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# Coparenting support in the context of difficult children: Mother and father differences

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## Abstract

While parenting children with difficult behaviors can intensify stress within the entire family system, families may lean on other familial relationships to mitigate that stress. The coparenting relationship is known to play a key role within the family system for child outcomes and familial interactions, but it is not clear whether it eases the stress and challenge of raising a difficult child, nor how that plays out differently for mothers versus fathers. Ninety-six couples (89.7% married) parenting young children (Mean age = 3.22 years) were included in this study. Using cross-sectional and aggregated daily response data, actor–partner interdependence models were used to examine how mothers' and fathers' perceived coparenting support lessened or intensified parenting stress and/or daily problems with their child/children—for themselves or their parenting partner. We found that greater coparenting support reported by mothers coincided with stronger links between the mother's report of child difficulty and daily problems encountered by both mothers and fathers. In contrast, when fathers reported greater coparenting support, the intensity between reported child difficulty and daily problems decreased for mothers, and fathers reported lower parenting stress. Coparenting support also moderated associations between parents' perception of child difficulty and daily problems with their children. These results suggest that mothers incur heightened coparenting support from fathers when experiencing more difficult child behavior and that coparenting support experienced by fathers may alleviate parenting challenges for mothers. These findings further contribute to the literature by emphasizing

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distinct differences between mothers and fathers in coparenting associations within the family system.

#### KEYWORDS

coparenting, difficult children, fathers, mothers, parenting stress

## INTRODUCTION

Raising a child whose behavior is consistently negative, defiant, or noncompliant can be one of the most exasperating experiences a parent might have. Although there is a range of explanations for disruptive/negative behaviors in children (e.g., Shiner, 2015; Tolan & Leventhal, 2013; Wakschlag et al., 2018), these are not easily identified and may not offer relief to parents who feel that solutions are infinitely out of reach. Family stress theories (Bush et al., 2017) and family systems theories (Cox & Paley, 2003) emphasize that inner processes within the family are dynamically linked, such that a child's behaviors and characteristics interact with interparental relationships in ways that influence not only the overall stress in the home but the child's later developmental outcomes. For instance, the characteristics and behaviors that a child brings to the table can challenge the strength and cohesion of coparenting and marital relationships (Feinberg, 2003), whereas the quality of coparenting and marital relationships can, in turn, spill over into parent–child interactions and subsequent child outcomes (e.g., Choi et al., 2019; Erel & Burman, 1995).

These interrelationships are evident in the literature, demonstrating the potential of child characteristics/behaviors and interparental relations to influence each other as individuals and relationships evolve within the family system (Cabrera et al., 2014; Cox & Paley, 2003; Feinberg, 2003; Sanson et al., 2018; Solmeyer & Feinberg, 2011). There is also substantial evidence demonstrating the direct influence of coparenting quality on child outcomes and behaviors (Bradford & Hawkins, 2006; Choi & Becher, 2019; Feinberg et al., 2009; Metz et al., 2018; Parkes et al., 2019; Umemura et al., 2015), as well as the impact of parenting stress on family outcomes when raising a difficult child (e.g., Heath et al., 2015; Miragoli et al., 2018). However, it is less clear how perceived coparenting support may moderate mothers' and fathers' parenting stress, or negative parent–child interactions, when raising a child with difficult behaviors.

Guided by the principles of family systems theory and family stress theory, we investigated whether coparenting support moderated the association between perceived child difficulty and levels of parenting stress differently for mothers and fathers. We further explored whether coparenting support moderated the link between perceived child difficulty and daily problems (i.e., disciplinary and parent–child argumentative interactions)—and how this played out differently within the family system according to mother or father perceptions. The purpose of this study was to examine whether perceived coparenting support might mitigate stressful family circumstances in the context of parenting children with challenging behaviors.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Difficult children

Before discussing the interrelationships of parenting stress, difficult children, and coparenting relationships, it is important to clarify our definition of “difficult children.” While some studies define difficult children only through temperamental traits, we have employed a broader definition that relies on the parent's perception, or how the child's characteristics are experienced in the home. Although “difficult temperament” (Thomas & Chess, 1977) is considered to be

biologically based, recent findings emphasize that such traits and behaviors are also influenced by environmental factors that can alter trait expression across development (Sanson et al., 2018) and that temperament defines “sensitivity” rather than “difficulty” (Belsky et al., 2007). Thus, challenging behavior traits that exacerbate parenting interactions may or may not be rooted in temperamental characteristics. Difficult behaviors are driven by multiple factors (Shiner, 2015; Tolan & Leventhal, 2013; Wakschlag et al., 2018), and parents may not be dramatically affected by their child's negative temperament but rather by their child's behaviors (Bussing et al., 2003). Thus, a “difficult child” seems best identified by the parents themselves, regardless of how the behaviors came to be. This study used parental reports of child difficulty representing both temperamentally and behaviorally based characteristics (Abidin, 1990).

## **Stress and daily challenges when parenting difficult children**

Parenting young children is stressful (Crnic & Low, 2002), but parenting a child who is perceived as difficult (e.g., uncooperative, defiant, negative, reactive) brings additionally demanding situations that may feel unmanageable. In the context of family stress theory and the ecological aspects of family systems, a parent's stress is not experienced by the parent alone—it is both influenced and interrelated across familial relationships (Bush et al., 2017; Cox & Paley, 2003). A child's negative behaviors and their parent's ensuing responses interact in dynamic and cyclical ways to exacerbate overall stress and negative outcomes in the home (Kiff et al., 2011; Nelson et al., 2009).

