Peer Conflict among Indian Children in School Settings

Megha Dhillon · Nandita Babu

Abstract This study examines developmental changes in children's peer conflicts within the school setting. Children in two age groups (6 and 10 years) were observed as they engaged in a variety of social activities. Issues over which conflicts erupted, strategies to deal with them and teachers' roles were explored. It was found that the amount of conflict was similar across both age groups, with boy-boy conflicts being most frequent. Cross-gender conflicts were significantly greater among the older children. Also, they had larger number of conflicts over facts and opinions than their younger counterparts. Physical aggression as an issue for conflict as well as a strategy to deal with conflict was more common among younger children. The children of both the age groups tended to involve teachers in handling their conflicts. The most common response of teachers toward conflict was to ignore or scold the children. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords Conflict · Gender · Indian children · Peers · School

Peer conflicts contribute to children's development in myriad ways. They enhance children's scientific reasoning (Azmitia and Montgomery 1993), problem-solving (Opotow 1991) and ability to express and defend views (Dunn 2004). However, the pattern of children's engagement with peer conflict tends to differ across cultures. Thus Indonesian children report disengaging from conflict more often than do North American children, who in turn report using negotiation more frequently (French et al. 2005). Differences have also been found between sub-cultures within countries. Morais and Otta (2008) compared children's conflicts in two subcultural groups in Brazil: one from São Paulo and another from a seashore community, Ubatuba. São Paulo's children showed more verbal tactics, while direct and proximal strategies prevailed among Ubatuba's children. The study of Indian children showed that victims and aggressors were more likely to report lack of social support but not more conflict with significant others than non-victims (Khatri and Kupersmidt 2003).

Haar and Krahe (1999) have related the tendency of German adolescents to endorse confrontational responses to individualism. They have linked the tendency of Indonesian adolescents to choose submissive responses with collectivism. India, does not present a simple picture with regard to individualism-collectivism. According to Sinha and Tripathi (1994) in India evinces individualism within a collectivist culture. Tripathi (1988) adds that individualism and collectivism act like figure and ground depending on the situation. While Indians tend to be collectivist with respect to family (Messner 2008), settings like schools are more complex. In the last decade India's Central Board of Secondary Education (Pushkarna 2013) has tried to promote values like team work and compassion. At the same time, schools remain highly competitive environments (Kurrien 2008) thus representing individualistic tendencies.

Past research conducted within schools has established children's conflicts to occur over a variety of issues (Killen and Sueyoshi 1995). Also, child-generated resolutions appear to increase with age (Chen et al. 2001). In the Indian context Srivastava and Lalnunmaw (1989) examined conflicts among Mizo children. Results indicated that children from English-medium schools were more competitive than government

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school children. Also Mizo children showed a strong preference for direct conflict responses.

This study examined the developmental changes in the conflicts of children from two age groups in the school setting. Existing research shows that children employ more diverse strategies as they get older (Laursen et al. 2001). Several theorists including Piaget have postulated changes in children's cognitive and social skills as they advance through middle childhood towards preadolescence. It was thus expected that age-related differences would be found. Following the work of Shantz (1987) conflict was considered as a dyadic event involving overt opposition and efforts to overcome it.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted in a co-educational school in Delhi, catering to upper-middle and middle-income families. The sample consisted of 80 children in grade 1 (48 boys, 32 girls; mean age 6.7 years) and 81 children in grade 5 (48 boys, 33 girls; mean age 10.6 years).

Procedure

Children of each age group were observed one hour daily for 21 days while they engaged in various activities including academics, sports and recess. All conflict episodes were noted in entirety including the actions and reactions of all children involved. Teachers' responses were also noted.

Conflicts were coded for age and gender of children involved and the issues over which they occurred. In any conflict episode two parties/children are involved. A complete description of conflict as it unfolds with time requires noting the initial reaction by the victim of instigation, followed by the action of the perpetrator and finally the reaction by the victim. These were noted by the researcher. More specifically the following scheme was adopted. The first, second and third strategies used to manage conflicts were also coded. First strategies are defined here as the reaction of the child who initially perceived a peer as interfering with his/her needs or wishes. The second strategy is defined as the response of the peer who was perceived to interfere. The third strategy would be the counter-reaction of the child who first perceived the interference. Teachers' responses were coded separately. After noting the frequencies for each issue and strategy, smaller categories were combined into larger ones to conduct statistical analyses to assess age related changes.

Results

Frequency

Conflicts occurred with similar frequency across both age groups. Boy-boy conflicts were most common in both groups while girl-girl conflicts were least common (Table 1). Significant age differences were found in the frequency of cross-gender conflicts. While 18.07 % conflicts among the 6 year olds occurred between boys and girls, 38.75 % of the conflicts among the 10 year olds were cross-gender in nature ($z = 2.93$, $p < .01$).

Issues

Conflict issues were classified into seven categories (Table 2). Objects were the most common conflict issue for the younger children (33.73 %). This was a common issue for the older children as well (27.50 %). Significant age differences were found for two out of seven issues.

