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# Learning and Developmental Pathways in Early Coparenting Among Finnish First-Time Parental Couples'

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## Abstract

Since the learning and developmental processes of adults have rarely been studied in the context of coparenting, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of early coparenting development by examining longitudinal qualitative multimethod data. The data of Finnish 30 opposite-sex two-parent families were collected during three different phases: the third trimester of pregnancy with individual interviews, 4–6 months postnatal by a survey and diary method, and 18 months postnatal through individual interviews. The longitudinal analysis combined initial cross-sectional thematic analysis and longitudinal analysis. The results showed that early coparenting develops among new parental couples through the merging of simultaneous individual and interrelational processes. Early coparenting involves several adult learning processes and turning points. Four developmental pathways illustrating the couples' journeys were identified: (a) equal and supportive coparenting, (b) from differential adaptation to smooth coparenting, (c) from the mother's primacy to a communicating team, and (d) a challenging coparenting rollercoaster. These pathways vary from a smooth and linear growth curve to a variable and tense process that takes time and patience. In all, the results indicate that first-time parents (either as couples or partners) can be at different points in adapting to a new life stage and growing into parenthood, which may complicate the development of coparenting.

**Keywords** Coparenting · First-time parent · Adult development · Adult learning · Transition to parenthood · Longitudinal qualitative study

## Introduction

Although there is research on the transition into parenthood as part of the development of adulthood (e.g., Newman & Newman, 1988; Palkovitz et al., 2003), a more detailed description of how two parents, as a couple, develop and learn to work together during this transition remains underexplored. Therefore, this study aimed to fill this gap by combining family research on coparenting and adult learning in the developmental phase of early adulthood. Coparenting

has been defined as a central element in family structure and functioning (Feinberg, 2003; Lamela et al., 2016) and denotes the quality of communication and coordination between adult caregivers in raising children together (Feinberg, 2003; McHale et al., 2004). The quality of co-parental relationships has been demonstrated to exert a significant influence on the well-being of the family unit (Feinberg & Kan, 2008). Earlier studies (Durtschi et al., 2017; Feinberg, 2003; McHale et al., 2004) have shown that parents who have a positive coparenting relationship tend to perceive their adaptation to parenthood as more seamless and tend to find it easier to balance their familial and work roles. Moreover, effective co-parenting serves to reinforce the close attachment between the child and both parents (Hock & Mooradian, 2013; Campbell, 2023).

When coparenting is understood as a developmental process over time, it becomes part of the context of adult development and learning. The present study employed longitudinal multimethod couple data ( $n = 30$  couples, 60 parents) from qualitative interviews, and open questions of the survey and diary. Thirty Finnish couples were followed from

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the third trimester of pregnancy until their child reached the age of 1.5 years. This study argues that parents' individual development stage of adulthood and parenthood as well as collective turning points and learning processes are important for understanding cooperation between parents (i.e., coparenting). This study draws on a life-course perspective (Elder & Giele, 2009) and the development of early adulthood within the theoretical context of coparenting. The transition into parenthood is traditionally considered a key marker on the road to adult maturity (Palkovitz et al., 2003), involving physical, psychological, and social changes in parents' lives (Robinson, 2013). First, life-course theorists have focused on developmental changes in terms of the transitions of roles, pathways, or turning points (Allen & Henderson, 2017; Elder, 1998; Rönkä et al., 2003) highlighting the significance of context, process, and socially constructed meanings in shaping human development and family life over time (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). Life-span developmentalists, with their origins in individual psychology, have paid more attention to developmental products (Baltes, 1979; Palkovitz et al., 2003) as individuals adapt to new roles and related expectations and tasks. However, both approaches have described the birth of the first child as a significant life stage in adulthood (e.g., Elder, 1998; Erikson, 1950), providing valuable lenses for exploring the development of early coparenting. Additionally, this study draws on transformative learning theory (Illeris, 2014). So far, adult learning has not been examined in the context of parenthood or coparenting. As argued by Illeris (2004, 2009), all adult learning requires the integration of two very different processes: the external process of interaction between the learner and his/her social and cultural environment and the internal process of elaboration and acquisition, where the concept of identity encompasses all dimensions of learning and mental processes. Moreover, adults' readiness to learn is closely related to developmental tasks associated with their social roles (Arnett et al., 2020), such as being a parent or coparent. Thus, this study considers adult learning to be a process in which informal learning experiences and important turning points in couples' family lives shape the coparental relationships of first-time parents.

### **The Transition into Parenthood during Early/Established Adulthood**

Becoming a parent usually occurs between the ages of 20 and 45 in an adult's life. Early adulthood, as defined by Robinson (2013), encompasses the period from emerging adulthood to midlife, beginning in one's mid-20s and ending around 40. The developers of psychosocial adult development theories (e.g., Erikson, 1950; Levinson, 1978) emphasized the importance of parenting for adult development. Erikson's (1950) map of the lifespan defined that the main task of early

adulthood is to develop a sense of intimacy (the ability to be close to others) and the courage to step into social roles (e.g., parenthood and partnership) and commitments without the fear of being trapped by those bonds. This challenge of individuality and togetherness is particularly important and may arise during the transition into parenthood (Robinson, 2013). Conversely, Levinson (1978) introduced life structure as a concept linking internal (e.g., identity and personal values) and external aspects (e.g., family and work roles). Transition involves a change in life structure when the meaning of important things is reevaluated, and the order of importance of these things may change (Levinson, 1986).

