Coparenting cooperation and child adjustment in low-income mother-grandmother and mother-father families

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Coparenting cooperation and child adjustment in low-income mother-grandmother and mother-father families

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Coparenting represents an important resource for mothers and children, particularly those confronting the multiple risks associated with economic disadvantage. The present study considers how coparenting cooperation in mother-grandmother and mother-father families relates to mothers’ parenting and children’s adjustment among a community sample of 117 urban, low-income, predominantly African American families with one preschool and one early school age child. Unique to the present study was almost equal representation of mother-grandmother and mother-father coparent families. We examined whether mother-reported coparenting cooperation was associated with mothers’ harsh and positive parenting, and children’s social competence and behavior problems. We also considered whether patterns linking coparenting cooperation to parenting and child development were consistent across coparenting configuration and child age. Results indicate positive influences of coparenting cooperation on mothers’ positive parenting of older siblings, and on younger and older children’s social competence. No differences between coparenting configurations emerged.

Keywords: coparenting; grandmothers; fathers; parenting; early childhood

Children from economically disadvantaged families are at greater risk for developing problem behaviors than more affluent children (e.g., Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Nonetheless, most children growing up in poverty experience positive development, and identifying protective family factors contributing to positive development is a key goal for researchers and interventionists (e.g., Raver, Gershoff, & Aber, 2007). Understanding protective family influences on children’s social development requires moving beyond mothers to include other caregivers, like grandmothers and fathers. Although coparenting has been identified as a key intervention target to promote parent and child well-being (Feinberg, 2002), coparenting among diverse families with young children remains relatively unexplored (e.g., McHale, Kuerstan-Hogan, & Rao, 2007). The present study examines the extent to which low-income mothers’ perceptions of coparenting cooperation in mother-grandmother or mother-father coparent families is linked to mothers’ harsh or positive parenting as well as children’s social competence, externalizing, and internalizing behaviors.

Parenting quality and children’s social adjustment

The preschool and early school years are critical periods for the development of social competence (e.g., Lengua, Honorado, & Bush, 2007) and for the emergence of behavior problems, including externalizing and internalizing behaviors (e.g., Campbell, Shaw, & Gilliom, 2000). Harsh parenting, or parenting that is adult-centered, controlling and hostile, is associated with poorer adjustment among children (e.g., Campbell et al., 2000; Shaw, Gilliom, Ingoldsby, & Nagin, 2003), possibly by interfering with the development of competent self-regulation (e.g., Lengua et al., 2007). In contrast, parenting that is warm, responsive and child-centered promotes the acquisition of social competence while reducing problem behaviors (e.g., Campbell et al., 2000; Lengua et al., 2007). For young children facing the additional environmental risks associated with economic disadvantage, such as neighborhood violence, toxins, and failing schools, exposure to positive parenting coupled with less harsh parenting may be especially protective (e.g., Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Raver et al., 2007). Clarifying the role by which family processes, such as coparenting, support positive parenting and reduce harsh parenting among low-income families is a paramount research goal.

Coparenting influences on children’s social adjustment

Coparenting refers to the communication, coordination, and sharing of caregiving responsibilities among
adults who are raising children together (e.g., McHale et al., 2002). Coparenting relationships are distinct from, yet related to, marital and parent-child relationships. Coparenting has been found to be directly and indirectly (via parenting) linked to child adjustment among two-parent families (e.g., Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2007; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Empirical research has traditionally focused on coparenting coordination among two-parent families. However, growing research on coparenting in diverse family systems indicates that many single mothers are in fact coparenting with other adults, and the quality of these coparenting relationships influences mothers’ and children’s well-being (Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterret, & Chester, 2007; McHale & Irace, 2011).

The present study focuses on mothers’ perceptions of coparenting cooperation, or the extent to which the coparents work together, respect each other as parents, and communicate with each other regarding minor and major childrearing decisions (Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001). Higher levels of coparent cooperation have been associated with more positive parenting behaviors and better child adjustment (e.g., McHale et al., 2002). For example, Margolin et al., (2001) demonstrated that coparenting, including self-reported coparenting cooperation, mediated the association between marital conflict and parenting quality among married families with preadolescents and preschool age children. Further, in a meta-analysis of the effects of coparenting among primarily married and cohabiting parents on children’s adjustment, Teubert and Pinquart (2010) report evidence of small yet consistent effects of coparent cooperation on social competence and externalizing and internalizing behaviors, net the influence of parenting practices, among children ranging in age from infancy to adolescence.

