

Maternal and Paternal Perceptions of Coparenting as a Link Between Marital Quality and the Parent–Toddler Relationship

Ashley S. Holland
Edgewood College

Nancy L. McElwain
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The aim of this study was to examine coparenting perceptions of support and trust as a link between marital quality and parent–child relationship quality. Mothers and fathers with 33-month-old children ($n = 122$, 61 girls) independently reported on coparenting support and trust, marital quality, and attachment-relevant aspects of the parent–child relationship. Additionally, child–mother attachment security was assessed observationally. Marital quality was related to higher quality mother–son relationships (self-reported and observed) via more positive maternal coparenting perceptions, and marital quality was related to greater father–son and father–daughter relationship quality via more positive paternal coparenting perceptions. For partner effects, marital quality was related to higher mother–son relationship quality via fathers’ perceptions of coparenting. Results highlight perceptions of coparenting of both mothers and fathers as a link between marital quality and mother–child relationship quality for families with toddler-aged boys. Further, findings suggest that marital quality fosters more positive paternal coparenting trust and support, which in turn has positive implications for father–son and father–daughter relationships during toddlerhood.

Keywords: coparenting, fathers, marital quality, parent–child attachment

Ample evidence indicates that more harmonious marriages predict more harmonious parent–child relationships and, ultimately, better socioemotional adjustment for children (see Erel & Burman, 1995; Fincham & Hall, 2005). Further, family theorists have highlighted coparenting as a key aspect of the family system (see McHale & Cowan, 1996) and contributor to child functioning (see Mangelsdorf, Laxman, & Jessee, 2011). The marital and coparenting relationships, though interconnected, are distinct. Whereas the quality of the marital relationship entails emotions, behaviors, and attitudes toward a romantic partner, coparenting involves a third person—the child. As such, coparenting has been defined as the collaboration between parents and the extent to which mothers and fathers trust and support one another as parents (Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996; McHale, 1995).

Empirical evidence demonstrates the conceptual distinction between coparenting and the marital relationship. Coparenting, for instance, tends to be a more proximal predictor of the parent–child

relationship than marital quality (see Feinberg, 2003) and, accordingly, coparenting has shown stronger associations with parenting (e.g., Abidin & Brunner, 1995), parent–child relationship quality (Frosch, Mangelsdorf, & McHale, 2000), and child outcomes (e.g., Bearss & Eyberg, 1998; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; O’Leary & Vidair, 2005). These findings suggest the utility of investigating coparenting as a link between the marital and parent–child relationships, and Fincham and Hall (2005) called for such investigations in their review of marital quality and parenting. We attempted to address this call. Guided by family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1985), as well as conceptualizations of coparenting and its role in the larger family system (Feinberg, 2003; Fincham & Hall, 2005), we tested perceptions of coparenting support and trust as a link between marital quality and parent–toddler relationship quality. Further, we tested mothers’ and fathers’ perceptions of coparenting in the same model and examined associations among reports from the same parent (“actor effects” e.g., *mother*–reported coparenting as a predictor of *mother*–toddler relationship quality), as well as between reports from the parent and his or her partner (“partner effects” e.g., *father*–reported coparenting as a predictor of *mother*–toddler relationship quality). Because associations between coparenting and other family subsystems (i.e., marital and parent–child relationships) may be especially robust among families with boys, we also investigated child gender as a moderator.

Ashley Holland, Department of Psychology, Edgewood College; Nancy L. McElwain, Human and Community Development, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ashley S. Holland, Department of Psychology, Edgewood College, 1000 Edgewood College Drive, Madison, WI 53711. E-mail: ashleyholland@edgewood.edu

Coparenting as a Link Between the Marital and Parent–Child Subsystems

Family systems theory posits that families are organized systems, and to understand the functioning of one subsystem it is necessary to examine the functioning of other subsystems (Cox &

Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1985). Conceptual models identify the coparenting subsystem as key in this regard (Feinberg, 2003; Fincham & Hall, 2005). Specifically, the quality of the marriage, posited to serve as an organizing influence within the larger family system, may influence the quality of the parent–child relationship via its influence on coparenting. For instance, high levels of marital love may foster partners’ support of, and trust in, each other as coparents. High levels of marital conflict and distress, in contrast, may result in coparents who undermine each other’s parenting decisions, compete with one another for their child’s affection, and communicate ineffectively about child rearing. A lack of coparenting support and trust with regard to important parenting issues, in turn, will likely have a negative impact on parents’ interactions with their children (Fincham & Hall, 2005).

Evidence for coparenting as a link between the marital and parent–child subsystems has emerged in three studies. First, Floyd, Gilliom, and Hall (1998) reported that higher marital quality was related to lower levels of mother–child negative interaction 18 to 24 months later, and this association was fully accounted for by Time 1 maternal reports of coparenting. Second, in a three-wave longitudinal study, Bonds and Gondoli (2007) reported a significant indirect effect from marital adjustment at Time 1 to maternal warmth at Time 3 via coparenting at Time 2. Notably, all paths tested controlled for earlier levels of the dependent variable, thereby providing a rigorous test of coparenting as a link between marital adjustment and maternal warmth. Third, Margolin, Gordis, and John (2001) reported that coparenting mediated the association between greater marital conflict and greater parenting stress (and less positive parenting), and these results held for both mother and father models.

