Fatherhood Research & Practice Network

Coparenting and Low-Income Fathers' Satisfaction with Parenting

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Overview

Families are complex systems that consist of individuals who relate to one another in unique but interdependent ways. There are father-child relationships, sibling relationships, interparental relationships, and then there are relationships such as when mothers, fathers, and children interact with each other as a triad (McHale & Lindahl, 2011; McHale, 2011). One of the most important relationships among families with children is the coparenting relationship, defined as the ways that parents work together in their roles as parents (Feinberg, 2003). The coparenting relationship is critical because it influences the quality of the parent–child relationships and child functioning. Fathers and mothers do not need to live together in order to be in a coparenting relationship. In fact, the quality of coparenting support among fathers and mothers who do not live together is more important to the father-child relationship than among fathers and mother who do live together (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011).

Coparenting is of great concern for fatherhood programs. In order to promote positive and engaged relationships between fathers and children, practitioners must be mindful of fathers' relationships with their children's mothers (or other coparents). Nonresidential fathers, in particular, may not have access to their children without the mothers' cooperation (Edin & Nelson, 2013). For this reason, many fatherhood programs promote healthy coparenting relationships as a means of encouraging active and engaged father-child relationships.

For this brief, we compared reports of coparenting by participants of fatherhood programs and their counterparts who have not participated in such programs. Per the recommendation of researchers (Waller, 2012), we incorporate positive and negative aspects of these relationships, such as cooperation and conflict. We also consider the distinct needs of cohabiting and nonresidential families which may require assessment strategies that differ from the ones used to assess married and divorced families (McHale & Lindahl, 2011; Waller, 2012). Our assessment tool is based on data from a previous study with low-income, nonresidential fathers enrolled in fatherhood programs (Fagan & Kaufman, 2015).

We also examine the relationship between coparenting and fathers' satisfaction with their parent-child relationships. This is an important, though often overlooked, dimension of parenting. Satisfaction promotes parents' emotional and physical wellbeing, and may affect the overall quality of familial relationships (Downing-Matibag 2009; Medora, Wilson, & Larson 2001).

Sample Characteristics

Our sample for this study consisted of 511 fathers with children under the age of 18. It included 168 who were enrolled in fatherhood programs at the time of their interviews (see Table 1) and 343 fathers who were not enrolled in fatherhood programs. Unenrolled respondents were recruited from various locations in low-income neighborhoods, including but not limited to barbershops, grocery stores, and churches. In order to be eligible to participate, respondents had to have at least one biological child under the age of 18 with whom they did not reside. All respondents completed an extensive interview about their coparenting experiences for one "target" biological child under the age of 18. It is important to note that, while all respondents were nonresidential fathers for at least one child, some resided specifically with the target child.

Respondents reported an average of 2 to 3 children. Eighty-five percent of the sample did not reside with their target child; these fathers reported spending an average of 3 to 4 nights with their child in the previous month.

A substantial majority of respondents were single, and had never been married. More than 70% of respondents identified their race as Black or African American. Approximately half of nonresidential fathers and residential fathers enrolled in fatherhood programs reported an income of less than $10,000 in the previous 12 months, and nearly 40% were unemployed at the time of their interviews. Among unenrolled residential fathers, just over 30% reported an income of less than $10,000 in the previous 12 months and 19% were unemployed. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 72, with an average of approximately 38.

Instrument

The survey instrument for coparenting was developed by researchers at the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network (FRPN), based on data from a previous study with 71 low-income men enrolled in fatherhood programs (Fagan & Kaufman, 2015). As part of a broader survey concerning the experiences of low-income nonresidential fathers, participants were asked a series of questions concerning coparenting relationships with the mother of a single target child under the age of 18.

