Processes Linking Mothers' Perceptions of Relationship Satisfaction with their Partner, Coparenting, and Parenting to Children's Competence and Behavior Problems

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ABSTRACT. Guided by family systems and multi-level complexity perspectives, this study examined dynamic family processes linking mothers' perceived relationship satisfaction with their partner, coparenting (cooperation, conflict, and triangulation), and harsh parenting to children's perceived competence and social acceptance, as well as behavior problems. The sample consisted of 61 dyads of mothers and preschool-age children. A path model revealed that low levels of coparenting conflict was directly associated with positive self-perception (greater perceived competence and social acceptance) in children. Mothers' greater reported relationship satisfaction was also directly linked to children's positive self-perception and to lesser behavior problems. In contrast, mothers who experienced greater coparenting triangulation with their partners reported harsher parenting, which in turn contributed to children's behavior problems, supporting the spillover hypothesis. Additional findings highlight specific links between greater maternal relationship satisfaction with their partners, lesser coparenting conflict, and greater social competence in children.

Keywords: Coparenting, child competence, child behavior problems, harsh parenting, mothers' relationship satisfaction

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A family systems perspective posits that parenting and parent-child relationships are interdependently associated with parents' romantic or marital relationships. Couples who experience greater relationship satisfaction are more likely to engage in cooperative childrearing and to display positive parenting behaviors (Bonds & Gondoli, 2007; Pedro et al., 2012). One mechanism accounting for individual subsystems' interdependence within a family is *coparenting*. Coparenting is defined as the extent to which parents collaborate with or undermine each other in childrearing within the family system (Feinberg, 2003; Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011). Whereas coparenting concerns children's well-being, spouses' relationship functioning affects couples' welfare (Margolin et al., 2001). Recognizing that coparenting is a multi-faceted construct characterizing family systems rather than a dyadic system (e.g., Feinberg et al., 2007), we considered three coparenting dimensions: Cooperation, conflict and triangulation (Margolin et al., 2001). *Coparenting cooperation* is the extent to which parents support each other and coordinate shared responsibilities of childrearing as parents (Feinberg, 2003). *Coparenting conflict* is the extent to which parents argue, disagree on childrearing issues, and undermine each other's parenting efforts (Feinberg et al., 2007). Finally, *coparenting triangulation* refers to the extent to which a parent excludes the other parent by drawing children into parental conflict and forming alliances with the child against the other parent (Margolin et al., 2001). This multi-dimensional approach allows us to gain a more nuanced understanding of specific associations between parents' relationships with each another, various coparenting dimensions, and child outcomes.

Past studies have found links between coparenting, parenting, and child behavior problems such as externalizing and internalizing problems (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Belsky et al., 1996; Feinberg et al., 2005). Although self-perceptions in older children (Lau, 2007) and adolescents (Amato et al., 2011; Macie & Stolberg, 2003; Sterrett et al., 2015) have been investigated, they have not been examined in young children. Focusing on children's perceived competence and social acceptance during preschool to Kindergarten years is important because this is a period of developmental advances in understanding the self and others (Harter, 2012). Moreover, children's perceptions of their competence and social acceptance are critical for the development of their social competence, learning, and academic success in Kindergarten and during school years. Given that coparenting is a central family process linked to parenting and child functioning (Feinberg, 2003), it is important to investigate processes by which parents' relationships, parenting and coparenting factors are associated with adaptive and maladaptive child functioning during preschool years. Guided by multiple perspectives, including family systems (Cox & Paley, 2003), determinants of parenting (Belsky, 1984), and multi-level complexity (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987), the present study examined roles of mothers' reported coparenting processes, relationship satisfaction, and parenting factors in children's adjustment (perceived competence and social acceptance) and maladjustment (behavior problems).

Family Systems Processes of Relationship Satisfaction, Coparenting, and Parenting: Spillover or Compensatory Hypothesis?

