Change Over Time in Coparenting and Interparental Conflict Among Families of Adolescents

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Abstract

We used a family systems perspective to examine whether change over time in coparenting explained levels of interparental conflict among a sample of two-parent families (n = 373) sampled for ethnicity (i.e., European- and Mexican-American) and father type (i.e., step and intact). We used a dual-process latent growth model with times weighted so the growth processes of coparenting predicted the growth of interparental conflict and interparental conflict levels in late adolescence. Coparenting and interparental conflict declined from early to late adolescence. Both higher initial status and a slower decline in coparenting predicted less adolescent exposure to interparental conflict at age 16. Results suggest stronger coparenting alliances can reduce adolescent exposure to interparental conflict throughout adolescence.

Introduction

Exposure to interparental conflict is a threat to adolescent well-being (Cummings, El-Sheikh, Kouros, & Buckhalt, 2009). Coparenting, described as how parents support each other's parenting decisions (Feinberg, 2003) is often studied among divorced parents (Dush, Kotila, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011) and parents of young children(Fagan & Lee, 2014) but has only rarely been investigated among two-parent families and parents of adolescents (Baril, Crouter, & McHale, 2007). Across adolescence, coparenting predicts adolescent adjustment outcomes with greater variation among girls (Riiina & McHale, 2014). Within- and between-family differences help explain variations in coparenting across adolescence and their influence on family level factors (Blandon, Scrimgeour, Stifter, & Buss, 2014). Among parents of infants, Fagan (2014) found interparental conflict had a negative impact on perceptions of the parenting alliance. Similarly, coparenting is an important protective factor against interparental conflict among racially/ethnically diverse families (Solmeyer, Killoren, McHale, & Updegraff, 2011). Despite, a well-documented relationship between coparenting and interparental conflict (e.g., Blandon, et al. 2014), questions remain unanswered about how these processes change together across adolescence and within families.

Research Question and Hypotheses

How does the growth of coparenting influence the growth of adolescent exposure to interparental conflict from early to late adolescence? Furthermore do these growth patterns differ by race/ethnicity (i.e. Mexican-American and European American), family type (i.e. intact vs. step), and child gender?
H1: Coparenting will decrease over time.
H2: Interparental conflict will decrease over time.
H3: Higher initial levels and slower change over time of coparenting among parents will predict less adolescent exposure to interparental conflict at age 16 and a faster rate of decline of interparental conflict.
H4: Coparenting will begin lower and decline faster among stepfather families than intact families.
H5: Coparenting will begin higher and decline slower among parents of girls.

Participants & Procedure

Participants were 392 adolescents and their parents who were in intact or stepfather families of Mexican-American (N = 193) and European-American (N = 199) ancestry drawn from the Parents and Youth Study (http://pays.sfsu.edu/).

Using a cohort sequential design, data were collected in four cohorts across three time points. Data were collected when adolescents were in 7th grade, 8th or 9th grade, and 10th grade.
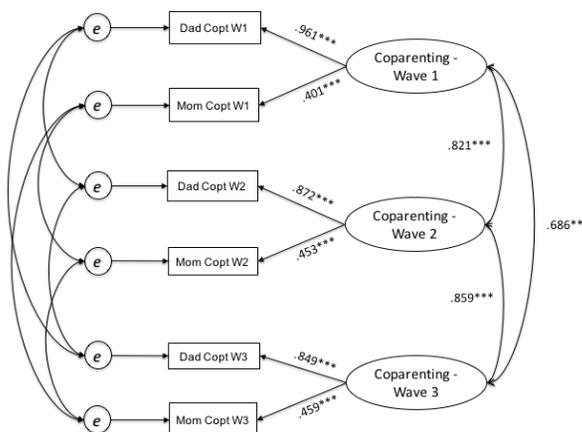
Figures

