

Coparenting Within the Family System: Review of Literature

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ABSTRACT

Family systems theory which postulates that family-level processes affect children's development over and above any individual subsystem, has changed the emphasis in research on children and families. Previous research of child development in families focused on associations with individual parent-child relationships or on connections between the marital relationships and child adjustment. In contrast, researchers have recently articulated distinctive family group dynamic, coparenting, which uniquely predicts children's social and emotional adaptation, over and above the effects of parenting and marital processes. This article reviews the literature on recent coparenting research and studies linking this family relationship to important indicators of children's development and adjustment. The implications for clinical practice and directions for future research are discussed.

Key words: coparenting, family dynamics, child adjustment

Introduction

Family system theory¹ which postulates that the family is an organized whole consisting of subsystems (e.g. marital, parental, and sibling subsystem) that are interdependent, has changed the emphasis in research on children and families. Previous research of child development in families focused on associations with individual parent-child relationships² or on connections between the marital relationships and child adjustment^{3,4}. According to family system theory, family-level processes affect children's development over and above any individual subsystem, and interactions at the family level are a unique social force that goes beyond the sum of its parts⁵. The importance of investigating interaction at the family level is heightened by evidence that parent and child behavior changes between the dyadic and triadic (mother-father-child) context. Gjerde⁶ found that the quality of the father-son relationship diminished in the context of mothers, whereas the quality of mother-son interaction improved as mothers and sons moved from dyadic to family contexts.

Increasing evidence suggests that one family relationship particularly important for children's functioning is the coparenting relationship⁷⁻¹⁰. Broadly defined, coparenting refers to the degree of coordination and support between adults rearing a child together⁷. The coparen-

ting subsystem is an important part of the family system that is related to the marital and parent-child subsystems and to children's later development¹¹⁻¹⁵.

This article reviews the literature on recent coparenting research and studies linking this family relationship to important indicators of children's development and adjustment. The implications for clinical practice and directions for future research are discussed.

History and Conceptualization of Coparenting

Research on coparenting dynamics have begun in the 1970s and 1980s, after the introduction of family system theory and the increase in systematic study of fatherhood due to the societal shift toward more equitable sharing of parenting tasks by mothers and fathers¹⁶, and in turn, a study of interparental interactions and their relation to child development¹⁷. Moreover, research indicated that marital disagreements focused on parenting affected children more than other forms of marital conflict (e.g., arguments over family finances)¹⁸. Coparenting research initially focused on divorced parents' ability to work together in parenting¹⁹. More recently research-

ers have begun to examine coparenting in intact families and how a couple's ability to work together as parents can affect parents and children^{7,9-12}. Most of what is currently known about coparenting alliances within families is owed to studies of nuclear families headed by a husband/father and a wife/mother.

Coparenting is typically defined as the quality of coordination between adults in their parental roles²⁰. To coparent individuals do not have to be married, they only have to share the responsibility of raising the child. It can involve any set of adults participating jointly in childrearing (children's two biological parents, whether married, divorced, or never married; mother-grandmother dyads; same sex couples). Coparenting has been characterized by numerous additional terms, including »shared parenting«²¹, »parenting partnership«²², and »parenting alliance«²³.

Coparenting has been conceptualized in different ways in the literature. Although several models of coparenting have been proposed^{10,24,25}, researchers agree that coparenting is multidimensional construct including agreement on childrearing principles, division of child-care labor, and mutual support. Coparenting behavior includes supportive and hostile-competitive dimensions, as well as discrepancies in parental involvement^{24,26,27}. Coparenting may encompass both overt (e.g., hostile behavior between parents in front of their child) and covert (e.g., one parent disparaging the other parent when alone with the child) parental behaviors and parents' perceptions of their parenting alliance⁷.

Family systems theory gives special importance to the coparenting relationship, referring to it as the family's executive system whose effective functioning provides children with a sense of predictability, stability, and security in the family^{1,8}. To provide such predictability and stability, it is important that coparenting partners support one another and be »on the same page« with respect to family rules, practices, and discipline. McHale has underscored partner cooperation and coparental warmth as aspects of supportive coparenting. Cooperation reflects interactions when one parent repeats the same request as the other parent, and warmth occurs when parents express moderate to high levels of positive affect during interaction²⁴. Unsupportive coparenting includes interactions in which adults are either inconsistent in parenting (e.g., discrepant levels of parent-child engagement) or undermine their partner's childrearing efforts (e.g., competition for children's attention, interrupting the other parent, undermining the other parent's agenda, or disagreeing with the other parent in the child's presence)^{24,28}.

