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## Partnering into parenthood : exploring the relationship between coparenting and couple satisfaction in triadic family systems

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Elizabeth Welton  
Partnering into Parenthood:  
Exploring the Relationship Between  
Coparenting and Couple Satisfaction  
in Triadic Family Systems

## **ABSTRACT**

This mixed methods study explores qualities in couple relationships, as they emerged in the initial interview of a coparenting intervention, as they relate to couple satisfaction. Fifteen sets of parents were asked to describe and discuss their coparenting and couple relationship in the initial interview. Their degree of couple satisfaction was measured at baseline and again 18 months later, and coparenting and couple qualities were examined side by side with baseline couple satisfaction scores and change scores. By exploring qualities pertaining to the coparenting and couple subsystems during early parenthood, this study illuminates the complex interplay between coparenting and couple relationships in relation to couple satisfaction.

Major findings of this study revealed that the discussion of qualities in the coparenting relationship tended to reveal more about the couple relationship than the discussion of the couple relationship itself, for these parenting partners. Findings pointed to maternal perceptions of father involvement, methods for handling couple disagreements, and the degree of affirmation offered from partner to partner as particularly important indicators of couple satisfaction. For partners who communicated strongly, affirmed one another's parenting, and for whom ideals were met with regard to the division of labor, couple satisfaction tended to start strong and stay strong. The findings implicate that the application of a coparenting paradigm is essential to understanding and improving family functioning and wellbeing, and that numerous complexities within family subsystems relate closely to couple satisfaction as it changes in relation to parenting.

**PARTNERING INTO PARENTHOOD: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP  
BETWEEN COPARENTING AND COUPLE SATISFACTION  
IN TRIADIC FAMILY SYSTEMS**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2012

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Research over the last several decades has confirmed a troubling reality about family life: On average, couples become more dissatisfied with their partnerships as they make the transition to parenthood. Couple dissatisfaction can lead to heightened inter-parental conflict, and exposure to such conflict is associated with child maladjustment (Kerig & Swanson, 2011). The stakes are high for families to avoid legacies of discontent. This has led to studies aimed at uncovering the source of couple problems during the early developmental years of their children's lives; decreased sleep, changes in work patterns, financial concerns, and decreased sexual activity are all factors that contribute to discord in couple relationships after the birth of children (Gottman, 2000; Lawrence, Rothman, Cobb, & Bradbury, 2011).

As researchers have delved into further understanding the interplay between couple relationships and parenting relationships, an important paradigm shift has occurred. The field has broadened from viewing parenting as the sole and overarching influence in the family to recognizing that there are several complex interlocking subsystems within every family system that are also important (Parke, Schulz, Pruett & Kerig, 2010). In order to meaningfully understand family dynamics, it is important to examine not only the couple relationship and each parent-child relationship, but also the *coparenting* relationship—that is, the nature of the alliance between two adults who together share responsibility for their children's care and upbringing

(McHale & Lindahl, 2011). In other words, it is not just important to consider how individuals parent—it is important to understand how individuals parent *together*.

There have been few studies aimed at exploring the coparenting relationship as it influences and is influenced by other subsystems within the family system. Even fewer have sought to explore the ways that coparenting experiences might *positively* impact the couple relationship. As researchers strive to illuminate a path to parenting that does not come at the expense of the couple relationship, solutions may lie within the coparenting paradigm. The current study seeks to build on knowledge disseminated from the Supporting Father Involvement project, a large scale intervention study aimed at improving outcomes for children by strengthening the co-parenting relationship, father involvement, and each parent's parenting. This study will explore qualities of the coparent and couple relationship as they emerge in the initial interview of fifteen couples participating in the intervention. This will illuminate the coparenting qualities that correspond with higher versus lower couple satisfaction, as well as the qualities that lead to increased or decreased couple satisfaction through the course of a coparenting intervention.

### **Purpose of Study**

In the quest to improve child development outcomes, family-focused interventions have been a staple in communities across the country for the last several decades (Parke, Schulz, Pruett and Kerig, 2010). These interventions have historically focused on either the improvement of the mother/baby relationship (Erickson, Korfmacher, & Egeland, 1992) or the quality of couple relationships (Cowan & Cowan, 2000), indicating that these relationships have strong impacts on child development. More recently, out of recognition that these two areas of family-focused intervention deserve better integration, scholarly attention has focused on



*coparenting* as another family subsystem of primary importance to child development (Cummings, Merrilees, & Ward, 2010). As opposed to the dyadic emphasis of the existing paradigms, the coparenting paradigm explores the parent-child-parent relationship as triadic, with greater inclusion of father-child relationships (e.g. C.P. Cowan & Cowan, 2000), in particular.

One of the few interventions that has applied a coparenting framework in the quest to improve family wellbeing and child development outcomes is the Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) project. The SFI project is a randomized clinical trial comparing two variations of a preventive intervention aimed at strengthening fathers' involvement in families and couple and child outcomes (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Pruett, 2007). The intervention was designed utilizing concepts central to coparenting research, with attention to the role of fathers within the coparenting relationship (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, & Wong, 2009). The intervention was offered in three separate conditions to which families were randomly assigned: fathers-only, couples, and a control condition. This study focuses on interviews carried out with coparents assigned to the couple's condition, for the purpose of examining coparenting and couple satisfaction as two important aspects of family functioning. Thus, attention will be given to the coparenting alliance that exists between individuals in *committed romantic partnerships* (married or non-married). Since couple satisfaction is a central focus of the study, coparents that are either separated or divorced (see Pruett & Donsky, 2011) or in non-romantic coparenting partnerships (see McHale & Irace, 2011) are excluded. A caveat with regard to terminology: while in this study I will refer to the degree of contentedness within the couple relationship as *couple satisfaction*, many researchers have examined *marital satisfaction* instead, indicating inclusion of only couples that are married. I treat these terms as interchangeable in my review of

the literature because they are similar concepts. To most accurately represent prior research, the term “marital satisfaction” will be used only in reference to those studies that focus on married couples; otherwise, the term “couple satisfaction” is intended to include anyone in a committed romantic partnership.

Also worth noting is the attention to *fathers* as a facet of the coparenting construct. The SFI study aims to increase father involvement and thus includes couples in which at least one partner identifies as a father figure, usually but not always the biological parent. This is a response to the reality that fathers have long been excluded from child development research (Lewis & Lamb, 2004)—a phenomenon in need of correction. Researchers have sought to rectify this imbalance over the last fifteen years, with greater attention to father-child relationships (Lewis & Lamb, 2004). The inclusion of fathers in this study does not detract from families coparented by two females. As the coparenting paradigm shifts toward embracing *all* children and families, research addresses diverse family constructs (McHale & Lindahl, 2011).

Rooted conceptually in family systems theory, coparenting research has the potential to serve a vital role in assisting families to improve family functioning and child adjustment. McHale (2009) outlines coparenting as a specific form of triadic (or polyadic) family interaction, with assessment focusing on the beliefs and interactions of partners as they pertain to the child and their shared connection to that child. In contrast, research that addresses couple relationship quality focuses on partners’ dyadic relational interactions and sentiments about one another (Mangelsdorf, Laxman, & Jessee, 2011). The coparenting paradigm allows for nuances of triadic family relationships to be accounted for, thus enabling a more integrated approach to exploring child development through a family-focused lens. The need for this study is perhaps best captured in a plea from researchers Mangelsdorf et al. (2011): “greater translation is needed

between basic research on coparenting and preventive interventions; understanding the unique importance of coparenting in families of young children is a prerequisite for helping couples develop an alliance that is both more rewarding for them and more beneficial for the social and emotional adjustment of the child” (pg. 55).

### **Theoretical Basis for Research**

Family systems theory posits that an individual cannot be fully understood independent of the network of relationships in which that individual is embedded (Cox & Paley, 1997; P. Minuchin, 1988). Thus, a parent’s role with a child cannot be understood outside of the triadic parent-child-parent relationship, nor can a child’s development be understood out of the context of the child’s relationship with his or her caregivers. Minuchin (1974) outlined several ways that triangular dynamics can affect children and families—coparenting adults may compete for a child’s loyalty, one parent may form a coalition with the child, or coparents may respond to distress in their romantic partnership by hyper-focusing on their child’s problems, to offer a few examples (McHale and Irace, 2011).

McHale and Lindahl (2011) suggest that contemporary coparenting theory rests on explicit assumptions borne out of family systems theory: (1) In any coparenting system that serves the needs of children, there must be functional hierarchies and appropriate boundaries; (2) A thorough understanding of the coparental alliance necessitates a triadic level of analysis—one in which the relationship between adults with respect to a particular child is considered; (3) Children themselves contribute to the particular relationship dynamic that evolves between them and their coparents; and (4) Although coparenting is a centrally important dynamic in families headed by heterosexual married couples, coparenting is also a socialization force that is characteristic of all diverse forms of family systems. These tenets have been instrumental in the

formulation of coparenting research and interventions and are central to the theoretical underpinnings of the SFI intervention.

Through a family systems lens, the coparent and couple subsystems are viewed as overlapping and interlocking subsystems within a greater family network. They are distinct in some ways, but alike in others (McHale, 2002). For example, Katz and Gottman (1996) found that marital hostility was associated with increased hostile-competitive coparenting, lower levels of interactiveness and responsiveness between spouses, and increased father withdrawal from children—attesting to the inter-relatedness of the coparenting and couple subsystems. On the contrary, Van Egeren (2001) found coparenting interactions to be unrelated to marital interactions in families with infants, and McHale (1995) observed that coparenting behavior differed depending on the gender of the child, suggesting a more complex coparenting dynamic than is represented solely in the couple dyad. Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale (2004) point to the fact that the coparenting relationship follows its own developmental trajectory, initiated separately from the couple relationship, as a discontinuity between the two subsystems. Thus, existing literature reflects varying levels of differentiation between the coparenting and couple subsystems. McHale, Khazan, Erera, Rotman, DeCoursey, & McConnell (2002) describe the coparent and couple subsystems as complementary rather than comparable; the present study moves forward with this framework in mind.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

Over decades, longitudinal research has substantiated that the quality of couple relationships tends to decline as they transition into parenthood (Belsky & Hsieh, 1998; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2001). The fact that the majority of couples undergoing divorce include a child under six (Whiteside and Becker, 2000) is indicative of how stressful early childhood years tend to be for parents' relationships. This decline may be attributed at least in part to the tendency of family roles to become more traditional than couples expected them to be in terms of the division of labor, with mothers taking on more child care tasks (Cowan & Cowan, 1988).

Although the influence of coparenting on child adjustment is documented (e.g., Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; Schoppe et al., 2001), less is known about the coparenting relationship itself, particularly as it evolves over time. Historically, scholars have researched coparenting as a factor within a couple's relationship, as opposed to a subsystem of its own (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). Using a framework that defines the coparenting and couple subsystems as interrelated, the question turns to *how* these subsystems are different from one another, and how they interact. What conclusions can be drawn from previous research about the relationship between the couple and their coparenting, both across families and across time?

Having established that parenthood, on average, leads to declines in couple satisfaction (Belsky & Hsieh, 1998; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Schoppe et al., 2001), scholars called for studies that extend beyond documenting declines and that illuminate the variety of adaptations that couples make, as well as factors that enhance or detract from adaptations (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Identifying couples that are likely to experience increased difficulty in their couple relationship in the transition to parenthood helps to focus intervention efforts on the most vulnerable couples. At the same time, understanding the strengths of couples whose relationships are enhanced by the experience of parenthood or for whom the experience has minimal negative impacts also may inform intervention (Cox, Paley, Payne, & Burchinal, 1999). In one study, Cox et al. (1999) examine the impact of birth of a child on a marriage through observed interaction of couples during a problem-solving task, before the birth of their first child and then again at 3, 12, and 24 months. They found that patterns of change in the marital relationship were related to whether or not the pregnancy was planned, to depressive symptoms of spouses, to the couple's problem solving behavior, and to the gender of the child (Cox et al., 1999). This research points to the reality that many nuances within the coparenting relationship may affect couple behavior, and in turn couple satisfaction, over time.