In addition to parental stress, we have examined daily problems (i.e., arguments, tension, and disciplinary actions) experienced by mothers and fathers as this is a common outcome with children whose behavior is consistently negative or demanding. This is particularly relevant for two reasons. First, while baseline parental stress gives an overall indication of a parent's challenging experiences, examining actual daily occurrence of child difficulties provides a fuller picture of family stress with greater ecological validity (Gunthert & Wenzel, 2012). And second, the daily occurrence of parenting difficulties is an important outcome in itself: daily problems impact the overall climate of the home and can contribute to negative family interactions (Cox & Paley, 2003), impact developmental outcomes (Kim et al., 2018), and exacerbate parent and child responses which often encourage more frequent challenging behaviors (Eddy et al., 2001; Patterson, 1982). Daily problems, such as a child's noncompliant or aggressive behaviors, can often lead to negative parenting and/or coercive interactions between parents and children (Eddy et al., 2001; Kiff et al., 2011; Patterson, 1982), amplifying a child's oppositional behavior.

Embedded in these dynamic interactions, however, are also family resources and relationship strengths that enhance family members' resilience. In the classic ABC-X family stress model (Hill, 1949) for instance, difficult child behavior hypothetically interacts with the family's resources and strengths (e.g., strong interparental relationships) to alter the perception of the situation's intensity and the family's ability to work through it successfully. This is an ongoing process that either moves the family unit in a strengthening and adaptive direction or a maladaptive direction, depending on how the family's resources, strengths, and perceptions are operating (Bush et al., 2017; Hill, 1949; Malia, 2006). Thus, it becomes especially important to identify familial resources that might be utilized in the circumstances of parenting a difficult child, particularly where behaviors and reactions may be biologically driven (Boyce & Ellis, 2005).

## **Coparenting support, family challenges, and child behavior**

Family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 2003) emphasizes the central role that the interparental relationship plays in influencing all other family interrelationships, interactions, and child

outcomes. In the context of difficult behaviors in children, coparenting relationships are both impacted by, and have an impact on, child behaviors and parenting stress (e.g., Fagan & Lee, 2014; Parkes et al., 2019). Traditionally, child characteristics have been presented in the literature as an influential factor on coparenting, and not the other way around (Feinberg, 2003); however, bidirectional associations between child characteristics and coparenting relationships are becoming increasingly emphasized (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2014), with growing evidence for the shaping influence of coparenting relationships on child behaviors (e.g., Bradford & Hawkins, 2006; Choi et al., 2019; Parkes et al., 2019; Umemura et al., 2015). In terms of mitigating stressful outcomes of difficult child behavior, coparenting support has been found to buffer parents from depressive symptoms when parenting a child with negative temperament (Solmeyer & Feinberg, 2011) and to lower parenting stress in fathers (Fagan & Lee, 2014). Hence, this study examined coparenting support as a potential moderator of parenting stress and daily parenting challenges associated with child difficulty.

## Differences between mothers and fathers

Although parenthood is commonly a shared experience for mothers and fathers, their roles and parent–child interactions—and subsequent experiences of challenges and stress—are not identical (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2014; Coltrane, 2000) and warrant individual consideration to fully understand inter-relational dynamics within the family system. How parents are influenced in their responses, and how their responses shape subsequent child behavior, may differ between fathers and mothers (Davis & Carter, 2008; Keown et al., 2018; McBride et al., 2002; Woodman, 2014), with distinct contributions to the family system (Cox & Paley, 2003; Parke, 2004). This has particular implications for the variables of interest in this study. For instance, fathers' stress may be increased by different behavioral and child characteristics than those that distress mothers (McBride et al., 2002) and fathers may be less supportive toward negative emotions than mothers (Cassano et al., 2007), with unique contributions for children's emotional adjustment (Keown et al., 2018). Mothers and fathers may also respond to lack of coparenting support differently, generating different impacts on the family system (Katz & Gottman, 1996). These differences may include a greater vulnerability to coparenting quality for fathers than mothers (Fagan & Barnett, 2003; McBride & Rane, 1998).

Mother and father differences are not only manifest in different experienced outcomes, they also uniquely influence the family system—particularly through interparental relationships such as coparenting (Cox & Paley, 2003; Katz & Gottman, 1996). For example, if a mother considers her child's behavior to be particularly difficult, she may relay disciplinary action to the child's father, increasing his negative interactions with their child and possibly his level of parenting stress. In turn, a father may perceive a child's challenging behavior as normative, giving the mother a decreased sense of coparenting support and increasing her disciplinary encounters with their child. These hypothetical examples emphasize the importance of considering the dyadic experiences and influences of mothers and fathers within the family system—where a mother's perception of coparenting support or child difficulty may impact the father's parenting stress and daily problems with their child, and vice versa. As this is a key purpose of this study, we have examined actor and partner effects in our analyses.

