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Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight

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Couple Relationship Quality and Coparenting

The quality of the relationship between a mother and father is important for understanding their coparenting behavior (i.e., shared decision making about the well-being of a child). Research suggests that better mother-father relationships and higher quality coparenting relationships go hand in hand, and the quality of each of these relationships is important for children's well-being.

Definitions

Couple relationship quality refers to the quality of a relationship between two married or romantically involved people. A more positive relationship is characterized by low levels of hostility and conflict and by high levels of support and satisfaction within the relationship.

Coparenting refers to the shared decision making between caregivers as it relates to the well-being of a child.²⁴ Positive coparenting is often characterized by each parent's supportiveness of the other, including affirming the other's competency as a parent, acknowledging and respecting the other's contributions, and upholding the other's parenting decisions and authority.^{17,30}

Importance and Implications of Relationship Quality for Coparenting

Research on relationship quality and coparenting has consistently found that higher quality couple relationships are associated with more positive coparenting, as well as with improved child well-being.

Implications of Couple Relationship Quality for Fathers' Coparenting

Research shows that high quality mother-father relationships and high quality coparenting relationships go hand in hand.^{5,6,15} This finding appears to confirm the "spillover" hypothesis – the idea that characteristics of the marital relationship influence characteristics of other family relationships (such as the parent-child relationship and the coparenting relationship).¹⁵

- Couples who are satisfied in their romantic relationships are more likely to exhibit positive cooperation and communication when interacting in the presence of their children.³
- Among married fathers, better marital quality is related to better coparenting.^{1,26,27}
- Among families with infants, those who experience marital distress exhibit more hostile and competitive coparenting.¹⁷
- For divorced fathers, those who have better, less conflicted relationships with their former spouses have more positive coparenting relationships.¹² Also for divorced fathers, those who mediated child custody have higher levels of coparenting 12 years later than those who were involved in litigating custody.⁴

Implications for Children

Father-mother relationship quality and the coparenting relationship are also associated with children's positive development.

- A large body of evidence suggests that the quality of the mother-father relationship is associated with child well-being.
 - Higher quality mother-father relationships are associated with secure attachment among toddlers.¹¹

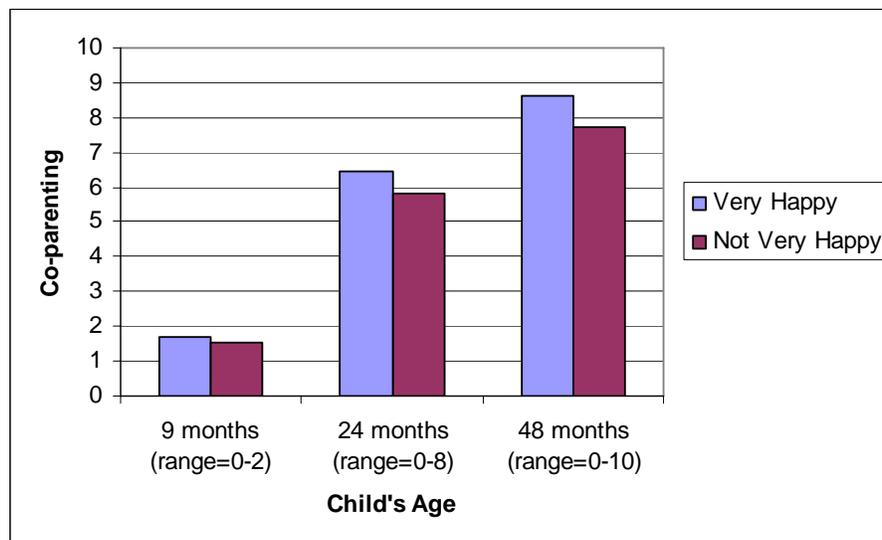
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- By contrast, hostile and conflicted mother-father relationships are associated with children having higher rates of internalizing and externalizing behaviors, maladjustment, aggression, hostility, anxiety/depression, suicide, low self-esteem, troubled peer interactions, antisocial behavior, and delinquency.^{8,9,13,14,28}
- Hostile and conflicted relationships are also associated with children having poorer educational attainment, lower GPAs, poorer physical health, higher levels of health problems, and receipt of lower quality health care.^{7,10,19,20}
- Increasing evidence also demonstrates an association between coparenting and children’s well-being.
 - Among very young children, positive and supportive coparenting is associated with healthy, secure attachment.² Harmonious parental interactions and agreement about childrearing practices have also been found to be positively associated with children’s interpersonal and social competence.^{16,29}
 - Cooperative coparenting is associated with greater involvement on the part of nonresident fathers,²³ which is itself associated with a range of positive outcomes for children.²²
 - By contrast, less supportive coparenting is associated with children having attention problems, externalizing behavior problems, sadness, and anxiety.^{18,21,25}

Relationship Quality and Coparenting in Early Childhood

Figure 1 and Table 1 show that over time, coparenting is slightly but consistently higher when the father-mother relationship is very happy than when it is not very happy. This pattern begins in infancy and persists into the preschool years (the latest time point for which data are available).

