Children’s Tattling: The Reporting of Everyday Norm Violations in Preschool Settings

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Tattling, defined as the reporting to a second party of norm violations committed by a third party, is a frequent but little-studied activity among young children. Participant observation and quantitative sampling are used to provide a detailed characterization of tattling in 2 preschools (initial mean age = 4.08 years, N = 40). In these populations, tattling represents the majority of talk about peers’ behavior to third parties. It is usually truthful, it rarely refers to transgressions committed against other individuals, it is not often ignored by adults, it is performed more frequently by dominant children, and it correlates with teacher reports of relational aggression. These exploratory results suggest several new avenues of research into children’s developing understanding of social norms.

Moral understanding does not develop in isolation from other competences, but is used by children to navigate everyday social interactions (for overviews, see Dunn, 2006; Turiel, 2006). An example is the use of normative appeals (e.g., “That’s not fair!”) in attempts to resolve social conflicts. Naturalistic observation has proved useful in analyzing such behavior, dating back to Piaget (1932), who studied appeals to social norms in the context of children’s street games. In family contexts, Dunn (1988) carried out extensive naturalistic studies of young children’s spontaneous justification and condemnation of everyday social behavior (see especially Dunn & Munn, 1987). Despite Piaget’s lead, such activities have received less attention in peer contexts, although Nucci and Turiel (1978) did observe the responses of preschool children to moral and conventional transgressions by peers in naturalistic settings. One of the categories of responses that they considered was that of verbal reports to the teacher. This kind of response is interesting because it represents the use of evaluative language to recruit third-party involvement in social problems, suggesting an early awareness of the moral force of language.

In the present article, we link preschool children’s everyday language use to their social and moral development through a naturalistic study of tattling. We define tattling as the reporting to a second party of a third party’s counternormative behavior, where “counternormative” may refer to explicitly proscribed behavior, or to behavior that is unwelcome to the individual who reports it and that they implicitly believe will also be unwelcome to their audience. The structure of tattling therefore offers a window on how individual children start to relate to social norms and to incorporate them in everyday discourse.

Social norms can operate effectively only if they are taught to new generations of children. Nichols (2004) has argued that norms are more likely to be selected for—through cultural selection—if they can effectively pass through the “cognitive filter” of children’s learning processes, which are more likely to happen if they produce a strong affective response. Independent of this affective component, Nichols also postulated that children are primed to acquire a “normative theory” early in development, suggesting that even very young children are sensitive to normative statements by adults. He cited the experiments of Harris and Núñez (1996), who showed that 3- to 4-year-old children were especially sensitive to actions that breached a
permission rule, compared to actions that breached a description rule. Their participants were better at identifying a picture where a child was “doing something naughty” than a picture where a child was “doing something different” (1996, Experiment 4; cf. Cosmides, 1989). Results similar to this have been found in cross-cultural studies with children (Harris, Núñez, & Brett, 2001) and adults (Sugiyama, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2002), suggesting that there may be an innate cognitive bias toward identifying breaches of social norms. Harris (2000) has pointed out that young children seem to generalize very readily about normative obligations: “Any novel obligation is understood in the light of a well-organized, pre-existing concept of constraint” (p. 158). The same point was made by Rakoczy, Warneken, and Tomasello (2008), who conducted experiments in which an experimenter demonstrated novel games (e.g., “daxing”), played by unfamiliar rules, to 2- and 3-year-old children. When a puppet started playing and broke these rules, the 3-year-olds spontaneously made both “normative protests” (e.g., “That’s not how you do it!”) and “imperative protests” (e.g., “Don’t do that”). The 2-year-olds were apparently too young to make a significant number of normative protests, but even at this early age they were given to making imperative protests about the puppet’s behavior.

If young children are especially sensitive to norm violations in an experimental context, the same cognitive bias might influence their natural verbal behavior. We suspected that the general sensitivity toward norm violations revealed by these experiments would make young children more likely to report everyday norm violations by peers. This led us to predict that tattling (as broadly defined above) would make up a large part of children’s everyday communication about third-party behavior, and that a study of the general characteristics of tattling would reveal interesting features of children’s attitudes to social norms.

Although analogous activities—such as snitching (Brewer & Selden, 1998), whistleblowing (Brewer & Selden, 1998), or eyewitness testimony (Loftus, 1979)—are practiced by adults when they report criminal behavior to an authority figure, the word tattling is usually associated with young children’s behavior. For much of the 20th century it was disapproved of by educators, and seen as a practice that children needed to be educated away from (Williams, 1989). While not infrequently mentioned in studies of child development, tattling has rarely been analyzed in depth, but more often simply listed as an example of undesirable behavior (e.g., Hurlock & McDonald, 1934; McConnell, 1963). A more detailed early treatment was by Smith (1932), who noted that negative “criticism” of a third party by children was much more common than positive comments, and that unlike adults, children often made their criticisms within earshot of the target. This suggests that children did not see anything counternormative about the act of tattling, even in an era when tattling was likely to be frowned upon by adults.

