other peers as evidenced in the current study, attributions of intent play a crucial role in determining subsequent behaviors. The present research further extends previous work by showing that the intention-response match with respect to evaluating others’ behaviors was a function of both the social relationship between evaluator and victim and the particular type of peer provocation evaluated. The intention-response match was evident for evaluator-victim best friend relationships in ambiguous and hostile peer provocation scenarios and for evaluator-victim enemy relationships in hostile provocation scenarios. It appeared that when the social relationship between evaluator and victim was well established (best friend, enemy), regardless of the valence of the relationship, the evaluator attuned to social-situational cues (type of provocation) when evaluating the peer interactions. Further, that no intention-response matches were revealed for evaluator-acquaintance relationships in any of the provocation scenarios points to the possibility that social relationships may play a vital role in determining how children evaluate others, particularly when the evaluator is personally involved with one of the peers being evaluated.

While evaluator-victim social relationships did not have their predicted effect on attributions of intent or behavioral responses, Grade and Provocation Scenario influenced children’s attributions of the aggressor’s intentions and also children’s (evaluator’s) predictions about how the victim would respond. Children perceived both the aggressor’s intentions and the victim’s behavioral response negatively in the hostile scenario and positively in the ambiguous and accidental scenarios; however, older children (fifth-and sixth-graders) reported aggressor’s intentions and predicted the victim’s subsequent behavior response as being more negative in the hostile scenario than did younger children (second-and third-graders). These developmental findings are similar to previous research noting that with age children become increasingly negative when making peer evaluations (e.g., Waas & Honer, 1990). Perhaps older children’s more negative evaluations of peer interactions stem from children’s increasing ability to differentiate and understand different types and forms
of conflict as they get older (Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, & Lake, 1991; El-Sheikh & Cheskes, 1995). Alternatively, older children’s more negative evaluations could be due to developmental differences in social-information-processing. With age, children are more likely to conceptualize others abstractly using dispositional, traitlike and internal characteristics and refer to internal motives of the actor when formulating attributions of intent (Livesley & Bromley, 1973). Thus, it could be that young children’s attributions of intent are based more on the actual behaviors being evaluated, whereas older children consider not only the behaviors but also infer internal traitlike information when attributing intentions to behavior and predicting a subsequent behavioral reaction. As a result, older children may simply be less forgiving than younger children. It is important to note that young children use dispositional information when making attributions of intent but in a less sophisticated manner than older children. For example, young children do not assume stable cross-situational personality traits when evaluating social behaviors (Rhodes & Ruble, 1984) and show difficulty integrating information needed to make trait evaluations (Ferguson, Olthof, Luiten, & Rule, 1984).

Interestingly, children reported no differences in their own affect when evaluating either a best friend, an acquaintance or someone they did not like in a potential conflict situation with another peer. Further, all children reported their own affect to be negative regardless of the evaluator-target relationship. Thus it appears that evaluating peer provocation is a negative experience in general, independent of the individuals involved or at the least independent of the social relationship between the evaluator and the targets being evaluated.

Limitations of the present investigation into children’s evaluations of peer provocation need to be highlighted. First, children evaluated hypothetical target peers in hypothetical situations as opposed to evaluating actual conflicts between peers. This raises the formal versus functional distinction proposed by Flavell and Wohlwill (1969). Certainly, it is important to recognize the distinction between formal (reflections) and functional (actual behaviors) evaluations of peers in conflict situations. Further, previous research (e.g., Ray & Cohen, 1996) has shown that in general, children rate friendship expectations (i.e., similarity) as more important when reflecting on a prototypical/hypothetical best friend compared to an actual, known best friend. Given that the social relationship between evaluator and victim being manipulated in the present study was also hypothetical in nature, it is possible that children would evaluate the interactions of actual peers (known best friend, known enemy) differently. Lastly, children’s evaluations were assessed using forced choice structured questionnaires. Thus, it will be important for future research to investigate more qualitative distinctions that children make when evaluating conflict.

Evaluating the social behaviors of one’s peers is inevitable and serves important social-developmental functions for both peers being evaluated and the evaluator. For the peers being observed, evaluations facilitate the initial development and subsequent maintenance of their social status and reputation within their peer group. For the evaluator, observing others in potential conflict situations may influence the evaluator’s relationship choices. For example, a child seen initiating many conflicts or engaging in many conflict situations may be avoided by the observer. Also, a child whose interactions are relatively conflict-free may be sought out as a potential playmate or friend. The current study revealed that variations in the social setting (intent), age of the evaluator and, the social relationship between the evaluator and the victim being evaluated, all had an influence on the evaluative processes children
engage in when witnessing the interactions of their peers. Not only do children wit -
ness and evaluate the positive and negative social interactions between peers and
between adults and children (parent-child, teacher-child) on a daily basis, these eval-
uations impact the lives of all participants involved. As such, future research needs
to further investigate how children evaluate their social world and the influences on
these evaluative processes.

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Appendix A: Relationship Type Vignettes

Best Friends: Let’s pretend that you have a best friend named Lee. You both go to the same school and are in the same class together. Lee lives just down the street from your house so the two of you get to spend a lot of time together playing games and having fun. You and Lee sat together and shared your lunch today. You and Lee tell each other secrets and take up for each other. You and Lee have been best friends for a long time.

Neutral Acquaintances: Let’s pretend you have someone in your class named Lee. You and Lee know each other but don’t sit by each other in class or at lunch time. It’s not that you and Lee don’t like each other. You just don’t know each other well enough to know whether you like each other or not.

Enemies: Let’s pretend that you have someone in your class named Lee. You and Lee are enemies. You don’t sit together and don’t play together. Let’s pretend that at lunch Lee knocked over your milk. At recess, you teased Lee in a mean way in front of the other classmates. You and Lee don’t like each other at all.

Appendix B: Conflict Scenario Vignettes

Response to Provocation

Accidental. The story you are going to hear is about Lee and a brand new kid at school named Chris. O.K., here’s the story. Let’s pretend that during a free period in class, the teacher has a contest to see which child can build the best ‘tower’ out of toy blocks. Lee and Chris are sitting next to each other at different tables. Lee and Chris are working hard to finish their towers. While working, the Chris accidentally drops one of the blocks. As Chris bends over to pick it up Chris bumps Lee’s table knocking down Lee’s tower.

Ambiguous. The story you are going to hear is about Lee and a brand new kid at school named Chris. O.K., here’s the story. Let’s pretend that during a free period in
class, the teacher has a contest to see which child can build the best ‘tower’ out of toy blocks. Lee and Chris are sitting next to each other at different tables. Chris and Lee are working hard to finish their towers. When Chris gets up to move to the other side Chris bumps into Lee’s table knocking over Lee’s tower.

Hostile. The story you are going to hear is about Lee and a brand new kid at school named Chris. O.K., here’s the story. Let’s pretend that during a free period in class, the teacher has a contest to see which child can build the best ‘tower’ out of toy blocks. Lee and Chris are sitting next to each other at different tables. Chris and Lee are working hard to finish their towers. Just when Lee is about to finish, Chris throws a toy block and knocks down Lee’s tower.

Note

1. Complete descriptions of all hierarchical regression analyses along with tabular data are available from the first author upon request.