A family systems perspective examining links between partners' relationships, coparenting, and parenting implies two potential mechanisms. The *spillover* hypothesis suggests that parents' relationship quality affects parenting and children's functioning, with all variables having the same affective tone. Parents who experience greater relationship satisfaction are more likely to display cooperative coparenting, which in turn makes them engage in better parenting (e.g., more maternal warmth) (Bonds et al., 2007; Pedro et al., 2012). A study examining sequential changes in marital relationship quality and participants' subsequent parenting changes supports the spillover hypothesis, demonstrating that improved marital quality was followed by improved parenting quality (Adler-Baeder et al., 2013). Conversely, marital negativity presages poor parenting and child maladjustment. Studies supporting negative spillover demonstrated that fathers' conflict was related to mothers' unsupportive parenting (Gao et al., 2019) and that undermining coparenting was associated with preschoolers' maladjustment (Feinberg et al., 2009). Another study using a daily diary method showed support for the spillover hypothesis, demonstrating that parents' daily ratings of marital quality were related to their perceptions of the parent-child relationship quality after controlling for global levels of marital satisfaction, marital conflict, and parenting (Kouros et al., 2014). A growing body of research also suggests nuances (e.g., mediation effects) on how marital relationships, coparenting, and parenting are associated in the context of the spillover association. For instance, on the one hand, mothers with higher marital satisfaction were more likely to facilitate their spouses' better parenting (Pedro et al., 2012). On the other hand, mothers with poor marital relationship quality tended to engage in more gatekeeping, thus preventing spouses from being involved in childrearing (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015).

In contrast, the *compensatory* hypothesis postulates opposite emotional tone in relationship quality and parenting, such as parents with poor relationship quality developing positive relationships with their children. One study by Gao and colleagues (2019) showed that mothers who experienced high levels of marital conflict engaged in less punitive parenting with their children. A longitudinal investigation using daily diaries also found support for the compensatory hypothesis, showing that decreases in marital quality were associated with increases in mother–child relationship quality from one day to the next (Kouros et al., 2014). According to family systems theory, subsystems' relationship quality influences other subsystems (e.g., coparenting and parenting in parent-child relationships) within families. To understand underlying mechanisms accounting for the family subsystems' interdependence, this study sought to examine both the spill-over and the compensatory hypotheses.

Conceptual Model Linking Relationship Satisfaction, Coparenting, and Parenting to Child Positive and Negative Functioning

Beyond the potential spillover and compensatory associations between relationship quality and parenting, a coparenting perspective provides an integrative framework for examining mutual influences of subsystems within families. Coparenting may influence child outcomes via parental adjustment and parenting quality (Feinberg, 2003; Margolin et al., 2001). For example, greater coparenting conflict was related to higher levels of parenting stress and depressive symptoms, which are known to be precursors of children's socioemotional difficulties, and language and cognitive problems (Brown et al., 2010). Previous studies also showed that coparenting conflict may result in harsher parenting and negative parent-child interactions, which contribute to children's feelings of emotional insecurity (e.g., Davies &

Cummings, 1994), internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, withdrawal; Belsky et al., 1996) and externalizing problems (e.g., aggression; Feinberg, 2003; Feinberg et al., 2007), as well as a total problem score (i.e., the sum of internalizing and externalizing problems; Huth-Bocks & Hughes, 2008; Lohaus et al., 2017). Few studies have examined coparenting triangulation. Those that have examined this phenomenon found that triangulated coparenting predicted child externalizing problems, after controlling for family conflict. Coparenting triangulation puts the child in the middle of parental problems, causing emotional dysregulation (Murphy et al., 2016).

In addition to the associations between children's negative outcomes, partners' relationship with each other, and coparenting and harsh parenting, a few studies have examined children's positive developmental outcomes. For example, Feinberg et al. (2009) found that coparenting intervention programs resulted in a decrease in coparenting conflict, which, in turn, facilitated infants' self-regulation, possibly through a sense of overall emotional security (Cummings et al., 2006; Feinberg et al., 2009). Cabrera and colleagues (2012) also found that lower levels of conflict in the coparenting relationship predicted preschool children's school readiness (math, literacy and social skills). In addition, mothers who frequently communicated with their partners about their children were more likely to display supportive parenting that promoted higher levels of school readiness, whereas mothers' reports of frequent shared decision-making with their partners were related to children's high levels of social skills (Cabrera et al., 2012).

During the transitional period from preschool to Kindergarten, children make considerable developmental advances in social understanding of the self and others (Harter, 2006). Children's perceived competence and social acceptance have consistently been linked to positive outcomes in school adjustment, peer relations, and well-being (see Harter, 2012, for a detailed review). In early childhood, positive parenting facilitates developmental pathways to higher levels of perceived competence in young children (Harter, 2006). Although the links between supportive parenting behavior and older children's positive self-perceptions have been well-documented (Harter, 2012), there is less clarity on how parents' relationship and coparenting factors are associated with development of young children's competence. Among the few available studies examining coparenting and children's competence and social acceptance, Lau (2007) found that coparenting conflict was significantly negatively related to children's self-esteem among post-divorce families in Hong Kong. Similarly, non-marital partners' coparenting warmth was associated with adolescents' higher self-esteem among African American single-mother families (Sterrett et al., 2015).

