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Empathy and Conflict Resolution in Friendship Relations Among Adolescents

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The present study addressed empathy's role in conflict resolution within the context of adolescent same-sex friendship relations. Self-report questionnaires were used to assess dispositional affective empathy and conflict resolution styles (problem solving, conflict engagement, withdrawal and compliance). The data of 307 adolescents (149 boys, 158 girls) were included in a multigroup path analysis with sex as a moderator variable. In agreement with the hypothesis that higher levels of dispositional empathy are associated with more successful conflict management, dispositional affective empathy was found to be positively linked to problem solving and negatively linked to conflict engagement among adolescent boys and girls. Dispositional affective empathy was not related to the two more passive strategies (withdrawal and compliance). Sex differences were demonstrated in empathic tendencies, with girls being more empathic than boys. Sex differences were also established in conflict resolution strategies, with girls using problem solving, withdrawal and compliance more frequently than boys. Both sexes scored equally low on conflict engagement, however, and were found to prefer problem solving to all other conflict resolution strategies. Findings are discussed in terms of previous research on empathy and conflict resolution. Aggr. Behav. 33:48–55, 2007. © 2006 Wiley-Liss; Inc.

Keywords: conflict resolution; empathy; adolescence; friendship relations

INTRODUCTION

Children need to acquire a variety of skills to initiate and maintain friendships. One type of maintenance skill is the ability to manage interpersonal conflict. Research suggests that conflict resolution skills improve with age, and that adolescence is marked by a shift from coercive strategies to more constructive ones [Laursen, 1996; Laursen et al., 2001]. Empathy, generally defined as the ability to understand and share another's emotional state [Cohen and Strayer, 1996; Feshbach, 1997], is thought to promote good communication, and successful conflict management in ongoing relationships [Davis, 1996; Hatfield et al., 1994]. The present study addressed empathy's role in conflict resolution within the context of adolescent same-sex friendship relations.

Empathy is a multicomponent phenomenon, encompassing traits (i.e., empathic tendencies of an individual), states (i.e., momentary empathic experiences elicited in concrete situations), interpersonal behaviors (e.g., helping or comforting) and empathy-related processes producing empathic states and behaviors [Davis, 1996; Duan and Hill, 1996; Hoffman, 2000]. Davis' [1996] organizational model identifies empathic traits as antecedents, which have the potential to influence empathy-related processes, experiences and interpersonal behaviors. Both cognitive traits, referring to the ability to understand another person's feelings (by means of simple associations or more complex perspective-taking processes), and affective traits, denoting the tendency to share another person's feelings and to experience empathy-related affective responses (such as empathic concern (EC) or personal distress) may exert their influence. Affective traits or dispositional affective empathy is the component examined in the present study.

Davis' [1996] organizational model argues that empathic tendencies of the individual may influence specific relationship behaviors such as conflict management. For example, adopting the perspective of the other person in a conflict situation may lead

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to a better understanding of the other's position, preventing destructive acts and facilitating constructive ones. Also, sharing another's distress may evoke sympathy or personal distress [Eisenberg et al., 1994], which, in turn, may inhibit destructive impulses in conflict situations. Sympathy or EC is an other-oriented emotion, associated with the motivation to help, and may thus enhance one's willingness to behave in a constructive way. Personal distress is a self-focused emotion, associated with the motivation to alleviate one's own aversive state. Personal distress may also promote constructive acts, if only to escape the vicarious distress [Davis, 1996; Feshbach, 1997; Miller and Eisenberg, 1988]. This reasoning predicts that higher levels of dispositional perspective taking (PT), EC and personal distress may be associated with more successful conflict management.