In sum, these studies provide initial evidence that aspects of the marriage are related to parent–child relationship factors through coparenting. Yet, only Margolin et al. (2001) tested coparenting as a link predicting both mothering and fathering, although the authors used *maternal* reports of the father’s coparenting to predict *paternal* reports of parenting, and vice versa. These analyses ruled out the possibility that associations were due to reporter bias, but the parent’s own perceptions of coparenting as predictors of parenting practices were not assessed. Moreover, parents of school-age children and adolescents (Bonds & Gondoli, 2007; Floyd et al., 1998) or older preschool-aged children (Margolin et al., 2001) were assessed in the above studies, and we know of no prior study that has examined such indirect effects among parents of toddlers. Toddlers’ increasing demands for autonomy, combined with parents’ increasing need to set limits, introduces new challenges to not only the parental role but also to coparenting dynamics. When parents perceive high levels of support and trust in the coparent, parent–toddler relationships may benefit because there is greater consistency across parents and children are less likely to be exposed to disputes related to child rearing. Indeed, prior studies have shown that marital functioning (Belsky, Youngblade, Rovine, & Volling, 1991; Frosch et al., 2000) and coparenting processes (Caldera & Lindsey, 2006; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, Lauretti, & Rasmussen, 2000) relate to parent–toddler interactions or attachment security in expected ways. Moreover, results from a large nationally representative sample indicated that couple relationship quality predicted parental engagement more strongly between one and three years of age, compared with three and five years of age,

indicating the toddler period as possibly sensitive to marital functioning (Carlson, Pilkauskas, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2011).

Child Gender as a Moderator

A second objective was to examine child gender as a potential moderator of the hypothesized indirect effects from marriage to the parent–toddler relationship via coparenting support and trust. Accumulating evidence tentatively suggests that associations between coparenting and aspects of the marriage or parent–child relationship quality may be stronger for boys. Higher levels of marital distress have been related to more competitive coparenting tactics during interactions with infant sons (McHale, 1995) and to greater maternal triangulation of preschool or adolescent sons in interparental disputes (Margolin et al., 2001). Additionally, supportive coparenting has been associated with greater infant–parent attachment security for both mother–son and father–son dyads (Brown, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, & Neff, 2010). In all cases, the above associations did not hold for girls. In one study to find an effect for girls, observed coparenting characterized by playful banter between partners was related to better toddler adjustment, but only for girls (Kolak & Vernon-Feagans, 2008).

Because fathers, on average, may be more invested in and involved with their sons versus daughters (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004), fathers may be more likely to remain involved with their sons in the context of marital distress, leading to difficulties and competition in the coparenting relationship and, in turn, adjustment problems for boys. From this “paternal investment” hypothesis, it also follows that fathers of girls may be more likely to withdraw from (vs. compete in) the coparenting role in the context of marital distress (see Mangelsdorf et al., 2011). In support of this notion, studies have shown that *mother–father discrepancies* in levels of parental warmth and involvement have been linked to marital distress (McHale, 1995) and poorer child adjustment (McConnell & Kerig, 2002) for girls but not boys.

The Current Study

When children were 33 months of age, parents reported on the marital relationship and coparenting support and trust, and we assessed the quality of the parent–child relationship using observations of child–mother attachment security and maternal and paternal reports of attachment-related aspects of the parent–child relationship. In a meta-analytic review of coparenting and child outcomes, Teubert and Pinquart (2010) reported a significant but weak association between coparenting dimensions and attachment security among four studies (also see Brown et al., 2010). As discussed by these authors, the limited number of studies examining associations between coparenting and attachment is surprising and more studies are needed. We agree, especially given pleas by family systems theorists to go beyond the investigation of maternal sensitivity when examining factors that predict attachment security (Cowan, 1997).

We hypothesized that higher marital quality would be related to higher levels of coparenting support and trust. More supportive and trusting perceptions of coparenting, in turn, were expected to relate to higher quality parent–toddler relationships. Notably, maternal and paternal coparenting perceptions tend to be only modestly associated (Ippolito Morrill, Hines, Mahmood, & Cordova,

2010; Van Egeren, 2004), have distinct antecedents (Gordon & Feldman, 2008; Van Egeren, 2003), and show differential prediction patterns (e.g., greater family warmth for mothers and more child-focused interactions for fathers; McHale et al., 2000). For these reasons, we assessed coparenting perceptions separately for mothers and fathers and examined the parent's own coparenting perceptions and the parent's partner's coparenting perceptions as predictors of the parent-child relationship. Few studies have examined partner effects of coparenting, but Ippolito Morrill et al. (2010) reported that wives' reports of coparenting were associated with husbands' reports of parenting and vice versa. In addition, Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, and Sokolowski (2008) found that coparenting quality was only related to father involvement when mothers were encouraging. Thus, initial empirical evidence of partner effects, combined with family systems conceptualizations that underscore the interdependence among individuals within larger subsystems (Minuchin, 1985), point toward examination of partner effects as a needed extension in the coparenting literature (see McHale et al., 2000, for a similar point). Because no previous study to our knowledge has tested coparenting support and trust as a mediator with respect to partner effects, this aspect of our study was exploratory.

