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The Trajectory of Coparenting Relationship Quality across Early Adolescence: Family, Community, and Parent Gender Influences

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Abstract

This study examined longitudinal change in coparenting support and conflict for married parents during their child's adolescence, and the links between financial, work, and community factors and coparenting support and conflict. We utilized an ecological perspective, drawing on five waves of data from 635 dual-earner families with adolescents ($M = 11.29$, $SD = .48$ years old at Time 1). Applying a multilevel modeling approach and using reports from mothers and fathers we examined: (1) change in coparenting support and conflict over six years; (2) correlated change in contextual factors (financial strain, work hours and satisfaction, and community cohesion) with change in coparenting; and (3) differences in associations for mothers versus fathers. Findings revealed a decline over six years in perceptions of partner coparenting support for mothers and fathers, but no significant change in perceived coparenting conflict. Changes in financial strain, work characteristics, and community cohesion were associated with change in coparenting support and conflict in expected directions; interactions by parent gender suggest that mothers' reports of coparenting quality are more closely linked to some contextual influences than fathers' reports. Discussion centers on the implications of social contexts for coparenting at a critical period in youth development.

Keywords

Coparenting support; coparenting conflict; financial strain; work characteristics; community cohesion; adolescent development

Coparenting is a multidimensional family systems construct that refers to the relationship between caregivers specific to their parenting roles (Feinberg, 2003; McHale, 1995). Past research has identified key dimensions of coparenting, including support and conflict. Supportive coparents tend to work together to achieve mutual childrearing goals rather than undermining one another's parenting efforts, whereas coparenting conflict is defined by disagreements and conflict over childrearing (Feinberg, 2003; Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004). Coparenting support and conflict play significant roles in child and family well-being

Findings for coparenting conflict were presented in 2017 at the meeting of the National Council on Family Relations.

and often predict adjustment above and beyond indicators of parenting or marital quality (Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001).

Given the implications of coparenting for family and individual well-being, recent attention has centered on factors – both within and outside of the family – that relate to coparenting relationship quality (Feinberg, 2003). However, our understanding of what contributes to effective coparenting remains limited. First, much of the existing literature focuses on young families, overlooking changes during later development, particularly adolescence when the family system is often in flux. Second, few studies have examined the role of contextual factors such as parents’ work or community factors in shaping the development of coparenting. Using longitudinal methods, this study advances coparenting research by examining: (1) the trajectory of mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting support and conflict from youths’ pre- to mid-adolescence period; (2) contextual (i.e., financial, work, and community) correlates of change in coparenting qualities over time; and (3) whether these associations differ by parent gender.

In investigating the roles of contextual factors for coparenting, this study moves beyond a limitation in longitudinal research to examine time-varying correlates of change in coparenting support and conflict. Studies often suggest that they are testing longitudinal associations without separating between-person from within-person effects (Curran & Bauer, 2011). Only a within-person analysis can address questions about changes in mothers’ and fathers’ financial, work, and community experiences and corresponding changes in coparenting. To shed light on associations between contextual factors and coparenting as a function of time, we tested youth age as a moderating factor. This allowed us to explore whether the strength of average and time-varying associations vary across adolescence. Therefore, this study advances the scope of longitudinal coparenting research by linking within-person change in financial strain, work hours, work satisfaction, and community cohesion with corresponding changes in coparenting support and conflict as youth move through pre- to mid-adolescence.

Coparenting during Adolescence

As a family systems construct, coparenting is sensitive to individual and family development. Adolescence, a period characterized by gains in autonomy and independence, is recognized as a transition that brings challenges to the family system (Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991). As such, we expect the early stages of adolescence to be a period when parents renegotiate their coparenting relationship as they adapt to these developmental changes.

Because coparenting has been shown to relate to parent and child well-being as well as family relationships, it is important to understand the longitudinal change in coparenting across developmental stages. Prior research has shown that coparenting differs by child age; however, most studies of coparenting children at different developmental stages are limited to comparisons of families with younger versus older children. For example, in a comparison of coparents with preschoolers and with preadolescents, the latter were more likely to become involved in coparenting dynamics that led to the formation of family alliances (Margolin et al., 2001). In contrast, coparents with preschool-aged children reported more

cooperation than did parents with adolescents. This was likely due to young children’s need for more “hands-on” parenting compared to the decreased needs of more autonomous adolescents (Maccoby et al., 1993). Indeed, parents’ joint decision-making declines as youth become more independent (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Daddis, 2004), and youth risky behavior in adolescence has negative implications for coparents’ level of shared decision-making (Riina & McHale, 2014). These findings illustrate not only the disparities in coparenting at different points in a child’s development, but also the adolescence-related challenges that can have implications for coparenting. Thus, we hypothesized that coparenting support would decline and conflict would increase as coparents face new challenges and renegotiate the task of raising an adolescent.

Contextual Correlates of Coparenting

Feinberg’s (2003) model of coparenting draws on family systems and ecological perspectives to highlight the roles of financial, work, and community factors as either stressors or supports for coparenting. Coparenting quality can suffer in the face of stressors, as things like daily hassles and parenting stress heighten individual strains and create tension between parents (Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz, & Carrano, 2010). Taking a contextual approach, we considered financial strain and long work hours as stressors; we expect such stresses to increase parents’ difficulty in maintaining a supportive and low conflict coparenting relationship. In contrast, satisfaction with work and living in a close-knit, cohesive community should reduce parents’ stress and thus lead to higher levels of coparenting support and lower levels of conflict.