Arnett et al. (2020) have highlighted recent changes in temporal order, with people moving on to parenthood later than before due to structural changes in adulthood, an expanded range of family structures, and increased life expectancy. Furthermore, Mehta et al. (2020) described a new established adulthood after emerging adulthood that occurs between the ages of 30 and 45 and is characterized by the demands and responsibilities of active childcare and careers. Currently, in Finland, as in most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the average age of women at the birth of their first child is over 30 years (OECD, 2021). Additionally, the average age when Finnish men first become fathers is approximately 31.9 years (Official Statistics of Finland, 2022).

The demands of different stages of development affect the goals and requirements of parenting and the individual abilities of each parent in different ways (Van Egeren, 2004). Thus, transitions from one development need to another may force a renegotiation of parental relationships. Moreover, cultural expectations and norms (Allan, 2008; Grunow & Evertsson, 2021; Lévesque et al., 2020) and the desire for equal parenting (Ranta et al., 2023) shape gendered parenting roles in the transitional phase. Equality in working life is also present in many modern societies. Especially in the Nordic countries, many mothers return to work when their children are young, and childcare is shared through parental leave for both parents during the baby phase (Nygård & Duvander, 2021). In Finland, the paid family leave policy provides equal benefits for both parents and enables flexible sharing of family leave between parents (Ministry of Social Affairs & Health, 2022). Each parent is entitled to a total of 160 days of parental allowance. A maximum of 63 days can be transferred from this quota to another parent, and leave may be taken at intervals until the child reaches the age of two. Furthermore, the cognitively demanding nature of work, expectancy of equal parenting, and global interconnectedness require new theories related to adult learning and development (Merriam, 2017). Additionally, families need diverse support during the transition into parenthood to develop their own well-functioning practices and ways of working together as parents.

## Coparenting as a Key Element of Family Life

Research on coparenting has increased since the 1990s. Coparenting, which is considered central to family life, is defined as a relationship wherein two individuals who share responsibility for raising children relate to one another in their roles as parents (Feinberg, 2003). The coparenting relationship has been linked to the triadic coparenting family system, contributing to parental adjustment, parenting, and child outcomes (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). It has been shown that the coparental relationship can be considered a family resource (McDaniel et al., 2017). Coparenting, where partners support each other, affects the well-being of the child and both parents and protects parents from parenting-related stress (Durtschi et al., 2017). Feinberg (2003) developed a multidimensional model of coparenting consisting of four interconnected components: parents' mutual support and undermining, division of labor, childrearing agreement, and joint family management. Additionally, expectant new parents in particular view these coparenting dimensions as an opportunity for growth, development, and learning (Ranta et al., 2023).

Research over the past 20 years has demonstrated that the quality of coparenting relationships matters, especially during the transition into parenthood. Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2023) described a high-quality coparenting relationship as consisting of high levels of mutual support between parents and low levels of undermining and conflict. Ranta et al. (2024) highlighted parents' ability to communicate daily. They found out, within the Finnish sample, parents' mutual support and agreement on their duties were perceived as necessary for well-functioning cooperation. Equal division of duties, sharing of parental leave, or fathers' childcare after the workday (as compensation for absence) promoted coparental cooperation. Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2022) also found that fathers' more egalitarian parenting role beliefs or commitment to equal parental roles were associated with fathers' lower perceived undermining, criticism, and experience of conflict.

Life transitions often entail stressful adaptations (Elder & Giele, 2009), including the transition into parenthood, which is a challenging period requiring couples to cooperate and support each other more than before (Halford & Petch, 2010). This transition may even cause health challenges for parents and lead to lower mutual support. Sleep disruption, common in the early months of parenthood, has been linked to parental distress and fatigue (McDaniel & Teti, 2012). Furthermore, parental depression, whose effect may persist over time, is associated with a weakened perception of coparenting by both mothers and fathers (Williams, 2018). Thus, both parents' mental health plays a role in the coparental framework shaping parents' perceptions of their cooperation as parents (McHale & Sirotkin, 2019; Williams, 2018).

Several longitudinal studies have investigated the temporal stages of coparenting during the first year of a baby's life. New mothers' and fathers' perceptions of positive coparenting have been reported to be high and stable from 1 to 6 months postpartum (Van Egeren, 2004), and parental agreement remaining relatively stable over the first year, whereas disagreements over discipline require more parental negotiation as infants progress towards toddlerhood (Schmidt et al., 2021). Bernier et al. (2023) have also examined the long-term effects of higher-quality dyadic interactions between fathers and 18-month-old children on better coparental interactions with their partner 4.5 years later. Parents' positive or negative interpretations of the child may also play an important role in shaping their feelings and the need for mutual support (Ranta et al., 2024). However, the development of coparenting does not necessarily progress linearly; rather, it includes conflicts (McHale et al., 2012) that may be meaningful moments that especially promote learning. Thus, it is important to consider the quality of parent–parent and parent–child relationships in the development of coparenting over time.

## Adult Learning and Development During the Transition into Parenthood

As children and adults develop, so do the behaviors and relationships between parents (McHale et al., 2004). The responsibilities brought about by parenthood and the coordination of family and work roles serve as impetuses for the development of coparenting (Allan, 2008; Durtschi et al., 2017). Nyman and Nyman (1988) described becoming a parent as a period of psychological growth that stimulates adults and promotes openness to learning new things and ways of coping. McHale et al. (2004) suggested parents can learn by experience in their relationship and modify their behavior so that even negative experiences in the transition into parenthood can form turning points and thus promote (positive) development. These aspects can be examined through life-course theory (Elder & Giele, 2009) and transformative learning theory (Illeris, 2014).

