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Are Some Children Harder to Coparent than Others? Children's Negative Emotionality and Coparenting Relationship Quality

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Abstract

The current study examined relations between child temperament – specifically, negative emotionality – and parents' supportive and undermining coparenting behavior, and further tested whether marital adjustment moderated relations between child negative affect and coparenting. One-hundred eleven two-parent families with a 4-year old child participated in this study. Parents completed questionnaires to provide information on children's negative affectivity, marital adjustment, and the quality of their coparenting relationships. Furthermore, parents and children participated together in two 10-minute task-oriented interactions that were coded to assess coparenting behavior. As hypothesized, parents of children higher on levels of negative affect demonstrated greater undermining coparenting behavior. In addition, marital adjustment moderated relations between children's negative affect and parents' supportive coparenting behavior. However, contrary to expectations, couples with *higher* levels of marital adjustment were most vulnerable to effects of child negativity on supportive coparenting. Results suggest that high-quality marital relationships may not buffer the coparenting relationship from the effects of temperamentally difficult preschoolers.

According to family systems theory, families consist of a number of interrelated subsystems (Minuchin, 1985). One important subsystem is the coparental unit. As detailed by Feinberg (2003), coparenting consists of support and coordination (or lack thereof) between individuals who share responsibility for rearing children. Research has established the uniqueness of coparenting and its potential to influence children's socioemotional adjustment, above and beyond marital quality or dyadic parenting (Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996; Karreman, van Tuijl, van Aken, & Deković, 2008; McHale & Rasmussen,

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1998). Although coparenting is a multifaceted construct (Feinberg, 2003), many studies share a focus on one key component: supportive and undermining behavior (e.g., Belsky et al., 1996; Lindsey, Caldera, & Colwell, 2005; Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004; Stright & Bales, 2003).

Given the established importance of coparenting, attention has turned to identifying parent, child, and family characteristics that may shape coparenting quality (e.g., Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995; Lindsey et al., 2005; Stright & Bales, 2003). Researchers have theorized that just as children with difficult temperaments may challenge dyadic parenting, child difficult temperament may affect coparenting as well (Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2003). In particular, Feinberg (2003) argued that coparenting might be especially susceptible to difficult child temperament as such children may make failures of particular parenting strategies more likely, leading to greater undermining behavior between parents. To date, however, the majority of studies that have examined direct relations between temperament and coparenting have failed to support this claim (McHale et al., 2004; Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2007; Stright & Bales, 2003; for exceptions, see Lindsey et al., 2005 and Van Egeren, 2004).

Two key reasons may underlie this discrepancy between theory and research. First, consistent with Crockenberg and Leerkes' (2003) transactive model of infant negative emotionality and family relationships, associations between child temperament and coparenting may be indirect, such that child characteristics interact with other subsystems, like the marital subsystem, to affect coparenting. "At risk" parents – in this case, parents with poorer quality marital relationships – may be most susceptible to the negative effects of difficult child temperament. Two recent studies have provided preliminary support for this hypothesis. Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2007) found that when faced with a more unadaptable infant, couples with lower marital quality were rated by observers as demonstrating greater undermining and less supportive coparenting behavior. Similarly, McHale et al. (2004) demonstrated that prebirth marital quality was an especially important predictor of postpartum coparenting cohesion when infants were characterized by high levels of negative reactivity. Thus, couples with poorer marital quality may have coparenting relationships that suffer more from dealing with a difficult child. Second, the nature of relations between child temperament and coparenting may differ depending on the child's developmental level. Whereas young infants with difficult temperaments may not exert direct effects on coparenting, the potential for a difficult (and more autonomous) toddler or preschooler to directly challenge the coparenting relationship may be greater. However, most studies that have examined connections between child temperament and coparenting have focused on relations during infancy.

To address this gap in the literature, our study examined relations between preschool aged children's temperament, specifically negative affectivity, and coparenting relationship quality. We focused on negative affectivity because it is a central dimension of temperament that shares with the difficult temperament construct a focus on negative mood (Putnam & Rothbart, 2006). In keeping with Feinberg (2003), we expected that preschoolers with high levels of negative affect would have parents who demonstrated greater undermining and less supportive coparenting behavior. We further tested whether parents of preschoolers who reported lower levels of marital adjustment would have coparenting relationships most compromised by children's negative affectivity, as has been found in families with infants (McHale et al., 2004; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2007).

