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Do Coparenting and Social Support Have a Greater Effect on Adolescent Fathers Than Adult Fathers?

This study examined whether coparenting support and social support had a stronger effect on father engagement with 3-year-olds among adolescent fathers compared with adult fathers. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (N = 1,540), we found that coparenting support and paternal social support had a significantly stronger positive effect on adolescent fathers than adult fathers. The associations among coparenting, social support, and adolescent father engagement did not depend on whether the father and mother were romantically involved with each other. The results support the idea that programs for adolescent parents should focus on coparenting and social support as a way to help fathers to stay involved with their children.

The United States has a higher rate of adolescent parenting than most other industrialized nations (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2009). The literature has also consistently shown poorer outcomes for adolescent parents and their children compared with the children of adult mothers (Borkowski et al., 2002; Furstenberg, 2007). Given the negative consequences of early childbearing, social policy and program professionals are often concerned about finding ways to support these at-risk families. Only

recently have programs begun to consider that helping adolescent mothers and their children also involves providing support to adolescent fathers. Yet, few studies have focused on adolescent fathers.

The available literature suggests that adolescent fathers are at greater risk than adult fathers of lowered engagement with their children as time passes (Farrie, Lee, & Fagan, 2011). These studies often allude to risk factors such as mother-father relationship dissolution (e.g., no longer residing together), antisocial behavior, and lack of employment as reasons for their decreasing involvement with children (Herzog, Umana-Taylor, Madden-Derdich, & Leonard, 2007). Researchers, however, have also suggested that some adolescent fathers are able to maintain positive relationships with their partners and, therefore, stay actively engaged with their children (Young & Holcomb, 2007). Researchers have also suggested that positive mother-father coparenting relationships and social support from family and relatives may be associated with higher levels of fathers' engagement with children (Florsheim, Moore, & Edgington, 2003). Although recent studies have shown a positive effect of coparenting and social support on adolescent father engagement with children (Futris & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007), studies have not examined whether the effect of coparenting and social support are greater for adolescent fathers than for adult fathers. Determining whether coparenting and social support have a greater effect on adolescent fathers' engagement with children than adult fathers' engagement is relevant to policymakers

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and practitioners charged with making decisions about which types of programs should be targeted for adolescent and adult fathers. This study addresses this gap by comparing the effect of coparenting and social support on fathers' engagement with 3-year-olds among adolescent and adult fathers. We focus on fathers' engagement with children (e.g., participation in play and oral language activities) because the literature suggests this variable is more closely linked to positive child outcomes than variables such as accessibility and contact (Pleck, 1997).

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The ecological systems perspective suggests that parent-child relationships (including father engagement) are embedded in networks of systems that influence all aspects of parenting. It is fairly well established that proximal processes within the family system, such as father-mother interactions, are important to both parents and children (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). There is also much available evidence that social support from family, friends, and organizations can positively affect parenting (Roy, Dyson, & Jackson, 2010). There is also a long history of research examining the associations between partner relationships and parent-child interactions among adult parents. Specifically, couple conflict and positive relationship interactions have been shown to influence the emotional climate in the family, which has effects on parenting behavior (Cummings & Merrilees, 2009). Furthermore, robust empirical findings suggest that couple conflict may spill over onto the parent-child relationship (Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Raymond, 2004; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). Couple conflict has also been shown to be associated with reduced father engagement with children (Pleck & Hofferth, 2007).

Recently, researchers have suggested that coparenting, defined as "the ways that parents work together in their roles as parents" (Feinberg, 2002, p. 1499), may have a stronger influence on parent-child relationships because it is more proximally related to parenting than is partner relationship quality (McHale, 2009). The basis for this argument is that coparenting connotes couples' awareness of the importance of relationship quality as it affects their children, whereas partner-relationship quality may represent more compartmentalized notions that

include an awareness that peers choose whether or not to stay in the relationship with their partner. Studies of older parents who reside with their children reveal that healthy coparenting relationships are associated with higher quality father-child relationships (Feinberg, Kan, & Heatherington, 2007) and higher levels of fathers' participation in child care and childrearing (Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004) even after controlling for partner relationship quality. This study focuses on coparenting support, which has been identified as a key element in the coparental relationship leading to increased parental efficacy and translating into warmth and sensitivity directed toward the child (Feinberg). Coparenting support is defined as "strategies and actions that support and extend the partner's efforts to accomplish parenting goals" (Van Egeren & Hawkins, p. 169).

