

Coparenting and Father Involvement in Married and Unmarried Coresident Couples

Children can benefit from involved fathers and cooperative parents, a benefit which may be particularly important to the growing population of children born to unmarried parents. This study observes father involvement and coparenting in 5,407 married and unmarried cohabiting couples with a 2-year-old child in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). A link was found between cooperative coparenting and father involvement for all couples. Compared with married couples, couples who married in response to the pregnancy and couples who remained unmarried showed higher levels of father involvement and more cooperative coparenting, indicating a potentially greater child focus.

Increasing numbers of children are being born to unmarried parents, with nonmarital childbearing in 2005 representing 36.8% of U.S. births, or more than 1.5 million births, an increase of 12% over 2002 (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2006). It is estimated that 80% of unmarried parents are romantically involved with each other at the time of the baby's birth, and about half are cohabiting, a proportion that appears to be rising (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; McLanahan et al., 2003). The unmarried fathers have an opportunity to be positively involved, thus benefiting their children (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb,

2000). Fathers may be more involved when they have a cooperative coparenting relationship with the child's mother (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Beitel & Parke, 1998; McBride & Rane, 1998), and cooperative coparenting also enhances the well-being of children (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; McHale, 1995). These effects have been found in married couples, but they have not yet been explored in unmarried cohabiting couples. It is thus necessary to expand our knowledge of the complex interrelationships among family members in this emerging family form.

Coparenting represents the nexus of the mother-father relationship and the parent-child relationship, and as such, it is an ideal locus for prevention and intervention efforts (Feinberg, 2002). Indeed, several recent initiatives seeking to improve at-risk fathers' involvement with their children emphasize coparenting, or team parenting (e.g., Hanks & Smith, 2005; Strengthening Fragile Families Training Institute, 2006).

This study examines the association of coparenting with father involvement in the context of the couple's relationship. Using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), the analysis focuses on coresident parents with a shared 2-year-old child. The focus is on the association of three aspects of coparenting (i.e., support, responsibility, and dissonance), with three core aspects of father involvement (i.e., engagement, accessibility, and responsibility). This analysis distinguishes among parents who were married before the pregnancy, those who married in response to the pregnancy, and those who remained unmarried. It examines both father and mother reports,

Department of Anthropology, Gender, and Sociology,
University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand
(bryndl.hohmann-mariott@otago.ac.nz).

Key Words: cohabiting parents, dyadic/couple data, father-child relations, parenting and parenthood.

thus allowing for a comprehensive analysis of relationship processes.

Union Formation

Unmarried parenthood may represent a distinct process of union formation. Stanley, Kline, and Markman (2005) described the difference between sliding and deciding in relationships. "Deciding" couples make the decision about commitment to a partner before constraints such as a shared child are imposed. By contrast, for "sliding" couples, the constraints are imposed before they have made any intentional choices about the long-term relationship. This distinction follows research by Manning and Smock (2005), who found that cohabiting couples often described moving in together as an unconscious, unintentional process. It also echoes the work of Surra and Hughes (1997), who distinguished between relationship-driven and event-driven reasons for marriage.

The different pathways of union formation may be reflected in the couples' enactment of their family roles. Deciding couples who commit to their relationship before having children may have a more relationship-focused family pattern. By contrast, sliding couples who established their relationship via parenthood may have a more child-focused family pattern.

A relationship focus of deciding couples is evidenced by higher relationship quality. Research consistently finds that sliding couples such as unmarried cohabiting couples and couples who cohabited before marriage tend to have relationships that are more problematic than those of deciding couples, typified by married couples who did not cohabit (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Smock, 2000; Surra & Hughes, 1997). Less is known about a potential child focus in sliding couples, as little research has compared the involvement of married and unmarried coresident fathers. There appear to be few differences by marital status (Berger, Carlson, Bzostek, & Osborne, 2008; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003), although unmarried cohabiting parents tend to endorse father participation to a greater extent than married parents (Hohmann-Marriott, 2009). The involvement of fathers may be a particularly responsive indicator of couples' child focus, as father involvement is highly dependent on relational context (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998).

Father Involvement

Most family scholars recognize that fathers are important figures in their children's lives (Marsiglio et al., 2000). Cultural changes are increasing the emphasis on fathers' active involvement with their children, and research is moving from a focus on what fathers do not do (a deficit perspective) to the contributions of fathers (a generative perspective) (Doherty et al., 1998; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). Fathers' contributions can take many forms. Palkovitz (2002) emphasized that men may perceive both their direct (e.g., hands-on interaction) and indirect (e.g., financial support, maintenance of the family home) actions as contributing to their children's well-being. All contributions can be valuable, but this study focuses primarily on more direct forms of involvement.

Lamb (1987) conceptualized direct contributions by fathers with three aspects: engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. Engagement represents fathers' interactions with the child in such activities as caregiving and play. All aspects of engagement are essential to the well-being and development of very young children, who have extensive caregiving needs and whose development primarily occurs through play and social interaction (Crockenberg & Leerkes, 2000). Accessibility is the father's presence and availability for potential engagement. Finally, responsibility encompasses fathers' participation in child-related planning and organization as well as preparation to accommodate emergencies or unforeseen circumstances. Responsibility for child-related planning and organization can involve coordinating with the child's mother, and thus has a conceptual overlap with coparenting. To more clearly distinguish these concepts, this study focuses on the enactment of father responsibility (e.g., accommodating the child's needs) rather than on its coordination. Responsibility has received far less attention than engagement and accessibility in prior research, which makes the inclusion of each of these three aspects of father involvement a strength of this study.

