

Effective coparenting leads to positive outcomes for children.

Coparenting refers to how parents work together in their roles as caregivers. Effective coparenting requires cooperation, supportiveness, and mutual involvement. Coparenting leads to increased warmth in their relationships with their children. When mothers and fathers support and encourage each other, they are more likely to engage in the sensitive parenting necessary for their children's optimal brain development.^{1,2}

Parents with low-conflict relationships are more likely than high-conflict parents to function as a team. They spend more time interacting with their children together, creating opportunities to learn from each other's parenting styles. Mutually supportive parenting, in turn, promotes children's behavioral and emotional adjustment, even in the first three years of life. By contrast, young children of high-conflict parents are at higher risk for anxiety, aggressive behavior, and poor social skills.^{3,4} Premature birth is the leading cause of death among infants in the U.S.¹

A strong marriage leads to warm and sensitive parenting.

Much of the research on how the bonds between parents affect children's development focuses on families headed by married couples. Children are affected by the quality of their parents' relationship even in the first three years of life. Mothers and fathers in healthy and satisfying marriages are more engaged in their role as parents and have more positive attitudes toward their children. Frequent and intense conflict, on the other hand, is associated with unresponsive and insensitive parenting.^{5,6}

Researchers call this the spillover effect. Positive feelings between a mother and father can spill over into each parent's relationship with the child. But so can negative interactions: parent-child conflict is more likely when there has been a recent marital conflict.^{1,7}

A harmonious marriage is particularly important for positive fathering. Father involvement is affected by marital quality, especially during infancy and early childhood.¹ Fathers can have positive effects on children's cognitive and language development in the first three years, above and beyond the influence of mothers.^{6,8}

Parental conflict affects children directly and indirectly.

Conflict is a normal part of intimate relationships. Disagreements and arguments that are handled constructively pose few risks for children. When conflict is frequent, intense, or hostile, however, children can be negatively affected. Repeated exposure to such conflicts can be a source of chronic stress. Infants may begin to see their parents as frightening, and older children are likely to learn poor behavioral and social skills.³

Conflict can also affect children indirectly. Persistent strife between a mother and father drains both parents' emotional resources and diverts their attention from their child's needs. In time, it can reduce both the quantity and the quality of parent-child interactions.^{3,5} Racial disparities in birth outcomes continue to plague our community.

Family-based interventions can reduce conflict, improve coparenting, and promote child well-being.

The transition to parenthood is a critical moment in a relationship. Some research indicates that couples become less satisfied with their marriage after they have children. Parenthood often means more conflicts and disagreements and less leisure time, communication and intimacy. These changes can be long-lasting.⁹⁻¹¹ Programs that help couples cope successfully with the arrival of a child have the potential to improve marital quality and child outcomes.

A number of recent family-based interventions have shown mixed success in improving parental and child outcomes. Parenting Together, an 8-session group-oriented program, improved fathers' caregiving skills and increased their involvement.¹² Welcome Baby, a home visitation program designed to improve marital quality, failed to produce measurable effects on couples' relationships. It did, however, increase fathers' involvement with their newborns.¹³

The Family Foundations program is a series of 8 classes covering communication, problem-solving, and conflict management skills. The program led to more positive parenting, more supportive coparenting, and less maternal depression and anxiety. As a result, children showed positive changes in temperament and behavior throughout their first three years.¹⁴

Interventions geared specifically toward decreasing marital conflict have also shown positive results. One three-hour classroom-based program educated new parents about the harmful

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effects of frequent conflict on children and taught them how to reduce hostility and improve problem-solving in their relationships. The program succeeded in reducing conflict and improving parenting skills.¹⁵ A similar 4-session program demonstrated long-term positive effects on children's emotional adjustment and parents' marital satisfaction.¹⁶

Smart policies can also benefit unmarried parents and their children.

The birth of a child is also a window of opportunity for improving parenting in unmarried, low-income couples. Unmarried fathers and mothers are likely to be romantically involved at the time of their child's birth, although fathers tend to have less contact as the child grows older.¹⁷ Mutually supportive parenting in unmarried couples promotes continued father involvement and improves father-child relationships.¹⁸ The months before and after a child's birth may provide an entry point for policies that engage both parents in programs to improve coparenting, father involvement, and children's well-being.

The Building Strong Families program serves romantically involved but unmarried parents. Around the time of their child's birth, couples participate in a 30-40-hour program that teaches relationship skills and provides individual support and appropriate referrals. The effects of the program varied widely among program sites due in part to differences in implementation and client demographics. However, the preliminary results indicate that the program can have positive effects on relationship quality, parenting skills, and conflict management.¹⁹

Programs like those outlined above show that many aspects of family functioning appear to be improved by well-designed interventions. What remains unclear is the cost of expanding such programs to serve more families. Typically no information on costs is included in such studies, but most programs involved highly-trained staff, numerous services, and long time frames. It is reasonable, then, to expect that the costs of expanding them in their current form may be prohibitive. Further research is needed to determine how such programs can be modified to serve more families at a manageable cost.²⁰

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