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Patty X. Kuo  
*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, pkuo2@unl.edu

Brenda L. Volling  
*University of Michigan-Ann Arbor*, volling@umich.edu

Richard Gonzalez  
*University of Michigan - Ann Arbor*, gonzo@umich.edu

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His, Hers, or Theirs? Coparenting After the Birth of a Second Child

Patty X. Kuo1,a, Brenda L. Volling1,2, and Richard Gonzalez1

1Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, 530 Church Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109
2Center for Human Growth and Development, University of Michigan, 300 North Ingalls, Ann Arbor, MI 48109

Abstract

This study examined changes in coparenting after the birth of a second child. Mothers and fathers from 241 two-parent families reported on their spouse’s coparenting cooperation and conflict with their firstborn child before (prenatal) and four months after the birth of a second child. Parents completed questionnaires (prenatal) on gender role attitudes, marital satisfaction, and firstborn children’s temperamental characteristics. Parents also reported on the secondborn infant’s temperament at 1 month following the birth of the second child. Coparenting conflict increased across the transition, whereas cooperation decreased. Couples in which fathers reported greater marital satisfaction were more cooperative 4 months after the birth. Firstborns’ difficult temperament contributed to less cooperative coparenting by both parents. When mothers had more traditional gender role beliefs, fathers engaged in more conflictual coparenting behavior, and when fathers had more traditional gender role beliefs, mothers engaged in more conflictual coparenting behavior. Mothers, but not fathers, engaged in more coparenting conflict regarding the firstborn when both the firstborn and infant sibling had difficult temperaments.

Keywords

Coparenting; Marital Satisfaction; Fathers; Second Child

Many families undergo the transition from one child to two, but most research overlooks this common developmental milestone in the family life-cycle (Volling, 2012). The birth of a second child often creates new stressors for parents as they worry about the firstborn’s behavior in response to the birth of their infant sibling and whether they, as parents, can manage the care of two young children in the family. Earlier findings suggested that children’s externalizing behaviors increased after the birth of an infant sibling, and that cooperative coparenting before the birth reduced the risk of children’s externalizing behaviors 1 month after the birth, whereas conflictual coparenting increased that risk (Kolak & Volling, 2013). Understanding how these coparenting processes unfold in the early months is critical for understanding children’s adjustment after the birth of a sibling. Several
recent studies suggest that coparenting dynamics may unfold in gender-differentiated ways such that women’s marital quality may be more influenced by coparenting than men’s marital quality (Le, McDaniel, Leavitt, & Feinberg, 2016). This study used an actor-partner interdependence model (APIM) within a structural equation modeling framework to test for interpersonal processes in coparenting after the birth of a second child and whether they differed by parent gender.

According to family systems theory (e.g., Cox & Paley, 2003), families are dynamic changing systems that are reorganized during transition periods, such as the birth of a second child. Further, a family systems perspective emphasizes the interdependencies between marital, parent-child, and sibling subsystems (Cox & Paley, 2003). The challenges surrounding the birth of a second child affect family members and relationship dynamics at multiple levels. Thus, the addition of a second child to the family system requires adjustments to how mothers and fathers coparent firstborn children because a newborn infant now requires attention and care as well. Although previous research has focused on coparenting changes one year after the birth of a second child (Szabó, Dubas, & van Aken, 2012), it is unknown whether coparenting changes within the immediate transition period, a time when firstborns increase in externalizing behavior problems (Kolak & Volling, 2013). How parents adjust and adapt to this reorganization is critical for preventing firstborns’ problem behaviors (Kolak & Volling, 2013). Thus, the first goal of this study was to identify whether coparenting cooperation and conflict changed after the birth of a second child. Our second goal was to understand which factors contributed to higher quality coparenting (more cooperation, less conflict) after the birth of a second child. To this end, we utilized Feinberg’s (2003) ecological model of coparenting to select parent, family, and child-level predictors of coparenting. Our third goal was to examine whether the associations between these predictors and coparenting differed by parent gender.

**Interpersonal Processes of Coparenting: A Gendered and Dyadic Perspective**

Beyond examining coparenting change and predictors of coparenting, it is important to understand that coparenting relationships are dyadic. Coparenting, or the manner in which mothers and fathers support or undermine each other in their parental roles, is an interpersonal process where each parent’s behaviors affect and are affected by the other coparent. Few studies have examined actor and partner effects on mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting. In the current study, parents reported on their partner’s behavior instead of their own, which allowed us to explore the possibility that mothers and fathers exerted independent effects on their spouses (partner effects), in addition to their own coparenting behaviors (actor effects), that would create transactional relations over time between coparents. Using cross-informant reports also reduced shared method variance, illuminated the dynamics between mothers and fathers within the coparenting system, and allowed us to examine whether there were gender differences in the associations between predictors and coparenting.
According to social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), mothers and fathers may experience parenting roles differently based on their gender. Because fathers’ roles are seen as ambiguous, elective, or even secondary to mothers (Brown et al., 2011), fathers’ coparenting behaviors are potentially more susceptible to ecological forces, including marital experiences, gender role beliefs, and children’s difficult temperament. In contrast, because women are socialized to be primary caregivers (Eagly & Wood, 2012), mothers’ coparenting behaviors may be less susceptible to ecological forces. In the remainder of the introduction, we evaluate the literature for marital quality, gender role beliefs and children’s temperament in turn and generate hypotheses for gender differences in light of available evidence.

Marital Quality and Coparenting: Interpersonal Influences and Gender Differences?