## Present study

Seen as a protective factor and buffering resource within the family system, coparenting support may play a critical role in alleviating parental stress in the home and mitigating negative parent–child interactions in connection with difficult child behaviors (Choi et al., 2019; Choi & Becher, 2019; Feinberg, 2003; Solmeyer & Feinberg, 2011). To address this question, this

study examined the moderating potential of coparenting support on parenting stress and daily parenting problems, in association with child difficulty ratings. Specifically, we examined the following research questions:

1. Does coparenting support moderate the relationship between perceived child difficulty and parenting stress differently for mothers and fathers?
2. Does coparenting support moderate the relationship between perceived child difficulty and daily problems with children differently for mothers or fathers?
3. Are there partner effects of child difficulty on parenting stress and daily problems?

We hypothesized that high coparenting support would serve as a moderating factor by improving parenting stress for mothers and fathers and decreasing disciplinary problems in the context of perceived child difficulty.

## METHOD

### Procedures

This study was part of a larger online study examining daily stressors in the context of raising young children. Parent-report data were acquired via Qualtrics at two time points in 2019: baseline (to assess global issues) and daily response data reported over a 10-day period (to aggregate daily family interactions). Participants over 18 years of age were eligible to participate if they were in an opposite sex, cohabiting couple relationship in the United States with at least one child under 6 years living at home. Exclusion conditions were not meeting any of these criteria (age, relationship status, age of children, country of residence). Couples were recruited through online social media ads, word of mouth, and snowball sampling. Ethical approval for this study was received by the Institutional Review Board at University of Notre Dame. To increase validity of the collected data and to prevent bot responses, a rigorous screening process was followed. Potential participants first needed to complete an interest form on a separate website. Then they were contacted to complete the screening questionnaire on Qualtrics and were shown a consent form if they were eligible. Following consent, potential participants were asked to provide contact information for the partner/spouse that would also be completing the study with them. The researcher then contacted the partner/spouse directly, who then needed to complete the same screening questionnaire and consent form with partner/spouse contact information. Matching information needed to be provided for the couple to be enrolled into the study. Participants individually completed a baseline survey then selected a start date for their daily diary where both parents would be at home with their child/children for 2 weeks. Participants chose whether they wanted to receive reminder links to complete daily surveys at either 7 or 9 p.m. local time and their preferred method of notification (i.e., email or text message). The date that the survey was completed was used to label that survey's responses as day 1, 2, 3...through 10. Participants were compensated \$5 for completion of the 20-min baseline survey and then \$1 for each nightly survey completed over the 10-day daily diary period. Couples with full participation in all surveys (both partners completed baseline and all 10 diaries) were eligible to enter into a drawing for \$100. All compensation was in the form of online gift card codes.

### Participants

Participants in the overall sample included 198 parents (96 mother–father couples) with 1–7 children living at home ( $M=2.24$ ,  $SD=1.31$ ). The mean age of children was 3.22 years old

( $SD=2.33$ ); within families the number of male children ranged from 0 to 6 and number of female children ranged from 0 to 5 (ratio of male children to total children within families = 0.50; ratio of female children = 0.47). Couples had an average relationship history of 9.89 years ( $SD=4.87$ ) with 89.7% married. Participants were predominantly White (87.1% mothers, 89.1% fathers; five mothers and two fathers identified as Hispanic) and resided all over the United States: 62 couples were from the Midwest, 17 from the South, 13 from the Northeast, and 5 from the West. Both mothers and fathers were highly educated with 76% of mothers and 70.4% of fathers reporting a bachelor's degree or higher. Mother and father differences in work status were evident, reflecting common representations of young families (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Most of the fathers worked full time (84.7%) with the remaining reporting part-time employment ( $N=4$ ), being a homemaker ( $N=3$ ), unemployed ( $N=4$ ), or other (e.g., graduate student;  $N=4$ ). Nearly half (43.4%) of mothers reported being homemakers, with 36.4% reporting full-time employment, 15.2% working part-time and a few who reported being unemployed ( $N=2$ ) or other (e.g., on maternity leave;  $N=3$ ). Household incomes were less than \$19,999 to more than \$120,000, with a mode of \$120,000 or more (20.6%).

## Measures

### Parenting stress (dependent variable)

Parenting stress was measured using the Parental Distress subscale of the Parenting Stress Index–Short Form (Abidin, 1990). This 12-item subscale captures the personal stress experienced by the individual in their role as a parent (e.g., feeling trapped by parental responsibilities, feeling unable to handle things well) with strong links to overall emotional health (Haskett et al., 2006). Each item was rated by the parent on a Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) and averaged for a total score, with higher values indicating greater stress ( $\alpha=0.84$  mothers,  $\alpha=0.82$  fathers).

### Daily problems (dependent variable)

Daily challenges with children were measured over a 10-day period, where mothers and fathers reported the presence of daily stressors including argument, tension, or disagreement with their child/children and disciplinary problems with their child/children (Bolger et al., 1989). Parents were *not* asked about a specific child; thus, parents with multiple children could be reporting on one or more children. Parents were asked to indicate the number of times these stressors occurred each day. These variables (i.e., argument/tension/disagreement with child/children and disciplinary problems with child/children) were combined for a total report of daily problems for each parent. A sum variable was then calculated from each parent's 10-day report to compare mother- and father-reported daily problems with children within couples.

### Difficult child (independent variable)

Parents' perceptions of child difficulty were assessed using the Difficult Child subscale of the Parenting Stress Index–Short Form (Abidin, 1990). The Parenting Stress Index is normed for parents of children from birth to 12 years (Abidin, 1990). Parents were not asked to report about a specific child in mind for these questions. This subscale uses 12 items on a Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) to measure temperament-like traits (e.g., easily upset, moody, strong reactions) and behaviors (e.g., demanding, bothersome, challenging to

engage in routine activities) with higher scores indicating more challenging behaviors. Items were averaged for a total score ( $\alpha=0.87$  mothers,  $\alpha=0.83$  fathers). This subscale has been correlated with dimensions of child temperament (McBride et al., 2002) and overall child adjustment (Haskett et al., 2006).

