

“Coparenting in Fragile Families”

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March 28, 2010

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Introduction

Nonmarital childbearing has increased dramatically in the U.S. since the early 1960s, rising from 6% of all births in 1960 to fully 40% in 2007 (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2009). Whereas similar trends have occurred in many developed nations, the U.S. stands out in the extent to which such births are associated with socioeconomic disadvantage and relationship instability. This has given rise to a new term ‘fragile families,’ which we define as unmarried couples who have a child together. The increase in fragile families reflects changes not only in the initial context of births but also in the fundamental nature and patterns of childrearing.

While much of the recent literature on coparenting has focused on married, coresident parents with children, most unmarried couples will break up within only a few years of a new child’s birth (McLanahan, 2009b). Therefore, for many unmarried parents, coparenting will occur across households and may be more similar to coparenting among divorced parents than among married parents. However, given the disadvantaged characteristics of unmarried parents, coparenting in this context may be even more complicated than it is after a legal divorce.

In this chapter, we provide an overview of coparenting in fragile families, focusing particularly on what has been learned from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. We begin by identifying key theoretical perspectives related to coparenting generally. Then, we briefly describe the typical characteristics of unmarried parents with children and the nature of their couple relationships over time. Next, we summarize contributions to the coparenting literature from more recent studies focused on unmarried parents (or similar populations), and we present some new data about coparenting among fragile families. Finally, we conclude by suggesting key areas for future research and noting implications for public policy.

Theoretical Perspectives and Prior Empirical Research

As this volume underscores, family systems theory stresses the importance and dynamic nature of various family relationships (mother-father, parent-child, and sibling-sibling) that affect each other and influence individual outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Minuchin, 1988). Among these dyadic relationships, an important family-level (or, triadic) relationship is the one between adults raising a child together (Minuchin, 1974). This coparenting relationship is defined as the extent to which parents can effectively work together in rearing their common child and has been identified as a unique construct distinct from both couple relationship quality and parenting behavior (Hayden et al., 1998; McHale, 1995; McHale et al., 2000). Coparenting is also differentiated from ‘parallel parenting,’ where each parent maintains a relationship with their child separate and distinct from that of the other parent (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Furstenberg, 1988). For parents living together, coparenting strengthens and reinforces the dyadic relationship each parent has with their child. For parents living apart—the majority of unmarried parents only a few years after a focal child’s birth — coparenting may represent the primary (or only) regular interaction they have with each other, as they endeavor to coordinate their parental investments across households (Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001). Indeed, cooperative parenting may be of greater import when families do not share the unifying context of household residence (Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990).

As detailed elsewhere in this volume, an initial focus of coparenting research was on parental relationships following divorce (Ahrons, 1981; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), where studies indicated benefits to children of cooperative post-divorce coparental relationships and adverse effects of conflicted ones (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Emery and colleagues (2001) determined that mediation, rather than litigation, promoted long-term coparenting by divorced

parents, suggesting that attainment of positive coparenting and continued involvement of non-custodial fathers may rely on what happens in the early stages of divorce (Ahrons & Miller, 1993). Positive coparental interactions among divorced parents, though the exception not the rule, then increase both the father's role in childrearing decisions and the responsiveness of his fathering (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Sobolewski & King, 2005). On the other hand, once coparental relationships become tense, parents may avoid contact with one another in order to minimize conflict (Seltzer, McLanahan, & Hanson, 1998).

More recent research has focused on coparenting among coresident (mostly married) families and how it relates to couples' relationship quality, parenting behavior, and child wellbeing. This growing literature, published mostly within psychology, is based primarily on small, non-representative samples. Even so, findings underscore the distinct nature of coparenting—vis-à-vis both couple relationship quality and parenting (Hayden et al., 1998)—and suggest that among coresident households, coparenting is linked to both marital behavior and child wellbeing (see Chapter 2 for a review); indeed, several studies indicate that coparenting may mediate between the former and the latter (e.g., Katz & Low, 2004; Margolin et al., 2001). Parents' adjustment is antecedent to positive coparenting, and cooperative coparenting in two-parent families is linked to more responsive parenting of infant and school-age children by both mothers and fathers, and to better child adjustment (Chapter 2).