Adolescent fathers often have difficulty with establishing supportive coparenting relationships, regardless of their relationship status with the mother. For example, qualitative studies of young nonresidential fathers reveal high levels of undermining between new parents (Young & Holcomb, 2007). Adolescent parents also tend to engage in low levels of communication with each other regarding their children (Vosler & Robertson, 1998). Specifically, adolescent couples may find it especially difficult to maintain supportive coparenting relationships because they lack experience in interpersonal skills because of their young age (Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997).

Despite the challenges faced by adolescent fathers in regards to coparenting relationships, studies have suggested that coparenting support may be more important for adolescent fathers wanting to stay involved with children than for adult fathers (Florsheim, Sumida, et al., 2003; Futris, Nielsen, & Olmstead, 2010). One reason is the likelihood that adolescent partner relationships tend to be unstable over time (Gee & Rhodes, 2003). Adolescent fathers may have little chance of staying involved with their children over time if they do not maintain at least an adequate coparenting relationship with the mother. Adolescence is also a time of rapid and multiple developmental changes when youth are still developing their coping skills, maturity (e.g., identity), and experience (see Steinberg & Morris, 2001). The challenges associated with adolescence, including lack of emotional control and tendency to engage in sensation

seeking, may interfere with adolescent fathers' ability to deal effectively with the stresses and responsibilities of becoming a new parent (Florsheim, Moore, et al., 2003). For example, research has shown that adolescent fathers are more likely to withdraw from parenting than adult fathers when the stresses associated with parenting are too great (Herzog et al., 2007). Adolescent mothers also may begin to restrict fathers' access to children and avoid coparenting when they show signs of withdrawing from parenting responsibilities (Futris & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007). The combined influence of interpersonal stresses with the mother and the tendency for adolescent fathers to withdraw from parenting may prove to be substantial barriers to fathers' engagement with children. These barriers, however, may be offset when adolescent fathers and their partners agree to engage in supportive coparenting. On the basis of the literature, we hypothesized that coparenting support will have a stronger positive effect on adolescent fathers' engagement with children than on adult fathers' engagement with children.

The second major ecological variable examined in this study is social support. Social support has been defined as the provision of psychological and material resources for the purpose of helping the individual to cope with stress (Cohen, 2004). Researchers have suggested that social support from individuals in the adolescent father's social network is a vital resource for reducing fathers' parenting stress and promoting paternal engagement with children (Fagan, Bernd, & Whiteman, 2007; Roy et al., 2010). Studies have suggested that adolescent fathers benefit from different types of social support, including emotional, material, childcare, and informational support (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Furstenberg, 2007; Gee & Rhodes, 2003; Roy et al.). In this study, however, we only focused on material and childcare support because the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCW) study does not include measures of the other dimensions of social support. Moreover, researchers have suggested that childcare and material support may be especially important types of support for fathers. Dallas and Chen (1998) suggested that social support network members facilitate father engagement with children by sharing with them the responsibilities of child care. In addition, because adolescent fathers are more likely than adult fathers to be

poor, adolescent fathers and mothers are likely to rely on others for childcare and material support (Gee & Rhodes).

Consistent with our hypothesis regarding coparenting, this study hypothesized that childcare and material social support will have a stronger effect on adolescent fathers' engagement with their children than on adult fathers' engagement. Although adult fathers are also likely to benefit from receiving social support for their engagement with children, they are likely to have more internal resources that enable them to stay involved with their children even during times of high stress. Our hypothesis also builds on the work of researchers such as Belle (1989) and others (e.g., Chu, Saucier, & Hafner, 2010) who have suggested that adolescents generally need social support more than adults in order to maintain a sense of well-being and positive involvement in life activities (e.g., school). Studies of adult fathers have revealed that the association between coparenting support and father engagement is moderated by mother-father relationship status (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011). In particular, coparenting support was found to have a stronger influence on paternal engagement when parents were in nonromantic relationships with each other than when they were in romantic (including marital, cohabiting, and nonresidential-romantic) relationships (Fagan & Palkovitz). On the basis of these findings, we conducted three-way interaction effects on father engagement with children (Romantic Involvement \times Coparenting \times Age Status of Father). We also examined whether there will be a three-way interaction effect of romantic involvement, social support, and age status of father on paternal engagement. We did not suggest specific hypotheses because it is not clear that the effects of romantic involvement are the same for adolescent fathers as they are for adult fathers, however.

