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## Parental Expressiveness as a Moderator of Coparenting and Marital Relationship Quality

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### Abstract

Driven by theory and extant research on the communication of emotions within the family, the current investigation examined marital quality and parents' emotional expressiveness as determinants of coparenting in a sample of 57 couples with young children. Specifically, mothers' and fathers' expressiveness was examined as moderators of the association between marital quality and coparenting behavior. Though negative expressiveness did not emerge as a significant predictor of coparenting when considered in conjunction with marital quality, parents' positive expressiveness made unique and interactive contributions to coparenting. Thus, it appears that positive expressiveness, especially fathers', may be beneficial to family functioning. Positively expressive husbands protected couples from negative coparenting interactions in the face of less supportive marriages. Couples in distressed marriages may benefit from work with practitioners and family life educators who consider the role that the communication of emotions plays in the context of coparenting.

### Keywords

Expressiveness; Coparenting; Marital Quality; Fathers; Parent-Child Relationships

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Coparenting, or more specifically, the process by which mothers and fathers coordinate and support one another's parenting efforts, has been linked to parenting behavior (Margolin, John, & Gordis, 2001), marital interactions (McHale, 1995), and children's developmental outcomes (Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001). Though spouses cooperate with each other by supporting and valuing one another's parenting goals, they also disagree about how to parent their children or undermine the other's parenting (Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995; Margolin et al., 2001; McHale, 1995). Further, triangulation may be present in the family. Children become triangulated when they are pressured to form an alliance with one parent against the other or when parents communicate through their children (Margolin et al., 2001). Coparenting takes on special meaning for families with young children as they attempt to navigate the myriad of caregiving and parenting tasks that come into play with this particular age group. Thus, the main goal of the present research was to examine coparenting

in families with young children and the individual and family factors that may influence coparenting behavior.

## Conceptual Framework

Guided by family systems (Cox & Paley, 2003) and determinants of parenting (Belsky, 1984) frameworks as well as extant research conducted by McHale (McHale, 1995, Talbot & McHale, 2004), the current investigation examined marital quality and parental expressiveness within the family as correlates of coparenting behavior. It has been argued that interpersonal relationships between two or more family members are explicably linked (Cox & Paley, 2003). For example, links between marital and coparental subsystems suggest that couples in well-functioning marriages create positive coparenting partnerships (Belsky et al., 1995; Katz & Gottman, 1996; McHale, 1995). This pattern of association, however, may not exist for all families (McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004), and characteristics of the individual parent (e.g. personality, childrearing beliefs) may moderate the nature of these connections. For example, in his Determinants of Parenting model, Belsky (1984) highlighted individual parent characteristics as central to the prediction of parenting behavior. According to Belsky (1984), parent characteristics are important determinants of parenting because not only do they influence parenting directly, but they also influence the interpersonal relations one forms with a spouse, other family members, and co-workers. Further, all of these contextual factors (i.e., marriage, social network, and work) together can influence parental and coparental outcomes.

McHale et al. (2004) also proposed that the examination of individual and family factors may help us understand why some couples are able to successfully coparent together despite being in distressed marriages. Talbot and McHale (2004) examined whether individual parent characteristics such as self-control and flexibility would attenuate the detrimental effect of marital distress on coparenting behavior. They found that fathers' flexibility buffered couples' coparenting partnerships from the negative effects of marital distress. In the current paper, we test a comparable model but focus on parental emotional expressiveness because previous research indicates that parents' communication of emotions within the family may be especially pertinent when focusing on the development and maintenance of positive intrafamilial relationships (Gottman & Levenson, 1999a, 1999b; Madden-Derdich, 2002).

Expressiveness is defined as "a persistent pattern or style of exhibiting nonverbal and verbal expressions that often, but not always, appear to be emotion-related" (Halberstadt, Cassidy, Stifter, Parke, & Fox, 1995, p. 93). Halberstadt and colleagues (1995) distinguished between positive expressiveness, characterized by openness and sensitivity to family members (e.g., being appreciative, empathic, loving, and concerned), and negative expressiveness, marked by anger and contempt. There is stability in husbands' and wives' reports of their own expressiveness over time (Halberstadt et al., 1995). Moreover, associations have been found between positive and negative expressiveness and more stable personality characteristics such as neuroticism and extroversion (Halberstadt et al., 1995). Expressiveness, then, appears to reflect a stable pattern of how individuals communicate emotions within the family context and indeed parents' positive and negative expressiveness have been linked to children's early development (Garner, 2005; Halberstadt & Eaton, 2002; Schoppe et al., 2001) and marital relationship quality (Gill, Christensen, & Fincham, 1999; Halberstadt et al., 1995; Rauer & Volling, 2005). For example, negative expressions of emotions are generally related to poorer marital interactions and lower marital satisfaction whereas positive expressiveness is associated with more positive marital interactions and higher marital satisfaction (Gill et al., 1999; Rauer & Volling, 2005; Halberstadt et al., 1995), though the nature of these associations did vary for husbands and wives.

