



The role of negative expectation in children's observable social behaviours during middle childhood.

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INTRODUCTION

Social information processing (SIP): how individuals attend to, perceive, interpret, and respond to the social cues of others during social interaction¹

Successful social interactions are marked by² :

- Reciprocal sharing of information
- Fluid and engaged behaviour

Children's history of social experiences and reactions from social partners informs children's unique SIP **database**¹. The database:

- Applies previous experience and knowledge to current social situations
- Affects the way in which a child perceives and reacts to a social situation – can form biases in perceptions

Biased perceptions of social interactions can affect children's socio-emotional well-being:

- Negative social self-evaluation predicts later clinical social anxiety³
- Children that tend to catastrophize others' evaluations also experience greater social anxiety⁴

The current study examines how children's socio-cognitive biases affect their real-world social behaviours when engaging with others.

HYPOTHESES

1. How do children expect others to evaluate them in social situations?
2. Do children's negative expectation biases affect their own social behaviours during social interactions?
3. Do children's negative evaluation biases affect their partner's behaviours during social interactions?

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 65 9–11-year-olds (63.6% female; $M_{years} = 10.14$, $SD = .08$), participating in a wider study of temperament and social cognition in South-Western Ontario

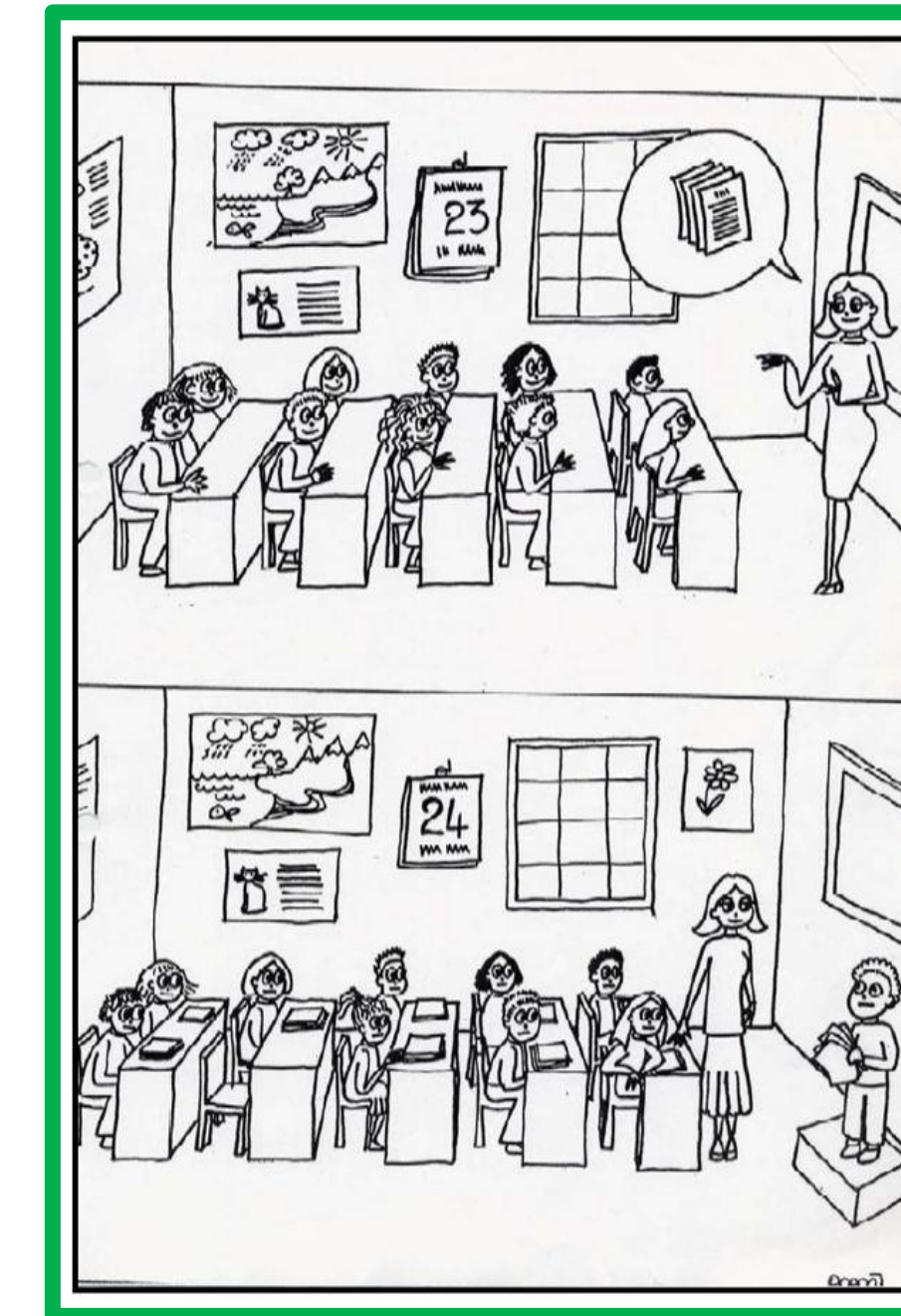
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METHODS