Unmarried Parents' Characteristics and Couple Relationships

Though research on coparenting in married and divorced families may be relevant to unmarried parents in the circumstances of coresiding versus living apart, respectively, unmarried couples are a very different demographic group from couples who are/were legally married and as a whole are much less well understood. This is changing thanks to the Fragile

Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a birth-cohort study of nearly 5,000 children born in 20 large U.S. cities at the end of the twentieth century (see Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). The study includes an over-sample of nonmarital births along with a comparison group of marital births. The mothers, fathers and children were followed over five years after the birth (a nine-year follow-up is nearly complete as of this writing), and the data (when weighted) are representative of births to parents in cities with populations of 200,000 or more in the late 1990s. Detailed descriptions of the Fragile Families respondents appear in other publications (e.g., Carlson & McLanahan, 2010; McLanahan, 2009a; McLanahan et al., 2003), and so here we will be brief in summarizing relevant data.

Unmarried parents differ from married (and divorced) parents in ways that have important implications for their long-term economic well-being, family stability, and—our focus here—their ability to work together as effective coparents. Existing data indicate that most unmarried parents are in their twenties, have a high school degree or less, and are African American or Hispanic; many have children by more than one partner (so-called ‘multi-partnered fertility’), and a high fraction of fathers have some history of incarceration. This description suggests that limited resources and high complexity in family relationships and parental roles may challenge unmarried parents’ ability to coparent cooperatively.

One of the most important findings to emerge from the Fragile Families Study is the close connection between unmarried fathers and mothers at the time of their child’s birth (McLanahan, 2004)—more than four-fifths of couples are in romantic relationships at the birth. About half of couples are living together, and a majority of both parents hold positive views of the benefits of marriage and believe their chances of marrying the other parent are ‘pretty good’ or ‘almost certain’. Although women are slightly more distrusting of men than are men

toward women, the quality of most couple relationships is high, and physical violence is relatively rare. However, longitudinal data reveal that these unmarried relationships are highly unstable and will likely dissolve within only a few years. Not surprisingly, as shown in Table 1, couples with greater relational attachment at birth are much more likely to still be together five years later. Of couples cohabiting at birth, 56% remained together five years later (28% married, 28% still cohabiting), as compared with 77% of couples married at birth who remain married. Of couples in ‘visiting’ relationships (romantically involved but living apart) when the baby was born, 7% got married, 14% were cohabiting, and 6% were still in a visiting relationship at five years. Among couples reporting no romantic relationship at birth, only a small minority later married or cohabited; fully 90% of couples not romantically involved at birth were not romantically involved at five years. Parents who started off as friends were more likely to be friends at five years than those who started off with no relationship, suggesting that a friendly relationship at the outset may contribute to parents’ being able to work together in rearing their common child later (see Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007). That said, because couples who are friends early on may differ in important (and unobserved) ways from other couples, it is not clear whether being friends contributes in a causal way to later positive coparenting.

(Table 1 about here)

With respect to factors encouraging union stability and barriers to marriage, research has been consistent with theories about economic incentives to marry (Becker, 1991; Ellwood & Jencks, 2004) in substantiating that men’s earnings, wages, and employment are important for marriage after a nonmarital birth (Gibson-Davis, 2009; Harknett, 2008; Harknett & McLanahan, 2004). Evidence regarding women’s economic resources is less clear, though education appears to be the key socioeconomic factor for women that increases the likelihood

of marriage (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Harknett, 2008). Social/psychological theories also describe how culture—defined as widely shared beliefs and practices—affect decisions and behavior surrounding family formation (Axinn & Thornton, 2000; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Nock, 1995). Positive attitudes toward and expectations about marriage and religiosity encourage stability (Carlson et al., 2004; Waller & McLanahan, 2005; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007); gender distrust, sexual jealousy (especially by women toward men), and multi-partnered fertility are key deterrents to marriage (Carlson et al., 2004; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Hill, 2007; Monte, 2007). Finally, married partners' perceptions of the emotional quality of their relationship affects whether they stay together or break up (Cowan, Cowan, Schulz, & Heming, 1994; Gottman, 1994; Karney & Bradbury, 1995), a linkage demonstrated among fragile families as well (Carlson et al., 2004).

There is a growing qualitative literature examining perceived barriers to marriage, which has identified both financial and relationship 'prerequisites': These include having sufficient resources to establish an independent household and afford a wedding celebration and having a relationship free of problems related to substance use, physical violence, or the father's criminal background (Cherlin, 2004; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). In addition to discouraging union formation/stability after a nonmarital birth, these latter factors likely also interfere with parents' ability to work together in rearing their common child, whether they remain romantically involved or not.

Coparenting among Fragile Families: What Do We Know from Recent Research?

