

Introduction

Children associate physical aggression with boys and relational aggression with girls (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Giles & Heyman, 2005). Further, children are more favorable toward individuals who behave stereotypically, compared to individuals who behave counter-stereotypically (e.g., Blakemore, 2003). This could imply that children might be more willing to befriend transgressors who engage in stereotypic aggression (e.g., physically aggressive boy) over counter-stereotypic aggression (e.g., relationally aggressive boy). Children also attend to transgressor intentions. In relation to gender, boy transgressors with ambiguous intentions are regarded more negatively than their girl counterparts (Giles & Heyman, 2005; Heyman, 2001).

It is uncertain how intentionality interplays with stereotypic versus counter-stereotypic aggression, including how both cues interact to drive children's willingness to befriend transgressors. Participant age might further complicate children's decisions, as assessments of transgressors become increasingly negative and nuanced across childhood (Boseovski, Lapan, & Bosacki, 2013).

The present study investigated whether children's willingness to befriend transgressors changed as a function of whether transgressors behaved stereotypically and intentionally, along with whether response patterns changed with age. Compared to younger children, we expected that older children would report more desire to befriend transgressors who behaved stereotypically than transgressors who behaved counter-stereotypically, especially when intentions were ambiguous rather than purposeful.

Method

As part of a larger study, 5- to 10-year-olds ($N = 139$) were shown four stories. Two stories included transgressors who behaved stereotypically (girls: relational, boys: physical) and two stories included transgressors who behaved counter-stereotypically (girls: physical, boys: relational). Transgressor intention was also manipulated: children either heard that all four transgressors acted purposefully (unambiguous condition) or no intentionality information was given (ambiguous condition).

After each story, children reported their desire to befriend each transgressor ("How much would you like to be friends with [name of transgressor]?") with a visual Likert scale (1 = not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = sort of, 4 = a lot, 5 = a whole lot).

References

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Results

A 2 (transgressor gender: boy vs. girl) x 2 (aggression type: relational vs. physical) x 2 (intentionality: ambiguous vs. unambiguous) x 2 (age group: 5- to 7-year-olds vs. 8- to 10-year-olds) mixed ANOVA was used to assess how each factor impacted children's desire to befriend the transgressors.

There was a transgressor gender x aggression type interaction, $F(1, 134) = 10.41, p = .002, \eta_p^2 = .07$. Follow-up tests revealed that the source of this interaction were children's judgments about the girl transgressors: children were more willing to befriend the counter-stereotypic, physical girl transgressors ($M = 2.20, SD = 1.33$) than the stereotypic, relational girl transgressors ($M = 1.59, SD = 1.06$), $t(137) = -5.22, p < .001$. Ratings for the counter-stereotypic, physical girl transgressors and stereotypic, relational girl transgressors were below chance, revealing a low desire for friendship with the girl transgressors overall. There was no significant difference in children's willingness to befriend the counter-stereotypic, relational boy transgressors ($M = 1.88, SD = 1.24$) as compared to the stereotypic, physical boy transgressors ($M = 2.04, SD = 1.35$), $t(137) = -1.35, p = .18$. Ratings for counter-stereotypic, relational boy transgressors and stereotypic, physical boy transgressors were also below chance, indicating a low desire for friendship with the boy transgressors overall.