We also examined child gender as a moderator of the hypothesized indirect effects. In light of past findings, we expected that associations would be stronger for boys. We caution, however, that among the studies examining coparenting as a mediator, child gender did not emerge as a moderator (i.e., Bonds & Gondoli, 2007; Margolin et al., 2001). Yet, these past studies were conducted with samples of older children, and findings for child gender as a moderator of coparenting associations have more often emerged in studies of infants and toddlers (e.g., Brown et al., 2010; McHale, 1995). Thus, it remains to be seen whether indirect effects differ among families of toddler-aged girls versus boys.

Method

Participants

One hundred twenty-eight families participated in a study of early social development. Families were recruited via birth announcements and informational flyers distributed through local organizations and child care centers. For this analysis, two families were excluded because the couple reported being either divorced or separated, and four families were excluded because both parents were missing data on all self-report measures; this sample, therefore, consisted of 122 families (M length of relationship = 7.50 years, $SD = 3.74$). Children (61 girls) ranged between 31 and 35 months of age ($M = 32.6$ months, $SD = .73$). Fifty-five percent of children were first-born, 33% were second-born, and 12% were third- or later-born. Mothers averaged 32.75 ($SD = 5.62$) years of age and 16.41 ($SD = 2.48$) years of education. Fathers averaged 34.18 ($SD = 5.61$) years of age and 16.15 ($SD = 2.69$) years of education. With respect to race, mothers and fathers were 3% and 4% African American, 6% and 3% Asian American, 82% and 86% European American, 1% and 1% Hispanic, 2% and 3% Native American, and 6% and 3% more than one race, respectively. For 71% of the sample, both parents were European American. The median family income was \$65,000 ($SD = \$33,513$).

Procedure

During a 90-min laboratory visit, mother-child dyads were observed in a variety of interactive tasks, including a modified Strange Situation, which occurred at the beginning of the visit. Mothers and fathers completed separate questionnaire packets at home, which they returned via mail within approximately two weeks of the laboratory visit. Parent questionnaires included items about the parent-child, marital, and coparenting relationships.

Measures

Child-mother attachment security. A modified 17-min Strange Situation procedure (Cassidy & Marvin, 1992) assessed child-mother attachment security. This procedure consisted of 5 episodes: 3-min warm-up, 3-min separation from mother, 3-min reunion with mother, second 5-min separation, and second 3-min reunion. During the separation episodes, no "stranger" was present, and mothers received no instructions about what to tell their child during the departure from the playroom. Two highly trained coders, certified by Jude Cassidy, coded all protocols, and children were classified as secure ($n = 82$), avoidant ($n = 6$), resistant ($n = 15$), and controlling/insecure other ($n = 18$). Coders also rated child-mother attachment security on a 9-point scale, ranging from 1 (*highly insecure*; e.g., during reunion, the child is highly avoidant, ambivalent, and/or disorganized) to 9 (*highly secure*; e.g., during reunion, the child is calm, but pleased to see mother return). Twenty percent of the protocols were double-coded, and disagreements were resolved by consensus. Interobserver agreement (before consensus) was 88% ($\kappa = .77$) for the four-way classification and .82 (intraclass correlation) for the 9-point security rating. Because of the small sizes of the insecure groups, we used the 9-point security scale in the analyses. Child-mother attachment security assessed via the Cassidy and Marvin (1992) system has been related in expected ways to concurrent maternal and child functioning (e.g., Moss, Bureau, Cyr, Mongeau, & St-Laurent, 2004; NICHD ECCRN, 2001).

Parent-child relationship quality. Mothers and fathers completed the Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS; Pianta, 1994a). The CPRS was adapted from the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (Pianta, 1994b), for which item development was informed by attachment theory and the Attachment Q set (Waters & Deane, 1985). Items captured parental feelings of warmth and closeness in their relationship with their child (e.g., I share an affectionate, warm relationship with my child; If upset, my child will seek comfort from me), as well as parent-child conflict and difficulties (e.g., My child and I always seem to be struggling with each other; My child is uncomfortable with physical affection or contact from me). Parents rated items on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*definitely does not apply*) to 5 (*definitely applies*). We created a total *parent-child relationship quality* score (20 items) by summing across items (with reverse scoring as appropriate), with higher scores indicating a more positive relationship ($\alpha = .77$ and $.74$, mothers and fathers, respectively). The CPRS has good internal consistency and has been related in expected ways to observed parent-child interaction and child adjustment (e.g., Perdue, Manzeske & Estell, 2009; Vazsonyi & Huang, 2010).