Studies examining the interpersonal dynamics within the coparenting relationship and marital quality have been inconsistent in finding gender differences. For example, in a study on the transition to first-time parenthood, higher marital quality prior to the birth predicted greater perceived coparenting support and less perceived undermining coparenting for mothers and fathers (Le et al., 2016). In a study of marital quality and coparenting of toddlers, higher marital quality predicted greater coparenting support of mothers and fathers (Holland & McElwain, 2013). In both studies, effects did not differ by parent gender. Other studies during the transition to parenthood do find different associations for mothers and fathers. Fathers’ reports of lower marital satisfaction predicted more competitive coparenting between parents, but this was not the case for mothers’ marital satisfaction (Christopher, Umemura, Mann, Jacobvitz, & Hazen, 2015). Further, fathers’, but not mothers’, pre-birth marital interactions predicted both fathers’ (actor effect) and mothers’ (partner effect) reports of positive coparenting 3 to 6 months after birth (Van Egeren, 2004). In the current study, we hypothesized that higher marital satisfaction would predict greater coparenting cooperation and less conflict, and that the associations between marital satisfaction and coparenting would be greater for fathers compared to mothers in line with social role theory.

Gender Role Beliefs: Another Way to Explore Gender in Coparenting?

Although Feinberg’s ecological model of coparenting emphasizes child, parent, and family-level predictors of coparenting, most studies of coparenting have focused primarily on marital quality as a predictor and fewer have considered parent characteristics such as gender role beliefs. Because it is theorized that mothers with egalitarian gender role beliefs encourage fathers’ involvement, whereas mothers with traditional gender role beliefs discourage father involvement (Allen & Hawkins, 1999), accounting for individual differences in parental gender role beliefs, rather than focusing simply on parents’ gender, may be necessary to appreciate fully the gendered dynamics driving the coparenting relationship. For first-time parents, mothers’ egalitarian gender role beliefs predicted supportive coparenting behavior during a triadic interaction with their 3.5 month old infants (Schoppe-Sullivan & Mangelsdorf, 2013), but there was no association between parents’ gender role beliefs and coparenting for parents of preschool-aged children (Buckley & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2010). Because individuals with egalitarian gender role beliefs endorse
shared parenting roles between mothers and fathers (Rogers & Amato, 2000), we hypothesized that holding egalitarian beliefs would lead to more coparenting cooperation and less conflict. In light of limited research on gender differences in associations between gender role beliefs and coparenting quality, we did not make hypotheses about whether gender role beliefs would differentially predict mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting.

**Beyond the Parents: Children’s Difficult Temperament and Coparenting**

Children’s characteristics are also theorized to shape coparenting dynamics (Feinberg, 2003). Children with difficult temperaments are more emotionally reactive and not easily soothed; therefore, coparenting may be more demanding with difficult firstborn children (Davis, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, & Brown, 2009; Feinberg, 2003). Thus, we hypothesized that firstborns and infants with more difficult temperaments will elicit less coparenting cooperation and more conflict. Children’s difficult temperament may differentially affect mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting based on gendered parenting roles. Several scholars have argued that because fathers have less defined parenting roles than mothers, fathers are more easily able to withdraw from parenting when their children are temperamentally difficult (Brown, McBride, Bost, & Shin, 2011). For example, fathers spent less time with their children when they were temperamentally difficult, but mothers’ time spent with children did not vary based on their children’s temperament (Brown et al., 2011). Because women are expected to be primary caregivers, their involvement is less likely to be governed by choice, and in turn, less susceptible to children’s reactive temperament. Thus, fathers’ coparenting behaviors may be more sensitive to children’s difficult temperament than mothers’ coparenting behaviors.

Consistent with a family systems’ perspective, the difficult temperament of one child may spill over and affect the coparenting relationship with the other child. For instance, an infant’s difficult temperament may not only elicit more attention and care from parents, but in so doing, less attention and emotional resources are directed toward the firstborn child. In the only study on coparenting after the birth of a second child, mothers reported less stability in coparenting quality with firstborn children in the year following the birth of the sibling if the infants had a difficult temperament (Szabó et al., 2012), but the same was not true of fathers. These findings seem to contradict previous research which has argued that fathers’ parenting may be more vulnerable to children’s difficult temperament than mothers because fathers are able to withdraw from difficult children (Brown et al., 2011). Although fathers are able to withdraw from temperamentally-difficult children, fathers’ limited involvement may create difficulties in the coparenting relationship. Mothers experience role strain when fathers are uninvolved after the birth of a second child (Kreppner et al., 1982). Mothers may report more coparenting conflict and be less cooperative with fathers who withdraw from parenting duties because mothers shoulder the double burden of childcare responsibilities for two children (Kuo, Volling, & Gonzalez, 2017), in addition to these children being temperamentally difficult. Indeed, mothers, but not fathers, report greater marital negativity after the birth of a second child (Volling, Oh, Gonzalez, Kuo, & Yu, 2015). Thus, we hypothesized that the difficult temperament of firstborns and infants would more strongly predict mothers’ coparenting than fathers’ coparenting. In the remainder of this paper, we refer to the secondborns as infant siblings.
The Current Study