The first aim of this research was to examine the relations among coparenting, marital quality, and mothers' and fathers' emotional expressiveness. Consistent with previous research, we expected to find links between the marital relationship and coparenting behavior (Belsky et al., 1995; Katz & Gottman, 1996; McHale, 1995) and expressiveness (Halberstadt et al., 1995; Rauer & Volling, 2005). Though no studies to date have considered the role of expressiveness in the facilitation and maintenance of the coparenting relationship, it likely plays an important role in this family subsystem. Therefore, we hypothesized that positive expressiveness would foster more positive coparental interactions between husbands and wives because partners who are more openly expressive with each other may be better at communicating about coparenting issues. Negative expressiveness, on the other hand, should be associated with less cooperation and greater conflict in the coparenting relationship because parents who are outwardly angry towards their partners may be less successful at navigating the challenges related to coparenting. Similar to the research linking parental expressiveness to marital quality, the patterns of association among expressiveness and coparenting may depend on parent gender; therefore, mothers' or fathers' expressiveness may be more or less relevant to predicting coparenting.

### **Parental Expressiveness as a Unique Contributor to Coparenting**

The second aim of this research was to examine whether parental expressiveness would make significant contributions to coparenting above and beyond the quality of the marital relationship. Given the importance that Belsky (1984) placed on both marital relationship quality and individual parent characteristics in his determinants of parenting model, these variables are likely equally relevant to the coparenting relationship. In fact, the current investigation takes the perspective that Belsky's model could actually be used to delineate the determinants of coparenting. Though marital quality and coparenting behavior are strongly linked (Belsky et al., 1995; McHale, 1995), parent characteristics, including expressiveness, may also contribute to coparenting behavior independent of marital relationship quality. Talbot and McHale (2004) examined the contribution of parent characteristics (i.e., self-control and flexibility) to coparenting once marital quality was accounted for in the model and found that both mothers' and fathers' self-control and fathers' flexibility continued to explain significant variation in coparenting harmony after accounting for overall marital quality. We also expected that parental expressiveness would make an independent contribution to the prediction of coparenting once marital relationship quality had been taken into consideration.

### **Parental Expressiveness as a Moderator between Marriage and Coparenting**

Talbot and McHale's (2004) findings also revealed that high paternal flexibility attenuated the relationship between low marital quality and coparenting negativity such that when fathers were more open-minded, there was no association between marital quality and coparenting. They argued that among families with highly flexible fathers, coparenting behavior was less vulnerable to low marital quality. In contrast, mothers' positive adjustment did not have the same ameliorative effect on the association between marital quality and coparenting difficulties. Marital distress may be detrimental for children's outcomes and it may be that these associations are mediated through the impact that marital distress has on coparenting behavior; however, as has been suggested by Talbot and McHale (2004), parents' individual attributes may protect couples from engaging in negative coparenting interactions. Research supporting this hypothesis may have important implications for practitioners and family life educators who work with couples in distressed marriages by helping these couples develop strategies to deal with these issues. Thus, the third aim of this research was to examine mothers' and fathers' positive and negative expressiveness as moderators of the relations between marital relationship quality and coparenting behavior.

In line with the work of Talbot and McHale (2004), we hypothesized that emotional expressiveness would attenuate the relationship between marital quality and coparenting. Thus, positive parental characteristics (i.e., high positive and low negative expressiveness) may serve an ameliorative function in the family that may leave coparenting behavior less vulnerable to the effects of marital distress. In contrast, the expected relations between less supportive marital interactions and negative coparenting behavior (i.e., low cooperation, high triangulation, and high conflict) may continue to exist when parents exhibit less optimal levels of expressiveness (i.e., low positive expressiveness or high negative expressiveness). In other words, the link between marital distress and coparenting problems may be amplified under these conditions.

## Interaction between Maternal and Paternal Expressiveness on Coparenting

Despite the fact that family systems theorists argue for the inclusion of mothers and fathers in research studies, research continues to analyze data for mothers and fathers separately. Husbands and wives do not function in isolation from their partners and as members of the same family system, their joint contributions to the coparenting relationship need to be examined. The current investigation simultaneously considered both mothers' and fathers' expressiveness as predictors of coparenting. Thus, the final aim of the current study was to simultaneously examine the effects of maternal and paternal expressiveness, as well as the interaction between maternal and paternal expressiveness, in predicting coparenting behavior. Testing the interaction allowed us to address whether it is necessary for both parents to exhibit high levels of positive expressiveness for positive coparenting interactions to ensue or whether it is possible that one parent's positive expressiveness compensates for the other parent's low positive expressiveness. Partners who are more similar on a variety of factors, including personality characteristics, report more marital satisfaction than couples who are dissimilar (Antill, 1983; Caspi & Herbener, 1990). Belsky et al (1995) argued that partners with similar personality characteristics may share the same outlook on life and approach family interactions, such as coparenting, in much the same way. When both spouses are high on positive emotional expressiveness, perhaps they also report higher marital satisfaction and more supportive coparenting than when only one spouse is high or both are low on expressiveness. We hypothesized that when both partners reported high levels of positive expressiveness or low levels of negative expressiveness, couples would be more likely to engage in positive coparenting partnerships. Conversely, we expected that when both partners were low in positive expressiveness or high in negative expressiveness, they would engage in less supportive coparenting - even though they would be similar in their levels of emotional expressiveness.

In sum, the four aims of the current study were (1) to examine relations between parental expressiveness and the quality of the coparenting and marital relationship; (2) to address whether parental expressiveness was a significant and unique predictor of coparenting behavior; (3) to assess whether parental expressiveness was a moderator of the coparenting and marriage link; and (4) to examine the interaction of mother and father expressiveness in predicting coparenting.