Apart from Smith’s (1932) early and rather unsystematic study of children’s criticisms, no previous observational study seems to have focused on tattling in an educational setting. The only modern observational study devoted to tattling was by Ross and den Bak-Lammers, who carried out a longitudinal study of sibling dyads aged 2 and 4 (Den Bak & Ross, 1996), and 4 and 6 (Ross & den Bak-Lammers, 1998). Siblings were observed in their family homes, and all their utterances recorded for later analysis. For all the age groups studied, tattling made up a large proportion of talk about the sibling’s behavior. This proportion decreased with age (although tattling did increase in absolute frequency), ranging from 87.1% among the 2-year-olds, through 74.8% among the 4-year-olds, to 56.4% among the 6-year-olds. One of the main aims of the present study was to find out whether the preponderance of tattling in young children’s communication about siblings would generalize to their communication about unrelated peers.

Tattling on peers is quite prevalent among children in elementary school settings, as Skinner, Cashwell, and Skinner (2000) anecdotally attested for the 9- to 10-year-old children with whom they studied. Skinner and his colleagues had some success with their program to encourage “tootling” (a term they coined for the reporting of prosocial behavior) by providing a collective reward for the class when they reached a target number of “tootles” (see also Morrison & Jones, 2007). Implicit in their account was the point that tattling, unlike tootling, does not have to be extrinsically rewarded in order to take place but presumably has some sort of intrinsic motivation. In some situations tattling may be motivated by processes of emotion regulation (Thompson, 1994). Cooney, Hutchison, and Costigan (1996) postulated that toddlers’ tattling is an intermediate stage in emotion regulation, which supersedes direct physical aggression and precedes more sophisticated forms of negotiation with peers that do not rely on adult intervention.
By adolescence, the overt reporting of peers’ transgressions to adult authority figures seems to become much less common. In a questionnaire-based study of tattling among teenagers in a residential care program, Friman et al. (2004) found that perceived rates of tattling correlated negatively with likeability and positively with social rejection. On the other hand, evaluative talk about peers to other peers becomes more important during preadolescence and adolescence (e.g., Cameron, 1997; Fine, 1986; Goodwin, 1990). Several groups of researchers have considered evaluative talk among these age groups in terms of the theoretical constructs of relational, indirect and social aggression (reviewed by Archer & Coyne, 2005). Central to the first two of these constructs, and often implicit in the third, is the idea that such verbal aggression is often covert, so that perpetrators are able to conceal their identities from their victims.

However, few observers have recorded covert talk about others’ behavior among children younger than 9 years. In a discussion of children’s gossip, Fine (1977) pointed out that early forms of talk about peers are rarely covert: “One salient difference between the social structure of adult gossip and that of children is that adult gossip is virtually always about non-present others, whereas children often gossip in front of the target” (p. 183). Mettetal (1983) conducted quantitative, naturalistic research into children’s everyday talk about peers, and found that the frequency of gossip-like discussions between dyads of girls increased dramatically between the ages of 6–7 and 11–12, rising to about one third of all conversations. A similar pattern was found by Engel and Li (2004), who asked three groups of children—aged 4, 7, and 10—to tell stories about their friends in semistructured interviews. The length, descriptiveness, and evaluative content of the stories all increased significantly with age, implying that the younger children’s stories were far less informative than the older children’s. This supported Engel and Li’s naturalistic observation, from tape recordings of conversations in a day-care center, that 4-year-old children very rarely told stories about absent peers: “It was surprisingly difficult to catch the children gossiping” (p. 160). Coupled with the observation of Ross and den Bak-Lammers (1998) that tattling occupies a decreasing proportion of overall communication about sibling behavior, these results suggest that overt tattling may decrease in importance through middle childhood at about the same time that covert gossip increases.

From this brief survey of the existing literature on tattling and other forms of evaluative social discourse in children, the following points informed our research design. First, tattling is a widespread activity among young children, but one that has been little studied in any context—and that has never been systematically studied in the context of the preschool classroom. Second, as children grow older, tattling to adults becomes both less frequent and less overt: It tends to have negative reputational consequences, whereas the covert reporting of peers’ activities to other peers becomes more common. Third, tattling may involve the socialization of aggressive impulses, representing an intermediate stage between physical violence and negotiation when a child is confronted with unwelcome behavior from a peer. With these points in mind, we carried out an exploratory observational study of tattling in the preschool classroom. As tattling had never been systematically studied in the preschool context, our study sought principally to establish a baseline of data about the general characteristics of young children’s tattling within peer groups. The aim was to compare the results with existing data on tattling in the home, and ultimately to generate hypotheses for more focused observational and experimental work.

Method

We used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative empirical approaches (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) to characterize as many different properties of tattling as possible. The first author engaged in participant observation of the children while working as a volunteer classroom assistant in two preschools. For about half of the observation time, he took on the more detached role of an independent observer and conducted behavioral sampling. The qualitative and quantitative methodologies were complementary in that the former helped us understand the meanings and motivations of acts of tattling for both children and adults, whereas the latter allowed us to quantify various descriptive properties of tattling.