Our analyses produced scales for six dimensions of coparenting[1]: support, which reflected the degree to which fathers felt supported by the mother of the target child; agreement, or the extent to which fathers and mothers had similar goals and beliefs concerning child rearing; parental alliance, which concerned coparents' collaboration and efforts to understand one another; undermining, which concerned fathers' perceptions regarding whether their target children's mother actively attempted to interfere with father-child relationships; gatekeeping, which focused specifically on mothers' efforts to deny fathers access to target children; and conflict, which covered a range of struggles including verbal disputes as well as physical violence. The first three of these (support, agreement, alliance) addressed positive or cooperative aspects of coparenting, whereas the final three (undermining, gatekeeping, conflict) addressed negative or conflict-driven aspects.

Each dimension of coparenting was assessed with between 2 and 6 items, such as "the mother of [name of child] tells me I am doing a good job or otherwise

[1]We ran Chronbach's analyses to assess the consistency among participants' responses to the various items within each category (all values above .70; see Table 1 for specific details).

lets me know I am being a good father" (support). Participants responded to each item on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 5 indicating "strongly agree." For each dimension of coparenting, we took the average associated items to produce an overall score ranging from 1 to 5[2].

Measures for father-child relationship satisfaction were adapted from the Network of Relationships Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). We asked the following three questions, specifically in regards to target children: how satisfied are you with your relationship with your child? How happy are you with the way things are between you and your child? How good is your relationship with your child? Participants answered on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating that they were not at all satisfied and 5 indicating that they were extremely satisfied. We took the average of these responses to produce an overall score for father-child relationship satisfaction, also ranging from 1 to 5 .

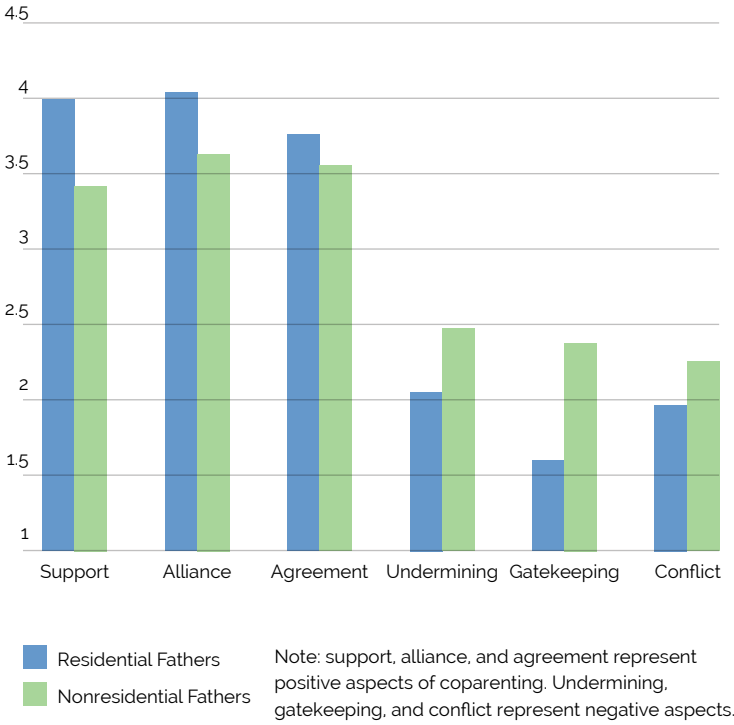
Results

All dimensions of coparenting were significantly correlated (see Table 2). Moreover, cooperative measures were positively associated with one another, and negatively associated with conflict-driven measures. Fathers who reported higher levels of support from their target children's mothers tended to also report greater agreement and alliance in coparenting, along with lower levels of gatekeeping, undermining, and conflict.

Overall, fathers reported higher levels of cooperative coparenting than conflict-driven coparenting (see Table 3). Reports of gatekeeping were surprisingly low (means ranged from 1.63 for residential, unenrolled fathers to 2.57 for nonresidential, unenrolled fathers). Respondents who were participating in fatherhood programs at the time of their interviews did not differ from those who were not participating in such programs. Fathers who resided with their target children consistently reported higher levels of cooperative coparenting and lower levels of conflict-driven coparenting than those who did not reside with target children[3] .