Financial strain

Financial strain is characterized by limited financial resources and difficulty making ends meet. Research has shown that financial strain has negative implications for parent and couple well-being, including heightened distress and increased family conflict (Conger et al., 1990; Gudmonson et al., 2007). In a study of married couples, Vinokur and colleagues (1996) found that financial strain was associated with depression, which in turn was related to greater social undermining and reduced partner support. Relatively few studies have examined associations between financial factors and coparenting. Findings from one study showed positive associations between income and coparenting support among non-resident unmarried African American fathers (Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2010). Limited financial resources and reported difficulty in making ends meet were linked to decreased satisfaction and support and greater conflict in coparenting among two-parent African American families (Brody et al., 1994; Riina & McHale, 2012). Building on prior research, we expected to find that financial strain is a stressor that undermines coparenting support and heightens coparent conflict.

Work characteristics

A work-family spillover perspective directs attention to the negative or positive transfer of mood or affect from the work to the family context (Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2002). Research on *work hours* suggests that parents who work long hours may experience negative spillover, as work interference with family life can be a strain on relationship

quality (Major, Klein, & Ehrhart, 2002; Voydanoff, 2004). For example, there is evidence that the time parents spend at work is inversely associated with their childrearing involvement (Brown et al., 2011). Further, one study suggests that mothers' work hours were associated with lower involvement from fathers, independent of fathers' own work hours (Norman, Elliott, & Fagan, 2014). Not only does spending more time at work come at the expense of time spent at home, but working long hours may also lead to an imbalance in the division of labor (Yavorsky, Dush, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). As a result, low involvement, particularly from fathers, and inequitable division of labor may increase tension or reduce support between coparents (Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011). Thus, we expected greater work hours to negatively disrupt coparenting, leading to decreased support and increased conflict.

Directing attention to positive work-family spillover, research on work-family enrichment suggests that *work satisfaction* enhances positive emotions at home (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), which may lead to more supportive and less conflictual coparenting. In addition, experiencing competence at work, which tends to be associated with satisfaction, may spill over to a greater sense of competence at home. A greater sense of competency may lead parents to be less defensive, more open, and more inclined to support their partner's childrearing style. Although research has yet to consider the implications of work satisfaction for coparenting, prior findings have suggested that overall happiness with work relates to marriage and parenting characteristics. There is evidence that when workers had a better day at work, they experienced more positive affect in their marital relationship (Ilies, Wilson, & Wagner, 2009), and these associations between work satisfaction and marital satisfaction have been shown to hold across 12 years (Rogers & May, 2003). A study of parenting found that fathers' work satisfaction lessened parenting burden; moreover, work satisfaction was more salient for parenting quality than work stress (Kinnunen et al., 1996). Given evidence of the positive implications of work satisfaction for family life, we expected greater work satisfaction to be related to more coparenting support, whereas low work satisfaction would relate to more coparenting conflict.

Community cohesion

Neighborhoods and communities play a vital yet understudied role in family well-being (Ceballos & McLoyd, 2002; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Indeed, many families actively seek communities that are cohesive and "family friendly," and offer amenities that cater to children's activities and parents' needs (Barnett & Gareis, 2009). Neighborhood benefits also are conferred via supportive social relationships and networking with community members that can facilitate access to supports. Community cohesion, defined by the extent to which residents feel a community is "tight-knit", may benefit coparents by serving as an extrafamilial source of social support (Plybon et al., 2003; Sampson, 2003; Tendulkar et al., 2012). Findings from a growing body of research suggest that living in a cohesive community promotes better parenting and family functioning (e.g., Kohen et al., 2008). With respect to coparenting, instrumental and emotional supports from neighbors may provide dual-earner parents with resources that allow them to better coordinate their work and parenting responsibilities (Voydanoff, 2007). In contrast, neighborhood disadvantage (i.e., poverty, crime, and disorder), has been found to compromise the quality of inter-parental relationships (Kiser & Black, 2005) and undermine

coparenting quality for single-parent African American mothers (Sterrett, Jones, Forehand, & Garai, 2010). Thus, we expected community cohesion to be positively associated with coparenting support and inversely related to coparenting conflict.

Mother-Father Differences

Despite continuing attention to gender differences in family relationships, relatively little is known about how mothers' versus fathers' extra-familial roles and experiences contribute to coparenting quality. The sex-role approach highlights mother-father differences in family roles, suggesting that men tend to focus their energy on work and financial support and women focus their energy on family functioning and childrearing (Voydanoff, 2004). Even though fathers are more involved in childrearing than ever before (Ponnet et al., 2013), women still tend to take primary responsibility for children and family even in dual-earner families (Falconier & Epstein, 2010). Working mothers are more likely than fathers to shoulder additional childrearing responsibilities without reducing their work hours (Yavorsky et al., 2015), leading to increased maternal stress which can in turn strain the coparenting relationship. Thus, strains in financial and work contexts in particular are likely to differentially relate to perceptions of coparenting for mothers and fathers. Given mothers' greater daily concern with childrearing issues, and hence attunement to coparenting dynamics, financial and work strains may more severely influence mothers' perceptions of coparenting than fathers' perceptions.

The Present Study

This study expands what is known about the development of coparenting in several ways. The first aim was to chart the trajectory of coparenting support and coparenting conflict across youth's adolescence. We expected to find decline in coparenting support and increase in conflict over time, as coparents renegotiate new parenting challenges. The second aim was to examine time-varying financial, work, and community correlates of change in coparenting support and conflict. We expected high levels of financial strain and time spent at work, and low levels of work satisfaction and community cohesion to act as stressors that would be associated with negative change in coparenting (i.e., decreased support, increased conflict). We expected these associations to emerge when considering predictors and coparenting on average across the study period, as well as at a time-specific level within our multilevel models. A conceptual model (Figure 1) outlines these expected patterns of association among contextual factors and coparenting. Our third aim was to examine parent gender as a moderator of context-coparenting associations. Given mothers' and fathers' different emphases on family and work roles, we expected gender differences in links between financial strain and work hours with coparenting, but also explored the role of gender differences in other contexts as well.