According to our hypothesized model (see Figure 1), which is informed by family systems (Cox & Paley, 2003) and multi-level complexity perspectives (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987), mothers' lower perceived relationship satisfaction, higher perceived coparenting conflict, and greater perceived triangulation would be linked to harsher parenting, which would result in children's behavior problems, perceived incompetence, and social rejection. Conversely, mothers' greater perceived relationship satisfaction and coparenting cooperation would be related to less harsh parenting, which would contribute to children's competence, social acceptance, and lower behavior problems (Feinberg, 2003). Our model tests the competing spillover and compensatory hypotheses with regard to links between mothers' perceived relationship satisfaction and parenting. Furthermore, our model also examines the role of coparenting and relationship satisfaction in children's behavior problems, perceived competence, and social acceptance. In particular, linking coparenting to children's self-perceptions, parents who collaborate and coordinate in their parenting roles on a regular basis may expose their

children to a positive family environment where their parents support each other as parents. These cooperative coparenting behaviors can influence parents' parenting behavior, promote children's feelings of emotional security and competence, and facilitate children's competence (Jones & Prinz, 2005). Alternatively, parents who undermine each other or who display conflict and disagreement in their childrearing may increase their own feelings of insecurity and incompetence, leading to harsher parenting, which can influence children's feelings of emotional insecurity and incompetence, hindering development of positive self-perception in children.

Overview of the Present Study

Despite the well-documented contributions of marital conflict and coparenting conflict to children's behavior problems, there is a paucity of research on the family systems processes by which couple, parental, and co-parental factors are associated with children's positive self-perception during preschool years. To address this research gap, we considered children's perceived competence and social acceptance during the preschool years. These years constitute a period of considerable developmental progress on the self-concept, which is a critical aspect of social and emotional development (Harter, 2012).

Guided by the extant literature and family systems and multi-level complexity perspectives, we sought to delineate linkages between relationship satisfaction, coparenting and parenting qualities, and children's adjustment and maladjustment. We examine family systems processes encompassing couple relationships (relationship satisfaction), coparenting (cooperation, triangulation, conflict), parent-child relationships and interactions (harsh parenting), and children's adjustment (competence and social acceptance) and maladjustment (behavior problems) during preschool years.

Method

Participants

Participants (N = 61 mother-child dyads; children ranging from 4-5 years of age) were drawn from a larger IRB-approved study. Written parental consent and informed child assent were obtained for all participants. Mothers were recruited from advertisements in local community centers, day care centers, museums, and via public university announcements. Eligible participants had to meet these criteria: (a) mothers were 18 years or older, (b) families were English speaking, (c) mothers were from two-parent families, and (c) children were without mental or physical developmental disorder. The mean ages of mothers and children were 33.42 years (SD = 5.11) and 5.20 years (SD = 3.64), respectively. Of the children, 71.2% were boys. The majority of families was White (72.7%), with approximately 18.2% being Hispanic and 9.1% Asian American. Median household income was between $60,000 and $90,000. Regarding highest educational attainment, 1.7% of mothers did not complete high school; 1.7% received a high school diploma/GED; 30.0% had two-year degrees; 15.0% had bachelor's degrees; and 51.6% had graduate degrees. All mothers were heterosexual. Of the mothers, 81.7% were currently married; 8.3% were divorced or separated; 5.0% were not married but in serious relationships; and, 5.0% were single (i.e., unmarried) but reported having a partner. Although missing data were minimal, family household income had the most missing data (n = 12). Missing data analyses revealed no statistically significant group differences (missing vs. no-

missing data) on mothers' age, t =.089; race/ethnicity $\chi^2_{(2, N = 55)}$ = .199; education, $\chi^2_{(6, N = 60)}$ = 1.746; relationship status, $\chi^2_{(3, N = 60)}$ = .317; child gender, $\chi^2_{(1, N = 59)}$ = .106; coparenting 3 domains, ts = .045 - .814; relationship satisfaction, t = 1.474; child behavior problems, t = .276; and child competence, t = 1.361 between families who did and did not report household income (ps = .230 - .941).

Procedure

Data for this study were obtained during participating mother-child dyads' visits to a university laboratory. Mothers reported on their relationship satisfaction, coparenting, and children's behavior problems via an online survey via Qualtrics. Child assessments of their perceived competence and social acceptance were administered using a pictorial self-perception measure during an interview.

