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# Resolving conflicts with friends: Adolescents' strategies and reasons behind these strategies

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## ABSTRACT

The study examined adolescents' strategies for managing hypothetical conflicts with the same-sex best friend and their reasons behind these strategies. The sample included 905 14-year-old Estonian adolescents. The findings indicated that negotiation was the most frequently suggested strategy by adolescents. At the same time, adolescents' strategies and reasons strongly depended on the source of conflict. Coercive strategies and self-oriented reasons were more common in case of severe conflicts that could damage interpersonal relatedness or pose a threat to the attainment of autonomy. Girls reported having conflicts more frequently and suggested more negotiation than boys in all conflict situations. Sex differences did, however, occur only in adolescents' strategies. Boys' and girls' reasons behind their strategies were similar. Implications will be discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is the period when relationships with peers start to play a crucial role in individuals' psychological adaptation and wellbeing (Steinberg & Silk, 1995). Social skills, including those related to conflict management thus become critical for better social and psychological adjustment. Although much research has been conducted on conflicts among adolescent friends, a deeper understanding why certain strategies are used to resolve different types of conflicts is needed. The present study examines adolescent boys' and girls' strategies for managing various hypothetical conflicts with their same-sex best friend and also their reasons behind these strategies.

### 1.1. The source of conflict

In the present study, *conflict* is defined as a state of incompatible behaviours or goals (Laursen & Hafen, 2010). In general, adolescents' conflict resolution strategies are more sophisticated than those of younger children: With increasing age, less coercion and more negotiation tend to be used (Laursen, 1993; Laursen, Finkelstein, & Betts, 2001).

Nevertheless, studies with young children show that children's strategies of conflict management are related to the source of conflict. For example, in provocative situations (e.g., name-calling), children are more likely to be coercive (Tamm, Tõugu, & Tulviste, 2014; Walker, Irving, & Berthelsen, 2002). In studies conducted among adolescents, the source of conflict has rarely been taken into account.

Adolescents' conflicts with friends are most often over relationship issues and over differences of idea or opinion (Laursen, 1995). In the present study, adolescents are asked to describe their strategies and reasons behind these strategies in four hypothetical conflict

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situations: having different tastes in music, having romantic feelings for the same boy/girl (romantic competition), disagreeing over whom one can be friends with (exclusivity of friendship), and finding out that your friend has talked negatively about them behind their backs (backbiting). According to the social domain approach (Nucci, 1996; Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014), these conflict scenarios differ in terms of their severity ranging from mild everyday conflicts over personal issues (i.e., disagreement over different music tastes) to more severe conflicts over moral issues (i.e., backbiting). Severity of conflict is thus mainly determined by the domain to which the issue of a conflict belongs, but at the same time, we acknowledge the role of many other potential confounding factors, such as short-term or long-term consequences or the perceived threat to autonomy and relatedness. The given conflict situations can be characterised by a degree to which they pose a threat to adolescents' autonomy and relatedness needs. Many researchers claim that during adolescence it is an important developmental task to achieve autonomy, but at the same time, to maintain relatedness with others (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kagitçibaşı, 2013). Balancing autonomy and relatedness can, however, be challenging during conflicts (Chango, Allen, Szewedo, & Schad, 2015).

Backbiting can be conceptualized as breaking the most serious – moral – rules as it causes psychological harm (Smetana, Crean, & Campione-Barr, 2005). Studies show that loyalty and trustworthiness become increasingly important for adolescent friends (Hall, 2011; MacEvoy & Asher, 2012; McNelles & Connolly, 1999). Betrayal of trust violates these unwritten rules of friendship and is likely to lead to the weakening of friendship ties and relatedness.

Less severe conflicts are likely to be experienced more frequently than more severe conflicts (Laursen, 1995). In the present study, the choice of music, friend and a dating partner can all be seen as personal issues and less severe than backbiting (Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Nucci, 1996; Smetana, 2006). These are more related to adolescents' autonomy, but at the same time, might require adolescents to consider how to express one's autonomy without damaging interpersonal relatedness. Compared to having different tastes in music, adolescents are likely to be more coercive when conflict arises over having romantic feelings for the same boy/girl and over the exclusivity of friendship because the latter can have long-term consequences for adolescents (Smetana, 1995).

We expect to increase the understanding of how adolescents manage different types of conflicts and what their reasons for using these particular strategies are. To our knowledge, no previous studies on conflicts among adolescent friends have examined adolescents' reasons behind their strategies. Research on parent-child conflicts has, however, shown the importance of examining both the strategies and the reasons. Adolescents' reasons are likely to reflect more strongly their attitudes and goals than their strategies (Phinney, Kim-Jo, Osorio, & Vilhjalmssdottir, 2005; Tamm, Kasearu, Tulviste, Trommsdorff, & Saralieva, 2017). It has been found that adolescents sometimes use, for example, compliance for self-oriented reasons (Tamm et al., 2017).

### 1.2. Adolescents' sex

Although friendships among opposite-sex peers become more common during adolescence, boys and girls still more frequently form close relationships with peers of the same sex (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Some studies suggest that girls' friendships involve more intimacy, cohesion, and commitment (De Goede, Branje, & Meeus, 2009; Johnson, 2004). Others argue that girls and boys rather differ in the way they establish intimacy: Intimacy lies in discussions and disclosure for girls, but in shared activities for boys (McNelles & Connolly, 1999; Sheets & Lugar, 2005).

By reviewing the relevant studies, Hall (2011) concluded that violations of symmetrical reciprocity (i.e., loyalty and trustworthiness) and communion (i.e., emotional availability and self-disclosure) are likely to be most damaging to girls' friendships. Nevertheless, MacEvoy and Asher (2012) examined 9–11 years old children's responses to situations in which their friend had violated the core friendship expectations (e.g., a friend's betrayal and unreliability) and found that although girls were more bothered by transgressions of friendship expectations and were more likely than boys to feel that their friend devalued them, there were no sex differences in the frequency of suggesting aggressive strategies. Moreover, girls were even more likely than boys to focus on maintaining the friendship when explaining their goals in such situations. Studies thus suggest that girls are more concerned for maintaining the relationship and taking into account joint interests, whereas boys might be more oriented to competition and their own interests (Black, 2000; Connolly et al., 2015; de Wied, Branje, & Meeus, 2007; Hartup, 1992; Keener, Strough, & DiDonato, 2012; Owens, Daly, & Slee, 2005; Schneider, Woodburn, del Toro, & Udvari, 2005; Strough & Berg, 2000; Strough & Keener, 2014; Tezer & Demir, 2001). We aim to examine the generalisability of these findings: Are girls are more oriented to joint interests regardless of the type of conflict or are sex differences context-specific?

### 1.3. The present study

Hypothetical conflicts have been widely used for examining children's and adolescents' friendship expectations and conflict management strategies (meta-analysis by Laursen et al., 2001; MacEvoy & Asher, 2012). Laursen et al. (2001) also reported that with participants' increasing age, the data collected with self-reports and observations become more comparable. The present study examines how adolescents' strategies of managing hypothetical conflicts with their same-sex best friend and reasons behind these strategies vary depending on the source of conflict and sex. We hypothesise that adolescents most frequently suggest coercion and focus on individual needs in their reasons in case of severe conflicts like backbiting, whereas they are more oriented to mutual interests in less severe conflicts such as having different tastes in music. In general, girls are likely to suggest more negotiation and focus on mutuality in their reasons more frequently than boys. In addition to this, we aim to clarify the role of the frequency of conflict in its management and examine associations between adolescents' strategies and reasons.

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