Marital quality. Parents completed the Intimate Relationships Scale (Braiker & Kelly, 1979), which consists of items tapping marital conflict, love, ambivalence, and maintenance. Us-

ing a 9-point scale, ranging from 1 (*very little or not at all*) to 9 (*very much or extremely*), mothers and fathers independently rated the degree to which each statement characterized their marital relationship. The following subscale scores were created by averaging items within parent: (a) conflict (5 items, $\alpha = .71$ and $.76$, mothers and fathers, respectively; e.g., How often do you and your partner argue with one another?), (b) ambivalence (5 items, $\alpha = .76$ and $.77$; e.g., How ambivalent or unsure are you about continuing in the relationship with your partner?), (c) love (10 items, $\alpha = .91$ and $.88$; e.g., How close do you feel to your partner?), and (d) maintenance (5 items, $\alpha = .75$ and $.74$; e.g., How much time do you and your partner spend discussing and trying to work out problems between you?). To capture an overall assessment of *marital quality*, we averaged mothers' and fathers' scores (with conflict and ambivalence scores reversed) across all subscales ($\alpha = .84$). This measure has shown good internal consistency and high test-retest reliability, as well as stability and consistency across different stages of intimate relationships (e.g., Belsky, Lang, & Rovine, 1985; Braiker & Kelley, 1979).

Coparenting support and trust. Mothers and fathers independently completed the 20-item Parenting Alliance Inventory (PAI; Abidin & Brunner, 1995). Parents rated how strongly they agreed with each item on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). For this analysis, we averaged ratings across 11 items that assessed the individual's feelings of trust in their partner as a parent and perceived support from the partner in the parenting role (e.g., I feel good about my partner's judgment about what is right for our child; My partner makes my job of being a parent easier). Higher scores indicated stronger coparenting support and trust ($\alpha = .90$ and $.86$, mothers and fathers, respectively). Because our aim was to assess actor and partner effects of coparenting on parent-child relationship quality, we focused specifically on items capturing each parent's own feelings of trust in the partner and being supported as a coparent. Items tapping more dyadic coparenting processes (e.g., My partner and I communicate well about our child) were less appropriate for testing actor and partner effects and, thus, were not included. The PAI has shown high levels of internal consistency and expected associations with measures of parenting style, parenting stress, and child adjustment (e.g., Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Bearss & Eyberg, 1998).

Data Analytic Strategy

Mplus 6.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2010) was used to test a series of path models in which coparenting support and trust was examined as a link between marital quality and parent-child relationship quality. Parent-reported parent-child relationship quality and observed child-mother attachment security were examined in separate models. For each set of outcomes, three models were compared. In Model 1 (see Figure 1a), we tested direct effects only; marital quality and parent- and partner-reported coparenting support and trust were examined as predictors of parent-reported parent-child relationship quality (or observed child-mother attachment security). In Model 2 (see Figure 1b), we added two paths from marital quality to coparenting perceptions. These additional paths in Model 2 permitted a test of coparenting as a mediator through which marital quality, in part, related to parent-child relationship quality. In Model 3 (see Figure 1c), we con-

strained the direct effects from marital quality to parent-child relationship quality to zero (as indicated by the dashed lines in Figure 1c) to test whether the indirect effects via coparenting wholly accounted for associations between marriage and parent-child relationship quality. Covariances between the error terms for (a) maternal and paternal perceptions of coparenting support and trust, and (b) mother- and father-reported parent-child relationship quality were also estimated.

Full-information maximum likelihood estimation (FIML) offers less biased estimates compared with other methods such as listwise deletion (Schafer & Graham, 2002) and was used to handle missing data (all measures less than 6%; see Table 1 for *ns*). The comparative fit index (CFI) and root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) were examined to assess model fit for Models 1 and 3. CFI values above $.95$ and RMSEA values less than $.06$ indicate good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Note that model fit can only be assessed when restrictions are placed on the model (e.g., paths are constrained to zero). Because Model 2 was saturated (i.e., all possible paths were included in the model), the fit indices did not apply and are not reported below for this model. To assess child gender as a moderator, we conducted a multigroup analysis for the model that showed the best fit to the data (Model 3, see below). We also conducted follow-up tests to assess whether specific paths differed by child or parent gender. For all tests of gender, the Wald test, which is based on the estimation of one (unconstrained) model and tests the null hypothesis that the parameters are equal for males and females, was used. The Wald test approaches the test of chi-square differences as sample size increases; in the current study, results from the Wald test for the multigroup analyses were consistent with those found using the chi-square difference test.

Notably, Mplus allows for tests of *specific* indirect effects (e.g., from marital quality to mother-child relationship quality via maternal perceptions of the coparenting) when multiple mediators are examined. Further, because traditional *z* tests of indirect effects may be biased due to non-normal distribution of the indirect effect when the null hypothesis is false, MacKinnon, Lockwood, and Williams (2004) recommended using the bias-corrected bootstrap method, which is a resampling technique that corrects for bias in the central tendency of the estimate of the indirect effect. Thus, via the bootstrap procedure in Mplus, we used bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI_{bc}) to assess indirect effects, and we specified 5000 replications for this bootstrap procedure. An indirect effect was considered significant if the confidence interval did not include 0. We estimated intervals at 95% ($p < .05$) and 99% ($p < .01$) confidence levels.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Family demographic variables were examined as potential covariates, and few significant associations emerged (3 out of 30). Thus, the demographic variables were not considered further. For descriptive purposes, correlations among the study measures are shown separately by child gender in the upper portion of Table 1, and descriptive statistics for the full sample and by child gender are shown in the bottom portion of Table 1. To assess whether coparenting perceptions or parent-child relationship quality dif-