Table 2 shows that 26.50 % of the 6 year olds' conflicts occurred over physical aggression. Only 7.50 % conflicts among the 10 year olds occurred over this issue ($z = 3.21$, $p < .01$). Meanwhile 30 % of the 10 year olds' conflicts occurred over facts and opinions while only 16.86 % of the younger children's conflicts were about such matters ($z = 1.99$, $p < .05$).

Resolution

Conflict resolution strategies were classified into seven categories (Table 3).

First Strategy Bi-lateral strategies (30.95 %) were the most common strategies among the younger children. They also showed high levels of physical (23.80 %) and verbal aggression (21.42 %). Verbal aggression (26.50 %) was the most common strategy among the older children followed by bilateral strategies (24.09 %). The older children showed high rates of verbal aggression but lower level of physical aggression (10.84 %). Age differences in use of physical aggression were significant ($z = 2.21$, $p < .05$). Significant age differences were also found for assertiveness ($z = 2.63$, $p < .01$) used in 2.38 % instances by the younger children and in 13.25 % instances by the older children.

Table 1 Age and gender-wise distribution

Gender	6 years %	10 years %
Boy-boy	71.08**	50.00**
Boy-girl	18.07**	38.75**
Girl-girl	10.84	11.25
N	83	80

**p<.01 and *p<.05

Table 2 Conflict issues observed in younger and older children

Issue	Description	6 years %	10 years %
Objects	Refusal to share, breaking/loss of objects	33.73	27.50
Physical aggression	Accidental/purposeful physical harm or threats of such harm	26.50**	7.50**
Facts, opinions	Conflicts over opinions/ factual matters	16.86**	30.00**
Rules/ conventions	Conflicts over school rules/norms	15.66	21.25
Disrupting	One child disturbing another	4.81	10.00
Relational aggression	Indirect means of harm like refusing to play	2.40	0.00
Verbal aggression	Yelling, taunting etc.	0.00	3.75
N		83	80

Second Strategy Age differences were not significant, $\chi2$ (6, N=162) =3.49, p>.05. Children in both age groups showed increased use of passive strategies. In fact passive responses were the most common second strategy for both groups. In case of the 6 year olds while only 4.76 % of the first strategies were passive in nature, 30.48 % of the second strategies were of this type. Similarly in case of the 10 year olds while 2.40 % of the first strategies were passive, 35.80 % of the second strategies were passive in nature.

Third Strategy These were used in 37.34 % of the younger children's conflicts and in 23.75 % of the older children's conflicts. This difference in proportions was insignificant (z=1.88, p>.05). Age differences in the use of third strategy were not statistically analysed due to the small number of instances involved, though the main trends are presented here. Many strategies used by the 10 year olds were passive (73.68 %). Younger children also frequently used passive strategies (41.93 %). However the strategy

they used most frequently was third-party intervention (54.83 %). Teachers were the third-party invoked most often. The older children tended to use this strategy early on in the conflict, with 20.48 % of their first strategies being of this kind. The use of third-party intervention dropped later in the conflict with 7.40 % of their second strategies and 10.52 % of their third strategies being of this nature. In contrast, younger children used third-party intervention more frequently later in the conflict. Only 10.71 % of their first strategies and 4.87 % of their second strategies involved third parties.

Teacher Involvement

Teachers were involved in 28.91 % of the younger children's conflicts and in 27.50 % of the older children's conflicts. Data regarding teacher involvement has not been statistically analysed due to the small number of instances involved. The most common response of teachers was to ignore conflicts. It

Table 3 Strategies of conflict resolution used by younger and older children

	Description	First strategy		Second strategy		Third strategy	
		6 years %	10 years %	6 years %	10 years %	6 years %	10 years %
Physical aggression	Causing/ threatening physical harm	23.8*	10.84*	19.51	9.87	0.00	0.00
Verbal aggression	Verbal behaviours intended to hurt e.g. belittling	21.42	26.50	15.85	17.28	0.00	5.26
Third party	Seeking teacher /peer intervention	10.71	20.48	4.87	7.40	54.38	10.52
Bi-lateral strategies	Strategies taking into account opponents' perspectives	30.95	24.09	9.75	11.12	0.00	0.00
Passive strategies	Withdrawal, submitting	4.76	2.40	30.48	35.80	41.93	73.68
Assertive-ness	Adhering to one's stance non-aggressively	2.38**	13.25**	18.29	17.28	0.00	10.52
Others	Relational aggression, Frowning	5.95	2.04	1.21	1.23	3.22	0.00
N		84	83	82	81	31	19

**p<.01

*p<.05

was observed that 37.50 % conflicts among the 6 year olds and 45.45 % conflicts among 10 year olds were ignored by teachers (Table 4).

When teachers responded, it was mainly through cessation strategies like scolding. This was the case in 29.16 % of the 6 year olds' conflicts and 27.27 % of the 10 year olds' conflicts.