Figure 1. Measurement model of mother and father/stepfather reports of coparenting from Wave 1 to Wave 3 of data collection. Copt = Coparenting. Standardized results shown. Error variances are correlated within reporters across each wave. Good model fit (X^2 = 5.767, df = 4, p = .217; RMSEA = .034; CFI = 0.998; TLI = 0.993; SRMR = 0.033). *Note.* *** $p \leq$ .001.
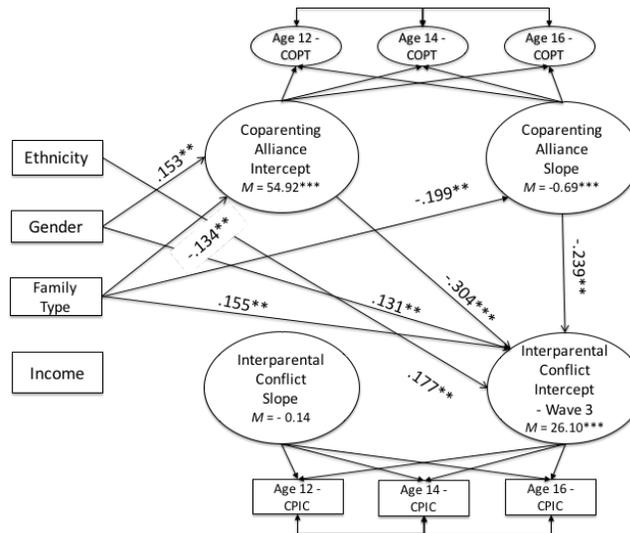

Figure 2. Standardized dual process latent growth model of coparenting and adolescent exposure to interparental conflict measured when adolescents were age 12-, 14-, and 16-years-old. CPIC = Interparental Conflict. Ethnicity is coded such that 1 = European-American and 2 = Mexican-American. Gender is coded such that 1 = Boy and 2 = Girl. Family Type is coded such that 1 = Intact and 2 = Step. Only significant paths shown. (N = 371). *Note.* ** $p \leq$ .01. *** $p \leq$ .001.

Measures

Coparenting. We used 13 items from the Parenting Alliance Inventory (PAI; Abidin & Brunner, 1995) to measure the degree to which parents support each other in their parenting decisions. The PAI has demonstrated construct, concurrent, criterion, and predictive validity among racially/ethnically and economically diverse samples of mothers and fathers. The PAI demonstrated good reliability (Mother reports: W1 α = .94, W2 α = .95, W3 α = .95; Father reports: W1 α = .92, W2 α = .93, W3 α = .93).
Interparental Conflict. Adolescents reported exposure to interparental conflict with a 16-item version of the Child Perception of Interparental Conflict scale (CPIC; Grych, Seid & Fincham, 1992). Items were included from the Frequency, Intensity, Resolution, Perceived Threat, and Coping efficacy subscales to form a unidimensional composite of adolescent perceptions of interparental conflict. Adolescent reports on the CPIC yielded good internal consistency at each wave (α = .82, α = .83, α = .87).
Income. Mother and father/stepfather reports of annual income were estimated for each family at wave 1 of data collection to indicate family income.

Results

Data were analyzed using MPlus version 7 (Muthen & Muthen, 2012). As shown in Figure 1, mother and father/stepfather reports of coparenting were used to form a latent factor of coparenting at each wave of measurement with good model fit.

We examined the trajectories of coparenting and child exposure to interparental conflict from Wave 1 to Wave 3 in separate models. The slope of coparenting declined over time (M = -0.613, p < .001) with a trend for individual differences in change over time (V = 5.76, p = .062). Similarly, the slope of interparental conflict remained stable over time with a trend toward a decline (M = -0.104, p = .071) with few individual differences in the pattern of change (V = 0.12, p = .648).

A dual process latent growth model was estimated using the latent intercept and slope factors of coparenting and interparental conflict indicated by latent variables of coparenting and measured indicators of adolescent reports of interparental conflict to measure, respectively (see Figure 2). The model achieved adequate fit (X^2 = 98.349, df = 44, p < .001; RMSEA = .058; CFI = 0.963; TLI = 0.940; SRMR = 0.059). Higher initial status and slower change over time in coparenting predicted higher interparental conflict intercept.

Coparenting started higher among parents of girls. Similarly, coparenting began lower and decreased faster among stepfamilies. At Wave 3, step and Mexican-American families reported more interparental conflict.

Results & Discussion

Our results suggest that, for most families, coparenting and interparental decline over the course of adolescence and that these trajectories can differ depending on family type, ethnicity, and child gender. That earlier levels of coparenting link to later levels of interparental conflict provides further evidence that perceptions of support in parenting may spillover into overt conflict in marriages, even in adolescence when couples may be protected from conflict. That we found a general trend for decline in coparenting over time also highlights how little is presently known about how couples maintain their support for one another in the parenting role across the adolescent transition.

Acknowledgement