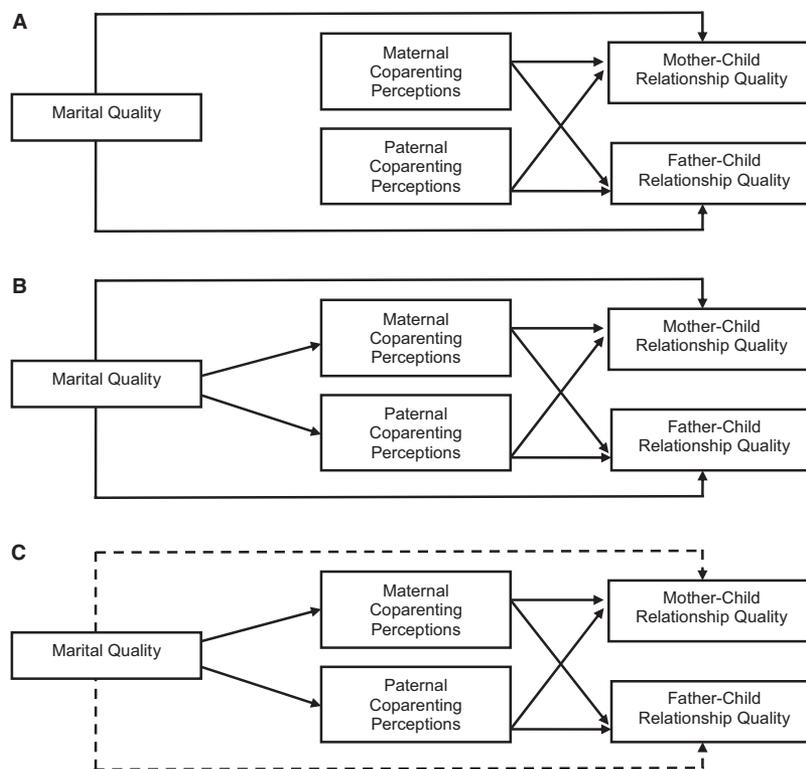


Figure 1. A, Direct effects (Model 1). Marital quality and coparenting perceptions as predictors of parent-child relationship quality. B, Direct and indirect effects (Model 2). Direct effects of marital quality on parent-child relationship quality, and indirect effects of marital quality via coparenting perceptions. C, Indirect effects only (Model 3). Indirect effects of marital quality on parent-child relationship quality via coparenting perceptions.

ferred by parent or child gender, 2 (parent) \times 2 (child gender) repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted with parent as the repeated factor and child gender as a between-subjects factor. One significant main effect of parent emerged: on average, fathers reported greater coparenting trust and support than did mothers, $F(1, 113) = 8.51, p = .004$ (see Table 1 for Means). Mothers and fathers did not significantly differ on reports of parent-child relationship quality. All child gender main effects and parent \times child gender interactions were nonsignificant. Further, t tests revealed no significant differences for marital quality or observed child-mother attachment security by child gender.

Coparenting as a Link Between Marital Quality and Parent-Child Relationship Quality

Model comparisons. Model 1 (direct effects only), Model 2 (direct and indirect effects), and Model 3 (indirect effects only) were each tested via path analyses, and separate models were tested for the two sets of outcomes ($n = 122$ for all models tested). Models 1 and 3 were each nested within Model 2, which was the saturated model. Model 1 provided a poor fit to the data: $\chi^2(2) = 86.14$, and $\chi^2(2) = 86.20, ps < .001$, parent-child relationship quality and child-mother attachment security, respectively; RMSEA = .59, CFI = .00, for both models. Model 1 misfit suggests that including only the direct paths from marital quality

and coparenting perceptions to parent-child relationship outcomes was not sufficient. In contrast, Model 3 provided an excellent fit to the data, $\chi^2(2) = .54, p = .76$, and $\chi^2(1) = .04, p = .84$, parent-child relationship quality and child-mother attachment security, respectively; RMSEA = .00 and CFI = 1.00 for both models. Thus, because the more parsimonious Model 3 did not differ significantly in fit from the saturated Model 2 (as indicated by the nonsignificant chi-square tests above for Model 3), Model 3 was considered the best fitting model.

Multigroup analyses by child gender. Next, we examined child gender as a moderator of the paths estimated in Model 3. Multigroup analyses indicated that the unconstrained model (i.e., path estimates were free to vary across boys and girls) versus the constrained model (i.e., path estimates were constrained to be equal across boys and girls) provided an improved fit for the models predicting parent-child relationship quality, Wald test ($df = 6$) = 15.07, $p = .020$, and child-mother attachment security, Wald test ($df = 4$) = 20.34, $p < .001$.