## Method

### Participants

Participants included mothers, fathers, and two children from 57 families participating in a study of marriage and children's development of prosocial behavior. Families were primarily recruited through birth announcements, newspaper advertisements, and hospital birth records and met the following criteria: (1) both mothers and fathers agreed to participate, (2) the family had a 2-year-old toddler, and (3) the toddler had an older sibling between 3 and 7 years of age.

Participants were predominantly European-American and included 3 Asian-American fathers, 1 Latino father, 1 Asian-American mother, and 1 Latina mother. Families were primarily middle to upper-middle class, with families' annual mean income between \$90,000 and \$100,000. Ninety-five percent of the fathers were employed outside the home and worked an average of 51 ( $SD = 9$ ) hours per week. Fifty-seven percent of the mothers were employed outside the home and worked an average of 30 ( $SD = 19$ ) hours per week. Most couples had some college education; 83% of the parents completed at least a bachelor's degree. Couples, on average, had been married for 9 years ( $SD = 3$ ). The younger children were, on average, 26.5 months old (range of 19 to 33) and their older siblings were, on average, 57.5 months old (range of 38 to 86). In all but 9 of the families, participating older and younger children were first- and second-borns, respectively. Fifty-eight families initially agreed to participate; however, one family declined to participate in the second lab visit.

## Procedures

Families participated in two laboratory visits (each 3 hours long) that were separated by approximately one month. The first visit focused on the married couple, and included several marital interaction tasks (e.g., problem-solving, storybook, marital support), of which the 20-minute marital support task was used here. Spouses also individually completed questionnaires about their marital relationship and emotional expressiveness. During the second visit, all family members were invited to the lab for a series of dyadic sibling and triadic parent-sibling interaction tasks. Spouses completed a self-report measure of coparenting as part of a packet of questionnaires. Families were compensated \$50 for their participation.

## Measures

**Marital relationship quality**—During the first visit to the laboratory, couples engaged in a 20-minute support task where each spouse took a turn (counterbalanced across spouse) talking about a problem he or she was having (10 minutes for each spouse). After the 20-minute session, each spouse completed the 21-item Interaction Supportiveness Scale (Cutrona, 1996) that assessed their perceptions of the type and amount of support the other spouse provided. Each item was rated from 0 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. Items included: “My spouse was sensitive to my feelings,” “My spouse behaved warmly to me,” and “My spouse did not take my problems seriously.” When necessary, items were reverse scored so that higher values represented more support. The 21 items were averaged to create a total support score for each spouse ( $\alpha = .73$  for wives and  $.74$  for husbands). Similar to Cutrona, Hessling, and Suhr (1997) we found strong correspondence between husbands' and wives' perceptions of support ( $r = .45, p < .001$ ) and then averaged spouses' scores to create a dyadic score of support during the communication task.

The Intimate Relations Questionnaire (Braiker & Kelley, 1979) assessed husbands' and wives' perceptions of the amount of love, conflict, maintenance, and ambivalence in their marital relationship. For the purposes of this study, only the love scale was used, which consists of the mean of 10 items that measure the extent to which individuals feel intimately connected to and committed to their spouses. Each item is rated on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 9 = very much or extremely. Examples included: “To what extent do you love your spouse at this stage?” and “How close do you feel toward your spouse?” Higher scores reflect more love ( $\alpha = .83$  for wives and  $.82$  for husbands). Belsky and Hsieh (1998) found marital love scores to be highly stable across four years for husbands and wives. Because wives' and husbands' ratings were significantly correlated ( $r = .39, p < .01$ ), they were averaged to create a dyadic love score.



Partners' perceptions of support during the communication task and their reports of marital love were correlated .48 ( $p < .001$ ). These variables were standardized and then averaged to create a composite of positive marital relationship quality.

**Parental expressiveness**—Halberstadt's Self-Expressiveness in the Family Questionnaire (SEFQ; Halberstadt et al., 1995) assesses the frequency of an individual's positive and negative expressiveness within the family. Forty hypothetical scenarios reflecting a range of emotion situations in family communication are rated on a 9-point scale from 1 = not at all frequently to 9 = very frequently. Twenty-three of the questionnaire items were averaged to create positive expressiveness scores for husbands and wives (e.g., "Expressing excitement over one's future plans" and "Spontaneously hugging a family member"). The remaining 17 items were averaged to create negative expressiveness scores for husbands and wives (e.g., "Crying after an unpleasant disagreement" and "Showing contempt for someone else's behavior"). Halberstadt et al (1995) found high levels of stability in men's and women's expressiveness across eight months ( $r$ 's ranged from .64 to .82). Internal consistency for positive expressiveness was .86 and .91 for wives and husbands, respectively, and .85 and .86 for wives' and husbands' negative expressiveness, respectively. Positive and negative expressiveness were not significantly related for either mothers or fathers and were retained as independent indicators in the current study.