Visit 1

Mentalizing task⁵

- 15 ambiguous socio-evaluative scenarios with the prompt: "If this happened to you, what do you think other children would think about you?"
- Participant' selected from a multiple choice of negative, neutral, or positive responses
- Negative expectation bias = total negative responses - total correct responses



Visit 2

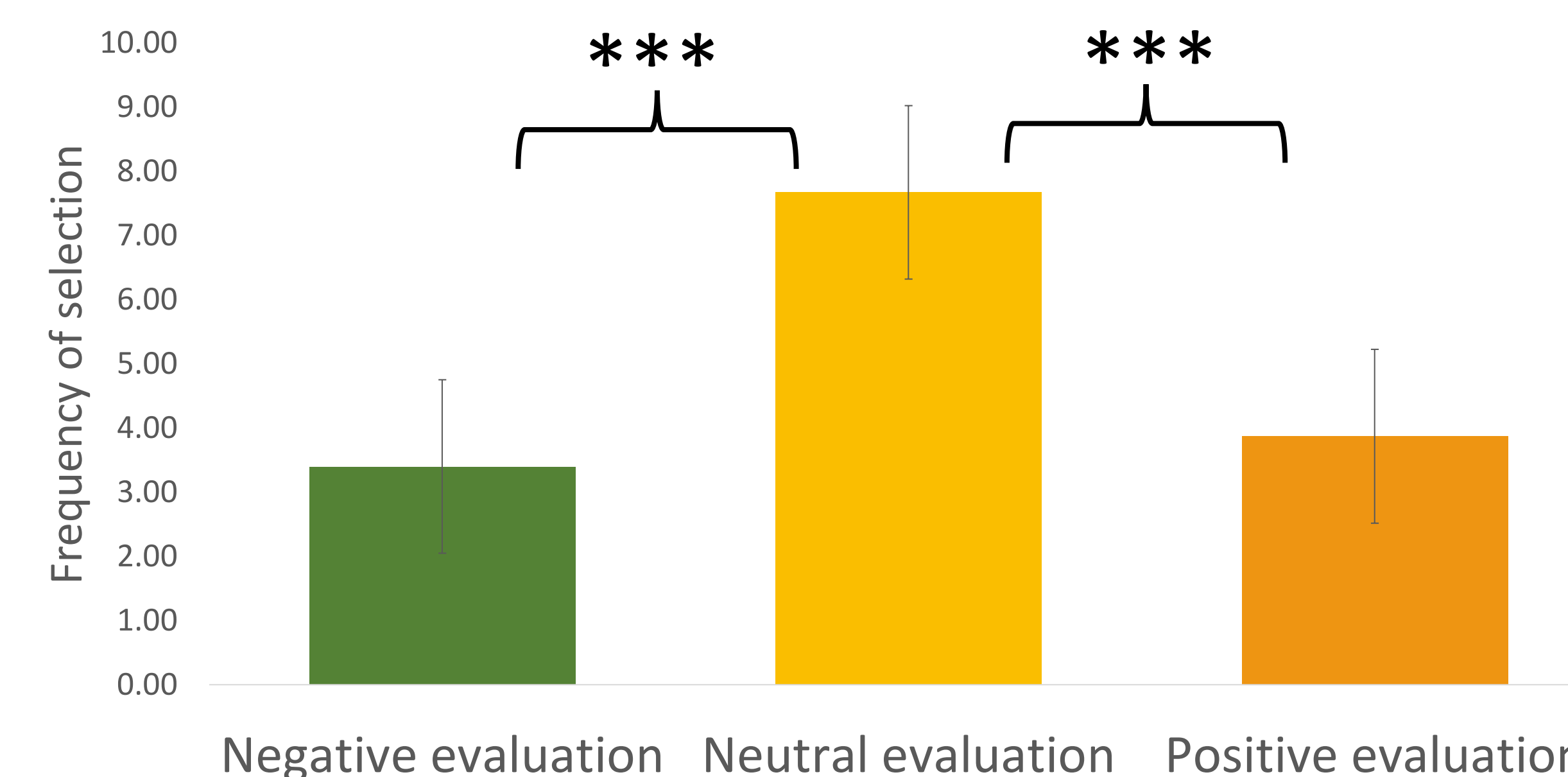
Peer Dyad: Get to Know You Task

- Participants paired with age and gender matched unfamiliar peer
- 5-minute interaction with no instructions from experimenter
- Behaviour coded using Mangold INTERACT software to quantify participants' levels of openness, social ease, and conversation (1=low, 5=high)
- Frequencies of seeks (asking for information) and shares (giving information) coded
- Composite *Social Engagement* score - all global scores and frequencies



