

The Moderating Role of Infant Temperament On Stability in Coparenting Across the First Year of Life

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Introduction

➤ **Family Systems Theory** conceptualizes families as larger systems made up of smaller subsystems

➤ **The coparenting relationship** -- one subsystem, defined as the coordination between adults in their roles as parents

➤ Consists of **supportive** and **undermining** behaviors designed to make the other partner feel effective or incompetent, respectively

➤ Is stable from infancy to early childhood (Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004)

➤ Affects children's behavioral outcomes above and beyond effects of marital quality and individual parenting practices (e.g., Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998)

➤ Prior research has focused on **how coparenting influences children's outcomes**; little research has considered **how children may influence coparenting relationship quality** (exceptions: McHale et al., 2004; Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Szewczyk Sokolowski, 2007)

➤ McHale et al. (2004) found that infant temperament solidifies links between prebirth factors and postbirth coparenting

➤ The current study examined whether infant temperament moderates stability in coparenting across the first year of life

Research Questions

1. Does coparenting remain stable across the first year of life?

We expected moderate stability based on prior research (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004).

2. Does infant temperament moderate stability in coparenting?

Consistent with McHale et al. (2004), we hypothesized that infant temperament would moderate stability in coparenting relationship quality.

Methods

Participants

63 Two-parent families and their infants

- 28 girls, 35 boys
- Income ranged from \$11,000 to \$100,000+ (Median income \$41,000-\$60,000)
- 69% of mothers, 66% of fathers college-educated
- 86% of mothers were European American, 5% African American, 9% Other
- 81% of fathers were European American, 8% African American, 11% Other

Procedure

Phase 1. Parents were observed interacting together with their 3.5-month-old infant in play and child-care contexts at home.

Phase 2. Parents were observed interacting together with their 12-month-old infant during structured play at the lab; mothers completed a questionnaire concerning infant temperament.

Measures

➤ **Coparenting Behavior:** Observational coding scales were used to assess two types of coparenting behavior at both phases (Cowan & Cowan, 1996):

- **Supportive** (pleasure, warmth, cooperation)
- **Undermining** (displeasure, coldness, anger, competition)

➤ **Infant Temperament:** Infant Behavior Questionnaire (Rothbart, 1981) used to assess three aspects of infant temperament:

- **Surgency** (smiling & laughter, activity level)
- **Negative Affect** (distress to novelty, distress to limitations)
- **Regulation** (soothability, duration of orienting)

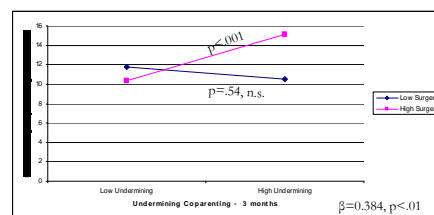
Results and Discussion

Question 1: Does coparenting remain stable across the first year of life?

Consistent with our hypothesis, correlational analyses suggest that coparenting is a moderately stable phenomenon across the first year of life ($r=.334$, $p<.01$ for supportive, $r=.376$, $p<.01$ for undermining).

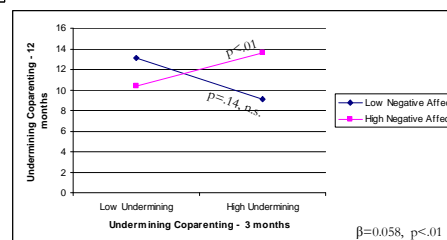
Question 2: Does infant temperament moderate stability in coparenting?

Consistent with our hypothesis, infant temperament moderated the stability in undermining coparenting behavior across the first year of life.

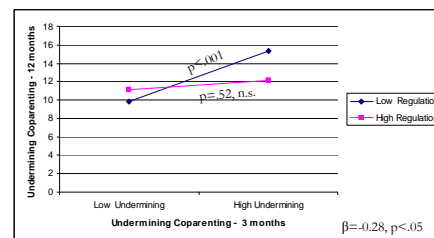


When parents showed high undermining behavior at 3.5 months, they continued to show high undermining behavior at 12 months, *if they had a child who was high in surgency*. If the child was low in surgency, there was no relationship between 3.5-month and 12-month undermining behavior.

When parents showed high undermining behavior at 3.5 months, they continued to show high undermining behavior at 12 months, *if they had a child who had high negative affect*. If the child was low in negative affect, there was no relationship between 3.5-month and 12-month undermining behavior.



When parents showed high undermining behavior at 3.5 months, they continued to show high undermining behavior at 12 months, *if they had an infant who had low regulation*. If the infant was better able to regulate herself, there was no relationship between 3.5-month and 12-month undermining behavior.



Conclusion

These data suggest that coparenting is stable across the first year of life, but that infant temperament affects the level of stability in undermining (but not supportive) coparenting behavior. Specifically, parents with a more challenging infant (high surgency, high negative affect, and low regulation) show stability in undermining behavior, whereas those with a less challenging infant do not. These results suggest that in families with temperamentally challenging infants, coparenting patterns may be solidified early.