**Coparenting behavior**—The Coparenting Questionnaire (CQ; Margolin et al., 2001) assessed parents' perceptions of coparenting: cooperation, triangulation, and conflict. Each of the 14 items on this questionnaire was rated on a 5-point scale from 1 = never to 5 = always to form scales for cooperation (5 items; e.g., "My spouse says nice things to me about our child"), triangulation (4 items, e.g., "My spouse tries to get our child to take sides when we argue"), and conflict (5 items; e.g., "My spouse argues with me about our child"). Margolin and colleagues (2001) established validity for this questionnaire using three independent samples and relating these coparenting dimensions to children's reports of parenting and observational ratings of couple's behavior. In the current study, each parent completed this questionnaire twice, once with respect to the spouse's interactions involving the older child and once with respect to the younger child in the family. Correlations revealed consistency in parental reports across children ( $r$ 's = .50 to .77) as well as across mothers and fathers ( $r$ 's = .25 to .54). To create more robust composites of coparenting behavior, we averaged across the subscales for each parent's reports of the other's coparenting with each sibling for cooperation, conflict, and triangulation, with one exception. The subscale for fathers' reports of triangulation for the younger sibling was not internally consistent ( $\alpha = .27$ ). It is not entirely clear why this scale was not reliable; however, it may be that mothers are less likely to use triangulating behavior with their partners with respect to the younger sibling or that fathers are less likely to observe their wives during these interactions. In either case, fathers' reports of wives' triangulating behavior for the younger child were not included in the final composite. Internal consistency was high for the remaining subscales ( $\alpha = .74$  to .86). Composites were significantly intercorrelated ( $r = -.45$  for cooperation and triangulation,  $r = -.72$  for cooperation and conflict, and  $r = .53$  for triangulation and conflict) but retained as three separate scales because they represent theoretically distinct constructs.

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for all variables used in the analyses.

## Results

### Associations among Marital Quality, Parental Expressiveness, and Coparenting Behavior

To address the first aim of the study, bivariate correlations were conducted to examine associations between marital relationship quality, parental expressiveness, and coparenting.

Analyses between marital relationship quality and coparenting revealed that supportive marital relationships were positively related to coparental cooperation ( $r = .51, p < .001$ ) and negatively related to coparental triangulation ( $r = -.44, p = .001$ ) and coparental conflict ( $r = -.56, p < .001$ ). Correlations for parent expressiveness with marital relationship quality and coparenting can be found in Table 2. Positive associations were found between husbands' and wives' positive expressiveness and coparental cooperation, as well as between husbands' and wives' negative expressiveness and coparental conflict. Only husbands' positive expressiveness was inversely related to triangulation. Finally, wives' positive expressiveness was positively associated supportive marital relations and husbands' negative expressiveness was inversely associated with supportive marital relations.

### Additive Effects of Parental Expressiveness on Coparenting Behavior

To address the second aim, six hierarchical regression models were conducted to examine the contributions of mothers' and fathers' expressiveness on coparenting behavior beyond supportive marital quality. Supportive marital quality was entered in Step 1 and mothers' and fathers' expressiveness in Step 2. Due to sample size constraints, a model using each individual characteristic (i.e., positive expressiveness and negative expressiveness) was run for each coparenting behavior (i.e., cooperation, triangulation, and conflict).

In each of the six models examined, marital relationship quality and parental expressiveness explained a statistically significant amount of variation in coparenting behavior. Together, marital quality and mothers' and fathers' positive expressiveness explained 36% ( $F(3, 53) = 9.84, p < .001$ ), 22% ( $F(3, 53) = 4.87, p < .01$ ), and 33% ( $F(3, 53) = 8.53, p < .001$ ) of the total variance in cooperation, triangulation, and conflict, respectively. Marital quality and mothers' and fathers' negative expressiveness explained 30% ( $F(3, 53) = 7.57, p < .001$ ), 18% ( $F(3, 53) = 3.84, p < .05$ ), and 37% ( $F(3, 53) = 10.52, p < .001$ ) of the total variance in cooperation, triangulation, and conflict, respectively. Supportive marital relationship quality explained a statistically significant amount of variance for each coparenting dimension (cooperation: 26%,  $F(1, 55) = 19.52, p < .001$ ; triangulation: 16%,  $F(1, 55) = 10.55, p < .01$ , and conflict: 31%,  $F(1, 55) = 24.93, p < .001$ ) when entered in Step 1. However, only in the case of coparental cooperation did maternal and paternal positive expressiveness explain additional variance,  $\Delta R^2 = 10\%$ ,  $F \text{ Change} = 3.96, p < .05$ ) above and beyond marital relationship quality.

### Interactive Effects of Parent Expressiveness and Marital Quality on Coparenting Behavior

To address the third and fourth aims of the study, the following interaction terms were added to the third step of the hierarchical regression models: maternal expressiveness by supportive marital quality, paternal expressiveness by supportive marital quality, and maternal expressiveness by paternal expressiveness. To reduce multicollinearity and increase interpretability, the continuous variables were centered by subtracting the mean from each score prior to creating the interaction terms (see Aiken & West, 1991). Significant interactions were graphed using high and low values (+1 and -1 standard deviation) for each of the variables in the interaction term. Simple slopes analyses were conducted to test whether the plotted regression lines were significantly different from zero. A slope significantly different from zero indicates that for a particular level of the moderator there is a strong relationship between the independent and dependent variables (Aiken & West, 1991).

Table 3 summarizes the significant findings from these analyses. A paternal positive expressiveness by supportive marital quality interaction was significant for triangulation (see Table 3). As Figure 1 shows, among fathers low in positive expressiveness, there was a significant negative association between supportive marital quality and triangulation. In families where fathers expressed low levels of positive affect, triangulation between parents

increased significantly as supportive marital quality decreased ( $b = -.25, p < .001$ ). In contrast, among those fathers who expressed high levels of positive expressiveness, the association between supportive marital quality and coparenting triangulation was not significant ( $b = -.05, p = .29$ ).

