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# 'What I Want and What You Want': Children's Thinking about Competing Personal Preferences

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## Abstract

*This study examined how children reason about competing personal preferences. Seventy-two participants (mean ages 5 years 5 months, 10 years 4 months, and 17 years 7 months) considered three hypothetical scenarios in which a protagonist's personal preference was in conflict with her or his friend's personal preference. Scenarios varied in the relative weightiness of each character's desires. Whereas 5- and 10-year-olds prioritized the friend's preference across scenarios, 17-year-olds affirmed the character's prerogative to act according to her or his own preference except when the friend's preference was weightier. Nevertheless, regardless of age, participants generally reasoned about these situations in terms of autonomy and friendship rather than as moral obligations. The findings contribute to our understanding of how children of different ages work out the boundaries of the personal.*

*Keywords:* children's reasoning autonomy; morality; friendship development

## Introduction

Moral development research has reliably demonstrated that starting at a young age, children are concerned with other people's welfare, judge it wrong to hurt others physically or emotionally, and discuss such matters in terms of prescriptions and obligations (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2006). Alongside those concerns, children also recognize, from an early age, that there are choices, preferences, and activities, such as deciding who their friends are or how to spend their leisure time, that bear exclusively on the self. They judge that these matters are within a person's own jurisdiction and that it is wrong for others to interfere with this realm of the personal (Nucci, Killen, & Smetana, 1996; Smetana, 2005).

The hallmark of matters included within the personal realm is that such matters are perceived as not harming others—which is why they are up to the individual to decide and regulate. And yet, in some situations the legitimate personal choices or preferences of two people may come into conflict with each other. As an example, two friends may have conflicts about whether they want to spend a specific time with each other, with someone else, or alone, or what they want to do while they spend time together. In

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those situations, it is possible that one individual's exercise of her or his personal preferences might result in disappointment or hurt feelings for another.

This type of conflict, also known as 'conflicts of interest' (Rose & Asher, 1999), is very common in the lives of children as young as four or five and through adolescence, as evidenced by observations of siblings' interactions (Dunn, 2002; Ram & Ross, 2001) and children's narrative reports of their own conflicts with friends and peers (Wainryb, Brehl, & Matwin, 2005). Nevertheless, surprisingly little is known about how children understand and navigate this kind of conflict because children's thinking about the personal realm has been typically studied in the contexts of conflicts and negotiations between a child or adolescent and an authority figure, especially a parent (Nucci et al., 1996; Smetana, 2005).

When conflicts such as these arise in real life, children have a choice to either compromise or resort to a win-lose resolution (in some cases, children also merely withdraw). Although children tend to compromise more often in conflicts with their friends than with their parents (Dunn & Herrera, 1997; Laursen, 1993a), research also suggests that children do not compromise all the time even in conflicts with their friends and that they tend to pick compromise more often in response to hypothetical scenarios than in real life (Laursen, Finkelstein, & Townsend Betts, 2001). Although decisions that involve compromise are important in their own right, conflict situations in which children are not given the possibility to compromise are uniquely significant as they raise two critical questions.

One is about the specific decisions that children make when forced to choose between conflicting personal preferences—their own and a friend's. Do children assert their own personal preferences, as they typically do when confronting their parents, or do they surrender their own preferences to acquiesce to those of their friends? Research on the development of prosocial attitudes (see Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006, for comprehensive review), might lead one to expect that younger children give priority to selfish or 'hedonistic' concerns, with older children and adolescents developing a more prosocial attitude and giving broader consideration to the wants and needs of others. Findings on gender differences in social development might, alternatively, suggest that differences may be organized around gender, with girls, for example, being more attuned and responsive to the preferences of others (Cross & Madson, 1997; Donenberg & Hoffman, 1988). In contrast to both these predictions, much research has shown that concerns for the realm of personal jurisdiction are present throughout development and equally among girls and boys, and do not come instead of but alongside prosocial concerns or interpersonal obligations (Killen & Turiel, 1998; Smetana, Killen, & Turiel, 1991; Smetana et al., 2009). While these findings suggest that it is unlikely that children of a certain age or gender are entirely without personal concerns or uniquely focused on the personal, they do not provide unequivocal guidance as to the precise decisions that children might make when forced to choose between exercising their own preferences or submitting to their peers'.

The other, related question is about the types of concerns that children consider when justifying their decisions in regard to conflicts arising between their own and their friends' personal preferences. An important issue in this regards is whether these conflict situations become an arena for entertaining and balancing matters of autonomy and friendship, or whether the decisions collapse under the prescriptive weight of moral obligations. In other words, children might use this type of conflict as a context for working out the boundaries of their own autonomy and their friends' autonomy. An alternative possibility is that children view these conflicts through the lens of morality;

this may occur if children become concerned that giving priority to their own preferences over their friends' might disappoint and hurt their friends' feelings, thereby creating a moral obligation on their part to curtail their own preferences and choices so as to prevent their friends' distress.