Most studies examining the impact of coparenting cooperation on children’s adjustment generally consider fathers or father-like figures among married or divorced families (McHale et al., 2007; Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004). Extended family members, particularly grandmothers, are most often considered in studies of adolescent mothers (Jones & Lindahl, 2011). Limited research has compared coparenting across mother-father and mother-grandmother configurations or the effect of coparenting cooperation among these two dyadic configurations on children’s adjustment (Jones & Lindahl, 2011). What is unknown is the extent to which the effect of coparenting cooperation on children’s positive adjustment is caregiver specific. That is, consistent involvement of a coparent may be beneficial, regardless of whether that caregiver is a father or grandmother. For example, in a rare study to focus on grandmother coparents, Baker, McHale, Strozier, and Cecil (2010) report that mother-grandmother coparenting quality among families in which grandmothers cared for children during maternal incarceration was negatively associated with children’s externalizing behaviors. Van Egeren and Hawkins (2004) argue that coparenting relationships require a minimum of two people who share joint responsibility for caring for a child. This broad definition of coparents may include individuals with varying relationships with a focal child. The present study adds to the growing body of research examining the effects of coparenting cooperation by considering the impact of the mother-grandmother coparent relationship, in addition to the mother-father coparent relationship, on child adjustment.

**Grandmother influences on children’s social adjustment**

Grandmothers often help mothers raise young children, particularly in ethnic minority, low-income communities. However, the process by which mothers and grandmothers coparent together, and the impact of their coparenting cooperation on child social adjustment is not well understood. The very limited empirical work considering the impact of grandmothers on children’s social adjustment tends to focus on adolescent mother families. For example, older adolescent mothers living with their own mothers tend to exhibit less optimal parenting behaviors than younger adolescent mothers and those living apart from their mothers (e.g., Chase-Lansdale, Brooks-Gunn, & Zamsky, 1994; Pittman & Boswell, 2008). Mother-grandmother conflict may partially account for less optimal parenting and poorer child outcomes (e.g., Apfel & Seitz, 1991; Oberlander, Black, & Starr, 2007). When mothers and grandmothers parent together, conflict over who is in charge of childrearing may be elevated. In fact, mother-grandmother conflict often undermines the parenting behaviors of mothers living in multigenerational households (Apfel & Seitz, 1991; Oberlander et al., 2007). Applying a coparenting framework to this work suggests that coparenting relationship quality, and even more specifically, coparenting cooperation, may be particularly problematic in families in which mothers and grandmothers reside together and coparent roles are ambiguous and/or conflictual.

**Coparenting and children’s adjustment among African American families**

Among African American single mothers, self-reported coparenting relationships characterized by high levels of support and low levels of conflict are associated with fewer depressive symptoms, more positive parenting behaviors, and better social adjustment for children during middle childhood (Jones, Forehand, Dorsey, Foster, & Brody, 2005; Shook, Jones, Forehand, Dorsey, & Brody, 2010). Coparenting cooperation may be an important resource for African American children and mothers, especially those...
experiencing economic disadvantage and associated risks such as neighborhood danger (Forehand & Jones, 2003). For example, Shook and colleagues (2010) found that mothers who rated the coparent relationship as more positive had children with higher levels of social competence. Interestingly, more positive and responsive parenting fully mediated the direct association of coparenting relationship quality on social competence, suggesting that coparenting affects children’s adjustment via its effect on parenting.

While the coparenting research conducted among predominantly White, middle class families has focused on mother and father coparents, studies of African American, low-income families have, for the most part, grouped together coparents of varying relations to the mother and child (e.g., Brody, Flor, & Neubaum, 1998; Jones et al., 2005; Shook et al., 2010). That is, much previous work linking coparenting to parenting and child development has failed to distinguish between mother-grandmother and mother-father coparenting (Jones & Lindahl, 2011). In addition, among low-income African American families, much of the coparenting research has focused on the impact of the coparenting relationship on children’s adjustment during middle childhood and adolescence, neglecting the potential impact of coparenting characteristics on adjustment earlier in life. The present study addresses these limitations by: (1) comparing the impact of two different coparenting configurations (i.e., mother-father and mother-grandmother) on children’s adjustment and (2) focusing on the preschool and early school developmental periods.

Coparenting influences as a function of children’s age

Mothers often rely heavily on coparents for childcare during early childhood, and may depend on coparents for childcare assistance with before or after-school care among slightly older children. In addition, what constitutes coparenting cooperation may vary with children’s development because the coparenting relationship changes to meet the shifting needs of a developing child (McHale et al., 2004). On the one hand, increases in coparenting cooperation may coincide with reductions in parenting demands, such that as parenting demands decrease, coparenting cooperation increases. Alternatively, mothers may rely most on coparents during the most demanding developmental periods, and thus high levels of coparenting cooperation may be particularly protective for young children during the preschool period. The present study presents an opportunity to examine the extent to which the impact of coparenting cooperation on children’s adjustment varies by children’s age by conducting analyses first with preschool-age children, and then replicating those analyses with their older, early school age siblings. This analytical strategy provides a rigorous test of age-related differences in associations among coparenting cooperation and children’s adjustment.