The regression analyses also revealed one significant maternal by paternal expressiveness interaction predicting coparental conflict (see Table 3). Although the slope of neither regression line was significantly different from zero, the significant interaction in Figure 2 shows that the regression lines representing the association between mothers' positive expressiveness and coparenting conflict differ as a function of fathers' positive expressiveness. Parents engaged in lower levels of coparenting conflict when one parent was low in positive expressiveness and the other was high in positive expressiveness. In contrast, parents engaged in higher levels of coparenting conflict when either both parents were low in positive expressiveness or when both parents were high in positive expressiveness.

## Discussion

The current investigation examined parental expressiveness, along with marital quality, as correlates of coparenting behavior. The results of this study support the importance of parental expressiveness in the prediction of coparenting. Of particular note is that parental expressiveness, especially fathers' positive expressiveness, makes unique and interactive contributions to couples' abilities to navigate the challenges and stresses related to parenting young children. Parental expressiveness may take on added meaning for couples in distressed or unsupportive marital relationships, and these couples may benefit from work with practitioners and family life educators who are cognizant of the role that the communication of emotions plays in the context of coparenting.

Consistent with our first aim, we replicated previous research supporting the link between marital quality and coparenting behavior. We also replicated earlier research linking expressiveness and marital functioning (Gill et al., 1999; Halberstadt et al., 1995; Lamke, 1989; Rauer & Volling, 2005); that is, wives' positive emotional expressiveness was related positively to supportive marital quality whereas husbands' negative expressiveness was inversely associated with supportive marital quality. Although it is not clear why negative and positive expressiveness may be linked differentially to marital relationship quality for men and women, one possibility is that women's positive expressiveness is more relevant to the interpersonal context of marriage, whereas for men, negative expressiveness is more relevant (Halberstadt et al., 1995). Women tend to be more emotionally expressive than men within the context of marital relationships (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995) and women's expressiveness frequently sets the tone for marital interactions (Wood, Rhodes, & Whelan, 1989). Positively expressive wives may create an environment that allows for more positive marital interactions. In addition to being less emotionally expressive than women, men are also more defensive and withdrawn in the face of marital conflict than women (Carstensen et al., 1995). It may be that men's defensiveness, coupled with fewer socialization experiences during childhood, leave husbands ill-equipped for dealing with their negative emotions within the marital context (Rauer & Volling, 2005). Thus, men's expression of negative emotions within the family may have a more negative impact on the marital relationship than wives' negative expressiveness.

In line with the first aim of this investigation, we posited that expressiveness would be associated with coparenting behavior such that positive expressiveness would support coparental relationships and negative expressiveness might lead to problems in the coparenting relationship. Consistent with expectations, we found that mothers' and fathers' positive expressiveness was positively related to coparental cooperation and mothers' and fathers'



negative expressiveness was related to coparental conflict. In general, when spouses express more positive emotions and less negative emotions, the coparental relationship involves more cooperation and less conflict. Due to the almost exclusive reliance on parent reports in the current investigation, some might attribute these significant associations to shared method variance. Yet, by compositing mothers' and fathers' reports of coparenting, we were able to reduce the likelihood that our findings are due simply to shared method variance across one reporter.

In the case of coparental triangulation, only husbands' positive expressiveness was negatively related to triangulation in the coparenting relationship. When husbands were less positively expressive they engaged in more triangulating behavior with their partners, forming alliances with their children against their wives and placing their children at-risk for potential adjustment difficulties (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Jacobvitz, Hazen, Curran, & Hitchens, 2004; Kerig, 1995). One might ask why husband's positive expressiveness was negatively related to triangulation when wives' was not. Men may have more difficulty maintaining interpersonal boundaries between the parent-child and marital subsystems (Minuchin, 1974). Several investigators have reported that marital conflict disrupts father-child interactions; however, it does not appear to affect mother-child interactions in the same way (Brody, Pellegrini, & Sigel, 1986; Belsky, Youngblade, Rovine, & Volling, 1991), suggesting that women are better able to establish flexible, yet clear, boundaries. Because triangulation inherently involves the inclusion of the child in an alliance with one parent against the other, it represents a boundary violation across the marital and parent-child subsystems. Men high in positive expressiveness may be directing their intimate and affectionate emotions toward their wives, whereas men low in positive expressiveness may be directing such emotions across family boundaries and forming closer bonds with their children. Further research examining the link between coparenting and parental expressiveness is needed to explore this possibility.

Taking a family systems' approach, the present work extended previous research by including both mothers' and fathers' expressiveness, along with marital quality, as predictors of coparenting. Consistent with the second aim of this research, mothers' and fathers' positive expressiveness together explained unique variance in coparenting cooperation after controlling for supportive marital quality. Although bivariate correlations revealed that both mothers and fathers who were openly expressive and loving within the family context were more cooperative with their spouses around coparenting issues, the regression analyses revealed that only fathers' positive expressiveness was a unique predictor of cooperation, even after marital quality was considered. These results highlight men's positive expressiveness as an important contributor to establishing supportive coparental relationships. Men who are more positively expressive may be more agreeable, in general, making it easier to establish cooperative coparenting relationships with their wives. It should be noted, however, that only 1 of the 6 models tested revealed that parental expressiveness explained more variance independently of the marital relationship. Parental positive expressiveness did not explain additional variance in triangulation or coparental conflict, and neither mothers' nor fathers' negative expressiveness was a unique predictor for any of the coparenting dimensions once marital quality was considered. Thus, in this investigation, positive expressiveness in the family, and particularly fathers' expression of positive emotions, appeared to be more influential in building cooperative coparenting relationships.