Historically, researchers have placed emphasis on couple satisfaction as a predictor of child development. As the field of coparenting research has matured, however, studies have found that coparenting is linked more to child outcomes than is the quality of the couple relationship (Frosch et al., 2000; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998). It has also been found that the quality of coparenting can either enhance or erode the quality of a marriage over time (e.g. Belsky et al, 1996; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). This counters the historically held assumption that the couple's behavior is established first and therefore predicts coparenting

behavior, highlighting the possibility that coparenting interventions may also serve to buttress couple behaviors, and perhaps satisfaction, of parents.

In previous research conducted by Belsky and Hsieh (1998), marital reports were obtained in 99 families when their firstborn sons were 10, 27, 36, and 60 months of age to identify patterns of change in marital functioning. It was found that couples whose marriages deteriorated over time engaged in more unsupportive coparenting behavior than couples whose marriages remained stable. Moreover, O'Brien and Peyton (2002) found that couples in which parents had differing beliefs about childrearing experienced steeper declines in marital intimacy over the 3 years after the birth of a child. These findings indicate that the early coparenting relationship has an important influence on the subsequent quality of a couple's relationship.

The most recent study in this genre was conducted by Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2004), who examined the associations between coparenting and marital behavior longitudinally, from infancy to preschool years. Forty-six (46) families were assessed through observations of family play and marital discussions at 6 months and again at 3 years after their child's birth. The researchers found that early coparenting predicted later marital behavior, but not vice versa (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). This study again highlights the importance of early coparenting behavior—particularly undermining coparent behavior—for understanding both subsequent coparenting behavior and subsequent marital behavior. There were limitations to this study, however. The assessment of early marital behavior included a discussion of child-care tasks, making the object of analysis not strictly dyadic in nature. Additionally, the 46 families included in the sample lacked ethnic diversity, reducing the generalizability of the study (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). With these limitations in mind, the authors called for future research that includes multiple observations and types of measures of coparenting and couple processes, as

well as inclusion of families that represent a range of structures and levels of adaptive functioning.

With regard to the question of how couple and coparenting relationships may function differently from family to family, there is still much research to be done. Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2004) point to the need for an individual-differences perspective in the further examination of coparenting and marital processes: for some families, are there stronger associations between coparenting and marital behavior, whereas for others, do these subsystems function more independently? This study aims to address this question directly, with the potential to inform researchers on how to craft coparenting interventions that better attend to the nuances of the relationship between the coparenting and couple subsystem.

### **The Implications of a Coparenting Intervention for Couple Satisfaction**

If early coparenting behavior is an important predictor of subsequent couple satisfaction, as suggested by previous research (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004; Belsky & Hsieh, 1998), then it stands to reason that interventions aimed at improving coparenting relationships may significantly impact couple satisfaction. While scholarly work provides a compelling conceptual framework for integrating the two prominent areas of family-focused intervention—parenting interventions and couple relationship programs—relatively little integration has occurred in the design and implementation of these interventions to date (Feinburg and Sakura, 2011). In their review of major themes emerging from family research, P.A. Cowan and McHale (1996) encourage researchers to explore the possibility that when coparenting is positive but the couple relationship is negative, parents may be able to rally for the sake of their children. The maintenance of a positive coparenting relationship, in these instances, may offer incentive for



repairing dyadic negativity. Feinberg and Sakuma (2011) suggest that the examination of the effects of coparenting interventions on couple satisfaction would allow for this idea to be tested.

The Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) project is a likely source of data for the aforementioned research inquiry; participating couples were assessed, among many other variables, on couple satisfaction pre- and post- intervention. Findings showed that the intervention was successful at strengthening the conjugal relationship and decreasing stress related to parenting, while increasing paternal involvement in coparenting (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, and Wong, 2009). This particular study is derived from the larger SFI dataset, and it will allow for the examination of couple satisfaction among SFI participants more closely, with attention to qualities that emerge in the narratives of couples in their initial interview as sign posts for how contented they are initially and how they may respond to an intervention aimed at strengthening their relationship.

Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2004) highlight the value of attending to early coparenting behavior when trying to understand both later coparenting and marital behavior. Specifically, they suggest that interventionists focus their attention on consistency in parenting values, beliefs, and attitudes (O'Brien & Peyton, 2002) and expectations about the division of child-care labor (C.P. Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Additionally, they recommend attention toward the subtle ways that coparents may undermine one another's parenting, and toward how their relationship as parents affects their relationship as a couple (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). This study will take each of these suggestions into account, as themes that emerge in the initial interview are explored in relation to couple satisfaction pre- and post-intervention.

## **The Role of the Clinical Interview in Assessment**

Given the recent emergence of the field of coparenting theory and research, clinical interventions designed to influence the functioning of coparental alliances have not been systematically evaluated. Frascarolo, Fivaz, & Favez (2011) suggest that approaches that target coparenting, at their best, should blend principles of treatment and prevention, guiding the coparental alliance in a positive trajectory. SFI and other projects of its kind (also see Feinberg and Sakuma, 2011) are carried out with these principles in mind, with the goal of promoting positive family outcomes.

Development of family focused interventions such as SFI requires careful and thorough assessment, occurring at various stages within the intervention. For this particular study, attention will be directed toward the initial clinical interview as a means of assessment, in which barriers and strengths are identified as they affect the trajectory of the parents' participation and success in the intervention. Initial assessments as such are critical for the researcher's purposes, but they can also be therapeutically beneficial to the family—as Frascarolo, Fivaz, & Favez (2011) emphasize: “thoughtful assessments of early coparenting patterns are not just an essential prelude to intervention—they can be seen as the initial stage of the intervention itself” (p. 216). McHale (2011) suggests that successful assessments hinge on an empathic connection and “joining” (Minuchin, 1974) with families, and stresses that assessments centered on learning about the family's strengths, successes and resilience promote more meaningful collaboration.

With regard to the content and purpose of family-focused assessments, there is some variation among scholars regarding what they might entail, depending on considerations specific to each intervention. Broadly speaking, from a family systems perspective, Holman (1983) purports that the purpose of the assessment is to understand (1) the family as a system, (2) the

family and its environment, and (3) the life cycle of the family. Lauffer (1982) contributes by offering the perception that assessments serve as a way of examining *what is* (here and now assessment), *what is likely to be* (future-oriented assessment), and *what ought to be* (normative assessment), with inclusion of both objective and subjective information. McHale, a leader in the establishment of coparenting assessment protocol, argues that:

Any essential “read” of the family’s coparenting alliance starts by establishing the identities and involvement of all the important parenting adults in the child’s life. This is followed by an evaluation of how the family’s unique coparental alliance functions with regard to (a) the mutual involvement and engagement by major coparents, (b) the presence and extent of active solidarity and collaboration between these individuals, and (c) the presence and extent of unresolved coparenting dissonance between them. For interventionists, the aim of a coparenting assessment is not just to describe the coparenting strengths and areas of need but to analyze why the coparental alliance is currently functioning as it is (2011).

Existing literature emphasizes the use of clinical interviews, observation, and self-report surveys for the purpose of assessment (McHale, 2011). While the SFI project has utilized each of these assessment tools, focus will be given particularly to the use of the clinical interview for the purpose of this study. The SFI study uses an hour-long interview (minimum) with coparents as one means of assessing the family dynamics, with attention to the couple relationship as well as each distinct parent-child relationship. The purpose of the interview is to help parents focus on topics they will discuss in the intervention, and to help parents and group leaders learn about

each other before the group intervention begins. It also serves as a screening tool to ensure group leaders that the family is ready and able to engage in an intensive group intervention.

McHale (2011) points to the clinical interview as an indispensable facet of coparenting assessments, in that they provide relevant information about how the adults function and reveal concerns that are not always accessible from direct observation. Though no gold standard has been set, there are a number of formal interview protocols published (see Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990; Mchale, Kazali, et al., 2004; Pleck & Stueve, 2001; Strozier, Armstrong, Skuza, Cecil, & Mchale, 2011; von Klitzing & Burgin, 2005, as cited in Mchale, 2011). These interviews are coded using a variety of standard and more creative qualitative methods of analysis—for example, some researchers have examined the “I-ness” versus the “we-ness” of interviews (Pleck & Stueve, 2001) to determine the degree to which each coparent thinks inclusively about their shared child.

McHale & Fivaz-Depeursinge (2010) provide a list of general guidelines for interviews, including specific questions that can be used to elicit information on coparenting processes and dynamics. They notes that it is especially revealing to ask what parents believe the other coparent does well — the absence or inclusion of supportive statements can be diagnostic (2010). The clinical interview also serves a very useful function: it enables the researcher to quickly gather practical information, such as the amount of effort and time each parent dedicates to the coparenting role, and how each partner views his/her own coparenting role as well as the partner's.

McHale and Fivaz-Depeursinge (2010) highlight three key questions that they believe are most beneficial in the assessment of coparenting: (1) Have the adults reconciled ideological differences about how ‘best’ to parent in order to have mutually agreed-upon, predictable

routines for the child? (2) To what extent do they provide (or fail to provide) mutual support and validation for one another's parenting efforts? (3) How well do they tend to children's emotional security within the family unit?

SFI's initial interview (see Appendix A) is very much in line with the suggestions put forth by McHale and Fivaz-Depeursinge (2010), with attention given to the strengths and dissonance within the coparenting relationship. The SFI interview is designed to elicit information that specifically pertains to the couple relationship and to the parent-child relationship. One purpose of this study is to identify facets of the interview that help us to understand how a coparenting intervention might affect couple satisfaction. Research suggests that early evaluation of coparenting behavior is important for understanding subsequent coparenting behavior and couple satisfaction (e.g. Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). It follows, then, that examination of the initial (pre-intervention) clinical interview may be a useful tool for identifying family strengths and vulnerabilities that are relevant to the family's progress through the intervention.

In this study, we will draw from information contained in the initial interview with 15 couples to determine which qualities, across couples, correspond with high/low couple satisfaction at the time of the interview. We will also determine which qualities correspond within marked increases or decreases in couple satisfaction through course of the coparenting intervention (according to measures acquired pre-intervention and again 18 months later). The following research questions will be addressed: 1) How do couples discuss and express their coparenting relationship and relationship satisfaction in an initial interview? 2) How do couple's descriptions of their co-parenting characteristics and processes in an initial interview relate to couple satisfaction prior to a coparenting intervention and eighteen months later? In addition to

exploring the relationship between coparenting and couple satisfaction, this study will highlight how the initial clinical interview is utilized as an effective assessment tool in this family-focused intervention.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) Design and Implementation**

Data for this study were obtained from the Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) study based in California (e.g., Cowan et al, 2009). The SFI study is a randomized clinical trial comparing two variations of a preventive intervention aimed at strengthening fathers' involvement in families and at strengthening couple and child outcomes. The data used in this study were obtained from the first phase of the SFI intervention, implemented between 2003 and 2005. Findings indicated that SFI was effective in enhancing fathers' involvement in the daily care of their children, strengthening the relationship between fathers and mothers, and improving behavioral outcomes for the families' young children (see Cowan et al., 2009 for a full description of the methodology and results).

The full sample of SFI included Mexican-American and European-American families residing in 4 California counties (San Luis Obispo, Santa Cruz, Tulare, and Yuba). All interested parents took part in one of 3 conditions on a randomly assigned basis: (1) a low-dose comparison condition consisting of a one-time informational meeting (3 hours); (2) a group for fathers that met for 16 weeks (32 hours); or (3) a group for couples that met for 16 weeks (32 hours). At each site, all three versions of the intervention were conducted with both interventions using the same curriculum, and all couples, including those in the low-dose

intervention (the single informational meeting), were assigned a Case Manager throughout their 18 months in the study.

At each site, project staff recruited participants through direct referrals from other services within the Family Resource Center, other county service agencies, talks at community organizational meetings, ads in the local media, local family events, and information tables placed strategically at sports events, malls, and community events. Because the project was preventative in nature—aimed at helping families before family problems became intractable—the project targeted expectant parents and those with a youngest child from birth to age 7 (Cowan et al., 2009).

A brief screening interview was administered by a case manager to assess whether or not the parents met four additional criteria: (1) both partners agreed to participate, (2) the father and mother were biological parents of their youngest child and raising the child together, regardless of their marriage and cohabitation status, (3) neither parent suffered from a mental illness or drug or alcohol abuse problems that interfered with their daily functioning at work or in caring for their children, or (4) neither parent had a currently open child or spousal protection case with Child Protective Services or an instance within the past year of spousal violence or child abuse (Cowan et al., 2009). These criteria were established both to increase the reliability of the study and ensure the safety and wellbeing of the families included in the study. Those families that did not meet criteria were referred to other appropriate services or resources.