Method

Study Design

The data used for this study came from the PROSPER (Promoting School-Community-University Partnerships to Enhance Resilience) project. PROSPER is a community-

randomized trial that aims to disseminate evidence-based prevention of substance use among rural adolescents (e.g., Spoth, Greenberg, Bierman, & Redmond, 2004). Participants lived in 28 rural and small town communities, 14 each in Pennsylvania and Iowa. Community eligibility was determined on the basis of school district enrollment (1,300 – 2,500) and proportion of student population eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch (> 15%). The predominant race of selected communities was White (61–96%). Communities were matched on school district size and geographic location and randomly assigned to the intervention or control conditions. Given the goals of the present study, study condition was included as a covariate in all models.

Sample

The PROSPER project focused on testing a model of substance use dissemination centered on university Cooperative-Extension educators’ as local prevention catalysts. The research study involved youth from two consecutive cohorts of sixth graders from the 28 participating communities. There were five points of data collection in four years, starting when the first cohort entered sixth grade in fall 2002. Families of youth in the second cohort were randomly selected to participate in annual home-based assessments starting in sixth grade. Recruitment included mail and telephone contact, followed by an in-person recruitment visit. Of the 2,267 families recruited for in-home family assessments, 980 (43%) completed at least one in-home assessment. Only 977 completed Wave 1, however; 3 additional families first completed an assessment at the Wave 2. Paired samples t-test revealed that youth in the in-home subsample were slightly younger, on average, ($M = 11.28$ years, $SD = .49$) relative to youth in the larger PROSPER sample ($M = 11.80$ years, $SD = .43$). In-home assessments consisted of a family composition interview and written questionnaires that were completed independently by mothers, fathers, and youth.

This study draws on data from mothers and fathers at each of 5 time points. We limited the sample to dual-earner families given our focus on parent work context ($n = 764$). Of those families 17% had missing data on coparenting at Time 1. Therefore our final sample included 635 families at Time 1. By Time 5, there were 433 families with complete data on coparenting. Given that data were deidentified, this study was exempted from IRB review. Descriptive statistics for family background and study variables are shown in Table 1.

Measures

All measures came from mothers’ and fathers’ reports on in-home questionnaires at each of 5 points of data collection.

Coparenting qualities—*Coparenting support* was measured using 4 items, and *conflict* was measured using 3 items, from a validated measure of coparenting (Feinberg, Brown, & Kan, 2012). Mothers and fathers reported on the extent of coparenting support they received (e.g., “My spouse supports my discipline decisions”) and on their perception of coparenting conflict (e.g., “My spouse argues with me about our child”) on a scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Items were averaged so that higher scores reflected higher levels of each construct. Alphas for support ranged from .69 - .72 (support) and .76 - .83 (conflict).

Youth age—Youth age in years was used as the metric of time. At Time 1, the average age was $M = 11.29$, $SD = .48$ years. At Time 5, average youth age was $M = 14.89$, $SD = .47$. Age ranged from 10 – 16 years across the study period.

Work hours—Mothers and fathers reported on their own work hours using the prompt “In a normal week, how many hours per week, on average, do you work at this job?” Work hours were log transformed and examined for normality.

Work satisfaction—Mothers and fathers reported on their satisfaction with their primary employment with the single item “How happy are you with this job”? The scale ranged from 1 = *very unhappy* to 5 = *very happy*. Higher scores represent greater satisfaction with work.

Financial strain—Mothers and fathers reported on their perceptions of financial strain and difficulty making ends meet using 5 items (e.g., “My family has enough money to afford the kind of home we should have”) on a scale ranging from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*. Higher scores reflect greater financial strain. Alphas ranged from .87 - .91.

Community cohesion—Mothers and fathers reported on community cohesion using 10 items (e.g., “This is a close-knit community”) adapted from measures of social control and social cohesion (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). The scale ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Higher scores represent stronger cohesion. Alphas ranged from .83 - .88.

Control variables—All analyses included controls for the following family and individual background characteristics measured at Time 1: Study condition (1 = *intervention*; 0 = *control*); State (0 = *Pennsylvania*; 1 = *Iowa*); Household income (estimated raw household income); Parent education (0 = high school or less; 1 = more than high school); Household size; and Child sex (0 = *female*; 1 = *male*). To ensure that findings reflected coparenting independent of marital quality, we included mothers’ and fathers’ marital satisfaction as a control. Using a scale ranging from 1 = *not at all satisfied* to 5 = *completely satisfied*, parents described their marital satisfaction using a single item (“All in all, how satisfied are you with your relationship?”).

Results

Analytic Strategy

We utilized multi-level modeling (MLM), to address each aim. An MLM approach extends multiple regression in several ways. First, it accounts for dependencies in the data that may exist between members of the same family (i.e., mothers versus fathers) and within person over time. Second, this approach provides for the use of cases with one or more observations missing at random (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002), allowing us to include all 635 families in these analyses. Further, MLM allows use of unbalanced data, meaning that participants can differ in age at the first point of data collection and do not need to be measured at the same point in time. This feature of MLM allowed us to index change in coparenting as a function of youth age in years—in doing so, we were able to detect developmental patterns of interest that may otherwise be obscured by using wave of data collection as the metric of time.

We tested a three-level model for each coparenting outcome using Proc Mixed in SAS 9.3. The Level 1, or within-person, model captured changes in coparenting in relation to time-varying covariates. First, to describe change in coparenting as a function of youth age we tested linear and quadratic age polynomials at Level 1. To understand whether changes in parents' social contexts (i.e., financial strain, work characteristics, or community cohesion) coincided with changes in coparenting, these indicators were included as time-varying covariates at Level 1 and were group-mean centered (centered around individual's cross-time mean on that indicator).

