

# "What Do You Want to Do Next?": Preschoolers' Emotional Responses to Peer Conflict Situations



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## Introduction

- Peer conflict is a normative occurrence in preschool classrooms and children must navigate these situations in an appropriate manner to promote peer acceptance and friendship.
  - Children who respond to conflict with aggression are more likely to experience social and academic difficulties (e.g., Crick et al., 2006).
- Emotional experiences before, during, and after peer conflict exert influence on children's responses to the conflict (Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000).
  - Children who experience anger in response to peer conflict are more likely to choose aggressive responses (e.g., Denham et al., 2013).
  - Children may also attribute previously triggered negative feelings to peer conflict and react to the conflict based on their current mood (Forgas & Eich, 2013).
- Mindfulness training has may be a way to improve children's social behavior because it influences the ability to disengage emotionally from difficult situations and promotes the experience of positive emotion (Zelazo & Lyons, 2012).
- Cognitively taxing situations may induce a negative change in emotion that could adversely affect children's responses to peer conflict.

In current study...

- Mindfulness training was hypothesized to produce a greater number of competent responses to peer conflict, while taxing training would produce the lowest number of competent responses.
- We further expected that emotion ratings after would relate to the number of competent responses chosen.

## Method

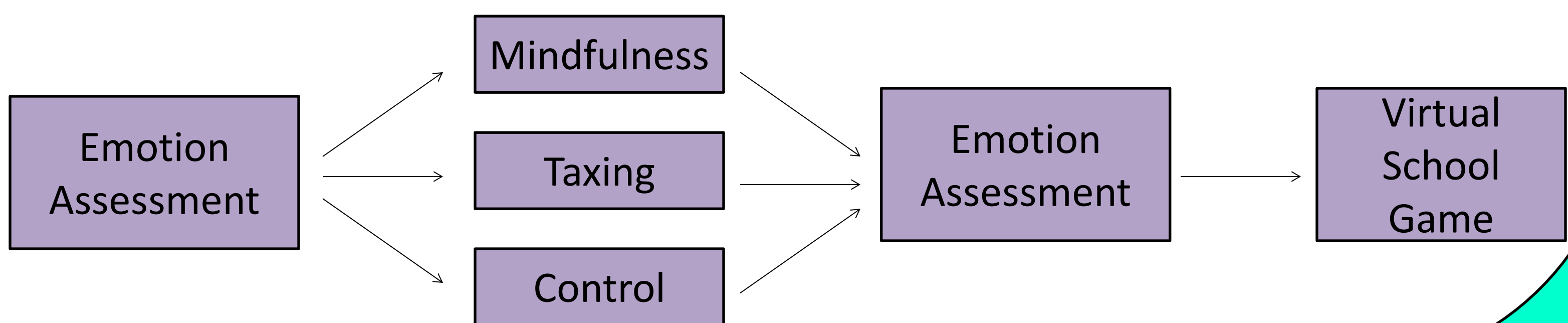
### Participants:

- One hundred and eight 5-year-old children ,  $M$  age = 64.41months,  $s = 3.54$ , 53 girls

### Materials:

- **Emotion assessment:** Participants pointed to one of five sex-matched faces (Tottenham et al., 2009) ranging in emotion from "very happy" to "very angry" (Figure 1).
- **Peer conflict assessment:** Virtual School Game (VSG)- an adapted version of the Challenging Situations Task (Denham et al., 2013) presented on a laptop computer (Figure 2).
  - Participants responded to six conflict situations (e.g., peer knocking over block tower) and three benign situations (e.g., peer asking to play).
  - Participants were given four response options to choose from:
    - Two aggressive response options: physical aggression (e.g., kick your peer), verbal aggression (e.g., yell at you peer)
    - Two competent response options: avoidant (e.g., go do something else), prosocial (e.g., ask your peer to help you rebuild your tower)

### Procedure:



## Method (cont.)

- **Mindfulness training:** Participants completed the following four contemplative tasks (Boguszewski & Lillard, 2015):
  - *Gummy Bear Task* – Participants answered questions about the perceptual characteristics of a gummy bear while they looked at, held in hand, held in mouth, and chewed the gummy bear for a total of five minutes.
  - *Line Walking Task* – Participants walked around a circle for two minutes, putting one front in front of the other while keeping their feet on the circle and thinking about how their foot felt when they put weight on it.
  - *Tummy Breath Task* – Participants held a stuffed animal on their stomachs and watched it go up and down while breathing in and out for two minutes.
  - *Mindful Listening Task* – Participants listened to a meditation bell with their eyes closed for two minutes and raised their hand when they could no longer hear the bell.
- **Taxing training:** Participants completed the same four tasks that were used in mindfulness training, but without the guided directions used to focus attention.
- **Control condition:** Components of all four mindfulness tasks were included (e.g., they ate a gummy bear and heard the meditation bell), but participants were able to play with a small box of toys throughout the training period.