There is considerable evidence that empathy relates positively to prosocial behavior, such as helping [see Eisenberg and Miller, 1987 for an extensive review and meta-analysis], and negatively to aggressive or antisocial behavior [e.g., Kaukiainen et al., 1999; Loudin et al., 2003; Mehrabian, 1997; see also Miller and Eisenberg, 1988 for a meta-analytic review]. However, few studies have directly addressed the role of empathic tendencies in conflict management. We found three questionnaire studies [Björkqvist et al., 2000; Richardson et al., 1994; Rusbult et al., 1991] and two laboratory studies [Ebesu Hubbard, 2001; Richardson et al., 1998] that examined the relationship between empathic tendencies and conflict-related behaviors. All studies, except the one conducted by Björkqvist et al., used Davis' [1983] Interpersonal Reactivity Index to assess dispositional PT and/or dispositional EC. In a questionnaire study with students, Richardson et al. [1994] established significant positive relationships between PT and constructive responses during conflicts with siblings or friends, such as problem solving, obliging and calm discussion. PT was negatively associated with aggressive responses (e.g., yelling, pushing and hitting). EC was found to be positively linked with obliging, and negatively with dominance. In a study with students who were involved in a dating relationship, Rusbult et al. [1991] demonstrated that PT (but not EC) was positively related to accommodation, that is, the willingness to react constructively when a partner behaves destructively. Ebesu Hubbard [2001] found that state role taking had direct effects on relational responsiveness during a conflict interaction (enacted at a laboratory site) between relationally uncertain romantic partners, although the effects diminished when trait role taking (PT) was taken up as a covariate. Björkqvist et al. [2000] examined the relationship between dispositional empathy and both prosocial and antisocial forms of conflict behavior among a large group of young adolescents. Using peer-estimated measures of (cognitive-affective) empathy, they found that empathy was positively linked to peaceful conflict resolution and withdrawal and negatively to various types of aggression. In Richardson et al.'s [1998] laboratory study, students participated in a reaction-time task. They could respond either aggressively or nonagressively under conditions of no provocation or increasing and decreasing provocation. Overall, PT (EC was not reported) was associated with the inhibition of aggressive responding and the facilitation of nonagressive responding, under conditions of both no provocation and increasing provocation of a fictitious partner. Although the studies are limited, most support the prediction that dispositional role taking is associated with successful conflict management. The findings for EC are less convincing.

In the present study, self-report questionnaires of dispositional affective empathy and conflict resolution styles were used to examine empathy's role in conflict management within the context of adolescent same-sex friendship relations. Bryant's [1982] index of empathy was used to assess dispositional affective empathy. This self-report questionnaire for children and adolescents taps a range of affective reactions, including emotional matching, sympathy and personal distress. Kurdek's [1994] Conflict Resolution Style Inventory (CRSI) was used to assess four distinct conflict resolution styles, that is, positive problem solving, conflict engagement, withdrawal and compliance. Of the four conflict resolution styles, withdrawal and compliance are the more passive ones. Problem solving is an active response, wherein one does something about the problem, which may be constructive to the future of a relationship. Conflict engagement is also an active response, but clearly destructive to the future of a relationship. Withdrawal and compliance may be less effective, but also less harmful to the relationship. In view of that, we focused on the relationships between empathy and the two active strategies (problem solving and conflict engagement) in the current study. The relationships between empathy and the two more passive strategies (withdrawal and compliance) were also examined in an exploratory way. The purpose of the present study was to examine how dispositional affective empathy relates to constructive (problem solving) and

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destructive (conflict engagement) conflict resolution styles, and whether these relations differ for adolescent boys and girls.

Sex differences have been demonstrated in empathic tendencies [e.g., Eisenberg and Lennon, 1983; Lennon and Eisenberg, 1987], with girls commonly being more empathic than boys. Sex differences in the use of conflict resolution strategies have also been established, although studies with adolescent samples are few and the results mixed, especially when it comes to the use of coercive strategies. Most studies show that girls use prosocial strategies more frequently than boys [Feldman and Gowen, 1998; Hartup, 1992; Lindeman et al., 1997; Owens et al., 2005]. Some studies also indicate that boys use more aggressive strategies than girls [Lindeman et al., 1997], whereas other studies report equal levels of overt anger for boys and girls [Owens et al., 2005], or even higher levels of overt anger for girls [Feldman and Gowen, 1998]. This inconsistency across studies could be seen to follow, in part, from methodological variations, including differences in relationships (peers vs. romantic partners), the nature of conflicts (actual vs. hypothetical) and the use of different measurement instruments. For example, where Lindeman et al. [1997] asked adolescents to choose problem-solving strategies in hypothetical situations involving other peers (friends nor enemies), Owens et al. [2005] asked adolescents to report on their behavior during actual conflicts with same-sex peers, while Feldman and Gowen [1998] asked them to rate how often they use certain conflict tactics when having a disagreement with a romantic partner. In spite of these differences, the data of the separate studies are largely consistent in showing that girls are more inclined to use prosocial strategies than boys. Yet in other studies, few or no significant sex differences emerged on constructive or destructive conflict resolution strategies [e.g., Black, 2000; Haar and Krahé, 1999].