Participants

Research was conducted in two inner-city preschools in Belfast, the principal city of Northern Ireland. The first preschool studied (Preschool A) was situated in a low-income residential area of Belfast, inhabited overwhelmingly by working-class Catholics. All the children came from (Northern) Irish
families, with the exception of one child who was of mixed Irish/Portuguese parentage. When research began in November 2006, there were 15 children in the preschool (8 boys and 7 girls). Their age at the start of the research, which lasted for three calendar months, ranged from 3.52 to 4.32 years ($M = 3.97$). In January 2007 they were joined by a younger girl aged 3.09 years, who was present for about half of the study time. Preschool B was situated in a semiresidential area of inner Belfast with a large immigrant population and was attended by a mixture of children who lived locally and those whose parents worked nearby. Hence, the children’s cultural backgrounds were more diverse than in Preschool A: The majority came from (Northern) Irish families, but 4 of the children studied were Chinese, 1 was Malaysian, 1 Nigerian, and 1 Zimbabwean. In addition, 2 children were of mixed ethnicity (Irish/German and Irish/Spanish). The study group comprised 24 children (13 boys and 11 girls). Their age at the start of the study, which lasted for 2 months from April 2007, ranged from 3.23 to 4.65 years ($M = 4.11$).

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation allows a researcher to map out the social and cultural context of human activities, rather than taking an isolated reading of behavior as with more structured observational techniques (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; see Corsaro, 2003, on participant observation in preschool settings). This method was used to contextualize the quantitative research, partly by investigating the meaning and motivation of children’s acts of tattling, and partly by getting a sense of how it felt, as an adult in a position of authority, to receive behavioral reports from children about their peers. The first author spent 2 months engaged in participant observation at Preschool A, working 3–4 days per week, for a total of 98 hr over 33 study days. He later spent 2 months at Preschool B, working 2–3 days per week, for a total of 96 hr over 23 study days. Both figures include time spent in quantitative sampling: After the first week, which was devoted solely to participant observation, most observation sessions started and finished with a period of participant observation. Field notes were typed up each afternoon after school had finished. In between the visits to the two preschools, and during the analysis phase after all observation was over, we analyzed the qualitative field notes and categorized emergent themes in the research (e.g., the various motivations for tattling).

**Event Sampling**

The quantitative method used most extensively in this study was the event sampling of children’s reports of peers’ behavior. Event sampling was chosen because it is a useful method for systematically recording a wide range of properties of everyday experience, and for generating novel hypotheses (Reis & Gable, 2000). At Preschool A, the first author spent 31 hr on event sampling, spread over 15 study days in continuous sessions of between 1 and 3 hr in duration. At Preschool B, he spent 35 hr on event sampling, over 15 study days. An event in this study was defined as a verbal report of a peer’s behavior (whether counternormative or not), made by a child to someone else. Every event that was overheard by the observer was recorded on paper, as soon as possible after it occurred (usually within 1 min, and nearly always within 5 min). A small number of events in the sessions (< 20 in total) were omitted, either because of partial inaudibility or because the observer was too busy to record them when they occurred.

For each event, the following information was coded on preformatted coding sheets in the observer’s notebook: the *time* at which the event occurred; the child(ren) who made the report (the *tattler*); the child(ren) who performed the reported action (the *miscreant*); the adult(s) or (occasionally) child to whom the report was made (the *audience*); the person most affected by the reported behavior (the *victim*), which was defined as either the tattler themselves, the audience, a third party, or nobody in particular; the *truth value* of the tattler’s account (true, false, or indeterminate); the free-text *content* of the tattler’s report (often verbatim); and a free-text description of the audience’s *response* to the event. After data collection, content analysis of the content and response free-text fields was used to code data using the coding schemes in the two paragraphs below. For these additional categories, half of the events were rated independently by a second person who was blind to the observational predictions and was given the definitions below, along with examples similar to those in the appendices. Interrater reliability for content type was 90%, and for response type it was 89% (Cohen’s kappas were .87 and .84, respectively).

**Content type.** Reports of peers’ behavior were assigned to one of 10 categories, following Ross and den Bak-Lammers (1998). See Appendix A for examples. Eight of these categories were considered to represent various kinds of norm violation. Reports of physical aggression referred to any kind
of unwanted physical contact, for example, hitting or pushing. Property damage reports described any kind of damage to property, for example, breaking a toy, or knocking over some blocks. Property entitlement covered reports of someone taking something that belonged to another child, or that another child had been using, as well as children refusing to share objects that they themselves owned or were using. A report of social convention referred to a violation of some conventional rule of the classroom, such as standing on a chair, or poor table manners. Joint play violations included reports of a child obstructing another child’s play, or refusing to play alongside them. Reports of taunting referred to one child shouting at another or calling them names. Deception reports described another child lying to or otherwise misleading someone. Reports of disagreement referred to one child denying something that another child had said or believed in. There were also two categories of reports that did not meet the definition of tattling, as they did not describe counternormative behavior. In nonjudgmental reports the behavior described was innocent and the child who reported it did not seem to be seeking any punishment. Finally, positive reports consisted of an approving description of another child’s prosocial behavior.