RESULTS

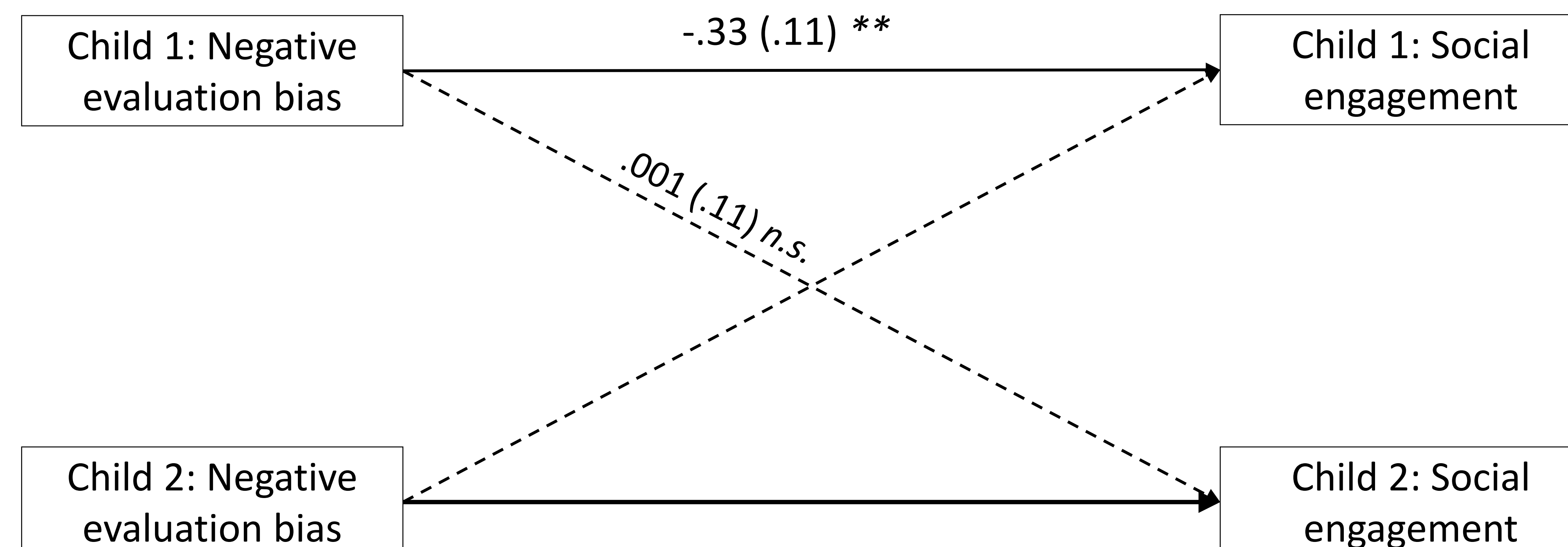
Research Question 1



Children were more likely to select neutral evaluation expectation responses versus negative or positive expectation evaluation responses

$$F(2, 180) = 314.16, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.34$$

Research Questions 2 and 3



Children's negative expectation biases were inversely associated with their own social engagement

- Higher negative evaluation bias predicting lower social engagement

However, children's negative expectation biases were not associated with their partner's social engagement

DISCUSSION & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In general, children selected more neutral evaluation responses than either negative or positive evaluation responses.

Children's negative expectations of others' evaluations predicts their social engagement during a dyadic task

There may be two pathways for this effect:

- **Self-protection:** children with negative expectation bias may predict that their social partner will judge them negatively, resulting in a protective withdrawal from interaction to avoid judgement from partner
- **Overwhelm:** children with negative expectation bias may be particularly overwhelmed by the stress of the task and find it difficult to engage with their social partner
- In both cases, the child may appear disengaged and disinterested, even while their internal cognitive state is highly preoccupied with the social situation at hand.

Future directions:

- Examine connection between mentalization tendencies and social behaviours in different social settings and with familiar versus unfamiliar social partners
- Examine the longitudinal effects of the findings in association with children's later socio-emotional wellbeing

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