Longitudinal life-course studies relate the lived experiences of individuals and social ties to their developmental processes and conceptual distinctions, such as the timing of change in life transitions and turning points (Elder & Giele, 2009). During transitions, past decisions and changes in lifestyle are reevaluated (Clausen, 1995). Turning points are defined as significant events promoting change in people's developmental paths and are often recognized afterwards (Clausen, 1995; George, 2009; Rönkä et al., 2003). Turning points may be positive life events, such as childbirth (Rönkä et al., 2003), and/or important developmental crises or even negative changes in people's lives (George, 2009), both of which can lead to learning experiences (Rönkä et al., 2003).

According to life-course theory, changes in relationships and social roles underlie the timing of important life events that enable adaptations for attaining individual and collective aspirations (Elder & Giele, 2009; Elder et al., 2003).

Transformative learning theory focusing on adults' life experiences (Merriam, 2017) facilitates the examination of coparenting as the integration of knowledge, emotions, identity, and social interaction (Illeris, 2014). Transformative learning implies the acquisition of qualitatively new information and capacity in learners as they change their understanding and attitudes (Illeris, 2014). The theory describes a person's motive (e.g., the need to understand his/her own experience) as the ultimate factor in achieving learning as people's beliefs, interpretations, and meaning making are transformed by reflection on their everyday lives (Mezirow, 1998). According to Illeris' (2014), the concept of identity plays a crucial role in the learning process, particularly within the family. Early adulthood facilitates comprehensive and transformative learning regarding all aspects of identity, with family identity being one of these aspects related to changes in personal and central identity. In addition, Illeris (2014) emphasized the meaning of emotions and social dimensions in learning processes. This kind of learning leads to progressive (i.e., development) or regressive transformations (i.e., withdrawal). Learning can be collective, and collectivity can sometimes make it easier to succeed with progressive transformations (even though examples of collective transformations involving a regressive process can also be found) (Illeris, 2014). Furthermore, Palkovitz et al. (2003) described, from the perspective of family life, that the more committed a parent is, the more he/she develops through parenting. Committed parenting thus represents the all-encompassing context and ongoing interactions that can influence life-course development, changes in life-course transitions, and developmental paths.

## The Present Study

This study focused on couples' (women's and men's) experiences relating to early coparenting development during the transition into parenthood for the first time. The qualitative and longitudinal research design employed multimethod couple data. The methodological choices (interview, questionnaire, and diary method) were intended (Levitt et al., 2018) to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of coparenting, considering the life situations of families, as well as the changes and turning points that occur over time. This study considered family as a dynamic entity wherein its members influence each other (Allen & Henderson, 2017). Longitudinal qualitative research is conducted with the same people over time, which enables the collection of information on the process and certain conditions of change

(Hermanowicz, 2013). To obtain an in-depth understanding of the early developmental pathways of coparenting, the current study sought to explore the developmental and learning processes that occur throughout the transition into parenthood. The study defined the process (Saldaña, 2003) as a journey and change in individual and shared meaning over time, considering the psychological and interrelational levels of coparenting. Learning was seen as a process within the mind involving the integration of knowledge, emotions, and social interactions (see Illeris, 2014). Turning points were defined as significant changes in the couples' developmental pathways (Rönkä et al., 2003). Accordingly, the research questions were as follows: (a) How does coparenting develop during the transition into parenthood? (b) What learning processes and turning points can be identified in coparenting? (c) What (temporal) developmental pathways can be identified from coparenting experiences over time? In summary, by treating coparenting as a context for learning and adult development, we sought to identify the related developmental pathways.

## Methods

### Participants

A total of 30 expectant heterosexual married or cohabitating couples ( $n = 60$  individuals) participated in this longitudinal qualitative research. The purposive sampling protocol involved recruiting Finnish-speaking parents expecting their first child and living together at the time of recruitment. Most of the couples (80%) were married, and the remainder were cohabitating. At the beginning of the research, the length of the couple's relationships ranged from 1 to 15 years (average 7 years). At the time of the first phase of data collection, the mean participant age was 30.5 years, with mothers ranging in age from 23 to 39 years and fathers ranging from 23 to 42 years. Participants were mostly highly educated, with 70% of the men and more than 80% of the women having at least a bachelor's degree.

### Procedures

The participants were recruited as part of a larger cross-national longitudinal study (*Learning to coparent: A longitudinal, cross-national study on construction of coparenting in transition to parenthood*). Recruitment for the study was implemented via advertisements and virtual family classes in maternity health clinics in four large municipalities in Finland. Prior to data collection, the project was approved by the ethics committee of the (University of Jyväskylä, Finland). Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the research process.

The longitudinal qualitative data were collected in three stages (see Fig. 1) during 2020–2022. The thirty first-time parental couples were followed from the third trimester of pregnancy until their first-born children reached the age of 1.5 years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in two separate phases: first, when the expectant parents were in late pregnancy (1–3 months before the due date); and second, with the same new parents when their infants were 17–19 months old. The first author conducted 92 of the 120 individual interviews. The remaining interviews were conducted by other researchers associated with the project. Due to the COVID19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted primarily remotely via video link or by telephone. In addition, to hear the experiences of both parents and to avoid the potential influences of the partner (Cerchiaro, 2023; Daly, 2003; Taylor & Vocht, 2011), participants were interviewed separately, with the majority of interviews conducted on the same day. Between interviews, the project collected survey and diary data when the children were 4–6 months old. This study utilized open-ended questions from the survey and mobile diary, which were administered at two different times (first, the survey, and after a month, the diary), and the questions were answered separately by both partners. The participants used their own mobile phones to answer the open questions.