Response type. The actions of the audience in response to a behavioral report were assigned to one of eight categories, again following Ross and den Bak-Lammers (1998). See Appendix B for examples. Supporting a tattler involved intervening on his or her behalf, such as by verbally admonishing the miscreant, or compelling her to hand over a toy to another child. Acknowledging a report consisted of agreeing or sympathizing with the tattler but not saying anything to the miscreant about the reported behavior. Excusing an action involved asserting to the tattler that the behavior reported is innocent or justified. Ignoring was coded if the audience did not seem to respond to the tattler in any meaningful way. When reprimanding a tattler, the audience reproached the tattler for tattling or for the tattler’s own reported behavior. In some cases, both tattler and miscreant were reprimanded—the implication being that they had both been involved in the reported activity—and this received its own code. Finally, a questioning response took place when the audience tried to find out exactly what had happened by questioning the tattler, the miscreant, or both, but was unable to reach any firm conclusions (i.e., the response did not resolve into any other category).

Point Sampling of Social Networks

Tattling is not just an individual activity but a relational activity between children and the peers whose behavior they report. It might therefore vary according to the social relations between individuals. We built up a picture of the social networks in the two classrooms and the sociability of individual children, by using point sampling to record the composition of children's play groups during free play sessions. In Preschool A, group membership was surveyed at a set time every morning. Several study days were also devoted to point sampling, taking a sample every 15 min for the duration of the morning. In all, 106 point samples were taken, each of which recorded the group membership of every child present. In the busier environment of Preschool B, point sampling was conducted on a more infrequent and ad hoc basis (18 samples, spread over nine study days).

Focal Follows and Dominance Analysis

In Preschool A, each child was observed individually for 1 hr. This hour was made up of one 30-min and two 15-min sessions per child, carried out on three separate days. Everything that the focal child did during these sessions was noted. The motivation for the focal follows was twofold: first, to check that the event sampling of the children’s verbal reports was not biased toward the most audible or attention-grabbing children, and second, to investigate the dominance hierarchy within the classroom. A common method for analyzing the dominance hierarchies of toddlers is to code for incidences of direct aggression (e.g., Strayer & Strayer, 1976). However, examples of direct aggression become much less frequent by age 4 (Hawley, 1999) and were rarely observed in Preschool A; therefore, instead we analyzed several types of social interaction that included a clear element of direction of one child’s behavior by another (cf. Barner-Barry, 1988; La Freniere & Charlesworth, 1983).

Child X was considered to have taken part in a dominant interaction with Child Y if any one of the following behavioral patterns occurred: (a) X initiated physical contact with Y, and Y did not resist; (b) X told Y to do something, and Y complied; (c) Y imitated X’s behavior; (d) Y followed X to another part of the room. In each case, the behavior of both children was important, emphasizing the point that dominance is a function of dyadic relations rather than of individual behavior.
alone (Strayer & Strayer, 1976). However, for many dyads there were no examples of such interactions, and so it was impossible to construct a single transitive hierarchy that included all the children. Therefore, the ratio of total dominant to submissive interactions for each child was used as an index of relative dominance. The dominance hierarchy constructed using this measure was in accordance with the transitive subhierarchies that were constructed based on interactions between specific dyads, and with qualitative observations and informal teacher reports of children’s relative dominance.

Teacher Ratings of Relational Aggression

Due to time constraints and the larger class size, and because we had some confidence from the first preschool that the event sampling procedure would not underestimate the level of tattling, no focal follows were carried out in Preschool B. Instead, we administered the Relational Aggression factor of the Preschool Social Behavior Scale–Teacher form (PSBS–T; see Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997) to the teacher and classroom assistant in Preschool B, to find out if there was a link between tattling and relational aggression. As mentioned in our Introduction, some forms of evaluative discourse in children have been analyzed as instances of relational aggression, defined as “harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of their peer relationships” (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, p. 711). The relational aggression factor of the PSBS–T consists of six descriptions of children’s characteristic behavior (e.g., “Tells others not to play with or be a peer’s friend”), on which each child was rated using a 5-point Likert scale. Crick et al. (1997) demonstrated that this factor was internally consistent and independent of the overt aggression, prosocial behavior, and depressed affect factors. McEvoy, Estrem, Rodriguez, and Olson (2003) found strong intermethod agreement between teacher ratings on the PSBS–T, peer nominations, and direct observation of relational aggression.

Results

Content of Children’s Behavioral Reports

Children’s tattling, operationalized as the reporting of the various categories of norm violations described in the Method section, was far more frequent than the reporting of positive or neutral behavior. Event sampling recorded 354 examples (93.1%) of tattling ($M = 1.26$ reports per child per day attended, $SD = 1.12$), 25 examples (6.6%) of nonjudgmental talk ($M = 0.09, SD = 0.14$), and just 1 example (.3%) of positive talk about a peer’s activities. There were no significant differences between the preschools either in the mean frequency of all behavioral reports per child, or in the mean proportion of negative reports, both $ts < 1$, both $ps > .5$. The range of behavioral reporting was 0–6.31 events per child per day attended.

Tattling might be expected to be more noticeable, and thus more readily observable, than other forms of talk about peers. However, a similar effect was observed in the data from the focal follows, where it would have been difficult to miss any kind of behavioral report about a third party made by the focal child. Of 32 instances in the focal follow data where a focal child was involved in a behavioral report, only two reports (6.3%) were nonjudgmental, and none were positive. Examples of actual tattling content are listed in Appendix A. No examples were found of one of the predefined categories of tattling content (deception). For the other seven categories, mean frequencies of children’s tattling are shown in Table 1. A series of $t$ tests revealed no significant differences in tattling content between preschools, though there were trends for children in Preschool A more frequently to report both social conventional issues, $t(16.2) = 1.86, p = .081,$ and disputes over property entitlement, $t(38) = 1.74, p = .090$.