A nascent literature has begun to explore the nature, processes, and consequences of coparenting among unmarried parents with children or in related populations. While there is much to be learned, these new studies have shed some light on the levels and antecedents of

coparenting, the link between coparenting and father involvement, and the potential of policy intervention to strengthen coparenting. We summarize key findings in each of these areas below.

Levels of Coparenting. Given the relationship instability of unmarried parents, coparenting occurs less frequently in coresidential units than across households. In the Fragile Families Study, positive coparenting was assessed at each wave with six items about whether the other parent: 1) acts like the father/mother the respondent wants for her/his child, 2) can be trusted to take good care of the child, 3) respects the schedules and rules the respondent makes for the child, 4) supports the respondent in the way he/she wants to raise the child—and whether the respondent 5) can talk with the other parent about problems that come up with the child, and 6) can count on the other parent for help when the respondent needs someone to look after the child. Response choices are “rarely true” (1), “sometimes true” (2), and “always true” (3).¹ The six questions were only asked of mothers if fathers had seen the child since the previous survey.

Carlson et al. (2008) found that the average level of coparenting reported by unmarried mothers about nonresident fathers across the 6 items was moderate (2.3 on the 1-to-3 scale) at 1 year, with only a slight decline to 2.1 at years 3 and 5. Thus, a typical mother describing how she and the focal father worked together to rear their common child portrayed positive aspects of coparenting as, on average, “sometimes true.” Using data reported by nonresident fathers in the Fragile Families Study, Bronte-Tinkew and Horowitz (2010) reached a more optimistic conclusion. Aggregating scores from only 3 of the 6 items, they found that fathers’ reports of positive coparenting averaged 7.5 on a 0-9 scale (corresponding to 2.5 on the 3-point scale). The higher scores may be because unmarried (especially nonresident) fathers interviewed in the Fragile Families Study (75% at baseline and 85% at least once from birth to year 5) were more

¹ At the 3- and 5-year surveys, an additional choice of “never” was given; we combine the small number of responses in this category with “rarely true” to yield a consistent 3-point scale across all years.

connected to mothers and more involved with their children than fathers not interviewed. Taken together, these data suggest that positive coparenting among unmarried parents who live apart but stay connected remains moderate to high over the first 5 years after a nonmarital birth.

Antecedents of Coparenting. What enhances (or deters) coparenting in unmarried families? Studies of resident (especially married) fathers portray men's roles as both partner and parent as a "package deal" (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008; Townsend, 2002). While this may be less true for unmarried parents, both the type of relationship parents share after a nonmarital birth (i.e., cohabiting, romantic but living apart, friends, or no relationship) and the quality of relationship net of type (i.e., supportiveness and ability to communicate effectively) have been linked to greater involvement by unmarried fathers (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007; Ryan, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2008). In cases where the "package" comes apart as a result of union dissolution, men frequently lose connection to their child(ren), particularly if the mother repartners and a new man assumes the 'father' role (Edin, Tach, & Mincy, 2009; Tach, Mincy & Edin, 2010). In other words, nonresident fathers desiring a positive coparenting relationship with mothers and involvement with their child may find this difficult to attain, especially in circumstances where unmarried mothers and fathers have different expectations about how parenting should be shared (Waller, 2002). Indeed, unmarried fathers report having less influence than divorced fathers in decision making about their child and experiencing more conflict surrounding attempts to be involved (Insabella, Williams, & Pruett, 2003).

Bronte-Tinkew and Horowitz (2010) found that fathers who lived away from children all three years after a nonmarital birth reported lower coparenting if they had previously been incarcerated, had more children with the focal mother, had no romantic involvement with the mother, had a new partner, and had more frequent contact with the child. By contrast, positive

coparenting was higher when both parents had some college education, when mothers worked, when fathers had higher income, when fathers provided more informal financial support (e.g., buying things for the child), and when the child was a boy. Thus, it appears that both economic capacities and relationship circumstances are fundamental domains that affect the ability of unmarried parents living apart to cooperate in rearing their common child. Later, we present results of new analyses of factors associated with coparenting in fragile families, both for parents who live together and for a broader sample of parents living apart.

Coparenting and Father Involvement. Understanding the link between coparenting and father involvement after a nonmarital birth is important, since fathers' contributions of time and money represent a substantial resource for children and their mothers (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; King & Sobolewski, 2006). Since mothers typically have primary responsibility for young children, and most often have custody if/when a parental union dissolves, engaging the father early on in a child's life is implicitly related to coparenting. In fact, particularly during the prenatal period and when the child is very young, it can be difficult to draw proper distinctions between the constructs of couple relationship quality, coparenting and parental involvement.