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 111 families (mother, father, child) recruited through local preschools, advertisements, and participant referrals in a large Midwestern metropolitan area. Children's average age was 4.11 years ($SD = .52$ years; 57 boys, 54 girls). Mothers' average age was 36.03 years ($SD = 5.26$), and fathers' average age was 37.71 years ($SD = 5.77$). Eighty-four percent of mothers and 81% percent of fathers had obtained at least a college degree (*Range* = some high school to Ph.D.). Family income ranged from less than \$10,000 to over \$100,000 per year ($Mdn = \$71,000$ to \$80,000). Seventy-five percent of families were European American, 7% African American, 1% Latin American, and 17% multiracial/multiethnic.

Parents were mailed questionnaires about their coparenting and marital relationships two weeks prior to a scheduled laboratory visit, and instructed to complete the questionnaires independently. At the laboratory, mothers and fathers first completed a questionnaire about their child's temperament independently. Next, parents were observed while coparenting their child together. Specifically, families participated in two 10-minute videotaped interactions involving goal-oriented tasks. In the first episode, parents and children were asked to draw a picture of their family together, and in the second to construct a house together using a toy building set.

Measures

Coparenting relationship quality—Parents reported on their partner's individual-level supportive (e.g., “My partner backs me up when I discipline the study child”; 7 items) and undermining (e.g., “My partner criticizes my parenting in front of the child”; 7 items) coparenting behavior using the Perceptions of Coparenting Partners Questionnaire (Stright & Bales, 2003; 1 = *never*, 5 = *always*). Alphas for perceived support and perceived undermining were .73 and .70 for mothers, and .77 and .58 for fathers, respectively.

Couple-level coparenting behavior was coded from the videotaped episodes by two trained coders who rated parents' supportive (pleasure, warmth, cooperation) and undermining (displeasure, anger, competition) behaviors using 5-point scales (1 = *very low*, 5 = *very high*) developed by Cowan and Cowan (1996) and used in previous research (for details regarding this coding system see Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). Coders overlapped on 29% of the episodes; gamma coefficients, appropriate for ordinal data (Liebetrau, 1983), ranged from .78 to .93 ($M = .87$), reflecting acceptable reliability. A family's ratings on each of the six scales were averaged across the two episodes; subsequently, the three scores reflecting observed supportive coparenting and the three scores reflecting observed undermining coparenting were summed to create composite variables.

Marital adjustment—Mothers and fathers completed the 32-item Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), a widely-used, reliable and valid measure of relationship adjustment. Summary scores were created for mothers and fathers ($\alpha = .92$ for both), and a couple-level score was created by averaging parents' reports ($r = .59$, $p < .01$).

Child negative affect—Parents completed the Very Short Form of the Children's Behavior Questionnaire (Putnam & Rothbart, 2006), a measure of temperament designed for children ages 3 to 8. We focused on the 12-item Negative Affect scale ($\alpha = .72$ for mothers and .74 for fathers), which measures negative emotions such as sadness and frustration. Parents' ratings on negative affect were significantly correlated ($r = .46$, $p < .01$) and thus averaged.

Results

Relations between child negative affect and supportive and undermining coparenting behavior were tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with Amos 16.0. Descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables are presented in Table 1. Because of limits on the number of parameters that could be reasonably estimated given our sample size, only supportive and undermining coparenting behavior were modeled as latent variables (with three indicators each); child negative affect and marital adjustment (both centered), as well as the child negative affect X marital adjustment interaction were modeled as observed variables. Corresponding error terms for the indicators of the coparenting variables were correlated to account for shared method variance. Additionally, given previous research linking child gender and coparenting (e.g., Lindsey et al., 2005), and preliminary analyses yielding differences in perceived coparenting for parents of boys versus girls (see Table 1), child gender was controlled for in SEM analyses.