Measures

Relationship satisfaction. Mothers' relationship satisfaction was assessed with an adapted version of the three-item Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMS; Schumm et al., 1983). Mothers reported on their relationship (rather than marital) satisfaction (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your relationship?") using a 5-point scale (1 = *extremely dissatisfied* to 5 = *extremely satisfied*). A composite score was created by averaging the items, with higher scores indicating higher relationship satisfaction. Cronbach's α was .96.

Coparenting. An adapted version of the 14-item Coparenting Questionnaire (CQ; Margolin et al., 2001) was used to assess mothers' perceptions of their partner's (rather than spouse's) coparenting. Mothers rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *always*). The Coparenting Questionnaire yields three subscales: *Coparenting cooperation* (e.g., "My partner asks my opinion on issues related to parenting our child"); *coparenting triangulation* (e.g., "My partner uses our child to get back at me"); and *coparenting conflict* (e.g., "My partner argues with me about our child"). Composite scores were created by averaging the relevant items, with higher scores representing higher levels of coparenting cooperation, triangulation, and conflict (αs = .82, .66, and .65 respectively).

Harsh parenting. Mothers' harsh parenting was assessed using the 10-item Attitudes toward Physical Punishment Scale (ATS; Holden & Zambarano, 1992). Mothers rated the extent to which they agreed with each description using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The scale included 6 items relating to the perceived benefits of spanking (e.g., "Spanking is a normal part of my parenting" and "Sometimes, the only way to get my child to behave is with a spank") and 4 items describing spanking as inappropriate or undesirable. Reports on the latter four items were reverse scored. Cronbach's alpha across all items was .87 and an average score was computed, with higher scores representing a more positive attitude toward spanking.

Child behavior problems. Children's behavior problems were assessed using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL/1½ -5; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000). Mothers completed 99 items regarding their children's problematic behaviors on a 3-point scale (0 = *not true* to 2 = *very true*).

The CBCL/1½ -5 is a well-validated, widely used, and standardized measure that evaluates maladaptive behavior and emotional problems in preschool-age children between the ages of 1½ and 5 years. The CBCL/1½ -5 yields a total problem score by summing the two broadband scores: *Externalizing problems,* including attention problems and aggressive behavior; and *internalizing problems,* including emotional reactivity, anxiety/depression, somatic complaints, and social withdrawal (αs = .85 to .90, respectively). A total behavior problems score was used to reflect overall problems rather than specific types of problems in line with recommendations of previous research (e.g., NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005) and the CBCL scoring manual (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000).

Child competence and social acceptance. Children's self-perceived competence and social acceptance were assessed during an interview session in the laboratory using the 24-item Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Acceptance for Young Children (Harter et al., 1983). To be developmentally appropriate for young children ages 4 to 7, each item on the scale presents two pictorial alternatives on 11 x 8½ inch card stock, with one picture of a child exhibiting more competence and the other less competence. As per Harter and colleagues (1983), we used one set for girls (each pictorial presents girls) and another set for boys (each pictorial presents boys), with the pictures for each item being otherwise identical for girls and boys. Using a two-step approach, children were first asked to decide which child in a pair was most like him/her, and then bidden to choose the degree to which the pictorial characterized them ("*really true for me*" or "*sort of true for me*"). The child's choice then received a score between 1 and 4. The pictorial scale yields four subscales: Two competence subscales (cognitive and physical); and two social acceptance subscales (peer acceptance and maternal acceptance). A composite score was created by averaging the items, with higher scores indicating higher perceived competence and social acceptance (α = .83).

Cumulative risk index. Based on a cumulative risks perspective (Sameroff et al., 1993), a cumulative risk index was created by averaging three demographic risk factors, including mothers' education (0 = *high school or more education*; 1 = *some high school or less*); mothers' minority race/ethnicity status (0 = *White*; 1 = *non-White*); and relationship status (0 = *married*; 1 = *not married*) as recommended by Sameroff et al. (1993), with scores closer to 1 reflecting greater cumulative risk.

Data Analytic Strategies

Using the statistic program Mplus 8.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017), we tested our conceptual model (see Figure 1) via a path model (see Figure 2) in which dynamic couple (relationship satisfaction) and family processes (coparenting cooperation, triangulation, conflict) predict children's adjustment (competence and social acceptance) and maladjustment (behavior problems) via parent-child relationships (harsh parenting). The cumulative risk index and child gender were also included as exogenous variables in the model to examine how cumulative demographic risk and child gender were associated with couple and coparenting relationships.