Truthfulness

For event samples where it was possible to determine unambiguously the truth of a behavioral

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
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<tr>
<td>Frequency of Reported Categories of Counter-normative Behavior</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Preschool A</th>
<th>Preschool B</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M^{*}$ ($SD$)</td>
<td>$M^{*}$ ($SD$)</td>
<td>$M^{*}$ ($SD$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property entitlement</td>
<td>0.53 (0.49)</td>
<td>0.32 (0.29)</td>
<td>0.41 (0.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical aggression</td>
<td>0.25 (0.27)</td>
<td>0.38 (0.40)</td>
<td>0.33 (0.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social convention</td>
<td>0.31 (0.47)</td>
<td>0.09 (0.11)</td>
<td>0.18 (0.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint play</td>
<td>0.08 (0.21)</td>
<td>0.17 (0.20)</td>
<td>0.14 (0.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property damage</td>
<td>0.16 (0.23)</td>
<td>0.06 (0.16)</td>
<td>0.10 (0.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taunting</td>
<td>0.07 (0.10)</td>
<td>0.12 (0.15)</td>
<td>0.10 (0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement</td>
<td>0.02 (0.05)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.03)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^{*}$Mean frequency of events reported by each child, per standardized school day attended.
report, a mean of 90.0% of reports were found to be true. As many children in each preschool were never observed to make a false report, there was no difference whatsoever between the two schools on this measure, \( t(32) = 0.020, \ p = .99 \). However in 43.1% of event samples, on average, the truth value of the report was undetermined. This was partly because the busy nature of the classroom environment sometimes made it difficult to record all the relevant antecedents of the children’s disputes, and partly because some reports (e.g., “He’s not listening to me!”) were difficult to assign objective truth values to without intensive questioning of the children involved. In the focal follow data, where it was much easier to determine the truth of children’s claims, only 9 of 32 (28.1%) reports were of undetermined truth value, and no false reports were recorded. In most of the undetermined cases, it is unlikely that the reports were false, as the alleged miscreants rarely denied their offenses, and the teachers rarely accused tattlers of lying. Moreover, the proportions of deceptive reports in our study were well below the 10% of false reports that were recorded. For example, Child B might crash into Child A on a tricycle, and Child A might falsely report to the teacher that Child C had crashed into him. This might be an error in face recognition, or a slip of the tongue: There were very few events in which the observer suspected that deliberate fabrication of a report was occurring. Mistaken ascriptions of intention (e.g., “She pushed me!” when one child accidentally knocked into another) were more common.

**Audience Responses to Tattling**

Children were far more likely to report the behavior of their peers to adults than to other children: In the event samples, only 4 of 380 events (1.1%) were reports made to other children. Table 2 shows the mean shares of the various types of audience response to tattling, ordered by overall frequency. Examples of actual responses are supplied in Appendix B. The most common response was supporting the tattler, which accounted for around 50% of responses. If acknowledging is included as a favorable response for the tattler, as it constitutes positive attention from an authority figure, almost 70% of responses were favorable for the tattler, and only 6% were clearly unfavorable (a reprimand for the tattler alone or for both tattler and miscreant). There were no significant differences between the preschools in the proportions of these responses, all \( ts < 1.5, \ all \ ps > .1 \).

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proportions of Audience Responses to Tattling</th>
<th>Preschool A ( M^a (SD) )</th>
<th>Preschool B ( M^b (SD) )</th>
<th>Overall ( M^c (SD) )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supporting</td>
<td>0.52 (0.27)</td>
<td>0.44 (0.19)</td>
<td>0.47 (0.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledging</td>
<td>0.17 (0.27)</td>
<td>0.25 (0.24)</td>
<td>0.22 (0.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excusing</td>
<td>0.08 (0.09)</td>
<td>0.12 (0.13)</td>
<td>0.11 (0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring</td>
<td>0.14 (0.17)</td>
<td>0.07 (0.09)</td>
<td>0.10 (0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reprimanding</td>
<td>0.03 (0.05)</td>
<td>0.03 (0.09)</td>
<td>0.03 (0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both reprimanded</td>
<td>0.04 (0.13)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.04)</td>
<td>0.03 (0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>0.12 (0.26)</td>
<td>0.13 (0.13)</td>
<td>0.12 (0.19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( a, b, c \) Mean share of responses for each child who was tattling.

**Egocentric and Sociocentric Reports**

Tattling was highly egocentric, in that it tended to focus on achieving help or punishment for another child’s negative behavior toward the tattler (mean share = 0.77, \( SD = 0.24 \)). Tattling on behalf of third parties was quite rare (\( M = 0.06, \ SD = 0.11 \)), and reporting a transgression that directly affected the audience was more unusual still (\( M = 0.01, \ SD = 0.02 \)). Tattling where there was no clear victim—as with most breaches of social convention—was more common (\( M = 0.16, \ SD = 0.17 \)). Children in Preschool A were more likely than in Preschool B to report incidents where there was no clear victim, \( t(34) = 2.17, \ p = .037 \), which might be linked to their tendency to report more social conventional violations.