Figure 1. Level of Coparenting by Quality of Father-Mother Relationship Over Time



Source: Child Trends’ analysis of ECLS-B 9-month, 24-month, and 48-month data

Table 1. Coparenting by Quality of Father-Mother Relationship

Survey Wave			
9 months	1.7	1.5 ^a	0 – 2
24 months	6.5	5.8 ^a	0 – 8
48 months	8.6	7.8 ^a	0 – 10

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month, 24-month, and 48-month data

a = significantly different from "very happy"

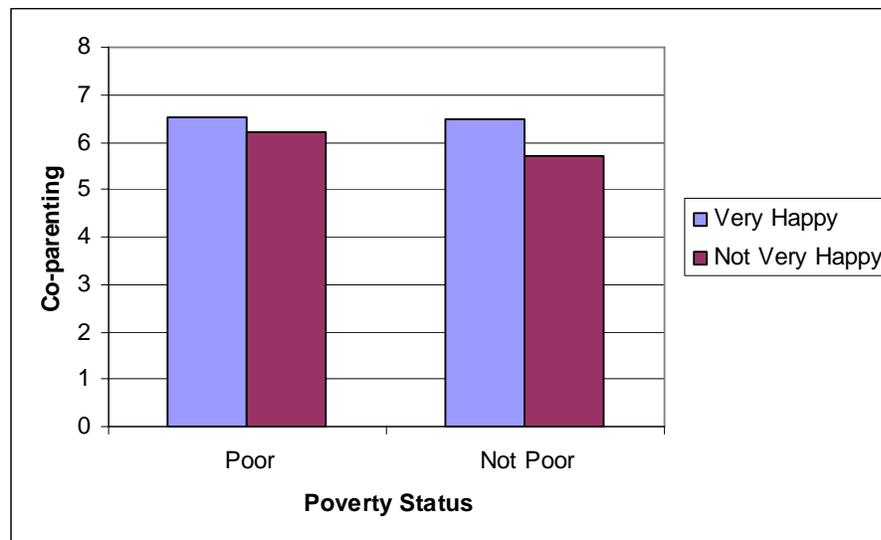
Differences in Relationship Quality and Coparenting by Subgroup

The following estimates are for fathers of toddlers (24-month-old children).

Differences by Poverty Status

Figure 2 and **Table 2** show that in households above the poverty line, coparenting is significantly higher when the mother-father relationship is happier. A similar pattern is evident among households below the poverty line, but this difference is not statistically significant.

Figure 2. Level of Coparenting by Poverty Status and Quality of Father-Mother Relationship



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 24-month data

Table 2. Coparenting by Poverty Status and Quality of the Father-Mother Relationship

Poverty Status			
Poor	6.5	6.2	0-8
Not Poor	6.5	5.7 ^a	0-8

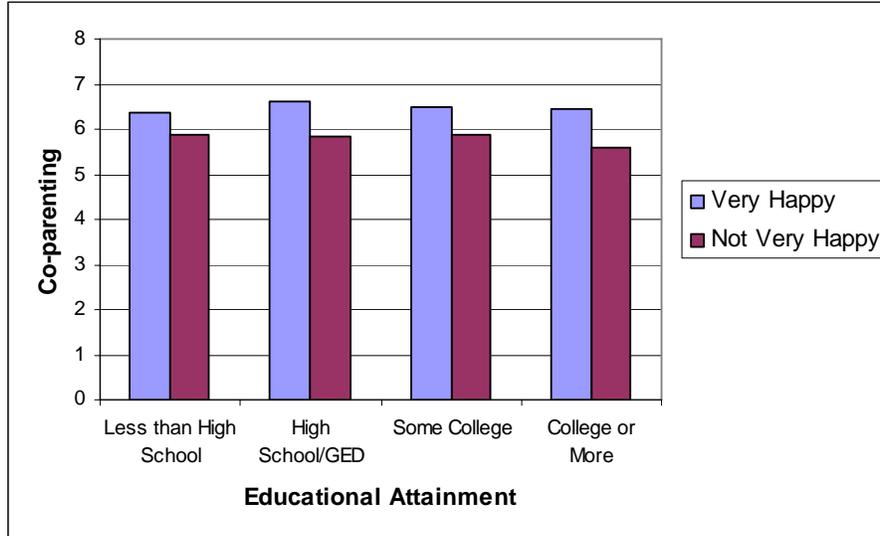
Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 24-month data

a = significantly different from "very happy"

Differences by Educational Attainment

Figure 3 and **Table 3** show that regardless of educational attainment, coparenting is significantly higher when fathers report very happy relationships than when fathers report relationships that are not very happy.

