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Sharing Child Caregiving May Increase Parental Conflict, Study Finds

Parents who share caregiving for their preschool children may experience more conflict than those in which the mother is the primary caregiver, according to a new study.

Results showed that couples had a stronger, more supportive co-parenting relationship when the father spent more time playing with their child. But when the father participated more in caregiving, like preparing meals for the child or giving baths, the couples were more likely to display less supportive and more undermining co-parenting behavior toward each other.

The results were surprising, and may be disappointing for people who believe mothers and fathers should share equally in the caregiving for their children, said Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, co-author of the study and associate professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University.

But, she said, it shows that there is not just one way to share parenting duties.

"I don't think this means that for every family, a father being involved in caregiving is a bad thing. But it is not the recipe for all couples," Schoppe-Sullivan said.

"You can certainly have a solid co-parenting relationship without sharing caregiving responsibilities equally."

Schoppe-Sullivan conducted the study with Rongfang Jia, a graduate student at Ohio State. The study appears in the January 2011 issue of the journal *Developmental Psychology*.

The study was designed to test how a father's involvement in child caregiving affected the couple's co-parenting relationship -- how parents interact together while parenting their child.

The study began with 112 Midwestern couples, most of whom were married, who had a 4-year-old child. At the

beginning of the study, fathers and mothers filled out questionnaires that asked how often they were involved in play activities with their children (such as giving them rides on their shoulders and backs) and how often they were involved in caregiving activities (such as giving the child a bath.)

The researchers then observed the couple for 20 min. while they assisted their child in completing two tasks: drawing a picture of their family together and building a house out of a toy building set.

These tasks are a bit difficult for preschoolers and required the guidance of both parents, which gave the researchers the opportunity to detect how much the parents supported each other or undermined each other in their co-parenting, Schoppe-Sullivan said.

The researchers looked for signs of supportive co-parenting, such as couples encouraging and cooperating with each other as they helped their child. Researchers also looked for evidence of couples criticizing each other's parenting or trying to "outdo" each other in their efforts to work with the child.

One year later, the couples returned to the laboratory and participated in a similar observed activity with their child.

The results showed that, in general, when fathers indicated they played more with their child at the beginning of the study, the couple showed more supportive co-parenting one year later. However, when fathers said they participated more in caregiving, the couples showed lower levels of supportive co-parenting one year later.

The gender of the children seemed to play a role, Schoppe-Sullivan said. Fathers playing with sons reduced

undermining behavior more than did fathers playing with daughters.

"Having fathers involved in play activity is good for co-parenting, but might be especially good for boys," she said. "But, fathers are more likely to get into conflicts with mothers when they are heavily involved in caregiving of boys."

The findings in the study held true even when the researchers compared dual and single-income families, and when they took into account a wide variety of other demographic factors that may have affected the results, such as fathers' education and work hours, family income, family size and the length of the couple's relationship.

She noted that this study only included children as they moved from 4 to 5 years old. How father involvement relates to co-parenting may be different with younger or older children.

The results of this study fit into other work by Schoppe-Sullivan that found mothers can act as "gatekeepers," either fostering or curtailing how much fathers are involved in caring for their children.

Even though fathers' involvement in child rearing has increased over the last few decades, mothers still do more child care, even when they work full-time, she said. Many mothers still feel they are in charge of child care.

"There might be some ambivalence on the part of mothers in allowing fathers to participate in day-to-day child care," she said. "But fathers might be ambivalent too, and may not be happy about shouldering more of the caregiving. That may contribute to less supportive co-parenting."

Even if both parents want the father to contribute more, it can be difficult to share responsibilities without some disagreements.

"If the mother is solely responsible for child care, she gets to determine how it is done. But if she is sharing those duties with the father, there is more opportunity for conflict about how tasks should be done," she said.

Overall, Schoppe-Sullivan said the results show that each couple has to decide for themselves which way works best when it comes to taking care of their children.

"There is more than one path to an effective co-parenting relationship," she said.

"Effective co-parenting is not necessarily synonymous with equally sharing caregiving duties."

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