The present report fills a gap in our understanding of coparenting by focusing on a significant developmental transition: coparenting of the firstborn after the birth of an infant sibling. Specifically, we examined (1) changes in coparenting cooperation and conflict with respect to the firstborn in the months following the birth; (2) whether parental gender roles, children’s temperament, and marital satisfaction predicted mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting; and (3) whether the associations between these ecological predictors (marital satisfaction, gender roles, children’s temperament) and coparenting behaviors differed by parent gender. To explore these interpersonal processes of coparenting and the effects of one spouse on the other, we conducted a series of nested APIM path models in which we tested whether mothers’ and fathers’ prenatal coparenting behavior, marital satisfaction, and gender role beliefs predicted their partners’ coparenting of the firstborn at 4 months after the birth of their sibling, and whether children’s difficult temperament predicted mothers’ and fathers’ reports of coparenting. We tested three specific hypotheses: (1) The equal influence hypothesis, which implies that coparenting is predicted jointly by both mothers’ and father’s characteristics (gender role beliefs, marital satisfaction) and that children’s temperament equally influences mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting; (2) the gender difference hypothesis, in which there will be differences across mothers and fathers in the effects of gender role beliefs and marital satisfaction on coparenting at 4 months in line with social norms for men’s and women’s caregiving expectations (e.g., Eagly & Wood, 2012); and (3) The difficult child hypothesis positing that children (both first and secondborns) with difficult temperaments will contribute to increased coparenting conflict and decreased coparenting cooperation after the transition, and this may be particularly the case for mothers who may be more sensitive to children’s difficult temperament during the transition to second-time parenthood (e.g., Szabó et al., 2012). The current study builds upon an ecological perspective to uncover ‘what’ predicts coparenting (child, parent, or marital factors) and to examine these ecological predictors through a gendered lens. Specifically, we explored whether there are mother-father differences that belie the interpersonal dynamics within coparenting.

Method

Participants

Participants were 241 families consisting of mothers and fathers, and their two children, participating in a longitudinal study investigating parent and firstborn children’s adjustment after the birth of a second child. Families were recruited if they met the following criteria: (1) mothers were expecting their second child; with (2) a firstborn between the ages of 1 and 5; (3) both parents were willing to participate; and (4) fathers of the infant were residing in the home. Families were excluded if the second child was born with a chronic physical health problem, an identified disability, were born preterm (< 37 weeks) or weighed under 2500 grams at birth. Firstborns ranged from 12 – 69 months, $M = 31.17$ months, $SD = 10.13$ months at the time of the infant sibling’s birth, 54.4% of firstborns and 41.9% of infant siblings were girls. Mothers and fathers were primarily European American (85.9% of mothers; 86.3% of fathers) with 14.1% of mothers and 13.7% of fathers representing other
racial and ethnic groups. The sample was well-educated (83.9% of mothers; 79.2% of fathers earned a Bachelor’s degree or higher), and middle- to upper-middle class (70.6% of families’ household income was $60,000 or higher). Marriage length ranged from .58 – 20 years (M = 5.77, SD = 2.74). The majority of fathers were working full time (92.1%), and most mothers were working at least part time (65.6%; > 1 hour per week) at the prenatal time point. Of the 241 families recruited, 217 participated at four months. Twenty-two families dropped from the study by four months for a variety of reasons (e.g., not enough time, moved away from area). Two families did not return questionnaires at four months. Fathers participating at four months were more highly educated than the recruited sample, \( \chi^2 (3) = 10.67, p < .05 \). There were no other significant differences between the recruited sample and the families who remained at four months.

**Study Design and Procedures**

The longitudinal investigation consisted of five measurement time points: prenatal (third trimester of mother’s second pregnancy), and 1, 4, 8, and 12 months following the infant sibling’s birth. Informed consent was obtained from the families prior to the prenatal visit, and all study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board. Data on family and child functioning were obtained through multiple methods using multiple informants (e.g., questionnaires, couple interviews, home and laboratory observations of family interaction). Information from the current report was derived from mothers’ and fathers’ reports of coparenting cooperation and conflict both prenatally and at four months after the birth, in addition to questionnaires assessing gender role beliefs, firstborn children’s difficult temperament and marital satisfaction at the prenatal time point, and parent reports of the infant sibling’s difficult temperament at 1 month. Questionnaires were left with parents during a 2-hour home visit and picked up approximately 2 weeks later during a second home visit at both prenatal and 4 months. Demographic information was obtained via interviews by research assistants during the prenatal home visit. Because we were interested in how individual spouse’s reports of marriage, gender roles, and coparenting prior to the birth of a second child influenced their perceptions of the other spouse in their coparenting roles after the birth, we analyzed mothers’ and fathers’ reports separately. Doing so also allowed us to use an actor-partner framework to test our hypotheses about interpersonal influence and the ecological factors that predicted coparenting. Coparenting information was not available at the 1-month time point because only a brief set of questionnaires was administered at 1 month to reduce the research burden on families and reduce the possibility of sample attrition during a stressful family transition. We were particularly interested in understanding changes in coparenting conflict and cooperation in the early months following birth (prenatal to 4 months) as this is a period of adjustment and adaptation for both parents and children after the transition from one child to two.

**Measures**

**Gender role beliefs**—Husbands and wives completed the 20-item *Gender Role Attitudes Scale* (Bird, Bird, & Scruggs, 1984) at the prenatal visit to assess attitudes concerning men’s and women’s roles in family and work. Example items included “A married woman’s most important task in life should be caring for her husband and child” (reverse coded) and “A husband should be just as willing as a wife to stay home from work and care for a sick
child”. All items were rated from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. A mean score across all 20 items was used in our analyses, and higher values indicated stronger endorsement of egalitarian gender role beliefs ($\alpha$ = .88 for wives and $\alpha$ = .85 for husbands).

**Coparenting behavior**—Husbands and wives completed the *Coparenting Questionnaire* (Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001) at the prenatal and 4-month time points to assess coparenting cooperation and conflict in caring for firstborn children. Parents completed the measure with respect to their spouse’s coparenting behaviors using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = never to 5 = always, and composites were created using mean scores across items. *Cooperation* (e.g., “My spouse shares the burden of discipline,” $\alpha$ range = .79–.80 for wives; .66 – .75 for husbands) and *conflict* (e.g., “My spouse and I have different standards for our child’s behavior,” $\alpha$ range = .74-.78 for mothers; .74-.78 for fathers) were each assessed using five items. Mothers’ reports were used to assess fathers’ coparenting behavior, whereas fathers’ reports were used to assess mothers’ coparenting behavior. This approach has been used previously to guard against shared reporter variance (Sears, Repetti, Reynolds, Robles, & Krull, 2016).