Confounding Variables

Research suggests a number of confounding variables that may be associated with father engagement and adolescent fatherhood, including father's cumulative risk, race/ethnicity, father's engagement with the child during infancy, and child's gender. We controlled for risk factors that are frequently used to explain the association between adolescent fatherhood and lower levels of paternal involvement,

including antisocial behavior, low education level, unemployment, nonresidential living arrangement with the baby's mother, multi-partner fertility, and being in a new romantic relationship (Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Belsky, & Silva, 2001; Klein & the Committee on Adolescence, 2005; Quinlivan & Condon, 2005). We constructed a cumulative index of these risk factors based on research showing that cumulative risk (i.e., adding risk factors) has a stronger negative effect on adolescent fathers' engagement with children than do individual risk factors (Farrie et al., 2011). In regards to race/ethnicity, it was found that African American fathers were more involved in paternal child care than European American fathers (Sanderson & Sanders Thompson, 2002). We controlled for race/ethnicity even though some studies do not show significant effects of this variable on paternal engagement with children (Holmes & Huston, 2010). We also controlled for child gender because some studies found that fathers were more involved with sons than with daughters (Kelley, Smith, Green, Berndt, & Rogers, 1998; Pleck, 1997). We controlled for these confounding variables as well as fathers' engagement when the child is 1 year old because early father involvement may influence subsequent father engagement.

METHOD

Data for this analysis came from the FFCW, a longitudinal study of nearly 5,000 families interviewed at the birth of a child and again when the child was 1, 3, and 5 years old (McLanahan & Garfinkel, 2000). The FFCW survey was conducted by the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (2008) at Princeton University and the Social Indicators Survey Center at Columbia University. This national study used a stratified random sample of all U.S. cities with 200,000 or more people. Stratification was based on policy environments and labor market conditions in the different cities. At baseline, data were collected from about 4,700 mothers of new babies recruited from hospital maternity wards. Of the total births, approximately 3,600 births were to unmarried mothers. Once a mother had been determined to be eligible, the mother signed a consent form to participate and completed the baseline interview. The baby's father was then asked to participate in the study (Center for Research on Child Wellbeing).

The sample ($n = 2,535$) used in this study included mothers and fathers who were interviewed when the baby was 1 year old (Year 1) and 3 years old (Year 3). Cases were dropped ($n = 995$) if there were substantial data missing on the father engagement, coparenting, or social support items. The final analytic sample included 1,540 couples.

To address concerns about selection bias due to sample attrition and, to a lesser degree missing data, we used Heckman's (1979) two-stage procedure to compute lambda, a selection bias control factor. To examine bias, we ran a logistic regression model predicting inclusion in the sample (results available from the authors). We compared the 1,540 fathers interviewed in the Years 1 and 3 samples to the 1,985 who were interviewed at baseline, but were either missing data that could not be imputed or were not interviewed at Years 1 and 3. We found that fathers who participated at Years 1 and 3 were more likely to be White non-Hispanic, less likely to be an interracial couple, less likely to have been interviewed in Spanish, and more likely to have completed at least high school. The residual from the equation was transformed to compute a lambda score for subsequent analyses. Lambda reflects the effects of all unknown characteristics associated with sample attrition; therefore, each model produces unbiased parameters of all other predictors.

