

Effective coparenting leads to positive outcomes for children.

Coparenting refers to how parents work together in their roles as caregivers. Effective coparenting requires cooperation, supportiveness, and mutual involvement. Coparenting leads to increased warmth in their relationships with their children. When mothers and fathers support and encourage each other, they are more likely to engage in the sensitive parenting necessary for their children's optimal brain development.^{1,2}

Parents with low-conflict relationships are more likely than high-conflict parents to function as a team. They spend more time interacting with their children together, creating opportunities to learn from each other's parenting styles. Mutually supportive parenting, in turn, promotes children's behavioral and emotional adjustment, even in the first three years of life. By contrast, young children of high-conflict parents are at higher risk for anxiety, aggressive behavior, and poor social skills.^{3,4} Premature birth is the leading cause of death among infants in the U.S.¹

A strong marriage leads to warm and sensitive parenting.

Much of the research on how the bonds between parents affect children's development focuses on families headed by married couples. Children are affected by the quality of their parents' relationship even in the first three years of life. Mothers and fathers in healthy and satisfying marriages are more engaged in their role as parents and have more positive attitudes toward their children. Frequent and intense conflict, on the other hand, is associated with unresponsive and insensitive parenting.^{5,6}

Researchers call this the spillover effect. Positive feelings between a mother and father can spill over into each parent's relationship with the child. But so can negative interactions: parent-child conflict is more likely when there has been a recent marital conflict.^{1,7}

A harmonious marriage is particularly important for positive fathering. Father involvement is affected by marital quality, especially during infancy and early childhood.¹ Fathers can have positive effects on children's cognitive and language development in the first three years, above and beyond the influence of mothers.^{6,8}

Parental conflict affects children directly and indirectly.

Conflict is a normal part of intimate relationships. Disagreements and arguments that are handled constructively pose few risks for children. When conflict is frequent, intense, or hostile, however, children can be negatively affected. Repeated exposure to such conflicts can be a source of chronic stress. Infants may begin to see their parents as frightening, and older children are likely to learn poor behavioral and social skills.³

Conflict can also affect children indirectly. Persistent strife between a mother and father drains both parents' emotional resources and diverts their attention from their child's needs. In time, it can reduce both the quantity and the quality of parent-child interactions.^{3,5} Racial disparities in birth outcomes continue to plague our community.

Family-based interventions can reduce conflict, improve coparenting, and promote child well-being.

The transition to parenthood is a critical moment in a relationship. Some research indicates that couples become less satisfied with their marriage after they have children. Parenthood often means more conflicts and disagreements and less leisure time, communication and intimacy. These changes can be long-lasting.⁹⁻¹¹ Programs that help couples cope successfully with the arrival of a child have the potential to improve marital quality and child outcomes.

A number of recent family-based interventions have shown mixed success in improving parental and child outcomes. Parenting Together, an 8-session group-oriented program, improved fathers' caregiving skills and increased their involvement.¹² Welcome Baby, a home visitation program designed to improve marital quality, failed to produce measurable effects on couples' relationships. It did, however, increase fathers' involvement with their newborns.¹³

The Family Foundations program is a series of 8 classes covering communication, problem-solving, and conflict management skills. The program led to more positive parenting, more supportive coparenting, and less maternal depression and anxiety. As a result, children showed positive changes in temperament and behavior throughout their first three years.¹⁴

Interventions geared specifically toward decreasing marital conflict have also shown positive results. One three-hour classroom-based program educated new parents about the harmful

Coparenting and Child Well-Being

effects of frequent conflict on children and taught them how to reduce hostility and improve problem-solving in their relationships. The program succeeded in reducing conflict and improving parenting skills.¹⁵ A similar 4-session program demonstrated long-term positive effects on children's emotional adjustment and parents' marital satisfaction.¹⁶

Smart policies can also benefit unmarried parents and their children.

The birth of a child is also a window of opportunity for improving parenting in unmarried, low-income couples. Unmarried fathers and mothers are likely to be romantically involved at the time of their child's birth, although fathers tend to have less contact as the child grows older.¹⁷ Mutually supportive parenting in unmarried couples promotes continued father involvement and improves father-child relationships.¹⁸ The months before and after a child's birth may provide an entry point for policies that engage both parents in programs to improve coparenting, father involvement, and children's well-being.