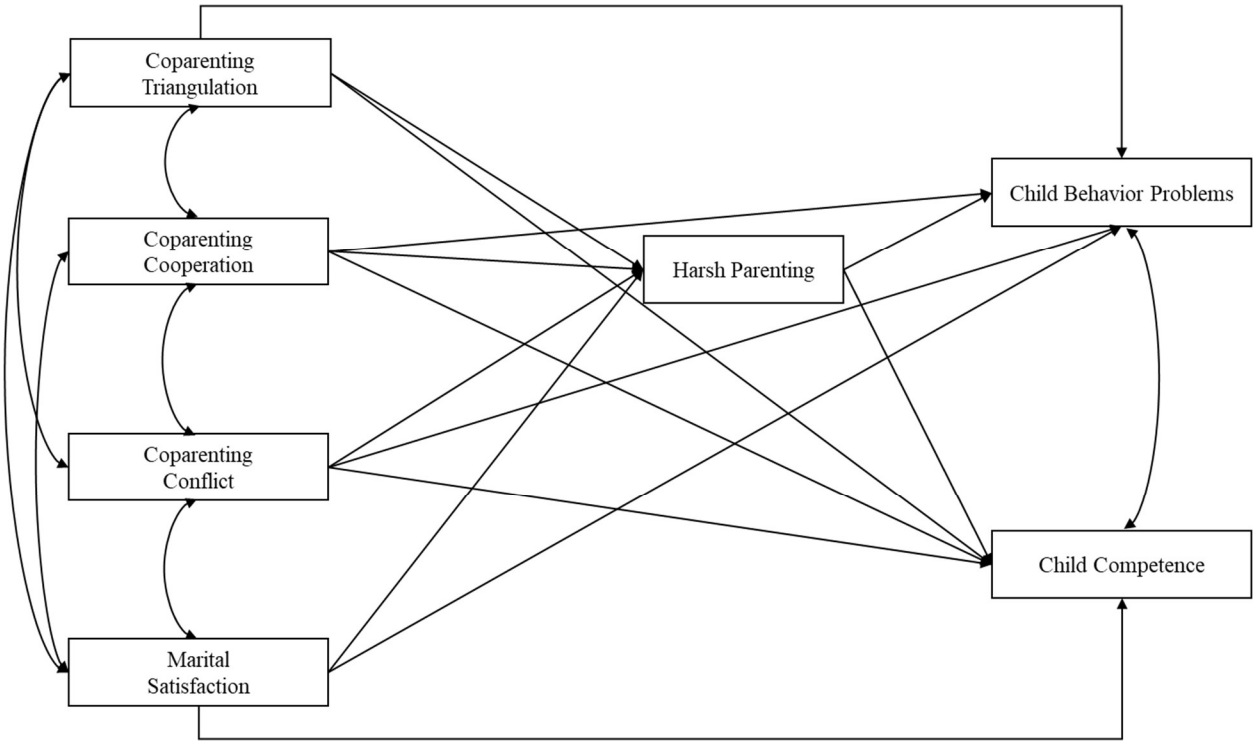

Figure 1. Conceptual model

Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Mothers reported relatively high cooperative coparenting (mean = 4.05, range 1-5), moderate coparenting conflict (mean = 2.33), infrequent coparenting triangulation (mean = 1.26), moderately high relationship satisfaction (mean = 3.90, range 1-5), moderately high levels of harsh parenting (mean = 3.63, range 1-5) and moderate levels of behavior problems in their children (mean = 37.92). Children reported moderately high levels of perceived competence and social acceptance (mean = 3.05, range 1-4). As for correlations among the study variables (see Table 2), higher relationship satisfaction was related to more cooperative coparenting. Among different coparenting domains, triangulation was positively related with conflict. Children's perception of their competence and social acceptance was negatively related to greater coparenting conflict and triangulation. Mothers' harsh parenting was associated with higher levels of coparenting triangulation and children's behavior problems.

The final path model examining dynamic processes of relationship satisfaction and coparenting relationships and harsh parenting, linking to child adjustment and maladjustment is shown in Figure 2. Standardized and unstandardized path coefficients are listed in Table 3. Model fit indices indicated a good fit to the data (Hu & Bentler, 1999), with $\chi^2(7) = 6.40$, a Comparative Fit Index of 1.00, a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation of .00 [90% CI = .00 - .1], and a Standardized Root Mean Square Residual of .04.