Cabrera, Fagan, and Farrie (2008), studying fathers' prenatal involvement (i.e., contributing financially, helping with transportation, presence at the birth) found that more prenatal involvement predicted higher father engagement in child activities between the ages of 1 to 3. However, because there are likely unobserved selection factors affecting *both* early and later involvement of men as partners and parents, it is not possible to determine whether prenatal involvement had independent causal effects on later outcomes. That said, because a new birth represents an important turning point for couples and perhaps for fathers especially, it may be an opportune window for intervention (Feinberg, 2002). Mothers' support of fathers' new role is

important: if both parents share a belief in the importance of fathers' caregiving, the couple is more likely to stay together (Hohmann-Marriott, 2009). For these reasons, recognizing the importance of the mother-father relationship for the family system, for fathers' ties to children, and ultimately for children's wellbeing is an important direction for both future research and public policy (see Chapters 1 and 6).

Since most unwed couples will break up after only a few years (hence the couple's romantic relationship quality is no longer a salient issue), a key question is how coparenting is linked with father involvement for nonresident fathers. In an analysis of coparenting and father involvement from the Fragile Families Study 1, 3, and 5 years after a nonmarital birth, Carlson, McLanahan and Brooks-Gunn (2008) drew on methods designed to deal with selection (both into nonresident fatherhood and into higher levels of involvement) to evaluate the direction of the association between coparenting and father involvement. Their results provided consistent evidence across three measures of paternal involvement (days of contact, spending one or more hours with the child, and frequency of engaging in activities) that supportive coparenting appears to affect fathers' subsequent involvement—whereas early paternal involvement has little effect on future coparenting. Further, using fixed effects regression models that control for all time-invariant individual characteristics and reduce bias due to unobserved heterogeneity across cases (Snijders, 2005), the authors found the effects of coparenting on father involvement to be robust. These conservative 'within-person' estimates suggest that when coparenting between couples improves, fathers are likely to become more involved with their children (Carlson et al., 2008). These data underscore that coparenting and father involvement are distinct constructs for nonresident fathers and that intervening to enhance cooperative coparenting could potentially help keep nonresident fathers connected to their children over time.

On a related note, fathers' access to their children and roles in childrearing are highly contingent on mothers' approval and facilitation of their involvement, typically referred to as "gatekeeping" (Ahrons & Miller, 1993; Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Although mothers often facilitate rather than hinder father involvement (Walker & McGraw, 2000), they clearly also make choices about when and how fathers will spend time with the child, particularly when the child is young. Evidence from the Fragile Families data—including a qualitative follow-up of participants in Oakland (Waller, 2002)—suggests that mothers often take active steps to protect their children from "unhealthy" men (Waller & Swisher, 2006), particularly fathers who have problems with physical violence and substance abuse. While most unmarried fathers do not present a danger to their children or their children's mothers, it is important for interventions to be sensitive to this concern. Interventions designed to strengthen coparenting among unmarried parents are discussed in greater detail in the next chapter of this volume.

New evidence from the Fragile Families Study

Variation in Levels of Coparenting. We now present new analyses of Fragile Families data examining differences in levels of positive coparenting across groups and multivariate analyses of antecedents across residential and nonresidential contexts. In Table 2, we show overall mean scores across the six coparenting items in the Fragile Families Study separately for coresident parents and parents living apart at years 1, 3, and 5. Then, we show means by race, education, poverty status and multi-partnered fertility.²

(Table 2 about here)

Among the 52% of unmarried parents living together at 1 year, the average reported level of positive coparenting by mothers is 2.7-2.8 on the 1-to-3 index, indicating very favorable

²While not shown in the table, we evaluated statistically significant differences using one-way comparisons of means using Scheffé tests; we discuss in the text only differences of $p < .05$.

maternal views on coparenting in this context. From year 1 to year 3, coparenting assessments decline slightly (but significantly) and then remain steady between years 3 and 5. Consistent with results presented in Carlson et al. (2008), maternal reports of positive coparenting are somewhat lower when parents live apart—closer to “2” on the 1-to-3 scale. Recall too that coparenting questions are only asked if fathers saw children since the previous survey, meaning that the ‘worst’ nonresident fathers are excluded from these analyses. At years 1, 3 and 5 (respectively), 13%, 29%, and 33% of nonresident fathers had not seen the child since the previous survey. Therefore, the estimates reported here should be seen as an upper-bound (and increasingly so over time), since fathers who do not see the child are presumably not interacting with the mother *about* the child. The overall picture appears to be that maternal perceptions of coparenting quality decline significantly between years 1 and 3, then remain steady between years 3 to 5.