Of the 550 couples who were administered a screening interview, 496 couples met the criteria for eligibility (Cowan et al., 2009). A total of 405 eligible couples were then scheduled for a joint 1.5-hour initial interview with the group leaders that covered five domains of family life—individual adjustment, couple relationship, parent-child relationship, three-generational



patterns, and the balance between life stress and social support. All parents were then scheduled to participate in a baseline assessment, consisting of questionnaires conducted interview-style in English or Spanish by case managers. After baseline assessments were completed, the 16-week couples groups began, with 147 couples participating in couples groups (in addition to the fathers-only and low-dose comparison groups, which are not a focus of this study). All groups were led by male-female pairs of group leaders. Each meeting involved structured exercises, discussions, short presentations, and an open-ended time in which participants could raise issues and concerns to discuss and problem solve.

### **The Present Study**

A sample of 15 couples participating in the couples group of the SFI Intervention will be used for this study. These couples were selected randomly with the following inclusion criteria: 1) the participating couple must be in a romantic partnership (for the purpose of examining couple satisfaction), and 2) the participating couple must have participated in the couple's group of the intervention (for the purpose of examining coparenting). Additionally, because interview data were to be analyzed by this English-speaking researcher, only English-speaking couples were included in the sample. The process of coding and analyzing data from the 15 initial interviews used for the purpose of this study is detailed below.

### **Data Collection and Coding**

The hour to hour-and-a-half long interviews used in this study were tape recorded (audio only) by the case managers working in the family resource centers where the interventions took place. The interviews were developed for SFI and consisted of open-ended questions concerning the coparenting relationship, each distinct parent-child relationship, as well as the parents' couple relationship. Interviews were transcribed by this researcher, and coded using Glaser's method of

constant comparative grounded theory analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). An open coding scheme was first applied, in which thoughts, experiences, and beliefs were identified for each interview participant. This allowed for an inductive process through which information related to the coparenting relationship could be extracted from the interview, with room to expand and re-define how relevant information was categorized as interviews were coded.

Constant comparative coding was then utilized to denote common phenomena across couples, and build them into concepts. These concepts were divided into five categories based on the paradigm of family domains developed by SFI (as cited in Cowan et al., 2009): (1) family members' personality characteristics, mental health, and well-being; (2) the trans-generational transmission of expectations and relationship behavior patterns; (3) the quality of the parent-child relationships; (4) the quality of the relationship between the parents; and (5) the balance of life stresses and social supports in the family's relationship with peers, schools, work, and other systems (Cowan et al., 2009).

Out of these five categories, several theoretically driven subcategories emerged in the coding process. The subcategories evolved as the coding process was completed, based on the emergence of hypotheses related to themes across couples. For example, themes included observations such as "supportive extended family," "substance abuse issues," and "couple easily identifies qualities that they appreciate about one another." Upon completion of coding, these themes were examined in relation to couple satisfaction scores to determine how patterns across families corresponded with either high, low, or average couple satisfaction scores, both pre-intervention and at follow-up (see analysis).

Quantitative coding was completed by this researcher using a coding scheme formerly developed by doctoral student David Strauss (under the guidance of Dr. Marsha Kline Pruett and

Dr. Rachel Ebling), and was modified by this researcher. Additional coders were not used. The scheme was utilized to measure couple qualities using a 5-point likert scale (see Appendix A), which included questions pertaining to the couple relationship as well as the coparenting relationship. The questions were as follows:

1. *How effective do the parents believe their methods are for resolving disagreement?*
2. *How much do the parents express reliance on each other for emotional support?*
3. *How much do the parents express reliance on each other for other forms of support (e.g., time, money, concrete help)?*
4. *How aligned are mothers' and fathers' perceptions of father's involvement with children?*
5. *To what degree does the couple express agreement/disagreement over child rearing issues?*
6. *How aligned are the mother's and father's perceptions of a fair and balanced division of parenting responsibilities between them?*

### **Measurement of Couple Satisfaction**

A measure of couple satisfaction for each couple was obtained using the *Quality of Marriage Index* (QMI; Norton, 1983). The QMI is a six-item questionnaire with one global estimate and five specific questions about marital satisfaction, (see Appendix B). Two sets of QMI scores were used in this study: baseline scores (those attained pre-intervention), as well as those attained post-intervention (at the 18 month follow-up). This was for the purpose of measuring couple satisfaction at baseline and the degree of change in couple satisfaction over the course of the SFI intervention.

***Baseline Couple Satisfaction.*** QMI scores were used in raw form for quantitative analyses, and were transformed into categories for qualitative analyses. To categorize individuals based on their degree of couple satisfaction, separate means of baseline QMI scores were obtained for males and females. Those individuals with scores that fell below the mean were considered to have a “lower” degree of couple satisfaction, and those above the mean were considered to have a “higher” degree of couple satisfaction. It is important to note that the means were different for males and females (explored further in the discussion section to come).

***Change in Couple Satisfaction.*** Gain scores were computed for each participant as the difference between the 18-month follow-up QMI score minus the baseline QMI score. Gain scores (also known as difference scores) have been shown to be an “unbiased estimate of true change” (Rogosa, 1995, p. 180). For the qualitative analyses, males and females were categorized regarding *changes* in QMI scores from before to after the intervention: (1) those for whom couple satisfaction scores “increased,” (2) those for whom couple satisfaction scores “decreased,” and (3) those that “stayed the same.” Subcategories were then created within the “increased” and “decreased” categories to delineate those individuals that experienced “minor” versus “major” change in couple satisfaction. The degree of change was determined by the standard deviation associated with the mean of the change scores (computed separately for males and females). Those individuals with a gain score within 1 standard deviation of the mean were considered to have experienced “minor” change, while those above 1 standard deviation were considered to have experienced “major” change.

### **Analytic Approach**

***Qualitative Analyses and Exploratory Questions.*** The open coding process allowed for two exploratory questions to be addressed, separately for males and females within each couple:

1. Which qualities in a couple relationship, as they emerge in an initial interview, are most predictive of the degree of couple satisfaction (before participating in the coparenting intervention)?
2. What couple relationship qualities, as they emerge in the initial interview, are most predictive of both increases and decreases in QMI scores over the course of the coparenting intervention?

Once coding was complete, couple satisfaction scores were viewed side by side with the interview data for each couple. Individuals within each couple were grouped according to baseline and change QMI scores for the purpose of noting patterns in couple qualities within each category. These patterns provided insight into which qualities in a couple relationship, as they emerge in an interview, are most predictive of their degree of satisfaction as a couple at baseline and their potential for changes in couple satisfaction over the course of the intervention (according to the QMI).

***Quantitative Analyses and Hypotheses.*** Statistical analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between measures of coparenting (coded from the initial interview) and couple satisfaction (from the QMI). Associations were examined between discrete interview codes and each of the QMI measures (baseline and change). Analyses were conducted separately for mothers and fathers. The two couples that were expecting a child were excluded from analyses involving the coparenting interview codes.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

Demographic information will be presented first, followed by quantitative findings. Then qualitative findings will be presented for each exploratory question—first for couple qualities that relate to *pre*-intervention couple satisfaction, and next, for couple qualities that relate to *changes* in couple satisfaction. Findings will be presented separately for mothers and fathers. Lastly, couple qualities that account for differences in couple satisfaction scores *within* each couple relationship will be presented. Presentation of qualitative data will be subdivided into the two domains of family life (as established by SFI) that are most pertinent to this study: *the quality of parent child relationships* and *the quality of relationships within the couple*. Themes will then be presented that appear across these domains.

### Demographics

The sample for this study consisted of fifteen couples participating (by random assignment) in the couples group condition of the SFI intervention, which took place in four different California counties. Among fathers, three identified as Hispanic/Latino, 11 as non-Hispanic white, and one as mixed ethnicity. Among mothers, five identified as Hispanic/Latino and ten as non-Hispanic white. The age of fathers spanned from 18 to 43 years, and the mean age of fathers was 30 years (SD=7.3). The age of mothers spanned from 19-37 years and the mean age of mothers was 28 years (SD=4.6). Family incomes ranged from \$0 to 100,000, and the mean family income was \$35,094. Ten of the participating couples were married, while five

were in committed partnerships though not married. The age of the target child (youngest, shared child) spanned from 0 to 6 years, and the average age was one year.

### **Quantitative Findings**

Quantitative analysis was used to determine which qualities of the coparenting and couple relationship—as they emerge in the initial interview—are most closely associated with couple satisfaction at baseline and change in couple satisfaction subsequent to the intervention. First, associations were examined between six qualities of the coparenting and couple relationship and couple satisfaction (baseline and change). The relationship quality codes were based upon the following questions (the first three pertaining to the couple relationship and the second three to the coparenting relationship), and will be referred to as the abbreviations stated in parentheses:

1. *How effective do the parents believe their methods are for resolving disagreement? (Methods for Resolving Disagreement)*
2. *How much do the parents express reliance on each other for emotional support? (Reliance for Emotional Support)*
3. *How much do the parents express reliance on each other for other forms of support (e.g., time, money, concrete help)? (Reliance for Other Support)*
4. *How aligned are mothers' and fathers' perceptions of father's involvement with children? (Fathers Involvement)*
5. *To what degree does the couple express agreement/disagreement over child rearing issues? (Agreement over Childrearing)*

6. *How aligned are the mother's and father's perceptions of a fair and balanced division of parenting responsibilities between them? (Division of Responsibilities)*

The two couples that were expecting a child were excluded from analyses involving the coparenting interview codes.

For mothers, based on Pearson correlations, there were significant associations between baseline couple satisfaction and two couple qualities: Methods for Resolving Disagreement and Reliance for Emotional Support. There were also significant associations between couple satisfaction and two coparenting qualities: Father Involvement and Division of Responsibilities. Father's Involvement was found to have the strongest correlation with mother's baseline couple satisfaction, followed by Division of Parenting Responsibilities, among the six codes for mothers. There were no significant associations for changes in couple satisfaction scores, though Father Involvement approached significance.



Table 1

**Correlations between Couple Relationship Interview Codes and Couple Satisfaction: Mothers**

n= 15		Mothers' Baseline QMI	Mothers' QMI Change
	Pearson Correlation	.555*	-.088
1. How effective does the mother believe the couple's methods are for resolving disagreement? (Methods for resolving Disagreement)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.032	.754
	Pearson Correlation	.566*	.090
2. How much do the parents express reliance on each other for emotional support? (Reliance for Emotional Support)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.028	.750
	Pearson Correlation	.321	.073
3. How much do the parents express reliance on each other for other forms of support (e.g., time, money, concrete help)? (Reliance for Other Support)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.244	.797

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 2

**Correlations between Coparenting Interview Codes and Couple Satisfaction: Mothers**

n=13		Mothers' Baseline QMI	Mothers' QMI Change
	Pearson Correlation	.756**	-.285
4. How aligned are mothers' and fathers' perceptions of father's involvement with children? (Father Involvement)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.346
	Pearson Correlation	.391	.125
5. To what degree does the couple express agreement/disagreement over child rearing issues? (Agreement over Child rearing)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.187	.684
	Pearson Correlation	.727**	-.003
6. How aligned are mother and father's perceptions of a fair and balanced division of parenting responsibilities between them? (Division of Responsibilities)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	.991

For fathers, based on Pearson correlations, there were significant associations between baseline QMI and one discrete interview code pertaining to the couple relationship (Reliance for Emotional Support) and two discrete interview codes pertaining to the coparenting relationship (Agreement Over Childrearing and Division of Responsibilities). Division of Parenting Responsibilities was found to have the strongest correlation among the six codes for fathers. As with mothers, there were no significant associations for QMI change scores, though Methods for Resolving Disagreement approached significance. Thus, aspects of the couple relationship are related to couple satisfaction scores at baseline for both mothers and fathers, but the qualities themselves are different, and these qualities are not related to change over the course of the intervention.

