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ABSTRACT

Noting that children's appeals to parents can provide information about children's understanding of the family justice system and the dynamics of third party intervention, this study examined the tattling behavior observed in 2- and 4-year-old siblings of 40 Canadian families from diverse occupational and educational backgrounds. Observations of family interactions took place in the participants' homes during six 90-minute sessions. Results indicated the act of tattling demonstrates that children believe a simple report on the misdeeds of the sibling will draw their parents into an alliance and influence the outcome of the conflict. Older children tattled significantly more often than did younger children. While children's frequent transgressions of certain family rules were reflected in siblings' tattling, other less frequently transgressed rules were more prominent in the children's reports to their parents. Data suggested that older children viewed property damage as especially reprehensible behavior, whereas younger children were concerned about physical aggression. Younger and older children tattled with different goals. Older children were concerned about issues of loyalty while younger children tended to be concerned about issues of power. Tattling outcomes did not account for differences in older and younger children's tattling behavior. (TJQ)

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Truth, Lies and Justice: Tattling in the Family Context

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Abstract

Appeals to parents can provide information about children's understanding of the family justice system and third party intervention. This study examines tattling behavior observed in 2 and 4 year old siblings of Canadian families from diverse occupational and educational backgrounds. Older children tattled significantly more often than did younger children. The content of tattled events did not correspond to actual rule transgressions made by either the older or younger children. Older children were concerned with establishing loyalty with their parent. Younger children were concerned with creating a powerful alliance with the parent in an attempt to resolve social problems.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine how children draw parents into their conflicts with their siblings. Prior research has shown that such behavior, traditionally known as tattling, occurs in a third of children's conflicts, follows transgressions of siblings rather than self, and emphasizes the sibling's responsibility in the conflict (Dunn & Munn, 1985). Through their tattling, children effectively manipulate their parents' involvement in conflict and show their understanding of family rules and the dynamics of third party intervention.

Sample Characteristics

N = 40 intact families with two children		
Children's ages: Older	4.4 yrs	3.6 to 4.9 yrs.
Younger	2.5 yrs	1.9 to 2.6 yrs.

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The children within the families were balanced for age and gender.

Sessions:

Observations of family interactions took place in the participants' homes. An observer narrated the parents' and children's behaviors onto one track of a stereo tape recorder while family speech was recorded on the second track.

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- 6 sessions of 90 minutes each
 - 3 sessions Mother and Children
 - 3 sessions Mother, Father and Children

How often do children violate the rights and welfare of siblings?

Older children violated the rights and welfare of their siblings ($M = 96$) significantly more frequently than did younger children ($M = 65$). Moreover, older boys were involved in these transgressions significantly more often than their female counterparts (figure 1).

Figure 1: Frequency of Violations.



How often do children tattle on their siblings?

Tattling occurred in all families. All but 2 children spontaneously reported their siblings misdeeds to their parents.

Table 1: Mean frequency of tattling by family, older sibling and younger sibling.

	Average	Stand. Dev.	Range
Family	12.7	7.5	2 to 31
Older	7.5	5.4	0 to 21
Younger	5.2	4.9	0 to 22

Some examples of tattling

- 1) Younger: Poop.
 Older: Amber said a bad word.
 Mom: She did?
 Older: Yes.
 Mom (to younger): Come here.
 Younger: (Doesn't respond to mother's request).
 Older: Amber said a bad word, she said a bad word.
 Mom (to younger): Amber!
 Older: The same thing I did.
 Mom (to younger): Julie said a bad word, I almost put a bar of soap in her mouth.
 Older: She said that right now, she just said it.
 Mom (to younger): You're a pretty little girl. I don't want to hear pretty little girls talk like that.
- 2) (Younger bites her older sister).
 Older (to Mom): Amber bite me.
 Mom (to younger): No biting!
 Older (to Dad): Amber bite me.
 Dad: Let me see.
 Older: She bite me.