The present study

The goal of the present study is to examine the direct and indirect (via mothers’ parenting) pathways by which mother-reported coparenting cooperation in mother-grandmother or mother-father, low-income families influences social competence, externalizing, and internalizing behaviors among preschool and early school age siblings. We evaluated the following hypotheses:

1. Higher levels of mother-reported coparenting cooperation is expected to be associated with higher levels of mothers’ positive parenting and lower levels of mothers’ harsh parenting.
2. Higher levels of coparenting cooperation will be positively linked to children’s social competence and negatively linked to children’s externalizing and internalizing behaviors.
3. Mothers’ positive and harsh parenting is expected to mediate the direct effects of coparenting cooperation on children’s adjustment.
4. Variability in the process by which coparenting cooperation was associated with child adjustment across mother-grandmother or mother-father coparent families was considered. Given limited empirical work comparing coparenting configurations, we did not expect the pattern of direct or indirect effects of coparenting cooperation to vary by configuration.
5. Finally, we expected the pattern of findings to the above-noted research questions to be similar for pre-school and early school age siblings.

Method

Participants

Participants were a subset of a longitudinal study of families with children who were initially recruited from urban Head Start centers in the southern United States when the younger child of the present study was 24 months old, and the older Head Start-enrolled sibling was 3–4 years old. Head Start provides comprehensive preschool services to low-income families. Participants completed three annual assessments corresponding to the younger child’s second, third, and fourth birthdays; 167 families were initially recruited and 154 families completed the final wave of the study (92.2% retention). The present study considers only data from the final year of data collection (total N = 154 for the entire wave) when the younger children were approximately 4 years of age (M = 47.56 months, SD = 3.15) and the older children were approximately six years of age (M = 73.21 months, SD = 8.71) because complete data regarding coparents are available only from the final data collection wave.

Mothers identified the individual upon whom they rely most to care for their children. Sixty mothers (42%...
identified the child’s grandmother, and 57 (40%) identified a father figure, of which 50 (83%) were biological fathers of the younger children, two were stepfathers, and six were mothers’ romantic partners. These father and father-like figures were combined into one category that will be referred to as “fathers”. Mothers reported that 44 of the 57 fathers (77%) lived with the child and mother. Twenty-seven mothers (19%) were excluded from the present analyses because they identified someone other than a grandmother or father as a coparent. These other coparents included aunts and family friends.

A series of t-tests were calculated to compare the families with grandmother, father, and other coparents on demographic, family, and child adjustment measures. No statistically significant mean differences between grandmother and other coparent families emerged. However, as compared to other coparents (and not grandmothers), mothers reported that fathers cared for children for significantly more hours per week. On average, grandmother and father coparents cared for children for 51.63 ($SD = 58.18$) hours each week, with no differences between grandmothers or fathers. Given the need for greater specificity regarding family relationships when considering coparenting, and the fact that fathers and grandmothers were the predominant coparents, the analyses proceeded with only father and grandmother groups of caregivers, resulting in a final sample size of 117 families.

Approximately 54% of the children in the present analyses are female. Mothers averaged 27.12 years ($SD = 3.35$) of age, and 76% of the mothers reported earning a high school diploma or equivalent degree. Approximately 28% ($N = 33$) of mothers were married, including 26 mothers with father coparents (46% of father coparent families). Families were predominantly African American (91%) and low-income (mean per capita annual income = $4866.49, SD = $3431.48).

**Measures**

Coparent cooperation Coparent cooperation was measured with seven items ($\alpha = .70$) designed for this study rated on a four-point scale indicating the degree to which coparents work together to raise children (e.g., make major decisions about the children; agree when talking about raising children). Items were summed ($M = 17.68, SD = 3.60$). Higher scores indicate higher levels of cooperation. See Appendix A for the complete list of items.

Mothers’ positive and harsh parenting Mothers’ parenting behaviors were assessed using an adapted version of Strayhorn and Weidman’s (1988) Parent Practices Scale that contained only two subscales consisting of 16 items for which mothers were asked to rate on a five-point scale how often they use specific responses to good and bad child behaviors. Mother responded separately for younger and older children. Positive parenting consisted of eight items ($\alpha = .77$ younger child, .80 older sibling) with a mean score of 4.36 ($SD = .57$) for younger and 4.42 ($SD = .43$) for older children. Harsh parenting consisted of seven items ($\alpha = .70$ younger child, .71 older sibling) with a mean score of 2.50 ($SD = .74$) for younger and 2.42 ($SD = .68$) for older children.

