Reflections About Coparenting

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to share some reflections about coparenting, defined as the relationship that exists *"when at least two individuals are expected by mutual agreement or societal norms to have conjoint responsibility for a particular child's well-being"* (Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004, p.166). Distinct from marital relations, coparenting has a specific influence on child development (McHale, 2007). High level of conflict and competition between the parents coupled with low level of warmth and cooperation predicts child's difficulties in terms of internalized and externalized troubles (Belsky, Putman & Crnic, 1996; Favez, et al., 2006, Frosch, Mangelsdorf & McHale, 2000; Stright & Neitzel, 2003). High discrepancy in parental investment during the first year is linked with high levels of anxiety at three years (McHale & Rasmussen, 1998). Inversely, cooperative and warm coparenting predicts an optimal socio-emotional adaptation (Favez, 2009; McHale, 2007). As it has been shown in the meta-analysis by Teubert & Pinquart (2010), balanced and cooperative coparenting is the most favorable coparenting for the child's development.

The reflections we share here came from observations realized in play situations in a laboratory setting during the first two years of life.

Coparenting Observations

We observed primiparous volunteer parents interacting with their infant or toddler in the Lausanne PicNic Game (LPNG; Frascarolo, Tissot & Favez, 2011). A task is set in which families are invited to pretend having a picnic together for about a quarter of an hour. We are always amazed by the multiple ways in which parents get organized to realize the game. Some of them make a full game with pretend eating and moments of play with some toys, and they succeed in having fun and sharing affects together. The game of others is less structured and, in spite of moments of parent-infant dyadic interaction, the three of them do not succeed in sharing pleasure together and sometimes the atmosphere is rather cold or even mildly hostile. One can imagine that what the infants experience during these LPNG is very different from one family to the other. Following these initial observations, we were able to classify families on the basis of a typology inspired by Minuchin (1974) and McHale (2007) according to four categories:

1. Families belonging to the first category, so-called "balanced and cooperative", are characterized by collaboration and mutual support between parents, dyadic and triadic interactions and family warmth. Parents take into account what their child is doing and adjust their behavior to his but they neglect neither their partner nor the couple relationship.

2. In those belonging to the second category, called "child at center" the parents are only focused on their child: the dyadic parent-infant interactions are more or less adapted, there is no conflict observed between the parents, but no real triadic interactions occur. The parents are totally focused on their infant and they have no exchanges with one another, but the general atmosphere is rather pleasant. Somehow the hierarchy, as defined by Minuchin, is inverted, implying that the authority is in the parents' hand; the parents are following more the initiatives of the child than framing the pretend play. As long as the two parents implicitly agree to put their infant at the center of their attention and put aside their couple relationship, they are not in conflict.

3. In families categorized "competitive coparenting" the parents not only lack mutual support and cooperation but they are in competition for their child's interest. The child is in the middle, pulled between his parents. Competition can result in conflicts, or reciprocally, conflicts may lead to competition. In that case, the infant has the choice between withdrawing in order to avoid being in the center of conflicts or, on the contrary, he may get involved on the inside and play the intermediary or go-between.

4. In the "excluding coparenting", one can observe that only one parent is invested in the infant and the other parent just withdraws from the play. There is no warmth and no cooperation between the parents. In case of conflict the non-invested parent could be excluded by a coalition between the invested parent and the infant.
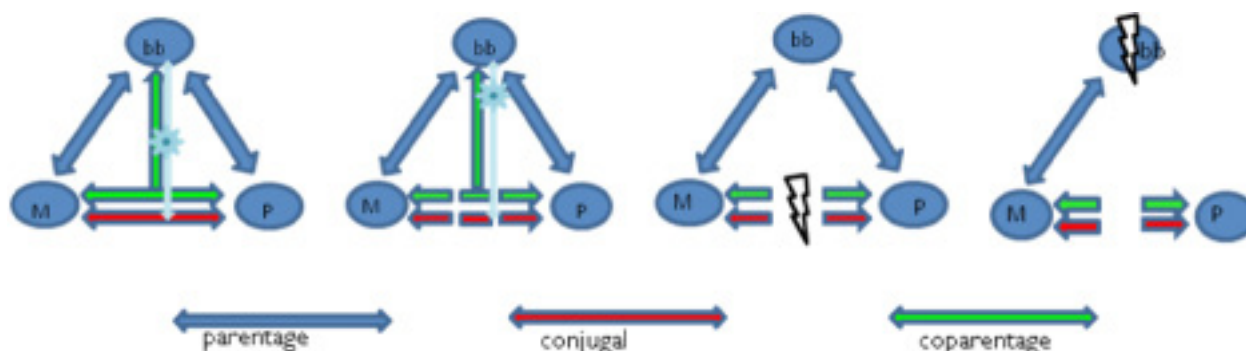