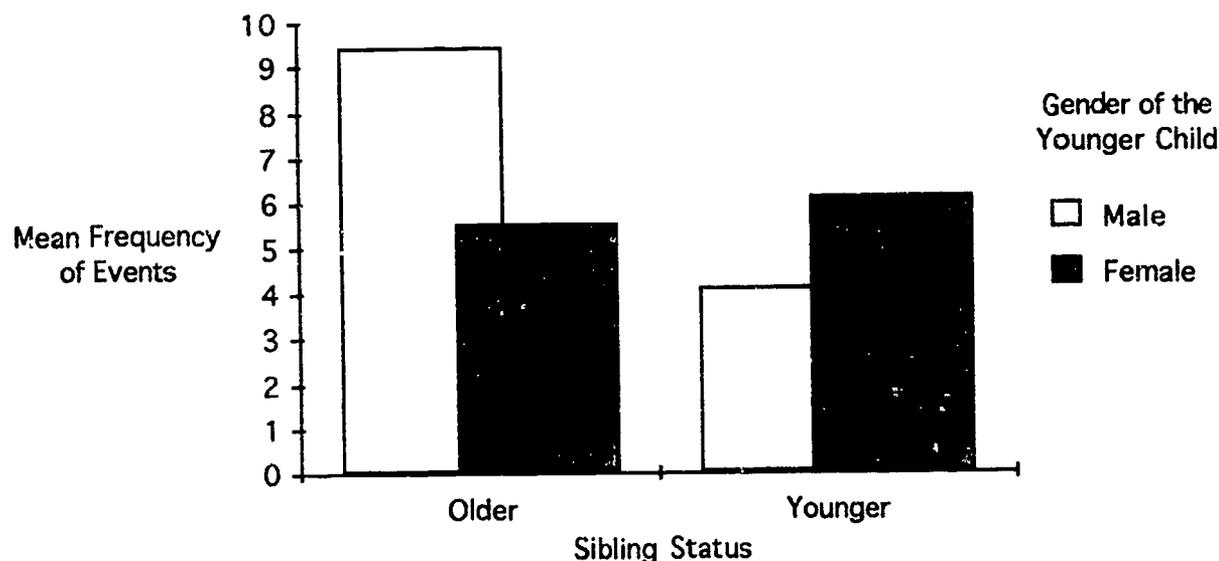
Who tattles?

Felson (1983) emphasized the importance of power struggles between siblings. In this view, parental support, typically offered to younger children, increases their relative power against their older siblings. In addition, the female child is traditionally regarded as weaker than the male child and thus, more in need of parental assistance.

Hypothesis: Younger children and girls will tattle more often than older siblings or boys. An interaction between gender and sibling status (younger vs. older) will occur such that younger girls will tattle with greater frequency, especially if their older sibling is a boy.

Results: Contrary to predictions, younger children did not tattle more than older children. Moreover, older siblings of brothers tattled significantly more often than did their brothers, and significantly more often than did older siblings of sisters (figure 2). Thus, the gender of the sibling, not the tattler determined the frequency of tattling events.

Figure 2: Frequency of Tattling.



What are the children tattling about: Does Tattling reflect reality?

The content of tattling, especially compared to the content of transgressions, reveals children's understanding of various rules within the family. Does the content of tattling by one child reflect the content of their sibling's transgressions, or are some transgressions more likely to elicit tattling than others? The transgressions that are tattled on relatively more frequently than violated reveal transgressions that the children regard as most reprehensible and most likely to elicit a sympathetic response from parents.

Hypothesis: The proportion of tattled events reflecting certain family rules will not match the proportion with which the transgressions actually occurred.

Coding: The content of each transgressed event, and each instance of tattling, was identified on the basis of a set of potential family rules.

Results: Both younger and older children regarded violations of physical aggression, possession and property damage as important family rules. As shown below, the importance of the rules, reflected by the rank order of the proportions of events, matched the order of the actual occurrence of the transgressions for some family rules but not for others. Older children's tattling reflected issues of interference and property damage more often than

did the younger children's tattling. Younger children's tattling reflected issues of physical aggression more often than did the older children's tattling.

Table 2: The rank order of the rule transgressions and tattling.

