Two Sides to Every Story? Parents’ Attributions of Culpability and Their Interventions Into Sibling Conflict

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This study examined associations between parents’ attributions of culpability and their observed interventions into sibling conflict. A total of 61 primary caregivers judged who was at fault for a sibling conflict and subsequently discussed the event with their two children (aged 4–10 years). Nonunilateral fault attributions (blaming both children or neither child) were related to parents’ discussion of the reasons underlying children’s behavior/perspectives and were more frequent when the age gap between children was larger. Parents selectively referred to their younger child’s point of view in conversation and, when the age gap was larger, selectively provided evidence in favor of their younger child. Results extend previous research by providing novel insight into how parents’ conflict judgments are linked to their intervention strategies with older and younger siblings and by identifying the circumstances in which parents intervene in ways that promote children’s mutual understanding and constructive conflict strategies.

Both common wisdom and systematic research underscore that children’s sibling conflicts are a major, continuing source of frustration for parents. Who among us has not encountered a parent who has been driven to “pull over this car until the two of you cool your jets”? Understandably, parents
are concerned about their children’s fights and how they should intervene (Kramer & Baron, 1995; Piotrowski, 1999). Indeed, parents play a key role in promoting young children’s constructive conflict strategies with their sibling (e.g., Perlman & Ross, 1997). Arguably, parental interventions may be especially crucial when power imbalances within the sibling dyad result in coercive or aggressive conflict processes (Bennett, 1990; Cicirelli, 1995); these power imbalances may be particularly evident prior to adolescence, when sibling conflict is at its peak (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990).

Research also reveals that parents use a wide variety of strategies for managing preschool and school-aged children’s conflicts, including passive nonintervention (e.g., ignoring), power-assertion (e.g., threats), adjudication (e.g., reasoning in defense of one child), and mediation-like procedures (e.g., promoting understanding between children). Some of these strategies appear to be more effective than others for diffusing conflict and promoting children’s conflict understanding and positive sibling relationships (Herrera & Dunn, 1997; Kramer, Perozynski, & Chung, 1999; Ross, Filyer, Lollis, Perlman, & Martin, 1994; Ross et al., 1996; Smith & Ross, 2007). Although parents’ immediate involvement in siblings’ everyday tussles may decline as children enter the school-aged years (Kramer et al., 1999), parents continue to be an important resource for more reflective discussions about intractable or recurring conflict issues between their children well into middle childhood and even adolescence (Recchia, Wainryb, & Pasupathi, 2011; Smith & Ross, 2007).

Nevertheless, despite a substantial literature suggesting that parental cognitions have fundamental connections to their socialization behaviors (Sigel, McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & Goodnow, 1992), little research has examined the beliefs and judgments that underlie parents’ strategies for discussing sibling conflict with their children. Similarly, previous research does not provide insight into when parents might intervene in ways that optimally promote their children’s development and constructive conflict resolution skills. The goal of this study was to address these issues by examining links between parents’ attributions of fault in relation to a recurring sibling conflict between their 4- to 10-year-old children and their observed intervention strategies in the context of a conflict discussion with their children. More specifically, our study was designed to explore two interrelated themes. First, we investigated whether parents perceived a recurring, unresolved conflict between their children as having a unilateral perpetrator, or whether they perceived culpability to be nonunilateral (i.e., both children or neither child was at fault), and how these patterns were associated with their interventions into the fight. Second, given that older and younger children take on distinct roles and wield unequal power within
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the dyad (Perlman, Siddiqui, Ram, & Ross, 2000), we examined the extent to which parental attributions of fault were selectively biased in favor of either older or younger siblings and whether their interventions into sibling conflict reflected asymmetries in their strategies with their two children.

Subjectivity and Parental Interventions Into Sibling Conflict

When left to their own devices, young children tend to resolve sibling conflicts unfairly and sometimes aggressively (Perlman & Ross, 1997; Siddiqui & Ross, 1999). Thus, one key function of parental intervention into sibling conflict is to enforce rules and uphold principles within the family (e.g., Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Indeed, observational research reveals that when parents intervene into their children’s conflicts, the parents tend to directly address the child who violated a rule by supporting the victim, and they consistently uphold particular moral principles, such as those condemning harm or failure to share (Ross et al., 1994, 1996).