Unstandardized and standardized path estimates and total R^2 estimates for the endogenous variables are shown in Table 2 (parent-child relationship quality outcomes) and Table 3 (child-mother attachment security outcome). Estimates are presented separately for boys and girls, and in all cases, significant associations were in the expected direction: higher marital quality was

Table 1
Intercorrelations and Descriptive Statistics for the Study Measures

Study measures	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Marital quality	—	.56***	.61***	.37**	.28*	.11
2. Maternal perceptions of coparenting	.76***	—	.43***	.50***	.41**	.33*
3. Paternal perceptions of coparenting	.44***	.43***	—	.50***	.47***	.14
4. Mother-child relationship quality	.37**	.30*	.30*	—	.55***	.26*
5. Father-child relationship quality	.35**	.21	.36**	.32*	—	.07
6. Child-mother attachment security	-.06	-.14	-.15	.02	-.08	—
Full sample						
<i>n</i>	121	120	116	121	117	121
Mean	6.80	4.34	4.50	3.93	3.86	5.67
<i>SD</i>	.85	.60	.44	.39	.38	1.82
Boys						
<i>n</i>	60	59	58	60	58	61
Mean	6.79	4.34	4.51	3.90	3.90	5.68
<i>SD</i>	.88	.55	.49	.42	.37	1.90
Girls						
<i>n</i>	61	61	58	61	59	60
Mean	6.81	4.35	4.49	3.95	3.82	5.66
<i>SD</i>	.82	.64	.37	.37	.39	1.75

Note. Correlations appear above the diagonal for boys and below the diagonal for girls.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

related to more positive perceptions of coparenting, and positive coparenting perceptions were related to higher parent-child relationship quality. Because child gender was a significant moderator of the path models, we tested indirect effects separately for boys and girls.

Indirect effects for boys. For the model predicting parent-child relationship quality, three of the four specific indirect effects were significant for families of boys: (a) marital quality → maternal coparenting perceptions → mother-son relationship quality (estimate: .09; 99% CI_{bc}: .001 to .198), (b) marital quality → paternal coparenting perceptions → mother-son relationship quality (estimate: .10; 99% CI_{bc}: .003 to .227), and (c) marital quality → paternal coparenting perceptions → father-son relationship quality (estimate: .09; 99% CI_{bc}: .007 to .179). For the model predicting observed attachment security, one of the two specific

indirect effects was significant for boys: marital quality → maternal coparenting perceptions → mother-son attachment security (estimate: .44; 99% CI_{bc}: .005 to .950).

Indirect effects for girls. For the model predicting parent-child relationship quality, one specific indirect effect emerged for girls: marital quality → paternal coparenting perceptions → father-daughter relationship quality (estimate: .07; 99% CI_{bc}: .001 to .196). For the model predicting observed attachment security, no significant indirect effects emerged for girls.

Follow-up gender analyses. To further probe child gender as a moderator of the significant indirect effects reported above, we conducted a series of path constraints in which the two paths composing a given indirect effect were constrained to be equal across boys and girls. The marital quality → maternal coparenting perceptions → mother-child relationship indirect effect differed

Table 2
Unstandardized and Standardized Path Coefficients by Child Gender for the Model Predicting Mother- and Father-Reported Relationship Quality With Their Toddler-Aged Child

Paths estimated	Boys		Girls		Wald test (<i>df</i> = 1)	<i>p</i> value
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	β	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	β		
Marital quality → Maternal coparenting perceptions	.35 (.07)	.55***	.59 (.07)	.76***	6.59	.010
Marital quality → Paternal coparenting perceptions	.34 (.06)	.61***	.20 (.05)	.44**	3.46	.063
Mother coparenting → Mother-child relationship	.26 (.09)	.34**	.12 (.08)	.21	1.45	.228
Father coparenting → Father-child relationship	.27 (.09)	.36**	.34 (.14)	.32*	.16	.670
Mother coparenting → Father-child relationship	.16 (.09)	.24*	.04 (.08)	.07	1.033	.309
Father coparenting → Mother-child relationship	.29 (.10)	.34**	.21 (.13)	.21	.27	.602
Endogenous variables in path model	R^2		R^2			
Maternal coparenting perceptions	.31**		.57***			
Paternal coparenting perceptions	.38***		.19*			
Mother-child relationship quality	.34***		.12			
Father-child relationship quality	.27**		.13			

Note. Because the same paths from marital quality to coparenting were tested for the two sets of outcomes, R^2 estimates for the coparenting measures are identical, although the path estimates reported in Tables 2 and 3 may vary slightly as a result of differences in the variance/covariance matrix examined in each model.

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Unstandardized and Standardized Path Coefficients by Child Gender for the Model Predicting Observed Toddler–Mother Attachment Security

Paths estimated	Boys		Girls		Wald test (<i>df</i> = 1)	<i>p</i> value
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	β	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	β		
Marital quality → Maternal coparenting perceptions	.35 (.07)	.56***	.59 (.07)	.76***	6.42	.011
Marital quality → Paternal coparenting perceptions	.35 (.06)	.62***	.20 (.05)	.43***	3.70	.054
Mother coparenting → Child–mother security	1.26 (.48)	.37**	–.24 (.38)	–.09	6.08	.014
Father coparenting → Child–mother security	–.31 (.54)	–.08	–.57 (.67)	–.12	.09	.763
Endogenous variables in path model	<i>R</i> ²		<i>R</i> ²			
Maternal coparenting perceptions	.31**		.57***			
Paternal coparenting perceptions	.38***		.19*			
Child–mother attachment security	.11		.03			

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

significantly by child gender for both outcomes: mother-reported parent–child relationship quality, Wald test ($df = 2$) = 8.03, $p = .018$, and observed mother–child attachment security, Wald test ($df = 2$) = 12.55, $p = .002$. Wald tests of the individual paths composing these indirect effects indicated that marital quality was related to maternal coparenting perceptions more strongly for girls (see Tables 2 and 3), and maternal coparenting perceptions were related to attachment security more strongly for boys (see Table 3). The indirect effects from marital quality to parent-reported parent–child relationship quality via paternal coparenting perceptions did not differ significantly by child gender, Wald tests ($df = 2$) = 3.62 and 3.75, $ps = .164$ and $.153$, father–child and mother–child relationship quality, respectively. We note, however, that the Wald test of the individual path from marital quality to paternal coparenting perceptions was marginally significant (see Tables 2 and 3), such that this path was stronger for boys.