Participant Characteristics

Approximately 11% of the fathers in the analytic sample were adolescents when the child was born (Table 1). The majority of adolescent and adult fathers were Black (58.1 and 55.8%, respectively), but a substantial proportion were Hispanic (30.2 and 27.6%). More adolescent fathers than adult fathers identified themselves and their current or former partners as interracial couples (20.3 and 14%, respectively). The mean age of the adolescent fathers at the Year 3 follow-up was 21.44 years, and the average age of adult fathers was 30.50 years. More than one half of adolescent fathers completed less than high school, whereas about one third of adult fathers completed less than high school. Adolescent fathers were more likely to be in nonromantic relationships with the baby's mother than were adult fathers (44.8 and 27.8%, respectively).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Participant Characteristics and Major Study Variables

	Entire sample (n = 1,540)		Adolescent father (n = 175)		Adult father (n = 1,365)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Child is a boy	781	50.6	107	62.2	674	49.4
Father's age at Year 3, <i>M, SD</i>	29.45	7.02	21.44	.93	30.50	6.79
Hispanic	429	27.8	52	30.2	377	27.6
Non-Hispanic White	216	14	16	9.3	200	14.7
Other	33	2.1	4	2.3	29	2.1
Black	862	56	100	58.1	762	55.8
Interracial couple	226	14.6	35	20.3	191	14
Education < HS	568	36.9	97	55.3	470	34.4
HS graduate or GED	551	35.8	55	31.7	495	36.3
Some college +	421	27.3	23	13	400	29.3
Nonromantic relationship	456	29.6	77	44.8	379	27.8
Father risk, <i>M, SD</i>	1.52	1.19	2.08	1.35	1.45	1.84
Coparenting, <i>M, SD</i>	14.77	1.76	13.87	1.82	14.88	1.57
Father's social support, <i>M, SD</i>	3.58	.66	3.50	.66	3.60	.66
Mother's social support, <i>M, SD</i>	3.48	.71	3.46	.73	3.49	.71
Father engagement (Year 3), <i>M, SD</i>	44.56	21.80	41.70	25.24	44.94	21.28
Father engagement (Year 1), <i>M, SD</i>	27.54	13.18	27.05	13.64	27.60	13.12

Note: Statistics are *ns* and percentages, except when indicated that they are means and standard deviations.

Measure of Dependent Variable

The FFCW father questionnaire included 12 items at Year 3 follow-up geared toward addressing paternal child care and participation in play and oral language activities. Items were based on a scale with responses ranging from 0 (*no days*) to 7 (*7 days per week*). Year 3 items included how often the fathers sing songs or nursery rhymes, read stories, tell stories, play inside with toys, take children to visit relatives, hug or show physical affection, tell children they love them, let children help them with household chores, play imaginary games with children, tell children they appreciate what they did, go to restaurant or out to eat with children, and assist children with eating. These items were summed to construct an index of fathers' engagement (range = 0–84; $\alpha = .91$).

Measures of Independent Variables

Age status of biological father. We constructed one dichotomous variable measuring the biological father's age when his child was born. Fathers were categorized as being adolescents when they were less than 20 years of age at childbirth. Age 19 was used as the cutoff to coincide with

U.S. social policy for identification of adolescent parents.

Coparenting support. Four items were used from the Year 3 interview to assess fathers' perceptions of coparenting support. The items addressed mothers' support to the father in the parenting role. Sample items included: "mother supports the way you want to raise your child," and "mother respects your rules for the child." These items were used in a prior study based on FFCW and were found to have strong psychometric properties (Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2010). Items were based on a scale with responses ranging from 1 (*always*) to 4 (*never*). The items were reverse recoded and then summed to construct an index of positive coparenting support (range = 4–16; $\alpha = .76$).

Social support. We used four items from the fathers' and mothers' Year 3 questionnaires to assess social support. The first item asked, "If you needed help next year, could you count on someone to loan you \$200?" The second item asked, "If you could count on someone to loan you \$1,000?" The third item asked, "If you could count on someone to provide you with a

place to live?" The fourth item asked, "If you could count on someone for emergency child care?" Response options were *yes* and *no*. The responses to the four items were added together to form indexes of fathers' and mothers' social support (range = 0–4, $\alpha = .77$ for fathers and $.74$ for mothers).

