



# A harsh parenting team?

## Maternal reports of coparenting and coercive parenting interact in association with children's disruptive behaviour

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Young children who display disruptive behaviour, such as fighting, temper flares, or oppositional and defiant behaviours, are known to be at risk of poor outcomes later in life such as adverse mental health, lower school achievement and delinquent behaviour. Because of this negative impact on the individual, as well as the associated burden for society, researchers are keen to understand more about how and why this kind of behaviour develops. Parenting has received a lot of attention over many years, with studies consistently showing that so-called 'harsh' parenting, which includes things like smacking, shouting at or threatening the child, can have a very negative impact on children's wellbeing – including increased disruptive behaviour. Reducing harsh parenting and increasing awareness and use of more positive parenting approaches are therefore common foci for family interventions that aim to ameliorate these behaviours.

However, intervention can be very difficult. One reason is that other aspects of the family environment – not least other family relationships such as that between siblings or the

parents themselves – interconnect with parenting, making things more complex. Coparenting is one such feature of the family environment. This term is used to refer to how parents work together in their parenting roles and there is some evidence that it is associated with children's behavioural development. Commonly, people think of coparenting as describing a separated or divorced couple where both parties remain involved with parenting the child. Indeed much of the early coparenting research began with these families. But whether mothers and fathers work well or not so well together in their parenting is relevant for children's wellbeing regardless of the marital status of the parents.

High quality coparenting refers to parents who show support for each other, share child-rearing values and cooperate with one another as they parent. On the other hand, low quality coparenting can involve things such as criticism of the other parent or actions that undermine a partners' parenting attempts. Having parents who demonstrate high quality coparenting has shown important positive links for

child outcomes, for example better child social skills and fewer behaviour problems. It has been suggested that high quality co-parenting may also act as a buffer, protecting children, for example, from parental criticism.

We were interested in understanding what role coparenting plays for children when there is harsh parenting happening in the home. Does high quality coparenting buffer children's behaviour from the negative impact of harsh parenting?

The study involved 106 UK families of young twins where the mother and father lived together. Both parents took part in a telephone interview and completed questionnaires to tell us about their harsh parenting, their coparenting and their twins' disruptive behaviour. The study was conducted during children's transition to primary school as this is a key period for their socio-emotional development when family influences may be especially salient.

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