



Links between mothers' and fathers' perceptions of infant temperament and coparenting

Regan V. Burney*, Esther M. Leerkes

*The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Human Development and Family Studies,
248 Stone, PO Box 26170, Greensboro, NC 27402-6170, United States*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 May 2009

Received in revised form 3 December 2009

Accepted 28 December 2009

Keywords:

Coparenting

Infant temperament

Transition to parenthood

Marital quality

ABSTRACT

This study examined the contributions of infant temperament, marital functioning, and the division of parenting on the quality of the coparenting relationship for couples parenting 6-month-old infants. Marital functioning was assessed prenatally. When infants were 6 months old, infant temperamental characteristics (i.e., distress to limits, distress to novelty, and soothability), division of parenting, and coparenting were rated by parents. Results indicated that the reactivity dimension of temperament was only associated with reduced coparenting quality if other stressors were present and these effects were different for mothers and fathers. Mothers who perceived their infants as more reactive only reported more negative coparenting if their infants were also not easily soothed or if mothers were dissatisfied with how parenting tasks were divided and performed given their prior expectations. Whereas fathers reported more negative coparenting when faced with a more reactive infant and they reported a low quality marital relationship.

© 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

From the time children are born they exert an influence on the lives of their parents. Children are active agents in their own development and previous research has shown that children are not passive recipients of parenting and they have an active role in parent–child relationships (Cole, 2003). Thus, they continue to have an influence on their families as they grow, change, and become a part of the family system. Yet, few researchers have examined the role children play in interparental relationships (Schermerhorn, Cummings, DeCarlo, & Davies, 2007), specifically, the coparenting relationship.

Coparenting can be conceptualized as how two individuals work together to raise a child (Talbot & McHale, 2004) and has been linked to parent and child outcomes (Leary & Katz, 2004; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001). For example, research indicates that when families exhibit hostile coparenting, there is more marital conflict, less father involvement, and children exhibit higher levels of externalizing behavior problems (McBride & Rane, 1998; McConnell & Kerig, 2002; Schoppe, et al., Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004). Much of the research on coparenting has focused on parental characteristics (e.g., personality, self-esteem) and concurrent marital quality (Lindsey, Caldera, & Colwell, 2005) as predictors. Little is known about how children affect coparenting. That children are active agents in parent–child relationships, suggests that they may also influence the coparenting relationship. Thus, identifying child factors that predict quality of coparenting is of interest. The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which perceived infant temperament is related to the quality of coparenting among new parents.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 336 256 0099; fax: +1 336 334 5076.
E-mail address: rvbeaudr@uncg.edu (R.V. Burney).

Child temperament has been found to be a strong predictor of the quality of parenting (Putnam, Sanson, & Rothbart, 2002). Thus, child temperament may also influence the quality of coparenting among parents. Drawing from Rothbart's (1981) conceptualization of temperament we focused on two aspects of infant temperament: reactivity, defined as infant distress to limits and distress to novelty, and regulation, defined as infant soothability. We reasoned that the extent to which infants are easily and intensely distressed and difficult to soothe, hallmark features of the "difficulty" construct, would be particularly relevant to coparenting because these are the types of infant characteristics most frequently linked with negative parental and marital outcomes among parents of young infants (Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2003). Further, division of parenting and the prenatal marital relationship were considered as potential moderators of the association between infant temperament and coparenting quality.

1.1. Family systems theory

Minuchin (1985) suggested six basic principles to family systems theory and several of these principles have implications for the development of coparenting. First, a system (e.g., a family) is an organized whole, composed of several subsystems that work interdependently but are distinct from one another: child, parent, marital, and coparent subsystems, thus, coparenting is just one subsystem nested within the larger family system. The marital and coparenting subsystems are distinct from one another. The 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). Also, most often, the marital relationship predates the coparenting relationship and each follows its own trajectory of development. In the coparenting relationship, partners develop their bond as parents and are able to continue this relationship even if the marriage dissolves (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). Additionally, this principle emphasizes the importance of examining the impact each member of the family has on other members or subsystems within the family. Consistent with this tenet, infant temperament, a child characteristic, may affect the coparenting subsystem. For example, parents of an "easy" infant may want to do all of the childrearing mutually because doing so is pleasant; however, parents of a "difficult" infant may choose to divide up parenting responsibilities and perform them separately in order to provide one another with respite.

Another principle is that subsystems are separated by boundaries, but each subsystem mutually influences one another (Cox & Paley, 2003). Thus, to understand what influences the coparenting subsystem it is important to understand the interplay among the other subsystems. This could be where one subsystem affects another and spill over may occur (e.g., the extent that parenting a "difficult" infant is stressful, may arouse negative feelings, which may prompt parents to be more critical of each other's parenting) or it could be more complex, where there may be interactions between two or more subsystems that affect a different subsystem. For example, if one partner is unsatisfied with the marital relationship and gives little support to the other partner, it may make it more challenging for coparents to cope with a more "difficult" infant, than when partners are satisfied with their marital relationship.

A final principle is that evolution and change are inherent in open systems and are likely to occur during developmental transitions (Cox & Paley, 2003). The family process becomes more complex once an infant enters the family system; new interactions and behaviors between parents must be established. With time, parents may be able to negotiate their respective parenting roles and become skilled cooperative coparents. On the other hand, as the realities of childcare set in and infants' personalities emerge, some parents may find it difficult to create a positive pattern of working together. These shifts and changes in children and couples make infancy an appealing time to study the coparenting relationship. Examining links between temperament and coparenting when infants are 6 months old is appealing because research has suggested that temperamentally-based fear, anger, and soothability are readily apparent to parents and stable across the second half of the first year of life (Rothbart, 1986; Sternberg & Campos, 1990).

2. Infant temperament and coparenting

In keeping with the view that systems are interdependent (Minuchin, 1985), it is important to examine the potential link between infant temperament and coparenting. Infants who are temperamentally reactive are characterized as displaying negative affect and being easily and intensely distressed (Rothbart, 1981), which may contribute to a stressful parenting environment, resulting in less adaptive coparenting. Alternatively, parents of reactive infants may work as a team and demonstrate positive coparenting to cope with this stress.

Given these conflicting hypotheses, it is not surprising that results from studies examining the links between child temperament and coparenting are mixed. Stright and Bales (2003) and McHale, Kazali, Rotman, Talbot, Carleton, and Liberson (2004) reported that there were no direct associations between reports of infant temperament and quality of coparenting. However, Van Egeren (2004) reported that when fathers' perceived their infants as reactive they had poorer coparenting relationships. Similarly, Lindsey et al. (2005) found that fathers demonstrated more intrusive coparenting when infants were reported to be temperamentally reactive. These discrepancies are not surprising given Crockenberg's (1986) proposition that the links between temperament and parenting may be moderated by individual and family characteristics. That is, parenting may only be compromised by temperamental reactivity when other risk factors are present (Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2003). It is probable that the association between temperament and coparenting is equally complex. To date, only two studies have examined this complex association between infant temperament and coparenting, using the marital relationship as the moderator (McHale et al., 2004; Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2007), and found

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/917478>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/917478>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)