In the present study, sex was included as a moderator variable in a multigroup path analysis in which the relation of empathy to conflict resolution styles was estimated for boys and girls. Starting from the assumption that empathy plays a determining role in successful conflict management, it was predicted that dispositional affective empathy relates positively with constructive responses (problem solving) and negatively with destructive ones (conflict engagement) in conflict situations with same-sex best friends. No specific hypotheses were formulated regarding sex differences in these relations. Sex differences were predicted, however, in dispositional affective empathy and the use of constructive conflict resolution strategies. Given that girls are commonly more empathic than boys, it was predicted that girls would obtain higher scores on the empathy index than boys in the present study. As girls seem to use constructive strategies more often than boys, it was predicted that their scores on problem-solving strategies would be higher than those for boys.

Furthermore, meta-analytic studies [Laursen, 1993 cited in Laursen, 1996; Laursen et al., 2001] evidence developmental differences in peer conflict resolution strategies, with successively higher levels of constructive strategies and lower levels of coercive strategies across childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. Also, meta-analytic reviews and empirical studies suggest that friends are more likely to manage conflicts harmoniously than nonfriends [e.g., Newcomb and Bagwell, 1995, 1996; Shulman and Laursen, 2002]. Because respondents in the present study were adolescents who reported on their behavior with same-sex best friends, higher scores were predicted for problem-solving strategies relative to conflict engagement.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this study came from the second wave of the family sample of the CONAMORE longitudinal study [CONflicts And Management Of RElationships; Meeus et al., 2004]. There was no attrition between the first and second wave. The sample consisted of 325 adolescents (age range = 13–16 years). Because of our focus on same-sex friends, adolescents who reported about their experiences with cross-sex friends ($n = 13$) were excluded from the sample. In addition, adolescents who did not complete all the items of the empathy questionnaire ($n = 2$) or the conflict resolution questionnaire ($n = 3$), were excluded from the sample. Of the 307 adolescents, 149 (48.5%) were boys, and 158 (51.5%) were girls. Mean age was 14.49 year (SD = .55) for boys, and 14.31 year (SD = .52) for girls. Different levels of education were represented, with approximately 49% of the adolescents at schools preparing for university, 36% of the adolescents preparing for higher education and 15% of the adolescents preparing for blue-collar work (because some classes are combination classes of different school levels, exact numbers cannot be provided).

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Procedure

Adolescents participating in this study came from 12 high schools located in the province of Utrecht, The Netherlands. Before the study, both students and their parents received written information and were required to provide informed consent. The adolescents annually filled out questionnaires both at school and during home visits. Interviewers visited adolescents at school and asked participating adolescents to gather in classrooms to fill out a questionnaire. Interviewers also visited the families at home. During these home visits, adolescents filled out an additional questionnaire. Results were processed anonymously. Families received €27—for participation and adolescents received an additional amount of €10—for participating at school.

Measures

Conflict resolution. Conflict resolution with friends was measured with a Dutch adaptation of Kurdek's CRSI [Kurdek, 1994], which distinguishes four conflict resolution styles: positive problem solving, conflict engagement, withdrawal and compliance. Adolescents rated for each of 20 items (five items for each style) on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from never to always, how often they had used particular conflict resolution behaviors over the past 7 days when having an argument or conflict with their friend. Positive problem solving involves making compromises and discussing the conflict effectively (e.g., "Trying to find solutions that are acceptable for both of us"). Conflict engagement involves being verbally abusive, getting very angry or losing self-control (e.g., "Letting myself go, and saying things I do not really mean"). Withdrawal implies avoiding the problem, becoming distant (e.g., "Not listening to him/her anymore"). Compliance involves not defending the own opinion and giving in too easily (e.g., "Not defending my opinion"). Mean scores were calculated for problem solving ($\alpha = .91$), conflict engagement ($\alpha = .83$), withdrawal ($\alpha = .88$) and compliance ($\alpha = .77$).

