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Co-parenting Problems Start Early, Affect Toddler Development
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When parents fail to adequately coordinate their parenting interventions and support one another’s parenting efforts, children as young as two years of age show a wide variety of social, emotional and behavioral adjustment difficulties, according to a major new study of early family dynamics. The study discovered that such co-parenting difficulties can be seen as early as three months after the baby’s birth and that parents exhibiting these early problems face significant risk for continued problems as their child ages. The newly released findings are from the “Families Through Time” study, one of the most comprehensive investigations of early co-parenting adjustment, conducted by James McHale, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology and director of the USF St. Petersburg Family Study Center.

Published last week by Zero to Three Press in a new book entitled Charting the Bumpy Road of Coparenthood, the study also found that co-parenting adjustment at the time of a baby’s first birthday strongly predicted co-parenting at 30 months. Further, when parents were struggling at 30 months, their toddlers were showing social adjustment and behavior regulation problems related to their parents’ difficulties.

Supported by two grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Development, the project followed 120 northeastern couples making the transition to new parenthood and examined consistency and change in co-parenting between the infant and toddler years. Parents completed extensive interviews at three, 12 and 30 months describing their co-parenting alliance and couples were observed together completing routine and slightly stressful tasks with their baby.

Researchers found distinctive co-parenting patterns that started at three months. These patterns were characterized by cooperation, support, and validation in some families and by detachment, disagreement and/or poor coordination in others.

Though a number of studies had previously examined early parenting adjustments by mothers or fathers, this investigation broke new ground through its in-depth look at coordination and support between parents.

McHale conceived the project to address gaps in the profession’s understanding of early co-parenting dynamics.

The study sheds light on how some of the normative adjustment difficulties encountered by new parents can consolidate and become more serious problems for the family and their child.

"It is hard enough for young children to learn to follow the rules and regulate their own behaviors when their parents are being reasonably consistent and working together," McHale said. "When parents can't get on the same page, toddlers really struggle. Our findings confirm that professionals need to be paying particularly close attention to this vitally important dynamic in families".

Major findings of the study:

- Mothers and fathers who harbored concerns before the baby’s arrival about their capacity to work collaboratively as parents frequently went on to exhibit low co-parenting cohesion at three moths post-partum, especially when their baby had a difficult early temperament.
- Co-parenting problems at three months foreshadowed co-parenting at 12 months, when conflict began to play a more prominent role in defining the co-parental relationship.
- Co-parenting difficulties at one year strongly predicted co-parenting adjustment 18 months later, when children where 30 months old.
- At 30 months, children in low co-parenting solidarity families had more problem behavior at home and poorer pre-academic skills at nursery school. They also had a less mature awareness of emotions and showed more reliance than other children on adults when trying to regulate their emotions.