With regard to our third hypothesis that parental expressiveness would moderate the associations between marital quality and coparenting, we found some support for the attenuation hypothesis (Talbot & McHale, 2004). In one instance, lower levels of marital functioning were not accompanied by increases in triangulating behavior when fathers were high in positive expressiveness, suggesting that fathers' positive expressiveness helps protect family relationships from conflict and may be beneficial to family interactions. Spouses'

expressions of positive affect, in particular, contribute to marital stability (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998), and positive emotions offset the expression of negative emotions during marital interactions (Gottman & Levenson, 1999a). The current findings suggest that fathers' positive expressiveness may prevent triangulation in the coparental relationship from undermining marital interactions. When developing interventions for couples with children, practitioners may want to attend to the emotional characteristics of the individual spouses and encourage husbands, in particular, to modify their emotional behavior within the family (Lebow, 1999).

In line with the final aim of this investigation, we were interested in the combined contribution of maternal and paternal expressiveness on coparenting behavior. In contrast to our hypothesis that parents would engage in low levels of coparental conflict when both parents were high in positive expressiveness, we found that parents engaged in the lowest levels of coparenting conflict when one parent was high in positive expressiveness and the other parent was low in positive expressiveness. Two competing hypotheses, the similarity hypothesis and the complementarity hypothesis, have been considered to understand the role of partner characteristics on marital satisfaction (Gattis, Berns, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004). The similarity hypothesis proposes that partners who are similar may be more compatible and experience higher marital satisfaction. In contrast, the complementarity hypothesis proposes that partners who are dissimilar from each other may complement one another, which also contributes to higher marital satisfaction. The current findings provide support for the complementarity hypothesis in that one spouse's openness to display positive emotions appears to compensate for (or complement) the other spouse's low levels of positive emotions, allowing positive coparenting interactions to continue. Apparently, it does not matter which spouse is more positively expressive as long as one is openly expressive. Positively expressive individuals may be more effective at communicating with their partners than less positively expressive individuals and in the long term, this communication translates to less conflict within the coparenting partnership. Again, these findings support intervention efforts focused on the communication of positive emotions (Lebow, 1999) in the family context to facilitate the development and maintenance of positive coparenting partnerships.

We must note, however, that when both spouses were either low in positive expressiveness or high in positive expressiveness, they engaged in the highest levels of coparenting conflict. Clearly, when both spouses do not openly share their feelings of love, appreciation, and concern, they may have difficulties communicating with each other which may lead to more conflictual coparenting interactions. It is less clear why two positively expressive individuals would engage in high levels of coparenting conflict; however, it is possible that these parents are frequently engaged with each other, including the parenting of their children. High levels of engagement in the parenting role may simply increase the likelihood of coparenting conflict (Feinberg, 2003). Therefore, coparenting conflict may increase when both spouses are either low or high on positive expressiveness, but for very different reasons. We should underscore, however, that conflict is an inevitable component of every interpersonal relationship and is not inherently detrimental for individual well-being or intrafamilial relationships when it is handled constructively and accompanied by the positive emotions (Katz, Kramer, & Gottman, 1995). Future research is needed to examine how spousal expressiveness interacts to determine the quality of interpersonal relationships.

Taken together, findings from the current investigation suggest that spouses' patterns of communication of emotions within the context of the family have implications for the development and maintenance of intrafamilial relationships and thus, communication may be an important avenue for clinical intervention for couples in the throes of raising young children. Simple interventions focused on emotion expression may assist families before they are in distress. Moreover, these findings draw attention to the differential impact that positive and

negative emotions play within the family. Given that positive emotions appear to be especially pertinent to family functioning, family practitioners may be wise to implement interventions that are specifically designed to bolster positive emotions.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Although this is one of the first studies to examine the role of personal attributes to coparenting relationships, there are several limitations to the current research that need to be addressed. Specifically, we utilized a sample of predominantly white, middle-class families in well-adjusted marriages, thus limiting the population to which our findings can be generalized. Future research may want to consider the linkages among coparenting, marital quality, and parent characteristics across a more culturally and economically diverse sample of maritally distressed families as these processes may operate differently.

In spite of the low-risk nature of this sample, we found some support for our hypothesis that parents' emotional expressiveness would moderate the associations between marital quality and coparenting behavior. The sample size was small given the number of variables included in each regression model, which may have limited our statistical power. Nevertheless, we were still able to detect significant associations among the study variables. We encourage researchers to test these hypotheses using larger samples of couples raising children at different points in the lifespan (e.g., middle childhood, adolescence). Research in this area may also benefit from observational studies of mothers and fathers interacting with their children as this would give us a more nuanced understanding of family interactions. Observational data may also be less vulnerable to problems related to social desirability that might characterize self-report assessments of behavior, thus, the observational assessments may increase the variability observed in individual expressiveness and family interactions.

