Longitudinal and Bidirectional Relationships between Cooperative Coparenting and Child Behavioral Problems in Low-income, Unmarried Families

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The coparenting subsystem is important for the psychosocial development of young children.

The majority of coparenting research has been conducted with *married middle-class couples* using *cross-sectional* or short-term longitudinal designs.

A few studies examined *bidirectional relations* but found *inconsistent* results.
We examined the **bidirectionality** using a **long-term longitudinal** design with repeated measures collected at **multiple time points** over a broad time frame from infancy to school age.

Does **more cooperative coparenting** at earlier times result in fewer child behavioral problems at later times?

Do **more problematic behaviors** at earlier times lead to less cooperative coparenting at later times?
- **Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study** with longitudinal national samples
- 788 dyads of parents who remained *unmarried* and stayed *connected* with their child and the other parent until the child’s age 9.
- Parents who have never been living in *poverty* were excluded.
METHOD | PARTICIPANTS

- **RACE**
  - 61% (M=23)
  - 62% (M=26)
- **AGE**
  - 69% (M=23)
  - 51% (M=26)
  - 19–24 years old
- **EDUCATION**
  - 21%
  - Some college
- **INCOME**
  - 79% (M=$6K)
  - 37% (M=$16K)
  - Under $10K
- **WELFARE**
  - 54%
  - Public Assistant

788 Dyads
- **Cooperative Coparenting** – 6 items measuring the degree of interparental cooperation, support, and communication measured at ages 1, 3, 5, and 9

- **Child Behavioral Problems** – Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) repeatedly measured at ages 3, 5, and 9

- **Child Difficult Temperament** – 6 items derived from the Emotionality, Activity, and Sociability (EAS) measured at age 1
- 0 – 37.5% missing data: Not Missing at Random (NMAR)
- Monte Carlo multiple imputation (MCMC)
- Cross-lagged structural equation model
- STATA 14, Mplus 7.4
RESULTS | FINAL MODEL

**Results Diagram**

- **Coparenting T1**
  - **F**: 0.52
  - **M**: 0.25
  - **R² = 0.44**

- **Coparenting T3**
  - **F**: 0.65
  - **M**: 0.50
  - **R² = 0.43**

- **Coparenting T5**
  - **F**: 0.68
  - **M**: 0.49
  - **R² = 0.38**

- **Coparenting T9**
  - **F**: 0.73
  - **M**: 0.49
  - **R² = 0.43**

**Path Coefficients**

- **Difficult Temperament T1** → **Coparenting T1**: -0.15
- **Behavior Problems T1** → **Coparenting T1**: 0.18
- **Coparenting T1** → **Difficult Temperament T1**: -0.20
- **Coparenting T3** → **Behavior Problems T3**: 0.52
- **Behavior Problems T3** → **Coparenting T3**: 0.59
- **Behavior Problems T3** → **Behavior Problems T5**: -0.12
- **Behavior Problems T5** → **Behavior Problems T9**: 0.42
- **Behavior Problems T5** → **Behavior Problems T3**: -0.22
- **Coparenting T5** → **Behavior Problems T5**: -0.10

**Model Statistics**

- N = 788
- Free Parameters = 60
- Bayesian Posterior Predictive Checking using Chi-Square Posterior Predictive P-Value = 0.370
  - [CI = 28.122, 44.029]
  - Deviance (DIC) = 6302.173
  - Estimated Number of Parameters (pD) = 57.559
  - Bayesian (BIC) = 6585.867

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* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001 (One-Tailed)
Coparenting at an earlier time point predicts behavioral problems at a later time point consistently from age 1 to 9.

The effect-size of coparenting at age 3 and behavior problems at age 5 was the largest.
Behavioral problems at **age 3** were found to be a modest but still significant predictor of coparenting at **age 5**.
Our findings support coparenting programs for unmarried parents and interventions that support relationship and conflict resolution skills.

The implementation of an integral and triadic approach that aims to promote coparenting efforts from both parents would benefit their children.
Thank you!