Sex Differences in Children's Trust in Peers

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Children in kindergarten, second, and fourth grades were required to judge how much they trusted each of their peers (classmates). A same sex pattern of peer trust was found; boys trusted boys more than they trusted girls, and girls trusted girls more than they trusted boys. This pattern of peer trust was evident in fourth- and second-grade children but not in kindergarten children. It was proposed that the same sex pattern of trust serves to reinforce and maintain the same sex pattern of peer relationships in children.

Some authors (i.e., Rotter, 1980; Selman & Selman, 1979) have proposed that children's trust in their peers is important and that it plays a critical role in peer relationships. However, there is scant research on children's trust in peers and even less on what role sex differences may play in peer trust.

One commonly held notion of sex differences in children's trust in peers may be called the "social group" hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, during childhood boys develop same sex social groups that enhance the trust in its members—boys—and minimize trust in individuals who are not members—girls. Similarly, girls develop same sex social groups and enhance trust in girls and minimize trust in boys. There is in fact, considerable evidence (see Asher et al., 1977) that children's friendship and peer interactions from nursery school through elementary school are largely same sex. The social group hypothesis of trust leads to the expectation that there is a same sex pattern of children's trust in peers and this would be shown in an interaction between the sex of the perceiver and the sex of the target. Specifically, it leads to the expectation that (a) boys trust boys more than they trust girls, and (b) girls trust girls more than they trust boys.

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Some research findings indicate that there may be sex differences in children's trust in their peers. Imber (1973) tested fourth-grade children on a trust scale that was designed to assess whether they believed in the sincerity and truthfulness of others' words and promises. He found that girls had higher scores on the trust scale than did boys. It might be concluded that girls trust peers more than boys do, but the findings provide limited support for this conclusion. First, the trust scale assessed trust in hypothetical others who were adults as well as peer-aged children. The children's trust in actual peers was not assessed. Second, the scale defined trust in terms of a set of beliefs. While findings concerning the children's belief in sincerity, etc. are of interest, it is worthwhile to know whether there are sex differences in children's own attributions of trust to peers. This would reflect the children's own trust perception.

There is some evidence that there are sex differences in children, in behaviors that are commonly associated with trust. In a study by Rivenbark (1973) children of 9, 11, 13, 15, and 17 years of age were questioned about their self-disclosure to their mothers, fathers, best male friend, and best female friend. Particularly relevant to the present issue were two findings. First, girls reported more self-disclosure to their best male and best female friends than did boys. Second, a same sex pattern emerged in which girls reported more self-disclosure to their best female friend than to their best male friend while boys reported more self-disclosure to their best male friend than to their best female friend. The present experiment was designed to investigate whether, in terms of the children's own attributions, (a) girls trust peers more than do boys and (b) there is a same sex pattern in children's trust in peers.

METHOD

Subjects

Children from kindergarten (11 girls, 13 boys), second grade (11 girls, 10 boys), and fourth grade (9 girls, 12 boys) were tested. The mean ages at those grades were 5-7, 7-8, and 9-8 years and months, respectively. The kindergarten, second- and fourth-grade children were obtained from 3 classes, 2 classes, and 2 classes, respectively, in a school located in Windsor, Ontario. The classes were small (16 students and less) and this maximized the likelihood that the children were familiar with each other.

Apparatus

The "trust" scale was composed of a series of five black columns of increasing height and a corresponding set of push buttons. (The scale is