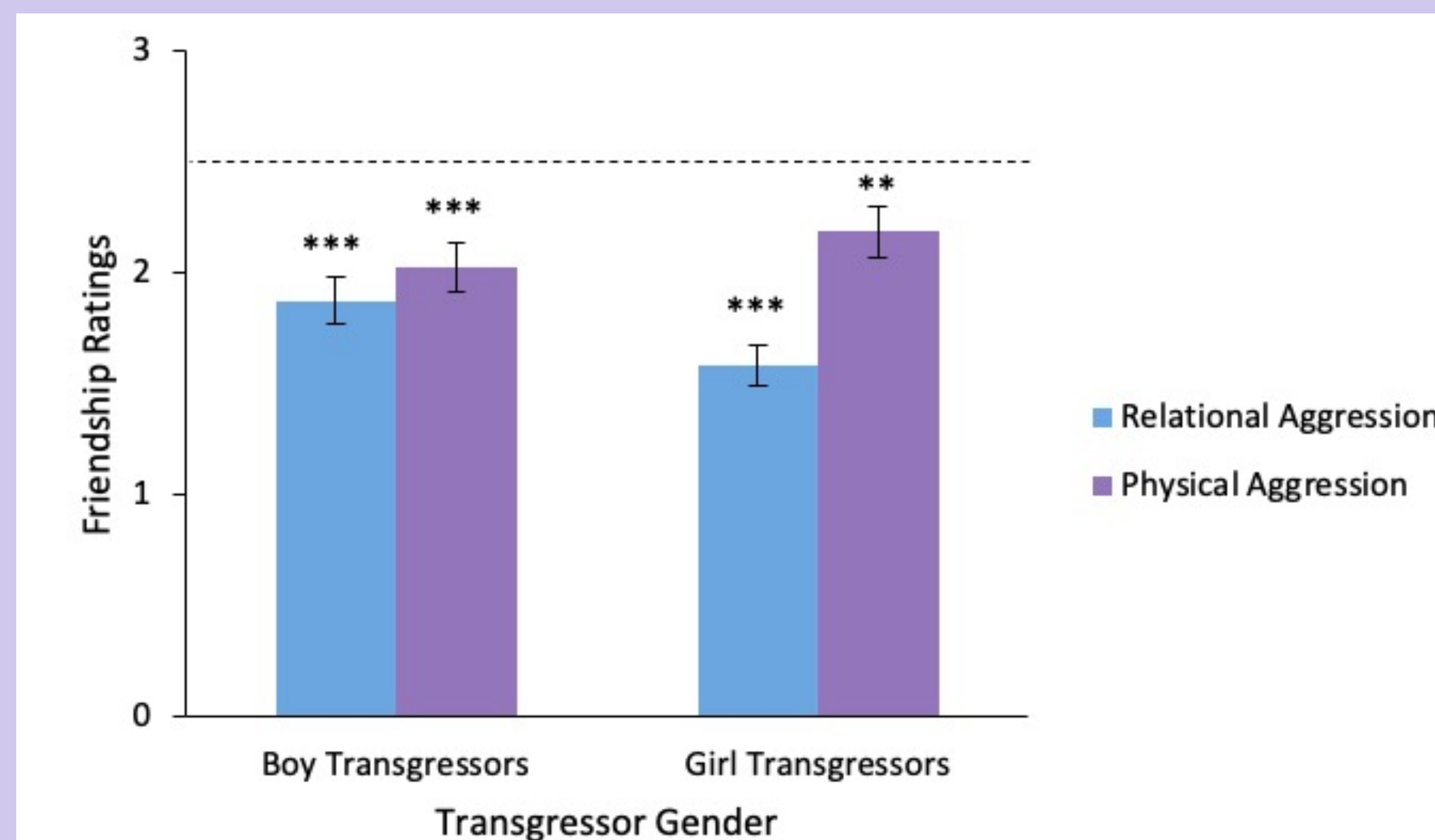


Figure 1. Mean friendship ratings by aggression type and transgressor gender. *** indicates significance against chance at $p < .001$, ** indicates significance against chance at $p < .01$. Note: The highest score possible was 5, rather than 3.