While related, these two questions are distinct. Children may or may not give priority to a friend's competing preference over their own. Even if they do, they may or may not judge that doing so is a moral obligation grounded on the need to prevent inflicting harm or distress on a friend. These questions are important because while any one individual preference or choice within the personal realm, such as how to spend one's leisure time, may be relatively inconsequential, the sum of personal preferences and choices constitutes an essential part of who a person is. Assertions of personal jurisdiction help establish a child's distinctiveness and autonomy, the stifling of which is associated with unhealthy psychological development and functioning (Hasebe, Nucci, & Nucci, 2004; Helwig, 2006; Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006). Research has shown that experiences involving conflicts with parents and other authority figures are critical contexts within which youths develop and exercise the drawing of boundaries for a personal realm of action (Nucci et al., 1996; Smetana, 2005). However, children and adolescents also spend considerable, indeed increasing, time with their friends and peers. It is thus important to understand whether conflicts among equals over matters of personal preference and choice also serve to support the development of a realm of personal jurisdiction. Indeed, if children were to systematically capitulate to their friends' preferences, and moreover, if they were to treat all such conflict situations as creating moral obligations, the possibility for meaningful exercise of personal choice within a significant portion of their interpersonal relationships would be deeply curtailed.

In this study, we asked how children reason about hypothetical situations in which a protagonist's personal preference is in conflict with his or her friend's. Because their decisions and judgments are likely to be informed by the relative importance of the competing concerns (Smetana et al., 1991, 2009), two conflict situations were contrasted, one in which both characters' personal preferences were relatively trivial and one in which both characters' personal preferences were relatively weighty. To ensure, however, that children are not merely selfish or self-focused and never care about their friends' preferences or needs, a third conflict situation was included for comparison, in which a protagonist's relatively trivial personal preference was in conflict with her or his friend's weighty personal preference. For each type of conflict, children were asked to make three distinct decisions. Because in naturally occurring interactions children have the ability to address situations such as these by compromising, we first asked participants, in an open-ended question, for any possible solutions to the conflict situation. However, research also suggests that compromising may be overrepresented as a desired solution in hypothetical contexts. Thus, next we attempted to circumvent this issue by telling participants that compromise was unfeasible or unavailable and by asking them to choose whether the protagonist should pursue her or his own or her or his friend's desires. Finally, we asked participants to evaluate whether it would be alright for the protagonist to pursue her or his own preference; this last question allowed us to assess whether children and adolescents think of the decision to pursue one's own desires in spite of a friend's conflicting preference as a moral obligation or a personal preference.

In general, we expected a main effect for the type of conflict on each measure. Children of all ages were expected to offer a compromise solution more often when

stakes were equal than unequal (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). When forced to choose, we expected children to be more likely to overlook the friend's preference and assert the protagonist's autonomy in conflict situations in which the stakes are lower than higher (Smetana et al., 2009). However, regardless of whether they sided with the protagonist or the friend, we expected that children would generally reason about these conflicts in terms of competing personal issues rather than moral obligations. Finally, we expected children to evaluate a 'selfish' (or self-oriented) choice more positively when the competing claims are equal rather than unequal (Pruitt & Kim, 2004); even negative evaluations, however, are unlikely to call for moral reasoning.

A broad age range sample was included in this study, including participants from preschool through high-school age, as research on personal choice and autonomy has often been too narrowly focused on adolescence. Research suggests that concepts of the personal exist in children as young as three or four (Nucci et al., 1996; Smetana, 2006), but the evidence also strongly indicates that there is a steep increase in children's assertion of their personal jurisdiction over areas of their lives, at least vis-à-vis their parents' restrictions, from childhood through adolescence (Smetana, 2005; Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003). Further, research shows that conflicts between children's competing personal preferences are fairly common starting in preschool and through adolescence (Dunn, 2002; Wainryb et al., 2005), but there is also evidence suggesting that at different ages, children deal with their friends in vastly different ways (Berndt, 2004; Dunn, 2004; Laursen & Pursell, 2009; Sandy & Cochran, 2000). These diverse literatures suggest somewhat different hypotheses in regard to the main effect of age on each of the measures of interest in the present study. On the one hand, findings bearing on the increase of autonomy might suggest that with age, children tend to compromise less and assert their personal prerogatives over their friends' competing preferences more. On the other hand, findings related to the changing functions and understandings of friendship at different ages suggest that the effect of age may be more complex. In general, given preschoolers' general difficulties co-ordinating opposing viewpoints in complex social situations (Shaw & Wainryb, 2006; Wainryb & Brehl, 2006), and their 'fight-or-flight' approach to resolving conflicts (Dunn, 2002, 2004), it is possible that the youngest children in the sample might tend to equivocate, sometimes siding with the friend, sometimes with the protagonist. By middle childhood, children become more preoccupied with being accepted by peers and thus work hard on amicable conflict resolution strategies that ensure continued social interactions (Gottman & Mettetal, 1986; Stafford, 2004); accordingly, they might tend to compromise more than their younger or older peers and, when not given the chance to compromise, might give priority to their friends' preferences over their own. Adolescents grow to trust the enduring nature of their friendships (Laursen, 1993a, 1993b), which might make them likely to compromise less and assert their own preferences more. Finally, we expected the evaluations of a 'selfish' choice to become less negative with age (Shaw & Wainryb, 2006; Wainryb et al., 2005).

Whereas some findings suggest that girls feature more relationship-maintaining goals, and boys more controlling and assertive goals in their friendships (Chung & Asher, 1996; Hartup & Laursen, 1993), comprehensive reviews of the literature indicate that the concern with drawing boundaries of personal jurisdiction is not exclusive to boys (Nucci et al., 1996; Smetana, 2005, 2006; Smetana et al., 2009). Accordingly, both boys and girls were included in the study, but the examination of gender was merely exploratory.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 72 5-year-olds (mean age = 5 years 5 months, range 4 years 11 months), 10-year-olds (mean age = 10 years 4 months, range 9 years 9 months–11 years 4 months), and 17-year-olds (mean age = 17 years 7 months, range 16 years 6 months–18 years 6 months), equally divided by age and gender. The sample size was determined by using power analysis with a medium size effect; the power was at least 80 percent to detect main effects and interactions (Cohen, 1977; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). Participants were recruited from a preschool, an elementary school, and a high school in a mid-size western city. As identified by the school district's annual report, the student population was primarily middle-class and White (17 percent Hispanic/Latino, 5 percent Asian, and 3 percent African-American). Parental consent and participant assent were obtained for all participants.