**Firstborn’s difficult temperament**—Assessment of the firstborn’s temperament was obtained at the prenatal time point from mothers’ and fathers’ reports using three subscales of the Child Behavior Questionnaire (Rothbart, Ahadi, Hershey, & Fisher, 2001): *activity level* (13 items, “Seems always in a big hurry to get from one place to another,” $\alpha$ = .76 for mothers, .73 for fathers), *anger/frustration* (13 items, “Has temper tantrums when s/he doesn’t get what s/he wants,” $\alpha$ = .77 for mothers, .73 for fathers), and *soothability* (13 items, “Calms down quickly after an exciting event,” $\alpha$ = .77 for mothers, .75 for fathers). Items were rated on a 7-point scale from 1 = Extremely Untrue to 7 = Extremely True. Based on previous research (Szabó et al., 2012), we created a composite of difficult temperament (activity level + anger/frustration – soothability). Mothers’ and fathers’ reports were significantly correlated, $r = .59, p < .001$. Because children may behave differently with mothers and fathers, reports from both parents may more accurately capture children’s overall temperament characteristics (Brown et al., 2011), and as such, we averaged mothers’ and fathers’ temperament reports to form a robust composite (Rushton, Brainerd, & Pressley, 1983), which also reduced shared-method variance and single-reporter bias.

**Infant sibling’s difficult temperament**—The difficult temperament of the infant sibling was assessed during the 1-month time point using mothers’ and fathers’ reports on the *Infant Characteristics Questionnaire* ICQ (Bates, Freeland, & Lounsbery, 1979). The 24-item ICQ has good convergent validity with observed temperament measures (Bates et al., 1979), and has four subscales (*fussy-difficult*, 9 items, “How easy or difficult is it for you to calm or soothe your baby when he/she is upset?”; *unadaptable*, 5 items, “How does your baby typically respond to a new person?”; *dull*, 4 items, “How much does your baby smile and make happy sounds”; *unpredictable*, “How easy or difficult is it for you to predict when your baby will go to sleep and wake up?” 6 items). Items were rated from 1 = Very Easy to 7 = Difficult. Based on previous use of the scale (Szabó et al., 2012), mean scores across the four subscales were summed to create composites of difficult temperament for mothers ($\alpha$
= .87) and fathers (α = .91). Mothers’ and fathers’ scores were positively correlated (r = .52, 

p < .001) and averaged (Rushton et al., 1983).

**Marital satisfaction**—At the prenatal time point, husbands and wives completed the well-
validated 3-item Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm et al., 1986) using a 5-point 
scale with 1 = not at all to 5 = extremely (“How satisfied are you with your marriage?,” α = . 
94 for wives, .92 for husbands). Items were summed to create a marital satisfaction score 
separately for husbands and wives.

**Results**

We first present descriptive statistics and then test for demographic covariates to be 
controlled in our main analyses. Correlations revealed no associations between coparenting 
at four months and fathers’ age, mothers’ age, children’s age, years of marriage, or number 
of hours worked. ANOVAs found no main effects of mothers’ employment status (full-time, 
part-time, stay-at-home, unemployed), firstborns’ or infant siblings’ gender, household 
income, mothers’ and fathers’ education, or family-earner status (dual-earner vs. single-
earer) on coparenting at four months. Demographic variables were not considered further 
in subsequent analyses. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between 
coparenting, gender role beliefs, marital satisfaction, and the difficult temperaments of the 
firstborn and infant sibling can be found in Table 1. Overall, mothers’ endorsement of 
egalitarian gender role beliefs was positively related to their husbands’ cooperative 
coparenting, but only at the prenatal time point. Fathers’ endorsement of egalitarian gender 
beliefs was positively associated with both parents’ cooperative coparenting, and negatively 
associated with both parents’ conflictual coparenting at both prenatal and four months. 
Mothers’ and fathers’ prenatal reports of marital satisfaction were positively related to their 
and their spouse’s cooperative coparenting, and negatively related to their and their spouse’s 
conflictual coparenting at both prenatal and four months. The firstborns’ difficult 
temperament was positively related to both mothers’ and father’s coparenting conflict and 
negatively to coparenting cooperation at prenatal and four months. Infant difficult 
temperament was positively associated with mothers’ (but not fathers’) coparenting conflict 
at 4 months.

**Coparenting Changes after the Birth of a Second Child**

To determine whether there were changes in coparenting cooperation and conflict for the 
firstborn from prenatal to 4 months, we conducted two linear mixed models using an 
unstructured covariance matrix. Time (2), parent (2), and the interaction between time and 
parent were modeled as fixed effects. Random effects were modeled for the intercept, which 
accounted for differences between families. Time and parent repeated effects accounted for 
longitudinal and dyadic dependence within families.

Significant time effects for coparenting cooperation, R(1, 411.89) = 8.58, p = .004, and 

conflict, R(1, 414.31) = 21.15, p < .001, revealed that cooperation decreased significantly 
over time, M_prenatal = 4.24, SE = .03; M_4months = 4.17, SE = .03, whereas conflict increased 
significantly over time, M_prenatal = 1.80, SE = .03; M_4months = 1.90, SE = .03. In addition, a 
significant main effect of parent, R(1, 242.30) = 48.96, p < .001, indicated that mothers

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reported fathers, $M = 4.05$, $SE = .04$, engaged in less coparenting cooperation than fathers reported for mothers, $M = 4.36$, $SE = .04$, but there were no parent differences for coparenting conflict. There were no significant time by parent interactions.