Children’s social competence Mothers rated each child’s social competence by responding to 10 items using a modified rating scale regarding the child’s behavior during the past two months (SCBE; LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996). The original measure uses a six-point response scale; in the current study, mothers rated children’s social competence on a three-point scale (0 = not at all true; 1 = sometimes true; 2 = always or often true). A social competence score was computed by calculating the mean of the 10 items ($\alpha = .77$ younger child, $M = 1.27, SD = .36$; .81 older sibling, $M = 1.42, SD = .39$).

Children’s externalizing and internalizing behaviors Externalizing behaviors were measured with mother reports for each child on the Child Behavior Checklist for ages 1½–5 years (Achenbach, 1994). Mothers rated children’s behavior during the past two months on a three-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all true) to 2 (always or often true). The 25 externalizing items were summed to create an externalizing behaviors scale ($\alpha = .90$ younger child, .90 older sibling). The Mean score for younger children was .59 ($SD = .32$). The Mean score for older siblings was .42 ($SD = .31$). The 25 internalizing behavior items also were summed to create an internalizing behaviors scale ($\alpha = .86$ younger child; .89 older sibling). Mean scores for younger children were .49 ($SD = .28$) and .42 ($SD = .29$) for older siblings.

Mothers’ depression Mothers reported on 20 items ($\alpha = .89$) from the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck & Steer, 1993) requiring them to rate their feelings about life in the past week on a four-point scale. At the request of the university Institutional Review Board, which approves all research involving human participants, one item addressing suicidal thoughts was eliminated. Items were summed to create a total depression score ($M = 6.78, SD = 7.65$).

**Plan of analysis**

Path models were estimated to test the hypotheses using the Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) estimation in AMOS 18.0. Overall model fit was evaluated using several fit indices: the comparative fit index (CFI), for which values above .90 indicate a good model fit (Bentler, 1990), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA, Steiger, 1990), for which values below .05 indicate an excellent model fit and values of .05 to .08 indicate
a good fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993), and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual for which values below 0.08 indicate a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Identical models were estimated separately for the younger and older children. Social competence was included in one set of models. Externalizing and internalizing behaviors were included in one model and allowed to correlate with each other given comorbidity among these behavior problem indices. All together, we tested four models, two for each child. Analytical models depicting hypothesized paths are presented in Figures 1 and 3 for younger children, and Figures 2 and 4 for older children. Although not shown in the figures for clarity, the disturbance terms for mothers’ harsh and positive parenting and children’s time 1 and time 2 behaviors (i.e., social competence, internalizing and externalizing behaviors) were allowed to covary.

Mothers’ reports are used for all measures. In order to reduce the effect of perceptual biases on predicted associations, relationships between maternal depression, parenting behaviors, coparent cooperation, and children’s adjustment at time 2 were statistically controlled in all analyses. Similarly, the effect of children’s age and sex on change in children’s adjustment was statistically controlled. For ease of interpretation, the maternal depression, child sex, and child age path coefficients are not presented, although this information can be provided upon request to the first author.

Potential differences in the patterns of associations for grandmother and father coparent families were estimated with a multiple-group comparison method (Bollen, 1989) such that an unconstrained model that allowed the path estimates to vary among grandmother and father coparents was estimated. Next, a fully constrained model that constrained all parameter estimates for grandmother and

Figure 1. Path model of associations between coparenting, mothers’ parenting, and social competence for younger children. Note: Paths representing associations between child sex and age and social competence, and paths from maternal depressive symptoms to coparent cooperation, positive parenting, harsh parenting and social competence are included in the analytical models.

Figure 2. Path model of associations between coparenting, mothers’ parenting, and social competence for older siblings. Note: Paths representing associations between child sex and age and social competence, and paths from maternal depressive symptoms to coparent cooperation, positive parenting, harsh parenting and social competence are included in the analytical models.

Figure 3. Path model of associations between coparenting, mothers’ parenting, and behavior problems for younger children. Note: Paths representing associations between child sex and age and externalizing and internalizing behaviors, and paths from maternal depressive symptoms to coparent cooperation, positive parenting, harsh parenting, and externalizing and internalizing behaviors are included in the analytical models.