Dispositional affective empathy. Bryant's [1982] Index of Empathy for Children and Adolescents (IECA) was used to assess dispositional affective empathy. The 22-item questionnaire was designed to assess emotional responsiveness, rather than cognitive insight. The items tap a range of affective reactions, including emotional matching (e.g., "Seeing a (girl/boy) crying makes me feel like crying") sympathy (e.g., "It makes me sad to see a (girl/boy) who can't find anyone to play with") and personal distress ("I get upset when I see a (boy/girl) being hurt"). Bryant [1982] demonstrated satisfactory test–retest reliability and construct validity of the IECA. The present study used the IECA in a Dutch translation, with the adult 9-point response format. Adolescents were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each of the 22 items (-4 = strongly disagree to $+4$ = strongly agree). After recoding the scale values (from 1–9), mean scores were calculated ($\alpha = .79$). Higher scores reflect higher levels of dispositional affective empathy.

RESULTS

Prior to conducting the main analyses on empathy's role in conflict management, sex differences in dispositional affective empathy and conflict resolution styles were examined.

Sex Differences in Empathy

Consistent with predictions, an independent-samples t test (two-tailed) yielded a significant sex difference, $t(305) = -11.26$, $P < .0001$, with higher empathy scores for girls than for boys (see Table I).

Sex Differences in Conflict Resolution Styles

A repeated measures MANOVA was conducted, with the four conflict resolution styles as a within-subjects factor, and sex of respondent as a between-subjects factor. The analysis revealed main effects for conflict resolution styles, $F(3,303) = 281.34$, $P < .0001$, and sex, $F(1,305) = 14.65$, $P < .0001$, and a significant conflict resolution styles × sex interaction, $F(3,303) = 6.22$, $P < .0001$. The main effect on conflict resolution shows that adolescents report to use problem-solving strategies more often than conflict engagement, $F(1,305) = 702.50$, $P < .0001$, withdrawal, $F(1,305) = 321.44$, $P < .0001$ or compliance, $F(1,305) = 529.08$, $P < .0001$. Repeated

TABLE I. Means and Standard Deviation Scores for Boys and Girls on Empathy and Conflict Resolution Styles

	Boys ($n = 149$)		Girls ($n = 158$)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Dispositional empathy	5.28[a]	.83	6.31[b]	.76
Conflict resolution styles				
Problem solving	2.88[a]	1.14	3.24[b]	1.02
Conflict engagement	1.25[a]	.47	1.25[a]	.52
Withdrawal	1.53[a]	.69	1.76[b]	.82
Compliance	1.50[a]	.51	1.73[b]	.66

Note: means in the same row with different superscripts differ at $P < .01$.

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measures analyses of variance performed separately for the two sexes with conflict resolution styles as a within-subjects factor yielded significant results for both sexes, F_{girls} (3,155) = 194.34, $P < .0001$, F_{boys} (3,146) = 103.94, $P < .0001$, with higher problem-solving scores relative to conflict engagement, F_{girls} (1,157) = 483.10, $P < .0001$, F_{boys} (1,148) = 394.99, $P < .0001$, withdrawal, F_{girls} (1,157) = 343.60, $P < .0001$, F_{boys} (1,148) = 270.61, $P < .0001$ and compliance, F_{girls} (1,157) = 360.32, $P < .0001$, F_{boys} (1,148) = 285.36, $P < .0001$. These findings demonstrate that problem solving is the most preferred strategy in resolving conflicts with same-sex friends among adolescent boys and girls. The significant conflict resolution styles × sex interaction reflect that boys (relative to girls) are lower on problem solving, $t(305) = -2.89$, $P = .004$, withdrawal, $t(305) = -2.62$, $P = .009$ and compliance, $t(305) = -3.41$, $P = .001$, but equal on conflict engagement, $t < 1$. Thus, consistent with predictions girls report to use problem-solving strategies more often than boys. In addition, girls report to use the two more passive strategies, i.e., withdrawal and compliance, more often than boys.