**Dominance**

In Preschool A there was a strong positive correlation between children’s dominance, as measured by the ratio of their dominant to subordinate interactions, and the rate at which they tattled on other children, \( r = .881, \ N = 16, \ p = .000007 \). That is, dominant children reported others’ transgressions significantly more than subordinate children. One possible explanation for this is that children who talked to the teacher more often were more likely to engage in tattling. However, there were no correlations between overall rates of addressing an adult in the classroom, as recorded in the focal follows, and either rates of tattling or ratio of dominant to subordinate interactions, both \( rs < .25, \ both \ ps > .3 \). Alternatively, sociability might be expected to increase tattling on the part of dominant children, as more social interactions might lead to more potential for conflicts and therefore more opportunities to report those conflicts. As the average
number of play partners for a given child would be affected by total attendance on the days that he or she was present, we calculated an index of sociability for each child, based on the ratio between the actual number of interactions with every other child and the potential number of interactions that could have taken place (i.e., the number of point samples at which both children were present). There was no correlation between this sociability index and either the frequency of children’s tattling or the ratio of dominant to subordinate interactions, both $r < .3$, both $p > .3$. Hence, there seemed to be a specific link between dominance and tattling in this preschool. (As explained in the Method section, dominance was not analyzed in Preschool B.)

**Relational Aggression**

In Preschool B there was a strong correlation between tattling frequency and a child’s score on the relational aggression section of the PSBS–T teacher-rated questionnaire, $r = .590$, $N = 24$, $p = .002$. This demonstrates that tattling in this preschool co-varied with verbal indices of relational aggression. (The PSBS–T questionnaire was not administered in Preschool A, as explained in the Method section.)

**Gender Effects**

No specific gender effects were predicted. Boys ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.88$, $n = 13$) were far more likely than girls ($M = 1.60$, $SD = 0.72$, $n = 11$), to be seen by the teacher as relationally aggressive, $t(22) = 4.84$, $p = .00008$. Girls’ behavioral reports were slightly more truthful than boys’ reports, but both were highly truthful ($M = 0.98$, $SD = 0.05$, $n = 19$ for girls; $M = 0.84$, $SD = 0.26$, $n = 21$ for boys), and this effect was not particularly significant, $t(19.8) = 2.36$, $p = .029$, given the number of potential gender effects that were tested (Bonferroni-corrected $\alpha = 0.0025$). As there was no difference in the overall tattling rates between genders, $t(38) = .882$, $p = .383$, it was possible to directly compare the frequencies of tattling by boys and girls on the various categories of norm violation (see Figure 1). The only significant difference was in tattling on physical aggression, which boys ($M = 0.49$ per day, $SD = 0.41$, $n = 21$) reported much more frequently than girls ($M = 0.15$ per day, $SD = 0.16$, $n = 19$), $t(26.7) = 3.46$, $p = .002$. There was no significant effect of tattler gender on the frequency of any of the various types of response to tattling, all $ts < 1.5$, all $ps \geq .15$. No effects of tattler gender were found on the frequency of behavioral reports, proportion of negative reports, or the likelihood of the tattler being the victim, all $ts < 1.0$, all $ps > .3$.

**Discussion**

Our data suggest that tattling is an important form of social communication for many young children. The great majority of children’s talk about their peers’ behavior took the form of descriptions of norm violations. This was a robust finding that held across both sexes in both preschools, and also in the focal follow data (for which sampling bias was less of an issue). Moreover, our data reiterate the finding of a bias toward talk about counternormative behavior among all four groups of siblings studied by Ross and den Bak-Lammers (1998). Taken together, our preschool study and their sibling study demonstrate that a bias toward reporting norm violations by other children—while not necessarily universal—is present in children of various ages in differing social contexts. It seems that when children first start talking to adults about what another child has done, they use this faculty largely to report behavior of which they disapprove. More generally, Miller and Sperry (1988) found that 2-year-olds’ stories about past events were highly evaluative, and that 64% of stories were concerned with negative experiences. This may reflect an early bias toward sharing negative experiences with caregivers, perhaps caused by an “ontogenetic adaptation” (Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2000) for children to
seek aid or sympathy from adults when suffering a negative affective response. However, the extent to which such a bias is recruited in everyday life and the precise kinds of events that are reported are likely to be affected by local cultural norms of discourse (Burger & Miller, 1999; Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005).

Children in the present study were much more likely to report disputes arising from issues of property entitlement or physical aggression than they were to report joint play disputes, taunting, property damage, simple disagreements, or deception. Again, this is consistent with the findings of Ross and den Bak-Lammers (1998). Nucci and Turivel (1978) likewise found that preschool children were more likely to protest about moral (harm-related) than conventional violations in a classroom setting. Events involving physical harm are also common in 2-year-olds’ stories about the past (Miller & Sperry, 1988). It seems that young children may preferentially report breaches of “affect-backed” norms (see Nichols, 2004), involving physical harm or property loss. Even at the age of 3, nonetheless, they can generalize this form of communication to breaches of simple social norms (such as shouting, or going into inappropriate areas of the classroom) but very rarely report instances of deception or disagreement—perhaps because an understanding of such complex linguistic norms requires an advanced theory of mind (Astington, 2006).