Figure 3. Level of Coparenting by Educational Attainment and Quality of Father-Mother Relationship



Source: Child Trends analysis of ECLS-B 24-month data

Table 3. Coparenting by Educational Attainment and Quality of the Father-Mother Relationship

Educational	Very Happy	Not Very Happy	0-8
Less than High School	6.3	5.9 ^a	0-8
High School/GED	6.6	5.8 ^a	0-8
Some College	6.5	5.9 ^a	0-8
College Degree or More	6.4	5.6 ^a	0-8

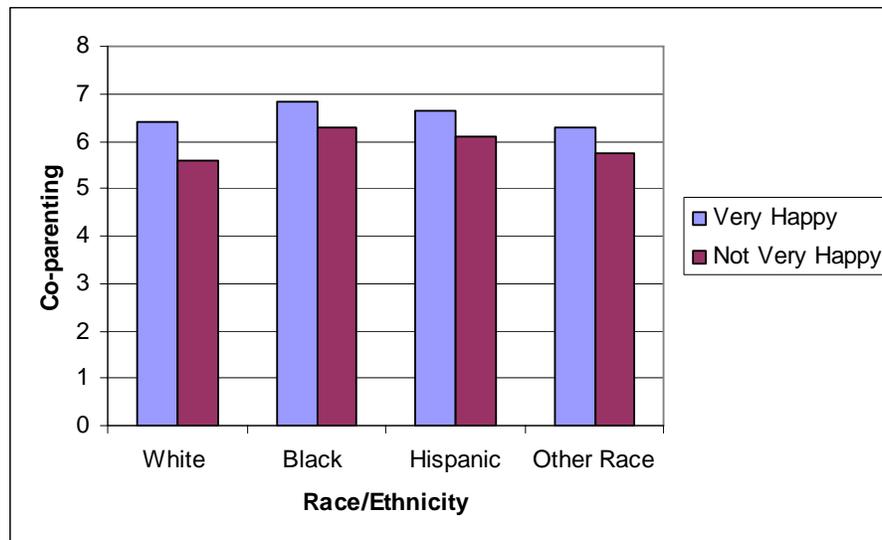
Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 24-month data

a = significantly different from "very happy"

Differences by Race/Ethnicity

As seen in **Figure 4** and **Table 4**, for non-Hispanic White fathers, Hispanic fathers, and fathers of another race/ethnicity, coparenting is significantly higher when the father reports a very happy mother-father relationship than when he reports that it is not very happy. A similar pattern is evident among non-Hispanic Black fathers, but this difference is not statistically significant.

Figure 4. Level of Coparenting by Race/Ethnicity and Quality of Father-Mother Relationship



Source: Child Trends analysis of ECLS-B 24-month data

Table 4. Coparenting by Race/Ethnicity and Quality of the Father-Mother Relationship

Race/Ethnicity	Very Happy	Not Very Happy	Range
Non-Hispanic White	6.4	5.6 ^a	0-8
Non-Hispanic Black	6.8	6.3	0-8
Hispanic	6.7	6.1 ^a	0-8
Other	6.3	5.7 ^a	0-8
Race/Ethnicity	6.3	5.7^a	

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 24-month data

a = significantly different from "very happy"

Definitions and Measurement

Fathers who said that their relationship with their spouse or partner was "very happy" were classified as having a very happy relationship, and fathers who said that their relationship was "fairly happy" or "not very happy" were classified as having a "not very happy" relationship.

Coparenting was assessed based on the level of shared decision making between the mother and the father as it related to decisions about the child's education/schooling/child care, nutrition, health care, and discipline. Specifically, when the child was nine months old, fathers were asked to rate the amount of influence they had about the decision to use or not use child care. When the child was 24 months old, fathers were asked to rate the influence they had about decisions related to child care, nutrition, health care, and discipline. When the child was 48 months old, fathers were asked to rate the influence they had about decisions related to child care, education, nutrition, health care, and discipline. Fathers reported whether they had "no influence," "some influence," or "a great deal of influence" on decisions related to each of these topics, with higher scores indicating greater influence. Scores for each item were added together to provide one measure of shared decision making.

Data Sources

Tables and charts documenting relationship happiness and father involvement among resident fathers came from Child Trends' analysis of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ELCS-B) 9-month, 24-month, and 48-month surveys. The ECLS-B is a nationally representative, longitudinal survey of American children born in 2001. The ECLS-B includes 10,688 children and their caregivers, and it follows these children from infancy until the time they enter first grade. Data were collected through parent interviews, direct child assessments, birth certificate data, and interviews with children's caregivers and teachers. Data were collected by the National Center for Educational Statistics.

Data Limitations

Because fathers are asked a different series of questions about shared decision making with children at each survey wave, the measure of coparenting differs slightly at each time point.

Resources

- The **United States Department of Health and Human Services** funds programs and research about fatherhood development and the importance of fathers for children: <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/>
- The **National Center on Fathers and Families** provides research-based information about father involvement and child well-being aimed at improving children's lives through the positive participation of their fathers: <http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu/>
- **The National Center for Fathering** conducts research and provides resources to increase involvement of fathers in the lives of children: <http://www.fathers.com>

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