Nonromantic involvement. Fathers were asked to identify the status of their relationship with the baby's mother at Year 3. Possible responses ranged from marriage to no relationship. We coded the couples to be in a *romantic relationship* (=0) when they were married, cohabiting, or nonresidential but romantically involved. Couples were coded as being in a *nonromantic relationship* (=1) when the father indicated they were friends, acquaintances, or in no relationship.

Confounding variables. We constructed a composite index of fathers' risk factors (six variables). Data for all dichotomous risk variables were coded as 0 (*no risk*) and 1 (*positive risk*). To assess *employment risk*, fathers were asked at Year 3 whether they did any regular work for pay in the last week. These data were used to construct a measure of unemployment. Fathers were asked during the Year 3 interview whether they and the biological mother currently live together most or all of the time. These data were recoded as 1 (*nonresidence*) and 0 (*residence*). We tested for collinearity between nonresidence and nonromantic involvement. These variables were moderately correlated with each other ($r = .57, p < .001$). We therefore included nonresidence in the risk index. A risk variable was included at Year 3 to indicate if the father either *had* or *is expecting a new baby* (with a different mother within this time period). Data were available at Year 3 indicating whether the father had a *new romantic relationship* with someone other than the birth mother. Risk also included fathers' *low educational attainment*. Fathers' low educational attainment was measured with one dichotomous variable indicating whether the man completed less than a high school degree (positive risk). Fathers who completed high school/GED, some college, or more were coded as no risk. Finally, we identified fathers who reported that they had been *convicted of a crime* (not counting minor traffic violations) between the Year 1 and Year 3 interviews. These risk variables were added together

so that a high score indicated higher levels of cumulative risk at Year 3 (range = 0–6).

We controlled for fathers' race/ethnicity—non-Hispanic Black (reference), non-Hispanic White, Hispanic, and all others. Because mothers' and fathers' race were highly correlated, we did not include mothers' race, but instead included a variable indicating if the couple was interracial (1 = *interracial*). We also controlled for child's gender (1 = *male child*). Fathers' engagement at Year 1 was also controlled using many of the same items as the Year 3 measure of engagement (e.g., how often the father plays games such as peek-a-boo or gotcha). A composite Year 1 father engagement score was created by summing fathers' responses across the seven items (range = 0–49, $\alpha = .86$).

Data Analyses

To test whether age status of the father was associated with paternal engagement, multiple regression analysis was conducted with paternal engagement as the dependent variable and age status, coparenting support, fathers' and mothers' social support, nonromantic involvement, controls, and lambda as the independent variables (see Table 2, Model 1). To test whether the effect of age status on father engagement varied on the basis of coparenting or social support, we computed two-way interaction terms for age status with coparenting and age status with social support. Each interaction term was added one at a time to the variables in Model 1 (see Models 2 and 3). Those interaction terms that were found to be significant in Models 2 or 3 were included together in one model (see Model 4). Finally, we tested 2 three-way interaction effects for (a) age status, coparenting support, and nonromantic involvement and (b) age status, social support, and nonromantic involvement.

RESULTS

Descriptive and Bivariate Analyses

Table 1 shows mean father engagement scores of 41.70 for adolescent fathers and 44.94 for adult fathers at Year 3. When this number was divided by the number of items ($n = 12$) in the scale, the average item score was 3.48 for adolescent fathers and 3.75 for adult fathers. These figures suggest that fathers engaged in child-related activities on the average of about

Table 2. Regression of Age Status, Coparenting Support, Social Support, Nonromantic Involvement, Controls, and Interactions on Father Engagement (N = 1,540)