Fathers' Self-Reports of Coparenting

Fathers in programs, n=168



Note: support, alliance, and agreement represent positive aspects of coparenting. Undermining, gatekeeping, and conflict represent negative aspects.

[2]The Network of Relationships Inventory was originally developed to assess children's relationships with siblings, adult relatives, peers, and teachers. Satisfaction items were modified for the present study in order to specifically address fathers' relationships with their children (Chronbach's = .92).

[3]In order to assess the overall effects of residency and program enrollment on coparenting, we ran a Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). This is a statistical technique that investigates the effects of a specific set of independent variables on several outcomes simultaneously. For this study, a MANOVA allowed us to examine the overall impact of residency and program enrollment on all 6 dimensions of coparenting. Residency with target children had significant effects across all coparenting scales (Wilk's =.96, F=3.35 [6, 502], p<.05). There were no significant effects for program participation, nor were there significant interactions between participation and residency status.

For example, among respondents who were not enrolled in programs, residential fathers reported feeling more supported by their coparents (M=4.26 and M=3.43, respectively, on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 indicating that they felt completely supported) and less undermined (M=2.02 vs. M=2.52) than nonresidential fathers.

Several dimensions of coparenting had an effect on fathers' satisfaction with their relationships with target children (results not shown; contact the FRPN for specific data). Fathers who reported greater levels of support, alliance, and conflict and lower levels of gatekeeping reported higher levels of father-child relationship satisfaction[4].

Discussion

Our findings suggest that coparenting relationships vary in regards to residency status. Simply put, fathers who live with target children report better coparenting relationships for them. While this may not be surprising, it is noteworthy given that all respondents in this study were nonresidential fathers of at least one child under the age of 18. Interviews focused on their experiences for a specific target child. Some of the fathers who reported supportive, low-conflict relationships in regards to residential coparenting may well have reported less supportive, higher-conflict relationships if asked about nonresidential coparenting. Our study participants' low reports of gatekeeping are also striking, given the emphasis on maternal gatekeeping in literature on fathers' involvement with their children (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Kaufman, 2015).

While prior research has established a connection between coparenting relationships and fathers' involvement with their children (Waller, 2012), few researchers have investigated the connections between coparenting and fathers' satisfaction with their father-child relationships. We found that fathers who report greater levels of support from and alliance with their children's mothers, and who face lower levels of gatekeeping, tend to be more satisfied with their father-son and father-daughter relationships.

Implications for Programs

Fathers with two or more children may have different coparenting relationships with each child's mother. Practitioners should be mindful of this, and may want to prioritize their intentions to improve coparenting relationships specifically in regards to children with whom fathers do not reside.

If fathers appear dissatisfied with their relationships with their children, practitioners may want to assess the quality of coparenting relationships with those children's mothers. Measures developed by the FRPN aim to assess various dimensions of coparenting, and will soon be available online at **www.frpn.org**.

[4]For this part of our analysis, we ran a linear regression. This is a statistical technique that isolates the relative effects of multiple independent variables on a single dependent variable. Using this method, we were able to assess the unique effects of each dimension of coparenting on father-child relationship satisfaction, and to reassess those effects when controlling for program participation and residency status with target children. These effects persisted when controlling for fathers' program participation and residency status with target children.

Implications for Researchers

Fathers with two or more children may have different coparenting relationships with each child's mother. Researchers should be mindful of this, and ensure that analyses address specific mother-father pairs in order to avoid obscuring any differences among fathers' different coparenting relationships.

Researchers should be sure to use coparenting measures that are specific to the populations they study. When assessing nonresidential fathers and/or participants in fatherhood programs, researchers should consider using the measures developed by the FRPN. Our measures were based on the reported experiences of low-income men enrolled in fatherhood programs, and have since been used successfully with a larger sample of enrolled and unenrolled fathers. These measures will soon be available online at **www.frpn.org**.

Researchers should continue to explore the associations between coparenting and satisfaction with father-child relationships. Longitudinal assessments with participants in fatherhood programs, specifically those that prioritize healthy coparenting, may help to establish causal connections between these variables.

