

Children's Perceptions of Emotion Regulation Strategy Effectiveness: Emotional Context, Age, and Gender Differences

Sara F. Waters & Ross A. Thompson

Abstract

Children's understanding of effective strategies for emotion regulation is a key component of social competence. The current study used illustrated stories to assess 6- and 9-year old children's perceptions of strategy effectiveness for regulating anger and sadness. Children endorsed problem-solving more highly for anger, and venting and seeking adult support more highly for sadness. Younger children endorsed venting and doing nothing more highly than older children. Gender differences consistent with those found in the adult literature were obtained.

Introduction

- Emotion regulation (ER) is a significant achievement of childhood as it is integral to healthy development.
- Children's self-reported understanding of the efficacy of ER strategies is an under-studied aspect of ER development.
- Studies that have asked preschool children about the effectiveness of ER strategies suggest that they evaluate strategies differentially by emotion (Dennis et al., 2009).
- Adults evidence gender differences in ER style (e.g. Gross & John, 2004), but such differences in children's perceptions of ER have not been examined.
- The current study investigated perceptions of ER strategy effectiveness for anger versus sadness in two age groups of school-aged children and tested for gender differences in strategy endorsements.

Research Questions

- Do children perceive emotion regulation strategies as differentially effective for different negative emotions?
- Do children's perceptions of strategy effectiveness differ with age?
- Do children's perceptions of strategy effectiveness differ by gender?

Methods

Participants. 48 6-year-olds (25 girls) and 49 9-year-olds (24 girls).
Measures. In the negative emotion interview, children heard four emotion-eliciting stories (two anger, two sadness) in counterbalanced order. In accordance with a functionalist approach to emotion, anger stories involved a blocked goal while sadness stories involved a loss. Each story was told with a series of four picture card illustrations (Figure 1). Children were given eight cards depicting ER strategies and asked to imagine each strategy in place of the question mark and then rate each one on a 4-point Likert scale of "very unhelpful" to "very helpful". The strategies were Problem Solving, Seeking Adult Support, Seeking Peer Support, Cognitive Reappraisal, Distraction, Venting, Aggression, and Doing Nothing. Effectiveness ratings for each strategy were averaged over the two stories within each emotion condition.

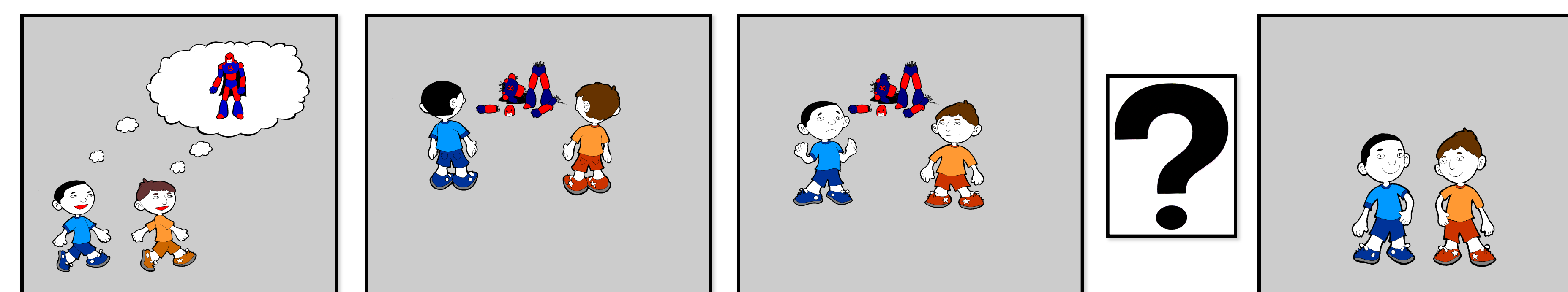


Figure 1. Example of sadness story illustrations

Results

- An 8 (strategy) x 2 (emotion) x 2 (age) x 2 (gender) mixed RM-ANOVA was conducted.
- There was a significant interaction effect for strategy and emotion, $F(7, 87) = 12.78, p < .001, \eta^2 = .51$. Problem-Solving was more highly endorsed for anger and Venting and Seeking Adult Support were more highly endorsed for sadness (Figure 2).
- There was a significant interaction effect for strategy and age, $F(7, 87) = 2.31, p = .03, \eta^2 = .16$. Venting and Doing Nothing were more highly endorsed by younger children than older children (Figure 3).
- There was a significant interaction effect for strategy and gender, $F(7, 87) = 2.54, p = .02, \eta^2 = .16$. Venting and Seeking Peer Support were more highly endorsed by girls than boys (Figure 4).