Sub-group analyses reveal striking consistency in levels of coparenting reported by mothers regardless of race/ethnicity, education, and poverty status. Among the very few significant differences is a higher report of coparenting from Hispanic mothers than from non-Hispanic White or non-Hispanic Black mothers at years 3 and 5 (but not year 1). Also of interest, more educated parents do not report more positive coparenting; we find essentially no difference in coparenting as a function of mother’s educational attainment. Although most unmarried parents studied had relatively low education (typically a high school degree or less) and few mothers had any college education, the highest educated mothers did not appear to be systematically different from their less educated counterparts with respect to coparenting. Also, we observed little difference by poverty status at the time of the baby’s birth. Although poor mothers had slightly (and significantly) lower levels of coparenting at year 1, there were no differences over years 3 and 5.

The most persistent differences in coparenting are observed as a function of couples' multi-partnered fertility (MPF) status, a common situation among unwed couples. In the Fragile Families Study, 59% of unmarried couples (compared to 21% of married couples) already had a child by a prior partner—of the mother, father, or both (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006). The modal child born outside of marriage thus has at least one half-sibling at the start of life.

Childbearing across partnerships creates the possibility that parents have divergent interests among their common children and those conceived with other partners. This may diminish their ability to effectively coparent and may also reduce the resources parents invest in a given child.

These data echo research on the complexities that remarriage brings to family life because of the presence of children from previous marriages (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Ihinger-Tallman, 1988). The lack of clear norms, authority, legal relationships and habits in stepfamilies with children compared to first families led to the characterization of remarriage as an “incomplete institution” (Cherlin, 1978). Children born outside of marriage likely receive even fewer parental resources and experience less effective coparenting when parents have children by prior partners, as compared to children born within marriage. This is both because unmarried parents are, on average, more economically disadvantaged than married parents and because of the absence of social legitimacy and paternal obligations established via marriage.

Descriptive statistics in Table 2 indicate that parents' ability to cooperatively coparent a focal child appears compromised if fathers—or both fathers and mothers—are also rearing children from prior partnerships. Across all years, the lowest levels of coparenting were reported when the father (only) had a child by another partner. At years 1 and 3, coparenting was significantly lower when fathers (only) had a child by a prior partner, compared to all other fertility categories; at year 5, this category was significantly lower than mother (only) and no

MPF but did not differ from families where both parents had a child by another partner. However, when the mother (only) had a child by another partner, coparenting was always *higher* than father (only) MPF—and sometimes (but not consistently) higher than the no-MPF category or when both parents had MPF.

Because these coparenting measures were reported by mothers, it is not surprising that women's own prior children were perceived as having less influence on how well they could work together with the father of the focal child—while his children were perceived as more detrimental. Since children typically live with mothers, these data may suggest that parental obligations to half-siblings outside of the focal child's household are more deleterious for coparenting than obligations to half-siblings within the household. Work in progress on how MPF affects parental relationships and children's wellbeing (in behavioral and cognitive domains) suggests that this result continues to hold up in multivariate analyses—fathers' MPF appears to significantly diminish coparenting among the focal child's biological parents (Carlson, Furstenberg, & McLanahan, 2010), a finding consistent with prior qualitative research among unmarried parents (Waller, 2002).

Antecedents of Coparenting. We now summarize results from random effects models (Table 3) examining factors associated with coparenting following a nonmarital birth for parents living together versus apart. Several variables are significantly associated with coparenting, although again, strikingly, demographic characteristics are not strong predictors of coparenting.

For coresident parents (Model 1), when only demographic and socioeconomic factors are included, only small, marginally significant estimates are found for Hispanic ethnicity and fathers' high school degree—both positively associated with better coparenting. Mother's age and father's age are (marginally) statistically significant, although the magnitude is negligible,

since they each round to zero. Adding the broader array of variables in Model 2 increases the magnitude of the estimates for two race/ethnic variables: Black non-Hispanic and Hispanic mothers report better coparenting than White non-Hispanic mothers. Yet, none of the other demographic factors are statistically significant, and magnitudes are close to zero. We note that parents' risk of depression is associated with lower coparenting, as is fathers' history of incarceration. As expected, couples with more supportive dyadic relationships between them (i.e., communicating and understanding each other) also have better coparenting relationships, whereas fathers' physical violence is associated with lower coparenting. There are no significant differences in coparenting by parents' multi-partnered fertility history for coresident couples. As for child factors, there is no difference in coparenting by the focal child's gender, but 'difficult' temperament diminishes coparenting, suggesting that parents have a harder time coordinating their efforts when the child is harder to deal with; this underscores a growing emphasis in family research on how children influence family processes (Crouter & Booth, 2003).