This research implies that, at least in some instances, parents perceive sibling conflicts as having a clear victim. Yet, in other cases, culpability for sibling conflict may be considerably less obvious. Overt conflict occurs when two antagonists each choose to act on their incompatible perspectives (Stein & Miller, 1991), and thus many conflicts may not have a clear victim and perpetrator but rather be characterized by a series of mutually oppositional acts. In this respect, one particular child may not be uniquely and unambiguously responsible for a particular conflict. To illustrate, when siblings are asked who started a given conflict, they tend to identify the other child as the conflict initiator. Yet their conflict narratives often include references to their own actions that were identified as conflict initiations by their sibling (Wilson, Smith, Ross, & Ross, 2004). Thus, children appear to remember many of the same concrete conflict actions but interpret the meaning of those actions differently in making judgments about who is to blame (Ross, Smith, Spielmacher, & Recchia, 2004; Smith, 2001). These findings speak to the inherent subjectivity that characterizes many instances of conflict, in that antagonists’ divergent goals and interpretations are related to different construals of events (e.g., Ross & Ward, 1996; Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005). Indeed, a willingness to engage in conflict is premised on a view of one’s own stance as uniquely legitimate. In line with this, children engage in primarily self-oriented reasoning as they resolve disputes (Tesla & Dunn, 1992) and, when asked to describe their conflicts, provide more justifications for their own perspective than for that of their sibling (Ross et al., 2004; Wilson et al., 2004). Further, research suggests that these divergent accounts may not simply reflect children’s self-serving
biases or deliberate attempts to manage the impressions of others. Rather, when positioned differently within a conflict, children’s divergent roles and motivations appear to be associated with distinct interpretations of their experiences (Wainryb et al., 2005).

For this reason, and especially in light of young children’s limited social-cognitive abilities (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006), another key function of parental intervention into sibling conflict may be to help children understand and recognize the legitimacy of their sibling’s divergent conflict perspective. A growing body of research reveals that parental interventions that scaffold children’s understanding of their brother’s or sister’s perspective may be particularly effective for fostering siblings’ mutual understanding and constructive resolutions. When parents use other-oriented reasoning during interventions into sibling conflict, children resolve sibling and peer conflicts more constructively on their own (Herrera & Dunn, 1997; Recchia & Howe, 2009). These effects have also been shown experimentally. When parents are trained to mediate their children’s conflicts (i.e., manage the process of negotiation and foster mutual understanding but leave the final resolution in the hands of the children themselves), children subsequently demonstrate a better understanding of divergent conflict perspectives in general and of their sibling’s perspective in particular, and also develop more equitable resolutions when resolving issues on their own (Ross & Lazinski, 2011; Smith & Ross, 2007).

Although this research highlights the benefits associated with parental interventions that help children develop mutual understanding, it nevertheless does not speak to the circumstances in which parents will be naturally most inclined to intervene in ways that recognize children’s differing conflict perspectives. In other words, although parents can be trained to promote children’s understanding of their sibling’s point of view, when do parents do this on their own? To answer this question, the first goal of this study was to examine associations between parental interventions and their judgments of whether culpability for a particular instance of conflict rested squarely on the shoulders of one child. Although this question has not been previously examined in the realm of parenting, findings from research on adults’ epistemological and moral reasoning inform our hypotheses in this regard. Specifically, Kuhn (1991) demonstrated that adults’ emphasis on the subjectivity of knowledge (i.e., that two people can disagree, but both have a valid point of view) is linked to their recognition of the perspective differences underlying divergent positions on contested issues. Even more directly relevant to issues of culpability, Wainryb and colleagues have shown that adults judge others’ transgressive behavior to be less blameworthy when they recognize that such behavior is based on differing
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informational assumptions or interpretations (Shaw & Wainryb, 1999; Wainryb, 1993). Taken together, these findings suggest that parents who refrain from assigning blame to one particular child may be more focused on the differing conflict goals and perspectives that underlie siblings’ disagreements. Thus, when parents perceive culpability for a fight to be non-unilateral (i.e., when both children or neither child is at fault), they may be more likely to promote mutual understanding in an attempt to overcome interpretive diversity than when they perceive culpability to be unilateral (i.e., that one particular child is at fault).

Power Differences Between Siblings and Parental Interventions Into Children’s Conflicts

Due to differences in age between older and younger siblings, these relationships typically feature asymmetrical roles and distribution of power within the dyad, especially prior to adolescence (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990). As such, during early and middle childhood, sibling conflict interactions and resolutions are often dominated by stronger and more sophisticated older siblings at the expense of their younger counterparts (e.g., Martin and Ross, 1995; Perlman et al., 2000). These patterns are also moderated by age gap in predictable ways. For example, extreme forms of older siblings’ aggression are less common when the age gap between siblings is smaller (Cicirelli, 1995), perhaps because power differences are less pronounced. Thus, it appears that, when age differences are smaller, older and younger children’s roles in the dyad are less differentiated, and sibling relationships are characterized by greater reciprocity (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985).