Figure 1. Emotion scale used for girl participants

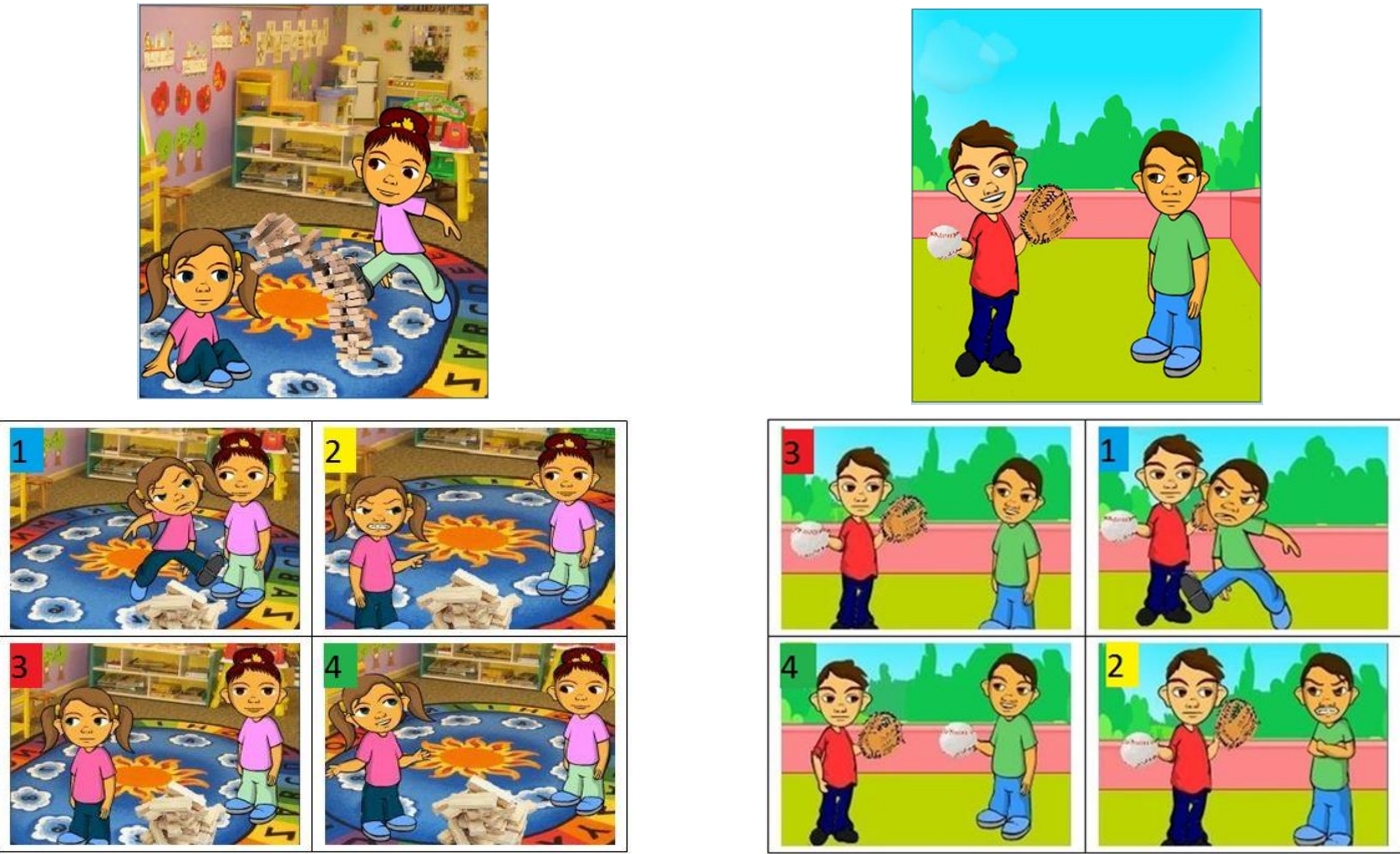


Figure 2. Example situation and response pictures for a conflict (left) and benign (right) situation

## Results

**Post-Training Emotion Ratings:** A one-way ANOVA revealed that training condition significantly affected post-training emotion ratings,  $F(2, 106) = 3.52, p = .03$  (Figure 3).

- Children in the Taxing condition endorsed lower post-training emotion ratings ( $M = 3.75, SE = 0.21$ ) compared to those in the Control condition ( $M = 4.41, SE = 0.15$ ). Mindfulness did not differ from either condition ( $M = 4.03, SE = .16$ ).
- Post-training emotion ratings were only significantly correlated with competent responding in the Taxing condition,  $r(107) = .38, p = .02$ .