## Coparenting support (moderator)

Coparenting support, or perceived support between partners regarding parenting interactions, was measured using the Parenting Alliance Measure (PAM; Abidin & Konold, 1999). This 20-item scale has been validated with multiple populations (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Bearss & Eyberg, 1998) and measures the parent's perception of partnership with their spouse (e.g., feeling included, valued, aligned) in parenting interactions (e.g., "My child's other parent and I are a good team," "My child's other parent believes I am a good parent"). Final scores were averaged from responses rated on a Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), where higher scores indicated more perceived coparenting support ( $\alpha=0.95$  mothers,  $\alpha=0.92$  fathers).

## Analytic plan

We conducted actor-partner interdependence models (APIM) to test our research questions. The use of APIM is a strength, given that this approach allows us to model couple data in a more holistic way, by including reports from both partners (i.e., mothers and fathers) on the independent (IV) and dependent (DV) variables in the same model. By including both partners' data in one model, the APIM allows paths from a person's IV to their own DV (i.e., actor effects), as well as a path from a person's IV to their partner's DV (i.e., partner effects). When dyad members are distinguishable (i.e., mothers and fathers), there are two actor effects and two partner effects, allowing for more robust conclusions to be made using both partners' data. In the current study, the IVs in the models were mothers' and fathers' reports of difficult child behaviors/characteristics. The DVs included in the models were mothers' and fathers' reports of parental stress and daily problems, respectively.

The distribution of the DVs (parental stress and daily problems) required two different APIM analyses. Parental stress was normally distributed and continuous; thus, we were able to use maximum likelihood estimation within a path model as suggested by Gonzalez and Griffin (2012). As recommended, we tested for distinguishability between mothers and fathers. The equality of variances and error variances assumption was met, thus, coparenting quality, child difficulty, parental stress, and daily problems variances and error variances were set to be equal between mothers and fathers. Other parameters in the model were not constrained for mothers and fathers (i.e., they were distinguishable). The analytic sample was 93 couples (three couples were missing data on the variables included in this analysis). Given less than 5% of the sample was missing data, we used full-information maximum likelihood estimation (Enders, 2022). Checks on the skew and kurtosis for our continuous variables confirm this choice of estimators [i.e., skew was (0.19–1.43) less than 2, and kurtosis was (0.20–3.20) less than 7, as recommended].

Similar to the parental stress model, we used a modified APIM for the daily problems model. Given daily problems are count data, we used a Poisson regression with a log link function to appropriately model the non-normal distribution. To address any sort of distribution misspecification of count data, the maximum likelihood with a robust (MLR) sandwich estimator was used (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). Specifying a residual covariance as directed in the APIM specification is not possible in Poisson regression (Hilbe, 2011). Thus,



we created a phantom factor (F) as a proxy for the residual covariance between mother- and father-reported daily problems (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017; Rindskopf, 1984). Everything else in the model was estimated per APIM specifications. The analytic sample was 92 couples (4% of couples were missing data).

To test for moderation, interaction terms were created and added to the APIMs. All continuous variables were centered prior to creating interaction terms. Simple slopes were probed using the Johnson-Neyman technique (Preacher et al., 2006), which identifies the range of moderator values for which the interaction is significant. More specifically, values outside the lower and upper bound regions are considered significant. Values that are outside of the range of the measure are not interpretable.

We evaluated the following demographic variables as potential covariates in our analyses: number of children, average children's age, couples' relationship length, household income, parents' education status, parents' working status, parents' marital status. Zero order correlations were conducted with our outcomes of interest (parenting stress, daily problems) with continuous demographics, and independent *t*-tests were conducted with our binary-coded demographic variables. The following emerged as significant in preliminary analyses: average child age (continuous), mother's work status (0 = not working, 1 = working), and mother's and father's education (0 = Associate's and below, 1 = Bachelor's and higher), thus were also entered as covariates.

## RESULTS

### Preliminary results

See Table 1 for correlation matrix of main study variables. As expected, mothers' and fathers' reports of coparenting support, parenting stress, child difficulty, and daily problems were positively associated, indicating some congruence between partners regarding these family interactions. Interestingly, although father reports of daily problems correlated with his partner's report of child difficulty, the inverse was not true for mothers. Greater coparenting support was associated with lower indications of parenting stress for both mothers and fathers; however, mothers' parenting stress was also negatively associated with father's coparenting support—meaning that, when fathers reported higher coparenting support, mothers reported less parenting stress. Mothers and fathers who reported higher coparenting support were also more likely to rate their child on the lower end of the difficulty scale.

### Parenting stress APIM model

The model fit was good,  $\chi^2(19) = 26.17$ ,  $p = 0.125$ , CFI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.06. See Table 2 for parameter estimates. *Actor* effects emerged for both mothers and fathers. For both mothers and fathers, greater parenting stress was associated with more difficult child behaviors/characteristics and poorer coparenting support. No *partner* effects emerged, meaning that one person's perceptions of coparenting or child difficulty were unrelated to their partner's parenting stress. For fathers, an interaction emerged between reported coparenting support and child difficulty (see Table 3 for regions of significance and mean-adjusted values). Given the range of centered moderator values (0.13–2.09), this means that when fathers' coparenting support is slightly above the mean, there is no association between difficult child perceptions and parenting stress. Below these values, as fathers' coparenting support decreases, the association between difficult child perceptions and parental stress intensifies.