Lastly, to explore differences in parallel paths by parent gender (within child gender groups), we constrained the following paths to be equal for mothers and fathers: (a) marital quality to coparenting perceptions of support and trust, (b) self-reported coparenting perceptions to self-reported parent–child relationship quality, (c) partner-reported coparenting perceptions to parent-reported parent–child relationship quality, and (d) maternal and paternal coparenting perceptions to child–mother attachment security. For parents of girls, marital quality was more strongly related to maternal versus paternal perceptions of coparenting, Wald test ($df = 1$) = 25.35, $p < .001$; for boys, the association between marital quality and coparenting perceptions did not differ by parent gender, Wald test ($df = 1$) = .00, $p = .992$. All other comparisons were nonsignificant.

Discussion

We aimed to extend the current literature on coparenting as a link between marital quality and parent–child relationship quality by assessing maternal *and* paternal perceptions of coparenting support and trust and parent–child subsystems in the same models, and relatedly, testing indirect effects from marital quality to parent–child relationship quality via coparenting for the parent as an “actor” and for the parent’s “partner.” The results largely supported our hypothesized model (Model 3), and child gender moderated indirect effects in some instances. With respect to actor effects, greater overall harmony in the marital relationship was

related to mothers’ more harmonious, secure relationships with sons (maternal reports and observations of attachment security) via maternal coparenting perceptions of trust and support. Greater marital quality was also related to more positive father-reported relationship quality with sons *and* daughters via paternal coparenting perceptions.

We interpret these overall findings in light of theoretical notions that families are organized systems (Cox & Paley, 1997) and that the quality of the marital relationship may promote (or hinder) functioning in the parent–child relationship via the strength of the coparenting subsystem (Feinberg, 2003). Our findings are also consistent with evidence that coparenting mediates associations between marital quality and parenting experiences (Floyd et al., 1998; Margolin et al., 2001) and maternal warmth (Bonds & Gondoli, 2007) among school-aged and preschool-aged children. In contrast to these past studies with older children in which child gender did not emerge as a moderator, we found that the indirect effects that emerged for mothers, specifically, did differ by child gender. We consider next the role of child gender in understanding coparenting perceptions as a link between marital and parent–child relationships.

For both observed child–mother attachment security and mother-reported parent–child relationship quality, indirect effects emerged for the mother–son relationship but were nonsignificant for the mother–daughter relationship. Inspection of the paths that composed these indirect effects indicated that the null indirect effects for girls were attributable to the nonsignificant path from maternal coparenting perceptions to mother–daughter relationship quality (observed and mother-reported). Although we had hypothesized that indirect effects would be pronounced for boys, we did not expect that the moderating role of child gender would be specific to mothers. We interpret these results in light of research indicating different coparenting dynamics in maritally distressed families of boys versus girls. (Recall that lower scores on our global measure of marital quality indicated greater conflict and feelings of ambivalence and lower levels of love and maintenance.) Because fathers tend to be more invested in their relationships with sons versus daughters (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004), coparenting among parents of boys tends to be characterized by competition and undermining when marital distress and conflict are high (see Mangelsdorf et al., 2011). For instance, greater marital conflict has been associated with more competitive coparenting.

renting for parents of infant boys (McHale, 1995) and more maternal triangulation of sons in coparental disputes, such as drawing sons into conflict and persuading them to take sides (Margolin et al., 2001). We suspect that such coparenting dynamics, stemming from low marital quality, would be detrimental to both mother–son and father–son relationships.

In contrast, fathers tend to disengage or withdraw from interactions with daughters in the face of marital conflict; this withdrawal results in coparenting dynamics that are characterized by discrepancies in parent involvement (McHale, 1995). It is likely that such coparenting processes would be detrimental to the father–daughter relationship. Implications of such family dynamics for the mother–daughter relationship are less clear, however. On the one hand, our results suggest that marital functioning contributes to mothers' unique perceptions of coparenting, and this association was pronounced for girls. If fathers of girls withdraw in the context of a poorly functioning marital relationship, then it follows that maternal feelings of support from and trust in the partner would be especially low in these families. On the other hand, at least in some cases, mothers in highly distressed marriages may attempt to compensate for fathers' disengagement from the family system by being more positively engaged with their daughters. Consequently, and as suggested by the nonsignificant paths from maternal coparenting perceptions to the mother–daughter relationship, maternal perceptions of coparenting trust and support may not influence mothers and daughters in the same way they do mothers and sons.