## Results (cont.)

**Competent Responses:** A one-way ANOVA revealed that training condition significantly affected the number of competent responses chosen on the VSG,  $F(2, 107) = 3.12, p = .05$  (Figure 4).

- Children in the Taxing condition picked fewer competent responses ( $M = 7.00, SE = 0.49$ ) compared to those in the Control condition ( $M = 8.29, SE = 0.20$ ). Mindfulness did not differ from either condition ( $M = 7.78, SE = .33$ ).

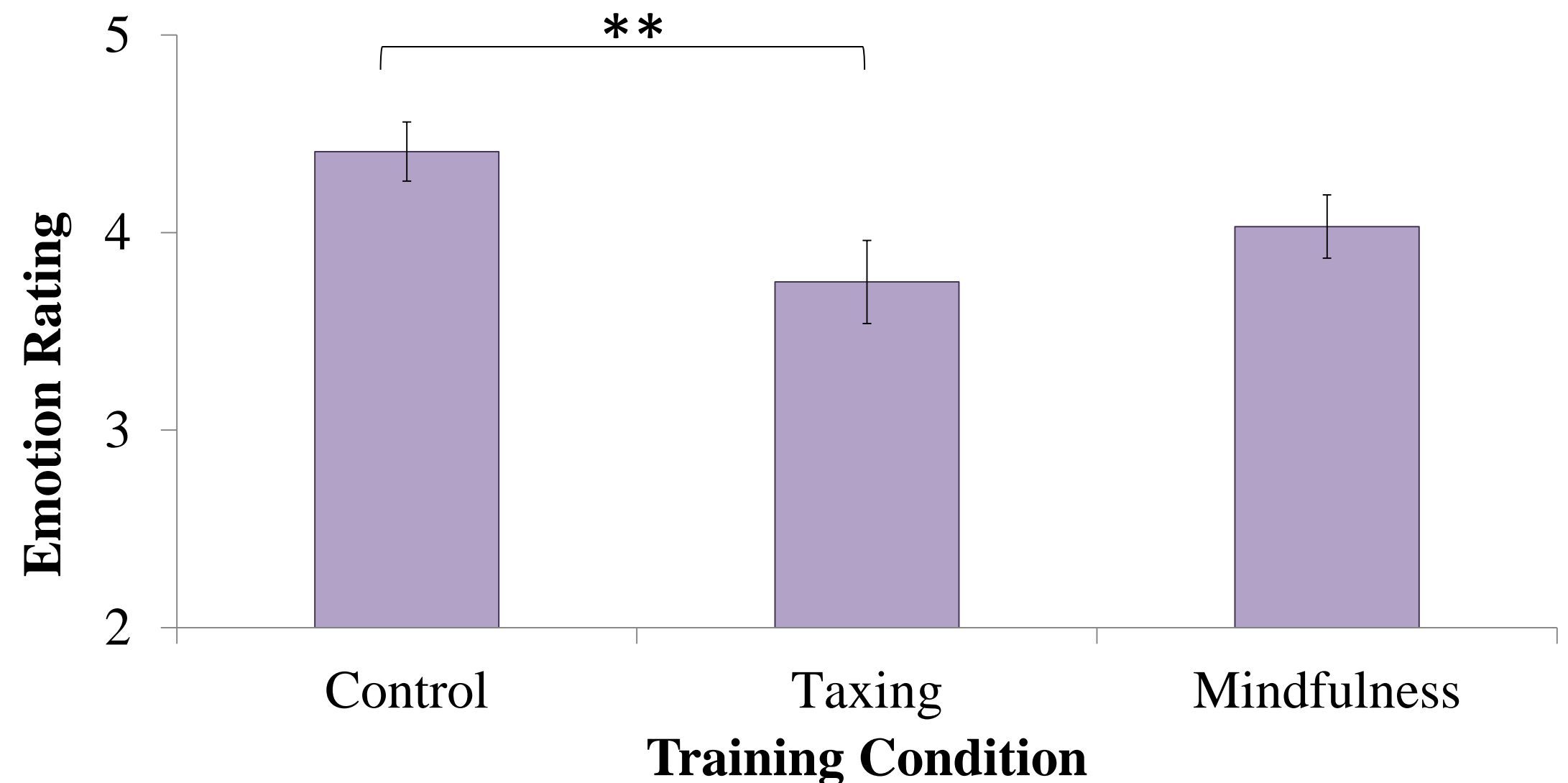
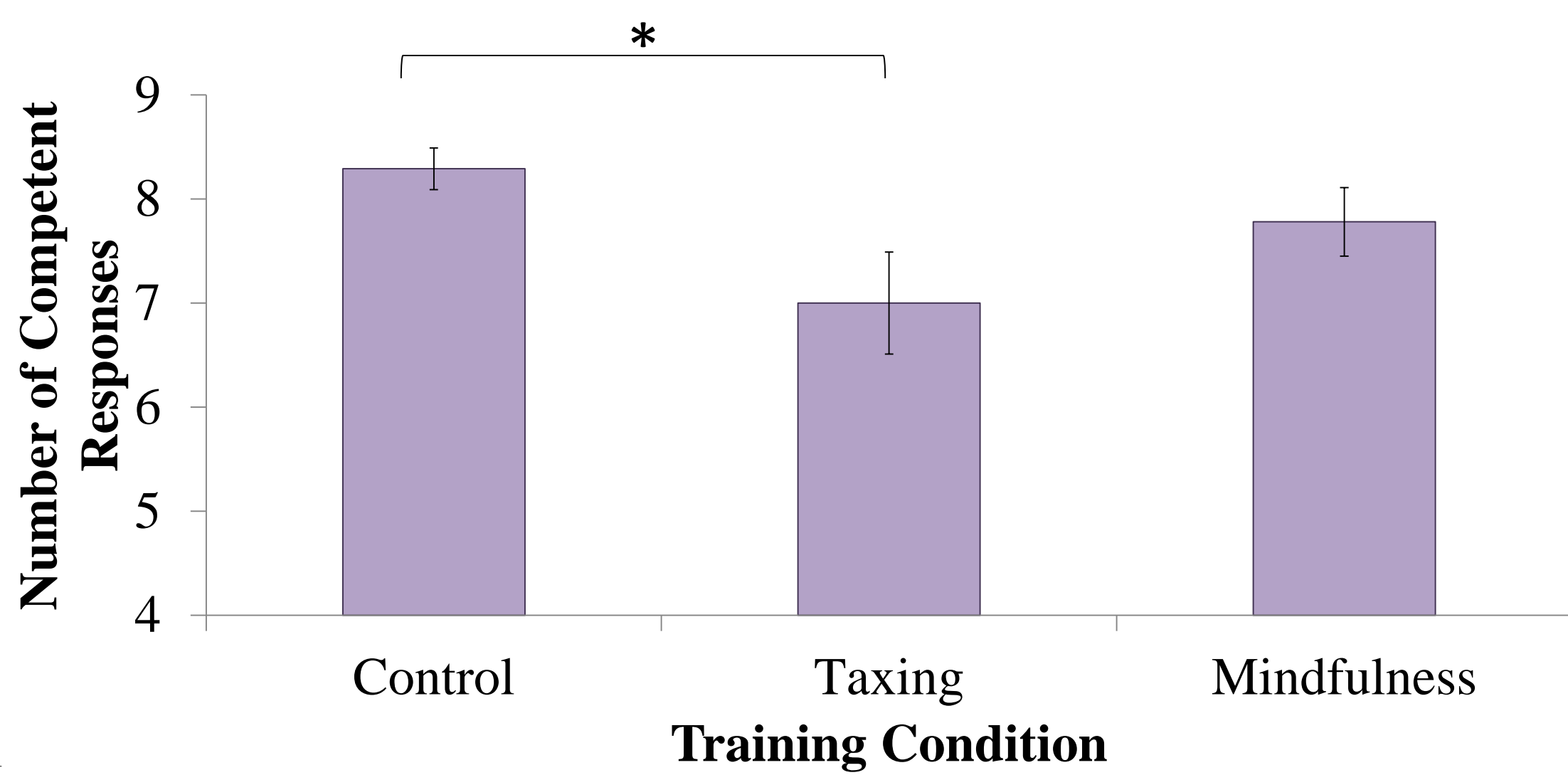


Figure 3. Means and standard errors of post-training emotion ratings by training condition



Note.  
\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

Figure 4. Means and standard errors of competent responses on the VSG by training condition

## Discussion

- Participants in the Taxing condition selected the fewest competent responses and endorsed lowest post-training emotion ratings, consistent with previous research on the effects of mood on social decision making (e.g., Denham et al., 2013; Forgas & Eich, 2013).
- Children in the Mindfulness condition did not significantly differ in the number of competent responses or post-training emotion ratings from either those in the Control or the Taxing conditions.
  - This could have been due to a number of different reasons, including the brevity of the mindfulness training or differences in the training task order. The gummy bear task was last in the Taxing and Control conditions, but first in Mindfulness.
  - It is also possible that competent responding was the prepotent response for the participants in our sample and thus they could not further benefit from mindfulness training.

## References

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