Table 1
Demographics and Descriptive Statistics

Variables	N	M (SD) or %	Range
Mother			
Age	60	33.42 (5.11)	24.0-50.0
Race/ethnicity			
White/Caucasian	40	72.7%	-
Hispanic	10	18.2%	-
Asian	5	9.1%	-
Education			
Some high school or less	1	1.7%	-
High school diploma/GED	1	1.7%	-
Some college	6	10.0%	-
Two-year degree	12	20.0%	-
Four-year degree	9	15.0%	-
Some graduate school	5	8.3%	-
Graduate degree	26	43.3%	-
Relationship status			
Married	49	81.7%	-
Not married but in a serious relationship	3	5.0%	-
Single, never married	3	5.0%	-
Divorced, or separated	5	8.3%	-
Family income			
Less than $15,000	3	5.9%	-
Between $15,000 and $25,000	4	7.8%	-
Between $25,000 and $40,000	7	13.7%	-
Between $40,000 and $60,000	10	19.6%	-
Between $60,000 and $90,000	11	21.6%	-
More than $90,000	15	29.4%	-
Mothers' co-parenting			
Cooperation	58	4.05 (0.78)	1.0-5.0
Triangulation	58	1.26 (0.46)	1.0-3.5
Conflict	58	2.33 (0.54)	1.0-4.2
Mother's relationship satisfaction	58	3.90 (1.12)	1.0-5.0
Mothers' harsh parenting	61	3.63 (0.67)	1.10-5.00
Child			
Childs' gender			
Male	42	71.2%	-
Female	17	28.8%	-
Child's behavior problems	60	37.92 (5.73)	30.0-58.0
Child's competence/social acceptance	61	3.05 (0.43)	2.21-3.96
Cumulative demographic risk index	60	0.15 (0.23)	0.0-1.0

Table 2
Bivariate Correlations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Coparenting Cooperation	-						
2. Coparenting Triangulation	-0.12	-					
3. Coparenting Conflict	0.11	0.42**	-				
4. Relationship Satisfaction	0.39**	-0.19	-0.04	-			
5. Harsh Parenting	-0.06	0.34**	0.18	-0.08	-		
6. Child Behavior Problems	-0.07	-0.21	-0.06	-0.22	0.35**	-	
7. Child Competence	-0.11	-0.28*	-0.42**	0.23	-0.09	0.01	-

Table 3
Coefficients of the Final Path Model
Path

	Unstandardized			Standardized		
Parameter Path	Est.	SE	*p*	Est.	SE	*p*
Cooperative co-parenting → Harsh parenting	-0.030	0.117	0.795	-0.035	0.135	0.795
Triangular co-parenting → Harsh parenting	**0.466**	**0.204**	**0.023**	**0.312**	**0.131**	**0.018**
Conflict co-parenting → Harsh parenting	0.063	0.169	0.709	0.051	0.137	0.709
Relationship satisfaction → Harsh parenting	0.016	0.083	0.844	0.027	0.138	0.844
Harsh parenting→ Child's behavior problems	**3.893**	**0.997**	**0.000**	**0.458**	**0.109**	**0.000**
Cooperative co-parenting → Child behavior problems	0.193	0.886	0.828	0.026	0.120	0.828
Triangular co-parenting → Child behavior problems	**-4.969**	**1.656**	**0.003**	**-0.391**	**0.126**	**0.002**
Conflict co-parenting → Child behavior problems	0.097	1.280	0.940	0.009	0.122	0.940
Relationship satisfaction → Child behavior problems	**-1.427**	**0.623**	**0.022**	**-0.279**	**0.120**	**0.020**
Harsh parenting→ Child competence	0.010	0.076	0.893	0.016	0.118	0.893
Cooperative co-parenting → Child competence	-0.102	0.070	0.144	-0.182	0.124	0.140
Triangular co-parenting → Child competence	-0.119	0.127	0.351	-0.123	0.132	0.349
Conflict co-parenting → Child competence	**-0.270**	**0.101**	**0.007**	**-0.339**	**0.122**	**0.005**
Relationship satisfaction → Child competence	**0.101**	**0.048**	**0.034**	**0.261**	**0.120**	**0.030**

Significant path coefficients revealed that greater relationship satisfaction was related to more cooperative coparenting. Within the three coparenting domains, more conflict was significantly related to more triangulating. More triangulation was related to higher levels of harsh parenting, which, in turn, contributed to more behavior problems in preschoolers. Harsh parenting was not significantly associated with children's perceived competence and social acceptance.