The father's personal characteristics can influence involvement. Research on ethnicity and resident father involvement indicates that Black and Hispanic fathers take on more responsibility for their children than White fathers (Hofferth, 2003). In addition, economic status may be influential, as more highly educated mothers had more supportive coparenting relationships with their partners than did those with less education,

and the more hours a father spent in employment, the less time he spent with his children on weekdays (Stright & Bales, 2003; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001). Older, more mature fathers may be more involved than younger fathers. The child and household context may also be important. Some research has indicated that fathers are more involved when their child is a boy than when the child is a girl, particularly when the parents are married (Harris & Morgan, 1991; Lundberg, McLanahan, & Rose, 2007). When there are more children in the household, fathers may have less time available for any single child.

Coparenting

Coparenting can be conceptualized as the interactions between the partners in their roles as parents. Cooperative coparenting includes partners supporting one another as parents, sharing responsibility for the child, and minimizing parenting-related dissonance between the two partners (Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995; McHale, 1995; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004). Because this is fundamentally a couple process, studies of coparenting need to consider both parents. Developmental and symbolic interactionist theorists conceptualize the process of coparenting as beginning when couples making the transition to parenthood co-construct their roles as parents (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Fuligni & Brooks-Gunn, 2004).

Coparenting and relationship quality are interrelated but distinct aspects of the partner and parental relationship. Research has consistently found that married parents who have greater marital quality also exhibit more supportive and cooperative coparenting (see, e.g., Katz & Gottman, 1996; Katz & Woodin, 2002; McHale, 1995; Van Egeren, 2003). However, coparenting is distinguishable from relationship quality, as evidenced by couples with low levels of marital quality who nonetheless develop a supportive coparenting relationship (Talbot & McHale, 2004).

There also appears to be a strong connection between coparenting and father involvement. The two parents can be viewed as together cocreating the father role (Dienhart, 1998, 2001; Dienhart & Daly, 1997; Matta & Knudson-Martin, 2006). Parents can help each other and learn from each other via their communication and coordination, and this support, knowledge,

and cooperation can facilitate the father's participation. In this context, mothers may be more likely to encourage the father's involvement, and this encouragement can increase the father's participation (DeLuccie, 1995). Conversely, the absence of a strong coparenting alliance can undermine the father's ability and willingness to be involved (McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004). This has been demonstrated in married couples, as those fathers who perceive more cooperative coparenting spend more time interacting with their young children, have more positive interactions, and take on more responsibility for children (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Beitel & Parke, 1998; McBride & Rane, 1998). Coparenting has been studied almost exclusively in married couples, leaving open the question of whether the connections between coparenting and father involvement are also present for unmarried coresident parents.

The Current Study

The current study first examines the extent to which a child focus may be more evident in couples who formed their union through sliding than in couples who formed their union by deciding. It then considers the extent to which all couples are able to link coparenting and father involvement. Finally, it explores whether linking processes differ between sliding and deciding couples. Key aspects of coparenting and father involvement are examined in both married and unmarried coresident couples with young children using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). The data include a representative sample of new parents; both mothers and fathers were asked questions about their relationship and coparenting, and fathers were asked about their involvement. By comparing the association of coparenting and father involvement in married and unmarried couples, this analysis provides an observation of parenting in the context of union formation.

METHOD

Data

The analysis used data from the ECLS-B, a nationally representative survey of children born in the United States in 2001. The ECLS-B is unique among recent national data sets in containing multiple indicators of coparenting and father involvement for both married and

unmarried mothers and fathers. The most comprehensive measures of coparenting are found in the second wave of ECLS-B, conducted when the focal child was about 2 years old. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with mothers, and resident fathers completed self-response surveys. The sample for this analysis is families in which the focal child is living with both biological parents at the time the child is 2 years old. The initial sample included 8,280 children living with both biological parents at 9 months, and 91% (7,535) of these mothers were reinterviewed at 2 years. Of these 7,535 mothers, 87% (6,856) were still coresiding with their child's father, and 83% of these coresident fathers completed a questionnaire, for a final sample size of 5,410. Selection models revealed that mothers unmarried and cohabiting at 9 months were significantly less likely to be reinterviewed than married mothers. All analyses used weights designed for use with 2-year mother-father dyads to maintain the representativeness of the results. To retain cases in the sample, missing items were imputed using a single imputation in PROC MI in SAS for individual-level items before the creation of couple-level variables.

A major strength of the ECLS-B is the inclusion of both mothers and fathers. Because fathers' reports have often been unavailable or disregarded in parenting research, the current study helps correct this imbalance by focusing on fathers' perspectives. The report of each parent also allows for a dyadic analysis. Dyadic analyses have several key advantages over use of reports from a single family member. First, a dyadic analysis captures the interpersonal processes of the family system more accurately, which enhances the reliability and validity of results (Thompson & Walker, 1982). Using the reports of two partners also reduces the problem of shared-method variance, in which correlations between any two pieces of information from the same source can be assumed to be upwardly biased. Both mothers and fathers reported most items used in the current study. The main exception is father involvement, which in the ECLS-B only fathers reported. Prior research comparing mother and father reports of father involvement has found similar patterns of reported involvement, although mothers have tended to report less involvement by fathers than do the fathers themselves. Coresident mother and father

reports are relatively more alike than noncoresident parents (Coley & Morris, 2002).