Older Sibling's Transgressions	Younger Sibling's Tattling	Younger Sibling's Transgressions	Older Sibling's Tattling
Possession	Physical Aggression**	Possession	Property Damage**
Bossing	Possession	Physical Aggression	Physical Aggression
Physical Aggression	Property Damage**	Interference	Possession*
Nagging	Sharing	Nagging	Interference
Verbal Aggression	Exclusion	Property Damage	Ownership
Exclusion	Nagging	Bossing	Sharing
Sharing	Ownership**	Verbal Aggression	Verbal Aggression
Interference	Disagreement* *	Sharing	Exclusion
Property Damage	Interference	Exclusion	Nagging*
Lying	Bossing*	Ownership	Lying
Disagreement	Verbal Aggression*	Disagreement	Disagreement
Ownership	Lying	Lying	Bossing

** Rules which increase in proportion relative to the actual transgression.

* Rules which decrease in proportion relative to the actual transgression.

Third party intervention: Power or loyalty?

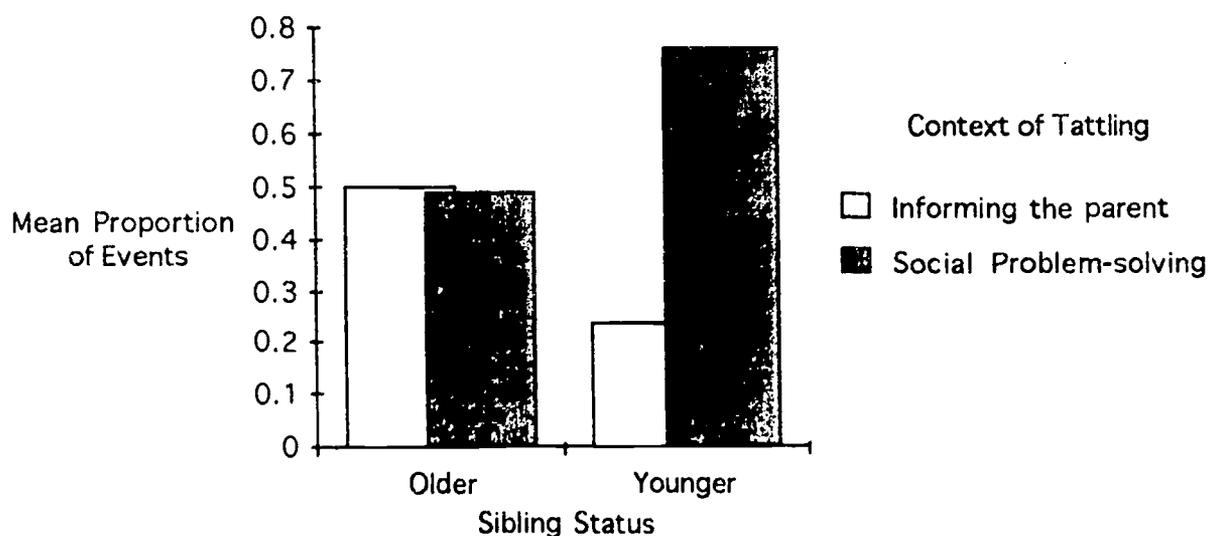
Emery (1992) discussed two dynamics underlying third party intervention: (a) establishing emotional closeness or loyalty between two of the individuals at the expense of a third person, and (b) allying two individuals against a third (power). Tattling can reflect both processes. When children face a social problem, tattling can be interpreted as a bid for power, because an alliance with parents can be instrumental in solving the problem to their advantage. Loyalty could also be a factor in such situations. At other times children tattle when they are not faced with a social problem. Such tattling seems to be aimed at merely informing parents of the wrong doings of siblings and can be interpreted as a bid for loyalty alone, as power is irrelevant.

Hypothesis: The older child, who may crave loyalty above power, will tattle to inform the parent of the younger siblings misdeeds. Younger children, who lack power, will tattle more when seeking assistance to resolve social problems.

Coding: Each tattling event was coded to determine whether or not the child was just informing the parent of the siblings negative behavior or whether s/he was attempting to resolve a social problem.

Results: Older children tattled to inform parents of younger's misdeeds as often as to seek assistance in resolving social problems; younger children tattled mostly in social problem-solving contexts (figure 3).