Table 3

**Correlations between Couple Relationship Interview Codes and Couple Satisfaction: Fathers**

n=15		Fathers' Baseline QMI	Fathers' QMI Change
	Pearson Correlation	.449	-.386
1. How effective does the mother believe the couple's methods are for resolving disagreement? (Methods for resolving Disagreement)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.093	.155
2. How much do the parents express reliance on each other for emotional support? (Reliance for Emotional Support)	Pearson Correlation	.564*	.148
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.029	.598
3. How much do the parents express reliance on each other for other forms of support (e.g., time, money, concrete help)? (Reliance for Other Support)	Pearson Correlation	.374	.092
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.169	.745

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 4

**Correlations between Coparenting Interview Codes and Couple Satisfaction: Fathers**

n=13		Fathers' Baseline QMI	Fathers' QMI Change
	Pearson Correlation	.430	-.299
4. How aligned are mothers' and fathers' perceptions of father's involvement with children? (Father Involvement)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.143	.322
5. To what degree does the couple express agreement/disagreement over child rearing issues? (Agreement over Child rearing)	Pearson Correlation	.554*	-.270
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.049	.373
6. How aligned are mother and father's perceptions of a fair and balanced division of parenting responsibilities between them? (Division of Responsibilities)	Pearson Correlation	.734**	-.066
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.831

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

**Qualitative Findings*****Relationship Between Couple Qualities and Baseline Satisfaction***

1. What couple qualities, as they emerge in the initial interview, are related to higher vs. lower couple satisfaction for mothers at baseline?

On average, couple satisfaction scores (QMI scores) for mothers were 36.8 (on a scale of 1-50, 50 being highest) at baseline. Six mothers scored below average, earning the distinction of "lower" couple satisfaction, and nine fell above average, earning the distinction of "higher" couple satisfaction. Qualities that correspond with each of these subsets of mothers will be presented below, as they appeared within the two domains of family life most relevant to this

study: *the quality of parent child relationships and the quality of the relationship between parents.*

***The quality of parent child relationships.*** When asked about the joys and challenges of parenting, mothers routinely cited that they enjoy the elements of nurture and affection that accompany motherhood. Several expressed appreciation for the experience of watching their children grow and learn new things. Mothers with **higher** couple satisfaction more frequently describe themselves, or are described by their partners as, “natural mothers”. One mother cites that she “adores parenting”, and that being a mom makes her “a better person”.

There are two distinctly different parenting philosophies that emerge in the subset of mothers with **higher** couple satisfaction—one group describes a philosophy in which each parent is skilled and equally invested in performing childcare tasks, and the other group describes a dynamic in which the parents fill distinctly different (and ideally complementary) roles. Five mothers describe a dynamic akin to the former scenario, in which parenting is equally shared by the parents. One mother says “both of us do 100%”; another says “we share parenting equally and give each other breaks often”. Three of these five mothers work part time while their partner works full time, one does not work (nor does her partner), and one stays home while her partner works.

Among the subset of mothers that describe a dynamic in which the parents fill differentiated roles, the father typically fills the role of logistical and financial provider that works outside of the house full time, while the mother considers childcare tasks primarily her responsibility (this is the case for three of the four couples, while the fourth couple is comprised of a mother and father that both work full time). One couple explained that they have a system in which they share parenting equally when the father is home from work, but that during the

week from 9-5 parenting is the responsibility of the mother. It is also common in the latter scenario (among parents of children that have aged out of toddlerhood) for one parent to do the majority of the disciplining, while the other parent provides more nurturance.

Several of the mothers scoring **lower** on couple satisfaction cited challenges that relate to maintaining “control” of their children’s behavior. While discipline poses challenges for many of the families across the intervention, those with low satisfaction seem to more prevalently approach parenting with a desire to possess more control and authority. This is particularly true for those mothers that cite challenges particular to one or more of their child’s temperaments—the two mothers that have a son that has been recently diagnosed with ADHD, as well as the mother who has a ten year old stepson that she describes as “defiant”. Three mothers describe changes in parenting due to recently going into recovery for substance abuse issues. For one mother in recovery, she reports that discipline has become more difficult since becoming sober, due to attempts to utilize new strategies—“with [our son], we used to let him do what he wanted [when we were using]. Now that we have put boundaries down, he don’t like it. We have to bribe him, in a way. We are getting better control of him, though.” Another mother in recovery for substance abuse describes her relationship with her children as a “rebuilding relationship”; her children were removed by Child Protective Services and lived with three different foster families until she became sober and regained custody.

Among mothers with **lower** couple satisfaction, three of them work full time, one part time, and two do not work outside the home. Thus, there are more mothers working full time that fall in the category of lower couple satisfaction than higher satisfaction. One working mother, who also attends school full time, reports that she feels “stretched thin” as a parent. Another mother that works full time expresses that she wishes her partner was more supportive

with parenting. Of the two mothers with lower satisfaction that do not work, both would like to be working (one is actively seeking employment, and the other plans to go back to school after finishing her day treatment program for drug abuse). In this subset, couples seem to either lack a philosophy with regard to parenting, or fall into the dynamic where the parents fill two highly differentiated roles as parents. In one couple, the parents describe their coparenting relationship as one in which the mother “does all the school stuff” and the father “has the last word”. Generally speaking, there is less confidence in parenting among these mothers, however the joy of parenting is not lost on them; each of these mothers describes a unique and nurturing bond with their children.

***The quality of the relationship between parents.*** A central theme among mothers with **higher** couple satisfaction is a tendency for them to describe their *couple* relationship as highly interchangeable with their *coparenting* relationship. That is, when asked to describe the strengths of their relationship as a couple, they tend to cite qualities about their coparenting relationship as indicators of a strong couple relationship. They do not see these roles as highly differentiated, and they seem to experience their children as a protective factor in their couple relationship. One mother shares that her couple relationship has grown stronger since having children, and that their main strength as a couple is problem solving. Another mother cites the main strength in the couple relationship as “prioritization of family”. One mother states, “It’s hard. We do have communication problems. But the kids help us, because they are there, and sometimes when we are not agreeing, they come into the room and smile and it makes us happy. So it kinda makes us forget”.

Also notable is that among couples with higher satisfaction, the majority actively address the hard work they put in to maintain a strong couple relationship. They acknowledge their

strength as a couple while also acknowledging their challenge areas—that is, they are confident in their relationship without idealizing or glorifying it. One mother describes the strengths of the couple relationship as an ability to “communicate and compromise”. Two of the mothers with higher couple satisfaction report that they are in couples counseling with their partner, while none of the mothers with lower satisfaction report utilization of couples counseling. Says one mother of her relationship with her partner, “I love our differences, but of course, according to our counselor, those differences can also be the source of conflict. So I tend to be anal and judgmental, and he doesn’t like to be bossed, or questioned very much. So it’s about communicating and finding ways to support those differences, rather than trying to make each other something that we’re not. When we are in a triggered place, its hard for us to maintain perspective.” This type of insight and awareness of challenges seems to correspond with increased couple satisfaction. Of the nine mothers with higher couple satisfaction, all are readily able to identify strengths in the couple relationship, and all but two can identify challenges; of the two couples that struggle to name any challenges, both of those couples seem to approach their couple and coparenting relationship non-critically and with considerable simplicity.

Of the mothers with **lower** couple satisfaction, all six mothers readily identify challenges in the couple relationship, of which communication is the most prevalent, and identification of strengths in the couple relationship is generally more sparse. Of the three mothers that have struggled with substance abuse issues, all three report that the couple relationship has changed since becoming sober—two report that the relationship has improved due to increased communication, and one reports that while their relationship has not necessarily improved, they have “stopped ignoring [their] problems”. However, she reports that they still “do not communicate well. One of us screams and the other walks away”. One mother reports that the

couple tends to “see eye to eye on parenting, but that the couple relationship is what is stressful”. She acknowledges that her negative attitude and moods influence the couple relationship. This mother also notes that the couple came close to separating in the last several weeks.

For one couple with low satisfaction, they identify conflict in their couple relationship as one of the few stressors they endure—they have no financial stress, good external support, and no identified drug or alcohol concerns. The mother reports that they bicker daily “about little stuff”. She elaborates on their strengths, followed by their challenges:

When we actually get together, we can talk about things. We may get heated and passionate in our discussions, but we do actually get somewhere. It’s never been “I don’t want to talk to you again”, or slamming doors. We can talk well to each other. As for challenges, we can push each other’s buttons. It’s interesting, because if I am having a challenging day, I can put him in a bad mood, and vice versa. So I think that is one of our weaknesses—we feed off each other negatively, rather than the positive person turning the other one around...But overall, I think our relationship is pretty positive. We really work at doing things together. That’s our strength—we really do like spending time together.

This mother names what appears to be an important indicator of couple satisfaction—whether the couple’s dominant narrative is one characterized by positivity, togetherness, and support, or one that is characterized by negativity and difference.

***Themes across domains.*** In addition to the themes presented above that were specific to either coparenting or couple satisfaction, there were several themes that emerged in the data that appeared to correspond significantly with couple satisfaction across domains. Noteworthy themes were 1) the presence (or absence) of substance abuse concerns, 2) the presence (or



absence) of a supportive network of friends and/or family, 3) the degree of external stressors related to work and financial wellbeing, and 4) the degree of mood stability.

Regarding substance abuse concerns, three of the six mothers with lower couple satisfaction reported that they were in recovery for substance abuse, while none of the nine mothers with higher satisfaction mentioned any substance abuse concerns. All three of the recovering mothers noted significant negative impacts that their substance abuse and recovery had on both their relationship with their partner and their children.

Regarding a support network, there was a pronounced relationship between the presence of a supportive network of friends and/or family with higher couple satisfaction for mothers. The mothers with lower couple satisfaction seemed to rely less on close friends and family; one mother identified an online community as her main source of support, another named AA, and another named various social service agencies. There seemed to be a particularly strong correspondence between higher couple satisfaction and the presence of a supportive group of *parenting friends*. While family members were the most commonly identified forms of support for mothers with both higher and lower satisfaction, the presence of a friend group of parents was noted only by three mothers, who all scored higher on satisfaction.

Stress related to work and finances also seems to affect coparenting and couple relationships significantly for mothers. For some mothers that work full time, there is a feeling of being “stretched thin”, which inhibits their ability to be as present and nurturing in their relationship with both their partner and their children. For other mothers, their concern is the extent to which their partner’s workload negatively impacts his ability to offer support as a coparent. Generally speaking, there is greater financial stability among mothers with higher

couple satisfaction, while stressors related to finances and work seem to correspond with strained family relationships for mothers with lower satisfaction.

Lastly, the degree of mood stability for mothers seems to correspond significantly with their satisfaction in their coparenting and couple relationships. Several of the mothers scoring high in couple satisfaction are noted (either by themselves or by their husbands) as particularly *patient* people, skilled in communication, that lean toward optimism. Several of the mothers lower in satisfaction cite mood instability; one reports that she “hates the world” when she comes home from work, one reports that she “yells a lot”, and another acknowledges “negative attitude and moods”.

*2. What couple qualities, as they emerge in the initial interview, are related to high vs. low couple satisfaction for men?*

While there are many similarities between mothers’ and fathers’ descriptions of their family relationships in the initial interview, there are also several dissimilarities worth noting. Additionally, while most mothers and fathers scored similarly on the QMI, there were some discrepancies. On the whole, fathers scored lower for couple satisfaction at baseline, with a mean of 33.7 (on a scale of 1-50, 50 being highest couple satisfaction). Seven fathers’ scores fell below the mean, earning them the distinction of “lower” couple satisfaction, while eight fell above the mean, earning the distinction of “higher” couple satisfaction. Of the fifteen couples, fourteen fathers fell into the same category as their partner; that is, both parents scored “higher” or “lower” in satisfaction. For one couple, the father scored “lower” in couple satisfaction, while the mother scored “higher”. Qualities in the couple/coparenting relationship as described by fathers will be presented below, first with regard to parent child relationships and then with regard to the relationship between parents.

*The quality of parent child relationships.* Across the board, fathers tended to emphasize the extent to which professional responsibilities affected their involvement with parenting. Among fathers that scored lower in couple satisfaction, this was particularly true; a theme emerged among this cohort of stress related to the feeling of being consumed by work. One father stated about his parenting, “I am doing the best I can, when I can. But my job is very demanding. As far as pieces of the pie are concerned, I probably do about 40% of the load, and she does about 60%”. Another father cites challenges about the quality of time he spends with his children: “I understand that they’re both individuals, and that they have times that they want to be around people and times that they don’t. But I’m the sole income for the family, so I’m not around, and I have my responsibilities at home and everything, so when I get the opportunity to be with them and they don’t really want to play with me, that’s kind of frustrating. And the opposite—when I’m doing the dishes and stuff, and they want to play, and I kind of have to push them away”.