Figure 1: Blueprint of the four categories of coparenting (from the right) "balanced and cooperative", "child at center", "competitive" and "excluding".
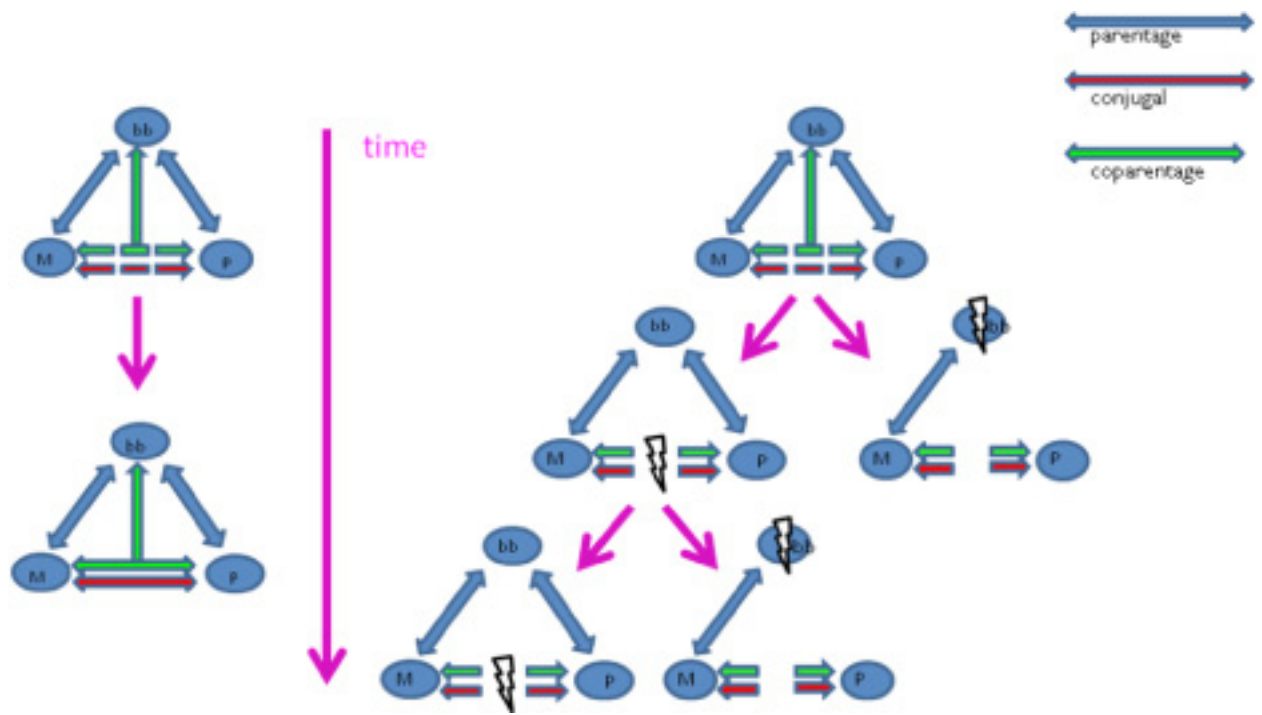
Figure 2: Possible evolutions of "child at center coparenting" (for the better on the left side and for the worse on the right side).

For example, at the very beginning of the game, parents of "balanced and cooperative" families would first discuss if they will eat on the floor or on the bench and then explain to the infant what they are going to do and ask him or her if he or she is as happy as they are. Parents of "child at center" families would ask their child where he or she wants to seat, even if he or she is too young to answer, without consulting each other. In families with "competitive coparenting", each parent would propose to the child a different place, for example, one on the bench and the other on the floor. And each would stand by his or her position by settling down where he or she proposed. Finally, in a family with "excluding coparenting", one parent will organize everything while the other parent will come and participate with more or less delay.

Among volunteer families, belonging to middle to high socio-education levels, observed in the Lausanne PicNic Game, the coparenting interactions of the majority of families belongs to balanced and cooperative category. But there are also a not insignificant percentage of "child at center" families.