This model fit the data quite well (see Figure 1). As hypothesized, child negative affect was a significant predictor of undermining coparenting, such that parents of temperamentally negative children engaged in more undermining behavior. Moreover, the interaction between child negative affect and marital adjustment was a significant predictor of supportive coparenting. A plot of this interaction and subsequent probing (see Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006) revealed that – contrary to expectations – the inverse relation between child negative affect and supportive coparenting was significant for families with *high* levels of marital adjustment ($\beta = -.84, p < .01$), but not for families with average ($\beta = -.18, p = .42$) or low ($\beta = .47, p = .16$) marital adjustment.

Discussion

Preschool children's temperament may indeed be an important correlate of coparenting behavior. As anticipated, and consistent with theory and prior research (Feinberg, 2003; Lindsey et al., 2005; Van Egeren, 2004), we found that child negative affect was a significant predictor of undermining coparenting, such that more temperamentally difficult children had parents who undermined each other's parenting more frequently and intensely. Although we did not find a direct association between child negative affect and supportive coparenting behavior, marital adjustment moderated the relation between child negative affect and supportive coparenting.

However, the nature of this interaction effect was different than forecasted. In light of Crockenberg and Leerkes' (2003) model and previous research on temperament and coparenting in infancy (McHale et al., 2004; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2007), we expected that parents with low levels of marital adjustment would be most vulnerable to coparenting difficulties when faced with a temperamentally difficult child. Instead, our results revealed that the presence of a child high on negative affectivity appeared to “cancel out” much of the advantage of high marital adjustment with respect to supportive coparenting. In our view, the most likely explanation for this counterintuitive finding is that coparenting a temperamentally challenging 4-year-old is quite different than coparenting a temperamentally challenging infant. Whereas a high-quality marital relationship may protect against coparenting struggles in infancy, a high-quality marital relationship may not guarantee successful coparenting of a difficult preschooler.

Whether children's temperament may exert more of an influence on coparenting relationships during the preschool years than during infancy awaits clarification by longitudinal work. What is more, given the cross-sectional nature of our data, we cannot be certain of the directions of relations among coparenting, marital quality, and child

temperament. For instance, the apparent effects of preschool children's temperament obtained in this study may reflect prior influence of coparenting and other family processes, or child temperament may affect coparenting, which in turn affects marital quality. Moreover, results of our study may not generalize to lower-SES families and those in which coparenting partners are not married mothers and fathers. Despite these caveats, this study has enhanced understanding of correlates of coparenting during the preschool years and the potential for children's difficult temperament to affect coparenting. Awareness of possible child effects on coparenting will prove useful to researchers as well as to practitioners; the work of both may be enhanced by an appreciation that difficult children may challenge multiple family subsystems.

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Figure 1.
Model testing relations between child negative affect and supportive and undermining coparenting.

Table 1
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Child Negative Affect, Marital Adjustment, and Coparenting Variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	M	SD
1. Child negative affect		-.06	-.11	-.04	.21*	.12	-.09	.10	4.11	.67
2. Marital adjustment			.52**	.56**	-.48**	-.46**	.22*	-.18 ⁺	3.58	.38
3. Mothers' perceived support ^a				.26**	-.60**	-.10	.28**	-.20*	4.13	.47
4. Fathers' perceived support					-.26**	-.51**	.13	.02	4.18	.51
5. Mothers' perceived undermining						.18 ⁺	-.24*	.22*	1.60	.44
6. Fathers' perceived undermining ^b							-.07	.21*	1.52	.37
7. Observed supportive coparenting								-.36**	16.87	2.72
8. Observed undermining coparenting									10.77	2.93

^aMothers of boys ($M = 4.03$; $SD = .43$) perceived receiving less support from their partners than mothers of girls ($M = 4.24$; $SD = .48$), $t(109) = 2.35$, $p < .05$.

^bThere was also a tendency for fathers of boys ($M = 1.59$; $SD = .39$) to feel more undermined by their partners than fathers of girls ($M = 1.45$; $SD = .35$), $t(109) = -1.91$, $p = .06$.

⁺ $p < .10$

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$