In this study, we conceptualized coparenting as the outcome variable and supportive marital quality and expressiveness as predictors. Although the predictors were assessed about a month before coparenting behavior (at the first lab visit), the temporal closeness in the measurement of these constructs still limits our ability to establish causality. It is possible that parents who have established more positive coparenting partnerships experience higher marital quality or that being in a supportive marriage allows one to express more positive emotions. More than likely, the associations between marriage and coparenting are bidirectional. Although we examined parent expressiveness as a moderator, parental characteristics may, in fact, be the driving force behind the marriages that couples form and subsequently, the coparenting partnerships that develop within these marriages. Belsky (1984) argued that personality characteristics are one of the strongest determinants of parenting because of their influence on individuals' relationships with spouses, family members, and co-workers. As such, parent characteristics may set the stage for the resulting marital relationship and the parenting that develops within a given family. Future research on the development of coparenting relationships would benefit from longitudinal data as coparenting no doubt changes as children mature and parents have different expectations for children's behavior over time.

Even though negative expressiveness was independently linked to marital quality and coparenting behavior, neither mothers' nor fathers' expression of negative emotion within the family contributed additively or interactively to our understanding of coparenting interactions. Though we anticipated finding stronger support for negative emotions in predicting the negative dimensions of coparenting, characteristics of the current sample may have prevented us from supporting these hypotheses. Only maritally-satisfied couples were recruited for the current research given our interest in the family dynamics that promote children's prosocial behavior. As such, negative emotional expressiveness may not characterize a large fraction of our sample, limiting our ability to examine the effects of negative emotions in the family. Moreover, expression of negative emotions, like coparental conflict, may not necessarily be

detrimental to family relations, especially if accompanied by the expression of positive emotions, which may offset the damaging impact of negative emotion on family relationships. Clearly, more research is needed that examines the combined role of negative and positive expressiveness for healthy family functioning. Until then, family practitioners should consider parents' expression of both positive and negative emotions as potential contributors to marital and coparental functioning.

Although self-expressiveness in the family has been linked to children's development and marital relationship functioning, to our knowledge this is the first study to consider parents' expressive behavior in the family with regard to the coparenting relationship. Our findings extend past research by underscoring the complex nature of intrafamilial processes and highlighting the role of both mothers' and fathers' emotional expressiveness within the broader family context. Future research examining the supportive role of fathers in the family is needed in order to fully appreciate how emotional expressiveness contributes not only to the cooperative and supportive relations between parents but to the wider interpersonal context of family relationships.

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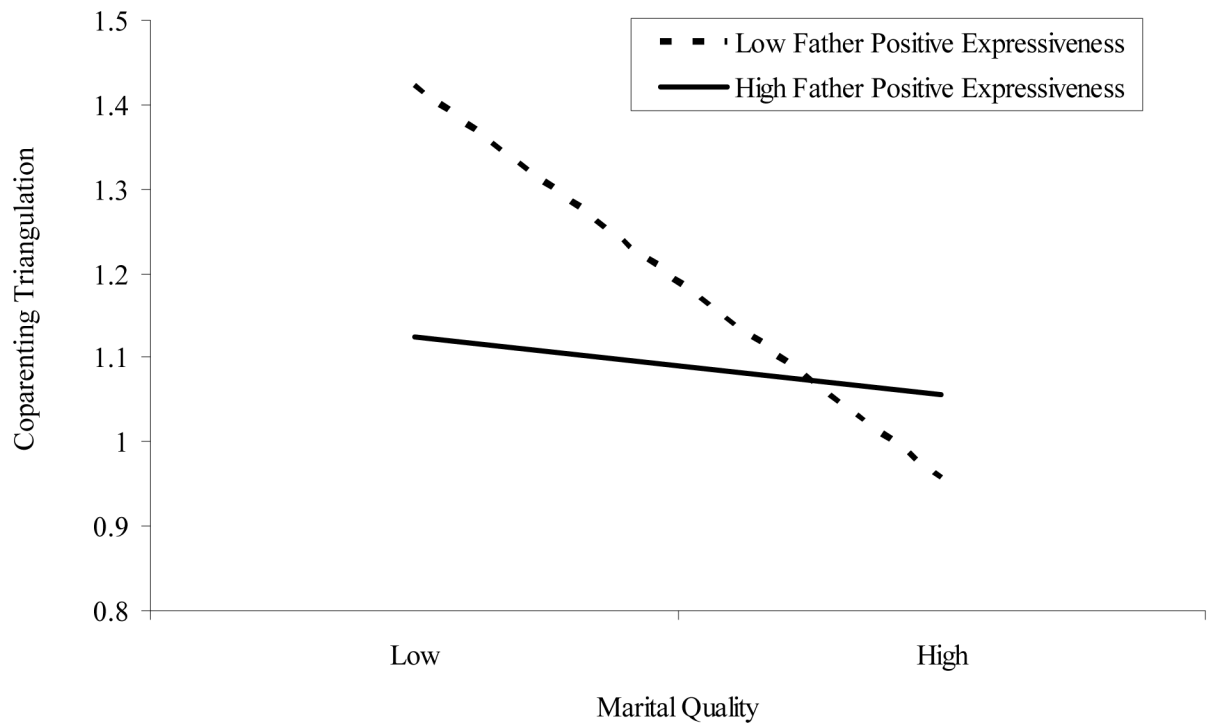
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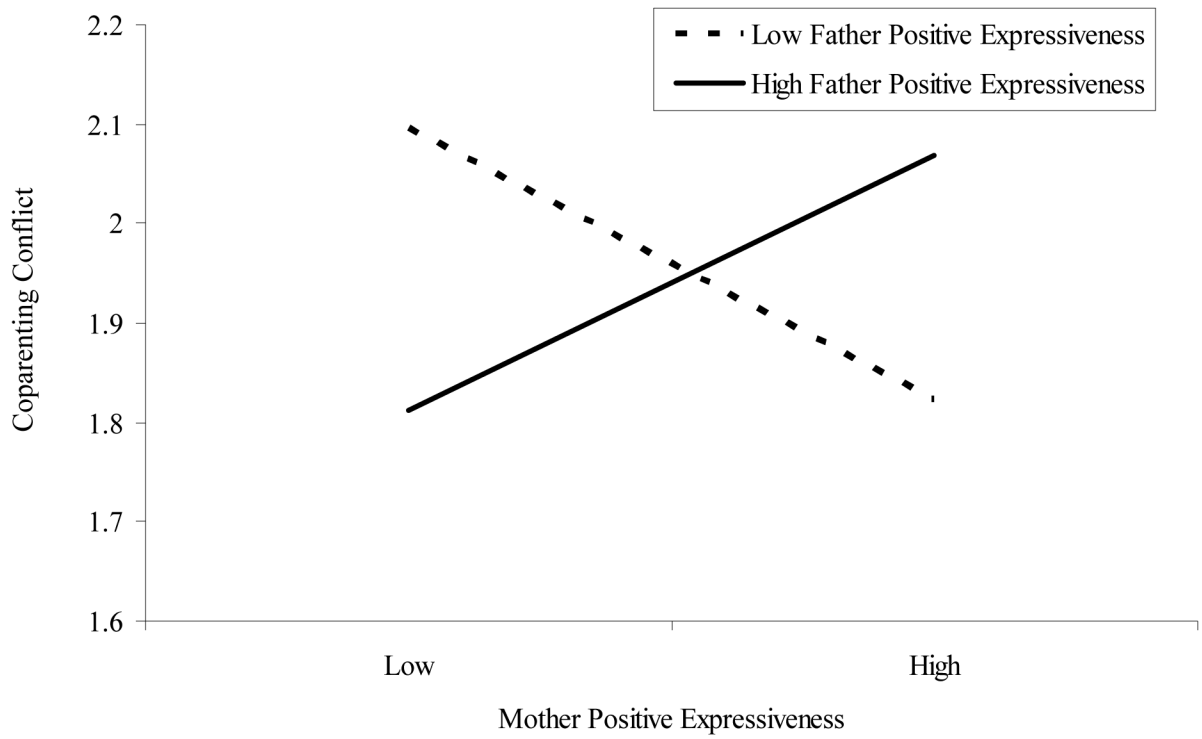
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**Figure 1.** The interaction between marital quality and fathers' positive expressiveness on coparenting triangulation.