The corresponding limitation of including each parent is that fewer fathers than mothers participated in the ECLS-B. Analysis of selection models for the nonresponding fathers found that, in couples where the father did not participate in the survey, mothers reported less discussion of their child and more conflict in their relationship. The mothers were also more likely to report that they were unmarried at the beginning of the pregnancy or still unmarried and more likely to report their race/ethnicity as Black, Hispanic, or Asian.

Variables

Coparenting. This study focused on the three core aspects of coparenting identified by Belsky and McHale (Belsky et al., 1995; McHale, 1995; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004). The first core aspect was support between the two coparents, in this study operationalized as the frequency of parents' communication about the child. The second core aspect was coparents actively taking responsibility for the child, represented by the influence of fathers on decision making about the child. To the extent that mothers are generally responsible for decisions about the child (see, e.g., Lamb, 1995; Peterson & Gerson, 1992), the measure of father influence represents the couple's ability to share decision making. Although it would have also been of interest to consider reports of the mother's influence on decision making, the survey did not ask about this item. Finally, the third core coparenting aspect was the extent of dissonance between coparents, represented in this study by the parents' conflict about the child. In the current analysis, coparenting was operationalized on a continuum, with more cooperative coparenting represented by higher levels of parenting-related communication and decision making and by lower levels of conflict.

Parents' communication was represented by a single item asking the father and mother, "How often do you talk about your child with your spouse/partner?" with responses coded on a weekly scale of 0 (*not at all*) to 7 (*every day*). Decision-making codes father influence from 0 (*none*) to 3 (*a great deal*), and it is composed of a scale of four items asking the father, "How much influence do you feel that you have?" and asking mothers, "How much influence do you

feel that your partner has?’’ in making major decisions about discipline, nutrition, health, and child care. The decision-making scale showed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.79$ for mothers and $\alpha = 0.72$ for fathers). Conflict about the child was a single item asking the father and mother each whether they have conflicts about the child, from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*often*). Discussion correlated positively (0.14) with decision making, and conflict correlated negatively with both discussion (-0.05) and decision making ($-.10$); each of the correlations was significant at $p < .001$. As the items tended to be skewed, categorical recodings of the items were also considered, with substantively similar findings.

To enable inclusion of both mothers and fathers, models included the mother’s response for each coparenting measure and a measure of difference between the parents. Measures of the difference between parents were created for discussion, decision making, and conflict by calculating difference scores that took the absolute difference between the mother and father responses. Because the father’s report of involvement was used, measures of coparenting used the mother’s report to minimize shared-method variance. However, the father’s report of coparenting was also present in the models in the form of this measure of difference between the parents.

Father involvement. The father-involvement items in ECLS-B were designed to assess engagement, accessibility, and responsibility, following Lamb’s (1987) conceptualization. In the current analysis, the outcome of father involvement was operationalized on a continuum, with greater frequency of engagement, accessibility, and responsibility representing greater father involvement. Engagement items included the frequency of the father’s participation in 13 activities with the child, encompassing caregiving tasks such as helping the child eat and developmental tasks such as reading books to the child. The activities were coded on a weekly basis, where responses ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 7 (*every day*). The engagement scale showed good reliability ($\alpha = 0.86$). Accessibility was represented by a single item measuring the time the father spent with the child without the mother present, also coded on a weekly basis from 0 (*not at all*) to 7 (*every day*). Although this measure did not fully capture Lamb’s (1987) concept of accessibility, it served as an indicator

of the relative presence of these resident fathers in their children’s lives. Fathers’ enactment of responsibility was assessed by a scale of three items asking the father how often he was the one to soothe an upset child, to stay home with a sick child, and to take the child to and/or from the sitter, with responses ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*) ($\alpha = 0.57$).

Union formation type. A key contribution of this study is the comparison of couples by union formation. Marriage before conception was used as a proxy for deciding to commit to the relationship before childbearing. Although it is certainly possible for couples to decide on a mutual long-term commitment without marriage, this tends to be relatively rare: In the United States, marriage remains normative (Cherlin, 2009). Sliding into the relationship was represented by those couples who were unmarried at the time the pregnancy began. This group is subdivided into those who subsequently married and those who remained unmarried.

Marriage was assessed by questions asking mothers to identify their marital status and, if married, the date of the marriage. Marital status at the time of conception could thus be calculated by comparing the date of marriage and the date of conception (calculated as date of birth minus gestational age at birth). Couples were coded as married before the pregnancy began, unmarried at the beginning of the pregnancy but married before the 2-year interview, or remaining unmarried at the time of the 2-year interview. Approximately half the couples who were unmarried at the beginning of the pregnancy but who subsequently married did so before the baby’s birth, and analyses that separated out this group indicated that they were substantively similar to couples who married after the baby’s birth.

Relationship quality. Two items represented relationship quality. Happiness with the relationship ranged from 1 (*not too happy*) to 3 (*very happy*). Conflict was a scale of nine items ($\alpha = 0.80$) asking about conflict in areas such as chores and money (excluding children) from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*often*). As with coparenting, models included both the mother’s report and the difference between the two partners for each characteristic.

Parent and child characteristics. Parent characteristics included age, race/ethnicity, years

of education, and hours of employment. In addition, models included the sibling composition of the household (only child, full siblings, half-siblings, both full and half siblings) and whether the child was male.