Regardless of content, the great majority (90%) of children’s reports about peers’ behavior were true, at least for cases in which truth could be easily determined. This figure is similar to Ross and den Bak-Lammers’s (1998) finding of a mean of 94.3% truthful reports across all four groups that they studied. Moreover, most false reports seemed to be mistaken rather than fabricated. This bias toward truthful communication is interesting because children of this age—and younger—are certainly capable of lying in both naturalistic and experimental settings (for a review, see Lee & Talwar, in press). Indeed, children in the present study were often observed to lie in response to tattling, usually by means of a simple denial such as “No I didn’t!” As strategic deception requires a high level of executive control (Hala & Russell, 2001), it may be that by this stage of development children’s executive competence enables them to make false denials of responsibility, but not yet to fabricate complex narratives that might successfully absolve them of responsibility. This finding argues against stereotypical views of tattling as “telling tales” (i.e., making up stories), suggesting as it does that young children’s reports of peers’ behavior are usually reliable.

Children were more inclined to report the behavior of those who had harmed or offended them directly. At a pragmatic level, this finding may reflect a general egocentric bias in children’s discourse (Rubin, 1973). At a motivational level, it may also reflect a greater incentive to punish peers who have offended against the subject rather than those who have harmed a third party. Nevertheless, children as young as 2 are capable of sociocentric speech (Bruner, 1983), and indeed in about 25% of cases, in the present study, children reported social conventional violations for which there was no clear victim. It is interesting that children reported social conventional violations much more frequently than transgressions against a third party. This suggests a certain level of social cognitive awareness, in that they may have assumed that the victims in the latter type of case could speak up for themselves.

Tattling was rarely ignored by adults and often led to a teacher or classroom assistant intervening in support of a child—whether by punishing the reported miscreant or by resolving a dispute in favor of the tattler. There would seem to be little risk involved in tattling, in that few tattling events led to a negative response for the speaker (this is also true of the family context; Ross & den Bak-Lammers, 1998). Furthermore, qualitative observations during the participant observational part of the current study showed that while an explicit threat of tattling sometimes deterred peers from carrying out an undesired activity, tattling rarely led to aggressive retaliation on the part of peers (except in the form of reciprocal tattling). Compared to direct physical retaliation—which might lead either to an escalation in aggression or to punishment by staff—tattling might thus be a useful, and low-risk, social strategy for young children to follow in seeking punishment for a perceived wrong. Yet qualitative observations also indicated that children’s motivations for tattling were highly variable across individuals and situations (see Ingram, 2009, for a detailed analysis). Punishment did not result in the majority of cases and was usually mild: Admonishment sometimes consisted simply of saying the transgressor’s name in a disapproving tone. Often it seemed to be enough for children that an adult was paying attention to them and that their concerns about another’s behavior were being acknowledged. Tattling is therefore more likely to be motivated by a general
drive to externalize emotional problems, than by a conditionally learned strategy to achieve punishment.

There were notable individual differences in tattling. Analysis of social hierarchies in Preschool A showed that dominant individuals tattled significantly more frequently than other children. Tattling is sometimes a response to a (perceived) aggressive action by another individual, and this may mean that it is practiced more by dominant children, who more often retaliate against peers’ aggression (Strayer & Strayer, 1976). In an environment where children’s physical aggression is frequently punished by adults, dominant individuals’ retaliatory impulses may be socialized and directed into indirect, verbal behavior (Cooney et al., 1996; Hawley, 1999). Tattling may be one of several interpersonal strategies—including relationally aggressive behavior such as saying “I’m not your friend,” verbally aggressive behavior such as threats or taunts, and direct physical aggression such as pushing—which some preschool children use, to varying degrees, to achieve social dominance. Although dominant children were no more likely than other children to address the teachers in general terms, it could also be that dominant children were less shy about the specific activity of drawing an adult’s attention to social problems. These possibilities are not mutually exclusive; that is, manipulating others’ attention may contribute to dominance in young children.

The results of the PSBS–T questionnaire administered in Preschool B suggest that there are links between tattling and relational aggression. The same children who often engaged in relationally aggressive activities, such as telling peers that they would not be their friend, tended to tattle the most frequently. On the other hand, relational aggression has been defined as behavior that “harm others through damage to their peer relationships (e.g., using social exclusion or rumor spreading as a form of retaliation)” (Crick et al., 1997, p. 579). Relational aggression is often also characterized as covert (Archer & Coyne, 2005)—for example, whispering behind someone’s back—whereas tattling in these two preschools was overt and unashamed, often taking place right in front of the tattling target. As it is often overt, tattling may be more closely related to social aggression, a construct defined to include both covert and overt forms of nonphysical aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Galen & Underwood, 1997). Moreover, it is unlikely that children who tattled always intended to harm the tattling targets. Sometimes, they may well have been motivated by a desire to win praise from the teacher or to correct some inequity in the classroom (Ingram, 2009), in an early form of restorative justice. More research is needed on the affective dimensions of tattling, and on its relation with other forms of social communication.

