Fatherhood | Research | & Practice | Network |

Assessing Fathers' Coparenting Networks

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Overview

Many fatherhood programs emphasize healthy coparenting as a strategy for promoting father-child involvement. This is particularly important for nonresidential fathers, who may not have access to their children without mothers' cooperation (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011; Edin & Nelson, 2013). In such circumstances, positive father-child relationships may be contingent upon positive father-mother coparenting relationships.

Unfortunately, coparenting assessment tools are often inadequate for addressing the circumstances of low-income nonresidential (mostly unmarried) fathers. Researchers and practitioners are often forced to rely on tools that were developed to assess coparenting in intact families and may thus fail to address the experiences of fathers who are not presently residing year-round with their coparents and children (McHale & Lindahl, 2011; Waller, 2012).

Yet the realities of coparenting are more complex. Single mothers often report that other adults, such as maternal grandparents and aunts, also take part in raising and caring for children (Jones et al., 2003). Fathers may also have multiple coparenting partners. Fathers may coparent with their own (paternal) relatives, as well as other adults such as friends and romantic partners. Those who have children with multiple mothers may coparent with each of those mothers (Fagan & Kaufman, 2015). Given this complexity, it may be more accurate to speak of *coparenting networks* rather than presumably singular, two-person coparenting relationships.

To investigate coparenting among fathers, we developed an assessment tool designed to address the size, composition, and quality of these fathers' coparenting networks. We then administered this instrument with a sample of more than 600 fathers (see below). In this brief, we present our findings, specifically in regards to mothers, paternal relatives, and maternal relatives whom fathers identified as coparenting partners.

Methods

We utilized a convenience sample of 606 fathers drawn from six northeastern cities. Two hundred sixteen of these fathers were recruited from various fatherhood programs and another 390 fathers, not enrolled in programs, were recruited from a variety of locations in low-income neighborhoods. All fathers had a least one child with whom they did not reside. All respondents completed an extensive interview about their experiences as fathers. Fathers' ages ranged from 18 to 72 with the average father being roughly 38 years old. The sample was disproportionately Black with 78% identifying as Black or African-American. Seventy seven percent of fathers reported never having been married. Just under 38% of fathers reported being unemployed at the time of the interview. There were no notable demographic differences between program fathers and non-program fathers.

Fathers were asked to provide information about their coparenting network including up to five non-professional caregivers for any of their children. Interviewers prompted with, "Please tell me about the people who assume responsibility for raising and caring for your child(ren). Please do not include people who are paid for their caretaking role. Please tell me each person's name and then please tell me the person's relation to you." This information was then

entered into a matrix which allowed us to examine relationships among coparenting network members including their degree of contact and cooperation.

Within an individual father's coparenting network, which includes the father plus a maximum of five other caregivers, there are potentially 15 unique relationships. To assess contact and cooperation within a coparenting network, fathers were asked, "How often do these two people have contact with regards to raising the child(ren) and then how often do they cooperate in raising the child(ren): always, often, sometimes, rarely, or never." This brief focuses specifically on the relationship and the amount of contact between the father and his named coparenting network ties. Of our sample, a total of 597 fathers completed a valid coparenting network matrix.

Findings

The fathers in our study provided information on a total of 1,509 coparenting network ties. Fathers averaged 2.53 ties (SD = 1.30) (see **Table 1**). All fathers named at least one coparenting network tie with the largest proportion naming only one tie. Caregivers' relationships to the father were diverse including mothers of their children, romantic partners, relatives, friends, and neighbors. Fathers most commonly named one of the mothers of their children with more than 94% naming at least one mother (see **Figure 1**). Notably, while just over 23% of fathers named multiple mothers of their children as

Table 1. Fathers' Coparenting Network Size by Type of Relationship (Percent)

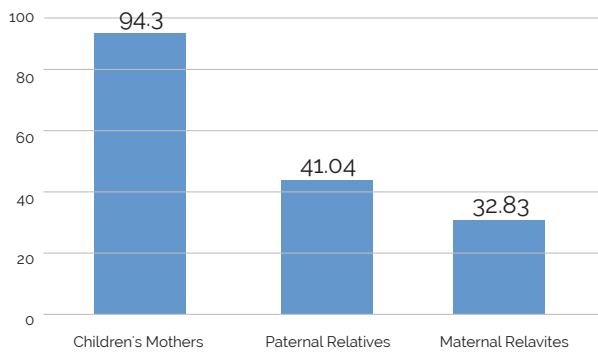| Ties	Total Network Size	Children's Mothers	Maternal Relatives	Paternal Relatives
0	0.00	5.70	67.17	58.96
1	28.81	71.02	21.78	22.45
2	23.45	15.08	9.55	13.74
3	22.95	5.19	1.34	3.69
4	15.75	1.84	0.17	0.84
5	9.05	1.17	0.00	0.34

FIGURE 1

Fathers' reports of individuals (by relationship to father) in their coparenting network (percent)

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coparenting network ties, nearly 40% reported having children with more than one biological mother.