The *first data collection phase* investigated first-time parents' prenatal expectations about coparenting and compared mothers' and fathers' expectations about their coparenting relationship (see Ranta et al., 2023). The semi-structured interviews involved questions about three main themes: *expectations for coparenting* including areas such as their wishes related to coparental support or cooperation (e.g., "What would you wish your cooperation as parents to be like when the baby is born?"), *current life situation* including questions related their work and home duties (e.g., "How do you currently share home responsibilities with your partner?"), and *role of support and other people on cooperation* including questions about social network and services (e.g., "Thinking about the way your own parents worked together as parents, would you like to follow their example or do

something differently?"). These individual interviews lasted 35–70 min.

The *second data collection phase* aimed to identify first-time parental couples' experiences and perceptions of meanings related to coparental cooperation at 4–6 months postpartum in their family life contexts (see Ranta et al., 2024). The open questions were asked on the last day of the 7-day diary period to obtain reflections on the families' week (see Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). The open questions in the survey were "How has your and your partner's cooperation as parents been since the child's birth?", "What are the most important things that help you and your partner work together as parents?" and "What are the most important things that complicate you and your partner work together as parents?" The open questions in the diary were as follows: "What observations have you made, or insights have you had over the past week about your ways of working together as parents?" and "Was the past week special in any way for your family (e.g. in terms of challenges or resources)? If so, describe how and why?" Both data sources (survey and diary) were complementary. The diary method, seldom used in qualitative research, enabled a deeper understanding of the daily family life challenges faced by couples (see Bartlett & Milligan, 2015).

The *last data collection phase* consisted of the second semi-structured individual interviews of the parents when their children were approximately 1.5 years old. The present study aimed to concentrate on the interview theme of coparenting as a journey (see "Appendix"), which consisted of, for example, the following questions: "If you think about your and your partner's parenting, what kind of journey has it been for you both from pregnancy to this moment?", "What have you learnt as a coparent (and parent?" and "What kind of changes or important turning points have there been in your coparenting journey?" These individual interviews lasted 40–75 min. Both members of all 30 couples participated in every data collection phase of the longitudinal study.

## Longitudinal Data Analysis

The qualitative longitudinal data were pseudonymized for the analysis. The study analyzed the developmental process in longitudinal research (Lewis, 2007), combining cross-sectional analysis and longitudinal analysis (see Fig. 2). The first author used Atlas.ti and Microsoft Excel software to organize, categorize and analyse the data in each phase (Levitt et al., 2018). To enhance the transparency and credibility of the data analysis, all decisions were discussed with co-authors. A shared agreement (Braun & Clarke, 2022) on the coding and the phases was discussed and developed among the authors. *First*, the interview data collected during the prenatal period were analyzed using thematic analysis and

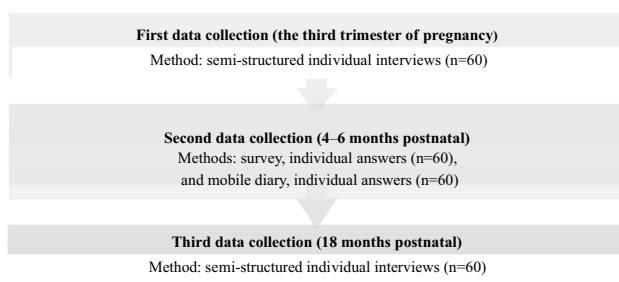
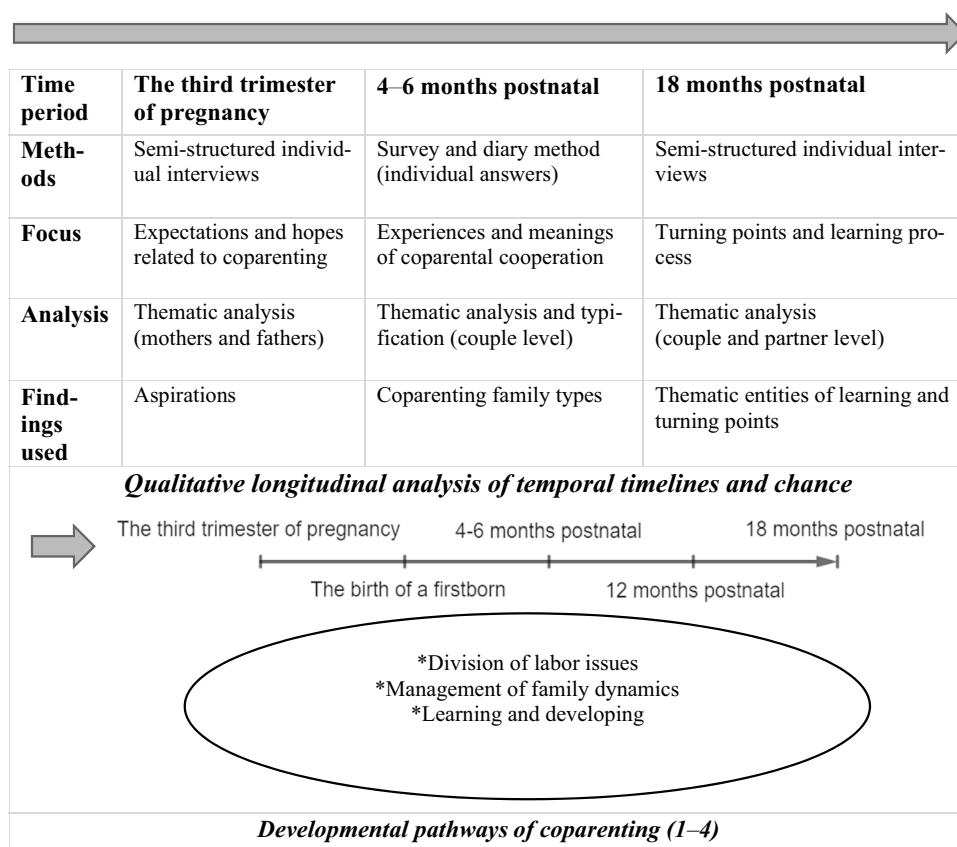