The Level 2, or between-person, model accounts for dependencies between members of the same family. By including both mothers and fathers in the same analysis, we were able to test the moderating role of parent gender to determine any mother-father differences in patterns of association. The variables at Level 2 were cross-time means, or time-invariant contextual characteristics that differed for mothers and fathers. To examine whether changes in parents' contexts were associated with changes in coparenting, at Level 2 we included the cross-time means for each parent on the time-varying predictors from Level 1. Level 2 predictors allowed us to examine whether cross-time average levels of contextual characteristics were associated with cross-time average levels of coparenting. Because Level 2 cross-time means reflect between-person variation, including these means also limited the time-varying indicators to explaining within-individual variation over time, beyond stable individual differences (Jacobs et al., 2002).

The Level 3 model estimates characteristics shared by mothers and fathers that are stable over time. Here we included youth sex, family size at Time 1, and study design characteristics (condition, geographic location).

Parent and child gender were coded 0 = female, 1 = male. Interactions by parent gender, youth gender, and youth age were tested for all predictors (there were no significant interactions with youth gender so they were dropped from each model). Interactions with parent gender revealed different patterns of association for mothers and fathers and interactions with youth age depicted whether patterns of association changed in a linear manner across adolescent development. All significant interactions were probed following procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991). Retaining non-significant interactions contributes to an increase in standard error (Aiken & West, 1991) so non-significant interactions were removed from each model.

Change in Coparenting Support and Conflict across Youth's Adolescence

The first aim was to examine the growth trajectory of coparenting across five years of youths' adolescence. The index of time (i.e., youth age) was centered at 13 years, the mean age across youth across all time points of the study. We used AIC and BIC fit statistics and significance of variance components to determine the best fitting model. A random intercept model was chosen as the best model to describe change in *coparenting support*. As shown in Table 2, there was a significant linear decline in coparenting support as a function of the time-varying indicator of youth age, $\gamma = -.02$, $SE = .01$, $P < .05$, suggesting that coparenting support declined as youth became older. The interaction between youth age and parent gender was nonsignificant, $\gamma = -.01$, $SE = .02$, ns , indicating that the rate and type of

change in coparenting support is not significantly different for mothers and fathers. A random intercept model was chosen to best reflect change in *coparenting conflict*. Contrary to expectations, the unconditional model revealed no significant linear, quadratic, or cubic change in coparenting conflict across youth's adolescence, and no significant interaction by parent (Table 2).

Contextual Characteristics and Change in Coparenting Support and Conflict

To address aims 2 and 3, we tested associations between contextual factors and change in coparenting support and conflict, and the moderating roles of parent gender and youth age on each association.

Financial strain—Results revealed significant links between financial strain at between- and within-person levels and coparenting support (Table 3, Model A). Associations were each qualified by interactions with parent gender. Interactions were probed by examining slopes separately for mothers and fathers (Aiken & West, 1991). Slopes tests revealed the between-person effect of financial strain for coparenting support was negative and significant for mothers, $\gamma = -.16$, $SE = .05$, $p < .01$, but not for fathers, $\gamma = -.04$, $SE = .06$, ns , suggesting that when mothers experienced higher levels of financial strain, they reported lower levels of coparenting support (Figure 2). Similarly, slopes tests for the within-person effect of financial strain revealed a significant negative association for mothers, $\gamma = -.23$, $SE = .05$, $p < .01$, but not fathers', $\gamma = -.07$, $SE = .05$, ns , to indicate that at times when mothers reported more than usual financial strain, they had further declines in coparenting support. No significant interactions involved youth age.

Findings revealed significant main effects of between- and within-person financial strain for coparenting conflict (Table 3, Model A), suggesting that higher levels of financial strain were linked with more coparenting conflict. At times when mothers and fathers reported higher than usual financial strain, they experienced greater coparenting conflict. There were no significant interactions by parent gender or youth age for financial strain and coparenting conflict.

Work characteristics—There were no significant between- or within-person effects of work hours for coparenting support (Table 3, Model B). There was a significant between-person effect of work hours for coparenting conflict (Table 3, Model B), which was qualified by parent gender. Slopes tests revealed that for mothers, $\gamma = .48$, $SE = .22$, $p < .05$, but not fathers, $\gamma = -.02$, $SE = .20$, ns , working more hours was associated with higher levels of coparenting conflict. To test the possibility that associations between work hours and coparenting were non-linear (i.e., only evident at extreme highs or lows), we examined the quadratic effect of work hours for coparenting support and conflict; these associations were non-significant.

The within-person effect of work satisfaction was significant for coparenting support, indicating that times of higher relative work satisfaction were associated with greater relative coparenting support. Similar to coparenting support, the within-person effect of work satisfaction was associated with coparenting conflict, suggesting that at times when parents

were more satisfied at work than average, they experienced less coparenting conflict. No work satisfaction - coparenting links were qualified by parent gender or youth age.

Community cohesion—There were significant between- and within-person effects of community cohesion for coparenting support (Table 3; Model C): Parents with higher cross-time averages of community cohesion experienced more average coparenting support. At times when parents perceived relatively greater community cohesion, they experienced greater than usual coparenting support. The between-person effect of community cohesion was qualified by a three-way interaction with youth age and parent gender. Following procedures advanced by Aiken and West (1991), we first broke down the three-way interaction by parent gender to examine the difference in Community cohesion X Youth age for mothers versus fathers. The simple slopes tests showed that Community cohesion X Youth age was significant for mothers, $\gamma = .13$, $SE = .05$, $p < .01$, but not fathers, $\gamma = -.00$, $SE = .04$, *ns*. Also following Aiken and West (1991), we next examined the effect of high (1 *SD* above the mean) and low (1 *SD* below the mean) community cohesion for age-related growth in coparenting support. Slopes tests revealed that mothers who reported low average levels of community cohesion experienced lower average coparenting support, and a significant decline in coparenting support across youth adolescence, $\gamma = -.05$, $SE = .01$, $p < .01$ compared to mothers in more cohesive neighborhoods, who experienced no significant change in coparenting support over time, $\gamma = .01$, $SE = .01$, *ns* (Figure 3).

