

What is Coparenting?

The relationship that two individuals, typically the mother and father, have in relation to parenting a child or children is called the coparenting relationship. This relationship is conceptualized separately from the romantic relationship since parents may not be romantically involved yet still cooperate to parent their shared children.

Introduction

This research brief discusses the results of two research questions analyzed with the Fragile Families data. First, among married and cohabiting couples who have just had a shared child: Are father involvement and coparenting associated with a change in relationship quality in the five years after the birth? Second, among cohabiting couples: Are father involvement and coparenting associated with transitions to marriage or separation in the first five years of the child's life? A positive coparenting relationship may reduce the stress typically associated with parenting (i.e., increased responsibility, lack of sleep) and increase the rewards (i.e., more play time, feeling competent in the parental role). The benefits of coparenting may be particularly strong for cohabiting parents who do not have the legal commitment to each other that married couples share.

Conceptualization and Method

Coparenting has only recently become a topic of research. Although there are multiple ways to conceptualize the coparenting relationship, the method utilized in this research is to consider the ways that parents support each other in their roles. Mothers are asked at waves 1, 3, and 5, how often (the father):

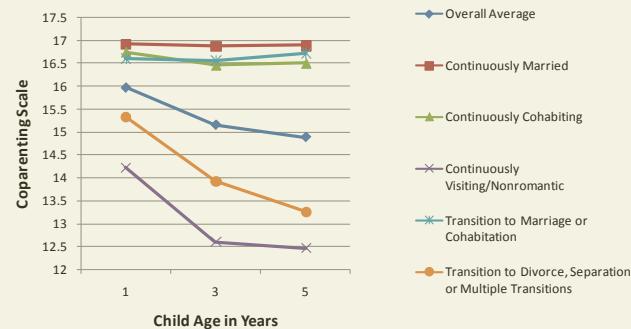
- (1) acts as an appropriate role model for the child,
- (2) is trusted to take care of the child,
- (3) respects your schedule and rules,
- (4) supports you in raising the child,

“Father involvement and a positive coparenting relationship are positively associated with relationship quality after the birth of a child among cohabiting and married parents.”

Figure 1

Fragile Families asks all mothers at each interview the set of coparenting questions listed with responses ranging from Never True (0) to Always True (3). These items are summed to achieve a coparenting scale (0-18), in which higher numbers indicate better coparenting.

Average Coparenting Over Time by Union Status/Transition



(5) talks about problems with parenting, and (6) counts on the father for help.

The mothers are then asked to respond: often (2), sometimes (1), or never (0). These responses are summed to get a coparenting score in which higher values indicate a more positive coparenting relationship.

To investigate whether coparenting is associated with greater relationship quality among cohabiting and married parents over time, a dyadic hierarchical linear model approach is used to chart parallel trajectories for mothers and fathers simultaneously. To determine whether coparenting is positively associated with transitions to marriage and negatively associated with transitions to separation among cohabiting parents, a discrete time event history approach is used.

Data Source

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is following a cohort of nearly 5,000 children born in large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000 (roughly three-quarters of whom were born to unmarried parents). Interviews were conducted with parents at the child's birth and first, third, and fifth birthdays.

Key findings:

- Coparenting is an important component of parents' relationship quality.
- Coparenting is associated with greater individual well-being among parents.
- Positive coparenting relationships provide union stability, benefiting both parents and children.

Sources

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For a full listing of sources, please visit the NCFMR website: http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/working_papers/file87969.pdf

The National Center for Family & Marriage Research, established in 2007 by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, aims to improve our understanding of how marriage and family structure affect the health and wellbeing of families, adults, children and communities and to inform policy development and programmatic responses.

Results

Using four waves of data from the Fragile Families and Child-Wellbeing Study, the role of coparenting in the trajectory of relationship quality among married and cohabiting couples after the birth of a child is examined. Coparenting is positively associated with relationship quality in the five years after a child is born. Additionally, the research explores the association between coparenting and union transitions among parents who are cohabiting at the child's birth. The results indicate that coparenting is largely, positively associated with transitions to marriage and negatively associated with transitions to separation. This relationship persists controlling for relationship quality, father involvement, and a number of background characteristics of both parents and the child. In fact, coparenting attenuates for the relationship between cohabitators' plans to marry at birth and their subsequent union transitions. Therefore, among cohabiting parents, coparenting matters for the success or dissolution of their unions beyond their relationship quality, relationship expectations, and absolute level of father involvement.

The transition to parenthood is arguably the most stressful time for a family. There are many changes to parents' daily routines, increased worry and stress, greater responsibility, lack of sleep, and increased financial expenses. When parents work together as a team, these stressors may be reduced and the rewards of having a new child can be more readily enjoyed. A positive coparenting relationship is key to adjustment during this time for resident and nonresident parents and may strengthen fragile families.

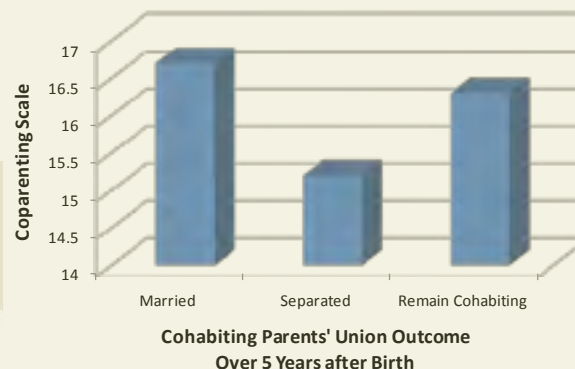
Policy Implications

The U.S. government has allocated funds to programs that foster healthy relationships and/or encourage father involvement. The research on coparenting and its benefits for parents and children highlight the importance of the inclusion of parenting techniques and communication about parenting in these programs. Positive coparenting can occur even if parents separate and may be particularly important in those cases. Therefore, programs that address issues such as communication, prioritization of the child, the importance of responsibility and dependability, and other skills that may result in both healthy romantic relationships and positive coparenting relationships may be especially effective.

Figure 2

Among parents who are cohabiting at the child's birth, coparenting is assessed (see Figure 1 for details). Figure 2 shows average coparenting during the cohabiting union by the union outcome. Parents who subsequently marry by the child's fifth birthday exhibit the highest level of coparenting, followed by continuous cohabitators, and is lowest among parents who separate.

Coparenting by Union Outcome Among Cohabiting Parents at Birth



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