Analysis. This study considered both coparenting and father involvement at a single point in time. It is important to acknowledge that each is a dynamic process that continually changes over time in response to prior patterns and other influences. This analysis, because it was not able to fully capture this dynamic process, was thus primarily concerned with establishing patterns of association. Couple types were compared in their coparenting and father involvement using χ^2 and *t*-test analyses. The association between these was assessed using regression analyses, and patterns by couple type were assessed using interactions.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the sample. Comparisons of coresident couples who were married before the pregnancy, unmarried at the beginning of pregnancy but who subsequently married, and who remained unmarried were conducted using *t* tests or χ^2 tests. Unmarried cohabiting mothers were the youngest, had the least education, and were the least likely to be non-Hispanic White, and they were the most likely to be in an interethnic union. Conversely, mothers married before the pregnancy were the oldest, with the greatest amount of education, and were the most likely to be non-Hispanic White. Mothers were employed an average of 18 hours a week across all union types, but the employment hours of fathers were lowest among unmarried cohabiting couples. Mothers reported relationships that were, on average, close to being very happy and with some conflict. Unmarried cohabiting couples reported the lowest relationship happiness and the highest levels of conflict of all union types. This confirms prior research, which found that unmarried cohabiting couples report more problematic relationships (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; Smock, 2000; Surra & Hughes, 1997). It also provides an indication that married couples and couples who married in response to the pregnancy may be more relationship focused than unmarried, cohabiting couples.

Coparenting and Involvement by Union Type

The first aspect of the analysis was the couples' child focus, as evidenced by reports of coparenting and father involvement. These reports, which Table 2 details, show that parents reported communicating about their child almost every day. Fathers had, on average, between some and a great deal of influence on decision making. A comparison of mother and father reports revealed that differences between mother and father reports of coparenting were not large, about half a day per week for communication and a third of a point for decision-making influence. Overall, mothers tended to report higher levels of coparenting than did fathers. This demonstrates a difference between coparenting and father involvement, as fathers tend to report higher levels of father involvement than do mothers (Coley & Morris, 2002). For their involvement, fathers reported being engaged in caregiving and developmental activities an average of four days per week; spending time with their child without the mother present an average of four days per week; and sometimes being the ones responsible for comforting, staying home with, and driving their child.

Overall, tests for differences between union types indicated that unmarried, cohabiting parents showed the highest levels of father involvement and married parents the lowest. Couples who were unmarried at the beginning of the pregnancy reported a greater frequency of communication about their child than did couples married before the pregnancy. Couples unmarried at the beginning of the pregnancy distinguished themselves from those who remained unmarried by having a significantly smaller difference between the partners, an indication of the lower relationship quality of the latter group. For fathers' influence on decision making, neither the mother report nor the difference between parent reports differed by union status. Couples who were unmarried at the beginning of pregnancy but who subsequently married reported the lowest levels of conflict about the child, and partners who were married before the beginning of pregnancy had the most similar views of their conflict about the child. For father involvement, there was a clear pattern of differences between fathers, with unmarried, cohabiting fathers the most involved and fathers married before the pregnancy the least involved. This means, for example, that unmarried cohabiting fathers were engaged and accessible nearly a half day more

Table 1. Partner and Relationship Characteristics by Union Status

	Total Sample	Married Before Pregnancy	Unmarried at Beginning of Pregnancy	Unmarried Cohabiting	Differences (M = Married, U = Unmarried, C = Cohabiting)
Age (years)					
Mother	29.86 (5.88)	31.13 (2.19)	26.39 (6.04)	25.16 (5.81)	C < U < M
Difference	3.71 (3.73)	3.53 (3.65)	4.37 (4.19)	4.15 (3.72)	M < UC
Education (years)					
Mother	13.88 (2.87)	14.42 (2.82)	12.83 (2.27)	11.51 (2.01)	C < U < M
Difference	1.68 (1.69)	1.72 (1.73)	1.57 (1.59)	1.60 (1.55)	U < M
Race/ethnicity of mother (%)					
White	66	71	62	40	C < U < M
Black	6	5	10	11	M < UC
Hispanic	21	18	20	46	MU < C
Asian	4	5	3	1	C < MU
Native American Indian	1	1	1	1	
Other	2	1	3	1	MC < U
Different from father	13	10	16	23	M < U < C
Employment hours					
Mother	18.69 (19.47)	18.52 (19.42)	19.21 (19.90)	19.23 (19.49)	
Difference	28.42 (20.97)	29.15 (21.03)	27.99 (20.70)	24.33 (20.35)	C < MU
Siblings in household (%)					
Only child	37	34	58	42	M < C < U
Full sibling(s)	50	58	17	31	U < C < M
Half sibling(s)	8	4	23	21	M < UC
Full and half siblings	4	4	2	6	U < C
Child is male (%)	52	51	55	56	
Relationship happiness (1–3 <i>not happy</i>–<i>very happy</i>)					
Mother	2.72 (0.48)	2.74 (0.47)	2.71 (0.49)	2.58 (0.54)	C < MU
Difference	0.29 (0.44)	0.28 (0.43)	0.30 (0.45)	0.36 (0.47)	MU < C
Relationship conflict (1–27 <i>never</i>–<i>always</i>)					
Mother	16.72 (4.62)	16.55 (4.50)	16.81 (4.81)	17.72 (5.06)	MU < C
Difference	3.69 (3.31)	3.56 (3.21)	3.81 (3.32)	4.42 (3.71)	MU < C
	N = 5,564	n = 4,247 (77%)	n = 623 (11%)	n = 694 (12%)	

Note: Weighted sample of ECLS-B 2-year coresident biological parents. Differences by union status are assessed using *t* tests or χ^2 tests.