Fathers with higher couple satisfaction were less apt to focus on the ways that their professional work detracts from their dedication to parenting. They appear generally to be less strained by their work as it affects their relationships at home. One father stated of his children, “I can work all day and just be so tired and worn out, but then you see them smile or something and you forget about the whole day”. Another father cited that he felt fortunate to be able to go home during his lunch breaks to see his daughter, noting that “just spending time with her” was the most valuable aspect of being a parent. Says one father of his son:

Whenever I come home, and you can see a smile come to his face, and he runs to me and puts his arms around me and says ‘daddy’, that’s one of the best parts...of course there

are down times where he gets frustrated or I get frustrated with him, but the good outweighs the bad.

Also pronounced among fathers was attention to discipline issues with their children, particularly among fathers scoring lower in couple satisfaction. Similar to mothers that scored lower in couple satisfaction, there was a theme among fathers that scored lower of the desire for greater control and authority. One father said, “The hardest part [of parenting] is the authority of who I am—the extent of my control as a dad. I am his friend as long as I don’t try to correct him.” Another father scoring lower in couple satisfaction cited that his biggest stressor is “getting control of my children”. One father, having recently become sober, spoke of discipline concerns in a new light: “Now, because we ain’t in the addiction, trying to discipline, and raise, and control, is more of a family matter, rather than spanking. It’s more about trying to talk things out with each other before it gets abusive”.

Several fathers were quick to describe a dynamic in which their relationship with their children is strained by the fact that the mother acts as the “primary parent”. There was a higher prevalence of this among fathers scoring lower in couple satisfaction; one father said, “I do a lot less, I guess, because [our son] has a tendency to want to go to mom, any time anything happens, or he is being disciplined by me. At this point in life, though, she is the primary parent, and that is all there is to it. There’s no way around that. But I still try to interact as much as possible”. Another father said about his relationship with his children: “We have good days and bad days, but we get along alright. They rely on me for a lot of things I do for them. But they get along better with their mom than me at this age”.

One father who scored lower in couple satisfaction described an approach to parenting that was very dissonant from the mother’s approach:

I am kind of like the hero. If she asks her mom for something that mom won't give her, she knows that she can come to me and she will get it. It's that striking a balance issue—I want her to think of me as someone she can depend on. If she wants the orange, she gets the orange. If she wants the milk, she gets the milk. She knows that she can count on me. I am the hero.

This tendency to “play hero” emerged for several fathers that spent significant time away from home for professional reasons, often impacting their success with discipline. One father (also scoring lower in couple satisfaction) laughed as he explained the differences in parenting roles: “Mom does all the disciplining, and I do all the joking”. Other fathers scoring lower in couple satisfaction reported that they felt responsible for a majority of the disciplining, which increased their levels of stress as a parent. Among fathers, highly differentiated roles as parents seemed to correspond with lower couple satisfaction.

Among fathers with higher couple satisfaction, several were quick to report that their partners' natural parenting abilities exceeded their own, and acknowledged that parenting was a “learning process” for them. One father said, “[My partner] is a lot more patient than me. After twenty minutes of baby time, I get frazzled, whereas she can go for hours. But I am working on it—I am a lot more patient than I was before”. Another describes his fathering role somewhat self-critically, saying “I could do better”, although during the interview his wife is highly affirming and encouraging of his parenting. One father says, “I think I have a lot to learn, as far as discipline and stuff. I work a lot, but when I am home, I try to spend as much time as I can. But like I said, I still have a lot to learn. I don't really know where I stand—I've never had a program like this”.

Among fathers with higher couple satisfaction, there is also less differentiation in their parental roles; one father says, “both of us do 100%. If I need to be home with them, I take care of them. We handle that together, or otherwise we couldn’t do it”. Another says of coparenting, “I look at it as both of us are skilled in every area. We both try to do what’s necessary when necessary.” Thus, those fathers that tend to see parenting as an equal task, regardless of the time they spend at work, seem to have both higher couple satisfaction and stronger relationships with their children.

*The quality of the relationship between parents.* In general, fathers are less apt to describe the strengths of the couple relationship. They tend to use simple terms, describing the strengths as “the support we give each other”, or the fact that “we are always there for each other”. One father struggled to name strengths of his relationship with his partner, but was able to name her patience and skill as a parent. Some fathers, however—particularly those that name communication as a strength in their relationship—describe strengths in their relationship with their partner more effusively. Says one father (scoring higher in couple satisfaction), “the best part of our relationship [as a couple] is our communication. We work together as a team. She is very forgiving of my faux pas, tolerant. And she’s happy to continue to grow, together.” Says another, “Both of us really enjoy creative expression, and we both love spending time with each other, with similarly optimistic views of each other and the world. We also both really take joy in being with our friends and family.” For one father scoring higher in couple satisfaction, he cannot identify any challenges in the couple relationship: “I wouldn’t change anything. She is the best thing that ever happened to me. And giving me two daughters, even better!”

Among fathers scoring lower in couple satisfaction, naming couple strengths was less prevalent, and there is typically more of a defensive tone. One father, after a lengthy pause, says

“wow, I have six eyes on me. Um....my clothes are spotless, the house is clean, the bed is made. She keeps things in order.” Another father (who was previously abusing substances) reports, “the relationship is a lot better now. I’ve always been supportive of my wife. I’ve always made sure that she doesn’t have low insecurity. She never has to worry anything about me. More so now, we get along great.” One father says of the couple relationship, “the strongest part would be logic. We’ve been together for a long time, and we both come from homes where our parents are divorced. So we are striving for having a family.” One father, when prompted to name strengths in the couple relationship, instead highlights his own strengths as a partner: “I am good at being able to kind of feel things out, and be in touch with myself. I see myself as a provider, and I have a lot of creativity.” Another father names the strength of the couple relationship as “the kids and stuff, I guess, keeping us together”.

Among these fathers, who scored lower in couple satisfaction, the most predominant challenges cited with regard to the couple relationship are those related to differences in lifestyle, age, values, and beliefs. Also noted were challenges related to one or both partner’s anger and a tendency to yell, as well as a need for alone time. One father said:

At times, we have been very different. Our politics are different. And how she was raised is different than how I was raised. We tend to have disagreements on current affairs in the world, and the bible....I can be very haphazard—I can bring my job home with me. And sometimes I use that as a crutch for how I spend my time. And I’m the aggressive one in being vocal. But it’s a relationship that continues to grow.

Another father cites that communication is their biggest issue; “I am a happy go lucky person, and I don’t like conflict, just like my dad. I don’t like confrontation. If something’s wrong, I won’t say nothing.”

Among fathers scoring higher in couple satisfaction, a major theme regarding challenges in the couple relationship was the difficult negotiation of the prioritization of personal needs, space, and alone time versus the prioritization of the needs of partners and children. One father said, “it was difficult after getting married, you know, having one life instead of two. Having our life together *all* the time.” What emerged for this subset of fathers was a theme of grieving the loss of independence, and challenges related to coming to terms with this loss. One father described the couple relationship as “rocky, sometimes, with us being so young and married. We had a child at a young age so we missed a lot”. Yet he privileged the maintenance of his marriage over his own needs:

It’s not so easy just to give up and say I quit, because you have two little ones to think about. If I notice that it’s serious where we are not communicating, I will sit down and talk with her about it, because I don’t want a divorce. I don’t want to have to put my kids through that. So the kids help us not say ‘I quit’. It has been rocky, but they tell us it’s always rocky in the first two years. I care about her a lot.

***Themes across domains.*** Several themes appeared that spanned across the domains of coparenting and couple satisfaction for fathers, some of which were similar to those of the mothers, and some of which were different. Like mothers, the presence of mental health concerns and substance abuse concerns seemed to be significantly related to the health of fathers’ relationships with both their partners and their children. For fathers, however, addiction concerns appeared more broadly; among the seven fathers that scored lower in couple satisfaction, three were in recovery for substance abuse issues, and two fathers described themselves as “workaholics”. Another father noted that he is “always online”, which may imply an internet addiction. Several fathers also noted that they enjoy watching television. While there



is not sufficient diagnostic information for this sample, addiction appears prevalent, and corresponds with strained relationships with partners and children for fathers. Among the fathers with lower couple satisfaction, there was also a prevalence of mental health concerns—one father reported that he was recently diagnosed with bipolar disorder, another reported that he struggles with comorbid depression and anxiety, and another with depression. Among fathers scoring higher in couple satisfaction, there was no acknowledgment of either substance abuse problems or mental health concerns.

There were also several personality characteristics, particular to fathers, which appeared important across domains. Over all, what seemed to separate fathers that scored higher in couple satisfaction from those that scored lower was the sense that they were more accepting of change and compromise, less individualistic in nature, and generally more attentive to positive attributes in their partners. On the whole, effective communication did not come as naturally to fathers as it did to mothers, but fathers with higher satisfaction exhibited more effort and willingness to learn in this arena. Notable among fathers with higher satisfaction was the presence of humility in addition to confidence—fathers were able to note the areas in which they would like to grow, and yet are able to succinctly name the positive contributions they make to their family. There was also a theme of selflessness—these fathers are giving of themselves as partners and parents in addition to working full time (except one father, who works part time). As opposed to expressing a desire to have their partners do more, they expressed a desire for more energy as parents. Thus, rather than blaming, they were oriented toward their own growth as a coparent.

Last, and perhaps most significant, was the theme of how professional and economic stress was relevant to fathers' relationships with their partners and their children. Most fathers highlighted the degree to which financial stress and/or demands at work impacted their ability to

be present and supportive in relationships at home. Both under-employment and over-employment corresponded with lower satisfaction. Fathers that expressed no concerns with the degree to which work impacted their family relationships typically had higher satisfaction, and most typically described work experiences that were positive, flexible, and financially stable.

*3. What couple qualities, as they emerge in the initial interview, are related to increases vs. decreases in couple satisfaction from before to after the intervention for women? What couple qualities correspond with major versus minor changes?*

Among mothers, five experienced *increases* in couple satisfaction over the course of the intervention, four of which were *minor* and one of which was *major*. Seven mothers experienced *decreases* in couple satisfaction, five of which were *minor* and two of which were *major*. For three mothers, couple satisfaction scores remained the same. As previously, qualities related to coparenting and couple relationships that correlate with these subgroups of mothers will be presented separately.

***The quality of parent child relationships.*** Among the five mothers that experienced increased couple satisfaction, the most salient themes related not to their parent-child relationships, but rather to the ways that each partner regarded *each other's* relationship with their children. Either the mother was highly supportive and affirming of the father's relationship with their child(ren) and vice versa, or the mother very concretely addressed the areas in which she would benefit from more support from the father. One mother described her partner as a "very loving, generous parent...he has a really effective, nurturing, attentiveness." She also describes herself in a positive light as a parent; "I am a very responsive, oriented parent. I'm pretty organized, and disciplined. I am a good teacher."

For the mother that scored lower in satisfaction at baseline and experienced major increases in couple satisfaction over the course of the intervention, communication and the division of parenting responsibilities were cited as the biggest challenges. It was readily apparent in the initial interview that she was not satisfied with the father's contributions as a parent, particularly toward his stepchild (her full child):

He isn't that involved with him—he has a hard time disciplining him. He's a good dad, I mean he takes care of him and everything, it's just that sometimes he doesn't take it seriously. I wish that he were more involved with him, maybe not with the discipline stuff, but with other stuff. I get the diaper bag ready, the dishes clean, everything washed and ready for the next day. I pretty much do it all.

This excerpt is illustrative of a theme common to mothers with increased couple satisfaction: an awareness of challenge areas and room for growth.

For mothers that experienced decreases in couple satisfaction, the most prevalent themes with regard to parent child relationships were discipline concerns and coparenting disagreements. One mother stated that she struggled most with discipline, which the father acknowledged was frustrating for him. There seemed in this cohort, overall, to be a lack of collaboration on the part of the parents which impinged on each parent's relationship with their child(ren). In many cases, a prevalence of external stressors, such as work, were mentioned. Said one mother of her partner:

I tend to put a lot off on him. When I'm not being listened to, I get mad. And I know that's not how I should do it, and I've been to parenting classes, but it's just sometimes easier. You know, low tolerance, because I am stretched out.

