



# A longitudinal study of heterosexual relationships, aggression, and sexual harassment during the transition from primary school through middle school

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## Abstract

The period of early adolescence witnesses the onset of interest in heterosexual relationships. Prior to this period, youngsters spend much of their free time with same-sex peers. In the present longitudinal, multimethod study, two dimensions of heterosexual relationships were examined: cross-sex interaction and cross-sex aggression. We examined the extent to which youngsters interacted with peers of the opposite sex, as well as self-reported dating frequency. Cross-sex aggression was also examined. It was predicted that cross-sex interactions would increase with time and that youngsters would use playful strategies to initiate cross-sex interactions. Aggression was measured through self-report, direct observations, and adult completed checklists. It was predicted that both boys and girls would target opposite-sex peer for aggression. Lastly, a mediational model of sexual harassment was proposed whereby dating frequency in the middle of sixth grade would mediate the relation between bullying at the start of seventh grade and sexual harassment at the end of seventh grade. A sample of rural sixth and seventh grade students was studied across their first 2 years of middle school. Predictions were, for the most part, supported. Results are discussed in terms of the role of activity settings as specifying peer youngsters' interactions. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

The adolescent period is one of transitions from childhood to adulthood, from parent-centered to peer-centered relationships, and from primary to secondary schools. Possibly, the most dramatic transition involves the move into puberty and the changes associated with

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increased heterosexual relationships. In this article, I describe changes in youngsters' relationships with peers of the opposite sex, in the context of the first 2 years of middle school. Contacts with opposite-sex peers will be examined in terms of causal contact, dating, and aggression.

Sex segregation during the juvenile period is a robust finding, being observed cross-culturally in industrialized societies, (Maccoby, 1998; Whiting & Edwards, 1973), as well as in many mammalian species (e.g., Ruckstuhl, 1998). Indeed, segregation by sex seems to be more potent in directing peer affiliation than race (Schofield, 1981). Segregation manifests itself most commonly in children choosing to interact with same-sex peers during their free-time periods with little adult supervision (Blatchford, 1998; Thorne, 1986, 1993).

### *1.1. The beginnings of heterosexual contact*

Researchers have spent significant time conducting direct observations of children in preschools (e.g., Serbin, Tonick, & Sternglanz, 1977), primary schools (Thorne, 1986), and middle schools (Pellegrini, 1992; Schofield, 1981) documenting the degree to which they choose same-sex peers and avoid opposite-sex peers for interactions in play, games, and seating at lunch. Same-sex preference is typically established by 3-years-of-age and only begins to change in adolescence (Maccoby, 1998; Pellegrini, 1992).

Segregation is most pronounced in settings where children are institutionally sorted into same-age groups, such as schools. Schools also happen to be the place affording many opportunities for children and adolescents alike to interact with peers, both of the same and opposite sex (Blatchford, 1998). Indeed, Maccoby (1998, p. 73) suggests that school is the “major setting” where children encounter peers of the other sex. Consequently, it is an ecologically valid venue to study peer interaction, generally, and heterosexual relationships, specifically. By extension, in order to understand the beginnings of heterosexual relationships, it is sensible to study youngsters as they first make the transition into a middle school, and follow them longitudinally. In this way, the natural history of relationships with opposite-sex peers can be studied from the point when youngsters first encounter each other in an institution designed for young adolescents. In the present study, youngsters were observed in a variety of venues in their middle schools, from school breakfast before school; through the school day as they changed classes, ate lunch, and had breaks; and at school dances held on Friday evenings on a monthly basis.

In the present study, a multimethod approach was utilized to document cross-sex contact. The extent to which youngsters had cross-sex contact was documented with direct behavioral observations, self-reports, and adult completed checklists. A multimethod approach was used as it maximizes construct validity (Rushton, Brainerd, & Pressley, 1983). Direct observations are particularly important complements to other measures, as they provide objective accounts of youngsters' reciprocal interactions in public places.

### *1.2. Initial approaches to cross-sex interaction: cooperative interaction, rough play, and dating*

Cross-sex contacts should increase with time as youngsters progress across middle school, as this is a period when heterosexual contact becomes a powerful force motivating peer

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