The initiation of coparenting is broadly defined with the birth of the first child in a family. However, some researchers suggest that expectant parents are able to develop mental representation of themselves as parents and coparents^{20,29}. Prebirth parental discussions on issues that are central to coparenting and their mental representations are predictors of subsequent coparenting. Coparenting as an explicit dimension occurs only af-

ter the child's birth. Several studies have addressed the stability of coparenting behavior over time. Some researchers report that there is stability in triadic family patterns during infancy^{30,31}. Other suggest that when children enter toddlerhood, there is a disruption in family patterns. McHale and Rasmussen¹² found that in families showing coparenting difficulty during triadic family interactions at the end of the child's first year, fathers subsequently reported engaging less often in behavior promoting family integrity, while mothers reported more disparagement of fathers to the children three years later. Schoppe-Sullivan et al.³² also reported moderate stability from infancy to the preschool years, linking supportive and undermining coparenting behavior observed during a 5-minute play assessment at 6 months with like behavior during a 10-minute play assessment at 3 years. Gable et al.²⁸ have found that coparenting behaviors remained unchanged from the age of the child 15 to 21 months suggesting that disrupted family patterns by the end of toddlerhood fall into place and become stable. Because the concept of coparenting is new, most of what is learned about stability and development of coparental alliances has involved families with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Findings that the experiences of coparenting are stable within developmental periods, but become less stable during transitions from one period to another as parents encounter different challenges are consistent with the family systems concepts of homeostasis and change within family⁶. As families attempt to adapt to transitions, multiple subsystems are affected and each subsystem affects one another causing new patterns to emerge within the family³³. Given the changing demands of a growing child, the particular coparenting behaviors reflecting supportive and undermining coparenting processes are somewhat different between developmental periods^{30,32}. Further research on the stability of coparenting behavior over other developmental periods is important because coparenting issues that arise when a child is a preadolescent or adolescent may be somewhat different than those that arise at earlier periods.

Coparenting and Marital Relationship

Coparenting and marriage appear to be related but distinct constructs within the family system for several reasons³⁴. First, the critical difference lies in the focus, the coparenting relationship centers around raising the child, whereas the marital relationship focuses on a range of other issues (e.g. finances, emotional intimacy). Second, most often, the marital relationship predates the coparenting relationship and each follows its own trajectory of development. The quality of marriage before the child's birth does set the stage for coparenting³⁵. After the child's birth, couples who continue to experience marital satisfaction also are more likely to experience coparenting satisfaction. In the coparenting relationship, partners develop their bond as parents and are able to continue this relationship even if the marriage dissolves^{32,36}. Third, coparenting and marital relationships dif-

fer in that the two relationships are based on different family subsystems (mother-father-child versus husband-wife). Furthermore, several studies have shown that coparenting behavior exerts a unique influence on children's adjustment, over and above the influence of marital behavior^{11,12}.

Recent investigations suggest that these two relationships are reciprocally related³⁷. Katz and Gottman³⁸ found that marital hostility was associated with increased hostile-competitive coparenting, lower levels of interactivity and responsiveness between spouses, and increased father withdrawal from children. Kitzman³⁹ reported that higher levels of negativity expressed during couple discussion »spilled over« into subsequent triadic interactions, which were characterized by more negative family processes, including less supportive coparenting. Gable et al.⁴⁰ suggested that low levels of supportive coparenting could influence marital quality. Supporting this, Belsky and Hsieh⁴¹ found marriages that deteriorated over time had higher initial levels of unsupportive coparenting.

Coparenting and Parenting (Parent-child Relationship)

Just as the coparenting relationship can be disentangled from the marital relationship, so can coparenting be differentiated from parent-child dyadic relationships within the family system^{1,35}. Evidence for the influence of parenting and parent-child relationships on child adjustment abounds², but increasing evidence suggests that coparenting makes an independent contribution to child adjustment, beyond the influence of parenting^{13-15,35}. Therefore, coparenting is not merely extension of parent-child relationships¹¹ and represents a separate sphere of influence on child functioning and the family system^{42,43}.