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β									
Lambda	-11.09	4.84	-.06*	-11.05	4.82	-.06*	-11.51	4.82	-.07*	-11.37	4.82	-.07*
Age status of father	.48	1.58	.01	-11.47	4.34	-.18**	-20.16	6.88	-.31**	-23.34	7.06	-.36**
Hispanic	-.47	1.23	-.01	-.46	1.22	-.01	-.43	1.22	-.01	-.43	1.22	-.01
Non-Hispanic White	-.72	1.47	-.01	-.71	1.48	-.01	-.61	1.48	-.01	-.63	1.46	-.01
Other race/ethnicity	-3.84	3.28	-.03	-3.54	3.27	-.03	-3.34	3.27	-.03	-3.26	3.27	-.02
Interracial parents	1.44	1.39	.03	1.42	1.38	.03	1.24	1.37	.02	1.28	1.38	.02
Father risk index	-2.77	.52	-.15***	-2.82	.52	-.16***	-2.78	.52	-.15***	-2.81	.52	-.16***
Nonromantic	-12.11	1.29	-.27***	-11.95	1.29	-.27***	11.97	1.29	-.27***	-11.89	1.29	-.27***
Child is a boy	1.75	.98	.04	1.72	.98	.04	1.69	.98	.04	1.74	.98	.04
Father engagement, year 1	.48	.04	.29***	.47	.04	.29***	.47	.04	.29***	.47	.04	.29***
Coparenting support	.25	.09	.07**	.16	.10	.04	.22	.09	.06*	.17	.10	.04
Father social support	.17	.62	.01	.02	.62	.00	-.32	.63	-.01	-.30	.64	-.01
Mother social support	.41	.58	.02	.34	.57	.01	.36	.57	.02	.32	.57	.01
<i>Interactions</i>												
Coparenting × AS				.87	.29	.20**				.63	.32	.15*
Father Social Support × AS							7.50	2.43	.32**	5.58	2.62	.24*
Constant	47.96	8.88		49.31	8.86		49.28	8.86		49.89	8.85	
R ² change				.005			.005			.01		
F change				8.73**			9.51**			6.64***		
R ²	.329			.334			.335			.337		
F	45.74***			43.37***			43.45***			40.90***		

Note: Age status of father: 0 = adult father, 1 = adolescent father. Black is the reference group for race/ethnicity. AS = age status of father.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

3.5 to 4 out of 7 days per week for both groups of fathers. The descriptive table also showed that although adult fathers' average scores on coparenting support were higher than those of adolescent fathers, both groups of fathers self-reported fairly high levels of coparenting. For example, when divided by the four items in the index, the adolescent fathers' score of 13.87 is equivalent to an average item score of 3.47 (range = 1–4). Adolescent and adult fathers and mothers reported high levels of

social support on the average. There was very little difference in the mean social support scores reported by adolescents versus adults. We also noted higher cumulative risk scores for adolescent fathers compared with adult fathers (2.08 and 1.45, respectively). Although an average of two out of six risk factors may not seem like a high level of risk, we note that the risk variables measured in this study assess important issues (e.g., convictions, multipartner fertility).

The correlation matrix (table not shown) revealed no evidence of collinearity among independent variables. Furthermore, all variance inflation factor parameters were under 2.5 and all tolerance parameters were over .40 in regression analyses, suggesting there was no multicollinearity.

Multivariate Analyses

There was no significant effect of age status (i.e., adolescent fatherhood) on paternal engagement after statistically controlling for coparenting, social support, nonromantic involvement, control variables, and lambda (see Table 2, Model 1). Model 2 reveals that adding the interaction effect of Coparenting Support \times Age Status resulted in a significant R^2 change. The second hypothesis was therefore supported: Positive coparenting relationships had a stronger positive effect on adolescent fathers' engagement with children than on adult fathers' engagement with children. Model 3 reveals that adding the interaction effect of fathers' Social Support \times Age Status also resulted in a significant R^2 change. Thus, the third hypothesis was also supported: Fathers' social support had a stronger positive effect on adolescent fathers' engagement than on adult fathers' engagement. Model 4 shows that both interaction effects were significant when included in one model with all independent variables and controls.

Figure 1 shows the graph of the interaction effect for coparenting support based on the data in Model 4. Father engagement increased at a steeper rate among adolescent fathers

FIGURE 1. TWO-WAY INTERACTION BETWEEN AGE STATUS OF FATHER AND COPARENTING SUPPORT.