**Predictors of Coparenting and Differences by Parent Gender**

To examine what predicts coparenting after the birth of a second child and whether these associations differed by parent gender, we conducted a series of nested models that tested for standard variance assumptions in APIM. We then tested gender differences between mothers and fathers in predicting coparenting. We used full information maximum likelihood (FIML) and allowed residuals to be correlated to account for couple-level correlations.

**Preliminary analyses**—Prior to hypothesis testing, a series of preliminary models were estimated to test the standard equal variance assumption between partners in dyadic analyses (Gonzalez & Griffin, 2012). In these preliminary models, equality constraints were placed on regression paths between partners, but released on the variances of predictor and outcome variables between spouses. The main tests in these preliminary analyses assessed whether there were equal variances on the predictor and outcome variables across husbands and wives. Significant chi-square difference tests between the model that assumed equal variances and the model that assumed unequal variances would indicate that the model did not meet the equality of variances assumption. The standard APIM with equality constraints on the variances fit well for coparenting conflict, $\chi^2(4) = 5.00$, $p = .29$, RMSEA = .03, CFI = 1.00; but not for coparenting cooperation, $\chi^2(4) = 45.11$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .21, CFI = .828, and the model that released the equality constraints on the predictor and outcome variances was better fitting $\chi^2(2) = 0.56$, $p = .76$, RMSEA = .00, CFI = 1.00; chi-square difference test: $\chi^2(2) = 44.55$, $p < .001$. Thus, for hypothesis testing, we proceeded with the model that released equality constraints on the predictor and outcome variable variances for coparenting cooperation, but used the standard model with equality constraints on the variable variances for coparenting conflict. With our sample size, we have .80 power to detect medium-sized actor and partner effects for a dyadic interdependence model (two predictors, two outcomes).

In testing our hypotheses, we conducted two sets of nested models, one predicting coparenting cooperation, and the other predicting coparenting conflict. The first model tested the “equal influence” hypothesis, in which effects on coparenting were set to be equal across mothers and fathers and children’s difficult temperament predicted mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting equally. The equal influence models were the most parsimonious of the nested models and thus each subsequent hypothesis-testing model was compared to the equal influence model using a chi-square difference test. In cases where there were no significant differences in fit, we chose the more parsimonious ‘equal influence’ model (Burnham & Anderson, 2003).

To test for gender differences in parent effects, we removed the equality constraints on mother and father predictor paths (i.e., prenatal coparenting, marital satisfaction, and gender role beliefs) on 4 month coparenting, but retained equality constraints on child predictor paths. The gender difference models were compared with the equal influence model to test
for gender differences in the prediction of coparenting. To test whether children’s difficult temperament exerted different effects on mothers’ compared to fathers’ coparenting, we removed the equality constraints on the temperament (child and infant) predictor paths, but retained equality constraints on mother and father predictor paths and compared this model to the equal influence model. Once we completed testing the equal influence, gender difference, and difficult child models, we then tested our “what predicts coparenting” (i.e., marital satisfaction, gender role beliefs, and/or children’s temperament) by interpreting the regression coefficients in our best-fitting nested model.

**Coparenting cooperation**—The equal influence model had excellent fit: $\chi^2(8) = 10.94, p = .21$, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .99. The gender difference model did not improve the fit over the equal influence model, $\chi^2(6) = 9.61, p = .14$, but also fit the data well, $\chi^2(2) = 1.33, p = .52$, RMSEA = .00, CFI = 1.00. The difficult child model also had a good fit, $\chi^2(6) = 9.08, p = .17$, RMSEA = .05, CFI = .99, but did not fit significantly better than the equal influence model $\chi^2(2) = 1.85, p = .40$.

The gender difference model suggested that fathers’ marital satisfaction exerted both an actor and a partner effect, but there was no such significant actor or partner effect of mothers’ marital satisfaction. As such, we tested a post hoc model in which the equality constraints between mothers and fathers were lifted only for the marital satisfaction variable. This post hoc model was significantly better fitting than the more parsimonious equal influence model $\chi^2(2) = 7.33, p = .03$, and had excellent fit $\chi^2(6) = 3.61, p = .73$, RMSEA = .00, CFI = 1.00. Thus we chose this post hoc model for final interpretation. Figure 1A shows the significant unstandardized and standardized betas for the path model predicting coparenting cooperation. Firstborn’s difficult temperament negatively predicted both mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting cooperation for the firstborn. Both parents’ prenatal coparenting behavior positively predicted their 4 month behavior. Fathers’ marital satisfaction positively predicted their own coparenting behavior and their spouse’s coparenting behavior. Based on post hoc Wald comparisons, the effects of fathers’ marital satisfaction were significantly different than mothers’ marital satisfaction on both mothers’ coparenting cooperation (Wald $z = -3.01, p < .01$) and fathers’ coparenting cooperation (Wald $z = -2.08, p < .05$).