One advantage of doing participant observation, in addition to quantitative sampling, was that it gave us a sense of the broad range of motivations for tattling. Tattling could sometimes be a strategic element of interchild conflict, as demonstrated by the fact that children occasionally threatened to do it (“I’m telling the teacher!”) as a sanction against unwelcome behavior by a peer. Yet tattling was not always an aggressive reprisal for a perceived wrong against the tattler: It sometimes seemed to be more concerned with providing useful information about rule breaking to an authority figure. When children tattled about nonegocentric events, it often seemed to be the principle of justice that most concerned them—an assertion of the rights and wrongs of the matter, rather than any particular settlement. For example, a frequent topic of tattling occurred when one child was perceived to take more than his or her fair share of bread or milk at the snack table. Other children would report this even when they themselves had plenty of food and drink in front of them. They seemed to be concerned with the principle of one child having relatively more than the others, rather than with any absolute loss of resources on their own part (for related experimental results, see Damon, 1977; Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008). Hence the motivating force behind tattling may sometimes be a drive to enforce the rules as the child perceives them, in pursuit of a sense of justice or social equity. What might produce such a drive? One cause might be a reluctance to see another go unpunished for an offense for which the tattler has been punished in the past, thus reducing the tattler’s relative standing. Another cause, which would fit well with our dominance results, might be a tendency for leaders to gain prestige from enforcing social norms (O’Gorman, Henrich, & Van Vugt, 2009).

There were several limitations to the present study. It was based on hand-written observations of a large body of children’s discourse: An analysis based on several hours of audio or video recording of focal children would contain fewer examples of tattling but might allow for finer-grained observation of the motivational and affective dimensions of tattling. Although two preschools were compared—and tattling took a generally similar dimensions in each, with no robustly significant differences—both
schools were in the same city, and so it would be interesting to contrast the results from these schools with results from culturally different populations. It would also be worth comparing preschoolers’ reporting of peer behavior with similar activities by older children in educational settings, thus complementing and extending the longitudinal study of Ross and den Bak-Lammers (1998) in home settings. It would be especially useful to carry the study of tattling up to preadolescence, as this may be when the activity first becomes derogated by peers (cf. Friman et al., 2004).

In this article we have extended the study of tattling to preschool settings, showing that it took a similar form in this context as for preschool-age children in the home context. Our results in the areas of negative bias, truthfulness, and adult responses to tattling are broadly in agreement with the findings of Ross and den Bak-Lammers (1998) for tattling between siblings. Children’s general bias toward reporting norm violations also recalls the sensitivity toward norm violations in experimental settings reported by Harris and Núñez (1996) and Rakoczy et al. (2008). Further experimental work needs to be done regarding the cognitive mechanisms responsible for this bias: Are norm violations simply more salient, and therefore more worthy of verbal attention, or are children’s verbal accounts of behavior always influenced by strategic considerations? Individual variations in tattling, and in particular the relations that we found with dominance and relational aggression, require carefully designed follow-up research. We conclude that tattling is a robust but individually flexible pattern of behavior, which is likely to undergo interesting developmental changes as children grow older and acquire an advanced theory of mind (see Ingram, Piazza, & Bering, 2009). Tattling may be an active part of the process by which some children learn to live in a world of social norms and social conflicts. It is thus an early example of the human ability to use language to externalize strategic problems and draw them into the public sphere.

References


Appendix A

Example Content Types of Children’s Behavioral Reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Report category</th>
<th>Examples of report content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical aggression</td>
<td>‘He tried to bited [sic] me’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Jack hurt me with the wheel’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property damage</td>
<td>‘She hit this thing’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Matthew, he’s knocking down the tower’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property entitlement</td>
<td>‘He won’t let me have the scissors’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Mudiwa took two breads’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social convention</td>
<td>‘Both of them ‘uns have Power Rangers—I seen them under the table’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘They’re being very loud’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint play violation</td>
<td>‘She’s not finished yet [with the paintbrush]; she won’t hurry up’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I wanted to be in there [the box] and Jack pushed it off me’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taunting</td>
<td>‘She’s shouting at me’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘James said I’m not Superman; James said I’m bad’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreement</td>
<td>‘She said she was in a different school’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I stood on Adam’s foot—he said I did it on purpose but I didn’t’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonjudgmental</td>
<td>‘He didn’t get any milk’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘He was trying to get in the car and I jumped in first’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>‘Emma gave me a flag’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix B

Examples of Responses to Tattling by Audience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response category</th>
<th>Examples of response content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supporting</td>
<td>Confiscated toys: “You know you’re not allowed them”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Tell him I’m not happy about that”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledging</td>
<td>Said “Does she?” and looked at the dolls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Told tattler that she would talk to miscreant about it (but never seemed to)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excusing</td>
<td>“That’s OK”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It was probably an accident”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring</td>
<td>Pretty much ignored (probably because the boys had been throwing things too)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More or less ignored, because everyone was going down into the playground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reprimanding tattler</td>
<td>Told tattler not to be fighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“You are all little tell-tales, aren’t you—always telling tales on each other!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both tattler and miscreant reprimanded</td>
<td>Ascertained that it was an accident, and told both boys to say sorry to each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Called both boys over and told them sternly not to climb on things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>Asked if it was an accident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questioning interrupted by arrival of tattler’s mother</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>