Fig. 1 The three multimethod data collection phases

**Fig. 2** The longitudinal analysis process combining previous cross-sectional analyses with longitudinal analysis



combining the inductive and abductive approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006) across the six-phase analysis process (see Ranta et al., 2023). Every data segment was coded from the perspective of coparenting expectations, and four focus categories were identified within the themes: content, aspirations, challenges, and a coparenting ideal. The present study utilized aspirations concentrating on whether these coparenting expectations were aimed at (a) equal parenting and active participation of both parents, including flexibility; (b) equality and responsibility but the mother's primacy in childcare, e.g., due to the father working overtime; and (c) traditional parenting and gender roles (i.e., the mother's primacy in childcare and household duties while the father plays the role of helper).

*Second*, the qualitative (cross-sectional) survey and diary data collected at 4–6 months postpartum were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis and typification (see Ranta et al., 2024). All data were organized and coded systematically focusing five phases of thematic analysis process (see more details in article). After gaining a holistic view of the dataset, the first author continued via typification aiming to deepen the knowledge of the co-parental cooperation among couples' daily lives. The present study utilized three different coparenting family types (alternating parents, equal sharers, and stressed searchers) to identify how Finnish first-time parental couples construct coparental cooperation at

4–6 months postnatal. When comparing the couples' level of education, age, time spent together and financial situation, the families were evenly divided between the types (see Table 1).

The average age of the women was 30.2 years and of the men 30.8 years. These couples had been together for an average of 8 years (range 2–15 years). However, highly educated couples were over-represented in the data. *Third*, the final interview data among these same couples (when their children were 1.5 years) were analyzed using thematic analysis, concentrating on couples' retrospective experiences of the learning process and turning points related to coparenting. The aim was to collect all turning points associated with the development of coparental cooperation and learning processes over time. Table 2 presents the thematic categorization of four thematic entities.

*Finally*, after these three analysis phases, the longitudinal analysis was assembled into five temporal timelines (see Fig. 2) based on the couples' (and partners') significant experiences and the developmental process of coparenting relating to the whole journey since pregnancy (combining interviews and open questions of survey and diary data). The analysis focused on the three coparenting domains (\*division of labor issues, management of family dynamics, and learning and developing) because they were closely interconnected and relevant to the content.

**Table 1** Background information of the couples at 4–6 months postnatal

	Journey 1, mothers (n = 10)	Journey 1, fathers (n = 10)	Journey 2 mothers (n = 8)	Journey 2 fathers (n = 8)	Journey 3 mothers (n = 9)	Journey 3 fathers (n = 9)	Journey 4 mothers (n = 3)	Journey 4 fathers (n = 3)
Age								
22–28	5	5	3	0	4	2	1	1
29–35	5	5	5	8	4	6	1	0
36–42					1	1	1	2
Educational level								
High school or vocational school	1	4	2	2	1	3		
Bachelor's degree	2	2	1	4	1	3	1	2
Master's degree	7	3	4	2	5	2	1	1
Doctoral/licentiate degree		1	1		2	1	1	
Financial situation								
Tight					1	1		
Tight-quite good	4	3	2	2				
Quite good	5	4	5	5	6	4	2	1
Very good	1	3	1	1	2	4	1	2
Length of relationship								
	Couples		Couples		Couples		Couples	
1–4 years	1		3		3		1	
5–9 years	5		3		4		1	
10–16 years	4		2		2		1	

*Journey 1* Equal and Supportive Coparenting, *Journey 2* From Differential Adaptation to Smooth Coparenting, *Journey 3* From the Mother's Primacy to a Communicating Team, *Journey 4* Involving a Challenging Coparenting Rollercoaster

**Table 2** Four thematic entities related to the learning processes and turning points of early coparenting

Thematic entities	Learning processes	Turning points
Individual-psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Learning self-compassion</li> <li>– Becoming less selfish</li> <li>– Growth of self-control and patience</li> <li>– Managing one's emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The perception of oneself as a parent changed</li> <li>– Uncertainty about caring for the child subsided</li> <li>– Confidence in one's own parenting increased after 6 months</li> </ul>
Interrelational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Learning mutual flexibility and organization</li> <li>– Learning from discussions what should have been done in the situation</li> <li>– Reading each other, recognizing the load</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– When working together became easier after a difficult start: sharing care during bedtime and the night, new division of responsibilities</li> </ul>
Child-related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Reading the child, meeting his/her needs</li> <li>– Child's sleep challenges teach cooperation and flexibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The child starts eating solids/end of breastfeeding: father able to feed the child and more even distribution in childcare</li> </ul>
Family-transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Understanding what parenthood is (complicated, not easy)</li> <li>– Adjusting to life changes (the child is your responsibility)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Birth was a natural transition</li> <li>– New parental identity (old versus new life) found when the child was a year old</li> </ul>

The critical phases (in coparental cooperation) were then identified by placing \*themes on a timeline for each couple and then comparing these thematized timelines across cases to locate commonalities in the developmental pathways.