Empathy and Conflict Resolution Styles

To examine whether empathy is related to different conflict resolution styles and whether these relations differ for boys and girls, multigroup path analyses were conducted in which the relation of empathy to conflict resolution was estimated for boys and girls. To control for mean differences in empathy and conflict resolution between boys and girls, means were included in the analyses. We entered the mean values for boys and girls based on the results of *t* tests. Variances of variables were constrained to be equal across groups. Correlations between different conflict resolution styles were allowed, but were constrained to be equal among boys and girls. Although invariant factor variance and covariance are not required to compare paths across groups, we chose to constrain these to be able to compare unstandardized as well as standardized coefficients.

Model fit was evaluated by the goodness-of-fit index and the non-normed fit index (NNFI), with values above .90 indicating acceptable fit and values above .95 indicating good fit, and the root mean square of error of approximation, with values up to .06 representing a close fit of the model [Browne and Cudeck, 1989, 1993; Hu and Bentler, 1999].

First, a model was estimated in which all variances, covariances and paths were constrained to be invariant across the groups of boys and girls.

TABLE II. Fit Indices of Multigroup Path Models on the Relation between Empathy and Conflict Resolution Styles

Model	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	NNFI	CFI	RMSEA
1. All similar	31.17*	17	1.83	.92	.93	.05
2. Different path coefficients	28.34**	13	2.18	.89	.93	.06

*$P < .05$.
**$P < .01$.

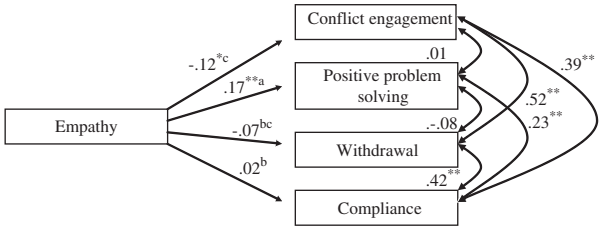


Fig. 1. Correlations and regression coefficients between empathy and conflict resolution styles. *Note*: Superscripts indicate significant differences between effect sizes of empathy on conflict resolution styles. *$P < .05$; **$P < .01$.

This model provided an adequate fit to the data (Table II). Next, we estimated a model in which path or regression coefficients were allowed to differ across groups. A χ^2 difference test was then applied to examine whether the difference between the constrained model and the less constrained model was significant. The results indicated that the less constrained model did not significantly fit the data better that the fully constrained model. Therefore, we can conclude that path coefficients do not differ for boys and girls.

Figure 1 shows the resulting path coefficients of the model with equal paths for boys and girls, and the correlations between the different conflict resolution styles. Critical ratios indicated that the beta coefficient for positive problem solving significantly differed in size from the beta coefficient for conflict engagement, withdrawal and compliance ($P < .01$). Also, the beta coefficient for conflict engagement significantly differed from the beta coefficient for compliance ($P < .01$), but not from withdrawal. In sum, the results show that empathy is significantly related to conflict engagement and positive problem solving. Higher levels of empathy are related to less conflict engagement and to more positive problem solving for both adolescent boys and girls.

DISCUSSION

The present study addressed empathy's role in conflict management within the context of adolescent same-sex friendship relations. Multigroup path

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analyses were conducted to examine the links between dispositional affective empathy and four distinct conflict resolution styles, that is, positive problem solving, conflict engagement, withdrawal and compliance. The current findings demonstrate that empathy is positively linked to problem solving and negatively to conflict engagement among adolescent boys and girls. These findings are in agreement with the hypothesis that higher levels of dispositional affective empathy are associated with more skillful conflict management. Dispositional affective empathy was not related to the two more passive strategies, that is, withdrawal and compliance.

As yet, few studies have examined the relationships between empathic tendencies and conflict-related interactions among partners or friends. While earlier studies established significant relationships primarily for role taking [e.g., Richardson et al., 1994, 1998; Rusbult et al., 1991], the present study yielded significant findings for a measure of dispositional affective empathy. Our measure tapped a broad range of empathy-related affective responses, such as emotional sharing, personal distress and EC. The current findings thus provide further evidence that those who are commonly more emotionally responsive to the emotions of other persons may inhibit destructive responses and maintain constructive ones when faced with conflicts with same-sex best friends.