Figure 4. Path model of associations between coparenting, mothers’ parenting, and behavior problems for older siblings. Note: Paths representing associations between child sex and age and externalizing and internalizing behaviors, and paths from maternal depressive symptoms to coparent cooperation, positive parenting, harsh parenting, and externalizing and internalizing behaviors are included in the analytical models.
father coparents to be equal was estimated. If this fully constrained model resulted in a statistically significant decrement of model fit ($\chi^2$) in comparison to the unconstrained model, then the pattern of associations could be assumed to vary for grandmother and father coparent families. Upon evidence that the pattern of associations varied by coparent configuration, individual paths that differed for grandmother and father coparent families would be released one at a time, and significant change in the $\chi^2$ statistic would be examined. A statistically significant change in $\chi^2$ indicates that the magnitude of the path coefficient was statistically significantly different for grandmother and father coparent families.

**Results**

**Correlational analyses**

As shown in Table 1, the patterns of correlations are similar for younger and older siblings. When mothers report more coparent cooperation, they also report higher levels of social competence among younger and older siblings. More coparent cooperation is positively associated with mothers’ positive parenting of older siblings. Mothers reporting harsher parenting perceive that their younger and older children display more externalizing and internalizing behaviors, while mothers reporting more positive parenting perceive that their younger and older children are more socially competent.

**Coparenting cooperation in mother-grandmother and mother-father coparenting configurations**

Prior to computing path models that tested hypotheses regarding linkages among coparenting cooperation, parenting and children’s social adjustment, we compared levels of coparenting cooperation in the two coparenting configurations. T-tests analyses and One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) procedures revealed that mothers with father coparents ($M = 19.04, SD = 2.56$) reported more coparenting cooperation than mothers with grandmother coparents ($M = 16.33, SD = 3.96$). Further, the variance in coparenting cooperation was statistically significantly higher in mother-grandmother versus mother-father families, $F(1) = 19.00, p < .001$. Therefore, while on average mothers report more coparenting cooperation when coparenting with fathers, there is more variability in the perceived coparenting cooperation of mothers who are coparenting with grandmothers.

**Patterns of associations by coparenting configuration**

We describe the results obtained from evaluating hypotheses 1–3 separately first by coparenting configuration (i.e., grandmother vs. father configurations), and then by child age group (i.e., younger children and older siblings). Models were estimated comparing grandmother and father coparent families to evaluate the extent to which the patterns of associations varied by coparent configuration for younger children and older siblings. These models separately considered social competence, externalizing behaviors, and internalizing behaviors. All models controlled for the influence of child sex and child age on current adjustment.

**Social competence path models**

The first model focused on the younger children.

A fully unconstrained model that allowed all paths among mother-grandmother and mother-father coparent families to vary was estimated. This model fit the data well, $\chi^2 (18) = 27.12, p = .08, CFI = .93, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = 0.05$. Next, a fully constrained model that placed equality constraints on all parameters for grandmother and father coparent families was estimated to examine the extent to which the patterns of associations varied by coparent. However, constraining all path coefficients to be equal for grandmother and father coparent families failed to produce a statistically significant decrement in model fit, $\Delta \chi^2 (10) = 10.59, p = .39$. Therefore, the pattern of associations does not vary for grandmother and father coparent families. Identical procedures yielding similar results were

Table 1. Bivariate correlations of study constructs for younger children (above the diagonal) and older siblings (below the diagonal).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Coparent cooperation</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–.06</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>–.13</td>
<td>–.03</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>–.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mothers’ harsh parenting</td>
<td>–.10</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.56***</td>
<td>.49***</td>
<td>–.04</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mothers’ positive parenting</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>–.06</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–.08</td>
<td>–.03</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>–.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Externalizing behaviors</td>
<td>–.12</td>
<td>.55***</td>
<td>–.16</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.73***</td>
<td>–.30**</td>
<td>.39***</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Internalizing behaviors</td>
<td>–.11</td>
<td>.36***</td>
<td>–.14</td>
<td>.77***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–.18</td>
<td>.42**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Social competence</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>–.17</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>–.30**</td>
<td>–.26**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Mothers’ depression</td>
<td>–.16</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>–.11</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>.50***</td>
<td>–.17</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$
followed for the older siblings. The fully constrained model fit the data adequately, \( \chi^2 (28) = 32.48, p = .26, \) CFI = .89, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .06, and the unconstrained model did not result in a decrement in model fit, \( \Delta \chi^2 (10) = 10.59, p = .39. \)