**Figure 2.**  
The interaction between mothers' positive expressiveness and fathers' positive expressiveness on coparenting conflict.

**Table 1**  
**Descriptive Statistics for Variables Used in Analyses**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Marital Quality</i>	0	1.00
<i>Maternal Expressiveness</i>		
Positive	6.86	.85
Negative	3.62	1.00
<i>Paternal Expressiveness</i>		
Positive	6.18	1.02
Negative	3.35	.96
<i>Coparenting Variables</i>		
Cooperation	4.11	.52
Triangulation	1.16	.28
Conflict	1.91	.49

**Table 2**  
**Correlations of Parental Expressiveness with Marital Quality and Coparenting Variables**

	Marital Quality	Coparenting		
		Cooperation	Triangulation	Conflict
<i>Maternal Expressiveness</i>				
Positive	.51***	.37**	-.12	-.22
Negative	-.13	-.26*	-.01	.29*
<i>Paternal Expressiveness</i>				
Positive	.17	.35**	-.29*	-.18
Negative	-.30*	-.14	.23	.28*

Notes:

\*  
 $p < .05$

\*\*  
 $p < .01$

\*\*\*  
 $p < .001$



**Table 3**  
Predicting Coparenting Behavior with Marital Quality and Positive Expressiveness

Models and predictors	$\beta$	<i>SE B</i>	Change in $R^2$	<i>F</i> Change
<i>Cooperation</i>				
Step 1: Marital Quality	.36*	.08	.26	19.52***
Step 2: M PE	.24	.08		
F PE	.28*	.06	.10	3.96*
Step 3: MQ $\times$ M PE	.14	.07		
MQ $\times$ F PE	.04	.08		
M PE $\times$ F PE	-.04	.08	.02	.59
Total $R^2$	.38			
<i>F</i> (6, 50)	5.10***			
<i>Triangulation</i>				
Step 1: Marital Quality	-.47***	.05	.16	10.55***
Step 2: M PE	.10	.05		
F PE	-.18	.04	.06	1.87
Step 3: MQ $\times$ M PE	.05	.04		
MQ $\times$ F PE	.32*	.05		
M PE $\times$ F PE	.01	.05	.09	2.25
Total $R^2$	.32			
<i>F</i> (6, 50)	3.73**			
<i>Conflict</i>				
Step 1: Marital Quality	-.58***	.07	.31	24.93***
Step 2: M PE	-.01	.08		
F PE	-.02	.05	.01	.54
Step 3: MQ $\times$ M PE	-.18	.07		
MQ $\times$ F PE	-.07	.08		
M PE $\times$ F PE	.27*	.07	.10	2.77*
Total $R^2$	.42			
<i>F</i> (6, 50)	6.08***			

Notes: MQ = Marital Quality, M = Mother, F = Father, PE = Positive Expressiveness The Standardized Betas and Standard Errors presented are from the final models in which all variables were included.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$

\*\*\*  $p < .001$