Table 2. Coparenting and Father Involvement by Union Status

	Total Sample	Married Before Pregnancy	Unmarried at Beginning of Pregnancy	Unmarried Cohabiting	Differences (M = Married, U = Unmarried, C = Cohabiting)
Coparenting					
Communication (0–7 days/week)					
Mother	6.81 (0.86)	6.79 (0.87)	6.86 (0.67)	6.81 (0.91)	M < U
Father ^a	6.57 (1.23)	6.57 (1.24)	6.67 (1.03)	6.49 (1.37)	MC < U
Difference	0.53 (1.33)	0.53 (1.34)	0.44 (1.18)	0.59 (1.43)	U < C
Decision making (0–3 no influence–great influence)					
Mother	2.60 (0.47)	2.60 (0.83)	2.62 (0.47)	2.61 (0.44)	
Father ^a	2.56 (0.44)	2.54 (0.44)	2.59 (0.41)	2.60 (0.44)	M < UC
Difference	0.37 (0.38)	0.37 (0.37)	0.39 (0.38)	0.37 (0.39)	
Conflict about children (0–3 never–frequent)					
Mother	2.32 (0.85)	2.32 (0.83)	2.24 (0.86)	2.37 (0.92)	U < MC
Father ^a	2.24 (0.85)	2.25 (0.83)	2.17 (0.88)	2.28 (0.93)	U < MC
Difference	0.70 (0.71)	0.07 (0.97)	0.72 (0.74)	0.59 (1.43)	M < C < U
Father involvement					
Engagement (0–7 days/week)	3.98 (1.34)	3.88 (1.32)	4.18 (1.60)	4.37 (1.42)	M < U < C
Accessibility (0–7 days/week)	4.08 (2.52)	4.01 (2.50)	4.09 (2.58)	4.48 (2.57)	MU < C
Responsibility (0–4 never–always)	2.18 (0.83)	2.12 (0.82)	2.30 (0.81)	2.43 (0.86)	M < U < C
	N = 5,564	n = 4,247 (77%)	n = 623 (11%)	n = 694 (12%)	

Note: Weighted sample of ECLS-B 2-year coresident biological parents. Differences by union status are assessed using *t* tests.

^aFather coparenting responses are not included in analytic models.

per week than fathers married before the pregnancy. There is thus an indication that unmarried cohabiting fathers and fathers who married in response to the pregnancy may have a greater child focus than fathers who were married before the pregnancy.

Association of Coparenting With Father Involvement

The next aspect of the analysis examined the associations between coparenting,

relationship quality, and father involvement. These were tested using ordinary-least-squares (OLS) regression models predicting engagement, accessibility, and responsibility (Table 3). Models were tested first using only the coparenting measures, and subsequently including the relationship, partner, and child characteristics. As the coparenting coefficients remained quite stable across the inclusion of the additional characteristics, only the latter models are shown with their unstandardized coefficients.

Table 3. OLS Regressions of the Association Between Coparenting and Father Involvement (N = 5,564)

	Engagement	Responsibility	Accessibility
Coparenting			
Communication			
Mother	-0.06**	0.00	-0.05
Difference	-0.11***	0.00	-0.08*
Decision making			
Mother	0.39***	0.27***	0.60***
Difference	-0.02	-0.03	0.15
Conflict about children			
Mother	-0.05*	-0.03*	-0.02
Difference	0.06*	0.05**	0.04
Relationship characteristics			
Union status			
Married before pregnancy (ref.)			
Unmarried at pregnancy	0.03	0.04	-0.05 ^a
Unmarried cohabiting	0.13*	0.08*	0.42**
Happiness			
Mother	0.10**	0.01	-0.03
Difference	-0.04	-0.07**	-0.11
Conflict			
Mother	0.03	0.09**	0.20*
Difference	0.15**	0.05	0.23*
Parent characteristics			
Age			
Father	-0.01*	0.00	0.02**
Difference	-0.01	0.00	0.01
Education			
Father	0.01	-0.01	0.00
Difference	-0.01	0.00	-0.04
Race/ethnicity (father)			
White (ref.)			
Black	-0.02	0.31***	0.40**
Hispanic	-0.02	0.26***	0.20*
Asian	-0.26**	0.24***	0.39*
Native American Indian	0.47	0.23	0.24
Other	0.04	-0.06	0.27
Different from father	0.13*	0.01	-0.07
Employment hours			
Father	-0.01***	0.00*	-0.01***
Difference	-0.01***	-0.01***	-0.02***
Child characteristics			
Siblings in household			
Only child (reference)			
Full sibling(s)	-0.28***	-0.04	0.12
Half sibling(s)	-0.21**	0.09*	0.57***
Full and half siblings	-0.15	0.14*	0.53**
Child is male	0.19***	0.09***	0.17*
Intercept	3.91***	1.73***	2.46***
R ²	0.12	0.20	0.08

Note: Weighted sample of ECLS-B 2-year coresident biological parents, unstandardized coefficients shown.

^aUnmarried at beginning of pregnancy is significantly different from cohabiting (-0.47, $p = < .01$).

Coparental communication was associated more strongly with father engagement than with other aspects of involvement. Lower levels of engagement were associated with more frequent discussions of the child and with differences between partners in their reports of communication about the child. To test the possibility that the parents' communications about their child may actually reflect conflict about the child, further analyses included an interaction term between communication and conflict (analyses not shown). These interactions were not significant, thus indicating that communication is associated with less engagement at all levels of conflict about the child. The weak and negative correlation between communication and conflict supports this finding.