### *Design and Procedure*

Participants were presented with three hypothetical stories in which two characters expressed different desires. For example, 'This is a story about two friends, Brian and Fred. Brian tells Fred, "I've got a new video game and I'd really want us to play it now." Fred thinks to himself, "I really wanted to go home and watch a movie by myself"' (see Appendix for complete examples of all scenarios). Although it would have been possible to ask participants to either imagine themselves as being in each of these hypothetical scenarios (Brehl, 2008), or to describe their actual conflict experiences with their own friends (Wainryb et al., 2005), such strategies produce data that, although very valuable in some respects, are hard to compare across participants (as children's friendships and conflict experiences vary so widely), and even within participants (as any one participant may recall one incident with a friend who happens to be very accommodating and patient, and another with an equally close friend who is more demanding and volatile). Thus, the strategy pursued in the present study was to rely on hypothetical scenarios and characters, where the types of conflicts and the characters involved were precisely controlled and presented to all participants in the same way, in an effort to maximize the comparability among age groups and conditions within participants.

Each of the three stories represented a distinct combination of clashing desires. In the low–low condition (L–L), the protagonist's relatively trivial desire (e.g., to go home and watch a movie), conflicted with her or his friend's equally trivial desire (e.g., that the protagonist play a recently acquired video game with her or him). In the high–high condition (H–H), the protagonist's relatively weighty desire (e.g., to attend a rock concert for which he or she had purchased advance tickets), conflicted with her or his friend's equally weighty desire (e.g., that the protagonist attend her or his birthday party). In the low–high condition (L–H), the protagonist's trivial desire (e.g., to go to the mall, as he or she does every week) conflicted with her or his friend's weighty desire (e.g., that the protagonist attend her or his end-of-year piano recital). A list of preferred activities common among children and adolescents were pilot-tested with children in each age group represented in the study; only items about which most children of all ages agreed in their appraisal of their relative triviality or weightiness were ultimately included in the stimuli used in the study. This pretesting does not ensure that children of all ages will conceive of the conflict

situations in exactly the same way—indeed, at the heart of the study is the expectation that children of different ages will construe and judge these situations differently. The pretesting aimed to ensure that the clashing desires included in each of the situations were, in isolation, judged to be either relatively weighty or relatively trivial by children of all ages.

To allow for generalizability across content areas, two comparable versions of each condition were designed; each version was presented to half the participants in each age and gender group. Female participants always heard stories about female characters, and male participants heard the same stories with male characters. To facilitate five-year-olds' comprehension, pictures depicting the contents of each story were used. In addition, in some cases the desires were slightly altered to match the interests of participants of different ages. For example, 'going to a rock concert' was replaced with 'going to the circus.' The order of presentation of the three stories was counterbalanced within age and gender groups using a Latin-square design.

Following each story, three assessments were obtained in a fixed order that follows the natural course of possible actions taken (the measures were modified from those used in a previous study by Wainryb & Turiel, 1994):

- (1) Open-ended choice: Participants were first asked for any possible solutions to the conflict situation (e.g., 'If Fred wants to go home and watch a movie by himself, and Brian wants Fred to play a new video game with him, what do you think Fred could do?').
- (2) Forced choice: Participants were then asked to choose whether the protagonist should pursue her or his own desire or the friend's desire. The wording of this question depended on whether, in responding to the open-ended question above, participants had suggested a compromise (e.g., 'Let's say Fred can do only one of those things: he can either go home and watch a movie by himself, like he wanted, or he can play the new video game with Brian, like Brian wanted. What do you think Fred should do? Why?'), or given priority to one of the character's (e.g., 'So you think that Fred can go home and watch a movie by himself, just like he wants to do. Is that what you think Fred should do? Why?').
- (3) Evaluation of self-oriented choice: Finally, participants were asked to evaluate the protagonist's decision to pursue her or his own preference (e.g., 'So Fred said, "Sorry Brian, but I really-really want to go home and watch a movie by myself, so I can't play the new video game with you," and he went home. Do you think it was okay or not okay for Fred to do that? Why?').

Participants were individually interviewed by the first author in their schools. Open-ended probes were used when necessary to further clarify participants' responses. Interviews lasted around 20 minutes, were tape-recorded, and subsequently transcribed for analyses.

### *Coding and Reliability*

Responses to the open-ended choice were scored for whether they included a compromise between the two characters' desires (e.g., 'they should have a birthday-soccer party'; 'he should go the birthday party for a little bit, and then go to the mall') or whether they sided with either character (e.g., 'she should go to her friend's birthday party'; 'he can go to the mall if that's what he feels like doing'), and were assigned scores of 1 and 0, respectively. Responses to the forced choice were coded for whether

they gave preference to the protagonist's desire ('self') or the friend's desire ('other') and were assigned scores of 0 or 1, respectively.