Additionally, there was a main effect of intentionality, $F(1,134)=31.09, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .19$. Children in the ambiguous condition ($M = 9.37, SD = 4.25$) were generally more willing to befriend the transgressors than children in the unambiguous condition ($M = 6.00, SD = 2.51$), $t(136) = -5.65, p < .001$. Given the transgressor gender x aggression type interaction above, exploratory analyses were conducted for girl transgressors as a function of intentionality. For the stereotypic, relational girl transgressor, children's friendship ratings did not significantly differ between the ambiguous ($M = 1.73, SD = 1.20$) and unambiguous condition ($M = 1.46, SD = .87$), $t(136) = -1.52, p = .13$. For the counter-stereotypic, physical girl transgressor, children reported more desire for friendship in the ambiguous condition ($M = 2.90, SD = 1.43$) as compared to the unambiguous condition ($M = 1.57, SD = .87$), $t(136) = -6.07, p < .001$.

There was also a main effect of age group, $F(1,134) = 5.86, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .04$. Compared to older children ($M = 6.90, SD = 2.90$), younger children ($M = 8.54, SD = 4.55$) were more willing to befriend the transgressors, $t(136) = 2.54, p = .01$.

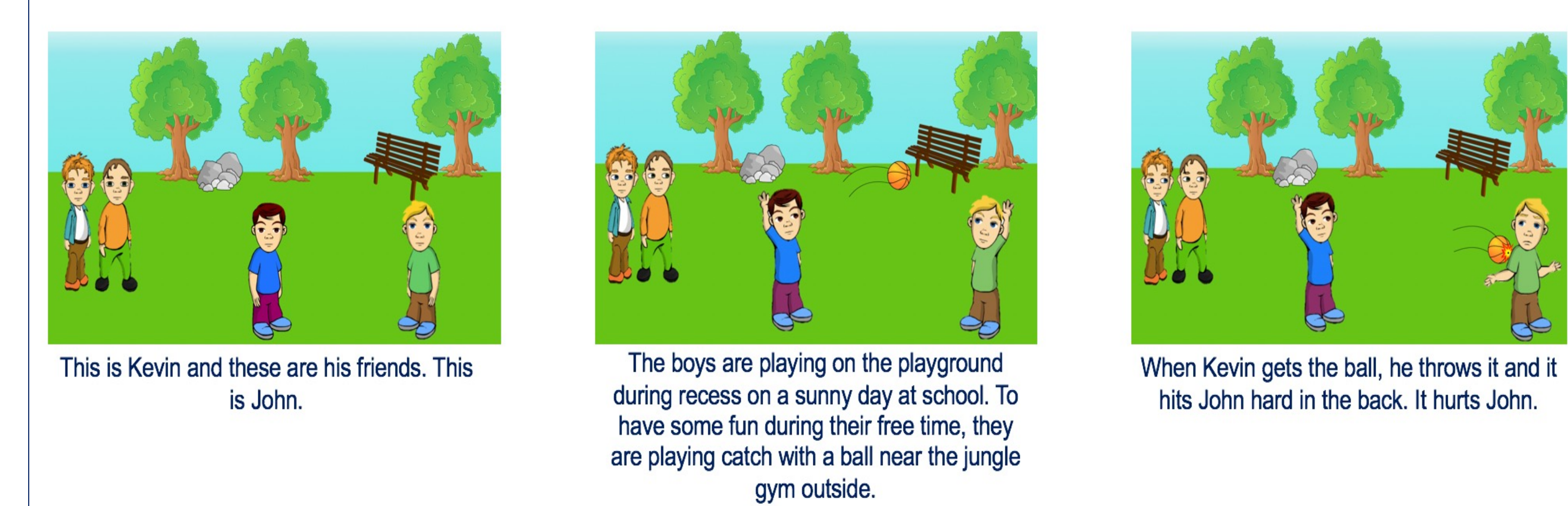


Figure 2. Sample story with a stereotypic, physical boy transgressor in the ambiguous condition.