Due to the inherent power imbalances that characterize sibling interactions, critics of parental intervention into children’s conflicts have claimed that parents may indiscriminately support the younger sibling and thus interfere with the established dynamics of sibling interactions (Felson & Russo, 1988). They suggest that, regardless of the true perpetrator in a given conflict, parents may artificially support the weaker party (i.e., the younger sibling), thus upsetting the natural balance of power between children and ultimately fostering further conflict. However, careful observational research has not borne out these concerns. Although parents intervene into sibling conflict by supporting the victim, their tendency to do so does not indiscriminately favor either older or younger siblings (Ross et al., 1994). In other words, parents are equally likely to support older and younger siblings who are victimized by their brother or sister. Further, when parents intervene into siblings’ fights, conflict resolutions tend to be much more
constructive and equitable than when children resolve issues on their own (Perlman & Ross, 1997; Recchia & Howe, 2009; Siddiqui & Ross, 1999). Thus, it appears that parents do not promote resolutions that unfairly support older or younger siblings but rather intervene in relatively unbiased, impartial ways.

Nevertheless, we argue that it is important to draw a distinction between parental interventions that are inappropriately and consistently biased in favor of one child and, conversely, evenhanded intervention strategies that nevertheless account for the role differences that characterize sibling relationships. Specifically, when children resolve conflicts on their own, older siblings may actually be learning that power-assertive strategies are an effective way of resolving conflicts in their favor (Bennett, 1990). Thus, to the extent that sibling conflict resolutions are more equitable when parents intervene, we propose that parents are supporting their younger children in some way (e.g., parents might aim to ensure that younger siblings’ voices are heard in conversation without undermining older siblings’ points of view). This may be especially important for promoting equitable interactions and mutual understanding when the age gap between siblings is larger, and thus power differences are more marked. Yet, to date, no research has examined whether parents are cognizant of these dynamics in interactions between their children, nor how these judgments might be reflected in conflict discussions with their children. Thus, the second goal of our study was to examine parents’ attributions of older and younger siblings’ culpability for conflict, and whether these judgments varied as a function of age differences between siblings. Moreover, to extend previous research, we investigated not only whether parental interventions were systematically biased in favor of one child (e.g., by selectively proposing solutions that favored the younger sibling), but also whether parents were able to curtail power imbalances and develop mutual understanding between their older and younger children while simultaneously promoting outcomes that were equitable and satisfactory to both siblings. For instance, we considered whether parents were able to help the younger sibling hold their own in ways that did not unfairly discriminate against their older child.

The Current Study

To summarize, this study examined associations between parents’ attributions of culpability in relation to a recurring sibling conflict and their subsequent interventions during a conflict discussion with their 4- to 10-year-old children. First, we examined whether parents’ fault attributions were associated with their tendency to engage in intervention strategies that
promoted understanding between children. Although this specific question has not been examined previously, research suggests that, when parents intervene into children’s conflicts in support of one sibling, they tend to focus on the transgressions of the other child, often in line with moral principles (Ross et al., 1994, 1996). Given this, we expected that unilateral attributions of culpability would be explained by referring to one child’s concrete violations of moral rules and principles. In turn, on the basis of research on adults’ epistemological and moral reasoning (i.e., Kuhn, 1991; Shaw & Wainryb, 1999; Wainryb, 1993), we reasoned that nonunilateral attributions of culpability were likely to be explained in relation to siblings’ divergent interpretations and motivations. Following from this, when parents perceived culpability to be nonunilateral, we further expected that their subsequent interventions would be more strongly focused on promoting children’s understanding of their sibling’s perspective (i.e., by exploring each child’s motivations, cognitions, and emotions, as well as the reasons underlying children’s positions).

Second, we assessed whether parents’ fault attributions and subsequent interventions systematically favored either older or younger siblings, and whether these patterns varied as a function of the age difference between children. We expected that, on average, parents’ fault attributions and interventions during conflict discussions would not be biased in favor of a particular child (e.g., that proposed solutions would be equitable). However, given developmental and role differences between older and younger siblings, we expected that parents might find ways to compensate for power imbalances between siblings, especially when the age gap between children was large. For instance, to the extent that younger siblings were not able to articulate their own perspectives as extensively as their older counterparts, we expected that parents might help to elaborate on the younger sibling’s point of view.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited via participant databases, newspaper advertisements, and word of mouth. Families with two children aged 4–10 years were identified and invited to participate in a study of sibling conflict; 78% of the eligible families initially contacted participated, whereas 13% were not interested and 9% were too busy to participate.

The sample included 61 sibling dyads and their primary parental caregiver (53 mothers, 7 fathers, and 1 legal guardian). Children ranged in age
from 4 to 10 years (older sibling $M$ age = 8.38 years, $SD = 1.21$; younger sibling $M$ age = 6.03 years, $SD = 1.13$), and the sample included approximately equal numbers of same-gender (15 female, 17 male) and mixed-gender (13 older female, 16 older male) sibling dyads. Primary caregivers ranged in age from 28 to 58 years ($M = 40.45, SD = 5.13$). The sample was primarily European Canadian (75%), and parental education ranged from high school to postgraduate school ($M = 3.3$ years postsecondary).

Parents provided written informed consent and permission on their children’s behalf, and children verbally assented to all procedures. Children received a small toy to thank them for their participation, and each family received a movie gift certificate.