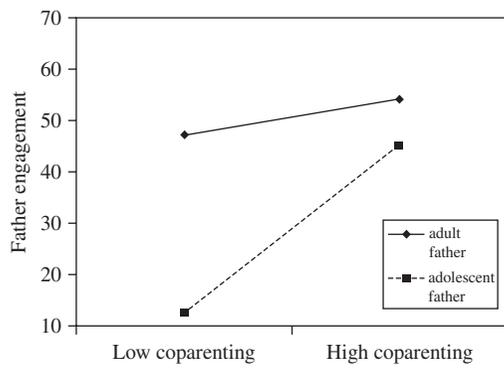
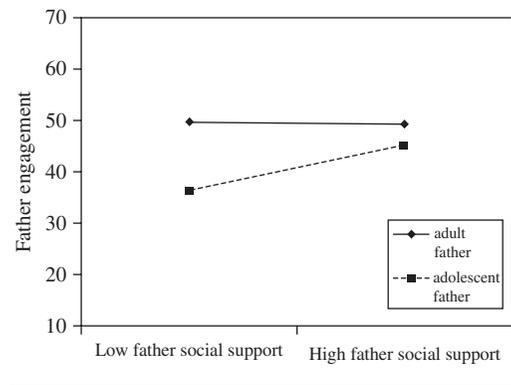


FIGURE 2. TWO-WAY INTERACTION BETWEEN AGE STATUS OF FATHER AND FATHERS' SOCIAL SUPPORT.



compared with adult fathers when coparenting support went from low to high. Adolescent fathers with low coparenting scores engaged in far fewer activities with their children than did adult fathers. Adolescent fathers with high coparenting scores engaged in many more activities with their children but still somewhat fewer than their adult counterparts.

Figure 2 shows the graph of the interaction effect for fathers' social support. Father engagement increased at a steeper rate among adolescent fathers when social support went from low to high. In contrast, adult fathers' engagement decreased slightly when their social support went from low to high. Although adolescent fathers' engagement increased when they had higher levels of social support, they nonetheless engaged in slightly fewer activities with their children than adult fathers when they had high levels of social support.

There were no three-way interactions among age status, coparenting support, and nonromantic involvement. There were also no three-way interactions among age status, father's (or mother's) social support, and nonromantic involvement.

DISCUSSION

Programs and practitioners have become increasingly interested in coparenting and social support interventions with adolescent parents (Fagan, 2008). This study examined two ecological variables (coparenting support and social support) in relation to adolescent and adult fathers' engagement with 3-year-olds. We

hypothesized that these variables would have a greater positive effect on adolescent fathers' engagement with children than on adult fathers' engagement. Both hypotheses were supported in this study. A growing body of research has shown that positive coparenting relationships are associated with higher levels of fathers' involvement with children (McHale, 2009). Our findings add to the growing body of knowledge about coparenting and fathering by showing that changes in levels of coparenting are more strongly associated with adolescent fathers' engagement compared with adult fathers' engagement with children. The results of this study also suggest that focusing on adolescent parents' coparenting relationship may help young fathers to stay connected with their children (see also Florsheim, Moore, et al., 2003; Futris & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007). In addition, this study suggests that helping adolescent fathers to increase their social supports may also lead to higher levels of paternal engagement with children.

We suggested that coparenting support is an important ecological variable because adolescent fathers and mothers are frequently in unstable relationships. Our findings are consistent with those of research showing that adolescent fathers are less likely than adult fathers to be romantically involved with the mother several years following the child's birth (Young & Holcomb, 2007). We did not find a significant three-way interaction between coparenting, age status of the father, and nonromantic involvement, however. Thus, we cannot conclude from our findings that coparenting support offsets the barriers to father engagement associated with nonromantic involvement. At present, we can only say that higher levels of fathers' self-reported coparenting support seem to have a stronger positive effect on adolescent fathers than adult fathers. We caution that our findings are correlational and cannot be used to suggest causation, however. It is just as likely that coparenting relationships improve as a result of high levels of adolescent fathers' engagement with children.