**Externalizing and internalizing behaviors path models**

A multiple group comparison method again was used to evaluate the extent to which the associations among coparent cooperation, mothers’ harsh and positive parenting and younger children’s externalizing and internalizing behaviors varied by coparent configuration. The unconstrained path model, allowing the paths for mother-grandmother and mother-father coparent families to vary freely, fit the data adequately, \( \chi^2 (40) = 63.24, p = .04, \) CFI = .96, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .06. The fully constrained model with equality constraints on all parameters for grandmother and father coparent families did not result in a statistically significant decrement in model fit, \( \Delta \chi^2 (11) = 8.22, p = .63. \) Turning to the older children, the fully constrained model in which all parameter estimates for grandmother and father coparent families were set to be equal again produced no statistically significant degradation in model fit (\( \chi^2 (11) = 13.74, p = .25 \)), in comparison to the unconstrained model (\( \chi^2 (40) = 60.57, p = .05, \) CFI = .95, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .05) in which paths for grandmother and fathers coparent families were freely estimated. Therefore, the pattern of associations did not vary for grandmother and father coparent families for preschool or early school age children.

Given the lack of differences for all outcomes for mother-grandmother versus mother-father coparent families, the remaining hypotheses were tested by combining all families into a single group and evaluating the path coefficients.

**Coparenting cooperation and mothers’ parenting: Hypothesis 1**

As depicted in Figures 1 and 3, the results fail to support Hypothesis 1 for younger children because no statistically significant association between coparenting cooperation and positive or harsh parenting emerged for younger children. In contrast, as shown in Figures 2 and 4, mixed support emerged for older children. Mothers who reported more coparenting cooperation also reported engaging in more positive parenting, but not less harsh parenting, towards older children.

**Coparenting cooperation and children’s adjustment: Hypothesis 2**

Mixed support emerged for our expectation that coparenting cooperation would be directly associated with child adjustment. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, for preschool and early school age children, higher levels of coparent cooperation were associated with more social competence. For both younger and older children, coparenting cooperation was unrelated to internalizing and externalizing behaviors (see Figures 3 and 4).

**Coparenting cooperation, mothers’ parenting and child adjustment: Hypothesis 3**

We failed to support our expectation that the quality of mothers’ parenting would mediate links between coparenting cooperation and children’s adjustment. Instead, consistent evidence for additive effects of coparenting cooperation and parenting quality emerged. Turning first to the results for younger children, as shown in Figure 1, self-reported positive parenting was positively associated with higher levels of social competence, but the indirect effect of coparenting cooperation on social competence behaviors through mothers’ positive parenting was not statistically significant (beta = 0.05, \( p > .05). \)

A somewhat similar pattern emerged for older siblings. As shown in Figure 3, positive parenting was directly positively associated with levels of mother-reported social competence. Although mothers who reported more coparenting cooperation also reported engaging in more positive parenting, the indirect path to social competence, through positive parenting, was not statistically significant (beta = 0.05, \( p > .05). \) As shown in Figure 4, the beta coefficients representing the paths between mothers’ harsh parenting and children’s externalizing and internalizing behaviors indicated that when mothers reported using harsher parenting, they also reported higher levels of children’s behavior problems. Specific to externalizing behaviors, a main effect for mothers’ positive parenting emerged such that less positive parenting was associated with higher levels of externalizing behaviors. However, no support for the hypothesized indirect path from coparenting cooperation to externalizing behaviors through mothers’ positive parenting emerged (beta = –0.05, \( p > .05). \)

**Discussion**

The primary goal of this study was to explore the extent to which coparenting in mother-grandmother and mother-father coparent families was associated with mothers’ parenting and children’s social adjustment among a predominantly African American sample of low-income families with both a preschool and early school age child. Results indicated that the impact of coparenting cooperation on children’s adjustment, both directly and indirectly, did not vary by coparenting configuration, despite higher mean levels of coparent cooperation in mother-father versus mother-grandmother families and greater variability in coparenting cooperation in mother-grandmother families. Importantly, coparenting cooperation explained unique
variance associated with preschool and young school-aged children’s adjustment, even after considering the direct effects of maternal parenting quality. The findings highlight the relevance of maternal perceptions of coparenting for young children’s social adjustment, as coparenting cooperation emerged as a family-based protective factor. Moreover, given the consistency in findings across coparent configuration, these results add to the growing body of research suggesting that more traditional definitions of coparenting that focus on fathers should be expanded to include grandmothers, especially among low-income African American families.

Direct associations between coparenting and children’s behaviors

Mothers’ perceptions of coparenting were directly associated with their reports of children’s social competence for younger and older children. Even after considering the effects of mothers’ harsh and positive parenting, mothers’ perceptions of the level of cooperation within the coparent relationship independently predicted increases in children’s social competence in both mother-grandmother and mother-father coparent families. Several possible explanations for this pattern of findings exist. First, exposure to coparenting cooperation may model, and thus encourage, socially competent behavior in children. Second, higher levels of coparenting cooperation may create a family environment that is positive and harmonious, thus supporting the acquisition of socially competent behaviors (Feinberg, 2002). Finally, perhaps mothers and coparents who are more socially skilled themselves are better able to facilitate high-quality coparenting cooperation, and they foster those same skills in young children.