Findings revealed significant main effect associations for between- and within-person effects of community cohesion and coparenting conflict (Table 3, Model C), suggesting that higher average community cohesion was related to lower rates of coparenting conflict. At times when parents experienced greater than usual community cohesion, they reported less conflict. There were no significant interactions involving community cohesion for coparenting conflict.

Final model—As a final step, we entered all significant between- and within-person main effects and interactions into a single model for each outcome (Table 3, Model D). Non-significant effects were trimmed systematically with a backwards elimination approach, starting with the indicators with the highest *p*-values first. For coparenting support, most main and interaction effects maintained significance in the final model except for between-person effects of financial strain and Financial strain X Parent. The within-person effect of financial strain and Financial strain X Parent retained significance, suggesting that the role of financial strain for coparenting support may be more closely tied to time-specific variation than average levels.

Most main and interaction effects retained significance in the final model for conflict, with the exception of between-person effects for work hours and Work hours X Parent. Thus, it seems that work hours is less robust in predicting coparenting conflict than other work and economic indicators. Overall, each final model suggested that financial strain, work satisfaction, and community cohesion are relatively unique and robust predictors of coparenting dimensions.

Discussion

A growing body of research demonstrates that coparenting relationship quality is highly salient for family wellbeing. Overall we find that coparenting support decreases from pre-to mid-adolescence whereas there is no change in conflict. Findings also suggest that financial, work, and community contexts foster or undermine coparenting during this period. In general, findings were consistent with hypotheses and prior research in that financial strain and work hours acted as stressors as they were linked to decrements in coparenting quality whereas work satisfaction and community cohesion were linked with more positive coparenting relationships.

This study adds to the coparenting literature in several ways. First, by examining the trajectory of two dimensions of coparenting – support and conflict – across a six-year period, the results shed light on changes that parents experience as youth enter the adolescent transition. More research should examine factors associated with the normative decline in coparenting support to help understand whether this change is adaptive and whether it occurs in response to changing parenting roles as youth transition through adolescence. Knowledge of how and why coparenting support declines during adolescence can help practitioners to develop materials that strengthen coparenting during a potentially challenging period in youth development.

Second, the results of this study direct attention to the link between extra-familial contexts and family processes. Importantly, this study is among the first to consider the unique implications of financial, work, and neighborhood factors for multiple dimensions of mothers' and fathers' cooperative childrearing. Third, this study advances coparenting research by considering *both* mothers' and fathers' perceptions of coparenting. Our findings of significant mother-father differences point to the distinct implications of parents' financial, work and community experiences for coparenting and/or perceptions of coparenting. Specifically, our findings suggest that mothers' reports of coparenting are more susceptible to contextual influences than are fathers. By examining time-specific associations between contextual factors and coparenting, this study reveals how individual variation in parents' extra-familial experiences across time, above and beyond average levels, relate to changes in coparenting.

Change in Coparenting during Adolescence

In line with our hypothesis, findings suggested that coparenting support decreases during youth's adolescence. It may be that coordinated parenting efforts are disrupted as parents encounter new challenges in raising an adolescent, consistent with some prior research (e.g., Riina & McHale, 2014). One possibility is that adolescents may engage in more advanced forms of triadic behaviors as the nature of the parent-child relationship becomes more reciprocal in adolescence; these behaviors may lead to parent-child coalitions or triangulation (Baril et al., 2007). Further, youth's increasing role in family decision-making during adolescence (Smetana et al., 2004) may interfere with coparental support. However, there was no significant change in coparenting conflict over time. Average levels of coparenting conflict in this sample were low, well below the midpoint of the scale; it is possible that limited room to decline influenced this finding. Alternatively, it may be that

coparenting support is more sensitive to developmental changes in the family system, whereas family conflict is more stable over time. It remains to be explored whether conflict becomes more entrenched in family patterns than support. Importantly, findings for these two dimensions of coparenting draw attention to support and conflict as unique subtypes of coparenting that are not merely two ends of a continuum. Future research should examine different domains of coparenting simultaneously to obtain a more complete picture of how coparenting relationships develop over time.

There was no evidence that change in coparenting support or conflict—either overall level or change—differed systematically for mothers versus fathers. Given mixed prior evidence for mother-father differences in coparenting, studies should continue to explore when and for whom gender plays a role in coparenting domains across youth’s development.

Contextual Predictors of Coparenting

Findings for the role of contextual financial, work, and community factors for coparenting were generally consistent with hypotheses. Financial strain and work hours were linked to diminished coparenting quality, whereas work satisfaction and community cohesion were linked to more positive coparenting quality. Several patterns varied by dimension of coparenting and for mothers versus fathers—these are discussed in further detail below.

Financial strain—In line with our expectation that financial strain is a stressor on family relationships, higher average and time-specific reports of financial strain were related to lower coparenting support and greater conflict. Only the time-specific report of financial strain remained significant for coparenting support in the final model, indicating that time-varying fluctuations in financial strain are more influential for change in coparenting than stable average levels of financial difficulty. Further, significant interactions with parent gender revealed that average and time-specific associations between financial strain and coparenting support were significant for mothers but not fathers. Other work has found that in the face of financial strain, spousal support is more salient for mothers than fathers (Simons, Lorenz, Conger, & Wu, 1992). From a sex-roles perspective where fathers often shoulder the burden of family financial problems, heightened financial strain may reduce fathers’ involvement in parenting. And as fathers’ parenting involvement is directly related to partners’ perceptions of coparenting support and undermining (Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011), such a pathway may explain our findings. From this standpoint, women who tend to be more interpersonally oriented than men, may be more attuned to changes in their partners’ support or involvement during a period of strain.

