ABSTRACT

Coparenting consists of the ways parents work together in rearing their children. The ability of parents to cooperate, support one another, and avoid undermining or criticizing each other influences the quality of their couple relationship across time as well as can spill over into their children’s behavior and well-being. Coparenting quality can influence children directly through compromising the emotional security that children feel in regards to their parents and indirectly as the quality of coparenting spills over into the quality of parenting children receive from each individual parent. Coparenting can also be a source of strain or support for parents, as they provide
assistance to one another in parenting. Therefore, examining the development of coparenting contributes in important ways to efforts to enhance family and child well-being.

Some studies have reported a moderate degree of stability in the quality of coparenting during the early years after birth—with those parents who start off working well together continuing to work well together later—yet researchers have often left relatively large gaps in between assessments of coparenting quality. For example, many longitudinal studies of coparenting tend to assess coparenting every 6 months to 1 year. These large gaps in between assessments leave us with an inadequate understanding of the complex family processes that are experienced by parents and children on a daily basis. Furthermore, the so-called “stability” that is observed in these studies tells nothing of what happens in between these various snapshots of family life. Indeed, coparenting quality likely fluctuates within families over shorter periods of time, as parents and families deal with the stresses of everyday life and seek for equilibrium. Moreover, these fluctuations likely hold meaning for relationships, parents, and children. Therefore, the current dissertation fills this gap in the research by examining coparenting quality on a daily basis.

Data for this dissertation were drawn from the Daily Family Life Project (DFLP), a longitudinal and daily diary study of parenting and family relationships in 183 couples with a young child under age 5. In Study I, I developed and validated the Daily Coparenting Scale (D-Cop), a 10 item measure of parents’ perceptions of daily coparenting quality. Utilizing multilevel factor analysis, I identified two daily coparenting factors at both the between- and within-person level: positive and negative daily coparenting. The reliabilities for assessing within-person change of the overall D-Cop and individual positive and negative subscales were good, and I confirmed that parents’ reports of coparenting quality fluctuated on a daily basis. Also, I established the initial validity of the D-Cop, as scores related as expected to (a) an established measure of coparenting in the field and to (b) couple relationship quality, parent depressive symptoms, and child behavior problems. Further, fluctuations in daily couple relationship feelings related to fluctuations in daily coparenting quality.

In Study II, I utilized multilevel modeling to examine predictors of within-person fluctuations in daily coparenting quality. Specifically and in line with frameworks on parenting and coparenting, I examined contextual (daily relationship quality, daily stressors, daily childcare burden), parent (daily negative emotions, gender), and child factors (daily child negative emotion, daily child-induced parenting stress) as predictors of mothers’ and fathers’ perceptions of daily coparenting quality. I found significant effects for daily relationship feelings, stressors, burden in childcare, parent negative mood, and parenting stress, although not child negative mood. These results indicate that on days when parents experience worse relationship satisfaction, more stressors, greater childcare burden, more negative emotions, and greater parenting stress—as compared with their usual level—they feel that coparenting functions more poorly than normal. No gender differences emerged in the effects of the predictors on daily coparenting.

As coparenting that is highly variable from day-to-day could potentially be a source of stress and insecurity for parents and children, Study III examined the overall extent of within-person variability (volatility) in daily coparenting across 14 days as a predictor of change in relationship (couple relationship quality, coparenting quality), individual (parent depressive symptoms), and child outcomes (internalizing and externalizing behavior) across 6 months. Overall, I confirmed that daily volatility was unhealthy for some parent and child outcomes. Specifically, parents who showed higher volatility were at risk of increasing depression, deteriorating coparenting quality, and increases in their child’s behavior problems. This was especially true for parents who already showed high levels of negative daily coparenting behavior on average, and volatility in negative coparenting (e.g., undermining, hostility) held more meaning for outcomes than volatility in positive coparenting (e.g., support, cooperation).
This dissertation contributes in many ways to the prior coparenting literature, as no work has examined coparenting at more micro time scales than months or years. The largest contributions of this dissertation to the literature include the first daily diary measure of coparenting quality (*Daily Coparenting Scale*), confirmation of fluctuations in coparenting quality on a daily basis, the potential meanings of daily variability in coparenting quality for parent and child outcomes, and potential avenues for targeted interventions to further stabilize and improve coparenting on a daily basis. The findings support and expand prior research and conceptualizations of coparenting as a dynamic construct that is multiply determined and that holds meaning for family, parent, and child well-being. This dissertation also suggests that studying family relationships at more micro-process levels (such as days) is useful and can assist researchers in uncovering processes of change for improving the quality of family relationships.