Interestingly, the influence of coparenting cooperation was limited to positive adjustment. Coparenting cooperation was not linked to externalizing or internalizing problems for younger or older children. Therefore, cooperation between coparents may bolster children’s positive adjustment, but fails to protect them from developing behavior problems. Particularly noteworthy, previous work documenting links between coparenting and children’s behavior problems that includes nontraditional coparents has focused on coparenting conflict, not cooperation (e.g., Shook et al., 2010). Importantly, coparenting conflict and cooperation are not orthogonal dimensions such that higher coparent cooperation implies low levels of conflict. Instead, high levels of coparenting cooperation may reflect dyads that are able to resolve parenting conflicts in socially appropriate ways. Future research should consider the extent which associations among various dimensions of coparenting, like conflict, in father and grandmother coparenting families are differentially associated with children’s adjustment. Nonetheless, these findings underscore the value of positive family processes as resources that may promote children’s social-emotional development, particularly within low-income communities (e.g., Raver et al., 2007).

Indirect associations between coparenting and children’s behaviors

Although characteristics of the coparenting relationship were expected to influence children’s adjustment indirectly through parenting quality, no statistically significant indirect effects emerged. Instead, for older siblings only, coparent cooperation was positively associated with mothers’ positive parenting, even after statistically controlling level of maternal depression. Previous studies using married, predominantly white middle class samples (e.g., McHale et al., 2002) and more limited work with African American families with older children (e.g., Brody et al., 1998; Shook et al., 2010) suggest that higher coparenting quality is linked to more positive parenting and, in turn, to better child social adjustment. In contrast to these studies, we relied on a single measure of coparenting, mothers’ reports of cooperation, rather than observations of coparenting quality (e.g., McHale et al., 2002), or assessment of coparenting support and conflict (e.g., Shook et al., 2010). As Jones and Lindahl (2011) discuss, in some ways this limitation is not unusual, as the field needs more comprehensive coparenting assessment among less traditional coparenting configurations. Thus, comparing coparenting cooperation influences by relying on mothers’ self-reports of coparenting cooperation may be a necessary first step in understanding how variations in coparenting configurations may impact children’s adjustment. Our results suggest that including nontraditional coparenting configurations has merit, and future studies that more comprehensively evaluate the level of coparenting cooperation among nontraditional configurations are clearly needed.

Coparenting cooperation and positive parenting were positively associated among the older group of children who averaged 6 years of age, but not for the preschool aged group. Interestingly, age 6 does seem to be the lower range of the middle childhood period where parenting has been found to mediate associations between mother reports of coparenting relationship quality and child adjustment among single-mother families (e.g., Jones et al., 2005; Shook et al., 2010). Perhaps similar skills shape cooperative coparent relationships and positive parent-child relationships during the early school years. For example, parenting during middle childhood is marked by increased cooperation in the parent-child relationship as compared to parenting during the preschool years (Holden, 2010). Moreover, the caregiving demands on parents tend to decrease as children enter school and become more self-sufficient. Although mothers’ reports of positive parenting practices were strongly correlated across the two children, \( r = .84; p < .001 \), associations with externalizing
problems only existed for older siblings. Therefore, family processes have different correlates and effects as a function of child age, even when mothers report parenting siblings similarly.

**Family process in grandmother and father coparent families**

Perhaps most striking is the absence of family process differences in mother-grandmother and mother-father coparent families. Our findings support the assertion by McHale and Irlace (2011) that coparenting processes are more equivalent in mother-father married families and mother-grandmother families within an exclusively African American sample. Moreover, Baker and colleagues (2010) conclude that observed dimensions of coparenting quality in mother-grandmother and nuclear mother-father coparent families are similar. Although our measures are limited to mothers’ self-reports on parenting, child development, and one dimension of coparenting, importantly, these findings are consistent with other more in-depth assessments of family processes. We provide further evidence that family processes in mother-grandmother and mother-father families may be quite similar, especially when, as in the present study, household and maternal characteristics such as education, income, and depression are identical across coparent family configurations. This similarity may help explain why in general residence in multigenerational versus two-parent households is less disadvantageous for African American children than white children (e.g., Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2007; Pittman & Boswell, 2008). Broadening definitions of family and coparents to include grandmothers, at a minimum, among economically disadvantaged African American families provides a more accurate representation of the caregiving environment to which children are exposed (Jones et al., 2007).