No mother-father difference emerged in the average or time-specific associations between financial strain and coparenting conflict, meaning that higher financial strain affected parents’ reports of increased conflict similarly. Consistent with hypotheses and the family stress perspective (Conger et al., 1990), findings for financial strain highlight the role of this stressor in coparenting relationships. Taken together, our results suggest that the implications of financial strain for coparenting support are somewhat more complex than the direct associations with coparenting conflict. Further, findings draw attention to the different processes that men and women experience in facing an extra-familial stressor.

Work characteristics—Although we did not find that average or time-specific report of work hours was linked to coparenting support, that the across-time average number of reported work hours was linked to higher levels of mothers', but not fathers', average reported conflict. Past work shows that mothers in dual-earner families take on a greater share of household responsibility, and are less likely to reduce time spent on household and childrearing as a result of greater work hours than are fathers (Bonney, Kelley, & Levant, 1999; Yavorsky et al., 2015). Likely as a result of working mothers' relatively higher level of dedication to household and childrearing involvement, and consequent time pressure and feelings of being overwhelmed and stressed, work-family support programs (i.e., flexible hours) have stronger positive implications for mothers than fathers (Shockley & Allen, 2007). Accordingly, a high level of work hours appears to be a stressor linked to increased coparenting conflict for mothers, who may feel more burdened than fathers and frustrated with fathers' lower engagement in childrearing.

In contrast to time spent at work, both across-time average and time-specific parent reports of work satisfaction had positive implications for both coparenting support and conflict; findings here did not differ for mothers and fathers. These results are consistent with a positive spillover model, such that when parents are happier at work, they bring less stress and negative emotion into the home, which allows them to engage with the other parent with more patience and positive support. Parental work satisfaction has been shown to benefit family functioning in a number of ways, including marital quality (Rogers & May, 2003) and youth physical and mental health (Lawson et al., 2014). These findings for time at work and work satisfaction adds to a growing literature illustrating the potential positive or negative implications of paid work factors for effective childrearing cooperation for both mothers and fathers.

Community cohesion—Consistent with expectations, average and time-specific reports of community cohesion were related to greater coparenting support and less coparenting conflict. Although this is one of the few studies to examine the role of community for coparenting, cohesion has been shown as a social support to parents (Byrnes & Miller, 2012) and is linked to reduced parental stress (Franco, Pottick, & Huang, 2010). Drawing on evidence that community cohesion promotes healthier youth development and reduces externalizing behaviors (Cradock et al., 2009), parents in more cohesive neighborhoods may experience fewer challenges from youth behavior and therefore experience fewer challenges to cooperative coparenting.

The time-specific effect of community cohesion for coparenting support was qualified by parent gender and youth age, indicating that the negative implications of low community cohesion for support grew stronger as adolescents grew older, and this association was significant for mothers but not fathers. In other words, for mothers especially, living in a less cohesive neighborhood can exacerbate declines in coparenting support as youth get older. Importantly, this finding suggests that community cohesion becomes increasingly important for coparents at a time when youth are spending more time outside of the home (Paikoff & Brooks-Gunn, 1991) and possibly engaging in more disruptive and delinquent behaviors outside the home. Given that mothers tend to be more knowledgeable about youth's whereabouts compared to fathers (Waizenhofer, Buchanan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2004), it

could be that community ties are more salient for mothers than fathers. Alternatively, mothers may benefit indirectly from community cohesion when their partners have more friends, support, and relief from work and family pressures. Indeed, past work has suggested that fathers benefit from structural (Barnett & Gareis, 2009) and informal community ties (Hostetler, Desrochers, Kopko, & Moen, 2012) that in turn increase mothers' perceived support via emotional contagion or increased father involvement. The pathways involved remain to be elucidated in future research.

Limitations

In light of new insights provided by this study, it was not without limitations. First, although the sample shared many characteristics with the general population from which it was drawn, it was not nationally representative. In addition, the sample was mostly White, two-parent families; findings should be replicated in more ethnically diverse groups and in families where coparenting is shared by parents other than mothers and fathers. Further, many measures consisted of a few or even a single item, and coparenting dimensions such as division of labor or satisfaction were not considered. Finally, although use of time-varying predictors eliminates some stable third variable explanations, we cannot determine the direction of effect in these associations. Strains in coparenting may heighten experiences of stressors in other contexts and vice versa. In the future, it will be important to elucidate these patterns by using a longitudinal cross-lagged design.

Implications and Conclusion

In sum, this study illustrates the significant changes that coparenting relationships undergo with youth's adolescent transition, and in accordance with extrafamilial experiences. Our findings provide a starting point for researchers and clinicians to consider the role of contextual factors for mothers' versus fathers' shared parenting roles. In general, coparenting support was more variable over time than coparenting conflict, and financial, work, and community factors were related to change in both domains of coparenting. Our results are relevant to the ecological model of coparenting, and answer recent calls to consider contexts for family dynamics. Our findings suggest that enhancing parents' work and community experiences may be helpful in promoting stronger coparenting relationships and ultimately more positive youth development. An important next step is to investigate the mechanisms that underlie these patterns of association to facilitate future intervention development.