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Table 1. Sample Characteristics*

	Fathers In Programs (n=168)		Fathers Not In Programs (n=343)	
	Resident with Target Child (n=18) % or M (SD)	Nonresident with Target Child (n=150) % or M (SD)	Resident with Target Child (n=57) % or M (SD)	Nonresident with Target Child (n=286) % or M (SD)
Age of Father (M years)	38.1 (11.9)	37.9 (11.4)	36.9 (11.4)	37.5 (11.7)
Education				
Less than High School	16.7	20.0	10.5	15.7
High School/GED	50.0	55.3	52.6	50.0
Some College	11.1	15.3	21.1	22.4
2-Year Degree or Higher	22.3	9.4	15.8	11.8
Marital Status				
Single, Never Married	66.7	76.7	63.2	82.9
Married	22.2	7.3	26.3	4.2
Divorced/Widowed	11.2	10.0	10.6	12.9
Employment				
Unemployed	38.9	39.3	19.3	40.6
Annual Income				
Less than $5,000	22.2	34.0	21.1	37.4
$5,001 to $10,000	27.8	20.0	10.5	12.6
$10,001 to $20,000	11.1	20.7	28.1	15.0
More than $20,000	27.8	11.4	35.1	23.0
Race				
African American	77.8	72.7	71.9	74.8
White	0.0	8.0	12.3	13.3
Other	16.7	9.4	12.3	8.0
Ethnicity				
Hispanic	5.6	16.0	1.8	8.4
Biological Children				
# of Children (M)	2.5 (1.2)	2.4 (1.5)	2.7 (1.5)	2.2 (1.5)
Target Child Age (M years)	6.1 (5.8)	7.9 (5.5)	3.4 (5.4)	7.5 (6.0)
Nights Spent with Target Child in Last Month (M)**	-	3.1 (5.5)	-	3.9 (6.1)

*Response rates ranged from 86% to 100%. Some frequencies do not add up to 100%.
**Only nonresident fathers answered this question.

Table 2. Correlations Among Fathers' Self-Reports of Coparenting

	Alliance	Agreement	Undermining	Gatekeeping	Conflict
Support	0.78	0.56	-0.61	-0.61	-0.61
Alliance		0.63	-0.62	-0.60	-0.63
Agreement			-0.65	-0.50	-0.66
Undermining				0.65	0.74
Gatekeeping					0.72

N = 511. All correlations are significant (p<.05).

Table 3. Fathers' Self-Reports of Coparenting

	Fathers In Programs (n=168)		Fathers Not In Programs (n=343)	
	Resident with Target Child (n=18) M (SD)	Nonresident with Target Child (n=150) M (SD)	Resident with Target Child (n=57) M (SD)	Nonresident with Target Child (n=286) M (SD)
Support	4.00 (1.06)	3.41 (1.36)	4.26 (0.96)	3.43 (1.29)
Alliance	4.03 (0.99)	3.70 (1.04)	4.83 (0.87)	3.76 (1.04)
Agreement	3.72 (1.04)	3.57 (0.92)	4.11 (0.79)	3.54 (0.94)
Undermining	2.07 (1.19)	2.47 (1.05)	2.02 (0.80)	2.53 (1.07)
Gatekeeping	1.67 (0.99)	2.37 (1.28)	1.63 (0.92)	2.57 (1.41)
Conflict	1.95 (0.82)	2.29 (0.81)	1.82 (0.78)	2.27 (0.87)

All scales range from 1.0 to 5.0, with 5 indicating the highest levels (for example, feeling completely supported by a coparent).

Chronbach's values for each scale are as follows: support (.85), alliance (.94), agreement (.72), undermining (.83), gatekeeping (.93), conflict (.81)

Significant differences between resident and nonresident fathers on all scales (Wilk's =.962, F=3.35, p<.05). There were no significant effects for program participation or interactive effects between residency and program participation.