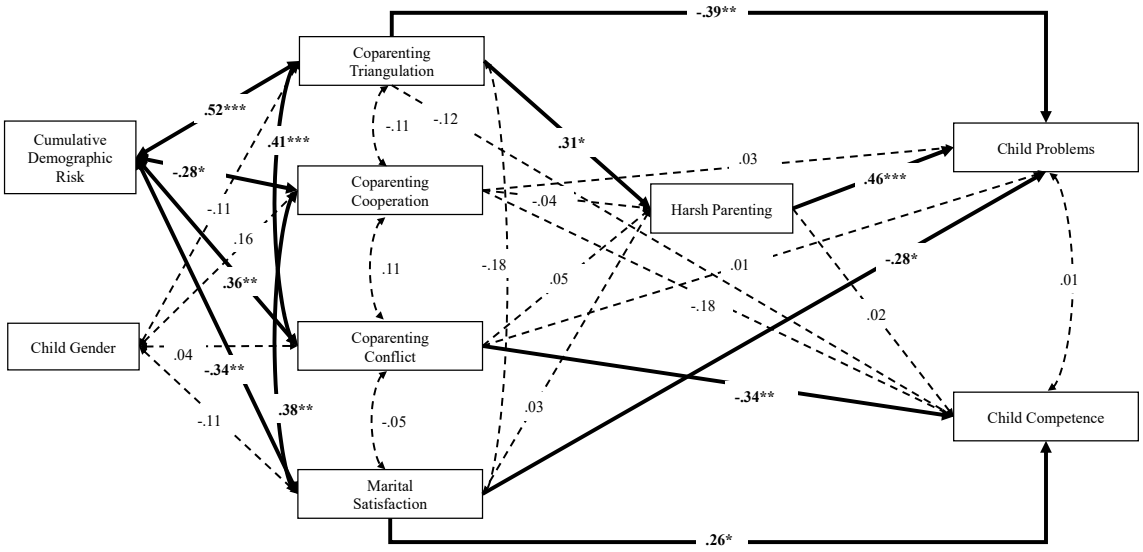

Figure 2. Path model linking marital/relationship satisfaction, coparenting, and parenting to children's competence and behavior problems. Note. Standardized coefficients are presented in the model. Significant paths appear as bold lines, whereas nonsignificant ones are dashed.

There were significant direct effects of relationship satisfaction and coparenting on children's competence and behavior problems. Specifically, greater satisfaction was directly associated with lower behavior problems and higher levels of perceived competence and social acceptance in children. Coparenting conflict was also significantly associated with children's competence and social acceptance, showing that children reported higher competence and social acceptance when there was less conflict in the coparenting relationship and when mothers reported greater relationship satisfaction. In contrast, there was a negative direct effect of triangulation in the coparenting relationship on child behavior problems, showing that more triangulation was associated with less behavior problems in young children. Although child gender was not significantly related to relationship satisfaction and coparenting, cumulative risk was positively related to coparenting conflict and triangulation and negatively related to cooperative coparenting and relationship satisfaction.

Discussion

Based on family systems and multiple-complexity perspectives, we sought to examine dynamic family processes by which mothers' perception of the couple relationship (relationship satisfaction), coparenting processes (coparenting cooperation, triangulation, conflict), and parent-child interactions (harsh parenting) were associated with children's adjustment (competence and social acceptance) and maladjustment (behavior problems) during the preschool years. In addition, we sought to investigate whether the findings would lend support to the spillover or the compensatory hypothesis.

Consistent with previous research on links between coparenting conflict and negative child outcomes (Belsky et al., 1996; Cabrera et al., 2012; Feinberg et al., 2007), we found significant direct effects of relationship satisfaction, coparenting, and parenting on children's behavior problems. Mothers who experienced more coparenting triangulation with their partners reported harsher parenting, which contributed to children's behavior problems. Greater relationship satisfaction was also associated with lower levels of children's behavior problems. These findings support the spillover hypothesis.

Although significant links between more coparenting triangulation, harsher parenting, and more child behavior problems are consistent with past research findings, the negative direct association between coparenting triangulation and child behavior problems was somewhat unexpected. Mothers' perceptions of their partner's greater triangulation may be closely related to their partners' higher levels of involvement in childrearing. Literature on maternal gatekeeping shows that fathers' involvement in parenting may result in maternal gatekeeping behavior (gate closing, because mothers are not willing to let fathers be involved), because mothers' identity as primary caregiver and decision maker might be challenged by greater father involvement (Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011). In fact, recent studies on father involvement show that greater paternal participation is associated with children's lesser externalizing behavior problems (Yan et al., 2018). Thus, it might be the case that more coparenting triangulation was negatively perceived by mothers who displayed harsher parenting. Alternatively, higher triangulation possibly stemmed from fathers' greater involvement, which was associated with lower behavior problems in children. We did not have a direct measure of father involvement to confirm this speculation. Further research on coparenting triangulation, father involvement, maternal gatekeeping, and child adjustment is needed to disentangle nuanced complex associations among these factors.

