



Variations in Co-parenting and Parenting Functioning Among At-risk Couples Following Participation in Couples Relationship Education

Rachael Nagy, Ted G. Futris, PhD., & Evin Richardson, PhD.
Department Human Development and Family Science



Background

Every year, more than three million child abuse cases are reported in the United States¹. In Georgia, 82,050 families were investigated for child abuse and neglect in 2015, an increase of 21.6% from 2014². Consequently, these children face major mental and developmental challenges and are nine times more likely to commit a crime¹, eight times more likely to engage in sexual-risk taking behavior³, 30% more likely to experience teenage pregnancy¹, and 80% more likely to meet criteria for psychological disorders by age 21¹. Furthermore, they are at risk of repeating this cycle of abuse when they become parents¹. Moreover, child abuse and neglect costs United States tax payers \$9.4 billion each year⁴.

The prevalence of child abuse and neglect is greater in at-risk families where conflict is prevalent and parenting stress is elevated⁵. Research has shown that the quality of the couple's coparenting relationship can strongly influence the environment in which children develop and thrive. Recently, couple relationship education (CRE) programs have been found to influence positive changes in relationship quality for couples in general⁶ as well as economically disadvantaged couples⁷. More so, positive changes in couple functioning have been linked to improved parenting behaviors after CRE⁸. The aim of the current study is to explore how CRE, provided to at-risk parents engaged in child-welfare services reduces parenting stress and improves co-parenting functioning.

Research Questions

1. Do parents report a more positive co-parenting relationship, lower parenting stress, and more positive parenting behaviors after completing the CRE program?
2. Do changes in co-parenting relationship quality, parenting stress, and parenting behaviors from T1 → T2 vary based on parent's sex (i.e., fathers vs. mothers), marital status (i.e., married vs. unmarried) and age of the youngest child (i.e., infants vs. young children)?

Measures

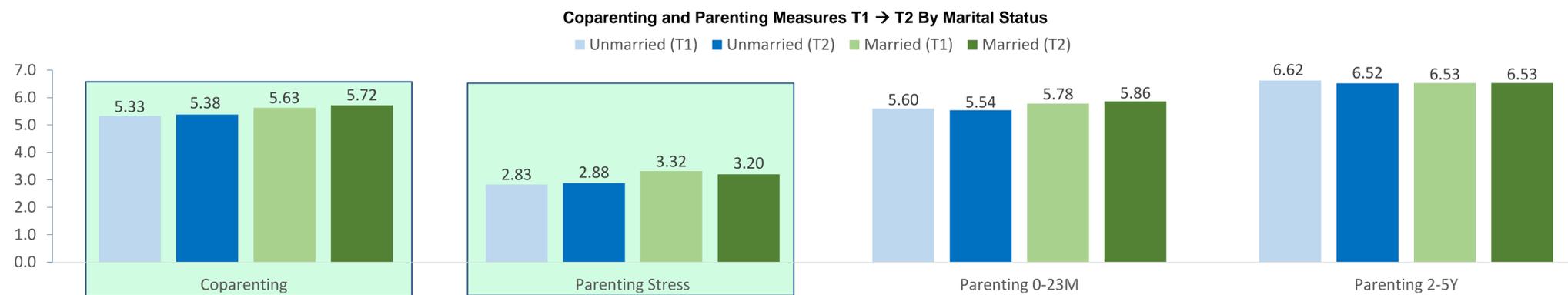
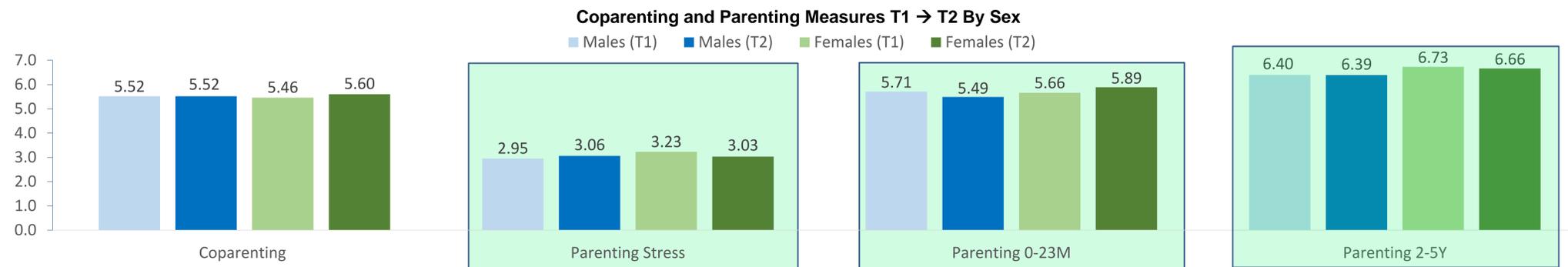
Construct (# of items)	Sample Items	Response Scale	Alpha
Co-parenting (n=12)	My partner shares parenting responsibilities with me; backs me up in parenting; is a good parent	1 = Very strongly disagree 7 = Very strongly agree	.90 T1 .91 T2
Parenting Stress (n=8)	Having children leaves little time and flexibility in my life; The major source of stress in my life is my children.	1 = Very Strongly Disagree 7 = Very Strongly Agree	.87 T1 .89 T2
Parenting 0-23 Month (n=10)	Babies need a routine; I do lots of organized activities with my baby	1 = Never True 7 = Always True	.82 T1 .88 T2
Parenting 2-5 Year (n=10)	I hold or touch my child in an affectionate way; I thank or praise my child	1 = Never True 7 = Always True	.84 T1 .87 T2