**Procedure**

Data for this study were drawn from a larger investigation of sibling conflict in early and middle childhood (see Recchia & Howe, 2009, 2010); only procedures relevant to the current study are described here. Each family participated in a session either in their home or in a playroom at the university. All interviews were audiotaped, and conflict discussions were both audio- and videotaped.

After a brief warm-up period, each child was individually and privately asked to nominate at least three recurring sibling conflicts. Subsequently, the two children were brought together (in the presence of the interviewers and their parent) to decide which conflicts would be discussed. In all cases, children were able to agree on two conflicts. Subsequently, one of the two conflicts was randomly selected for discussion with their parent. This corpus of 61 conflicts formed the basis of the present study. As reported elsewhere, conflicts almost invariably surrounded the types of moral issues that tend to be implicated in sibling relationships, such as physical/psychological harm (e.g., teasing) and fairness/rights violations (e.g., sharing toys; Recchia & Howe, 2010).

Following conflict selection, parents were privately interviewed about the conflict while children were engaged in a separate activity in another room. During the interview, parents were asked an open-ended question about who was at fault for the conflict and to explain their judgment (“Whose fault is this fight really and truly? Why?”); parents were not asked to choose among fault-attribution response options (i.e., older sibling, both, etc.) but rather answered in their own words. Following this interview, parents and children were brought back together to discuss the conflict. Families were asked to talk about the conflict and try to work it out in any way that they thought best. They were told that the interviewer would return
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after 10 minutes and that they would be given an additional 3 minutes if necessary (M duration of discussions = 5 min, 32 s; range = 1 min, 27 s, to 13 min, 0 s).

Interviews and conflict discussions were transcribed verbatim for analysis. In the case of conflict discussions, nonverbal behaviors relevant to understanding participants’ tone and content of dialogue were added to the transcripts (e.g., laughing, leaving the room, pointing).

Coding

Based on 20% of the transcripts, interrater reliability was established between the first author and a naïve coder. Reliabilities for individual codes are presented in the following sections.

Fault attributions. Parents’ attributions of fault for their children’s conflicts were coded into one of five mutually exclusive categories (Cohen’s kappa = .84). Specifically, parents could indicate that (a) the older sibling was at fault, (b) the younger sibling was at fault, (c) for each instance of the recurring conflict, one particular child was at fault, but it depended on which instance, (d) both children were at fault, or (e) neither child was at fault. For the purpose of analyses, we subsequently collapsed these five categories into a dichotomous variable contrasting (a) unilateral fault attributions that included blaming the older sibling, the younger sibling, or indicating that it depends (these latter attributions were unilateral in the sense that culpability was described as unambiguous for each instance of conflict but that the identity of the culprit varied between particular conflict episodes) with (b) nonunilateral fault attributions that included blaming both children or neither child for a given instance of the conflict (both of these attributions were nonunilateral in the sense that parents refrained from characterizing one child as the culprit and the other as the victim).

In many cases, parents’ explanations for their attributions of culpability were multifaceted. As such, multiple categories of explanations could be coded for one fault attribution. Specifically, we coded the presence or absence of each of the following categories: (a) the older and/or younger sibling’s concrete actions (e.g., “Tim was hogging the computer”; “Sarah screams at Frank”; kappa = .79), (b) the older and/or younger sibling’s conflict cognitions (e.g., “They forgot whose turn it was”; “Ryan doesn’t realize how his helpful intention is going to be taken”; kappa = 1.0), (c) the older and/or younger sibling’s stable qualities (e.g., “They just have very different personalities”; “Danielle doesn’t like being alone”; kappa = .95),

1 All names are pseudonyms.
(d) the presence of conflicting goals ("Greta wanted to be part of what Sammy was doing and Sammy wanted to be alone"; "They both wanted the same toy at the same time"; kappa = 1.0), (e) circumstances outside of the children’s control or not directly related to the conflict ("The computer wouldn’t let her log on"; "We just put them to bed too late at night"; kappa = .63), and (f) moral principles, including rights, fairness, and harm ("I think they should share objects"; “It was really mean to do that; it hurts people’s feelings”; kappa = .86).

Conflict discussions. Parents’ contributions to conflict discussions were coded when they referred to one of four categories of content (kappa for type of content = .89), with percent agreement for lines of transcript to be coded, computed as agreements/(agreements + disagreements) = 81%. More specifically, we coded parents’ references to the following types of content: (a) older and younger siblings’ conflict perspectives, (b) reasons for children’s perspectives or behaviors, (c) evidence in support of the older or younger sibling’s point of view, and (d) solutions to the conflict. References to perspectives encompassed children’s cognitions (e.g., “So you thought he was in his room”), motivations (e.g., “He wanted to play with you”), and emotions (e.g., “He got really sad”) in the context of the conflict. References to reasons included explanations for the children’s past behaviors (e.g., “He didn’t help you because he had homework”) and explanations for their perspectives (e.g., “You were mad because he told you to go away”). References to evidence included accusations (e.g., “but you went into his room without asking!”), facts (e.g., “You had the computer first on Monday”), or judgments (e.g., “It wasn’t nice to do that”) that were presented for the purpose of making a case in support of a particular child. Finally, references to solutions referred to strategies for solving the problem (e.g., “We should make a calendar”). It was possible for one conversational turn to be coded into multiple categories (e.g., if a parent referred to a reason that also served as evidence). Perspectives and reasons were further coded for whether they referred to the older or younger sibling’s point of view or behavior. In turn, evidence and solutions were coded for whether they supported the older or younger sibling (or, in the case of solutions, whether they supported both siblings equally; kappas > .89).