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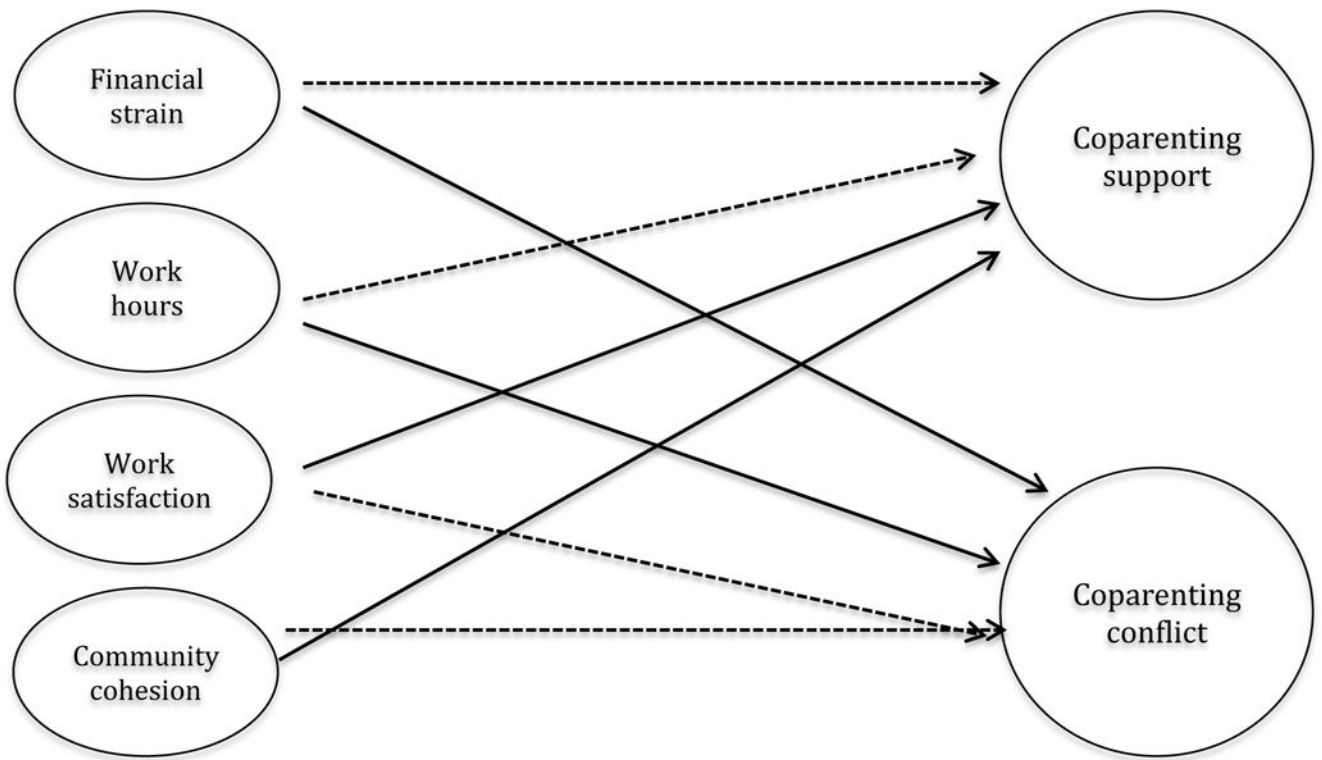


Figure 1. Conceptual model for associations between contextual factors and coparenting support and conflict

Note. Solid lines represent hypothesized positive associations; dashed lines represent hypothesized negative associations.

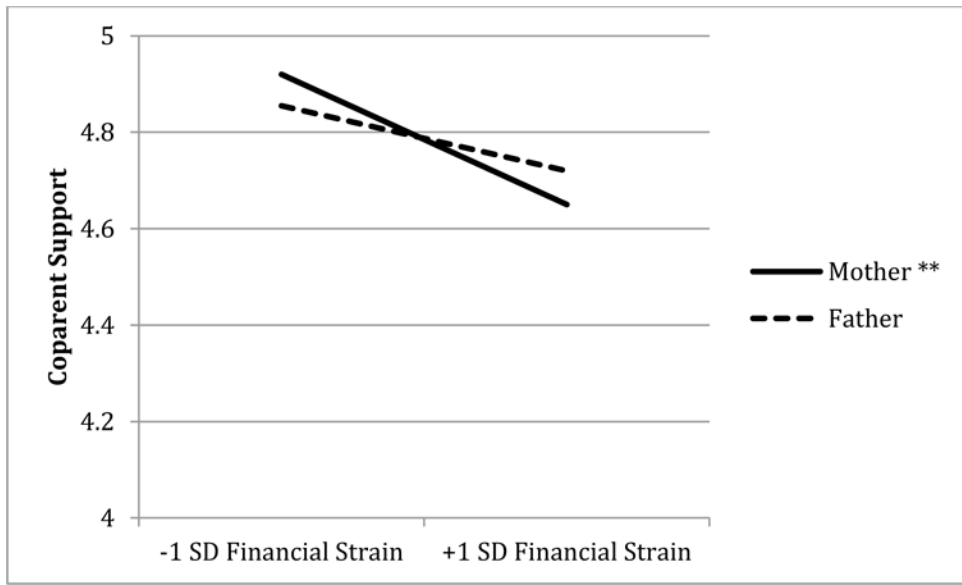


Figure 2. Within-person effect of financial strain moderated by parent gender, predicting coparent support

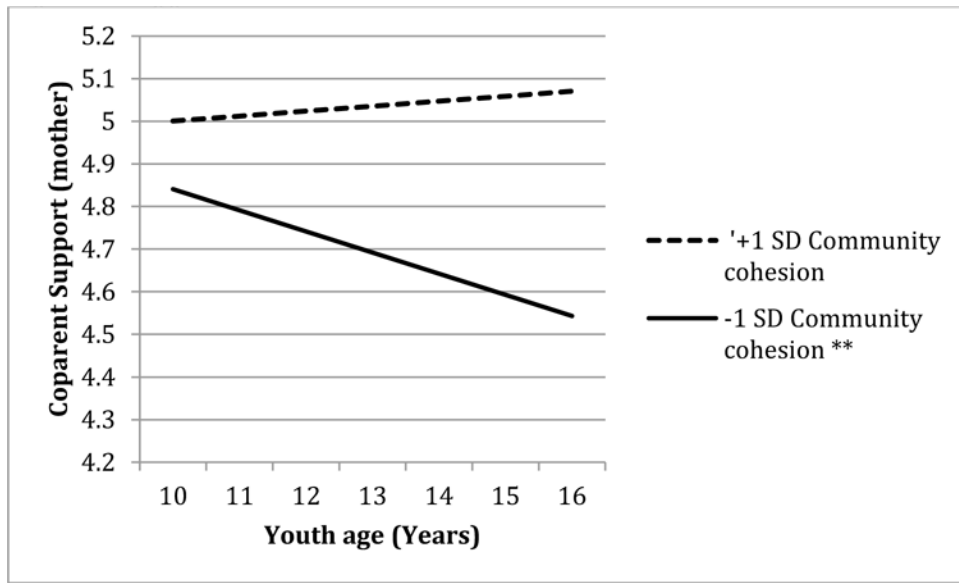


Figure 3. Mothers' report of community cohesion moderated by youth age, predicting mothers' coparent support

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Table 1

Descriptives for study variables at Time 1.