Shared decision making was strongly associated with all three aspects of father involvement. In families where the mother reported greater contributions by fathers to decision making, fathers reported higher levels of engagement, responsibility, and accessibility.

Conflict about the child was associated with decreased engagement and responsibility of fathers. Differences between parents were also a factor for conflict about the child. Here, the greater the difference between the mother's and father's reports of conflict, the greater was the father's engagement and responsibility. The findings suggest again that when either partner perceived a lower level of conflict, the father was more involved.

Fathers in unmarried, cohabiting families were more involved in all areas than were fathers married before the pregnancy, which confirms the bivariate analysis that these couples showed a distinct child focus. In addition, when mothers reported greater happiness with the relationship, fathers reported higher levels of engagement, and when the two parents held different views on the level of conflict in their relationship, fathers reported lower levels of involvement in all areas. Father involvement was also associated with parental employment, and it can be seen that the more hours that fathers were employed, the lower the level of involvement they reported. Fathers also reported lower levels of involvement when mothers were employed fewer hours, as indicated by a larger difference between mother and father hours of employment. These associations were further explored using additional measures of parents' split-shift hours and children's hours of nonparental care, but

as these neither influenced the association between coparenting and involvement nor were associated with father involvement beyond the father's hours of employment, they are not presented in the final models.

To investigate whether these processes of association between coparenting and father involvement were consistent or different by union type, models were tested that included an interaction between each coparenting measure and union type. The tests found that almost all aspects of the association between coparenting and father involvement were consistent for couples in all three union types, as indicated by nonsignificant interactions (results not shown). Only the association of shared decision making and availability differed by union status.

DISCUSSION

Couples who slide into a committed relationship via childbearing appear to be more child focused than couples who decide to commit to their relationship before childbearing. Sliding fathers who remain unmarried are particularly willing to be involved in their child's life, both in their active engagement in caregiving and play as well as in areas less often measured, such as taking responsibility and spending time without the mother present. Sliding fathers who married in response to pregnancy also show a child focus, reporting greater involvement than deciding fathers who married before the pregnancy and having the most cooperative coparenting. Consistent with prior research, this study also found that deciding couples had more of a relationship focus, as evidenced by higher relationship quality, than sliding couples who remained unmarried. However, sliding couples who married in response to pregnancy showed no differences in relationship quality from deciding couples. The committed sliding couples thus appear to be focused both on their relationship and on their child.

The child-centeredness of sliding couples may have several sources. If the relationship and child are a tightly bound package deal, then fathers who wish to remain in the relationship with the child's mother may need to participate more in child rearing to demonstrate their commitment. Sliding couples may hold more flexible views of parental roles, thus allowing fathers to participate to a greater degree (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995). Conversely, deciding couples who are married and who have been

married longer may have more conventional views and have established more specialized roles that designate a greater proportion of the involvement with young children to mothers. It is also possible that the sample was selective of more involved unmarried fathers. Unmarried fathers had a higher nonresponse rate than married fathers, and perhaps those fathers who chose to participate in a survey about their child were also more likely to be involved in other areas of their child's life.

Although the levels of coparenting and father involvement are higher for sliding parents, the processes linking coparenting and father involvement appear to be consistent across all types of union formation, as indicated by nonsignificant interactions of almost all major variables with union formation types. For all parents, participating in decisions about the child's well-being is linked with fathers' greater engagement, accessibility, and responsibility for their children. Here, fathers who feel they have more influence may be more invested in the day-to-day life of their child and consequently may be more inclined to be actively involved. Conversely, fathers who do not have a say in major decisions may be less invested in the day-to-day lives of their child and less interested in this type of involvement. It may also be that fathers who are more active participants in their child's life may feel more entitled to have input in decisions about the child, whereas fathers without active participation would forfeit their right to input.

For all parents, less engagement and responsibility were linked with greater conflict about the child. Couples who have higher levels of conflict about their child may not have created a shared perspective on coparenting (Fuligni & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). Their conflict indicates a lack of coordination in coparenting, signaling a potential difficulty in coordinating father involvement as well. Lower levels of engagement with the child and taking responsibility for the child may also precipitate arguments about the father's lack of involvement.

A somewhat counterintuitive finding is that greater parental communication about the child is linked with lower levels of father involvement. Partner differences in reports of communication provide a potential insight into this puzzle. When partners give divergent reports of communication, meaning that one partner feels that they communicate much more frequently than the other partner, the partners may not be creating

a shared concept of their parenting. If they perceive their parenting so differently, they may feel the need to talk more with their partner about their parenting. The partner may misinterpret or not comprehend this communication, thus continuing the cycle. These partners may be uncoordinated in both their coparenting and in the involvement of fathers, meaning that they have frequent, yet futile, communication combined with low father involvement.

The ECLS-B data set is the only recent national data set to contain items that encompass multiple aspects of coresidential coparenting, thus allowing for a detailed look at these processes in a national sample. However, as it was not designed to measure coparenting, the items may not fully capture the underlying construct. Their relatively low correlation with one another is an indication that more comprehensive measures are necessary. Also, relying on single-item measures to tap into complex interactional patterns may miss important nuances. Future surveys would do well to consider including more comprehensive and targeted measures of coparenting. This study was also not able to distinguish the direction of association between coparenting and father involvement. Future research may be able to test this by using additional waves of data as they become available. As these waves may be too far apart to capture the more immediate reciprocal dynamics, researchers also need to consider studies that are able to assess the ways coparenting and father involvement are continually cocreated.