Fathers were more likely to list one of his own relatives as a member of his coparenting network than a relative of one of his children's mothers (see **Table 2**). Mothers (grandmothers to the fathers' children) were the most common relative to be in a father's coparenting network with more than a quarter of fathers naming their own mothers as a caregiver for their children. Nearly

Table 2. Relatives in Fathers' Coparenting Networks (Percent)

Relatives	Paternal	Maternal
Mother*	25.13	22.78
Father*	5.86	4.19
Grandmother	5.53	3.35
Grandfather	1.34	1.17
Aunt	2.51	1.34
Uncle	1.17	0.34
Cousin	1.68	0.34

*Mother and Father refer to the parents of the father (paternal) and any of his children's mothers (maternal). They are thus the grandparents of his children.

23% of fathers named one of his children's maternal grandmothers as a coparenting tie. The fathers' siblings, grandmothers, and fathers followed as the most common relatives to be named in their coparenting networks. Fathers named nearly twice as many paternal siblings in their coparenting networks as maternal siblings. Romantic partners were rarely named among fathers' coparenting networks.[1] Only 3% of fathers ($n = 18$) listed a romantic partner who was not the mother of one of his children as a coparenting network tie and only 1% of fathers named a friend (results not shown in table).

We also asked fathers to rate the level of contact among their coparenting network ties. The amount of contact between the father and each coparenting network tie was assessed on a scale from never (1) to always (5). High contact ties were determined to be those with whom the father reported having contact "often" or "always." Fathers reported an average of 1.60 ($SD = 1.25$) high contact ties (see **Table 3**) among the members of their coparenting networks (up to 5). Nearly 18% of fathers reported having no high contact ties.

Among fathers naming a mother of their child(ren) as a coparenting network tie ($n = 563$), nearly 30% of fathers had no high contact ties with the mothers. Fathers were considerably more likely to have high contact ties with paternal relatives in their coparenting network than with maternal relatives. Less than 9% of fathers with paternal relatives in their coparenting network ($n = 245$) reported no high contact ties with their paternal relatives whereas nearly 57% of fathers with maternal relatives in their coparenting network ($n = 196$) reported having no high contact ties with these maternal relatives.

Discussion

While mothers make up the majority of fathers' coparenting networks, fathers also name a number of other coparents as well. Paternal relatives are

[1] Four percent of fathers (n=24) indicated a mother of their child(ren) as a romantic partner. This includes fathers who indicated a romantic relationship separately or who were currently married to a mother of his child(ren).

more likely to be named in fathers' coparenting networks than maternal relatives. Fathers appear to coparent with their own mothers, siblings, fathers, and grandmothers as well as the mothers and siblings of their children's mothers. Paternal relatives are much more likely to be high contact, exceeding even the ties between fathers and mothers.

Implications

Practitioners may want to assess fathers' coparenting networks, rather than focusing only on the father-mother coparenting relationship, when working to promote father-child involvement. Those embracing a "risk and protective factors" framework might consider strong coparenting ties as resources, or protective factors. The Fatherhood Research & Practice Network (FRPN) Coparenting Network Measure can serve as a guideline for such assessments and will soon be available online at **www.frpn.org**.

Researchers may want to embrace an expanded model of coparenting that incorporates all adults with whom fathers coparent. The FRPN Coparenting Network Measure provides a model for assessing the size, composition, and quality of fathers' (or any caretakers') network and will soon be available online at **www.frpn.org**.

Researchers may want to examine differences in fathers' ties to paternal and maternal relatives and their degree of contact and cooperation. This may be especially relevant among fathers who have children with multiple biological mothers.

Table 3. Number of High Contact Ties in Coparenting Networks (percent)

High Contact Ties	Total Network	Children's Mothers	Maternal Relatives	Paternal Relatives
0	17.59	29.31	56.63	8.98
1	39.20	59.33	33.67	56.33
2	21.27	9.41	7.14	25.71
3	12.73	1.42	2.55	7.76
4	6.37	0.00	0.00	1.22
5	2.85	0.53	0.00	0.00
	n=597	*n=563*	*n=196*	*n=245*

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