Coparenting – James P. McHale, Ph.D., University of South Florida
Day 2 Keynote for 6th Annual Texas Fatherhood Summit, June 18, 2021
https://www.stpetersburg.usf.edu/resources/family-study-center/index.aspx
Sponsors of work described in this presentation

National Institute of Child Health and Development R01 HD082211
- Randomized Controlled Trial of Prenatal Coparenting Intervention for African American Fragile Families

National Institute of Child Health and Development KO2 HD047505
- Prebirth Predictors of Early Coparenting

Brady Education Foundation Early Childhood Grant
- Figuring it Out for the Child: Promoting Coparenting Alliances of Expectant Unmarried African American Parents

National Institute of Child Health and Development R29 HD37172
- Coparenting and Family-Level Dynamics during Infancy and Toddlerhood

Juvenile Welfare Board of Pinellas County
- Promoting Coparenting Alliances of Expectant Unmarried African American Parents
Established in 2003 and directed by Dr. James McHale, the USF Family Study Center in St. Petersburg, FL is the home of both basic and applied research studies and initiatives concerned with understanding, supporting, and advocating for diverse families raising young children.

All the Center’s studies and direct service supports are guided by a frame prioritizing the relationship adults share as coparents to infants and young children -- and attention to the impacts of coparental functioning on the social and emotional adjustment of very young children.
Coparenting refers to the mutual, joint efforts of adults raising children for whom they share responsibility.
Four essential features of an effectively functioning coparenting alliance that supports children’s emotional health. (McHale and Irace, 2011)

- **Support and solidarity** between parenting figures
- **Consistency and predictability** in the approaches the different caregivers take in guiding the child’s development
- **Security and integrity of the family’s home base** (regardless of whether that home base is a single domicile or spans multiple residences).
- **Accurate attunement** to the young child’s fears, needs, wishes and sensibilities
Quality of coparenting robustly affects children’s socioemotional development.*

Coparenting must be understood as a *triangular* construct.

Distinctions between triangular and 2+1 views of family
Why the best coparenting is hyphenless
Spotlight on coparenting in families led by unmarried parents*

- Coparenting alliances may be especially significant for children in unmarried families.
  - But they are also often the most challenging.
- Unmarried parents differ greatly from one another.
  - Some have never started a relationship.
  - Others have a committed relationship.
  - Others have split up acrimoniously.
- Ways of working with these different types of families will not be the same, though some general principles for engaging and intervening may exist.

Focused Coparenting Consultation (FCC): Bringing co-parents together as coparents

- 3-stage process:
  - Stage 1: Heightening consciousness
  - Stage 2: Selective skill building
  - Stage 3: Guided enactment
Community-embedded coparenting initiatives serving unmarried African American fathers and mothers - together as a coparenting dyad - in a prenatal FCC intervention*

- In Pinellas County, FL*, African American elders, civic leaders and clergy provided leadership and guidance in planning, co-designing, and offering culturally-grounded coparenting and family programming in community settings.
- African American communities and families have often had negative experiences with programs created to be “helpful and supportive.”
- Coparenting is a culturally syntonic and supported dynamic in African American communities.
- Unmarried African American fathers frequently maintain contact with their children and their children’s mothers.
- Unmarried African American coparents express a desire to support their shared child or children through trustworthy programming.
- Expectant residential and nonresidential coparents expecting a first child together both show commitment to - and derive substantial benefit from - dyadic coparenting programming**

*The legacy of redlining has kept Pinellas as among the most segregated counties in the state of Florida, according to the University of Wisconsin’s County Health Rankings — condensing over half the county’s Black population into a four zip code area of south St. Petersburg.

Pinellas County Florida’s High-Risk Zones (JWB)

Low Birth Weights by Zip Code

9th grade FCAT Reading by Zip Code
Impact of the FCC Pilot Intervention: Significant Changes in Rapport and Problem-Solving Communication; Evidence of Coparental Coordination and Cooperation in the Family Triangle

**Figure 1.** Mother-lather-baby Lausanne Triogue Play interaction.

Dads responded to infant bids by becoming more involved 77\% of the time (N = 206)
Active elements of FCC -- Stage 1

- FCC begins by raising parental consciousness and 
  heightening empathy for the child’s experience.
  - So both parents can recognize and validate what children need.

- Heightening consciousness demands creativity and 
  sensitivity by interventionists.
  - Interventionists must tread more gently with post-
    divorce couples.

- Parents are helped to:
  - Recognize where their parenting biases come from.
  - See how their instincts and impulses are 
    consciously/unconsciously motivated by good 
    intent.
  - Distinguish areas in which they share common 
    desires for protecting their children and helping 
    them adjust successfully.

- Focus is on children’s family-level security.
  - Selective skill building comes only later.
New RCT Data: Unmarried Parents, Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and Triangles

Conventional wisdom has been to not work dyadically with couples where IPV has been, or is, occurring at concerning levels.

The safety and efficacy of the FCC intervention was investigated in a recently-concluded 5-year investigation funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD)*

• A prenatal version of the FCC intervention, “Figuring It Out for the Child” focused on cultivating a positive and safe coparenting alliance in unmarried family systems, beginning with a series of discussions about coparenting before the baby is born.
• Throughout, the triangular frame and approach remained the lens, but the parents were only engaged in the FCC intervention if safe and appropriate. R&R for all.
• Of 157 participating families, 138 moved forward to randomization after thorough intake assessments (70 intervention, 68 control), and only 5 families randomized to the intervention had to be administratively withdrawn.
• Significant effects favoring intervention group families were found for coparenting, father engagement, and reductions in reports of psychological aggression

*Randomized Controlled Trial of Prenatal Coparenting Intervention for African American Fragile Families.
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Useful resources from other experts


• https://www.fatherhood.gov/for-programs/program-activities/your-childs-perspective-ialac-story - Short activity created by Pamela Wilson; dramatizes the impact of parental conflict on children. Designed to increase participants’ motivation to work cooperatively with their child’s mother and other parenting team members.
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