**TABLE 1** Pearson and point-biserial correlation coefficients and descriptive statistics.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Coparenting support mother report	–											
Coparenting support father report	0.57 <sup>c</sup>	–										
Parenting stress mother report	-0.45 <sup>c</sup>	-0.24 <sup>a</sup>	–									
Parenting stress father report	-0.15	-0.37 <sup>c</sup>	0.32 <sup>b</sup>	–								
Difficult child mother report	-0.29 <sup>b</sup>	-0.14	0.56 <sup>c</sup>	0.08	–							
Difficult child father report	-0.12	-0.25 <sup>a</sup>	0.24 <sup>a</sup>	0.39 <sup>c</sup>	0.37 <sup>c</sup>	–						
Daily problems mother report	-0.06	-0.04	0.20	0.04	0.47 <sup>c</sup>	0.06	–					
Daily problems father report	-0.05	-0.16	0.08	0.02	0.35 <sup>b</sup>	0.28 <sup>b</sup>	0.55 <sup>c</sup>	–				
Children's age	-0.11	<0.01	-0.06	-0.35 <sup>c</sup>	0.09	-0.03	0.05	0.03	–			
Mother work status	0.08	-0.06	0.09	0.22 <sup>a</sup>	-0.08	0.07	-0.23 <sup>a</sup>	0.03	-0.09	–		
Mother education	0.07	0.20	0.02	0.03	0.02	-0.03	0.22 <sup>a</sup>	0.13	-0.22 <sup>a</sup>	0.12	–	
Father education	0.02	0.11	0.08	0.06	0.05	0.10	0.05	0.20 <sup>a</sup>	-0.13	0.06	0.48 <sup>c</sup>	–
Mean	4.37	4.32	2.30	2.23	2.19	2.21	2.53	2.08	3.22	0.53	0.76	0.70
Standard deviation	0.57	0.48	0.67	0.59	0.68	0.57	3.44	3.08	2.73	–	–	–

Note: Mother's work status (0=not working, 1=working) and mother's and father's education (0=Associate's and below, 1=Bachelor's and higher) were entered as covariates. Means for binary variables represent proportion scores.

<sup>a</sup>*p* < 0.05.

<sup>b</sup>*p* < 0.01.

<sup>c</sup>*p* < 0.001.

**TABLE 2** Unstandardized parameter estimates for the parenting stress APIM.

Regression coefficients	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>p</i>
<i>Mother's parenting stress</i>			
Intercept	2.16	0.07	<0.001
Covariates			
Age of children	-0.03	0.02	0.111
Mother's work status	0.20	0.10	<b>0.048</b>
Actor paths			
Coparenting support—mother	-0.41	0.11	<0.001
Difficult child—mother	0.47	0.09	<0.001
Coparenting support × difficult child—mother	-0.16	0.13	0.221
Partner paths			
Coparenting support—father	0.07	0.13	0.570
Difficult child—father	0.06	0.10	0.550
Coparenting support × difficult child—father	-0.23	0.18	0.192
<i>Father's parenting stress</i>			
Intercept	2.12	0.07	<0.001
Covariates			
Age of children	-0.76	0.02	<0.001
Mother's work status	0.20	0.10	<b>0.043</b>
Actor paths			
Coparenting support—father	-0.37	0.13	<b>0.005</b>
Difficult child—father	0.26	0.10	<b>0.007</b>
Coparenting support × difficult child—father	-0.49	0.18	<b>0.005</b>
Partner paths			
Coparenting support—mother	0.04	0.11	0.748
Difficult child—mother	0.04	0.09	0.608
Coparenting support × difficult child—Mother	0.22	0.13	0.098

Note: Bolded *p*-values represent significance  $p < 0.05$ .

Abbreviations: *b*, unstandardized regression coefficient estimate; *p*, *p*-value; SE, standard error.

## Daily problems APIM model

See Table 4 for parameter estimates and Figure 1 for the path model with standardized coefficients. Actor effects emerged for both partners, but the direction of effects varied for parents. For mothers, high coparenting support and child difficulty related to mothers' reports of increased daily problems with children. For fathers, high coparenting support, but not child difficulty, related to fathers' reports of decreased daily problems with children. Turning to partner effects, mothers' reports of child difficulty and coparenting support related to fathers' increased daily problems with children, whereas fathers' reports of coparenting support related to mothers' decreased daily problems with children.

Three interactions emerged (see Table 3 for regions of significance and mean-adjusted values). Mothers' coparenting support moderated the association between mothers' reports of child difficulty and mothers' daily problems (actor effect) and fathers' daily problems (partner effect). Follow-up probes suggested the interaction was significant for mothers' coparenting support at high values and only a narrow range of low values for both mothers' and fathers'

**TABLE 3** Regions of significance and mean-adjusted values for coparenting support as a moderator.

	Regions of significance <sup>a</sup>		Mean-adjusted values <sup>b</sup>	
	Lower bound	Upper bound	Lower bound	Upper bound
Mother's daily problems				
Mother: difficult child × Coparenting support	-2.55	-0.76	1.82	3.61
Father: difficult child × Coparenting support	-1.15	0.12	3.17	4.44
Father's daily problems				
Mother: difficult child × Coparenting support	-2.87	-0.63	1.50	3.74
Father's parenting stress				
Father: difficult child × Coparenting support	0.13	2.09	4.45	6.41

<sup>a</sup>Regions of significance are presented using centered values. Values outside the lower and upper bound regions are significant.