(Table 3 about here)

Turning to parents living apart (and typically, children live with the mother), Black non-Hispanic mothers report significantly higher positive coparenting than White non-Hispanic mothers (Model 1). Because African American couples with children are less likely to live together, parenting while living separately is more normative within the Black community (Mincy & Pouncy, 2007). Surprisingly, mothers with some college education report lower levels of coparenting compared to those with less than a high school degree. This may be because more highly educated mothers have higher expectations about nonresident fathers' involvement, so they assess fathers' coparenting behaviors more critically.

Adding the additional covariates in Model 2 does little to change the estimates for Black non-Hispanic race/ethnicity and some college education. Also, 'other' non-Hispanic race becomes marginally significant and positive, indicating that this small group of (mostly Asian) mothers report higher positive coparenting than White mothers. At the same time, being foreign born is now marginally significantly linked with lower levels of coparenting. As with coresident parents, mothers' and fathers' depression and fathers' incarceration are strongly associated with lower positive coparenting. Similarly, when mothers report that there was more supportiveness in the couple relationship when they were still together, coparenting is higher. However, for parents living apart, physical violence is not linked to coparenting. It may be that mothers have separated from violent fathers, thus limiting fathers' contact with mothers (and their children) and limiting coparenting contact (Waller & Swisher, 2006). Compared to couples with no MPF, coparenting is significantly lower when the father (only) has children by a prior partner. By contrast, when the mother (only) has a child by a prior partner, coparenting is reportedly higher; as noted above, a half-sibling living in the household may be less disruptive to coparenting (at least from mothers' perspectives) than a half-sibling living elsewhere. As with coresident couples, the focal child's more difficult temperament is linked to slightly lower positive coparenting.

Overall, these estimates suggest that coparenting is typically high for parents subsequent to a nonmarital birth, especially when parents are still romantically involved and living together. Among parents living apart, Black mothers report higher levels of coparenting by nonresident fathers than do other race/ethnic groups, although fathers' multi-partnered fertility (common among nonresident fathers) deters coparenting. Regardless of coresidence status, having (or having had) a high-quality couple relationship is linked to maternal reports of higher coparenting; parental depression and paternal incarceration diminish cooperative coparenting.

Limitations of the Fragile Families Study. While the Fragile Families Study has added significant new information to our understanding of coparenting among unmarried parents with children, it is important to keep in mind its limitations. As with all quantitative surveys, response rates and attrition must be noted. By using a hospital-based design, the Fragile Families Study was able to attain higher response rates than other similar studies, particularly for fathers, who are typically under-represented in national surveys (Garfinkel, McLanahan, & Hanson, 1998; Nelson, 2004). At the same time, one-quarter of unmarried fathers were not interviewed at the time of the birth, and of unmarried parents interviewed at baseline, 16% of mothers, and 19% of fathers were lost to attrition by the 5-year survey. Attrition is not random, and those who drop out are more likely to be racial/ethnic minorities and have lower socioeconomic resources than those who remain. Hence, analyses of supportive coparenting may be overestimated to the extent that parents lost to attrition likely have lower coparenting than those who remain in the study.

A second limitation concerns reliance on maternal reports. Using mothers' reports allows all couples in a given survey wave to be included, even if fathers are not interviewed. However, mothers provide only one perspective on the coparenting relationship, and fathers' views may differ. Mothers also may not convey accurate information about the frequency and content of nonresident fathers' involvement with children (Coley & Morris, 2002; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1995), and the extent of their knowledge is likely correlated with the degree of cooperative coparenting. Also, using maternal reports for both the coparenting and outcome variables (and some covariates) may inflate correlations, as the same respondent may over- or under-report positive feelings of all kinds, referred to as "shared method variance" (Marsiglio et al., 2000).

Third, as a multi-dimensional survey designed by an inter-disciplinary team, the Fragile Families Study covered a wide range of topics but with less detail about any given topic than

would typically be found in a study focused primarily on one substantive area. With respect to coparenting, there were no measures of negative coparenting included, such as the extent to which mothers and fathers may actively undermine the parenting of one another.