Because the cooperation model failed to meet the equal variances assumption, the equality constraints placed on mothers’ and fathers’ paths become more difficult to interpret. Even though the unstandardized path is equal in the model (akin to a latent parameter), the effect on the outcome variable of a unit change on the observed predictor variable will not be equal because of the differential error variance. Therefore, we are unable to claim that firstborn difficult temperament equally affects mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting behavior at the observed score level. Similarly, the differences in associations between marital satisfaction and cooperation for mothers and fathers are also unclear based on these unequal variances. Thus we cannot make strong claims that fathers’ marital satisfaction more strongly predicted coparenting than mothers’ marital satisfaction, only that the associations between marital satisfaction and coparenting differed by parent gender.
Coparenting conflict—The equal influence model was good-fitting, $\chi^2(10) = 17.26, p = .07$, RMSEA = .06, CFI = .97. The gender difference model was also adequate-fitting, $\chi^2(4) = 13.79, p = .008$, RMSEA = .10, CFI = .96, but did not fit significantly better than the equal influence model $\chi^2(6) = 3.48, p = .75$, suggesting that the parent effects on coparenting conflict were not different for mothers and fathers. The difficult child model was excellent-fitting, $\chi^2(8) = 7.49, p = .49$, RMSEA = .00, CFI = 1.00, and fit significantly better than the equal influence model $\chi^2(2) = 9.78, p = .008$. Thus, the effects of children’s difficult temperament on coparenting appeared to be different for mothers and fathers.

Therefore, we chose the difficult child model to determine which ecological factors (i.e., gender role beliefs, marital satisfaction, children’s temperament) significantly predicted coparenting conflict. Figure 1B shows the significant unstandardized and standardized beta coefficients in the path analysis predicting coparenting conflict at four months. Mothers’ egalitarian beliefs negatively predicted fathers’ coparenting conflict and fathers’ egalitarian beliefs negatively predicted mothers’ coparenting conflict. Mothers and fathers’ coparenting conflict not only predicted stability (actor effects) but also cross-paths (partner effects).

Here, because the coparenting conflict model met the equal variances assumption, we can conclude that the equality constraints placed on mother and father paths reflect equal effects. The firstborn and infant sibling’s difficult temperament positively predicted mothers’ coparenting conflict, but not fathers’ coparenting conflict. Post hoc Wald comparisons revealed that the effects of infant difficult temperament on mothers’ coparenting conflict were significantly different than the effects on fathers’ coparenting conflict, Wald $z = -2.53, p = .011$. The effects of firstborn difficult temperament on mothers’ coparenting conflict were not significantly different than the effects on fathers’ coparenting conflict Wald $z = -1.00, p = .32$. Inclusion of firstborn age as a covariate in the modeling did not change the pattern of results.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine changes in mothers and fathers’ coparenting conflict and cooperation with firstborn children after the birth of a second child, to determine what (parent, marital, child) predicts coparenting from a dyadic perspective, and whether the associations between ecological predictors and coparenting could be differentiated by parent gender. We observed, on average, that coparenting cooperation decreased and coparenting conflict increased from before (during third trimester) to four months after the birth. Overall, our results revealed that coparenting dynamics after the birth were multiply determined by parent, child and marital factors, and that some factors exhibited different patterns for mothers and fathers, whereas other factors were the same across parents. Our results suggested that although both mothers and fathers jointly contributed to coparenting conflict over time, only mothers engaged in more coparenting conflict (according to fathers) when their children had more difficult temperaments. In contrast, the associations between marital satisfaction and coparenting cooperation differed for mothers and fathers.
Coparenting Across the Transition

On average, coparenting cooperation with the first child decreased whereas conflict increased within the first four months after the birth of an infant sibling, reflecting the difficulties mothers and fathers face in coparenting their first child in the early months after the birth of their second child. Whereas previous research has focused on changes in coparenting quality one year after the birth of a second child, and found no change (i.e., Szabó et al. 2012), we focused on early changes during the initial months of adjustment and adaptation. Our results provide a different picture of coparenting in the earliest months with evidence of increased conflict and decreased cooperation. Similar to recent work on changes in the marital relationship after the birth of a second child (Volling et al., 2015), the early months may represent a period of adjustment for the couple as they balance the care of two young children, but eventually they may adapt to the changes, and the quality of the coparenting relationship may stabilize. Szabó et al. (2012) also reported that parents’ observed coparenting behavior in triadic interactions (both parents and firstborn) significantly improved in a tetradic interaction 1 year after the birth, although perceived coparenting quality did not change significantly. Further research is needed to determine whether observed coparenting behaviors differ from reported coparenting in the early months and how coparenting of the infant sibling may change coparenting of the firstborn as the transition progresses.

His, hers, or theirs? Are there gender-differentiated dynamics in coparenting?

In this study, we explored whether marital satisfaction, gender role beliefs, and children’s difficult temperament differentially shaped mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting behavior based on Feinberg’s ecological model of coparenting to determine whether child, parent, and marital factors before the birth predicted coparenting after the birth. We also relied on social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) to see if prediction might differ for mothers and fathers given different expectations for men’s and women’s caregiving roles in our society. Our results indicated that first, coparenting is multiply determined in that children’s temperament, parents’ gender role beliefs, and marital satisfaction predicted coparenting quality at 4 months, but the relations differed in some cases by parent gender.

Marital Satisfaction and Coparenting

Father’s marital satisfaction predicted both mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting cooperation. We suspect that maritally-satisfied fathers see their partners in a more positive light and behave more cooperatively, ultimately making mothers feel supported, which leads them to positively appraise their partner’s cooperation after the birth of a second child. We did not find that mothers’ marital satisfaction was uniquely predictive of either mothers’ or fathers’ reports of coparenting cooperation, which might reflect the fact that women’s roles as caregivers are such that they are cooperative regardless of their marital satisfaction. Mothers’ cooperation in coparenting may be especially heightened during the transition to second-time parenthood, when gender roles can become even more traditional (Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde, 2010). Previous work on marital quality and coparenting during the transition to first-time parenthood has found mixed support for differences in patterns by parent gender, with some finding stronger associations for fathers with marital quality and coparenting
Christopher et al., 2015) but others finding no differences by parent gender in associations between marital quality and coparenting (Le et al., 2016).