<sup>b</sup>Mean-adjusted values were transformed by adding the original mean of coparenting support to the lower and upper bound values. Coparenting Support Scale Possible Range = 1–5; mean-adjusted values outside the range of the scale are not interpretable.

daily problems. When mothers reported high coparenting support, the association between mothers' difficult child perceptions and both parents' daily problems with the child intensified.

Fathers' coparenting support moderated the association between fathers' reports of child difficulty and mothers' daily problems (partner effect). Probes suggested that fathers' perceptions of coparenting support were significant for all values except a narrow range near the mean for mothers' daily problems. When fathers reported high coparenting support, the association between fathers' difficult child perceptions and mothers' daily problems with the child diminished. Notably, the region of significance was much broader for the mothers' moderators than fathers' moderators.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined the potential of coparenting support as a moderator for both parenting stress and daily parenting problems—and how this was differently experienced for mothers and fathers. Applying family systems theory, we employed actor–partner analyses to further illuminate these differences and understand how a mother's report of child difficulty and perceived coparenting support was interlinked with her partner's experience of parenting stress and daily problems with their child, and vice versa. Our parental stress model showed significant actor effects only, a phenomenon that is common with self-report designs (where perceptions may predict your own perceptions but do not necessarily influence your partners' perceptions). However, our daily problems model showed both actor and partner effects in varied directions—meaning that mothers and fathers not only experienced challenges differently from one another in the same situation, they also influenced their partner's experiences in contrasting ways.

As expected, more parenting stress was experienced by both mothers and fathers who reported having more difficult children. Similarly, when mothers and fathers reported more coparenting support from their spouses, they also experienced lower levels of parenting stress, a finding that coincides with prior literature on the influence of coparenting relationships for mitigating parenting stress (e.g., Lionetti et al., 2015; McDaniel et al., 2018). However, there were differences between mothers and fathers when coparenting was examined with ratings of child difficulty. In this situation, coparenting moderated the relationship between difficult children and parenting stress for fathers only. In other words, having a difficult child exacerbated parenting stress only among fathers who reported low coparenting support. When fathers reported high coparenting support, having a difficult child was no longer associated

**TABLE 4** Unstandardized parameter estimates for the daily problems Poisson APIM.

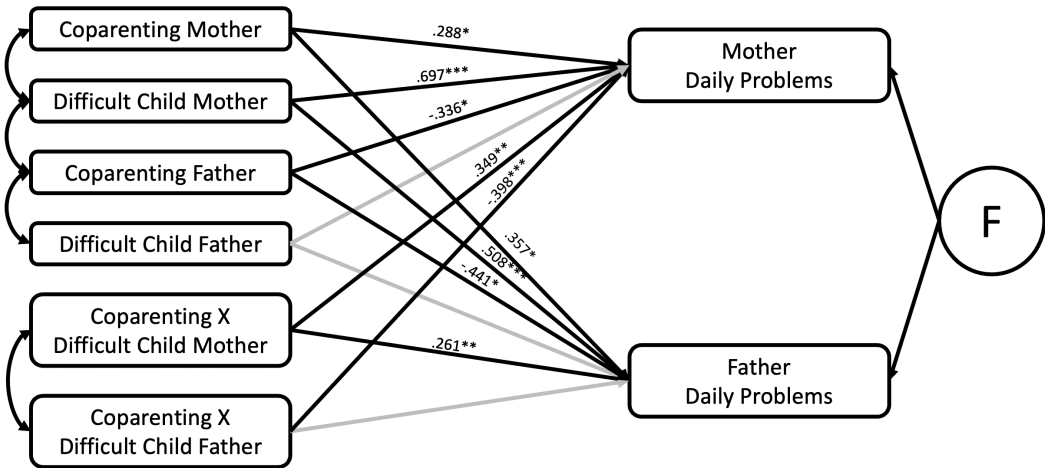
Regression coefficients	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>EXP(B)</i>
<i>Mother's daily problems with child</i>				
Intercept ( $B_0$ )	-0.60	0.38	0.114	0.55
Covariates				
Age of children	0.08	0.05	0.121	1.09
Mother's work status	-0.37	0.23	0.115	0.69
Father's education status	-0.51	0.25	<b>0.044</b>	0.60
Mother's education status	1.85	0.38	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	6.36
Actor paths				
Coparenting support—mother	0.51	0.22	<b>0.022</b>	1.66
Difficult child—mother	1.03	0.19	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	2.79
Coparenting support × difficult child—mother	0.86	0.26	<b>&lt;0.001</b>	2.36
Partner paths				
Coparenting support—father	-0.72	0.32	<b>0.023</b>	0.49
Difficult child—father	-0.32	0.27	0.242	0.73
Coparenting support × difficult child—father	-1.58	0.55	<b>0.004</b>	0.21
<i>Father's daily problems with child</i>				
Intercept ( $B_0$ )	-0.80	0.37	<b>0.030</b>	0.45
Covariates				
Age of children	0.09	0.06	0.154	1.09
Mother's work status	0.15	0.25	0.547	1.16
Father's education status	0.76	0.47	0.106	2.13
Mother's education status	0.57	0.47	0.218	1.78
Actor paths				
Coparenting support father	-0.94	0.43	<b>0.029</b>	0.39
Difficult child—father	0.06	0.22	0.802	1.06
Coparenting support × difficult child—father	-0.91	0.68	0.179	0.40
Partner paths				
Coparenting support—mother	0.63	0.28	<b>0.023</b>	1.88
Difficult child—mother	0.75	0.19	<b>0.000</b>	2.11
Coparenting support × difficult child—mother	0.64	0.21	<b>0.003</b>	1.89