The Building Strong Families program serves romantically involved but unmarried parents. Around the time of their child's birth, couples participate in a 30-40-hour program that teaches relationship skills and provides individual support and appropriate referrals. The effects of the program varied widely among program sites due in part to differences in implementation and client demographics. However, the preliminary results indicate that the program can have positive effects on relationship quality, parenting skills, and conflict management.¹⁹

Programs like those outlined above show that many aspects of family functioning appear to be improved by well-designed interventions. What remains unclear is the cost of expanding such programs to serve more families. Typically no information on costs is included in such studies, but most programs involved highly-trained staff, numerous services, and long time frames. It is reasonable, then, to expect that the costs of expanding them in their current form may be prohibitive. Further research is needed to determine how such programs can be modified to serve more families at a manageable cost.²⁰

References

1. Barnett MA, et al. Interdependence of parenting of mothers and fathers of infants. *Journal of Family Psychology*. 2008; 22(3): 561–573.
2. Bonds DED, Gondoli DM. Examining the process by which marital adjustment affects maternal warmth: the role of coparenting support as a mediator. *Journal of Family Psychology*. 2007; 21(2): 288–296.
3. Fincham FD, Hall JH. Parenting and the marital relationship. In T. Luster & L. Okagaki (Eds.), *Parenting: An ecological perspective*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. 2005; 205-234.
4. Jenkins JM. Marital conflict and children's emotions: the development of an anger organization. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2000; 62(3): 723-736.
5. Buehler C, Gerard JM. Marital conflict, ineffective parenting, and children's and adolescents' maladjustment. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2002; 64(1): 78-92.
6. Pancsofar N, Vernon-Feagans L, Odom E, et al. Family relationships during infancy and later mother and father vocabulary use with young children. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*. 2008; 23: 493–503.
7. Almeida DM, Wethington E, Chandler AL. Daily transmission of tensions between marital dyads and parent-child dyads. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 1999; 61(1): 49-61.
8. Cabrera NJ, Shannon JD, Tamis-LeMonda C. Fathers' influence on their children's cognitive and emotional development: from toddlers to pre-K. *Applied Developmental Science*. 2007; 11(4): 208-213.
9. Crohan SE. Marital quality and conflict across the transition to parenthood in African-American and white couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 1996; 58: 933-944.
10. Doss BD, Rhoades GK, Stanley SM, et al. The effect of the transition to parenthood on relationship quality: An eight-year prospective study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 2009; 96: 601-619.
11. Twenge JM, Campbell WK, Foster CA. Parenthood and marital satisfaction: a meta-analytic review. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 2003; 65: 574-583.

Coparenting and Child Well-Being

12. Doherty WJ, Erickson MF, LaRossa R. An intervention to increase father involvement and skills during the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Family Psychology*. 2006; 20(3): 438-447.
13. Hawkins AJ, Lovejoy KR, Holmes EK, et al. Increasing fathers' involvement in child care with a couple-focused intervention during the transition to parenthood. *Family Relations*. 2008; 57(1): 49-59.
14. Feinberg ME, Jones DE, Kan ML, et al. Effects of a transition to parenthood program on parents, Parenting, and children: 3.5 years after baseline. *Journal of Family Psychology*. 2010; 24(5): 532-542.
15. Faircloth WB, Cummings EM. Evaluating a parent education program for preventing the negative effects of marital conflict. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*. 2008; 29: 141-156.
16. Cummings EM, Faircloth BF, Mitchell PM, et al. Evaluating a brief prevention program for improving marital conflict in community families. *Journal of Family Psychology*. 2008; 22: 193-202.
17. Carlson M, McLanahan S. Shared parenting in fragile families. 2001. Center for Research on Child Wellbeing Working Paper #01-16-FF. Available at: <http://crcw.princeton.edu/workingpapers/WP01-16-FF-Carlson.pdf> Accessed February 10, 2011.
18. Sobolewski JM, King V. The importance of the coparental relationship for nonresident fathers' ties to children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 2005; 67(5): 1196-1212.
19. Wood RG, McConnell S, Moore Q, et al. The Building Strong Families Project: Strengthening Unmarried Parents' Relationships: The Early Impacts of Building Strong Families. 2010. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. Available at: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/strengthen/build_fam/reports/unmarried_parents/15_impact_main_rpt.pdf Accessed February 10, 2011.
20. Cowan PA, Cowan CP, Knox V. Marriage and fatherhood programs. *The Future of Children*. 2010; 20(2): 205-230.

*This brief was authored and prepared by
Marc Goodman-Bryan*