Although the marital relationship is considered to be the eminent predictor of coparenting (Feinberg, 2003), marital satisfaction was not uniquely predictive of perceived coparenting conflict. Our findings were somewhat dissimilar to Le et al.’s (2016) transition to first-time parenthood study that found effects of prenatal marital quality on perceived undermining coparenting 6 months after the birth of a first child. However, Le et al. focused solely on reciprocal influences between marital quality and coparenting quality over time and did not consider additional predictors such as children’s temperament or parents’ gender role beliefs. Another explanation is that the processes that contribute to coparenting cooperation or conflict unfold differently over time and across different parental transitions (e.g., first-time and second-time parenthood). Le and colleagues (2016) reported that both parents’ marital quality at 6 months postpartum predicted their perceived coparenting support three years later. But, when it came to predicting undermining coparenting, only mothers’ reports of marital satisfaction relationship quality at 6 months predicted her perceptions of undermining coparenting at 3 years; there was no association between fathers’ 6-month marital quality and 3-year perceived undermining coparenting. Collectively, our results join a growing literature examining gendered relations between marital quality and coparenting across the transition to parenthood, only we focused on the transition after the second child. Parents are more experienced, more mature, and at a different phase in their own lives when expecting a second child, so it is not clear why we should expect gender to play out similarly across different developmental transitions, including how marital satisfaction predicts coparenting. We recommend that future studies attend more closely to the different ecological settings across transitions when making predictions about gendered dynamics of coparenting.

**Gender Role Beliefs and Coparenting**

Gender role beliefs about men’s and women’s traditional roles in the family may be one way of determining how gendered dynamics arise after an infant’s birth. In the current study, when fathers were more egalitarian in their gender role beliefs, mothers engaged in less coparenting conflict, and the same was true for mothers; mothers’ egalitarian gender role beliefs predicted less coparenting conflict from fathers. Couples with more egalitarian gender role beliefs may find it easier to negotiate conflict when both have a firm commitment to shared involvement in parenting compared to couples with more traditional gender roles (father breadwinning, mother caregiving). Parental gender role beliefs did not uniquely predict cooperative coparenting, however. It may be that the more immediate marital quality of the relationship between the couple at the time of the transition is far more important to cooperation than expectations about who should do what (Volling et al., 2015). Because including gender role beliefs in a study of coparenting using an actor-partner framework was a novel component of this research, more work is needed to confirm whether these patterns of associations extend to other contexts outside the transition to second-time parenthood.
Influence of Children’s Temperament: Harder on Mothers than Fathers?

In addition to parental characteristics (marital satisfaction and gender role beliefs), we also examined whether the difficult temperament characteristics of firstborns and infant siblings predicted coparenting dynamics with the firstborn. Mothers and fathers were less cooperative when firstborns had more difficult temperaments, but the infant sibling’s temperament did not seem to matter in whether parents worked cooperatively to coparent the firstborn. Different relations emerged for coparenting conflict, however. Mothers engaged in more conflictual coparenting when both the firstborn and the infant sibling had more difficult temperaments (according to fathers), but fathers’ coparenting conflict seems to be unaffected by children’s temperament (according to mothers). Our results are similar to the only other study on coparenting and temperament during the transition to second-time parenthood (Szabó et al., 2012). The effect of children’s difficult temperament on mothers’ coparenting may stem from differences in mothers’ and fathers’ parenting duties, particularly during the transition to second-time parenthood, when mothers are primarily responsible for both children (Kuo et al., 2017). Because social expectations are such that mothers do not have the choice to spend less time with temperamentally difficult children the way that fathers may (Brown et al., 2011), mothers have to engage in caregiving regardless of the temperament of their children, whereas fathers may have the choice to withdraw. Further, it may be this potential for choice and the fathers’ withdrawal from caregiving of the firstborn at a time when caregiving demands are high (the birth of a second child) that contributes to more coparenting conflict when children are temperamentally difficult.

Mothers were also more conflictual in their coparenting for the firstborn (as reported by fathers) when infants had more difficult temperaments. Because most mothers in our sample were primary caregivers for both children, the strain of having a difficult infant may create difficulties for mothers as she continues to be a primary parent for the firstborn. The difficulties in juggling responsibilities for both children may create tension between mothers and fathers. Given that father involvement with firstborns after the birth of a second child can reduce role overload for mothers (Kreppner, Paulsen, & Schuetze, 1982), mothers may be looking for more assistance from the father with the firstborn when faced with caring for an infant with a difficult temperament.

Coparenting Conflict: A Transactional Process Between Parents?

We also found interesting actor and partner effects for coparenting conflict. Coparenting conflict results were unique in that there were common actor and partner effects for both mothers and fathers, with prenatal reports of both mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting conflict predicting 4-month coparenting, demonstrating that both partners contributed to escalating coparenting conflict across the transition. It is likely that these transactional effects existed because parents were noticing and reacting to their partner’s conflictual behaviors. Such findings are consistent with numerous studies examining the escalation of coercive marital and family interaction, wherein couples continuously engage in negative interactions that build over time (Gottman, 1993). There were no partner effects of cooperation, suggesting that parents are not likely to become more cooperative when their partners are more cooperative. Although Le et al. (2016) found no evidence of partner effects of perceived
coparenting support or undermining from 6 months postpartum to 3 years postpartum for first-time parents, partner effects may differ when predicting “negative” outcomes (i.e., hostility or conflict) in comparison to “positive” outcomes (i.e., cooperation and support) during stressful transition periods. According to theories of family stress, negative patterns of behavior between family members are likely to be amplified under stressful conditions (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983), as might be the case with the birth of a second child.

