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Communicative factors and behavioural strategies intertwined into a sequential process of conflict progression – influence on reconciliatory outcome and subsequent social interaction

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Small children attend preschools at very young ages and expected to communicate their needs and effectively exchange social behavior in peer groups. Children hone social skills and develop language through participation in peer interaction. This entails coordinating individual perspectives, which may be in opposition of one another. How peer conflicts are managed influences the ultimate behavioural dynamics of subsequent interactions. Conflict resolution is challenging, entails heightened emotionality and requires emotional regulation for behavioral organization and subsequently communication, perspective taking and problem-solving skills. One resolution strategy, reconciliation (friendly exchanges between opponents shortly following conflict termination) decreases aggression and stress-related behaviour and may thereby facilitate developmental peer interaction after conflict has run its course. Twenty boys (4-6 years-old) were filmed during free-play at preschools. Peer conflicts were identified and behaviors were coded with a validated system. Social interaction between opponents in the pre-conflict period was examined in relation to conflict causes, which in turn were examined in relation to specific reconciliatory behaviors (Invitation to play, Body contact, Object offer, Verbal apology, Self-ridicule, Cognition) shown in the post-conflict period. Lastly, social interaction between opponents in the pre-conflict period and reconciliatory outcome were examined in relation to the possibility of former opponents connecting in social interaction in the succeeding non-conflict period, i.e. after conflict management had run its course. The boys demonstrated sequential, non-random conflict progression patterns. Conflict causes were linked to pre-conflict social interaction, and subsequently related to the category of exhibited post-conflict reconciliatory strategy. Verbal apologies were least accepted by opponents. Finally, increased social interaction between former opponents after the conflict management process, in the succeeding non-conflict period was positively associated with both pre-conflict social interaction and reconciliation. In sum, peer conflicts are observed as socially organized events, involving communicative references and processes, with each behavioral turn influencing the responsive behavioral turn.

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