## Results

Four broader thematic entities and four different developmental pathways of coparenting were identified from the



data. To determine the temporal developmental pathways of coparenting, this study utilized experiences of learning processes and turning points of coparenting. According to 60 first-time parents, learning focused on parents' experiences of their own and shared learning processes during the transition into parenthood, with a strong emphasis on well-being. Turning points meant the parents' experiences were essential for the positive development of their coparenting. The four thematic entities identified individual-psychological, interrelational, child-related, or family-transition learning processes and turning points.

### Thematic Entities of the Learning Process and Turning Points of Early Coparenting

The thematic entities outlined two different types of change over time: individual and collective processes of coparenting. As Table 2 shows, learning processes and turning points were focused on four thematic entities: individual-psychological, interrelational, child-related, and family-transition. First, individual-psychological learning included experiences related to an individual's *internal changes and mental processes* (e.g., parents talked about gaining increased control of their own emotions, acquiring more patience, and learning to recognize their own stress and load). Second, *interrelational learning between parents* was presented, for instance, as skills of mutual flexibility and organization, as well as the development of communication. Third, *learning related to childcare* was described as the growth of practical skills and understanding related to childcare. One important insight was that the child affects the realization of equality (e.g., by choosing a parent to put him/her to sleep) and not everything can be agreed upon between two adults alone. Fourth, *learning related to the transition to family life* was portrayed as a long process of adapting to life changes (e.g., through acceptance of the demands of parenting). One father described the transition into parenthood as follows: "It has been a life-changing journey; full-time and holistic, with family always in mind and involved." Significantly, all couples experienced learning processes that highlighted these thematic entities.

The four thematic entities (see Table 2) were also the sources of important turning points related to individual and collective processes, the transition to family life, and the positive development of coparenting. An example of an *individual-psychological turning point* relating to growing into parenthood was when the mother experienced a decrease in uncertainty and an increase in confidence in her own parenting abilities a year after giving birth. Many couples expressed *interrelational turning points*; for example, mutual discussions related to the expectations about the division of labor and shared parenting roles facilitated their sharing of duties after childbirth. One distinct *turning point*

*relating to childcare* was when the child started to eat solids or the mother's breastfeeding ended, thus enabling a more even distribution of responsibility as the father could also feed the child. In addition, a *turning point related to the family transition* was the parents' process of forming their own parental identities; this process lasted at most a year (as one mother described in the interview). However, the findings revealed that first-time parental couples (and individual partners) were often at different points in adapting to a new life stage, growing into parenthood, and coparenting. Therefore, just as developmental changes occurred at different times for different parents, turning points occurred at different times for different couples.

### Developmental Pathways of Early Coparenting

After the longitudinal analysis, four different developmental pathways of coparenting were identified: (a) a journey of equal and supportive coparenting, (b) a journey from differential adaptation to smooth coparenting, (c) a journey from the mother's primacy to a communicating team, and (d) a journey involving a challenging coparenting rollercoaster. As the Table 1 shows, the developmental pathways did not differ from each other in terms of participants' age, educational level or the length of their relationship. The following paragraphs describe the developmental pathways more broadly.

#### A Journey of Equal and Supportive Coparenting (10 Couples)

The first developmental pathway, characterized as smooth, illustrates the easiest way to develop and learn coparenting. What these 10 couples had in common was their prenatal wishes for equal parenting and division of labor and the active participation of both parents, including flexibility. They had already shared a division of housework during the pregnancy period. These couples expected the presence and participation of both parents in parenthood and childcare, making joint plans and decisions, and both parents have the right to parental leave, meaning that both could manage alone with the child. Parenting roles and wishes had already been discussed during the pregnancy. At 4–6 months postpartum, these couples belonged to the coparenting family type of equal sharers who had implemented the kind of coparenting they had hoped for, and the same development continued until the child was 1.5 years old.

These couples' journeys were characterized by joint and simultaneous growth into parents: they had grown and *learned* a lot together as people and were both surprised by their natural parenting. One mother, Julia, described the journey as follows:

All kinds of new things have had to be learned all the time, but it has not been as big of a change as we originally thought that there would have been some kind of growing pains or somehow auditioning for a role...we communicate quite a lot. Both of us are usually quite well informed about what is happening and what needs to be done or what has been taken care of...that way, in my opinion, things remain very equal. We constantly share information about how things are going and how each of us is feeling.

As this quote reveals, these couples did not generally report any major challenges, discoveries about their roles, or growing pains in adjusting to family life during their journey. Three couples had some life challenges (e.g., maternal postpartum depression, anxiety, and a child's illness), but they felt that their effective cooperation carried them through these ordeals. All these couples reported that both partners were satisfied with their cooperation and described themselves as well-functioning, mutually supportive, and flexible teams. They felt joy from the family, where both also had their own free time. In addition, there was no ambiguity regarding both parents' active participation in the division of duties, and they generally described mutual empathy and understanding. The *turning points* were often insights associated with their interactions or events related to the child. Most often, fathers had already switched to parental leave after the mother, when the child was approximately 6 months old.