The above interpretation, although informed by prior evidence and theorizing (Mangelsdorf et al., 2011; Margolin et al., 2001; McHale, 1995), is speculative. Future investigations will benefit from intensive observations of mothers, fathers, and children in both dyadic and triadic contexts to assess potential microlevel processes (e.g., spillover for mothers of boys; compensation for mothers of girls) that further elucidate the role that child and parent gender play in moderating associations among marriage, coparenting, and parent–child relationship quality. Moreover, given the lack of findings for child gender as a moderator of indirect effects among studies of older children, the moderating role of child gender may be particularly salient during infancy and early childhood because of the unique challenges of parenting and coparenting young children (e.g., Brown et al., 2010; Kolak & Vernon-Feagans, 2008; McHale, 1995).

Turning to our exploration of partner effects (e.g., the mother's coparenting perceptions as a predictor of father–child relationship quality), evidence was weak. Only one indirect partner effect was found: marital quality was related to higher mother-reported mother–son relationship quality via paternal perceptions of stronger coparenting support and trust. Although this single effect does not shed light on the role of partner effects more generally, it does provide corroboration that marital quality is associated with mother–son relationship quality via reports of coparenting from both the mother's perspective (actor effect) and the father's perspective (partner effect). We note, however, that the bivariate correlations revealed three (of six) significant partner associations: mothers' coparenting perceptions related to father–son relationship quality, and fathers' coparenting perceptions related to mother–son and mother–daughter relationship quality (also see Ippolito Morrill et al., 2010; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008, for similar findings). The overall lack of indirect partner effects in the path models, therefore, could be attributable to a stringent test of the

partner's unique coparenting perceptions, which controlled for the parent's own coparenting perceptions. In addition, partner effects would likely be weaker than actor effects, and we may have had limited power to detect the smaller effects of partners' coparenting perceptions. Further investigation is needed to clarify how partner coparenting perceptions may contribute to the links between marital quality and parent–child relationships.

We note several limitations of the current study. First, our concurrent design does not permit conclusions about direction of effects, although we have indicated a strong theoretical basis for expecting coparenting as an intervening link (Feinberg, 2003; Fincham & Hall, 2005). In addition, previous studies provide longitudinal (Bonds & Gondoli, 2007; Floyd et al., 1998; but see Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004) and experimental (Kitzmann, 2000) evidence that aspects of the marriage predict change in coparenting, and coparenting, in turn, predicts change in parent–child interactions. A second limitation was the heavy reliance on parental reports. Confidence in the current results is bolstered, however, by the consistent indirect effect (i.e., marital quality \rightarrow coparenting \rightarrow mother–son relationship quality) that emerged across observational and self-report measures of the mother–child relationship. Moreover, parental reports capture the parent's cumulative experiences with and feelings toward the other parent, which are less easily captured when observational measures are used. Third, our primarily middle-class, European American sample of two-parent families limits our ability to draw conclusions about more diverse family systems as characterized by different socioeconomic, cultural, and/or coparenting structures. As outlined by McHale and Irace (2011), coparenting dynamics and child outcomes will likely differ as a function of the familial structure and larger cultural context in which the family is situated. Fourth, coparenting in this study was operationalized to include the unique perceptions of each parent, as opposed to the dyadic processes occurring within the coparenting relationship. For future research, there is a need to consider coparenting perceptions in tandem with dyadic and triadic assessments of coparenting processes that involve cooperation, communication, conflict, and competition to better understand how coparenting perceptions of mothers and fathers and coparenting interactions are related (McHale et al., 2000). Finally, effects found were small to moderate, as coparenting support and trust and parent–child relationship quality are likely determined by multiple factors. Future research should consider additional explanatory mechanisms, such as parental self-efficacy, psychological well-being, and/or emotion regulation strategies (see Feinberg, 2003).

Despite these limitations, the current findings highlight the importance of the larger family system, both with respect to the marital and coparenting relationships, to attachment-relevant aspects of the parent–child relationship. Intriguingly, parental states of mind with respect to attachment have been related to coparenting conflict and cohesion during the first months of a child's life (Talbot, Baker, & McHale, 2009). Parents' secure states of mind may promote child–parent security, in part, through a family climate of mutual respect, effective communication, and cooperation between adult partners. Our findings for robust associations between coparenting and attachment-related aspects of the parent–child relationship, in tandem with those from Talbot et al. (2009), indicate that this will be a promising direction for future research.

The current study provides the first evidence of coparenting support and trust as a link between marriage and parent-child relationship quality among two-parent families with toddlers, and results underscore child gender as an important moderator, at least during this developmental period. This period may be key given that higher quality marriage (Belsky et al., 1991; Frosch et al., 2000) and more supportive coparenting (Caldera & Lindsey, 2006) have been related to more positive parent-child relationships for toddlers. Additionally, our examination of mothers and fathers together permitted a more complete assessment of the family system than if only mothers were assessed or if mothers and fathers were examined in separate models. Indeed, we speculate that therapeutic interventions that adopt a whole-family perspective and engage mothers and fathers as active participants in improving and maintaining cooperation in the coparenting relationship will be most successful in promoting effective parenting and high quality parent-child relationships.

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