Before discussing ancillary data, the following limitations of the current study should be recognized. First, although we examined the effects from empathy to conflict resolution, we cannot draw causal conclusions from the present crossectional data. The order may also be reversed, that is, from conflict resolution to empathy. It is possible, for example, that individuals who talk over their disagreements in a calm and constructive way may learn to understand the other's position and feelings, which, in turn, may contribute to the development of empathy. Longitudinal studies may be used to examine the developmental order in the relationships between empathy and conflict resolution strategies. Experimental designs are needed to examine whether the hypothesized causal relationship between empathic tendencies and conflict resolution strategies exist.

Another limitation of correlational research methods is that it is often difficult to avoid confounding variables. In the current study, the quality of friendship relations (e.g., mutuality or exclusivity) might be potentially confounding as friendship variations may influence both state empathy [e.g., Hatfield et al., 1994] and the way conflicts are managed [e.g., Hartup, 1992]. Although adolescents were asked to report on their behavior with best friends (not just any friend or casual acquaintances), the present study focused solely on self-reports, neglecting the perspective of the other friend. It would, however, be desirable to obtain information from both friends to identify the reciprocity in the relationship, and to control for reciprocal influences in future studies. Moreover, as we examined empathy's role in conflict resolution with best friends, caution should be exercised in generalizing these findings to other contexts. Finally, although empathy was found to be significantly related to both problem solving and conflict engagement, the observed relationships were modes at best. These findings lead one to consider other possible intervening factors. Yet, in agreement with predictions based on Davis' organizational model, different types of relationships were established, that is, a positive relationship for empathy and problem solving and a negative relationship for empathy and conflict engagement.

In addition to the main objective of this study, we also examined sex differences in empathy and conflict resolution styles. Consistent with predictions, sex differences were demonstrated in dispositional affective empathy, favoring girls. Sex differences were also established in the frequency with which conflict resolution styles are used, with girls being relatively higher in positive problem solving, withdrawal and compliance. These findings are in agreement with predictions, and results from previous studies [Feldman and Gowen, 1998; Hartup, 1992; Lindeman et al., 1997; Owens et al., 2005], showing that girls are more likely to behave constructively in conflict situations than boys.

No significant sex difference emerged on conflict engagement. The following two explanations arise. First, research suggests that variations in relationships may influence empathic responses [Hatfield et al., 1994; Zillmann, 1991], such that close friends are more likely to engage in role taking and emotional sharing than nonfriends. In view of that, it is possible that boys (just like girls) inhibit aggressive responses when having an argument with their same-sex best friend because they are more inclined to engage in PT and to feel how their friend feels about the situation. On the other hand, it is possible that both boys and girls inhibit the use of destructive resolution strategies to resolve conflicts with friends just because friendships are voluntary relationships that may be ended when conflict engagement is used [Laursen, 1993]. It is worth

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mentioning in this connection that Hartup et al. [1988], in their study with preschool children, demonstrated that both boys and girls prefer to use "softer" modes of conflict resolution with friends than nonfriends. Clearly, more research is needed to examine sex differences in conflict management among friends vs. nonfriends.

A final issue addressed in the present study concerned the pattern of conflict resolution. Consistent with predictions, the present data show that adolescents report to use problem-solving strategies more often than conflict engagement to resolve conflicts with same-sex best friends. What is more, similar patterns were observed for both sexes. That is, both adolescent boys and girls apparently prefer to use problem-solving strategies when faced with conflicts with their same-sex best friend. These findings match well with meta-analytic reviews, suggesting that constructive strategies prevail among adolescents [Laursen et al., 2001], especially among close friends [Newcomb and Bagwell, 1995].

In sum, the present study demonstrated that dispositional affective empathy is positively linked to problem solving and negatively linked to conflict engagement for both adolescent boys and girls, suggesting that those who are more empathic are also more skillful in managing conflicts with same-sex best friends. Sex differences were established in empathy and conflict resolution styles, with girls being more empathic than boys, and girls using problem solving, withdrawal and compliance strategies more frequently than boys. However, both sexes were equally low in conflict engagement, and seem to prefer problem solving to all other resolution strategies in resolving conflicts with same-sex best friends. These findings further suggest that adolescents strive to resolve conflicts harmoniously when having an argument or conflict with their same-sex best friend. As such, friendship relations may constitute a context where prosocial strategies can be enhanced and reinforced.

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