

Goodness-of-fit in family context: Infant temperament, marital quality, and early coparenting behavior[☆]

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Abstract

This study examined the contributions of infant temperament and marital relationship quality to the quality of the early coparenting relationship for couples parenting 3.5-month-old infants. Marital quality was assessed observationally during the third trimester of pregnancy. When infants were 3.5 months old, infant temperamental characteristics (fussiness and unadaptability) were rated by parents and observers and coparenting behavior was assessed observationally in play and child care contexts. Results indicated that associations between infant temperament and coparenting behavior depended on marital quality: couples with high marital quality showed more optimal coparenting behavior when faced with a challenging infant, whereas couples with low marital quality showed less optimal coparenting behavior when caring for a challenging infant.

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Many parents prepare extensively, both physically and psychologically, for the arrival of a new infant. Nurseries are painted, childbirth education classes completed, discussions with siblings held, and often, fantasies about changes in family life shared with an intimate partner or other likely caregiver. But, throughout this process, for even the most well prepared parents, there is a “wild card” on the horizon. A crucial element remains largely unknown: the infant herself. What kind of baby is about to be welcomed into the family system?

Despite the obvious significance of the infant’s temperament in shaping the larger family system of which she or he is a part, scant research has focused on understanding how the infant’s characteristics affect the family system beyond consideration of effects on parent–child (primarily mother–child) relationships (e.g., Crockenberg, 1981; Mangelsdorf & Frosch, 2000; Vaughn & Bost, 1999), and to a lesser extent marital relationships (e.g., Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Leerkes & Crockenberg, 2002). In the present study, we examined the role of the infant’s temperament in relation to the quality of the emerging *coparenting relationship*, or the relationship between adults in the family as parents. We focused specifically on two aspects of infant negative emotionality, fussiness and unadaptability (Putnam, Ellis, & Rothbart, 2001), which may be particularly challenging for parents. Further, the quality of the marital relationship

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was considered as a potential moderator of the associations between infant temperament and emerging coparenting behavior.

1. Coparenting and the family system

Family systems theory gives special importance to the coparenting relationship (e.g., Minuchin, 1974), referring to it as the family's executive subsystem. Coparenting behavior is typically defined as the quality of coordination between adults in their parental roles (Cowan & McHale, 1996; McHale, 1997; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, Lauretti, & Rasmussen, 2000), and primarily includes supportive and undermining dimensions (Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996; Gable, Belsky, & Crnic, 1995; McHale, 1995; McHale, Kuersten, & Lauretti, 1996). Over the past decade, research on coparenting has flourished (McHale et al., 2002). Much of this research productivity is reflected in studies of the links between coparenting behavior and children's adjustment. Across a number of studies, consistent associations have been found between more unsupportive, undermining coparenting behavior and child behavior problems and deficits in self-regulation (e.g., Belsky, Woodworth, & Crnic, 1996; Brody & Flor, 1996; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001), and between more supportive coparenting behavior and children's positive peer behavior, increased self-regulatory capabilities, and more harmonious sibling relationships (e.g., Brody, Stoneman, Smith, & Gibson, 1999; McHale, Johnson, & Sinclair, 1999). Moreover, this accumulating body of research has substantiated claims that coparenting processes can be differentiated from marital and parent-child processes empirically as well as theoretically (Belsky, Putnam, et al., 1996; Floyd, Gilliom, & Costigan, 1998; Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001; McHale et al., 1999; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; Stright & Neitzel, 2003).

However, research focused on understanding the forces that shape triadic coparenting processes in families has only just begun (McHale et al., 2004; Schoppe-Sullivan, 2003; Stright & Bales, 2003; Talbot & McHale, 2004; Van Egeren, 2003). Identifying factors that set the course for coparenting dynamics in families with young children is imperative, given the significance of coparenting for understanding children's adjustment, combined with the fact that coparenting quality shows stability across early infancy (Fivaz-Depeursinge, Frascarolo, & Corboz-Warnery, 1996; Van Egeren, 2003) and into toddlerhood (Gable et al., 1995) and the preschool years (Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004). Moreover, coparenting dynamics forecast changes in marital quality over time (Belsky & Hsieh, 1998; O'Brien & Peyton, 2002; Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, et al., 2004).

2. Coparenting and child temperament

Despite widespread recognition by developmental psychologists of the importance of the child's contributions to family processes, research has been slow to give adequate weight to children's contributions (Crouter & Booth, 2003). What we do know about effects of infants' characteristics has been mostly confined to the context of mother-infant relationships, and, with respect to temperament, has tended to focus on measures of infant "difficultness" (i.e., negative mood, withdrawal, low adaptability, etc.; Sanson & Rothbart, 1995). Moreover, research on children's contributions has typically considered main effects of infant characteristics on family relationships, despite the likelihood that complex, interactive effects may more closely resemble real-world relations and processes, thus more accurately capturing the goodness-of-fit between the infant and her family (Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2003; Thomas & Chess, 1977).

To date, only one published study has examined the role infant temperament may play in shaping early coparenting processes. McHale et al. (2004) found no direct associations between infant negative reactivity and observed coparenting behavior in families with 3-month olds. A few other preliminary reports have considered infant temperament in relation to coparenting, with mixed results. Berkman, Alberts, Carleton, and McHale (2002) found that 3-month olds rated as more negative and inhibited by observers had parents who actually showed greater coparental cooperation during triadic play. In a preliminary report from the present study, Schoppe-Sullivan, Szewczyk Sokolowski, Brown, Beggs, and Mangelsdorf (2004) found that parents of more temperamentally extreme infants displayed both less supportive and less undermining coparenting behavior. In contrast, in Stright and Bales' (2003) study of families with preschoolers, no significant associations were obtained between a measure of children's difficult temperament and observations or self-reports of coparenting relationship quality. These contradictory findings are not clarified by taking into account related studies that have considered the effect of infant temperament on the marital relationship across the transition to parenthood. Such investigations have tended to find that difficult infant temperament is associated with declines in marital quality across the transition (e.g., Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Levy-Shiff, 1994).

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