The results of several investigations have shown that coparenting mediates the association between marital quality and parenting^{10,15,44}. Further, research indicates that the coparenting relationship is more powerfully and proximally related to parenting, the parent-child relationship, and child adjustment than other aspects of the couple relationship⁴⁵. Parental self-efficacy may be a crucial link between coparenting and parenting performance⁴⁶. Conflict within coparenting relationship has been associated with heightened parental distress and impaired parenting abilities⁴⁷. On the other hand, the coparenting support may contribute to the parent's increased parental efficacy which has been linked to enhanced parental sensitivity and warmth and ultimately enhanced child adjustment⁴⁶. Through the mediating role of parental efficacy, the coparenting relationship may also influence behavioral management competence (undercontrolling/withdrawal vs. overcontrolling/harsh parenting) with different consequences for children (externalizing vs. internalizing problems)⁴⁸. Another important mechanism through which coparenting affects parent-child relationship may be individual adjustment of each parent.

Consistent with findings that individual psychological functioning is connected with support received in close relations⁴⁹, linkages between coparenting and individual parental adjustment have been found³⁶.

Coparenting, Family Process, and Family Structure

Several studies have examined coparenting in relation to whole-family processes. High levels of hostile-competitive coparenting and low levels of family harmony during infancy were associated with higher levels of teacher-reported hostile-aggressive behavior 3 years later while greater discrepancies in coparenting involvement were associated with teachers' ratings of more anxious and fearful child behavior¹². Brody and Flor⁵⁰ measured the associations between youth adjustment and coparenting in rural African-American families and found that harmonious family interactions and youth self-regulation mediated the association between parents' perceptions of received support from their spouse and adolescents' well-being. Schoppe et al.²⁷ found that supportive coparenting techniques and more adaptive family structures (i.e. balanced alliances and high family cohesiveness) were related to less externalizing behavior problems. On the other hand, undermining coparenting was linked to an increase in externalizing behavior problems only under conditions of high negative affect. Thus, the effects of certain aspects of the family (e.g., coparenting) on child functioning may depend on other aspects of the family (e.g., family affective processes and family structure). Certainly, more work focusing on whole-family processes related to coparenting is needed.

Coparenting as a Mediator

Coparenting is influenced by individual, family, and environmental factors and in turn it influences relevant outcomes, child adjustment in particular. Therefore, coparenting plays a central role in the family systems as a mediator of influence from other factors to outcomes^{10,15,25}.

Several researchers have proposed that children's characteristics may be related to coparenting. Margolin et al.¹⁰ suggested that coparenting likely depends on the age and the gender of offspring. In addition, Feinberg²⁵ suggested that the parents whose offspring have easy temperaments will have an easier time coparenting than the parents whose offspring have more difficult temperaments. The coparenting literature, however, has not found much evidence supporting the notion of child effects. Stright and Bales⁴² found that preschool children's age, gender, and temperament were not related to observed coparenting and suggested that child characteristics are less important than parent characteristics for coparenting quality. Research indicates that individual parent characteristics, ranging from cognitions (e.g., parental beliefs) to more affective features (e.g., depression, hostility) and personality traits (flexibility and self-control) affect parents' ability to cooperate in childrearing

and family management and may be important contributors to coparental alliance over and above the effects of marital quality^{36,37}.

The most important family factor influencing coparenting relations is the dyadic-level overall marital relationship⁴⁰. Although the quality of the overall marital relationship and coparenting are probably reciprocally related³⁷, the salience of coparenting for child outcomes is in its mediating role of the effects of marriage on parenting experiences^{10,15}.

Environmental, extrafamilial factors also influence coparenting relations. High levels of environmentally-influenced stress – whether derived from pressure at work, financial difficulty, extended family relations, or other sources – typically undermine individuals' functioning, leading to less ability to tolerate frustration and more negative interpersonal relationships⁵¹ and consequently resulting in less supportive, more conflictual coparenting⁹.

Coparenting and Child Adjustment

Coparenting quality, whether assessed via self-report or observational methodologies, has reliably shown systematic associations with a number of important indicators of children's socioemotional adjustment. Numerous studies have shown that coparenting predicts unique variance in child well-being over and above the effects of general marital adjustment and conflict^{11,12}, and maternal and paternal parenting^{13–15}.

The mechanisms linking coparenting processes with child adjustment are probably multiple and complex; perhaps ineffective coparenting frustrates individual parenting efforts⁴⁰, resulting in child maladjustment²⁶ or coparenting processes may affect children's adjustment through their sense of family security^{1,4}. When children experience warmth and cohesion in their family, they attain a sense of emotional security and self-confidence, which promotes children's well-being and protects them from developing adjustment problems. Consistent with these theories, researchers have found that supportive coparenting processes are associated with prosocial peer behavior⁵², academic competence⁵³ and absence of clinical symptoms during early childhood³¹. Among school-age children, supportive coparenting was associated with children's attention, academic¹³ and overall competence⁵⁰.