Fourth, while not a limitation of the Fragile Families Study per se, survey data generally are inherently inferior to experimental design for discerning causal effects. Therefore, caution must be taken in interpreting findings concerning coparenting (or any measure of interest) as causal; even with the wide array of measures included in the Fragile Families Study, there are certainly other unmeasured factors affecting coparenting, its antecedents and its consequences.

Conclusions and Implications

Research on coparenting in fragile families is critically important, as unmarried parents with children typically remain unmarried and break up within only a few years after the child is born. Fragile Families study data reveal that compared with married parents, unmarried parents are more likely to be Black or Hispanic, have low education levels, and have children with more than one partner. Collectively, these and other differences affect parents' relationships with each other, their relationships with their child, and their coparenting relationship vis-à-vis their common child. Coparenting among unmarried couples is a product of social-psychological characteristics, such as depression and the quality of parents' relationships, both of which can be related to parents' broader socioeconomic circumstances. For unmarried parents who live apart, the story is complicated by whether the father has a child with another partner. Because better mental health and more positive relationships appear to strengthen coparenting among unmarried parents, promoting coparenting alliances in fragile families is an important social policy matter.

Although scholars have begun to explore important aspects of coparenting in fragile families, there are many unanswered questions. One such question concerns the extent to which

coparenting in fragile families affects children's wellbeing. Cooperative, low-conflict coparenting relationships have been linked to better child outcomes among coresident (mostly married) and divorced parents (see Chapters 2 and 9), but we do not yet have sufficient data about this linkage among unmarried families. Second, we need to understand more about how coparenting processes differ in fragile families as a function of parents' race/ethnicity and children's age. Though the "package deal" linking partner and parent roles may be less salient in Black families (Edin et al., 2009) where the "baby father" role is more clearly distinguished from the mother-father romantic relationship (Mincy & Pouncy, 2007), data on variation in coparenting remain scarce, and virtually nothing known about whether coparenting changes as children's needs and the parenting tasks required over the course of childhood and adolescence change. Third, the complex inter-relationship between coparenting, fathering, and child support is not well-understood; it may be of value to know whether coparenting is associated with fathers' payment of child support—and whether this operates directly or indirectly.

Finally, with respect to implications for public policy, strengthening couple relationship quality and encouraging marriage were a focus of the Healthy Marriage Initiative funded by the U.S. Deficit Reduction Act of 2005. To the extent that Healthy Marriage efforts succeed in promoting stable marriages, the U.S. will have fewer children ever living away from their fathers in the first place. Yet, even with genuinely successful interventions that achieve healthy marriages for some, there will likely still be many other unwed couples who break up. To the extent that better coparenting among unmarried parents positively affects child development and wellbeing—a critical issue in need of further study, policy interventions might usefully focus not only on strengthening the couple's romantic relationship but also on strengthening their ability to work together in rearing their child.

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Table 1. Relationship Stability, Birth to Five Years (in percent)

Time of Birth	Five Years after Birth of Child (percent of row total)					(n)	Total
	Married	Cohabiting	Visiting	Friends	No Relationship		
Married	77	0	0	0	22	1,012	100%
Unmarried	17	19	3	20	42	3,120	100%
Cohabiting	28	28	2	14	29	1,487	100%
Visiting	7	14	6	27	46	1,093	100%
Friends	3	5	1	34	56	254	100%
No relationship	4	6	0	10	81	286	100%
Number of cases (n)	1,292	592	78	760	1,410	4,132	

Note: Figures are weighted by national sampling weights; numbers of cases are unweighted.

Relationship status is reported by mothers. Cohabitation at five years is defined as living together "all or most of the time" or "some of the time;" cohabitation at the time of birth is reported as yes/no.

Table 2. Mean Levels of Coparenting after a Nonmarital Birth (Mothers' Reports)