Results

Who Do Parents Blame for Sibling Conflict?

Frequencies of unilateral and nonunilateral fault attributions are presented at the top of Table 1. More specifically, in terms of unilateral fault attributions,
in eight cases, parents indicated that fault shifted between different instances of the same conflict; in nine cases, parents blamed older siblings; and, in 15 cases, parents blamed younger siblings. A $t$ test revealed that this difference in the relative likelihood of blaming the older and younger sibling was not statistically significant, $t(23) = 1.24$, $ns$. With regard to nonunilateral fault attributions, in 16 cases, parents blamed both children; and, in 11 cases, parents blamed neither child.

The explanations provided for unilateral and nonunilateral fault attributions are presented at the bottom of Table 1. The relative likelihood of parents using each explanation category for the two types of fault attributions was assessed using a series of chi-square tests (for this and all other analyses, alpha was set at $p < .05$, two-tailed). Not surprisingly, parents were especially likely to refer to children’s concrete conflict actions and violations of moral principles in their explanations for unilateral (as compared to nonunilateral) fault attributions. In contrast, parents who provided nonunilateral attributions of fault more often explained these judgments by referring to the presence of conflicting goals and extenuating circumstances.

Finally, logistic regressions were used to examine associations between age gap and parents’ fault attributions. Parents were more likely to provide nonunilateral attributions of fault when the age difference between their children was larger, $\chi^2(1) = 4.62$, $B$ for age difference $= .07$, $p < .05$. 

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**Table 1.** Frequencies of parents’ attributions of fault for sibling conflict and their explanations for these attributions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of explanation for fault attribution</th>
<th>Unilateral fault attribution ($n = 31$)</th>
<th>Nonunilateral fault attribution ($n = 27$)</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children’s actions</td>
<td>26 (84)</td>
<td>8 (30)</td>
<td>17.50***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s cognitions</td>
<td>6 (19)</td>
<td>10 (37)</td>
<td>2.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s qualities</td>
<td>9 (29)</td>
<td>14 (52)</td>
<td>3.14†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflicting goals</td>
<td>2 (6)</td>
<td>7 (26)</td>
<td>4.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circumstances</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>5 (19)</td>
<td>6.28*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral principles</td>
<td>29 (94)</td>
<td>6 (22)</td>
<td>30.68***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Percentages in each column may sum to greater than 100% because explanation categories were not mutually exclusive. Three parents are not included in this table: One was not asked to provide an attribution of fault, a second indicated that “it depends” but was not asked to explain her attribution, and a third indicated that she did not know who was at fault because she had not had the opportunity to observe directly the conflict in action.

†$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$. 

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Specifically, when the age gap between siblings was 19.49 months (1 SD below the mean), the estimated probability of making a nonunilateral fault attribution was 29%, whereas this probability increased to 57% when the age difference between siblings was 35.35 months (1 SD above the mean). To clarify this effect, we conducted a follow-up analysis including only the parents who described one specific child as consistently responsible for the fight ($n = 24$ cases). This analysis revealed a trend suggesting that, when the age difference between siblings was larger, parents were more likely to blame the older sibling relative to the younger sibling, $\chi^2(1) = 3.26$, $B$ for age difference $= .10$, $p < .10$. At 1 SD below the mean of age gap, the estimated probability of blaming the older sibling (relative to the younger) was only 23%, whereas at 1 SD above the mean of age gap, the probability of blaming the older sibling was 62%. Thus, these analyses revealed that a larger age gap between siblings was associated with nonunilateral fault attributions, whereas a smaller age gap was marginally related to blaming the younger sibling.

How Are Parents’ Unilateral and Nonunilateral Fault Attributions Associated With Their Subsequent Interventions Into Sibling Conflict?

Our next set of analyses used a series of $t$ tests to examine whether parents’ relative focus on four types of conversational content varied as a function of their unilateral vs. nonunilateral attributions of culpability (see Table 2). Proportional references to each category of content were computed—by dividing each category by the total number of coded conversational contributions by the parent—to capture parents’ relative emphasis on each type of content (e.g., proportional references to perspectives = [perspectives]/

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Proportions of parents’ references to various types of conversational content as a function of their attributions of culpability</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of parent’s contributions to conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solutions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *$p < .05$. 