**Strengths and Limitations**

There were multiple strengths to the current study. First, we used both mother and father reports and examined interpersonal influence in our examination of coparenting. Second, we relied on a prospective longitudinal design that included pre- and post-birth reports of coparenting rather than utilizing only post-birth reports. Finally, this is only the second study to examine coparenting after the birth of a second child. In addition, we examined changes in coparenting in the initial months after the birth, a time of notable adjustment and adaptation for families after the transition (Volling et al., 2015). Despite these significant strengths, the study also has several limitations. Although we used a cross-reporter design to reduce shared method variance, parents’ reports of their partners’ behaviors may not fully capture parents’ coparenting behavior. Because parents are reporting on their spouse’s coparenting behavior, their reports are filtered through their perceptual lenses and may not reflect their perceptions of their own behavior or may not align with actual observations of coparenting during triadic interactions. Do parents’ gender role beliefs exert effects on their spouse’s conflictual coparenting behavior, or do their beliefs only shape how they perceive their spouse’s behavior? Therefore, future research should examine observed coparenting cooperation and conflict during the early transition period, as observational data may provide different results from those obtained from self-reported coparenting.

Our sample consisted primarily of middle-class, white, married families so the results may not generalize to samples of unmarried or cohabiting couples or coparents from other ethnic or racial backgrounds. Similarly, couples were not at high-risk for couple or family dysfunction so findings may differ for couples experiencing significant marital difficulties. Also, we were particularly interested in understanding coparenting in the early months immediately following the transition after the birth of a second child because of the significance of coparenting in predicting firstborn children’s behavior problems (e.g., Kolak & Volling, 2013), but coparenting undoubtedly undergoes continuous changes over the course of the year following the birth as couples adapt to the care of two young children. Future analyses should take both short-term and long-term approaches to documenting and predicting changes in coparenting in the early and later months following the birth of a second child. Additionally, the reliability of the coparenting cooperation scale was lower for husbands at the prenatal time point than is preferred. In addition, the age range of our firstborns was large (12–67 months), and the Child Behavior Questionnaire to assess temperament has been validated on children 2 years and older. However, we did not want to use different measures of temperament across different ages of children due to concerns about measurement equivalence. Further, we had acceptable reliability for these scales regardless of age. Because the coparenting cooperation model did not meet the equal variance assumption, the equality constraints on the mothers’ and fathers’ paths may not
reflect fully equal effects. Future studies may need to use alternative models that do not require equal variances between mothers and fathers, or to investigate the source of unequal variances between mothers’ and fathers’ coparenting cooperation, which may have arisen from differences in parenting responsibilities between mothers and fathers.

**Conclusions & Implications**

The transition to second-time parenthood is a common life event for many couples (Volling, 2012). Our results indicate that the early transition period after the birth of a second child is marked by decreased cooperation and increased conflict between coparents when caring for their first child. From previous research, Kolak & Volling (2013) found that the firstborns’ externalizing behavior increased immediately after the birth of their infant sibling when parents were observed in less coparenting cooperation and more coparenting conflict before the infant sibling’s birth. Thus, it appears that children’s externalizing behavior problems are increasing at a time when parents are also reporting declines in coparenting cooperation and increases in coparenting conflict. It is possible that coparenting changes are in response to difficult child behavior at a time of family transition or that difficult child behavior is in response to declines in coparenting. In the current study, we explored what might predict coparenting dynamics for the firstborn in the first four months after the birth by focusing on prenatal indicators of child, parent and marital factors in line with Feinberg’s (2003) ecological model of coparenting. We found that parents’ gender roles and their coparenting conflict contributed jointly to the development of coparenting conflict after the infant sibling’s birth, but fathers’ marital satisfaction prior to the birth was particularly influential in predicting coparenting cooperation after the birth. Temperamentally difficult firstborns exacerbated coparenting difficulties during the transition. Mothers engaged in more coparenting conflict when infants had more difficult temperaments. Given the stability in individual differences in coparenting before and after the birth, as well as the associations observed in these models, we recommend that parents strengthen their coparental alliance with a focus on the difficult behavior of their firstborn before the birth in an effort to prepare for the stresses surrounding the birth of their second child. Such interventions may be particularly important in preventing the escalation of coparenting conflict with difficult firstborn children once the infant is born and should include the participation and cooperation of both parents, as they both appear equally important and culpable in coparenting conflict. Existing coparenting interventions that focus on emotional self-management, conflict management and positive communication strategies (Feinberg & Kan, 2008) may prove effective in improving the coparenting relationship and helping parents manage the transition from one child to two.

**Acknowledgments**

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Figure 1.
A and B. Unstandardized and Standardized Regression Coefficients in Final Coparenting Model

*Note.* *p* < .05, **p** < .01, ***p** < .001. Unstandardized coefficients appear first, standardized coefficients appear in parentheses. All coparenting reports are cross-informant reports. Non-significant paths, correlations between predictors and correlations between residual variances are not displayed.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<td>5. Fathers’ Cooperation (M, 4m)</td>
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<td>−.43**</td>
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<td>6. Fathers’ Conflict (M, 4m)</td>
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<td>.22**</td>
<td>−.35**</td>
<td>.62**</td>
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<td>10. Fathers’ Gender Beliefs (F, Pre)</td>
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<td>−.20**</td>
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<td>11. Mothers’ Marital Satisfaction (M, Pre)</td>
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<td>−.30**</td>
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<td>−.17*</td>
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</table>

Mean
4.07  1.78  4.41  1.81  4.02  1.89  4.31  1.88  5.46  5.34  12.59  12.91  4.22  14.00

Standard Deviation
.68  .51  .47  .55  .74  .55  .53  .57  .76  .73  2.46  2.19  1.34  2.09

Note. Pre = prenatal timepoint, 1m = 1 month, 4m = 4 month; M = Mother-reported, F = Father-reported.

*p < .05,

**p < .01