Of the seven mothers that experienced decreases in couple satisfaction, four started out as lower at baseline, while three started out as higher. Two experienced *major* changes, and both of these mothers scored lower at baseline. One of these mothers describes a partnership in which both parents are dedicated parents, but they do not parent well *together*. The mother expresses disappointment in her partner's ability to discipline, and feels that his parenting often undermines her own. The other mother describes parenting challenges related to discipline, and cites control and authority as central parenting concerns, and cites that they "often have to bribe [their son]".

For the three mothers for whom couple satisfaction scores remained constant, two started off in the higher subgroup and one in the lower subgroup. For the two that scored high and remained constant, both exhibited considerable satisfaction with the status quo, as far as parenting concerns. To follow her partner's explanation of the division of parenting tasks, one of these mothers said, "I don't anticipate that things will change—I am pretty happy with how it is." For the mother lower in couple satisfaction that remained constant, the birth of her first child occurred during the course of the intervention. Thus, information on coparenting was not attained in the initial interview, aside from her expectation that parenting would be divided very equally.

***The quality of the relationship between parents.*** The most prevalent theme among mothers that experienced increases in couple satisfaction was attention to communication issues with their partner. Three of these five mothers named communication as the greatest strength in their relationship, and the other two expressed challenges in communication, but noted that they were making improvements. Also noteworthy was the degree to which these mothers noted problem solving and teamwork as strengths. When these mothers were asked how they handled disagreements with their partners, they all named an ability to sit down and discuss the issue at

hand. Two said that they take space and then come back together to discuss. One said, “When we actually get together, we can talk about things. We may get heated and passionate in our discussions but we do actually get somewhere. We can talk well to each other.” For the mother that experienced the greatest increases in couple satisfaction, she noted that she and her partner were on the verge of separating just weeks before the intervention. Her chief concern in the couple relationship was her partner’s willingness to communicate.

Among mothers that experienced decreased couple satisfaction, the most pronounced theme was a lack of effective communication in the face of couple disagreements. One mother said, “We express our opinions and it doesn’t go anywhere.” Another said, “We end up screaming back and forth until he just walks away.” Several external stressors were identified as relevant to the couple relationship; one mother noted that her sex drive had decreased as a result of medication, and another cited the consequences of substance abuse on the couple relationship: “Addiction caused a lot of damage—distrust and jealousy. We separated, and since coming back together, I feel it has been a friendship growing...I know that he doesn’t hear anything when I yell. He walks away and it causes more problems.” Apparent among these couples, as described by the mothers in the interview, is a difficulty listening, receiving feedback, and valuing the insights of the other parent.

*4. What couple qualities, as they emerge in the initial interview, are related to increases vs. decreases in couple satisfaction from before to after the intervention, for fathers? What couple qualities correlate with major versus minor changes?*

Among fathers in the sample, four experienced increases in couple satisfaction, of which two experienced major changes and two experienced minor changes. Eight experienced decreases in couple satisfaction, of which two experienced major changes and five experienced

minor changes. For three fathers, couple satisfaction scores remained the same pre- and post-intervention. Qualities that emerged in the initial interview that corresponded with changes in couple satisfaction for fathers will be presented below, first in the domain of *the quality of parent child relationships* and then in the domain of *the quality of relationships between parents*.

***The quality of parent child relationships.*** For the four fathers that experienced increases in couple satisfaction, there were no significant themes with regard to parenting. One father who experienced major increases in couple satisfaction noted that it was not coparenting issues that caused stress in their relationship—“We tend to see eye to eye when it comes to parenting”. None of the fathers in this subset raved about the quality of their relationships with their children—they tended to describe them as “pretty good” or “typical father child relationships”.

For fathers that experienced decreases in couple satisfaction, like mothers, discussion of discipline issues emerged as a theme, as well as a lack of structure and routine with regard to parenting. One father discussed his discipline tactics at length, and was very resistant to others “butting in” when it came to raising his children. The father that was previously described as wanting to “be a hero” to his daughter, who struggled with an ability to provide structure and discipline, experienced major decreases in couple satisfaction. One father in this subset spoke of parenting as “like having a really, really important puppy.” On the whole, these fathers spoke of their relationships with their children largely using terms related to behavioral control and described their success as parents in terms of their ability to enforce rules.

Consistent themes were noted among the fathers that remained constant in terms of couple satisfaction, with regard to coparenting—each of these three fathers scored higher in couple satisfaction at baseline, and described a relationship with their child(ren) that was very positive and nurturing. They each noted feeling fortunate to have flexibility at work, which

allowed for time with their child(ren). Each of these fathers described a very supportive coparenting dynamic, as well, in which both parents were highly involved in aspects of parenting.

*The quality of the relationship between parents.* Fathers whose couple satisfaction scores increased through the course of the intervention all scored lower at baseline. Each cited communication challenges in the couple relationship, and two of the four were very direct in expressing their desire to become better communicators. Several of these fathers cite that they have managed to “avoid problems” in the couple relationship, as opposed to addressing them. For one, this was related to his substance use, and for another, it was related to his tendency to “work constantly and bring work home with me”. A third cited that he avoids confrontation. For one of these fathers, who experienced major increases in couple satisfaction, it was apparent throughout the interview that the couple felt positive about their ability to coparent together, yet felt out of touch romantically. When discussing his hopes, he expressed a desire to “drop my pride, and become more loving. To help things flow better around the house.”

Among fathers that experienced decreases in couple satisfaction, the most prevalent theme emerged with regard to styles for handling couple disagreement. Some expressed an ability to compromise and find resolution, but others expressed challenges related to accepting each other’s feedback. One father said:

I tend to push her aside and do it anyway. That’s a problem, I know, but I’m kind of stubborn. I was raised religiously, and I am pretty headstrong about what I believe. And so sometimes I force things on her.

The fathers whose couple satisfaction scores remained constant all exhibited higher couple satisfaction. One identified the greatest strength as a couple as “how much time we make

for our family.” Another reported that the couple relationship “is growing in strength and maturity”. These fathers name practical challenges, such deciding who will get up in the middle of the night to take care of the baby, but seem very secure and content in general with their partners.

*5. What couple qualities correspond with differences in couple satisfaction scores and change scores within each couple?*

***Baseline Couple Satisfaction Scores.*** On average, mothers scored higher on relationship satisfaction than fathers at baseline—an average of 36.8 and 33.6, respectively. Two couples scored equally at baseline, while other couples scored quite differently; the greatest score difference within a couple was 16. On average, couples’ scores were 5.4 points different from one another. Interestingly, the four couples that scored most similarly at baseline all scored higher in couple satisfaction. Of the four couples that had the greatest differences in baseline scores, three scored lower in couple satisfaction.

Among the four couples with the greatest differences in scores between parents, all of the mothers scored higher than the fathers. A theme among all four couples was a tendency for the father to be domineering and controlling toward the mother. When asked how the couple handles disagreements about parenting, one of these fathers said “I tend to push her aside and do it anyway...sometimes I force things on her. I try and let her be useful on the disciplinary side, let her make decisions. But usually if we disagree, I win.” These fathers also had a more difficult time identifying strengths in the couple relationship—one could only identify challenges, and another said of his relationship:

It’s rocky sometimes. With us being so young and married. But we can work a lot more on the communication part. She likes to communicate a lot, and she wants to sit down



and talk. But usually I end up falling asleep, because I am working. Or sometimes I have things on my mind and I can't just sit down and open up. Pretty much we are just making it, paycheck to paycheck, day to day.

In addition, two of these fathers reported struggling with bi-polar disorder or depression.

Among the four couples that scored equally (within one point of each other) at baseline, all were in the higher couple satisfaction subgroup and described a considerable amount of stability in their home. Each of these partners identified each other as their primary emotional support person, as opposed to other individuals. In three of the four interviews, the mother and father gave brief responses and manifested a belief system about family relationships that was straightforward and relatively simple.

***Change Scores.*** Although mothers scored higher than fathers at baseline in satisfaction, fathers' scores increased more significantly (or decreased less significantly) than mothers' scores on average between baseline and follow-up. Mothers' QMI scores decreased an average of 3.5 points during the 18 month period in which the intervention took place, while fathers' scores decreased only an average of 0.9 points during the same 18 month period.

No consistent themes emerged for couples in which the parents' change scores were very different from one another. In the three couples with the greatest contrasts in change scores, the mother's satisfaction scores decreased much more significantly than the fathers (for two couples), or the father's increased much more significantly than the mother's (for one couple).

For couples whose change scores were fairly equal (within one point of each other's), there were also no consistent themes that emerged; these couples tended to be higher in satisfaction at baseline, with little to no change over the 18 month period. For one of these couples, both partners scored lower in satisfaction at baseline and both decreased ten points over

the 18 month period. Both partners were in recovery for drug addiction. Thus, regardless of the direction in which parents started, more difference between partners was associated with more individuality in response and less consistency within the couple or between couples.

On the whole, fathers tended to fare better than their partners with regard to couple satisfaction over the course of the 18 months, despite scoring lower on average at baseline. Their satisfaction seems to have been more sensitive to the intervention. The stresses that remain are focused on parenting concerns among the mothers, especially with regard to parenting their sons (several expressed challenges related to their son's defiance or ADHD diagnosis). Fathers, on the other hand, were typically more concerned with finances and professional obligations.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

This study sought to illuminate qualities in couple relationships, as they emerged in the initial interview of a coparenting intervention, examined in relation to couple satisfaction. Further, this study sought to determine how these qualities correspond with changes in couple satisfaction subsequent to the intervention. By exploring qualities pertaining to the coparenting and couple subsystems during early parenthood, this study sheds light on the complex interplay between coparenting and couple relationships in relation to couple satisfaction. The results of this study have the potential to influence future coparenting intervention efforts by bringing into focus the qualities that can protect, strengthen, or inhibit the satisfaction of couples as they work to improve their coparenting relationship.

#### Baseline Couple Satisfaction

The first task of the study was to explore coparenting and couple qualities that emerged in the initial interview as they related to baseline couple satisfaction scores. Quantitative findings suggested that the strongest correlations existed between coparenting qualities as they emerged in the interview and baseline couple satisfaction, both for women and men. *Coparenting issues, therefore, were even more predictive of baseline couple satisfaction than issues of the couple relationship itself.* Those parents that discussed their couple relationship interchangeably with their coparenting relationship tended to score higher in couple satisfaction, suggesting that the ability to parent well *together* is of crucial importance to the quality of couple

relationships. This finding reinforces the value of applying a coparenting paradigm to the study of family development; by using a triadic level of analysis, the nuances of multiple interlocking relationships within one family can be fully appreciated and accounted for, as they impact family development outcomes (McHale and Irace, 2011). This finding elaborates on previous research, as well; Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2004) determined that early coparenting behavior is predictive of later marital behavior, rather than vice versa. This finding suggests that not only is coparenting behavior predictive of couple satisfaction, but that *tending* to the coparenting relationship may serve to buffer couple satisfaction even more than tending to the couple relationship itself, for parenting partners – perhaps especially those with young children. Previous research has also substantiated that coparenting appears to be more strongly linked to child development outcomes than does couple relationship quality (Mangelsdorf et al., 2011), further strengthening the case for the application of a coparenting paradigm.

***The relationship between coparenting qualities and baseline couple satisfaction for mothers.*** The most significant quantitative indicators of baseline couple satisfaction for women were (1) the alignment of mothers’ and fathers’ perceptions of father involvement and (2) the alignment of mothers’ and fathers’ perceptions of a fair and balanced division of parenting responsibilities between them. This was substantiated by qualitative findings; how much responsibility mothers assumed for childcare was not significant—it was the *perception* that mothers had about how parenting responsibilities should be divided that was significant. Some mothers with higher couple satisfaction worked full time outside the home, while several mothers with higher couple satisfaction provided childcare full time. Some mothers found it equitable and fair that they provided the majority of childcare, while others were quite dissatisfied with that arrangement. Whether or not these arrangements were dissonant from their

expectations and ideals is what seemed to be most related to their satisfaction in their couple relationship. This supports Schoppe-Sullivan et al.'s (2004) suggestion that coparenting interventions should focus on parents' *expectations* of the division of labor, as it relates to their values and beliefs. Also supported are Cowan and Cowan's (1988) findings that for both parents, satisfaction with family task arrangements was associated with self-esteem, parenting stress, and marital quality after childbirth—and these measures of adaptation were more closely linked with role satisfaction than with the actual sharing of family work. Regardless of where couples fall on the traditional-to-egalitarian continuum of attitudes, men's and women's family role arrangements become increasingly traditional after the birth of a child (Cowan & Cowan, 1988), leading to the potential gap between expectations and realities in family work division.