Evaluations of the self-oriented choices were scored on a 3-point scale, with 1 = 'negative' (not okay), 2 = 'mixed' (both okay and not okay), and 3 = 'positive' (okay). Justifications for the forced choice and the evaluation were scored using categories adapted from a widely used scoring system (Davidson, Turiel, & Black, 1983), including *autonomy* (e.g., 'soccer is really important to him, it's his life and he gets to make his own choices'; 'she doesn't have to do everything her friend asks, she can choose what she wants'); *friendship* (e.g., 'she should go to the recital and support his friend, that's what friends do'; 'if he is a friend, he will understand that Fred needs to be by himself this evening'); and *morality* (e.g., 'if he misses his friend's birthday party, it will make his friend really sad'; 'it will hurt her friend's feelings'). Unclear, irrelevant, or partial responses that did not reliably fit any of these categories were scored as *unelaborated*. Multiple justifications were allowed and, when they occurred, were scored in terms of the proportional use of each justification category (e.g., 'She should go to her friend's recital because it will upset her friend if she doesn't show up, and good friends always support each other' was coded as .5 for *morality* and .5 for *friendship*).

Finally, in addition to scoring participants' justifications to the forced-choice question according to whether they contained references to autonomy, friendship, or morality, those responses were also scored for whether they contained references to the concerns of only one of the characters (e.g., 'because soccer is really important to her'), or to the concerns of both characters (e.g., 'because the birthday party is important for his friend and he can go to the mall any other time'), and were assigned a score of 1 or 2, respectively; responses that did not refer directly to the characters' concerns (e.g., 'because best friends do what best friends want to do'), were assigned a 0.

Scoring reliability was assessed through independent recoding of 20 percent of the protocols by a second judge. Inter-rater reliability for the various measures ranged from 86 percent (Cohen's  $\kappa = .83$ ) to 100 percent (Cohen's  $\kappa = 1$ ).

## Results

ANOVAs by age, gender, and condition, with condition as a repeated measure, were used to analyze participants' choices, number of perspectives, and evaluations. GLM procedures were adopted for analyzing participants' justifications, scored in terms of the proportional use of various categories ('unelaborated' responses were excluded from all analyses). It should be noted that although loglinear- and SEM-based procedures are typically deemed most appropriate for analyzing categorical data, the sparseness of this study's dataset poses unique challenges to these procedures because they rely on computations within cells, thus crashing when encountering zeros (see also Posada & Wainryb, 2008; Wainryb, Shaw, Laupa, & Smith, 2001). Analyses made using loglinear procedures come to a halt due to the impossibility of logging zeros. Sparseness also becomes a challenge for SEM when modeling the data by specifying relevant latent factors, which tend to result in untrustworthy solutions (e.g., negative variance). GLM gets around this problem because it computes variability across all cells, thereby capitalizing on the fact that sparseness is cell dependent. (Note, however, that the sparseness of this dataset results not from a small sample size or an inappropriate coding scheme, but rather from the strength of the experimental manipulation; for example, our conceptual model predicts that no participants would choose self-oriented preferences in the L-H condition or would justify their choices using moral

reasons). Although, in relying on GLM, assumptions about the nature of the covariance matrix are violated, evidence indicates that this violation of assumptions is likely to produce a more conservative test of the hypotheses (Kupek, 2006). Preliminary analyses by version yielded no significant effects or interactions; version was thus dropped from all subsequent analyses. For all analyses, *post hoc* comparisons using Bonferroni *t*-tests were performed to test for significant within-subjects effects. Checks for skewness and kurtosis were conducted and, where appropriate, arcsine and logarithmic transformations were used. Analyses with transformed and untransformed data yielded identical results; results are presented with the untransformed data.

When making an open-ended choice, participants either offered a compromise solution or sided with one of the two characters involved in the conflict. The ANOVA yielded no significant effect for age but a significant effect for condition,  $F(2, 65) = 4.867, p = .011, \eta^2 = .130$ , qualified by a significant condition–age interaction,  $F(4, 130) = 3.727, p = .007, \eta^2 = .103$ . No effects or interactions involving gender were found ( $\eta^2$  ranged from .008 to .028). As shown in Table 1, 10-year-olds offered compromises more often in the L–L condition (67 percent) than in the other two conditions (17–38 percent). There were no significant condition differences among either younger or older children; on average, 5-year-olds suggested compromises in 19 percent of cases and 17-year-olds in 36 percent of cases.

Next, participants were ‘forced’ to choose whether the protagonist should fulfill his or her own (‘self’) or his or her friend’s (‘other’) desires. The ANOVA yielded significant effects for age,  $F(2, 60) = 5.92, p = .005, \eta^2 = .165$ , and condition,  $F(2, 59) = 23.956, p < .001, \eta^2 = .448$ , and a significant age–condition interaction,  $F(4, 118) = 5.157, p < .001, \eta^2 = .167$ . No effects or interactions involving gender were found ( $\eta^2$  ranged from .001 to .010). As also shown in Table 1, 17-year-olds responded differently to the conditions featuring conflicts between unequal and equal desires. Indeed, whereas 100 percent judged that the protagonist should give priority to his or her friend’s (‘other’) desire in the L–H condition, in which the protagonist’s own desire was trivial and the friend’s weighty, around two-thirds (65 percent) judged that the protagonist should follow his or her own desire (‘self’) when the protagonist’s and the friend’s desires were either equally weighty or equally trivial. Less expected was the finding that the large majority of 5-year-olds (62–81 percent) and 10-year-olds (64–100 percent) gave priority to the friend’s desire (‘other’) over the protagonist’s own desire (‘self’) across all three conditions regardless of whether the conflicting desires were equal or unequal, weighty or trivial.