In contrast, interparental discord or inconsistency between parents is understood to promote feelings of helplessness, threat, and self-blame among children. Such attributions, in turn, are believed to lead to a sense of emotional insecurity and heightened negative emotional arousal which may interfere with children's abilities to modulate emotions and behaviors effectively, resulting in such problems as externalizing and internalizing symptoms^{4,47}. In keeping with these theories, researchers have found that unsupportive coparenting is linked with young children's inattentiveness and low persistence⁷, externalizing^{26,50,53} and internalizing behavior problems^{12,53}. A study examining coparenting in families with school-aged children revealed linkages between observed coparental

conflict and concurrent internalizing and externalizing symptomatology for boys, while interparental differences in warmth and investment were linked to more internalizing problems in girls⁵⁴. Studies of coparenting among adolescents showed that coparenting conflict predicted adolescent antisocial behavior but not depressive symptoms^{14,55}, although inconsistency in parenting (not coparenting per se) was related to higher levels of internalized distress⁵⁶.

Coparenting Interventions

The recognition that the coparenting relationship plays a central, causal role in guiding the course of family relationships and thus in influencing the well-being of both parents and children provides a potentially important direction for intervention programs for enhancement of family functioning and child outcomes. Margolin¹⁰ has proposed that coparenting represents a risk mechanism, whereas general marital conflict or marital quality may represent a risk indicator. Prevention programs should target the risk mechanism rather than a factor that may merely be a marker of risk⁴⁵.

Because studies of the determinants and consequences of coparenting are a relatively recent phenomenon, there is little evidence regarding the ability of psychosocial intervention to effect positive change in coparenting, and consequently in parent-child relationship and child adjustment. Philip and Carolyn Cowan described a couple group intervention specifically concerned with coparenting dilemmas of families with preschool-aged children. Among the benefits of this intervention were greater marital satisfaction, more effective father-child interaction, and significant improvements for children on a number of academic and social adjustment indicators^{57–58}. Feinberg and Kan investigated the ability of the psychosocial prevention program implemented through child-birth education programs to enhance the coparental relationship, parental mental health, the parent-child relationship, and infant emotional and physiological regulation. The results of this first randomized controlled trial suggest that it is possible to foster positive coparenting among first-time parents by utilizing a universal psychosocial program, but also indicate significant program positive effects on maternal depression and anxiety, distress in the parent-child relationship, and even on infant regulation⁵⁹. These findings support the view that coparenting is a potentially malleable intervention target that may influence family relationships as well as parent and child well-being. In future, more controlled clinical studies substantiating the potential value of focused coparenting interventions, both during the transition to parenthood and during other developmental periods, have yet to be completed.

Conclusion

At present, it seems clear that coparenting dynamics are a unique family phenomenon and socialization force in children's lives. Most of what is currently known about

coparenting within families is owned to studies conducted in the Western developed countries. To date, little is known about coparenting processes in families beyond the nuclear, two-parent family unit. Further research of the meaning, developmental significance, and differences of such dynam-

ics in a diversity of family configurations (step-families, grandparent-headed families, adoptive families), ethnicities, and social status groups is needed. There will certainly be some refinements to the existing knowledge base and perhaps also many new findings in the years ahead.

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USKLAĐENOST RODITELJA U ODGOJU U OBITELJSKOM SISTEMU: PREGLED LITERATURE

SAŽETAK

Sistemska teorija obitelji prema kojoj je značenje obiteljskih procesa za razvoj djeteta veće i nadilazi značenje individualnih podsistema, promijenila je naglasak u istraživanjima djece i obitelji. Ranija istraživanja razvoja djeteta u kontekstu obitelji bila su usmjerena na povezanost s individualnim odnosom roditelj-dijete ili na veze između bračnog odnosa i prilagodbe djeteta. Nasuprot tome, istraživači su u zadnje vrijeme naglasili zaseban obiteljski grupni proces, usklađenost roditelja u odgoju, koji je jedinstveni prediktor socijalne i emocionalne prilagodbe djece, više i iznad utjecaja bračnog odnosa i roditeljstva. Članak iznosi pregled literature o novijim istraživanjima usklađenosti roditelja u odgoju i ispitivanjima povezanosti ovog obiteljskog odnosa sa značajnim pokazateljima razvoja i prilagodbe djece. U članku se raspravlja o implikacijama za kliničku praksu i smjernicama za daljnja istraživanja.