Discussion

The present results indicated that boys were engaged in more conflict than girls. Gender differences in conflict frequency may stem partly from socialization processes that encourage girls to avoid conflict. Another factor contributing to the observed differences in conflict frequency seems to be the kinds of behaviours boys and girls engage in during conflict. Boys' conflicts tend to be more visible because they are more boisterous (Malloy and McMurray 1996; Younger et al. 1999) and physically aggressive. Girls are likely to rely on covert forms of aggression that are less amenable to observation (Crick and Grotpeter 1995). While the frequency of girl-girl conflicts was not found to differ, there were more cross-gender conflicts among the older children. This may be explained by the changing nature of cross-gender interactions as children grow. Although gender segregation peaks in preadolescence (Crandell et al. 2009) boys and girls do interact in distinct ways. These are contacts characterised by taunting, teasing, and open disavowal. These behaviours serve to maintain gender boundaries, while allowing for cross-gender interaction (Sroufe et al. 1993). It is also apparent that they entail high potential for conflict.

Objects were a common conflict issue across both age groups. Previous research has shown object conflicts to decline as children get older (Hartup and Laursen 1993). We did not find this to be the case. It is possible that the competitive ethos in Indian schools contributes to the high frequency of object-based conflicts. Environments which encourage

Table 4 Teacher's responses to the conflicts of children

Response	6 years %	10 years %
Ignored	37.50	45.45
Scolded	29.16	27.27
No time for response	12.50	4.54
Encouraged apology	8.33	0.00
Clarified	8.33	9.09
Decided the matter	4.16	13.63
N	24	22

children to surpass peers may create competitiveness not only with regard to academic performance but also with regard to available resources. One age difference found was that older children had more conflicts over facts and opinions than the younger children. Several reasons may explain this developmental shift. Greater capacities for complex thinking and self-reflection are likely to contribute to preadolescents having distinctive views on various matters. We also observed that several conflicts on facts and opinions occurred when children were engaged in tasks demanding some degree of independent decision-making. It was also clear that the older children were assigned more such tasks. Children's activities shape the occurrence of conflict through the kind of social interaction elicited (Hartup and Laursen 1993). The greater space given to older children to work on tasks somewhat independently may have created more opportunities for such conflicts.

Assertiveness as a resolution strategy was used more frequently by the older children. Assertiveness is less likely to provoke anger and more likely to get compliance from opponents than aggressive responses (Scaglione and Scaglione 2006). It is thus considered a healthy strategy for conflict management. In this study the older children used assertiveness frequently as the first and second strategy. The younger children tended to use it mainly as a second strategy. This indicates that older children's automatic responses are likely to involve insistence or explaining their position. Younger children however may find the confidence to assert themselves later in the conflict. In addition, older children's conflicts tended to include less physical aggression than those of the younger children. However it may be noted that when the 10 year olds were physically provoked, they responded in kind. As children become older they become better at inferring motives (Hartup 1974). If someone is deliberately hurtful, 10 year olds are likely to detect aggressive intent and retaliate. Hence retaliatory aggression persists through childhood.

Results pertaining to the second and third resolution strategies indicated two trends. First, passive strategies which allow little opportunity for conflict escalation were common among both age groups. Passive strategies are considered useful in many Asian cultures for maintaining social harmony (Ohbuchi and Takahashi 1994). However children also report using such strategies to end conflicts quickly, avoid being isolated by peers and prevent trouble with adults (Dhillon and Babu 2013). Hence self-interest may be as important as social harmony in their use. Second, older children tended to involve teachers earlier in their conflicts than did younger children. Perhaps they perceived this to be the quickest way to settle conflicts. This seems plausible on the basis of an another finding. As mentioned earlier we found children to respond to each other with strategies which were quite similar. An exception to this was the case of third-party intervention. The most common response to third-party intervention was the use of passive strategies. Perhaps because an adult (and in

some instances, a peer) was now involved, the child left the conflict resolution to that person or became passive due to threat of punishment or retaliation.

Teacher's responses mainly involved ignoring or scolding the children. Scolding is a cessation strategy. These strategies involve adults directing or separating children and providing adult-generated solutions. In contrast mediation strategies involve acknowledging feelings, generating mutual solutions and offering support (Evans 2002). The use of cessation strategies may be an outcome of teachers' working conditions. Most Indian classrooms require teachers to monitor several children. This school was no different. Moreover teachers have to complete lengthy syllabi. Such pressures may not leave teachers enough time or energy to address conflicts adequately.

Concluding Comments

The results of the study point to certain areas in which teachers must work with children. For instance negotiation as a resolution strategy was rarely observed, even among the older children. Negotiation tends to appear more often in children's self-reports than in their behaviour (Laursen et al. 2001). This may be because children feel more emotionally aroused or threatened during real-life conflicts than when discussing them. The sense of threat may inhibit children from using the more mature strategies they are aware of. It is important to explore if discussing and encouraging children to employ negotiation can increase the likelihood of using it. Another area which needs to be highlighted is retaliatory aggression. This was common in both the age groups. Teachers must build on the finding that conflict partners often reciprocate the strategies chosen by their opponents. Stimulating children to think about this pattern may encourage them to approach conflict resolution non-aggressively. Most importantly findings point to the need for creating conditions that allow teachers to manage children's conflicts in healthier manners. This will in turn encourage children to resolve conflicts amicably.

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