Note:  $N=92$  dyads. Bolded  $p$ -values represent significance  $p < 0.05$ .

Abbreviations:  $b$ , unstandardized regression coefficient estimate;  $p$ ,  $p$ -value;  $SE$ , standard error.

with levels of parenting stress. Mothers' parenting stress in connection with difficult children, however, was not buffered by greater coparenting support.

When interpreting these results, it is helpful to return to the theoretical lens of family stress and family systems theories that guided this study. Within family stress theory, the ABC-X model postulates that a parent's adaptation to a challenging family situation is moderated by tangible and perceived resources as well as their perception of the situation (Hill, 1949; Malia, 2006), whereas family systems theory reiterates the interparental relationship as a



**FIGURE 1** Daily problems with children model. *Note:* Covariates not shown. Standardized beta value shown for significant results. Gray lines indicate nonsignificant paths. *F* indicates a phantom factor which is devised to represent covariation between count outcomes in Poisson regression. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

central point of influence for all family relationships (Cox & Paley, 2003). It is possible that the resource of felt support in conjunction with a less intense perception of the circumstances ameliorated the situation differently for fathers than for the primary caregiving mother—who, in contrast, may require a stronger pool of resources to counteract her increased exposure to the situation. Considering that nearly 85% of fathers in this sample were employed full time versus 43% of mothers, and the difference between mothers and fathers who identified as homemakers (43.4% vs. 3%, respectively), these different patterns may be reflective of the proportional time spent in day-to-day parenting and whether the parent serves in a primary or secondary caregiving role.

In terms of daily problems with children (i.e., arguments, tension, disciplinary problems), we found that coparenting support played an important role in the family, but in opposite patterns depending on the parent. When fathers' perceptions of coparenting support increased, both parents' own daily problems with the child decreased. This aligns theoretically with the positive role of coparenting in parent–child relationships (Feinberg, 2003). Surprisingly, when mothers perceived higher coparenting support, each parent's daily problems with their child increased. Why one parent's coparenting support ameliorates problems for both partners and the other parent's coparenting support exacerbates problems for both partners is a perplexing question. Here, we turn our interpretation toward the context of different roles within the family and how these can influence the family system in different ways (Cabrera et al., 2014; Coltrane, 2000; Cox & Paley, 2003). As noted above, our sample representation reflects commonly ascribed roles for parents of young children (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019) where one parent (typically the mother) spends significantly more time in the parenting role. As such, these results may offer insight into how coparenting support might moderate problems differently in families depending on whether it is experienced by the primary or secondary caregiver. It is possible that parenting challenges for mothers as the primary caregiver spills over into the parenting experiences of fathers in unique ways, whereas fathers may serve as an external resource to the parenting problems when they are in a secondary caregiving role. Here, further research is merited to examine whether these findings are related to parent gender or primary caregiving. This is particularly relevant to examine family interactions across varied family structures, as our sample was limited to opposite sex partners in two-parent families.

When we examined mothers' perceived coparenting support in relation to their reports of child difficulty, we found additional perspective and interpretation to these differences in associated outcomes. For example, when considered with ratings of child difficulty, we see that fathers' coparenting support moderated daily disciplinary problems at high and low levels, whereas mothers' reports of coparenting support were only significant at higher levels. This seems to indicate that a mother's perception of child difficulty has a strong influence on the family system, and that the relationship between a mother's increased coparenting support and more frequent child problems may be reflective of the challenging situation the family is facing. In other words, mothers who feel weighed down by their child's difficult behavior will likely lean on the child's father for increased support—and more parenting teamwork would be evident, as we see here. Thus, our results might reflect a situation in which mothers and fathers who are faced with parenting a difficult child have no choice but to work together (e.g., Brown et al., 2021).

Importantly, although we saw increased daily problems for both parents when mothers considered their children difficult, the story was notably different for fathers. Fathers' assessment of their child's difficult characteristics did not impact daily parent–child problems for either parent except when considered with levels of coparenting support. When coparenting support increased for fathers, the connection between difficult children and daily behavior problems was ameliorated—but only for mothers. This indicates that a father's experience of coparenting support attenuates the mother's daily problems with their child/children. In other words, when the father feels like an included and important parenting partner, the relationship between his reported child difficulty and the parenting challenges the mother experiences on a daily basis is diminished.