### **A Journey from Differential Adaptation to Smooth Coparenting (8 Couples)**

The second developmental pathway was one of the growth stories of coparental cooperation, wherein the process involved the partners' adaptation to parenthood at separate times. During the pregnancy, these eight couples strived for equality and responsibility, hoping for a fair division of duties in childcare, alternating between caring for the baby and sharing household tasks. However, the mothers aimed to take parental leave until the child was approximately a year old, although these arrangements were uncertain, as the partners had not discussed matters extensively together. At 4–6 months postpartum, these couples belonged to the coparenting family type of alternating parents or stressed searchers. They were not completely satisfied with their cooperation due to the demanding nature of the fathers' work. They experienced difficulty in reconciling family and work and sharing duties fairly, which led them to engage in the role finding process.

These couples' journeys were characterized by initially challenging times after the birth. Both partners described difficulties, such as fatigue. They were surprised by the

emotional rollercoaster, and they had to do emotional work to transition from a couple relationship into a triadic family relationship. In particular, the fathers went through an identity negotiation at this stage, emphasizing the mother's role as the primary caregiver and support for the partner. Mark, one of the fathers, described how their process of growing into parenthood occurred at different times:

A relationship had already formed between the child and the mother during the pregnancy period, and the child was so attached to the mother; at the same time, many things were required of me, so it was not the easiest time. It was kind of a difficult phase of growth before becoming a father, and it showed up with symptoms, such as mood swings and a bit of depression... All that changed when we started to move into the toddler period, when the child was 9–10 months old...that is when the relationship really started to form between me and the child. So, it changed a lot.

As Mark experienced, these couples had a significant *turning point* that helped them find a common way to work together. These significant turning points were identified at different times (8–10 months postpartum) among these couples. One typical turning point was when the father took family leave or was solely responsible for the child, allowing him to fully assume and become acclimated to his role. Another turning point occurred when the breastfeeding symbiosis of the mother and child ended, leading to a strengthening of the father–child relationship and a balancing of parenting roles. In the end, these couples adapted to their new life situation. They described their *learning* as involving novel perspectives about themselves and their partners, their emotional lives, burdens, and means of survival. In particular, they learned to plan, communicate, and agree on things through the participation of both parties. As a result, the partners' division of labor was balanced, their prenatal expectations were fulfilled, and both were very satisfied.

### **A Journey from the Mother's Primacy to a Communicating Team (9 Couples)**

The third developmental pathway was another growth story of coparenting, this time comprising the development of a functional parental team through team building and learning to communicate. Nine expectant couples hoped for interparental cooperation, equality, shared responsibility, and learning together. The fathers, in particular, wished to work collaboratively. However, these couples' journeys were characterized by quite traditional roles, with the mothers' (strong) primacy in childcare and household duties while the fathers played important parts as helpers.

The early months after childbirth were characterized by uncertainty, and the mothers were especially surprised by

the intensity and commitment of motherhood and adapting to an enormous change. At 4–6 months postpartum, these couples belonged to the coparenting family type of alternating parents trying to balance their duties by alternating childcare. The mothers were on parental leave for at least the first 9 months. These couples detailed their financial situation and the wage difference affecting their parental leave choices. Even though the mother's parental role was described as strong, parenting roles became more balanced as the child reached a year old. This *turning point* happened because the mothers' breastfeeding ended and couples were able to share the child's feeding. Then, the fathers were described as equal parents, especially in relation to caring for the child. Furthermore, when the children of these couples were 1.5 years old, the parents had found working operating models (the pieces had fallen into place), and they both experienced flexibility and responsibility. They emphasized *learning* from situations and mistakes; joint discussions; and organizing, planning, and agreeing on shared action models related to the child and household duties. One father, Pauli, described how they learned to share responsibilities:

My spouse had put the baby to sleep every night, and it was a few hours before it fell asleep. Then, we decided to try having me put the baby to sleep with a breast milk substitute. Afterwards, it was a matter of about 15 minutes before the baby fell asleep. It was like that. This realization hit us both quite hard. When you understand how to share and ask for help from the other and, of course, also give help, it can make things so much easier.

Furthermore, the mothers talked about learning to give space to the fathers and both taking the other person into consideration. Even though the spouses' expectations were not met at first, these couples learned to build a workable way to implement coparenting. While they were mostly satisfied in the last stage, they also expressed wishes for future cooperation.

### **A Journey Involving a Challenging Coparenting Rollercoaster (3 Couples)**

The fourth developmental pathway was a challenging journey in which new parents had faced a variety of intense life-shaping problems and difficulties in coparental cooperation, creating new challenges that had not yet been fully resolved. In other words, these three dissatisfied couples were characterized by difficulty in forming effective cooperation. During the pregnancy, coparenting expectations were described as traditional parental roles with the primacy of the mother and the father assuming the role of helper, or a desire for both parents to share responsibility. There had not been joint discussions or shared decisions during the pregnancy, leaving

differences in the partners' expectations and aspirations. After the birth, the beginning stages of parenting were confusing and burdensome, especially for the mothers, and there were life challenges, including maternal postpartum depression, anxiety, an intense identity crisis for the mother, or a child's illness. However, the mother had primary responsibility for the child, and the parents' experiences of the initial challenges differed.

