



A cocaring framework for infants and toddlers: Applying a model of coparenting to parent–teacher relationships^{☆,☆☆}



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ABSTRACT

Connections between home and childcare are vital for coordinating high quality care and education, especially for very young children. However, we know little about the key dimensions of parent–teacher, or cocaring relationships, in early childhood education, especially in subsidized care settings. Through individual, semi-structured qualitative interviews, this study examined 10 parent–teacher relationships where parents were receiving subsidized, center-based childcare for their infant or toddler. Using iterative, inductive analysis and deductive analysis based on [Feinberg's \(2003\)](#) definitions of key coparenting dimensions—a critical guiding theoretical framework for also understanding parent–teacher coordination and interaction—three main themes emerged: the importance of good, open communication between parents and educators, challenges when undermining versus support was used in their interactions, and tensions when parents and educators disagreed versus agreed on practices such as feeding or toilet training. This study found evidence for positive cocaring interactions, especially positive communication that related with effective care coordination. The cocaring conceptualization offers a practical framework to support strong parent–teacher relationships and a theoretical tool to facilitate future research on parent–teacher relationships in early childhood education.

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As early childhood is recognized as a formative developmental period, impacting children's future academic success and social-emotional adjustment, establishing and maintaining high-quality early childcare is essential ([NAEYC, 2009](#); [Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001](#)). A major aspect of quality childcare, especially for infants and toddlers, is the effective coordination of care between home and school. Parent–teacher relationships are a vital part of this coordination as they allow both parents and teachers to better understand

their children, or the children in their care, ultimately supporting children's development ([Reedy & McGrath, 2010](#)). In fact, meaningful relationships between teachers and families during children's early years are linked to school readiness, later academic success, greater academic motivation, and stronger social emotional skills ([Halgunseth, Peterson, Stark, & Moodie, 2009](#)). Therefore, a deeper understanding of parent–teacher relationships is essential to optimally support strong home-childcare connections and children's adaptive development.

Although the National Association for the Education of Young Children ([NAEYC, 2009](#)) emphasizes a partnership between families and teachers, stressing the importance of coordinating care between home and school settings to optimally support children's development, we know little about how parents and teachers actually conceive of and work within their relationships with each other ([McGrath, 2007](#)). Within the early childhood (EC) education literature, teachers are advised to build strong connections with families by learning about their unique practices, being sensitive to the diverse stressors with which families may be coping, and providing multiple avenues for participation and communication ([Gartrell, 2012](#); [Halgunseth et al., 2009](#)). However, relatively lit-

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tle research has examined the effectiveness of the aforementioned strategies, or how parents and educators see and work in their relationships with each other (Bernhard, Lefebvre, Kilbride, Chud, & Lange, 1988). This information may be especially helpful for families receiving subsidized childcare, whose children are more at risk for poor developmental outcomes (Duncan, Ziol-Guest, & Kail, 2010). In addition, there is little research on parent–teacher relationships in infant and toddler classrooms, which for an increasing number of families, are the first home–school connections many families form (Child Care Aware of America, 2014). Understanding key dimensions of parent–teacher relationships, especially for low-income families utilizing early care, provides essential information that can aid in the development of interventions to support positive parental involvement and children’s healthy transitions to school.

The body of literature on coparenting, or how parents work together to coordinate care of their children (Feinberg, 2003), provides a framework for understanding and identifying critical components of the relationships between parents and teachers, a relationship that exclusively revolves around the care of a particular child or children. High-quality coparenting relationships support children’s development (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010) and greater father involvement in childrearing (Hohmann-Marriott, 2011); correspondingly, the relationship between parents and early care educators, or what we have termed the *cocaring* relationship, may have important implications for child adjustment and parent involvement in childcare contexts. In particular, our study sought to understand not only what parents and teachers see as essential parts of their relationships, but also if dimensions from Feinberg’s (2002, 2003) model of the coparenting relationship could offer (1) insight into what makes parent–teacher relationships for very young children receiving subsidized childcare successful or challenging, and (2) a conceptual framework for cocaring relationships. Our review of relevant literature below will examine: (1) parent–teacher relationships, and (2) coparenting.