When asked to justify their choices, participants referred largely to concerns with friendship (51 percent) and autonomy (36 percent). The MANOVA (Wilks’s lambda) yielded significant main effects for condition ( $p = .031$ ) and age ( $p < .001$ ). No effects or interactions involving gender were found ( $\eta^2$  ranged from .003 to .101). As shown in Table 2, references to friendship were more common in the context of the L–H condition (68 percent) than in the other two conditions (42–44 percent),  $F(2, 132) = 7.577, p = .001, \eta^2 = .103$ . By contrast, concerns with personal choice and autonomy were more common in the L–L and H–H conditions (42–44 percent) than in the L–H condition (22 percent),  $F(2, 132) = 5.755, p = .004, \eta^2 = .080$ . Notably, references to friendship were also more common among 10- and 17-year-olds (60–61 percent) than among 5-year-olds (32 percent),  $F(2, 66) = 9.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .230$ . By contrast, while rare overall (7 percent), moral concerns with the friend’s hurt feelings were slightly more common among the 5-year-olds (13 percent) than among 17-year-olds (1 percent),  $F(2, 66) = 2.579, p = .08, \eta^2 = .072$ .

**Table 1. Proportion of Responses Reflecting a Compromise (Open-ended Choice), and Responses Prioritizing the Friend's Preference (Forced Choice), by Age and Condition**

	5-year-olds			10-year-olds			17-year-olds		
	L-L	H-H	L-H	L-L	H-H	L-H	L-L	H-H	L-H
Compromise (open-ended)	M (.38)	.33 (.48)	.08 (.28)	.67 <sub>a</sub> (.48)	.38 <sub>b</sub> (.49)	.17 <sub>b</sub> (.38)	.33 (.48)	.46 (.51)	.29 (.46)
Friend-preference (forced)	M (.50)	.76 (.44)	.81 (.40)	.86 (.35)	.64 (.49)	1.0 (0)	.35 <sub>a</sub> (.49)	.35 <sub>a</sub> (.49)	1.0 <sub>b</sub> (0)

*Note:* Subscripts indicate where significant age × condition effects emerged. Means in the same age group that do not share subscripts differ at  $p < .05$  in tests of simple effects (with Bonferroni adjustment).  
L-L = low-low condition; H-H = high-high condition; L-H = low-high condition.

**Table 2. Justifications for Responses to the Forced-choice Question, by Age and Condition (Percentages)**

	5-year-olds			10-year-olds			17-year-olds		
	L-L	H-H	L-H	L-L	H-H	L-H	L-L	H-H	L-H
Autonomy	38	33	44	33	44	17	56	54	6
Friendship	33	33	31	54	48	79	44	44	94
Morality	8	17	13	13	8	4	0	2	0
Unelaborated	21	17	13	0	0	0	0	0	0

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

L-L = low-low condition; H-H = high-high condition; L-H = low-high condition.

**Table 3. Evaluation of Self-oriented Preference, by Age and Condition**

	5-year-olds			10-year-olds			17-year-olds		
	L-L	H-H	L-H	L-L	H-H	L-H	L-L	H-H	L-H
M	2.25	2.17	2.25	2.40 <sub>a</sub>	2.29 <sub>a</sub>	1.42 <sub>b</sub>	2.88 <sub>a</sub>	2.54 <sub>a</sub>	1.83 <sub>b</sub>
(SD)	(.99)	(.96)	(.99)	(.83)	(.81)	(.78)	(.45)	(.78)	(.92)
% negative	38	38	38	21	21	75	4	17	50
% mixed	0	8	0	17	29	8	4	13	17
% positive	63	54	63	63	50	7	92	71	33

Note: Means are based on a 3-point scale (1 = negative, 2 = mixed, 3 = positive). Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Subscripts indicate where significant age  $\times$  condition effects emerged. Means in the same age group that do not share subscripts differ at  $p < .05$  in tests of simple effects (with Bonferroni adjustment).

L-L = low-low condition; H-H = high-high condition; L-H = low-high condition.

Recall that participants' justifications to the forced-choice question were also scored for whether they contained references to the concerns of either a single character or both characters (justifications that did not include references to the concerns of either character were scored as 0). The ANOVA yielded a significant age effect,  $F(2, 65) = 61.089$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .653$ , with means increasing consistently with age ( $M_s = .91, 1.63, 1.83$ ;  $SD_s = .34, .32, .22$ , respectively, for 5-, 10-, and 17-year-olds).

Finally, participants were asked whether it was okay or not okay for the protagonist to give priority to his or her own desire over his or her friend's. The ANOVA yielded a significant effect for condition,  $F(2, 65) = 16.204$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .333$ , and a significant condition-age interaction,  $F(4, 130) = 4.317$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta^2 = .117$ ; no effects or interactions involving gender were found ( $\eta^2$  ranged from .001 to .023). Unlike 5-year-olds, 10- and 17-year-olds clearly distinguished among conditions (see Table 3). They made largely positive or mixed evaluations of self-oriented choices in the two conditions in which the protagonist's and her or his friend's desires were equally weighty or equally trivial, but the large majority of 10-year-olds and half of

**Table 4. Justifications for Evaluations of Self-oriented Preference, by Age and Condition (Percentages)**

	5-year-olds			10-year-olds			17-year-olds		
	L-L	H-H	L-H	L-L	H-H	L-H	L-L	H-H	L-H
Autonomy	50	48	33	46	54	25	65	69	27
Friendship	17	38	19 <sub>a</sub>	40	25	42 <sub>ab</sub>	31	25	60 <sub>b</sub>
Morality	13	6	2 <sub>a</sub>	15	17	33 <sub>b</sub>	4	6	13 <sub>a</sub>
Unelaborated	21	8	46	0	4	0	0	0	0

*Note:* Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Subscripts indicate where significant age  $\times$  condition effects emerged. Percentages in the same row that do not share subscripts differ at  $p < .05$  in tests of simple effects (with Bonferroni adjustment).