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[perspectives + reasons + evidence + solutions]). Contrary to expectations, the association between parents’ focus on children’s conflict perspectives and their fault attributions was not significant. However, in line with hypotheses, parents who described culpability for conflict as nonunilateral were more likely to delve into reasons than were parents who described culpability as unilateral.

Do Parents Intervene Differently With Older and Younger Siblings?

As already mentioned, our findings for fault attributions suggested that, on average, parents were not significantly more likely to blame either older or younger siblings for conflict. Nevertheless, their interventions might be more likely to favor their older or younger child, or to more heavily scaffold their younger child’s participation in the conversation. To investigate this issue, we examined associations between birth order (i.e., older vs. younger sibling) and the content of parents’ interventions (see Table 3). To examine this question for reasons and perspectives, we computed the proportions of parents’ references that referred to a particular child’s point of view (e.g., parents’ selective emphasis on older siblings’ reasons = [references to older sibling’s reasons]/[total number of references to reasons]). Parents were excluded from this analysis if they failed to refer to a particular category of content (i.e., if the denominator = 0), and therefore the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of conversational content</th>
<th>Older sibling proportion M (SD)</th>
<th>Younger sibling proportion M (SD)</th>
<th>t(df)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>References to child’s perspective</td>
<td>.37 (.32)</td>
<td>.63 (.32)</td>
<td>-2.81 (50)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons underlying child’s behavior or perspective</td>
<td>.33 (.40)</td>
<td>.67 (.40)</td>
<td>-2.31 (29)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence in child’s favor</td>
<td>.40 (.41)</td>
<td>.60 (.41)</td>
<td>-1.46 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solutions in child’s favor</td>
<td>.42 (.38)</td>
<td>.58 (.38)</td>
<td>-1.18 (28)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The degrees of freedom vary between tests because families were excluded in cases when a parent failed to refer to a particular type of content (e.g., to be included in the analysis of solutions, a parent had to refer at least once to a solution that favored one child over the other).

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01.
Relative to their older child, parents were especially likely to discuss the *perspective* of their younger child, as well as *reasons* underlying their younger child’s behavior/perspective. Next, we computed parents’ proportional references to evidence and solutions that favored one child over the other (e.g., \([\text{evidence favoring the younger sibling}] / \text{total number of references to evidence}\)); as with the foregoing, the \(df\) varied between tests, because some parents (a) failed to make any references to evidence or (b) failed to refer to at least one solution favoring a particular child over the other. These analyses revealed that parents were not more likely to provide *evidence* or *solutions* that favored one child over the other. In fact, it is important to note that the solutions proposed by parents were overwhelmingly equitable; on average, 81% of parents’ proposed solutions favored both siblings equally.

Our final set of analyses examined whether parents’ interventions varied as a function of the age difference between siblings. Correlations revealed one significant effect: The selective provision of *evidence* in favor of the younger sibling was related to the magnitude of the age difference between children \((r = .39, p < .01)\). In other words, parents were proportionately more likely to provide evidence in favor of their younger child when the age difference between children was larger.

**Discussion**

Sibling conflicts can become affectively intense or aggressive, and some parental intervention strategies may be particularly effective for promoting children’s constructive conflict skills and positive relationships (e.g., Herrera & Dunn, 1997; Smith & Ross, 2007). Yet, although parents’ beliefs are clearly related to their socialization strategies (e.g., Sigel et al., 1992), we know little about how parents perceive and judge their children’s sibling conflicts and even less about how these judgments are related to parents’ strategies for intervening into children’s fights. In this respect, the current study provides useful information about how parental cognitions may be linked to their intervention techniques in the context of a conflict discussion with their children. In particular, this study revealed how parental attributions of culpability for sibling conflict are related to their strategies for intervening into children’s fights. The results provide new insights into the parental judgments that may be related to their strategies for promoting understanding and empathy between siblings, as well as for scaffolding younger siblings’ contributions to conversations about conflict. Each of these sets of issues will be discussed in turn.
In the heat of the moment, recognizing the interpretive differences that underlie a disagreement can be difficult even for adults. These difficulties are even more pronounced for young children, who have limited ability to infer others’ mental states and to take others’ perspectives (Carpendale & Lewis, 2006). For this reason, parents can play an important role in fostering children’s understanding of their brother or sister’s divergent point of view on sibling conflict. When parents engage in strategies that promote understanding between their children, this has been linked to children’s understanding of interpretation, their ability to recognize their sibling’s perspective, their tendency to resolve conflicts constructively, and the positive quality of their sibling relationships (Herrera & Dunn, 1997; Howe & Ross, 1990; Smith & Ross, 2007).