Discussion

- As seen in preschoolers, school-aged children evidence a **functionalist understanding of emotion regulation**, endorsing some strategies differentially for anger versus sadness.
- Developmentally, **younger children endorse less constructive strategies** than older children, who have abandoned these from their repertoire.
- Our finding that **girls endorse emotional expression and social support strategies more than boys** is some of the earliest evidence for the gendered pattern of regulatory styles seen in adolescents and adults.

Contact Info: sara.waters@ucsf.edu

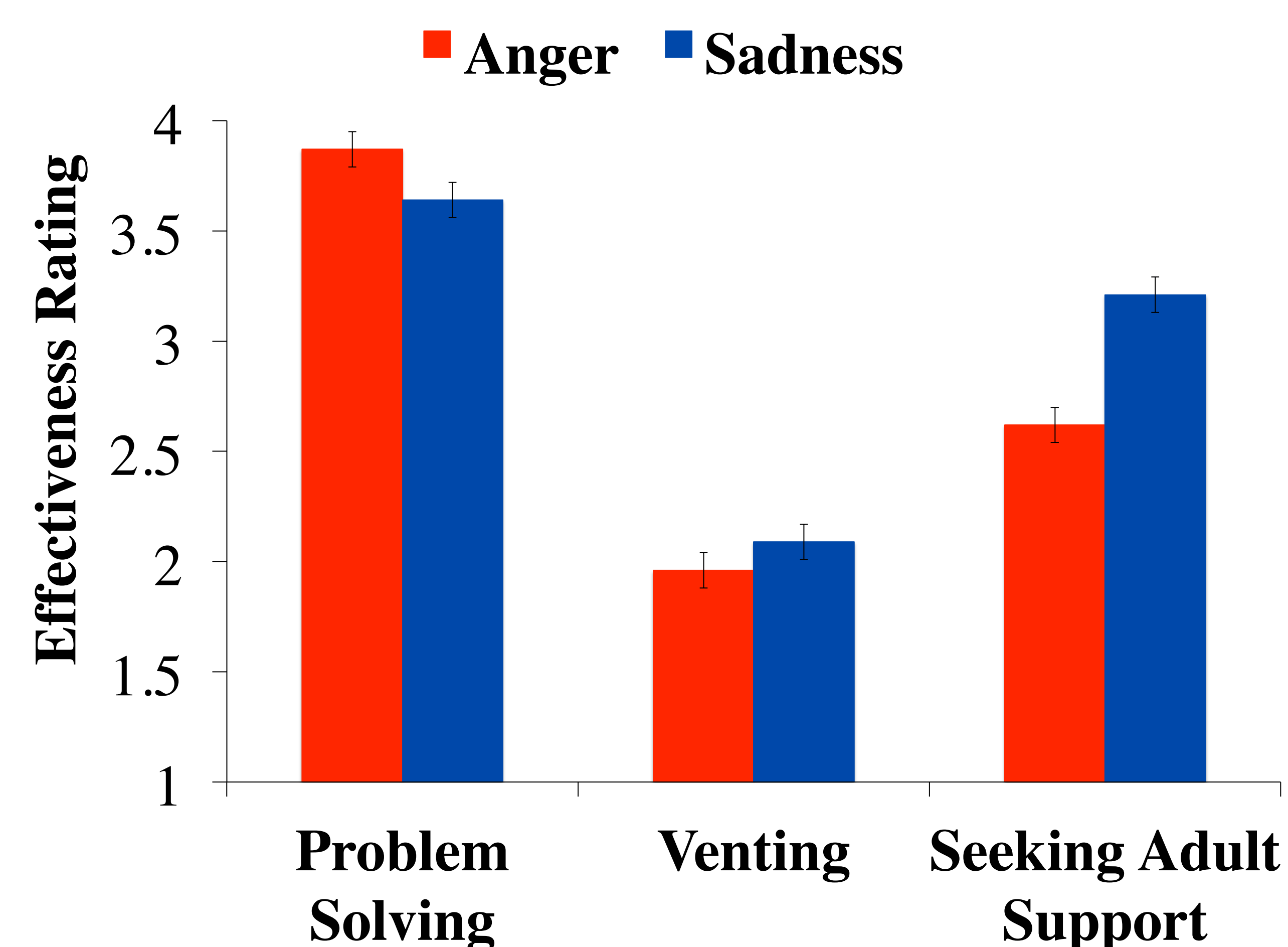


Figure 2. Strategy effectiveness by emotion

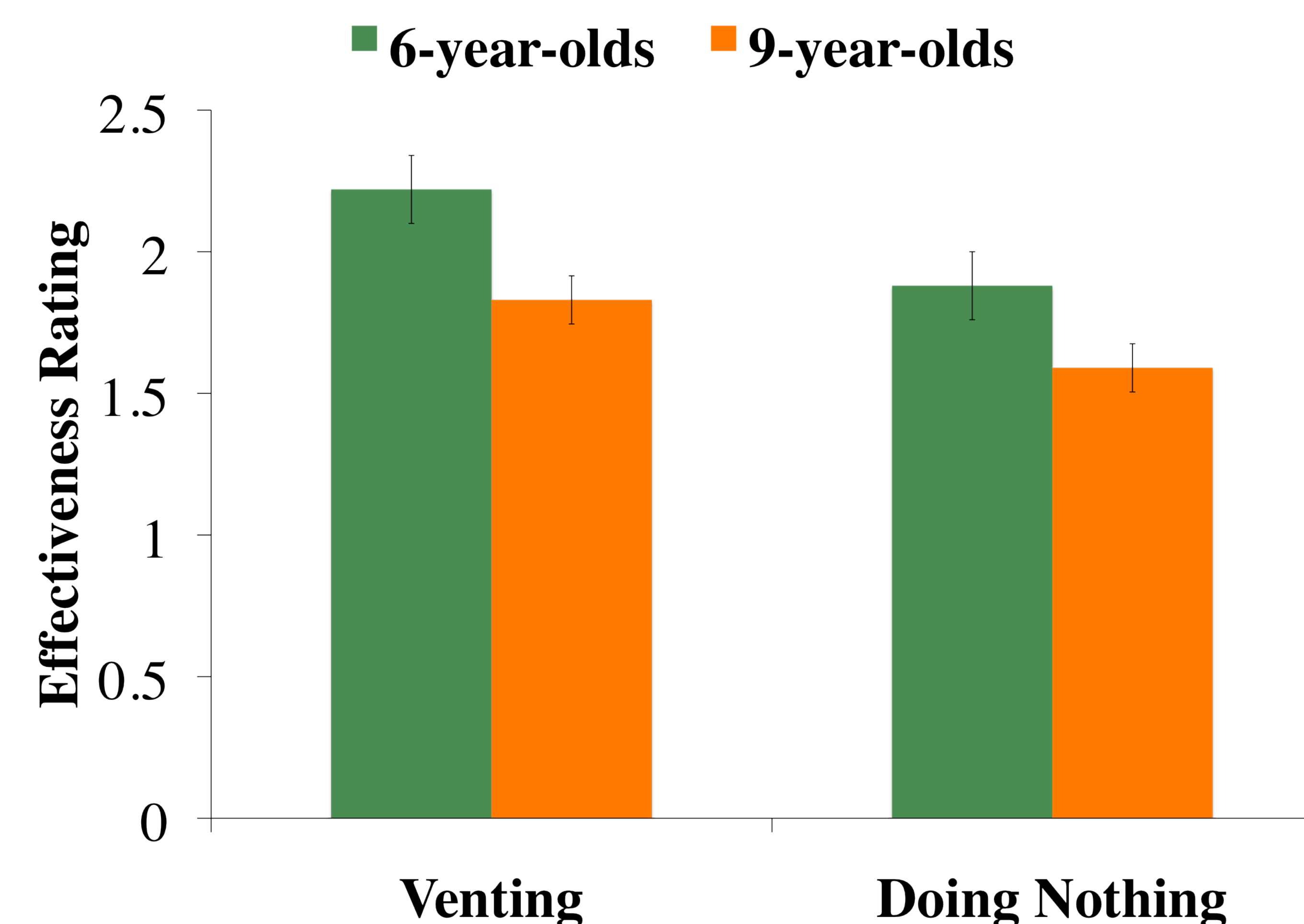


Figure 3. Strategy effectiveness by age

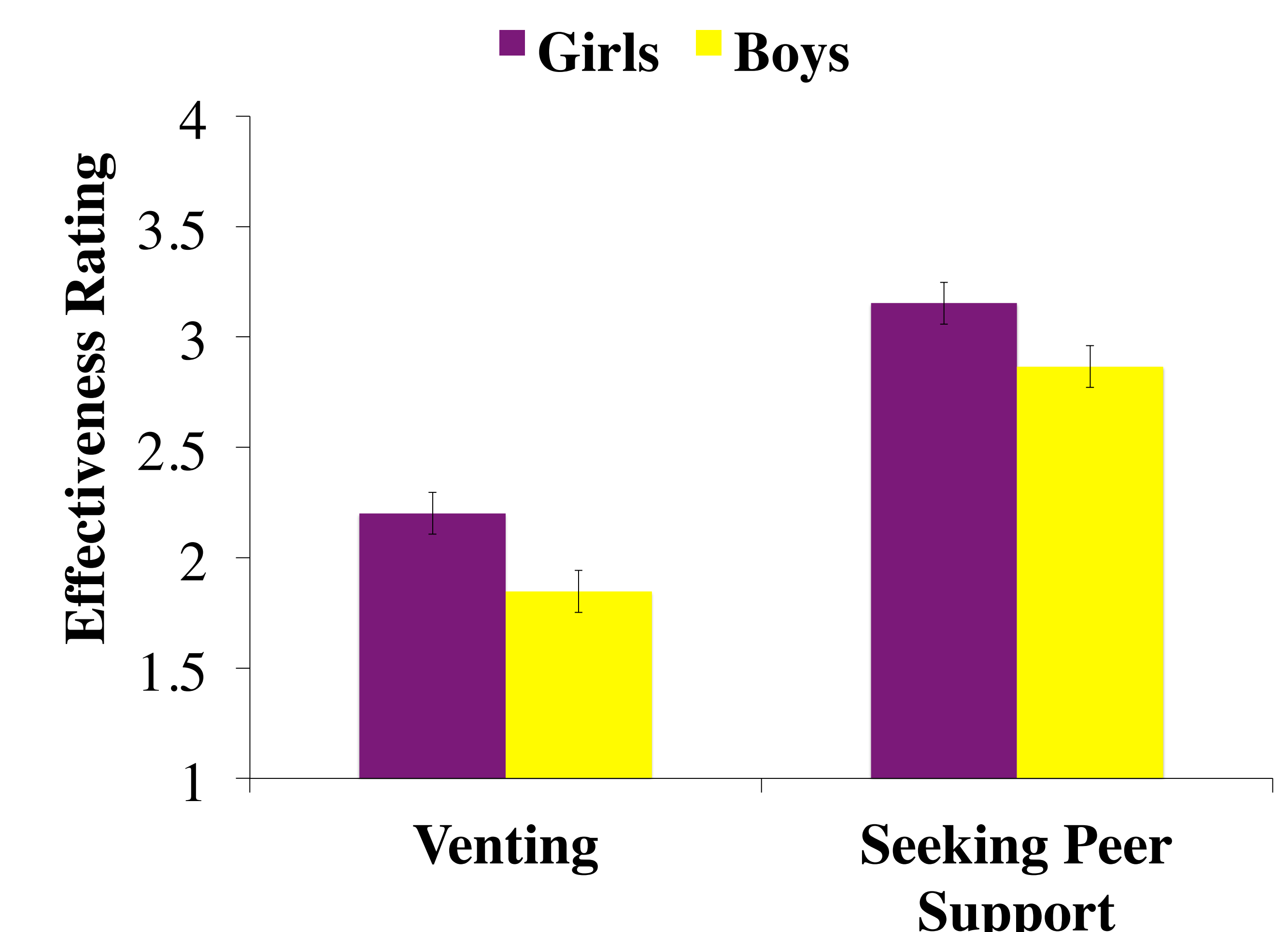


Figure 4. Strategy effectiveness by gender