L-L = low-low condition; H-H = high-high condition; L-H = low-high condition.

17-year-olds made negative evaluations of the same choice when the friend's desire was weighty and the protagonist's trivial.

When asked to justify their evaluations, participants referred largely to concerns with autonomy (46 percent) and friendship (33 percent); references to moral concerns were comparatively infrequent (12 percent). The MANOVA (Wilks's lambda) yielded significant effects for condition ( $p < .001$ ) and age ( $p < .001$ ), as well as a significant condition-age interaction ( $p < .001$ ). No effects or interactions involving gender were found ( $\eta^2$  ranged from .001 to .130). As shown in Table 4, across all ages concerns with autonomy were more frequent in the context of the L-L and H-H conditions (54–57 percent) than in the L-H condition (28 percent),  $F(2, 132) = 11.652$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .150$ . Conversely, in the L-H condition, 17-year-olds (60 percent) referred to friendship more often than 5-year-olds (19 percent),  $F(4, 132) = 3.450$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .095$ , and 10-year-olds (33 percent) referred to moral concerns slightly more often than both 5- and 17-year-olds (2–13 percent),  $F(4, 132) = 2.267$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $\eta^2 = .064$ .

## Discussion

In this study we asked how children think about conflict situations in which a child's preference is in conflict with his or her friend's preference. In general, the findings indicated that children construe this sort of conflict in discretionary, not obligatory, terms, as entailing the need to reconcile two sets of personal preferences. In so doing, children tend to consider matters of personal choice and autonomy, but concerns with friendship are also very important, especially in some contexts. The overall lack of gender differences (main effects and interactions involving gender were not significant, with an average effect size of .014), was consistent with reliable findings from the literature on the development of the personal realm (Nucci et al., 1996; Smetana, 2005, 2006). Although generally children did not distinguish, in their judgments, between low-stake and high-stake conflicts, many did distinguish, as expected, between conflict situations in which the stakes were equal and unequal.

Indeed, substantial age differences were found in the ways 5- through 17-year-olds think about these conflicts. As we had expected, 17-year-olds clearly distinguished

between situations in which the competing claims were equal and unequal. In those situations in which the characters' disagreements were over matters of equal magnitude, whether trivial or weighty, a majority of 17-year-olds affirmed the protagonist's prerogative to act according to his or her personal preference. They referred largely to concerns with choice and autonomy, although in some cases (22 percent in the L-L condition and 17 percent in the H-H condition), they also referred to the nature of friendship to support siding with personal prerogative, as when they argued that 'a friend will understand that sometimes you just do what you want to do' (a uniquely interesting type of reasoning, that reminds us that adolescents understand that friendship involves not only intimate sharing but also supporting one another's needs for autonomy). By contrast, when the conflict was between preferences of unequal magnitude, such that the protagonist's preference was trivial and his or her friend's weighty, 17-year-olds uniformly opined that the protagonist should go along with the friend's weightier preference. But even in this case, as we had also expected, participants refrained from justifying their judgments in moral terms. Rather, nearly all (94 percent) 17-year-olds referred to friendship concerns, such as the need to support a friend ('you really have to be there for your friend'), or prevent relationship damage ('if she blows her off they might not be such good friends anymore').

The findings concerning the younger participants were less expected, as in general a majority of both 5- and 10-year-olds (73 and 83 percent, respectively), thought that protagonists should go along with their friends' preferences across all conditions, including those in which the competing desires were of equal magnitude. Nevertheless, even as 5- and 10-year-olds endorsed the protagonist's prerogatives less frequently than we had expected, the majority refrained from moralizing these conflicts. Indeed, not unlike adolescents, very few (4–17 percent) reasoned that protagonists should go along with their friends' preferences for moral reasons, even when the friend's desire was weighty and the protagonist's desire was trivial.

The differences between 10- and 17-year-olds in the frequency with which they endorsed a protagonist's autonomy in the face of a friend's comparable desires may be understood not only in terms of the age-related increase in the centrality of autonomy concerns (Smetana, 2005; Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003), but also in light of what is known about their distinct experiences and psychological understandings of friendship relationships. The 10-year-olds' predominant orientation to satisfying friends' preferences makes sense given the significant concern of children this age with peer acceptance and rejection. At this age, children tend to be apprehensive about maintaining friendships and fear that the occurrence of conflicts might threaten the continuation of relationships (Berndt, 2004; Gottman & Mettetal, 1986). Indeed, many 10-year-olds expressed such a preoccupation when explaining the decision to go along with a friend's preference, as in 'if she just does what she wants to do then she might not have friends anymore.' By contrast, adolescents not only have an increasing need for a personal sphere of action and autonomous decision-making (Smetana, 2005; Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2003), but are also known to be more confident in their friendships with others. They understand that friendships not only survive conflicts but often become stronger in the process (Hartup & Laursen, 1993; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996), and thus fear less that asserting their own choices will necessarily damage their relationships: indeed, many claimed that 'friends understand that sometimes you just want to do your own thing' or that 'today you can disagree but tomorrow you will go along, and that evens it all out in the long run.'