Given these patterns, it is crucial to identify the circumstances in which parents are most likely to engage in intervention strategies that promote understanding between siblings. As such, the first goal of the current investigation was to explore how parental attributions of culpability are related to their tendency to discuss each child’s motivations, cognitions, and emotions in the context of conflict, as well as their references to reasons underlying each child’s behavior or perspectives. As expected based on past research (Kuhn, 1991; Shaw & Wainryb, 1999; Wainryb, 1993), we found that parents’ unilateral and nonunilateral attributions of culpability were accompanied by distinct types of explanations. When parents made unilateral attributions of fault, these judgments tended to be explained on the basis of children’s concrete actions that violated moral principles. In contrast, when parents judged that fault was nonunilateral (i.e., shared by both children or that neither child was responsible for a given conflict), their explanations more often included references to children’s conflicting goals and extenuating circumstances. Consider the following two examples of nonunilateral fault attributions:

“They both contribute. It’s like coming down the lane after school. They both had their umbrellas, and Annie playfully whacked Melinda, but Melinda didn’t interpret it as a playful thing and got really cheesed off and wanted to whack Annie with hers. So whose fault is that?”

“Well, it’s one of those cases, you know, where it’s nobody’s fault really. I mean, I sort of understand Amanda. She spent fifteen minutes on the computer but didn’t get to play because the system wasn’t letting her...
Both of these instances clearly reflect a judgment that, for this particular conflict, the issue of responsibility could not be determined on the basis of a concrete transgressive behavior by one child, such as hitting someone with an umbrella, or staying on the computer for more than 15 minutes. Thus, at least for some conflicts, parents seem to acknowledge that multiple divergent interpretations of the same event may be both possible and legitimate.

Perhaps even more interestingly, these judgments of culpability were related to the content of parents’ interventions during a conflict discussion with their children. Specifically, as compared to parents who made unilateral judgments of culpability, when parents believed that there were two sides to the story, they were subsequently more likely to discuss the reasons underlying children’s conflict behavior and perspectives. In other words, when parents described culpability as nonunilateral, they were more likely to delve into the explanations for why children behaved the way they did, or to elaborate on the reasons for children’s motivations, cognitions, and emotions. This type of strategy is one key component of mediational techniques that have been implemented as part of parent training programs that aim to improve sibling conflict processes (e.g., Smith & Ross, 2007). The current study provides a complement to this intervention research by identifying one key correlate of parents’ tendency to use such strategies during a reflective conflict discussion in the absence of mediation training. To our knowledge, ours is the first investigation to reveal such an association between parental judgments about conflict and their tendency to engage in sibling conflict intervention strategies that can serve to promote understanding and empathy between siblings. This information may have implications for efforts to promote constructive conflict resolution between children, a point we return to in the conclusion.

Leveling the Playing Field: Asymmetry in Parents’ Interventions With Older and Younger Siblings

Theory, research, and practical advice concerning parental interventions into sibling conflict have considered the implications of the inherent power imbalances between older and younger siblings. In particular, experts have debated whether parental interventions artificially support the younger sibling and upset the natural power dynamics of the sibling relationship, or whether parents intervene in an unbiased manner (e.g., Felson &
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Russo, 1988; Ross et al., 1994). Our results suggest that, in the context of a reflective discussion about a recurring conflict issue, parental intervention strategies are typically equitable. Overwhelmingly, parents in our sample discussed solutions that favored both children equally, and when they did occasionally suggest solutions that favored one child, such solutions were equally likely to benefit older and younger siblings. Further, on average, parents were equally likely to provide evidence in support of their older and younger children.

Yet, as already noted, these relatively equitable patterns stand in contrast to how siblings typically resolve conflicts on their own. In other words, parental interventions appear to mitigate the power differences between older and younger siblings that are evident in early and middle childhood. How might they be doing so? Our results suggest some ways in which parental intervention strategies with their older and younger siblings are distinct. Specifically, parents were substantially more likely to refer to their younger child's perspective in comparison with their older child, as well as the reasons for the younger child's behavior/perspective. We suggest that this pattern has a straightforward explanation: Older siblings were simply more able and inclined to speak for themselves. Consider the following example:

**Parent** (to both children): “What do you guys do?”

**Older sibling**: “I let her hide first. Then the next time when she’s been found she says, “I don’t want to count.” And sometimes she comes running to you crying.”