This study examines coparenting in conjunction with all three aspects of father involvement conceptualized by Lamb (1987). It is particularly noteworthy that one aspect of Lamb's idea of responsibility bears a striking similarity to coparenting. Both concepts involve coordinating, organizing, and planning around children by fathers and mothers together. Thus, coparenting would appear integral to Lamb's ideas of father involvement. The current study did not directly address this issue, as it focused on the enactment of father responsibility rather than on coordination between the parents. Further research and theorizing is needed to more distinctly conceptualize this aspect of father involvement.

Another strength of the current study was the inclusion of both the mother's and the father's perspectives. Many studies of father involvement rely on the mother's report, but

this can be problematic as the more time the father spends with the child without the mother present, the less she may be aware of what he is doing with the child. This could be one reason mother reports of father involvement tend to be lower than father reports of themselves (Coley & Morris, 2002). For coparenting, inclusion of both parents allows for an understanding of the ways the two parents together are co-constructing their relationship and sheds light on the ways this is linked with other aspects of family process. Mothers reported higher levels of coparenting than did fathers, perhaps indicating their greater awareness of or aspiration for more extensive forms of cooperation. The results of this study demonstrate the multidimensional understanding of the relationship that can be gained by including both parents. In addition, the use of mothers' reports of coparenting and fathers' reports of involvement provided a more robust test of the association of these two processes than would have been possible if only one parent's report had been used.

Strong relationships, cooperative coparenting, and involved fathers can all benefit children and their families. Programs, policy, and practitioners aiming to promote these qualities can target the unique strengths of couples. For married deciding couples with a relationship focus, interventions can begin with the potentially higher relationship quality and aim for increased father involvement and coparenting. For unmarried or recently married sliding couples with a child focus, interventions can begin with the potentially more involved fathers and more cooperative coparenting and target increases in relationship quality.

This study examined coparenting and the involvement of fathers who live with their 2-year-old children, using comprehensive measures of the cooperative coparenting and father involvement. It underscores the claims of prior coparenting research that this facet of families is integral to their functioning. This research is also able to extend prior studies by including both married and unmarried coresident parents in a nationally representative sample. Given the rising numbers of nonmarital births, the fragility of these families, and policies encouraging unmarried parents to marry, these couples are an important concern. For those unmarried and recently married parents, this study demonstrates an area of potential strength.

NOTE

This research was conducted while I was a National Institute of Child Health and Human Development postdoctoral fellow at the Population Research Institute at Pennsylvania State University. I thank PRI, Paul Amato, Valarie King, and Alan Booth for their support.