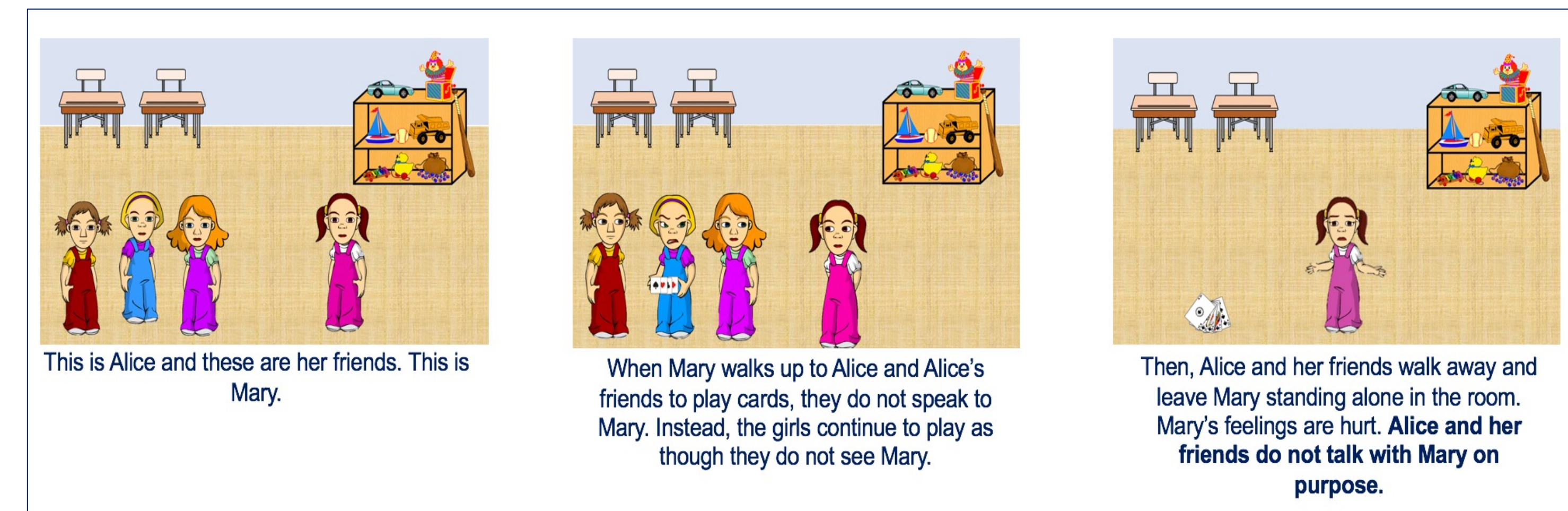


Figure 3. Sample story with a stereotypic, relational girl transgressor in the unambiguous condition.

Discussion

Both older and younger children were primarily attuned to whether transgressors behaved stereotypically or intentionally, rather than jointly considering whether they behaved stereotypically and intentionally.

The lack of preference for the stereotypic over counter-stereotypic transgressors is in contrast to past research that suggests preferences in favor of stereotypic individuals (e.g., Blakemore, 2003). Perhaps children perceived counter-stereotypic behavior as less intentional than stereotypic behavior, despite the intentionality information provided. This is most evident in children's preferences for the counter-stereotypic, physical girl transgressor over the stereotypic, relational girl transgressor. In fact, exploratory analyses revealed a stronger desire for friendship with the counter-stereotypic, physical girl transgressor with ambiguous intentions, rather than unambiguous, clear intentions. Thus, it is possible that children were more willing to perceive the physical girl transgressor's actions as accidental because they were counter-stereotypic and unusual, especially when intentions were unclear.

Generally, children were more willing to befriend transgressors with ambiguous over purposeful, unambiguous intentions. This follows past research, which also shows that reasoning about intention increases with age (e.g., Boseovski et al., 2013; Mull & Evans, 2010). This was evident in how younger children were more willing to befriend the transgressors than older children.

The present findings suggest that a variety of contextual cues impact children's judgments about transgressors, such as whether a transgressor behaves gender stereotypically or intentionally. Future work should consider how these factors impact other social judgments, such as how judgments change if transgressors consistently engage in aggression across multiple contexts.