

ABSTRACT

The association between coparenting quality and children's externalizing and internalizing behavior problems was investigated in a sample of low-income, racially diverse mothers. The potential mediating effect of parenting style was also examined.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Coparenting describes the collaboration between two parental figures who share responsibility in raising a child (Feinberg, 2002). Several studies demonstrate that coparenting quality is significantly related to child behavior problems; specifically, lower coparenting quality is associated with more child behavior problems (Parke, Coltrane, Buriel, Dennis, Powers, French, & Widaman, 2004; Feinberg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Low coparenting quality can constitute parental disagreements about child-related issues, and/or fighting. Coparenting includes four dimensions: joint family management, division of labor, childbearing agreement, and support/undermining (Feinberg, 2003). Previous research identified the relationship between coparenting quality and child behavior problems, but there might be a mediating factor that influences this relationship. The relationship between coparenting and parenting style is already established (Dorsey, Forehand, & Brody, 2007). In addition, the relationship between parenting style and child behavior problems is already established (Prinz, Onghena, Hellinckx, Walter, Hans, Pol, & Hilde, 2005). The goal of this research is to investigate whether parenting style is a mediating factor for coparenting and child behavior problems.

Most of the existing research concerning parental conflicts utilizes samples that are comprised of a majority of Caucasian participants, and only a minority of people of color (POC) were included (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). In addition, previous research investigating parental and marital conflict has largely focused on married and/or divorced parents (Fincham & Grych, 2001). Since previous investigations has not been inclusive of diverse families, specifically of coparents who are not married and who are not living together, another goal of this research is to investigate whether parenting style is a mediating factor for diverse families.

METHODOLOGY

Participants:

63 low-income mothers (age $M = 32.4$, $SD = 9.4$), with children between the ages of 2 and 11 years old (child age $M = 5.9$, $SD = 3.5$) living in a large metropolitan area in the mid-Atlantic US completed self report measures as part of a larger longitudinal study on parenting and father involvement. Low income status was defined as eligibility to receive government benefits such as WIC, SNAP, and Medicaid or having an annual income and number of dependents qualifying the participant for a government benefit program. Race of mothers was 73% African American, 16% Latina, and 11% Other. Forty percent were in romantic relationship with their child's father and 36% were living with their child's father.

Table 1. Sample Demographics

	n	%
Race		
AA/Black	46	73%
Latina	10	16%
Asian	1	2%
Other	6	9%
Relationship Status		
In a Relationship	25	40%
Cohabiting		
Yes	23	36%

Measures:

Child internalizing and externalizing behavior was measured using the 25-item **Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire** (SDQ; Goodman, 1997). Externalizing and internalizing scores were created by summing responses from each subscale with higher scores indicating more parent reported behavior problems. Three different versions were administered to align with the age of the participants child (2-4 years old, 4-10 years old).

Parenting style was measured using the 32 item **Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire** (PSDQ; Robinson, Mandelco, Olen, & Hart, 2001). This survey measures parenting style according to three global dimensions: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting. Items for each subscale were averaged to create three mean scores for each parent. Higher scores indicate more frequent use of parenting style.

Coparenting quality was measured using the 35-item **Coparenting Relationship Scale** (CRS; Feinberg, Brown, & Kan, 2012). All items were averaged, with negative items reverse scored, to create an overall CRS score. Higher scores indicate a higher quality coparenting relationship.

Analysis:

Pearson correlations were conducted on all variables of interest (Table 1). The PROCESS SPSS macro (Version 3.0; Hayes, 2018) was used to run two separate mediation analyses, one predicting externalizing and one predicting internalizing (Figure 1).

RESULTS

Pearson correlations were computed among the coparenting measure, all three parenting styles, and both internalizing and externalizing childhood behaviors.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations

	M	SD
CRS	4.10	1.11
EXT	5.68	4.30
INT	3.63	3.41
AUTHTAT	4.16	0.59
AUTH TAR	1.93	0.68
PERM	2.65	0.84

Table 3. Pearson correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. CRS	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. AUTHTAT	.142	-	-	-	-	-
3. AUTH TAR	-.174	.229	-	-	-	-
4. PERM	-.157	-.115	.457**	-	-	-
5. EXT	-.476**	-.226	.256	.138	-	-
6. INT	-.298*	-.145	.347**	.103	.472**	-

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

The results indicated that coparenting had a significant relationship with both children's internalizing ($r = -.30$, $p = .05$) and externalizing behavior ($r = -.48$, $p = .01$). Further, authoritarian parenting had a significant association with permissive parenting ($r = .46$, $p = .01$) and children's internalizing behaviors ($r = .35$, $p = .01$). Children's externalizing behavior also was significantly correlated to internalizing behavior ($r = .47$, $p = .001$). Given the findings from the correlation analysis, a mediation analysis with authoritarian parenting style mediating the relationship between coparenting quality and internalizing behavior was conducted. Baron and Kenny's (1986) steps for mediation were not met. Furthermore, the indirect effect was -0.17 , 95% CI $[-0.54, 0.14]$. Since the confidence interval does not include zero, we can not conclude that authoritarian parenting mediated the effects of coparenting quality on children's internalizing behavior.

DISCUSSION

Our findings indicate that higher coparenting quality is associated with lower levels of both children's internalizing and externalizing behavior, suggesting that coparenting might be a protective factor in the development of child behavior problems. Further, the correlational results indicate that authoritarian parenting is associated with permissive parenting. Although one style consists of high control with low warmth, while the other consists of high warmth and low control, they are both ineffective parenting styles and suggest that parenting styles are best measured in a multi-dimensional manner. Although our findings did not support the mediating effect of parenting style on the relationship between coparenting quality and children's behavior problems, our results extended previous literature by studying coparenting in low-income, minority mothers with diverse family compositions. Future studies should continue to examine coparenting in minority and low income populations and utilize a larger sample size to more thoroughly examine the potential mediating role of parenting style in the relationship between coparenting quality and children's behavior problems.

Additional information and references can be requested from Rachel Mack (ramack@gwu.edu)