REFERENCES

- Abidin, R., & Brunner, J. (1995). Development of a parenting alliance inventory. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 24*, 31–40.
- Beitel, A., & Parke, R. (1998). Paternal involvement in infancy: The role of maternal and paternal attitudes. *Journal of Family Psychology, 12*, 268–288.
- Belsky, J., Crnic, K., & Gable, S. (1995). The determinants of coparenting in families with toddler boys: Spousal differences and daily hassles. *Child Development, 66*, 629–642.
- Berger, P. L., & Kellner, H. (1964). Marriage and the construction of reality: An exercise in the microsociology of knowledge. *Diogenes, 46*, 1–24.
- Berger, L. M., Carlson, M. J., Bzostek, S. H., & Osborne, C. (2008). Parenting practices of resident fathers: The role of marital and biological ties. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 70*, 625–639.
- Bumpass, L. L., & Lu, H. (2000). Trends in cohabitation and implications for children's family contexts in the United States. *Population Studies, 54*, 29–41.
- Cherlin, A. (2009). *The marriage-go-round: The state of marriage and the family in America today*. New York: Knopf.
- Clarkberg, M., Stolzenberg, R. M., & Waite, L. J. (1995). Attitudes, values, and entrance into cohabitational versus marital unions. *Social Forces, 74*, 602–632.
- Cohan, C. L., & Kleinbaum, S. (2002). Toward a greater understanding of the cohabitation effect: Premarital cohabitation and marital communication. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 64*, 180–192.
- Coley, R. L., Morris, J. E. (2002). Comparing father and mother reports of father involvement among low-income minority families. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 64*, 982–997.
- Crockenberg, S., & Leerkes, E. (2000). Infant social and emotional development in family context. In C. H. Zeanah (Ed.), *Handbook of infant mental health* (2nd ed., pp. 60–90). New York: Guilford.
- DeLuccie, M. F. (1995). Mothers as gatekeepers: A model of maternal mediators of father involvement. *Journal of Genetic Psychology, 156*, 115–131.
- Dienhart, A. (1998). *Reshaping fatherhood: The social construction of shared parenting*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Dienhart, A. (2001). Make room for daddy: The pragmatic potentials of a tag-team structure for shared parenting. *Journal of Family Issues*, 22, 973–999.
- Dienhart, A., & Daly, K. J. (1997). Men and women co-creating father involvement in a nongenerative culture. In A. J. Hawkins & D. C. Dollahite (Eds.), *Generative fathering: Beyond deficit perspectives* (pp. 147–164). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Doherty, W. J., Kouneski, E. F., & Erickson, M. F. (1998). Responsible fathering: An overview and conceptual framework. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60, 277–292.
- Feinberg, M. E. (2002). Coparenting and the transition to parenthood: A framework for prevention. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 5, 173–195.
- Fulgini, A. S., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2004). Measuring mother and father shared caregiving: An analysis using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics—Child Development Supplement. In R. D. Day & M. E. Lamb (Eds.), *Conceptualizing and measuring father involvement* (pp. 341–358). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Hamilton, B. E., Martin, J. A., & Ventura, S. J. (2006, November 21). Births: Preliminary data for 2005. *National Center for Health Statistics*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/hestats/prelimbirths05/prelimbirths05.htm>
- Hanks, D. T., & Smith, D. M. (2005). *Healthy relationships and marriage among fragile families in Baltimore City*. Baltimore: Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development.
- Harris, K. M., & Morgan, S. P. (1991). Fathers, sons, and daughters: Differential paternal involvement in parenting. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53, 531–544.
- Hawkins, A. J., & Dollahite, D. C. (1997). *Generative fathering: Beyond deficit perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hofferth, S. L. (2003). Race/ethnic differences in father involvement in two-parent families: Culture, context, or economy? *Journal of Family Issues*, 24, 185–216.
- Hofferth, S. L., & Anderson, K. G. (2003). Are all dads equal? Biology versus marriage as a basis for paternal investment. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65, 213–232.
- Hohmann-Marriott, B. E. (2009). Father involvement ideals and the union transitions of unmarried parents. *Journal of Family Issues*, 30, 898–920.
- Katz, L., & Gottman, J. (1996). Spillover effects of marital conflict: In search of parenting and coparenting mechanisms. In J. McHale & P. Cowan (Eds.), *Understanding how family-level dynamics affect children's development: Studies of two-parent families. New directions for child development* (Vol. 74, pp. 57–76). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Katz, L., & Woodin, E. (2002). Hostility, hostile detachment, and conflict engagement in marriages: Effects on child and family functioning. *Child Development*, 73, 636–651.
- Lamb, M. E. (1987). The emergent American father. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The father's role: Cross-cultural perspectives*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Lamb, M. E. (1995). The changing roles of fathers. In J. L. Shapiro & M. J. Diamond (Eds.), *Becoming a father: Contemporary, social, developmental, and clinical perspectives. Springer Series, Focus on Men* (Vol. 8, pp. 18–35). New York: Springer.
- Lundberg, S., McLanahan, S., & Rose, E. (2007). Child gender and father involvement in fragile families. *Demography*, 44, 79–92.
- Manning, W. D., & Smock, P. J. (2005). Measuring and modeling cohabitation: New perspectives from qualitative data. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 989–1002.
- Marsiglio, W., Amato, P., Day, R. D., & Lamb, M. E. (2000). Scholarship on fatherhood in the 1990s and beyond. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 1173–1191.
- Matta, D. S., & Knudson-Martin, C. (2006). Father responsivity: Couple processes and the coconstruction of fatherhood. *Family Process*, 45, 19–37.
- McBride, B., & Rane, T. (1998). Parenting alliance as a predictor of father involvement: An exploratory study. *Family Relations*, 47, 229–236.
- McHale, J. P. (1995). Co-parenting and triadic interactions during infancy: The roles of marital distress and child gender. *Developmental Psychology*, 31, 985–996.
- McHale, J. P., Kuersten-Hogan, R., & Rao, N. (2004). Growing points for coparenting theory and research. *Journal of Adult Development*, 11, 221–233.
- McLanahan, S., Garfinkel, I., Reichman, N., Teitler, J., Carlson, M., & Audiger, C. N. (2003). *The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study baseline national report*. New York: Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing.
- Palkovitz, R. J. (2002). *Involved fathering and men's adult development: Provisional balances*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Peterson, R. R., & Gerson, K. (1992). Determinants of responsibility for child care arrangements among dual-earner couples. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54, 527–536.
- Smock, P. J. (2000). Cohabitation in the United States: An appraisal of research themes, findings, and implications. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 1–20.
- Stanley, S. M., Kline, G. H., & Markman, H. J. (2005, February). *The inertia hypothesis: Sliding vs. deciding in the development of risk for couples in marriage*. Paper presented at the Cohabitation: Advancing Research and Theory Conference, Bowling Green, OH.

- Strengthening Fragile Families Training Institute. (2006, November). *Integrating responsible fatherhood and relationship education*. Washington, DC: National Partnership for Community Leadership.
- Stright, A. D., & Bales, S. S. (2003). Coparenting quality: Contributions of child and parent characteristics. *Family Relations, 52*, 232–240.
- Surra, C. A., & Hughes, D. K. (1997). Commitment processes in accounts of the development of premarital relationships. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 59*, 5–21.
- Talbot, J. A., & McHale, J. P. (2004). Individual parental adjustment moderates the relationship between marital and coparenting quality. *Journal of Adult Development, 11*, 191–205.
- Thompson, L., & Walker, A. J. (1982). The dyad as the unit of analysis: Conceptual and methodological issues. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 44*, 889–900.
- Van Egeren, L. A. (2003). Prebirth predictors of coparenting experiences in early infancy. *Infant Mental Health Journal, 24*, 278–295.
- Whiteside, M. F., & Becker, B. J. (2000). Parental factors and the young child's postdivorce adjustment: A meta-analysis with implications for parenting arrangements. *Journal of Family Psychology, 14*, 5–26.
- Wu, Z., & Balakrishnan, T. R. (1995). Dissolution of premarital cohabitation in Canada. *Demography, 32*, 521–532.
- Yeung, W. J., Sandberg, J. F., Davis-Kean, P. E., & Hofferth, S. (2001). Children's time with fathers in intact families. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 63*, 136–154.