Methods and Sample

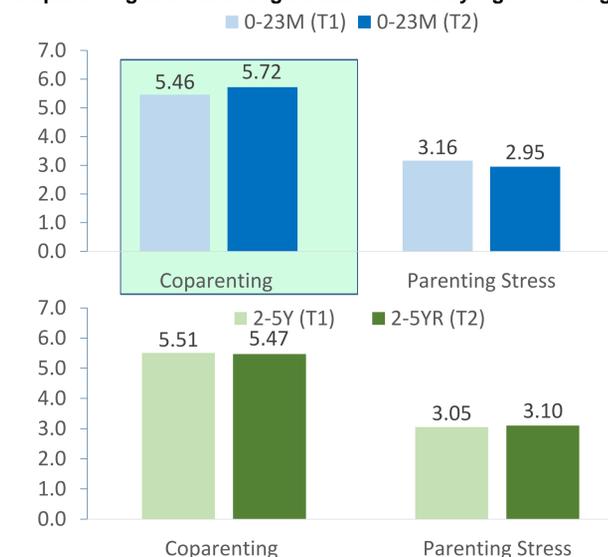
- 157 couples (314 parents) enrolled to participate in the 8-hour *Elevate* program: 82% had one or both partners graduate.
- Participants completed a pre-survey within 4-weeks of the first class (T1) and a post-survey with the same measures again approximately 6-8 weeks after the last class (T2).
- The sample was reduced to parents who were in a heterosexual couple relationship, had a child age five years or younger, and both partners completed both T1 and T2 surveys.
- **Final sample: 88 couples (53.4% married) together, on average, for 6.9 years (SD = 4.5) with a focal child (M = 24.9 months, SD = 16.5) age 0-23 months (37.5%) or 2-5 years (62.5%).**
- No significant differences between the parents in the final sample and those dropped.

	Male (n = 88)	Female (n = 88)
Age	Range = 18-49 years, M = 31.5 (SD = 6.9)	Range = 18-45 years, M = 29.4 (SD = 6.2)
Race	40.2% WH, 48.3% AA, 11.5% OT	46.0% WH, 39.1% AA, 14.9% OT
Employment Status	20.2% Unemployed, 67.9% Full-time, 11.9% Part-time/temporary	47.6% Unemployed, 28.6% Full-time, 23.8% Part-time/temporary
Highest Level of Education	14.9% No HS Diploma, 46.0% HS Diploma/GED, 18.4% Some College, 20.7% College degree	11.6% No HS Diploma, 33.7% HS Diploma/GED, 24.4% Some College, 30.2% College degree
Income past 30 days	35.0% < \$1K, 52.0% \$1-3K, 13.0% > \$3K	67.5% < \$1K, 26.5% \$1-3K, 6.0% > \$3K
Household Ann. Income	42.1% ≤ \$24,999, 30.1% \$25,000 - \$39,999, 27.8% ≥ \$40,000	

Results



Coparenting and Parenting Stress T1 → T2 By Age of Youngest Child



- Repeated measures ANOVAs showed that, overall, participants did not report a statistically significant change in co-parenting relationship quality, parenting stress and parenting behaviors.
- Between subject effects were found for co-parenting relationship quality ($F = 5.24, p = .023$) and parenting stress ($F = 6.31, p = .013$) based on marital status: On average, married parents reported *more* positive co-parenting relationship quality and *higher* parenting stress compared to unmarried parents.
- Between subject effects were found for parenting 2-5 year olds based on sex ($F = 12.14, p = .001$): On average, mothers of 2-5 year olds were more positively engaged compared to fathers.
- Within subject effects were found for parenting stress ($F = 3.95, p = .049$) and parenting 0-23 month olds ($F = 3.85, p = .054$) based on sex: On average, mothers reported a *decrease* in parenting stress and an *increase* in positive parenting behaviors after the program where as fathers reported *no change* in parenting stress and a *slight decline* in positive parenting behaviors.
- Within subject effects were found for co-parenting relationship quality ($F = 5.47, p = .020$) based on age of youngest child: On average, parents with infants (0-23 months) reported greater improvement in their co-parenting relationship after the program compared to parents with young children (2-5 years).