These findings lend support to prior literature demonstrating the impact coparenting relationships have on mitigating parenting challenges (Choi et al., 2019; Marchand-Reilly & Yaure, 2019; Parkes et al., 2019) and to the particular importance of coparenting quality when parenting difficult children (Camisasca et al., 2016; Kolak & Volling, 2013), with implications for the unique role and influence of fathers within the family systems (Cabrera et al., 2018; Woodman, 2014). Although connections with child outcomes demands further investigation beyond the scope of this study, we can contextualize the unique effect with fathers within the context of paternal parenting roles and the sensitivity of father–child relationships to marital relationship quality (Cabrera et al., 2018; Kuo et al., 2022; McBride & Rane, 1998; Nelson et al., 2009). Mothers who engage in undermining coparenting behavior, such as contempt or disapproval, may incur more power-assertive father–child discipline and more externalizing behaviors in children (Katz & Gottman, 1996; Schoppe et al., 2001) and may threaten the father's sense of parenting self-efficacy (Merrifield & Gamble, 2012). In contrast, mothers' support of the father's parenting may serve to decrease competitive coparenting and increase father involvement (Murphy et al., 2017).

## Limitations

While self-report measures are sometimes considered a limitation in a study, we view these parent-reported assessments to be crucial for understanding and untangling the dynamics of child characteristics and coparenting quality within the context of family stress and daily parenting challenges. Particularly when situated within family systems and family stress theories, parental perspectives play a key role in how challenging situations are addressed, the level of stress incurred, and the family's ability to adapt (Bush et al., 2017; Malia, 2006). Thus, child difficulty and coparenting support are more accurately understood when assessed from the parent's point of view through self-report versus an objective assessment of family characteristics and functioning. For example, child difficulty may be perceived differently between

mother and father because the level of difficulty is indicated from personal perspectives and expectations. This study was designed to examine parents' *perceptions* of stress, daily problems, and difficulty of their child/children; thus, parents were not asked to report on any particular child. The interpretation of results, therefore, should be limited to parental experiences and not child behavior patterns.

When applying the findings of this study, it is also important to consider that the homogenous nature of our sample population (i.e., predominantly White, opposite sex couples with middle- to high-income status) poses limitations for generalizability. The goal of this study is not to generalize across populations but, rather, to identify an understudied area of family interactions that merit further investigation—for which a homogenous sample rendering a narrower spectrum of generalizability serves as a strength (Jager et al., 2017). Thus, future research is needed to examine these relationships among varied family structures and across dissimilar populations and socioeconomic backgrounds.

As with all research studies, there are also important limitations to the extent to which findings should be interpreted and applied regarding how our data were captured. For instance, cross-sectional data were used for the parental stress model; thus, those findings should not be interpreted with causal implications. Furthermore, while daily response data captures a much more ecological view of day-to-day family interactions, it nevertheless represents a glimpse in time within a family's trajectory. Although our data were sufficiently appropriate for the conducted analyses (e.g., Fairchild & McQuillin, 2010), we recommend that future research examine the relationships among variables in this study over time through longitudinal studies.

## Implications

In terms of family stress theory and the central role of the interparental relationship within family systems, these findings reveal important insights about how mothers and fathers can be differently supported when faced with challenging child characteristics and behaviors. Our findings supported family stress and family systems theories wherein one individual's challenges (e.g., increased stress when parenting a difficult child) influences the whole family system; we also lend further emphasis on the coparenting relationship as a central part of family functioning and adaptation. Whereas prior literature asserts that high coparenting quality is associated with decreased child problems (e.g., Choi et al., 2019; Umemura et al., 2015), we lend additional insight to how its moderating role plays out differently in family systems for mothers versus fathers and within the context of perceived child difficulty. Specifically, perceived coparenting support was associated with enhanced or diminished daily parenting problems depending on whether that support was experienced by mothers or fathers.

Our findings also support Cabrera et al.'s (2014) expanded ecological model emphasizing the importance of the father's influence in the family system as a separate and unique sphere of influence. The coparenting support measure used in this study emphasizes teamwork as well as one's sense of value in the parenting role. That conceptualization is important here in light of the different patterns that played out systemically for mothers and fathers. Perhaps the father's perception of coparenting support is reflective of his feelings about the mother and the ways in which his parenting contributions are valued. In the challenging circumstances of raising a child with difficult behaviors and/or characteristics, this study highlights the importance of fathers experiencing coparenting support for the benefit of the entire family system. Our results indicate that when fathers feel valued, included, and supported in the parenting partnership, mothers benefit from fewer daily parenting problems and fathers parent with less parenting stress.



Overall, our study points to a particularly relevant area within the family system to support parents who are challenged with difficult child behaviors. In these situations, addressing child behaviors and parenting practices appear to be the most straightforward areas of focus, but our findings identified the coparenting relationship as a central point of intervention with unique perspective on paternal influence. When fathers felt involved and supported in the coparenting relationship, challenges with difficult children improved. Practitioners would do well to consider fathers' inclusion and felt support as a key player in the struggle and decisions that accompany parenting challenging children. This has the potential to mitigate daily problems for the mother, alleviate parenting stress experienced by fathers, and facilitate more positive family outcomes.

It should be noted here that these findings are relevant to our sample population, which included two, opposite sex parents among primarily White families. We recognize that family structures and backgrounds vary and that many practitioners will be working with families wherein coparenting responsibilities are shared between divorced parents or with one parent and another family member (e.g., grandparent). While we do not imply that our findings generalize across varied family structures, we argue that our findings may be relevant to other family arrangements and that supporting coparents in their parenting role is likely to have positive impacts on family and child development across multiple family configurations (Cabrera et al., 2018; Choi & Becher, 2019).


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