As one can see on the Figure 1, the first main difference between these two categories concerns the apparent lack of interaction between father and mother. We say "apparent lack" because there is sufficient cooperation in the second category despite the lack of direct interaction for not being competitive;

for example, parents interact one after the other with the baby. The second difference concerns the focus of attention of the partners. For the families with a "balanced cooperative" coparenting the focus (represented by means of the little star) is in the middle of the family but, in fact, it moves flexibly from the infant to the couple ideally according to the needs expressed by each of them. In the "child centered" families, the focus is rather rigidly fixed on the infant.

One can hypothesize that not only the "balanced and cooperative coparenting", but also the "child centered coparenting," is adequate as long as the latter is temporary and linked to the dependency of the infant or to the task. When the infant is very young some parents want so much to meet his needs that they, more or less deliberately, give precedence to him irrespective of the effect on their couple relationship. Also, comparing to what they would probably do in real daily life, in the specific context of the LPNG (presented as a family task), some parents may pay more attention to the child and reduce their couple interactions, especially if they believe that the researchers' interest is the child's behaviors. Given that the instructions are the same for all families, we do not think that the parents' considering the infant or the toddler as the target of our studies is sufficient to explain the absence of interaction between the parents, but observations in naturalistic contexts are definitively needed.

As time goes by, with the empowerment of the child, the focus of the parents should ideally go to the center of the family. Moreover the couple relation should take up more space and coparenting should become "balanced and cooperative" (left side of the blueprint in Figure 1). But some parents may encounter difficulties in staying connected or becoming connected again and, in that case, they would keep a "child centered coparenting". But can "child at center" coparenting stay stable? One can imagine that not being coordinated as parents would create a gap between them. This gap has to be filled otherwise there is a risk that it becomes deeper and wider. And couple relationships would get worse.

Indeed the lack of cooperation and connection between the parents could generate some tension and conflicts. When conflicts are observed one does not know if the attention given to the infant is the cause or the result of these conflicts. Is it because each parent gives "too much" to the child and not enough to their partner, that resentment and conflicts appear? Or, do the parents turn to the child in order to avoid the loneliness generated by their couple conflicts? Nevertheless it would lead either to a "competitive coparenting" characterized by conflicts or to "excluding coparenting" with the eviction of one parent (second line of the right side of the blueprint of Figure 2). As time goes on, the "competitive coparenting" itself may remain unchanged or it could lead to the (self-) exclusion of one parent (third line of the right side of the blueprint of

Figure 2). The latter "choice" might be done according to an observation made by McHale (1995) concerning coparenting and child gender, namely that in conflicting coparenting families with boys fathers tend to stay involved while in families with girls, fathers tend to be (self-) excluded.

In the families with a stable "balanced and cooperative" coparenting, right from the beginning, the parents adjust not only to their baby but also to their coparent. Moreover, they may think that interacting with the other parent in front of their infant, or with him, is an advantage not only for him, but also for their couple and for their family. As said above, the focus of the parents (represented by a little star) is rather flexible and adjusted not only to the infant needs but also to each parent's needs and to the family's. Over time, with the empowerment of the child, the parent's focus goes more in the center but remains flexibly adjusted not only to the child's but also to each partner's and to the family needs.

Conclusions

As well documented by Fivaz-Depeursinge and Philipp (2014), the type of coparenting will determine the daily experiences lived by the infant which will in turn impact on his development. Being the observer or being included in a warm interaction with his two parents is definitively not the same real-life experience than being split when receiving simultaneous stimulations from two different partners. When the child is cut off from one parent in order to preserve his relation with the other one or when he has to renounce to his own agenda for being a go-between trying to repair his parents' conflicts it is another different real-life experience.

According to some authors (Fivaz-Depeursinge, Favez, Lavanchy et al. 2005), infants are able to communicate with two people already at three months of age. One can assume that communicative abilities are given at birth; that infants are born with the potential to communicate with several people. According to the type of coparenting, the infant will either develop or fail to develop his triadic capacity and his "triadic communication skills". Observing some parents' difficulties to include two partners (their spouse/ significant other and their infant) one can doubt whether their ability to communicate with several people has been preserved and developed.

These theoretical models of coparenting evolution definitively need to be confirmed on samples including clinical families and by means of longitudinal research. Nevertheless, we hope that these reflections will give ideas to researchers and help clinicians to see what is at stake in the consideration of the family and not only of the parent-infant dyad. We also hope that it will encourage them to promote cooperative coparenting.

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