	Year 1		Year 3		Year 5	
	% or <i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	% or <i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	% or <i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)
<i>Co-Resident Parents (% at survey)</i>	52 %		45 %		36 %	
Co-resident parents	2.84	(.44)	2.74	(.34)	2.77	(.33)
Parents living apart	2.29	(.66)	2.06	(.69)	2.12	(.66)
<i>Co-Parenting by Sub-groups</i>						
Mothers' Race/Ethnicity						
White Non-Hispanic	2.57	(.59)	2.34	(.70)	2.33	(.64)
African American Non-Hispanic	2.61	(.52)	2.41	(.61)	2.37	(.63)
Hispanic	2.63	(.52)	2.51	(.58)	2.54	(.55)
Other Non-Hispanic	2.68	(.49)	2.49	(.74)	2.44	(.67)
Mothers' Education (at time of birth)						
Less than HS	2.58	(.58)	2.45	(.62)	2.43	(.63)
HS Degree	2.64	(.50)	2.44	(.64)	2.43	(.61)
Some College	2.65	(.46)	2.37	(.62)	2.41	(.61)
College Degree	2.55	(.63)	2.45	(.65)	2.33	(.63)
Mothers' Poverty Status (at time of birth)						
Poor	2.58	(.57)	2.43	(.62)	2.41	(.66)
Not Poor	2.64	(.51)	2.44	(.65)	2.43	(.59)
Couple Multi-partnered Fertility (MPF) Status (at 1 year)						
No MPF (First Birth or All Children Together)	2.65	(.49)	2.46	(.63)	2.46	(.60)
Father MPF only	2.50	(.59)	2.23	(.73)	2.25	(.68)
Mother MPF only	2.70	(.49)	2.62	(.45)	2.57	(.60)
Both Parents MPF	2.62	(.52)	2.45	(.58)	2.38	(.57)
Total number of cases (<i>n</i>)	2,496		2,726		2,511	

Notes: All figures are weighted by national sampling weights for each year; numbers of cases are unweighted. Coparenting is the average of six items, range=1-3 (1 "Never/rarely," 2 "Sometimes," and 3 "Always"), with higher scores indicating higher coparenting.

Table 3. Random Effects Estimates Predicting Co-Parenting after a Nonmarital Birth

	Co-Resident Parents		Parents Living Apart	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Demographic Characteristics</i>				
Mothers' Race/Ethnicity (ref=white non-Hispanic)				
Black Non-Hispanic	.03	.06 **	.16 **	.17 **
Hispanic	.04 +	.05 *	.07	.08
Other Non-Hispanic	.06	.06	.17	.19 +
Father of different race/ethnicity	-.03	-.02	-.07	-.07
Mother foreign born	.04	.02	.11	.10
Father foreign born	-.00	-.03	-.08	-.13 +
Mothers' Education (ref=less than HS)				
HS Degree	.02	.00	-.06	-.04
Some College or more	-.00	-.02	-.12 **	-.11 *
Fathers' Education (ref=less than HS)				
HS Degree	.03 +	.01	.02	-.00
Some College or more	.03	.00	-.00	-.04
Mother's age (years)	.00 +	.00	.01 *	.00
Father's age (years)	-.00 *	-.00	.00	.01 +
Mother lived with both parents at 15	.00	-.00	-.01	.01
Father lived with both parents at 15	-.01	-.01	.06	.03
Mother's self-reported health status	-.02	.00	-.09	-.02
Father's self-reported health status	-.04	-.00	-.01	.04
<i>Social-psychological Characteristics</i>				
Mother's religious attendance		-.01		-.01
Father's religious attendance		.00		.01
Mother substance problem		.09		.09
Father substance problem		-.04		.02
Mother at risk of depression		-.11 **		-.21 **
Father at risk of depression		-.06 *		-.13 **
Father ever incarcerated		-.05 **		-.11 **
<i>Relationship Quality and Fertility History</i>				
Supportiveness		.27 **		.29 **
Father hits/slaps		-.09 *		-.06
Number of children in mother's household		-.01		.02 +
Couple multi-partnered Fertility (MPF, ref=no MPF)				
Father MPF only		-.03		-.12 **
Mother MPF only		.02		.09 *
Both Parents MPF		.00		-.08

Table 3 (cont). Random Effects Estimates Predicting Co-Parenting after a Nonmarital Birth

	Co-Resident Parents		Parents Living Apart	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Child Characteristics</i>				
Child is a boy		-.01		-.02
Child has 'difficult' temperament		-.02 *		-.03 *
Constant	2.73 **	2.09 **	1.97 **	1.31 **
Number of unique cases (<i>n</i>)	1,366	1,366	1,164	1,164
Number of observations	2,847	2,847	2,166	2,166

+p<.10 *p<.05 **p<.01

Notes: Co-parenting is the average of six items reported by mothers with responses ranging from 1 "Never/rarely" to 3 "Always", with higher scores indicating higher quality co-parenting. Cases are pooled across years 1, 3 and 5 after a nonmarital birth based on co-residence status of the biological parents (with each other) at each survey wave.