None of this is to say that children's and adolescents' views of conflicts between competing personal preferences were merely unidimensional, with 10-year-olds being solely oriented to friends and 17-year-olds to the personal. Indeed, one notable finding was that even as they chose friend over protagonist or vice-versa, the majority of 10- and 17-year-olds (67–84 percent) considered and weighed both characters' preferences in their responses and justifications (as compared with only 5 percent of 5-year-olds).

Furthermore, even as 10-year-olds claimed that protagonists should go along with their friends' preferences, they often approached the conflict situations by first suggesting a compromise—which denotes that their eventual favoring of friends was not a result of merely ignoring the personal. (Interestingly, compromise solutions were more common in the context of trivial conflicts, suggesting that situations that involve low stakes are most facilitative of compromise solutions.) Finally, when asked whether it would be okay for protagonists to act according to their own preferences in the context of equal competing claims, few (21 percent) made categorically negative judgments of such behavior and even fewer (15–17 percent) reasoned about such a behavior as a moral transgression.

Just as 10-year-olds did not merely ignore the significance of autonomy, 17-year-olds were not merely selfish and unconcerned with friendships. Indeed, 100 percent judged that protagonists should attend to their friends' desires when their friends' desires were weightier. The finding that 17-year-olds sided with the protagonists in the equal conditions (65 percent) and with the friend in the unequal condition (100 percent) is particularly noteworthy given that the protagonists' trivial desire in the equal (L–L) and unequal (L–H) conditions were virtually identical (e.g., watching a TV show; going to the movies). Clearly, therefore, the friend's competing desire weighed heavily in their choice to prioritize or not prioritize the protagonist's goal.

As compared with the older children and adolescents, the thinking of five-year-olds was characterized by being fairly one-sided, as evidenced by the findings that only 5 percent referred in their reasons to both the protagonist's and the friend's concerns. Relatedly, only 19 percent suggested compromises, as compared with 36–41 percent of 10- and 17-year-olds. These findings are not surprising given young children's limited ability to simultaneously attend to conflicting components of complex social situations (Shaw & Wainryb, 2006; Wainryb & Brehl, 2006). They are also consistent with young children's primitive strategies for conflict resolution, which typically take the form of 'fight-or-flight' responses (Dunn, 2002, 2004). What was less expected was the finding that five-year-olds were so largely oriented to pleasing the friend rather than asserting the protagonist's personal choice. This finding is surprising not because some may have expected young children to be largely hedonistic (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Rather, given their difficulties co-ordinating two points of view and their one-sided approach to conflict resolutions, we had expected that five-year-olds would equivocate, sometimes siding with the friend, sometimes with the protagonist. These data suggest that when they are not directly involved in a conflict situation but rather are considering hypothetical scenarios, young children construe the friend's claim as more compelling, even though—and this is important to underscore again—they rarely view such claims as creating a moral obligation.

Indeed, a central finding of this study was that across the broad age range tested, children did not treat conflicts between competing personal preferences in moral terms or judged that characters that pursued their own preferences were doing something

morally wrong. This finding was consistent both across age groups and across conflicts. Whereas it may be argued that participants' generalized resistance to moralize these conflict situations merely reflects the predominantly individualistic orientation of middle-class Americans (e.g., Miller, 1998), such an interpretation would be inconsistent with this study's and related findings. In this study, for example, the majority of 5- and 10-year-olds in all conditions and all 17-year-olds in the unequal condition judged that the protagonist should satisfy the friend's rather than his or her own preference—a judgment that does not suggest an exclusive concern with the individual's choices and preferences. More generally, research (e.g., Killen & Turiel, 1998; Smetana et al., 1991, 2009), has shown that in situations in which personal desires are set in conflict with interpersonal responsibilities rather than with other personal desires, and especially in the context of close relationships, American participants not only give preference to interpersonal responsibility but make prescriptive and obligatory judgments about them. Thus, this finding in our study should not be taken to mean that friendships *never* impose moral obligations or that moral obligations cannot exist within friendships. Rather, this finding speaks about those very common instances in children's and adolescents' lives in which their own personal desires—more or less trivial, more or less weighty—conflict with the personal desires—more or less trivial or weighty—of their friends.

The importance of the finding that children and adolescents view these conflicts not in moral terms but in terms of reconciling two sets of equally legitimate desires should not be underestimated. If children had systematically thought of conflicts between friends' competing *personal* preferences as creating moral imperatives, their ability to maintain a sense of autonomy within a large segment of their most meaningful relationships would have been severely compromised. The need to maintain some degree of autonomy within close relationships is likely to be a deep psychological need rather than a cultural peculiarity (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975; Stern, 1985). Future research might investigate how such a need becomes manifested in different cultures.

As a whole, these data go a long way toward showing that the realm of personal jurisdiction is constructed not only in opposition to authority intrusion and regulation but also in relation to other people's—in this case, peers'—personal realm. Further, these data suggest that unlike the case of conflicts with parents and authority figures, working out the boundaries of the personal within relationships among equals, and perhaps especially friends, entails something other than resistance.