Despite similar processes linking coparenting cooperation to mothers’ parenting and child adjustment, the mean and variance of coparenting cooperation differed across families, supporting the particularly complex nature of coparenting when mothers and grandparents are coparents (e.g., Apfel & Seitz, 1996; Jones & Lindahl, 2011). Further, children growing up with two parents may in part be more advantaged than their peers in multigenerational caregiving families due to greater coparent cooperation. Future work examining the determinants and consequences of coparenting in diverse family structures is clearly needed.

Despite similar associations with parenting and children’s adjustment in mother-grandmother and mother-father coparent families, mothers reported significantly more coparenting cooperation in mother-father coparent families than in mother-grandmother families. In fact, this was the only statistically significant mean difference among mother-grandmother and mother-father coparent families. Perhaps high levels of mother-father coparent cooperation represent more balance and equality in their relationship, thus promoting greater coparent cooperation. Mother-grandmother coparent families may be characterized by ambiguity regarding roles and less willingness to compromise to work together to raise the child (e.g., Apfel & Seitz, 1991).

**Study strengths and limitations**

The present study has a number of strengths. First, unlike many other studies in which the coparent relationship to the child is confounded with other sources of disadvantage (e.g., maternal age, household), in this highly disadvantaged sample there are few differences in maternal and family characteristics among families with grandmother or father coparents. Instead, the extent to which family processes, including coparenting cooperation, are uniquely associated with risks for reduced social competence and elevated externalizing and internalizing behaviors were evaluated. Second, the use of a sibling design created an opportunity to evaluate the extent to which similar processes account for children’s adjustment across two closely linked developmental periods, the preschool and early school-aged periods.

Like all studies, this study has limitations. First, the data are cross-sectional, and thus the direction of effects is unclear. Second, results may not generalize to larger, more advantaged and ethnically diverse samples in the United States and elsewhere. Third, the sample size was too small to conduct a more fine-grained analysis that includes examination of the extent to which parental marital status may be linked to coparenting differences within father coparents. Fourth, these findings should be interpreted with caution because the measures are subject to same method variance. Mothers reported on all items. We included maternal depression as a covariate to account partially for this limitation, but it is imperative that future research includes the perspectives of coparents and other reporters. Further, the measurement of coparenting was limited to mothers’ reports on a single dimension, cooperation, and thus the extent to which these findings would replicate with more comprehensive measures of coparenting is worthy of future investigation. However, including grandmother coparents at all is an important initial step in this growing area of coparenting research in diverse families. It is also worth noting that Baker and colleagues (2010) found that mothers’ reports of coparenting quality were more closely related to observations of mother-grandmother coparenting and to children’s externalizing behaviors than grandmothers’ reports. Finally, analyses were conducted separately for younger and older siblings, and thus caution must be used when interpreting any differences between models.
Implications
These findings highlight the importance of including coparents in research and interventions in economically disadvantaged communities that may be characterized by high rates of single motherhood. Coparenting cooperation emerged as an additional influence on children’s social competence. That is, the development of social competence seemed to be enhanced among children who were exposed both to coparenting cooperation and mothers’ positive parenting. Moreover, although research and intervention often overlook grandmothers, their coparenting relationship with mothers also had benefits for children’s adjustment. Lower levels of coparenting cooperation among mother-grandmother families, as compared to mother-father families, point to the value of including coparenting cooperation in family support programs for multigenerational families. Research and practice clearly need to move beyond a focus on household structure to include family members, like fathers and grandmothers, who affect the quality of family relationships and associated family-level processes; such relationships provide important resources for young children growing up in economically disadvantaged families.

References


Appendix A

Coparenting cooperation questions

Please think about decisions that you and [caregiver] make about the children’s lives. How often do these things happen when you talk together about the children?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Make major decisions about the children together?</td>
<td>□0</td>
<td>□1</td>
<td>□2</td>
<td>□3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Discuss the children’s school problems?</td>
<td>□0</td>
<td>□1</td>
<td>□2</td>
<td>□3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Plan special events (e.g., Birthdays) in the children’s lives?</td>
<td>□0</td>
<td>□1</td>
<td>□2</td>
<td>□3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Make day-to-day decisions about the children?</td>
<td>□0</td>
<td>□1</td>
<td>□2</td>
<td>□3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Get angry when talking about how to raise the children?</td>
<td>□0</td>
<td>□1</td>
<td>□2</td>
<td>□3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Have big differences of opinion about how to raise the children?</td>
<td>□0</td>
<td>□1</td>
<td>□2</td>
<td>□3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Agree when talking about how to raise the children?</td>
<td>□0</td>
<td>□1</td>
<td>□2</td>
<td>□3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1 Item was reverse scored.