To investigate how relationship satisfaction, coparenting, and parenting processes are associated with children's adjustment, we simultaneously considered positive and negative child developmental outcomes. The findings show a significant association between harsh parenting and children's behavior problems, whereas there was no significant direct link between harsh parenting and children's competence and social acceptance. Positive parenting has consistently been found to be related to children's positive developmental outcomes such as social skills (Cabrera et al., 2011) and self-regulation (Feinberg et al., 2007), but findings from this study show that absence (or lower levels) of harsh parenting is not the same as positive parenting, the latter of which can facilitate children's feelings of emotional security, competence, and social acceptance. These findings support the specificity of parenting processes in child functioning (Amato & Fowler, 2002).

Although the literature consistently shows significant links between marital conflict and children's feelings of emotional security (negatively) and behavior problems (positively) (Cummings et al., 2006; Margolin et al., 2001), there is less evidence regarding how conflict in the coparenting process pertaining to childrearing issues affects children's competence and social acceptance. In this study, however, we found that low coparenting conflict was associated with high levels of competence and social acceptance in children. That is, a family environment with less conflict in coparenting promoted children's feelings of competence and acceptance.

Interestingly, there were no significant associations between coparenting conflict and children's behavior problems through harsh parenting. Although past studies indicate that greater marital conflict affects mothers' harsh parenting (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Guo et al., 2018),

we found that more coparenting triangulation (not conflict) was significantly related to harsh parenting behaviors, which contributed to children's behavior problems.

Greater marital satisfaction was related to more coparenting cooperation, but cooperative coparenting was not significantly associated with negative dimensions of coparenting, harsh parenting, children's competence, or children's behavior problems. Yet, consistent with our hypothesis, mothers' perceived greater relationship satisfaction was directly associated with children's greater competence and fewer behavior problems. Perhaps mothers in satisfying relationships facilitate family environments that promote children's positive development. These findings are consistent with past studies (Cummings et al., 2006), supporting the spillover hypothesis.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

The findings of this study must be considered in light of its strengths and limitations. First, although obtaining mother-child dyads and multiple informants (mothers and children) is a major strength, the sample size was small. We also used mothers' reports of their relationship satisfaction, coparenting, harsh parenting and child behavior problems; therefore, shared method variance may have influenced the findings. However, we used children's reports on their perceived competence and social acceptance and found similar patterns of associations between relationship satisfaction (positive), coparenting conflict (negative) and competence and social acceptance, suggesting that effects of the shared variance may be limited. Future research is needed to identify underlying mechanisms (e.g., possible moderated mediation) by which mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their relationship with one another, their coparenting and parenting behaviors, along with cumulative risk factors, are directly and indirectly associated with child outcomes. Furthermore, mothers were from heterosexual couples, which limited generalizability in that regard. Finally, the present study was cross-sectional; therefore, associations in the path model should not be interpreted as causal effects. Accordingly, we cannot rule out the possibility that children's behaviors affect parents' behaviors, rather than parents' behaviors affecting their children's.

Despite its limitations, the study also has several strengths. This study is one of the first to examine processes by which relationship satisfaction, various dimensions of coparenting, and parenting factors were directly and indirectly associated with preschool-age children's positive adjustment (competence and social acceptance) and maladjustment (behavior problems). Unlike previous research, this study included multiple dimensions of coparenting (cooperation, triangulation, conflict) together with relationship satisfaction, parenting, and children's adjustment and maladjustment. Finally, this study used multiple informants for child adjustment, including direct assessment of children's own perceived competence and social acceptance and mothers' reports of child behavior problems.

The findings of this study have implications for preventive intervention efforts and for practitioners. Consistent with past studies, the results support the notion that coparenting is a multifaceted construct, showing the impact of coparenting conflict and triangulation on parenting and child outcomes. Informing practitioners and clinicians of the different dimensions in family-level coparenting would help development of effective intervention strategies such as resolving coparenting conflict and addressing gatekeeping behavior. Educational programs on parenting strategies should also strengthen couples' coparenting alliance and promote parents' feelings of

confidence in their harmonious working relationship as parents to foster a nurturant environment for children's exploration and positive development.

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