In addition to the expectations-reality gap, another dimension examined through this study is the relationship between earner status and couple satisfaction. Stephanie Coontz (2005) wrote:

Today working wives report fewer feelings of distress than wives who stay at home, and they are more likely to believe that their marriages are egalitarian. And unlike the past, marital equality is now associated with greater marital satisfaction for men as well as women (p. 292).

Coontz's viewpoint (2005) was confirmed by this study—two of the most dissatisfied mothers were those that worked full-time and felt that they also took on the majority of the childcare tasks. Their sense of inequality seemed clearly related to their dissatisfaction. As gender roles and family norms continue to transform over time, more research is called for to examine the evolving relationships between ideals, division of labor, and couple satisfaction.

The importance of the mother's perception of the father's role in parenting substantiates previous research conducted by McHale (2010); he asserted that one of the most important questions with regard to coparenting is whether or not parents offer validating statements about one another's parenting. His study found that the degree to which mothers validated the fathers' parenting was of particular importance; when mothers' perceptions of the father's role were dissonant from the father's perception, this typically was correlated with lower couple satisfaction. This finding suggests that mothers, particularly when identified as the "primary parent", may play a gatekeeping role that impacts father involvement. Mothers that were affirming of their partners in the interview tended to be matched with more confident and involved fathers. Which came first – affirmation on the part of the mother, or confidence on the part of the father – is not clear, though what findings suggest is that there is a reciprocal relationship between the two. A correlation between maternal gatekeeping and lower quality of coparenting has been substantiated by previous research (Mangelsdorf et al., 2011), and the findings of this study suggest that couple satisfaction may also be negatively impacted.

***The relationship between couple relationship qualities and baseline couple satisfaction for mothers.*** Quantitatively, there were two couple qualities that proved to be predictive of couple satisfaction for women: (1) how effective the couple's methods are for resolving disagreement, and (2) the degree to which parents express reliance on each other for emotional support. Qualitative results elaborated on these findings; for mothers with lower couple satisfaction, communication issues with their partner were cited more often than any other qualities as an impediment to the quality of their relationship as a couple. Frequent descriptions of a dynamic were offered in which disagreements were handled through screaming and bickering. This substantiates previous research showing that patterns of change in the couple

relationship were largely related to the couple's problem solving behavior (Cox et al, 1999; Gottman, 1994; Doherty, 1982).

Regarding awareness of challenges in the couple relationship, a spectrum emerged on which mothers scoring higher in couple satisfaction seemed to fall at either end—two had little awareness of couple challenges and tended to describe a strong and supportive relationship, devoid of problems. Three had a strong awareness of couple challenges, and described very intentional efforts the couple takes to resolve these issues. Mothers with lower satisfaction seemed to fall in the middle of the spectrum—they named couple challenges, but had less awareness of how these challenges manifested or how they could be meaningfully resolved. This typically also corresponded with communication challenges with respect to problem solving—these mothers tended to describe a dynamic in which one parent folded to the other, often due to screaming or yelling, without allowing for joint expression of beliefs, needs, and wants.

Overall, this set of findings suggests that interviewers in coparenting interventions might benefit from focusing on maternal perceptions of father involvement as a particularly rich tool for gauging the strength of the couple and coparenting relationship. The strength of the couple relationship seems to rest more heavily on how father involvement is perceived subjectively by the mother, as opposed to how it is perceived by the father himself. This highlights, again, the importance of *expectations* of the division of labor held by each parent—an equitable view seems to contribute to and/or benefit from a sense of the parental alliance. This is particularly important given the fact that parents' beliefs about the solidarity of their alliance together as parents have been tied to the adjustment of their young children (Mangelsdorf et al, 2011).

*The relationship between coparenting relationship qualities and baseline couple satisfaction for fathers.* Quantitative results showed that the most significant indicators of couple satisfaction for fathers at baseline were (1) the degree to which the parents express agreement/disagreement over childrearing issues, and (2) the degree of alignment between the parents' perceptions of a fair and balanced division of parenting responsibilities between them. The latter quality had the strongest correlation with couple satisfaction for fathers, suggesting that similar to mothers, the extent to which fathers' expectations of the division of labor are met may be related to their level of satisfaction. Qualitative results showed that fathers with higher satisfaction described the belief that when they are at home, no matter how much effort was expended at work, parenting duties should be equal. This may have been easier for these parents to attain, as fathers with higher couple satisfaction appeared less stressed by their employment.

For fathers, more so than mothers, attention was given to discipline issues in the parent-child relationship. Also notable was the extent to which fathers noted disagreements within the couple relationship that pertained to differences in beliefs about discipline. Some fathers expressed frustration about the fact that disciplining responsibilities fell to them while other fathers shared that they avoided disciplining their children out of a desire to please their children and manage their child's impression of them. These fathers tended to spend less time with their children, increasing their desire for their time to be spent lovingly and affectionately, as opposed to being spent dealing with difficult disciplinary issues.

Discipline concerns seemed to serve several fathers as a yardstick for their success as parents—fathers took pride in well-disciplined children, and were particularly concerned when their children acted “out of control”. Mothers also expressed frustration about discipline concerns but seemed to take them less personally. This finding suggests that addressing fathers'



and others' different approaches to discipline may be another important facet of coparenting interventions.

Also noteworthy was the extent to which fathers with higher couple satisfaction described themselves as “learning fathers”. The “learning fathers” routinely cited that they have a lot to learn with regard to discipline, as opposed to citing the aspiration to have more control over their children. Thus, they located the opportunity for growth inside of themselves, as opposed to externalizing the concerns as being caused by their child(ren). This reflected certain paternal qualities that may correspond with higher couple satisfaction for both partners: a willingness to grow internally, as a parent, and perhaps – though this is conjecture – this may indicate a mature attitude toward feeling less competent or knowledgeable that translates into more positive interactions between parents about coparenting. This conjecture finds support from the results of a study conducted by Talbot and McHale (2004), in which they found that in families in which fathers were more ego resilient, marital distress was less likely to spill over and disrupt the coparenting of infants. The degree to which fathers parented from their ego-centered self seemed to have a strong influence on both coparenting and couple subsystems. Thus, coparenting interventions might benefit from curricula designed to facilitate a process of self-reflection for fathers with regard to taking self-responsibility for becoming better parents, rather than responding to assuage their partner.

***The relationship between couple relationship qualities and baseline couple satisfaction for fathers.*** Quantitative results showed that the quality that emerged in the initial interview that was most predictive of couple satisfaction for fathers was the degree to which the couple expressed reliance on one another for emotional support. The fathers that vocalized the strengths of their couple relationship in the interview, and offered affirming words about their partner, had

higher couple satisfaction scores (as did their partners). Providing an opportunity for fathers to discuss the strengths of the couple relationship is useful both diagnostically and as a facet of the intervention itself. This is true for mothers as well, but because the fathers identified fewer relationship strengths than did mothers, this question appeared particularly useful with fathers. This result suggests that future coparenting intervention efforts would benefit from exercises designed to increase fathers' abilities to effectively communicate affirmation and appreciation of their partners.

Also noteworthy was the extent to which fathers with higher couple satisfaction tended to highlight, in their own words, the grief associated with losing their identity as an individual by assuming the identity of partner and parent. For fathers with lower couple satisfaction, this awareness and recognition was less present—they seemed to utilize work, substances, and television as a sort of escape from the process of reconciling their loss of independence. Fathers generally expressed a need for alone time and independence more frequently than mothers, and were more prone to identify leisure activities (e.g. fishing and boating). The fathers with higher couple satisfaction demonstrated that they had worked to reconcile the loss of independence—not necessarily by giving it up entirely, but by being cognizant of the push and pull, and in conversation about it with their partner. This finding suggests that in future interventions, fathers would benefit from the inclusion of a support group, in which the change in identities over the transition to parenthood and associated grief related to the loss of individual time and independence can be processed and normalized. Parents could strive to support each other in finding healthy ways of maintaining the “individual” parts of themselves while still meeting the demands of being a partner and parent. This would be of benefit to fathers with lower couple satisfaction for the purpose of increasing awareness, and would benefit fathers with higher

satisfaction by normalizing and creating opportunities for connection. There appears to be a lack of previous research that explored grief over the loss of independence for males as it impacts coparenting and couple satisfaction; the field may benefit from further exploration of this topic.

### **Change in Couple Satisfaction over the Course of the Intervention**

While quantitative results pointed to strong correlations between particular couple qualities and baseline satisfaction scores, the quantitative results produced no correlations between the relationship between couple qualities and *change* in couple satisfaction from pre-intervention to post-intervention. Thus, for researchers, the ability to utilize couple qualities as they emerge in the initial interview of a coparenting intervention does not appear to determine how much a couple will benefit from the intervention; such changes are murkier and more nuanced. There is also a paucity of research that evaluates the longitudinal evolution of coparenting in relation to couple satisfaction. A larger sample size would likely be more revealing in terms of quantitative data, but this study allows for qualitative data to fill the gaps.

***Relationship between coparenting qualities and relationship satisfaction change scores for mothers.*** While there were no significant quantitative correlations between change in couple satisfaction scores and coparenting qualities as they emerged in the initial interview, qualitative data gave rise to a few noteworthy themes. For mothers that experienced increased couple satisfaction over the course of the intervention, there was a theme of strong communication skills, and an awareness of challenge areas and room for growth regarding the division of parenting responsibilities. For mothers whose couple satisfaction scores decreased over the course of the intervention, discipline concerns and coparenting disagreements were frequently cited, with a lack of tools for resolving disagreements. Thus, tending to conflict specific to coparenting may be an important task of a sound coparenting intervention. For the sake of

affirming and capitalizing on each parent's individual strengths, interventions may benefit from an exercise in which each parent identifies parenting strengths in one another. For example, in a couple in which the mother is generally more patient than the father with the child, the mother may offer the father techniques she uses for maintaining such patience—whether it is breathing techniques, short breaks, or simple reminders she offers herself. A father might offer the mother his skills in drawing boundaries with their child, by offering the child few and concrete choices. By sharing these strengths with one another, the couple would draw on their complementarity to support the other's being the best parent he/she could be, enhancing the health of their coparent and couple relationship.

There is value in the complementary differences beyond meeting the world as a more complete unit, and that is the potential for the further development of each partner...By joining with someone markedly different...each partner has the chance to learn in an intimate way the workings of someone else... If both partners learn well, they can move toward their own completion..." (Prosky, 1991, p. 2).

***Relationship between couple relationship qualities and couple relationship change scores for mothers.*** There was also a lack of significant quantitative data related to couple relationship qualities and couple satisfaction. Qualitative data, however, pointed to a relationship between improved couple satisfaction and a few particular qualities that mothers cited as strengths in the couple relationship: problem solving skills, team work, and a willingness to manage conflict directly. These mothers seemed to embrace couple conflict as inevitable, and felt well equipped to manage conflict with their partners in healthy ways. For the mothers who did not recognize the presence of couple conflict, their satisfaction scores tended to remain stable through the course of the intervention. These may represent parents who were not experiencing

much conflict at the time of the intervention; perhaps they participated to enrich a well-functioning relationship, also lending credence to the finding that being open to learning and talking more about the relationship seems to be associated with couple stability, if not strength. For those mothers who cited poor management or avoidance of couple conflict, satisfaction scores tended to decrease. This finding suggests that inclusion of a problem-solving task may be an important assessment tool in coparenting interventions, with the potential to reveal information about the couple that is predictive of their capacity to benefit from the intervention.

*Relationship between coparenting qualities and couple satisfaction change scores for fathers.* No significant coparenting themes emerged among fathers that experienced increases in couple satisfaction—they each described fairly supportive coparenting dynamics, and located their problems more specifically in the couple relationship. This supports Cowan and McHale's (1996) theory that when coparenting is positive but the couple relationship is negative, the couple may be able to rally for the sake of their children) —and it demonstrates that when parents rally for the sake of their children, their couple relationship itself may benefit. Thus, children may have the potential to serve as protective factors in their parents' relationship as a couple, which several parents that scored higher in couple satisfaction articulated.