Figure 3: Proportion of Tattling in Context



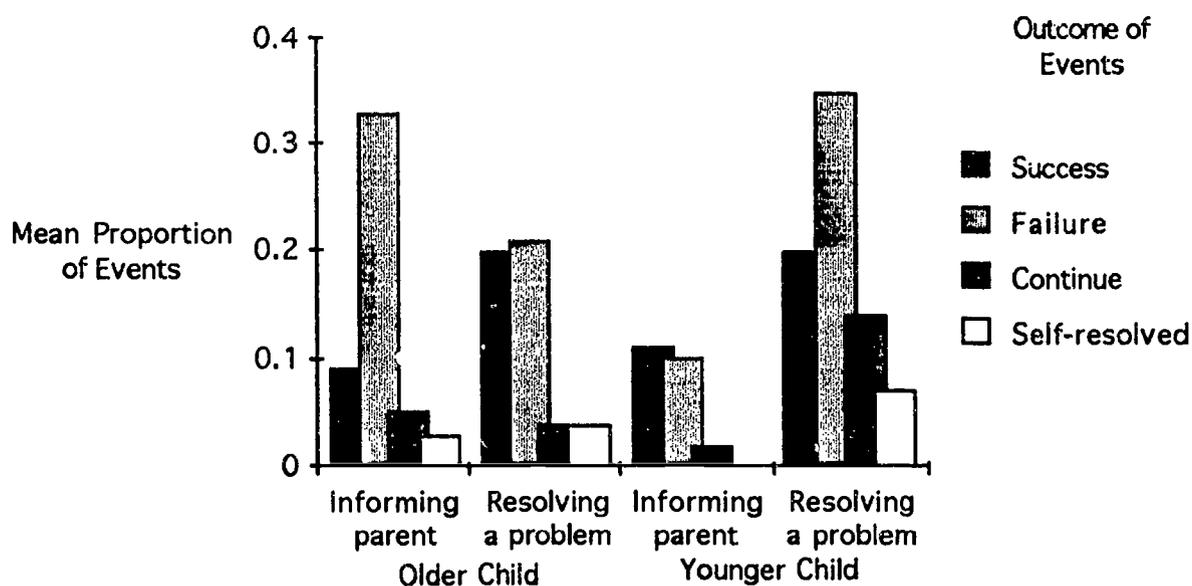
Is tattling rewarded?

According to Social Learning theory, the reinforcing value of successful tattling should account for the differences in the pattern of tattling between older and younger children.

Coding: The outcomes of events were distinguished in terms of whether the children succeeded or failed to achieve their goals in tattling. Success meant that tattling did result in compliance by the sibling. Failure meant that tattling did not result in compliance by the sibling. A third category, self-resolved, occurred when the child tattled, the parent did not respond, and eventually the sibling did comply to the child.

Results: Overall, tattling resulted in failure for a greater proportion of events ($M = .48$) than it did in success ($M = .31$) or self resolution ($M = .07$). Failure was especially prominent when the older children were informing the parent of a sibling's behavior and when younger children were attempting to resolve social problems (figure 4). Success and failure occurred equally often when older children were attempting to resolve a social problem and when younger children were informing the parent of their sibling's behavior.

Figure 4: Proportion of Events and Their Outcome



Conclusions

- In general, the act of tattling demonstrates that children believe that a simple report on the misdeeds of the sibling will draw their parents into an alliance and influence the outcome of the conflict.
- Although both two and four year old children tattled, the older children both transgressed and tattled more frequently than did the younger children. The present study did not verify the commonly held beliefs that younger children, and girls, would tattle more than older siblings and boys.
- Children's frequent transgressions of certain family rules were reflected in sibling's tattling. However, other rules, which were not transgressed as frequently, were more prominent in the children's reports to their parents. The data suggested that older children viewed property damage as especially reprehensible behavior while younger children were more concerned about physical aggression.
- Younger and older children tattled with different goals: older children were concerned about issues of loyalty while younger children tended to be concerned about issues of power.
- Tattling outcomes did not account for differences in older and younger children's tattling behavior.