Unquestionably, children resist parental intrusion into what they consider their personal domain. Most parents of even young children, and certainly parents of adolescents, have heard their children assert their rights, when children think that their parents are attempting to regulate or curtail their personal choices. More poignantly, social situations in which persons with more decision-making power attempt to limit the personal choices of those in positions of lesser power frequently give rise to moral claims to fairness and rights (Wainryb & Turiel, 1994). Our data show clearly that such an assertion of rights does not arise in the context of competing personal preferences among friends. (It should be noted here that extreme care was taken in this regard; all the responses scored as 'autonomy' were scored a second time by a reliable scorer exclusively for the purpose of ascertaining whether children or adolescents ever talk about the protagonist as having 'a *right* to do what he/she wants.' They do not.) This is not surprising inasmuch as friends generally (and specifically in the design of the present study), do not attempt to restrict or regulate their friends' personal freedoms.

Rather, friends tend to make claims, directly or indirectly, on one another's time and attention.

Clearly, by adolescence, children are fairly comfortable with dealing with such claims. Quite systematically they assert personal choice in contexts in which the competing claims are comparable, relying both on concepts of autonomy and, importantly, also on concepts of friendship (as when they presume friends would understand or that things between friends work out in the long run). They also seem to know when not to do so, as when they recognize that their friends' claims or preferences are more important than their own.

Five- and 10-year-olds do not yet seem quite as comfortable asserting autonomy in the face of friends' competing personal claims. Their reasoning suggests there may be an earlier step in the process of drawing personal boundaries in the context of peer relations, namely the firming up of the understanding that pursuing one's personal goals is not the same as setting out to hurt others. This is reminiscent of research suggesting that young children distinguish between peers who have been victimized and 'cry-babies' (Leslie, Mallon, & DiCorcia, 2006; see also Shaw & Wainryb, 2006). For example, they recognize that stealing someone's cookie is morally wrong, but eating your own cookie is not wrong even if someone really wants it and cries because you ate it. Similarly, for 5- and 10-year-olds in our study, going along with one's friend's preferences may be friendlier and even desirable, but not doing so is not morally wrong.

The finding that, prior to adolescence, children think of their friends' claims as so compelling also underscores the distinctive significance of parent-child conflict at this age. Indeed, although conflicts with parents have been amply studied in adolescence (Smetana, 2005), our findings suggest that parent-child conflict might be uniquely important in middle childhood—a time when evidently conflicts with friends are still challenging for children in terms of their opportunities for working through boundaries of the personal. Future research directly comparing how children and adolescents reason about conflicts with friends and conflicts with parents might thus deepen our understanding of how youths construe a personal realm of action.

An additional factor to be explored in future research is the effect that power differentials within friendships may have on children's ability—at any age—to carve up personal space within peer contexts (von Salisch, 1996; Updegraff et al., 2004). The asymmetrical nature of some friendship relationships, resulting from children's varying social skills and personality characteristics (von Salisch, 1996), may play a role in whether children can assert their own preferences at least some of the time, or might tend to more habitually go along with the preferences of their more powerful friends (Bugental & Martorell, 1999). In the latter case, conflict situations involving competing preferences might give rise to moral concerns involving fairness and reciprocity, especially as children make decisions in light of their friendships' history. Unfortunately, although concerns about the long-term nature of friendship relationships were evident in some of our participants' responses (e.g., 'It is okay for him to go to the concert because he can bring a birthday gift and apologize to his friend tomorrow'), they were so infrequent as to make it implausible to examine this phenomenon further within the present dataset. The role of power differential is relatively well understood within the context of parent-child relationships (Smetana, 2005; Steinberg, 2001), but in that context, the effect of power is balanced by the fact that parent-child relationships are typically not terminated by conflict. Given that peer relations tend to be more vulnerable than parent-child relations, the potential

significance of power and status within friendships—especially as these weigh on the construction of personal space and autonomy—should not be underestimated.

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## Appendix. Competing Preference Stories: Versions 1 and 2 (females)

### Low-Low Condition

#### Version 1

This is a story about two friends, Sara and Jenny. Sara tells Jenny, 'I've got a new video game, I really want us to play it now,' and Jenny thinks to herself, 'I really wanted to go home and watch a movie by myself.'

#### Version 2

This is a story about two friends, Maggie and Rita. Maggie tells Rita, 'I've got this new movie *Walk the Line*, and I really want us to watch it now,' and Rita thinks to herself, 'I really wanted to go home and watch my favorite TV show by myself.'

### High-High Condition

#### Version 1

This is a story about two friends, Lisa and Debbie. Lisa tells Debbie, 'I'm having a small birthday party this Saturday evening, it's a special party, and I really want you to come,' and Debbie thinks to herself, 'I really wanted to play at the last soccer game of the season on Saturday and it's at the same time as the party.'

#### Version 2

This is a story about two friends, Cindy and Kate. Cindy tells Kate, 'I'm having a piano recital this Saturday evening and I get to invite just one friend, so I really want you to come,' and Kate thinks to herself, 'I really wanted to go to the *Greenday* concert on Saturday, it's the last day it's in town and it's at the same time as the recital.'

*Low-High Condition*

Version 1

This is a story about two friends, Trisha and Mary. Trisha tells Mary, 'I'm having a piano recital on Friday after school and I get to invite just one friend, so I really want you to come,' and Mary thinks to herself, 'Friday after school is when I always go to the movies, I really want to go to the movies like I always do.'

Version 2

This is a story about two friends, Becky and Donna. Becky tells Donna, 'I'm having a small birthday party on Friday after school, it's a special party, so I really want you to come,' and Donna thinks to herself, 'Friday after school is when I always go to the mall, I really want to go to the mall like I always do.'