**Younger sibling**: “Do not. I don’t come crying.”

**Parent** (to younger sibling): “So what do I usually say?”

**Older sibling**: “You have to count because you’ve been chosen.”

...*

**Parent** (to younger sibling): “What do you usually do?”

**Younger sibling** *(fake crying sound)*

**Parent**: “You get mad, right? Then you say you don’t want to play anymore.”

In this case, the parent appears to be implicitly supporting her older child’s position, but nevertheless it is she who elicits and elaborates on her younger child’s perspective, whereas her older child seems quite capable of speaking for himself. It is the older sibling who responds to the parent’s initial request for information; he also answers a subsequent question that is
directly addressed to his younger sister. In fact, the patterns in this example mirror what we see in conflicts between siblings when they are alone, in that older, more sophisticated siblings tend to dominate these interactions. For instance, in conflict discussions between two children, older siblings’ strategies tend to be more strongly associated with the ultimate resolution than are those of their younger siblings (Ross, Ross, Stein, & Trabasso, 2006); not surprisingly, such solutions often tend to be in their own favor (Perlman et al., 2000). Thus, when parents become involved, resolutions may ultimately be more equitable because parents are able to level the playing field by selectively elaborating on the younger sibling’s perspective. Indeed, it is important to note that, in this sample, even though parents actually tended to favor their older children’s point of view more often, they were also almost twice as likely to elaborate on their younger child’s perspective. We suggest that this parental intervention strategy could be constructive for both children, in that it may scaffold younger siblings’ ability to verbalize their own point of view and simultaneously help older siblings to acknowledge their younger brother or sister’s perspective on events. Indeed, the latter socialization process may be especially important for older siblings, because research suggests that conflict “winners” tend to have particularly limited knowledge of the other’s position (Stein, Bernas, & Calicchia, 1997).

We also found that the age difference between siblings moderated these patterns in predictable ways. We reasoned that, when age gap was larger, the power imbalance between older and younger siblings would be more pronounced, and thus parents would be more likely to compensate accordingly. The results we obtained were in line with this interpretation. When there was a bigger age difference between siblings, parents were more likely to make nonunilateral attributions of culpability. Furthermore, when they did blame one particular child for conflict, when the age difference was larger, a trend suggested that parents were more likely to place blame on the older rather than the younger sibling. When considered in combination, these findings suggest that parents recognize and respond to the challenges inherent in interactions between two children with marked differences in their levels of social and cognitive sophistication. Both of these issues come through clearly in the following example:

“Matthew doesn’t give up his territory very easily. You know, it’s funny, because I think that because Matthew is older, he has more of a responsibility to understand and stop these things before they start. Because ultimately, Matthew can stop these things before they start. He’s very
clever, he’s an intelligent boy, and he’s older. And Bruno is a little more socially immature. I’m not saying that Bruno isn’t responsible for his actions, because he absolutely is. But if Matthew is given the responsibility, whether he likes it or not, as an older child—and I hated this too—you are setting the example.”

These moderating effects of the age difference between siblings were also reflected in the manner in which parents intervened into sibling conflict. When the age gap between siblings was larger, parents were more likely to selectively provide evidence in favor of their younger child. Thus, parental intervention strategies appear to be in line with their perceptions of the relative imbalance of power between siblings in the dyad.

Conclusions

This study was based on a small sample of primarily middle-class, White, North American, well-functioning families, and thus we caution that our results may not be directly applicable to other populations. For instance, our findings may not generalize to how parental judgments and intervention strategies are interrelated in families with a history of sibling violence and more extreme forms of recurring conflict. Further, this investigation included a conversation about only one recurring conflict per family, and thus we were not able to determine the extent to which a particular parent’s judgments and interventions vary across situations. It is also important to note that our findings in the context of structured interviews and conflict discussions may not apply to parents’ attributions and interventions when parents’ and children’s emotions are running particularly high, children are in imminent danger of physical or psychological harm, or parents are trying to get dinner on the table (e.g., Hastings & Grusec, 1998). Indeed, by asking parents (a) to make judgments of fault and (b) to help children resolve their differences, our procedure may have prompted parents to be particularly reflective about their children’s conflicts and their own parenting practices. We may also have introduced socialization goals that are not salient in all family interactions; in naturalistic contexts, parents may sometimes refrain from intervening altogether (e.g., Kramer et al., 1999). Finally, we examined the parenting strategies of only one parent (i.e., the children’s primary caregiver); our small sample did not enable us to determine whether the gender of this parent moderated some of the observed patterns.

Nevertheless, our results reveal patterns that extend our knowledge of parental socialization strategies in response to their children’s sibling
conflicts. We set out to investigate links between parents’ fault attributions and interventions into sibling conflict, with the goal of providing insight into parents’ promotion of understanding between siblings and recognition of power imbalances within the sibling dyad. The results of our study suggest that parents’ unilateral and nonunilateral attributions of culpability are based on distinct understandings of the roots of their children’s conflicts, are relevant to their strategies for intervening, and are associated in predictable ways to the age difference between their children. Thus, programs designed to help parents become more effective at discussing sibling conflict with their children might benefit from a consideration of parents’ interpretations of their children’s conflicts rather than simply attempting to change their concrete intervention strategies without taking into account the beliefs and judgments that underlie them. Related to this point, the correlational nature of our study does not allow us to identify the causal mechanisms underlying the associations observed between parental judgments and intervention strategies. As such, an important direction for future research is to disambiguate the causal relationships between parents’ beliefs about their children’s conflicts and their observed intervention strategies.

References

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