Variable	Mean (SD)	%	Range
Coparenting support	5.00 (1.17)		1–7
Coparenting conflict	2.22 (1.34)		1–7
Financial strain	2.12 (.89)		1–5
Work hours	39.25 (11.17)		2–80
Work satisfaction	4.00 (1.06)		1–5
Community cohesion	3.78 (.56)		1–5
Youth age (years)	11.29 (.48)		10–13
Youth sex (female)		51	
Mother age (years)	38.66 (5.75)		16–60
Father age (years)	40.87 (6.70)		20–70
Race (non-Hispanic white)		89	
Race (African American)		6	
Race (Latino-Hispanic)		2	
Marital satisfaction	4.08 (.78)		1 – 5
Household income	\$57,314 (\$35,481)		
Mother education (> HS)		55	
Father education (> HS)		38	
Household size	4.30 (1.26)		3–11
Geographic location (Pennsylvania)		38	
Study condition (control)		38	

Note. HS = high school

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Table 2

Unconditional model for youth age predicting change in coparenting support and conflict.

Fixed Effect	Coparenting Support		Coparenting Conflict	
	γ	SE	γ	SE
Intercept	4.96	.03**	2.22	.05**
Age (linear)	-.02	.01*	.02	.02
Parent			.07	.06
Age (quadratic)			.01	.01
Age (linear) × Parent			.00	.02
Age (quadratic) × Parent			-.03	.02
Random Effects				
Level 1	.64	.02**	.94	.02**
Level 2	.25	.03**	.37	.04**
Level 3	.43	.04**	.40	.05**

Note.

* p < .05;

** p < .01

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Table 3

Coefficients predicting coparenting support and conflict as a function of within-person (Level 1) and between-person (Level 2) contextual characteristics.

Fixed effect	Model A: Financial Strain			Model B: Work Characteristics			Model C: Community Cohesion			Model D: Final Model		
	Support	Conflict	γ (SE)	Support	Conflict	γ (SE)	Support	Conflict	γ (SE)	Support	Conflict	γ (SE)
Intercept	4.92 (.13)**	2.34 (.15)**	4.78 (.13)**	2.58 (.14)**	4.87 (.12)**	2.43 (.13)**	4.86 (.12)**	2.33 (.15)**				
Level 1 (WP)												
Linear youth age	-.02 (.01)*	.02 (.01)*	-.02 (.01)	.02 (.01)	-.02 (.01)	.02 (.01)	-.02 (.01)*	.02 (.01)				
Financial strain	-.25 (.04)**	.19 (.04)**					-.25 (.05)**	.18 (.04)**				
Financial strain × Parent	.17 (.07)*						.20 (.07)**					
Work hours			-.05 (.07)	.05 (.09)								
Work satisfaction			.06 (.02)**	-.07 (.03)**			.04 (.02)*	-.06 (.02)*				
Community cohesion					.11 (.05)**	-.16 (.06)**	.09 (.04)*	-.16 (.06)**				
Level 2 (BP)												
Parent	.00 (.04)	.07 (.05)	-.02 (.05)	.09 (.05)	-.01 (.04)	.08 (.05)	-.00 (.05)	.07 (.05)				
Income	.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)**	.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)				
Marital satisfaction	.83 (.05)**	-.71 (.05)**	.85 (.05)**	-.76 (.05)**	.80 (.04)**	-.70 (.05)**	.79 (.04)**	-.67 (.05)**				
Financial strain	-.16 (.05)**	.17 (.05)**						.12 (.06)*				
Financial strain × Parent	.13 (.06)*											
Work hours			-.06 (.13)	.44 (.18)*								
Work hours × Parent				-.47 (.23)*								
Work satisfaction			.03 (.04)	-.05 (.05)								
Community cohesion					.39 (.08)**	-.35 (.08)**	.38 (.08)**	-.29 (.08)**				
Community cohesion × Age					.07 (.12)**		.10 (.03)**					
Age × Parent					-.00 (.01)		.00 (.02)					
Community cohesion × Parent					-.08 (.11)		-.06 (.11)					
Community cohesion × Age × Parent					-.13 (.05)**		-.11 (.05)*					
Level 3												

Fixed effect	Model A: Financial Strain		Model B: Work Characteristics		Model C: Community Cohesion		Model D: Final Model	
	Support	Conflict	Support	Conflict	Support	Conflict	Support	Conflict
	γ (SE)	γ (SE)	γ (SE)	γ (SE)	γ (SE)	γ (SE)	γ (SE)	γ (SE)
Study condition	.00 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.00 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.00 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.00 (.02)
Geographic location	.01 (.06)	-.04 (.06)	.04 (.06)	-.06 (.07)	.01 (.06)	-.04 (.06)	.02 (.06)	-.04 (.06)
Child sex	-.01 (.05)	-.01 (.06)	-.00 (.06)	-.03 (.06)	.01 (.05)	-.03 (.06)	.01 (.05)	-.04 (.06)
Household size	-.03 (.02)	.04 (.02)*	-.04 (.02)	.05 (.02)*	-.02 (.02)	.04 (.02)*	-.02 (.02)	.03 (.02)

Note. WP = within-person; BP = between-person;

* p < .05;

** p < .01