Parent–teacher relationships

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological systems theory outlines the potential developmental impact of connections and experiences across different microsystems (e.g., home and childcare), or what Epstein (1995) later referred to as “spheres of influence,” in a child’s life. Using this understanding, some researchers have attempted to examine the connections across home and school or childcare settings by identifying the influences, outcomes, and make-up of strong versus conflictual parent–teacher relationships (Bernhard et al., 1988; Forry, Moodie, Simkin, & Rothenberg, 2011; McGrath, 2007; Nzinga-Johnson, Baker, & Aupperlee, 2009).

Parent–teacher relationships appear meaningful for children’s social emotional outcomes. For example, Churchill (2003) found that when parents and teachers agreed, or had stronger “goodness-of-fit” on expectations for children’s behavior and parenting practices, preschool children had higher social competence. However, for many children, their parents and teachers may hold different child-rearing beliefs (Bernhard et al., 1988; Ipsa, 1994). Forry et al. (2011) reviewed a broad array of research across disciplines to identify key caregiver attitudes, knowledge and practices in parent and caregiver relationships that are associated with positive academic and social emotional outcomes for children and parents. Although their research was helpful in consolidating key findings across disciplines of what may be high-quality practices for teachers to establish better relations with families, its purpose was not to identify the main components within parent–teacher relationships. Understanding the main elements that comprise cocaring relationships may offer a conceptual framework that

educators can use to evaluate and augment their parent–teacher relationships.

In addition to the lack of a conceptual framework for understanding parent–teacher relationships, much of the research on parent–teacher relationships has focused on older children (Bernhard et al., 1988; Nzinga-Johnson et al., 2009). Far less is known about parent–teacher relationships for infants and toddlers. McGrath’s (2007) observational classroom case study in an ethnically and economically diverse childcare center with children two to five years of age was the only previous research we found focusing exclusively on parent–teacher relationships for toddlers. Through careful analysis of the parent–teacher relationships in one particular classroom, McGrath (2007) found that parents were generally more invested in building a relationship than teachers were, and that teachers were often unaware of the influence and power they had in these relationships. However, McGrath (2007) concluded that because of the imbalance of power, a true partnership between teacher and parent was never formed. This work was an important step toward understanding parent–teacher relationships, yet it is unclear if these experiences apply to other classrooms for very young children.

Coparenting—a new way to understand parent–teacher relationships?

Feinberg (2002) has defined coparenting as “the extent to which parents work together in their roles” (p. 173) and emphasized that many different adults likely operate as coparents in a variety of family forms (e.g., foster parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, grandparents; Feinberg, 2003). Hence, analyzing how educators and children’s parents may “work together” in their roles nurturing a child may be a natural extension of the coparenting literature, one that can potentially help identify specific features or processes within these relationships that may encourage (or suppress) parental involvement and children’s healthy adjustment to school-like environments. Although the coparenting literature (Feinberg 2003; McHale et al., 2004) offers a framework for investigating the multifaceted nature of the relationships between parents and EC educators, these relationships are also different in critical ways from coparenting (e.g., the coparental relationship is typically only one facet of the larger relationship between children’s parents, see McHale et al., 2004, whereas parents and EC educators likely only interact about the child). Because of these differences, we have dubbed the relationship between parents and EC educators the *cocaring* relationship.

Feinberg (2002, 2003) developed a framework for conceptualizing the coparental relationship stemming from observational, quantitative, and qualitative research on coparenting, which includes four components: child-rearing agreement, childcare division of labor, supportive versus undermining behaviors, and joint family management, including managing children’s exposure to inter-parental conflict. Because of the differences highlighted above between coparenting and cocaring relationships, two of these components are likely more relevant to the cocaring relationship: child-rearing agreement and supportive versus undermining behaviors.

Child-rearing agreement

Child-rearing agreement refers to the extent to which parents concur with regard to their morals, values, and beliefs about how to raise children; for example, their beliefs about appropriate discipline or educational expectations. Feinberg (2003) is careful to note that disagreement regarding child-rearing, in and of itself, may not actually lead to negative outcomes, but rather how disagreement

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