Among the fathers that experienced declines in couple satisfaction, discipline concerns emerged as a theme, as well as a lack of structure and routine with regard to coparenting. These findings reinforce the suggestion that coparenting interventions would benefit from a continued focus on communication and the development of a coparenting routine mutually agreed upon by each parent. In research conducted by Frosch, Mangelsdorf, and McHale (2000), it was found that high positive engagement between parents during discussion of childrearing tasks is linked to more secure father-child attachment. Thus, carving a space for fathers to engage more in

mutual discussion and agreement about parenting issues may be beneficial to both the coparenting and couple subsystems.

***Relationship between couple relationship qualities and couple relationship change scores for fathers.*** All four of the fathers that experienced increases in couple satisfaction scored lower at baseline, demonstrating that the SFI intervention may have been particularly beneficial to this cohort. These fathers also all focused on communication challenges as a central conflict in their couple relationship, suggesting that the intervention may have been particularly beneficial by opening channels for dialogue between the father and mother. The initial interview served as an initial opportunity for such a dialogue to take place, with the support of the interviewers. Similar to the mothers, those fathers who experienced declines in couple satisfaction tended to cite difficulty resolving couple disagreements as a chief concern in their couple relationship. For these fathers to be best served by coparenting interventions, it may behoove researchers to include curricula that are formulated specifically around resolving communication issues as they arise and are identified in the initial interview.

***Themes across gender and couple/coparenting subsystems.*** Certain themes emerged that seemed particularly predictive of baseline couple satisfaction for men and women in their coparenting and couple relationships. Above all others, substance abuse concerns were highly correlated with lower couple satisfaction scores, and seemed negatively related to coparenting. Three couples reported that they were in recent recovery for substance abuse concerns, and in each of these couples both partners scored lower in couple satisfaction than the rest of the sample. Other addiction concerns emerged among men with regard to professional life, television, and internet. Thus, addictions must be addressed in order to maximize the potential benefit of coparenting relationships, and attention to the effects of addiction on couple

satisfaction may be particularly worthwhile. While researchers have explored the use of couple therapy to support substance abuse recovery (Saatcioglu, Erim, & Cakmak, 2006); Trepper, McCollum, Dankoski, Davis, & LaFazia, 2000), there appears to be a lack of research regarding the impact of substance abuse treatment on coparenting and couple satisfaction. Researchers McMahon and Rounsaville (2002) studied the impact of substance abuse on fathering, citing that “substance-abusing men remain one of the poorly understood, negatively stereotyped populations of fathers in many cultures” (p. 1110). Thus, more research in this area would be invaluable to the understanding of couple and coparenting dynamics.

Also noteworthy was the extent to which parental symptoms of depression appeared to be a risk factor for lower couple satisfaction and strained coparenting relationships. This was particularly true among fathers, which substantiates previous research: Bronte-Tinkew, Scott, Horowitz, and Lilja (2009) found that among fathers of nine month olds, the presence of more depressive symptoms correlated with greater conflict over the child with their spouse, less daily discussion of the child, and less support from their spouse a year later. Thus, conjoint referral for the assessment and treatment of mental health concerns, particularly among fathers, is indicated to be an essential component of coparenting interventions.

Not surprisingly, there also was a connection between financial instability and lower couple satisfaction and coparenting stress. This correlation has been well-documented by previous researchers, who have found that parents of lower socio-economic status experience higher levels of stress, which may in turn impede coparenting equality (see Mangelsdorf et al., 2011). Medical issues also arose in this study as a common stressor among parents with lower couple satisfaction. This calls for the provision of case management services to intervention participants, as modeled by the Supporting Father Involvement (SFI) project (Cowan et al.,

2009), so that stressors related to finances, medical concerns, and other external issues can be managed to increase the potential for participants to sustain their participation in the intervention and draw meaning from it.

### **The Role of the Clinical Interview in Assessment**

Clinical interviews are viewed among researchers as indispensable to the assessment of coparenting and couple satisfaction, as they reveal information that could not be captured merely through observation or questionnaires (McHale, 2011). This study shed light on which elements of a coparenting interview may be most revealing and predictive of later outcomes. This is important given that previous research suggests that early evaluation of coparenting behavior is important for understanding subsequent coparenting behavior and couple satisfaction (e.g. Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004). Above all else, the results of this study demonstrated that engaging parents in an interview about their mother-father-child family system was essential; many interesting nuances emerged when parents spoke about their relationship with each of their individual children, as well as their relationship with their partner, and the nexus between both relationships. Similarly, discussions about the coparenting relationship and couple relationship as separate subsystems yielded distinctly different information, reinforcing the view that these subsystems are interlocking but not interchangeable (Frosch et al., 2000; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2004).

McHale (2010) highlights three key questions that he believes are most beneficial in the assessments of coparenting: (1) Have the adults reconciled ideological differences about how 'best' to parent in order to have mutually agreed-upon, predictable routines for the child? (2) To what extent do they provide (or fail to provide) mutual support and validation for one another's parenting efforts? (3) How well do they tend to children's emotional security within the family



unit? The interview designed for the SFI intervention sought to elicit information relevant to each of these questions, and useful data emerged from all three. Particularly revealing was the questions that prompted parents to describe their partner's parenting; the extent to which they offered affirmation or expressed disappointment was significantly related to their couple satisfaction scores. Those parents that could succinctly identify areas of growth they desired for themselves and their partner tended to experience improved couple satisfaction scores through the course of the intervention. Further, several parents expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to discuss their concerns about one another's parenting in a secure environment. This use of clinical intervention that is not therapy may elicit participation and change from couples that would not otherwise engage in working on their relationship satisfaction, parenting, or coparenting. It is also worth noting that several topics emerged in the interviews without being prompted; for example, interviewers did not explicitly ask participants about the degree to which substance use impacted their family relationships, however several mothers and fathers brought substance use up as a concern as it related to parenting and the couple relationship. There may have been couples that chose not to address this topic because they were not asked directly about it, which in turn could have impacted the completeness of the data on the topic. In future interventions, it may behoove researchers to include a question that explicitly asks parents about whether or not they believe there are any habits or addictions that impede their own (or their partner's) ability to contribute as a parent and partner.

McHale (2011) emphasizes the need for interventionists to utilize interviews not only to describe the coparenting strengths and areas of need but also to analyze *why* the coparental alliance is currently functioning as it is. This held true in the current study; the most useful information emerged when the interviewers stayed with parental descriptions of their

relationships long enough to reveal the dynamics underlying surface interactions, at which point their dominant relational themes emerged. This gives interventionists the potential to craft interventions to specific couple challenges in order to maximize growth for each participating couple.

### **Limitations and Next Steps**

Given the mixed methods approach utilized for this study, a small sample size of 15 allowed for in-depth qualitative research but limited the validity and significance of the quantitative findings. Thus, a larger sample size would have been more revealing in terms of quantitative research, particularly with regard to changes in coparenting scores over the course of the intervention. The use of multiple coders would have also increased the validity of quantitative results.

Similar to other intervention studies, a sample of convenience was recruited rather than a sample that was representative of the four California counties; the individuals participating were parents that were willing to consider taking part in an intervention designed to enhance father involvement (Cowan et al, 2009). Additionally, the data used in this study were based on parental report, as opposed to observation or other means of collection. Because the participants were either Mexican American or European American, findings were not generalizable to other ethnic groups. Further, the SFI interviews were structured such that parents were asked to succinctly reveal intimate information about their personal lives to two case managers with whom they had little previous contact. Thus, data collection in the interviews may have been impacted by cultural values and language differences—for example, several of the Latino parents were more private about family concerns than white American parents; their descriptions were

brief and generally less revealing. The ethnicity, gender, and cultural values of the interviewers may also have had an impact on the ways that the interviews unfolded.

This study was most impactful in two particular ways: (1) the relationship between coparenting and couple satisfaction was further teased out, with protective factors identified with respect to how coparenting can enhance couple relationships, and (2) insights were gained as to how interviews can best illuminate couple and coparenting qualities that may be predictive of the potential for coparenting interventions to enhance couple relationships. This study reinforced the value of a coparenting paradigm for supporting healthy family development, by articulating how essential coparenting is to couple relationships. Coparenting interventions are a promising vehicle to bring about improved family development outcomes; by tending simultaneously to the couple relationship and each parent-child relationship, it is ensured that each working part of a family system benefits from the other parts, leading to a more cohesive whole.

As noted intermittently throughout this section, there are many directions for future research in order to build on the current literature regarding coparenting, couple satisfaction, and relevant interventions. Above all else, there is a need for further research to identify themes of coparenting among various ethnicities, cultures, income levels, sexual orientations, etc., so that interventions can be developed to effectively meet the unique needs of couples from various social groups. The field would also benefit from more longitudinal studies that examine the relationship of coparenting and couple satisfaction as it evolves over the life cycle.

### **Implications for Social Work**

Through a social work lens, human beings are viewed as only as happy and healthy as the relationships they build. Essential in this equation are the relationships built with early caregivers (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). This study contributes to the field of social work

by navigating the complexities of family systems, for the purpose of identifying the qualities that can strengthen the alliances of couples that parent together. While this is of great benefit to the parents, it is their children that benefit most; healthy child development hinges on healthy attachment relationships with caregivers. Because coparenting interventions are preventive in nature and enact change systemically within families, they have the potential to create change that is sustainable and impactful across generations. This provides substantial incentive for continued research and intervention in this area. Social workers are well-primed facilitators of such research and intervention, given the person-in-environment and strengths-based perspective that drives the social work profession.

Fortunately, researchers are applying the coparenting framework to increasingly diverse populations and family constructs (e.g. McHale & Irace, 2011; Patterson & Farr, 2011; Pruett & Donsky, 2011). This is essential to the field. At the same time, it is important to maintain a focus on families that are parented by two parents, often a mother and father, given that the majority of families are constructed in such a way. While research shows that the presence of at least one supportive caregiver is optimal for a child's development, the presence of two supportive caregivers has been found to be more effective (see Amato, 2005). And for those two caregivers to have a supportive coparenting relationship with one another has been found to be the most optimal, in terms of child development outcomes (see Musick & Meier, 2010). Yet within two parent households, parental conflict is associated with lower quality relationships and lower psychological well-being for children (Amato & Booth, 2001). Given the adage that parents can only nurture their children to the extent to which they nurture themselves, a parent's decision to tend to their relationship with their partner is one of the greatest gifts they can give their child. Facilitating a process that supports parents on this journey is an important task for

the social work profession, with the potential to prevent social problems before they emerge, and preserve family life in its various constructions for future generations to come.

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## Appendix A

### Quantitative Coding Scheme

1a) How effective does the father believe their methods are for resolving disagreement?

1	2	3	4	5
Methods are Ineffective		Moderately Effective	Methods are Effective	

1b) How effective does the mother believe their methods are for resolving disagreement?

1	2	3	4	5
Methods are Ineffective		Moderately Effective	Methods are Effective	

2) How much do parents express reliance on each other for emotional support?

1	2	3	4	5
None	Moderate Level			High Level

3) How much do parents express reliance on each other for other forms of support (e.g., time, money, concrete help)?

1	2	3	4	5
None	Moderate Level			High Level

4) How aligned are mother's and father's perceptions of father's involvement with child(ren)?

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Different	Somewhat aligned, somewhat different			Completely Aligned

5) To what degree does the couple express agreement/disagreement over child rearing issues?

1	2	3	4	5
Completely Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Half Agree/Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Completely Agree

6) How aligned are mother and father's perceptions of a fair and balanced division of parenting responsibilities between them?

1	2	3	4	5
Completely	Somewhat aligned, somewhat different			Completely

## Appendix B

### Quality of Marriage (QMI) Index

#### Our relationship (between the parents)

*Instructions:* Please tell me the number that best describes the degree of satisfaction you feel in various areas of your relationship. (*Hand participant scale card. Read all choices as needed*)

		<i>Very Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Very Strongly Agree</i>
1. We have a good relationship.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
2. My relationship with my child's other parent is very stable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
3. My relationship with my child's other parent is strong	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
4. My relationship with my child's other parent makes me happy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
5. I really feel like part of a team with my child's other parent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
6. On a scale from one to ten, one being unhappy, five being happy, and ten being perfectly happy, all things considered, what degree of happiness best describes your relationship with (PARTNER'S NAME)? Please tell me a number. ( <i>If needed, explain the scale further to participants so that they may pick a number</i> )								

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Unhappy				Happy			Perfectly Happy		