An important part of adolescent father's environment is the availability of social support from family and friends. We found that fathers' social support had a stronger positive effect on adolescent fathers' engagement with children than on adult fathers' engagement. Researchers have suggested that adolescent fathers often have less social support than their adult counterparts

(Bunting & McAuley, 2004). Our results did not concur with these findings. Mean levels of self-reported social support were about the same for the two groups of fathers. Social support, however, appears to have a greater influence on adolescent fathers. Conceivably, adolescent fathers are more likely to stay involved with their children when they have family and friends to turn to for material and childcare support. These supportive individuals may help the young men to work through personal difficulties that interfere with their parental involvement. Again, the correlational analysis used in this study prohibits making conclusions about cause-effect relationships.

There are a number of limitations in this study. Selection bias due to sample attrition and missing data present challenges with generalizing the findings to all urban families in the United States, despite attempts to correct for these data problems. The data were also limited to fathers' self-reports of coparenting support and father engagement with the child. Observational measures of these variables would provide more objective assessments and reduce the risk of shared method variance. We also note limitations with the coparenting and social support measures available in FFCW data. Both measures relied on a small number of items, and although the indexes derived from these items had good internal consistency, validation studies have not been conducted to assess their psychometric properties. The social support measure also only included items focusing specifically on childcare and material support. Future research should include additional social support items that focus on fathers' and mothers' emotional and informational support. In addition, there were possible limitations with the nonromantic involvement variable, which is treated as a dichotomous variable. Future studies should also examine the quality of romantic involvement. Moreover, it is not possible to establish cause-effect relationships between father engagement, coparenting, and social support because these variables were measured concurrently. Longitudinal and experimental research designs would be better suited for determining causation.

Implications for Policy and Program

An important issue facing programs and practitioners is how to design programs intended

to enhance adolescent fathers' coparenting and social support. There are several available curricula focusing on coparenting, such as Together We Can (Michigan State University Extension, 2010) and MELD for Young Dads (2001). For example, the MELD curriculum for young fathers includes a five-session component on coparenting. Topics include mothers and fathers sharing the responsibilities of parenthood, healthy communication between mothers and fathers regarding parenting issues, the benefits to babies when they have both parents in their lives and when parents support each other in the parental role, and finding solutions to barriers of successful coparenting. These curricula, however, have been subjected to minimal outcome research. One research study revealed positive effects of the MELD curriculum on adolescent fathers' perception of their coparenting behavior (Fagan, 2008). Adolescent mothers whose partner participated in the coparenting program, however, did not report improvements in the coparenting relationship.

At present, there are many unanswered questions about coparenting interventions with adolescent fathers and their partners. Are they likely to be as effective with nonromantically involved couples as they are with romantically involved couples? Do coparenting interventions work better when both the adolescent mothers and father are involved together in the program? We are inclined to think that both mothers and fathers should be involved in the program given the results of previous studies showing that only father perceptions of coparenting are changed when fathers and not mothers are involved in the program (Fagan, 2008). Should the program be implemented before the birth of the baby, or is it best to wait until after the birth? How many sessions are needed and what type of curriculum is most effective? Practitioners and researchers need to carefully examine these issues when designing and testing interventions for adolescent fathers. We think that coparenting interventions are a fruitful area for future research and development, especially considering our findings showing that higher levels of coparenting support have a stronger positive effect on adolescent fathers than adult fathers.

More is known about interventions targeting adolescent fathers' social supports (Stoiber & McIntyre, 2006; Trivedi, Brooks, Bunn,

& Graham, 2009). Studies have shown that providing social support to adolescent fathers results in greater likelihood that adolescent fathers and mothers stay together and adolescent fathers are involved with their children (Wiggins et al., 2005). Practitioner social support has also been shown to have a positive effect on adolescent fathers' probability of working or being in school (Kost, 1997). We are, however, not aware of intervention studies that have targeted adolescent fathers' social support from families and friends. We think this may be a useful area for research given the growing body of research showing the significant association between social support and adolescent father involvement with children. The findings of this study support this direction for research and practice.

In conclusion, the findings of this study are consistent with the direction of programs focusing on coparenting and social support. This study adds to the knowledge base by showing that higher levels of coparenting and social support have a significantly stronger positive effect on adolescent fathers' engagement with children than adult fathers. There is still a large need for researchers and practitioners to determine how best to design and deliver these interventions.

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