At 4–6 months postpartum, all these couples belonged to the coparenting family type of stressed searchers. These unsatisfied couples had to go through constant negotiation related to their parenting roles and the division of labor, about which they also had disagreements over time, leading to mutual communication problems. The unsatisfied mother Miia described her first year as follows:

We are now trying to have both of us participate... In the beginning, it was a bit like my partner was withdrawing into his own space, and we [the baby and I] were left alone; he somehow thought that he was an outsider, but he is certainly not. I don't know if he even thought that we didn't want things to be like this or that I meant it to be like this... Now, it feels more like we are a team and we can take turns, for example, on the weekends, one morning one person gets to sleep longer and the next the other. It took a surprisingly long time to figure this out, but well, this was the first time we were here.

As this quote reveals, their coparental team worked better after the first year because of the more even division of labor. In general, at 18 months postnatal, all these couples described *turning points* as a relief from challenges (e.g., discovering an identity between their old and new lives, finding medication for their child's illness, or the mother returning to work and the father spending more time with the child). They had *learned* a lot during their transition into parenthood (e.g., personal and collective coping strategies) although they initially found it difficult to describe their learning related to adapting to parenthood, living on the child's terms, knowledge about childcare situations, and stronger discussion and consideration of each other, including recognizing each other's burdens. In the end, these parents were still dissatisfied (especially the mothers) as their expectations had not been met and they were tired and burdened; thus, they continued to search for and develop a working coparenting arrangement, hoping for smoother collaboration and more time together as a couple.

## **Discussion**

The present study contributes to earlier literature by integrating theoretical perspectives on coparenting, adult learning, and development. The findings *suggest diversity in the*

*development of coparenting among couples and between partners*, with individual differences in adapting to parenthood and interconnected processes. The results also revealed that early coparenting involves *several adult learning processes*, thereby highlighting adult learning as an essential dimension of coparenting development (see Ranta et al., 2023). Additionally, this study provides a new perspective on adult development theories by highlighting the importance of *mutual family processes* during early adulthood.

All 60 parents reported learning experiences through which couples constructed and developed coparental relationships. The learning processes of coparenting were connected with individual and collective processes comprising four thematic entities: *individual-psychological learning*, which encompasses internal change and mental processes, and *interrelational learning* between parents, including, for example, learning flexibility, organization, and recognizing partner load. Other two thematic entities were *child-related learning* (e.g., parents' readiness to be more sensitive to their child's needs) and *family-transition learning*, which includes adjusting to life changes and understanding the concept of parenthood. Although adult learning has mainly been studied as a psychological phenomenon within the mind (Merriam, 2017), collective learning is less examined in the area of family research. However, transformative learning processes can be individual and collective (Illeris, 2014), manifesting the integration of internal psychological and external social and cultural aspects. These interrelated learning aspects between parents can be linked to transformative learning (Illeris, 2014; Mezirow, 1998) as they imply that new qualitative information, capacity, and reflection in parents change their beliefs, interpretations, and conceptions of meanings.

The four developmental pathways contribute to the theoretical understanding of coparenting and adult development, demonstrating diversity and change in two simultaneous processes: individual and joint growth between parents. The results revealed that first-time parental couples and partners can be at different stages in adapting to a new life stage and growing into parenthood, which may complicate their coparenting development. Life-course theory (Almeida & Wong, 2009; Elder & Giele, 2009) suggests that although processes and changes vary between individuals, developing social bonds and interdependence is important in creating new roles in transitional phases. Each family member experiences unique mental and physical development, during which active and passive adaptation take place as part of achieving individual and collective goals (Elder & Giele, 2009). Thus, parents adapt to changes in life either at the same pace or at different paces. According to various scholars (Elder & Giele, 2009; Erikson, 1950; Levinson, 1978; Palkovitz et al., 2003; Robinson, 2013), the transition into parenthood is a key marker of adult maturity and

development. This focus on adult individual development is important, but an understanding of the interrelated processes is also needed.

The developmental pathways also demonstrated mutual growth and development into coparenting. In the first developmental pathway (*a journey of supportive and equal coparenting*), the parents seemed to move at the same pace; they described themselves as ready for parenthood at the same time and as natural parents. They had already planned and discussed issues during the pregnancy, and collective sharing and equality laid the foundation for suitable and flexible teamwork. Thus, this path appeared as a linear and steady development of the process of coparenthood over time. Research has shown that better-adjusted couples demonstrate more positive and constructive coparenting relationships after a child's birth (Le et al., 2016), and the hopes of equality and expertise for both parents' parenting (Ranta et al., 2023) have been shown to transcend boundaries in the differentiated gender roles of mothers and fathers (Miller, 2017).

In addition, the findings of this study revealed two different cooperation growth stories, (a) *from the mother's primacy to a communicating team* and (b) *from differential adaptation to smooth coparenting*, which indicate the variation of progressive and regressive transformations (see Illeris, 2014) and turning points toward something better during the development of early coparenting. Although these couples had different challenges in cooperation during the first months of the child's life (e.g., trying to find a balance between their parental roles, sharing duties, and adapting to the change from couple to triadic family), they reported positive turning points in coparenting, leading to more equal sharing and smooth coparental everyday life. These couples usually experienced turning points at 8–10 post-natal months, when the father's role in childcare increased and the father–child relationship strengthened. In addition, the initial individual psychological processes of emotions (including feeling overwhelmed and tired) were emphasized to the point that eventually the partners learned to agree and engage in equal participation. According to McHale et al. (2012) the development of coparenting is not always linear and includes different kinds of conflicts and developmental crises. Similarly, the couples in this research described their collective learning from mistakes, difficult situations, and joint discussions and they eventually agreed on shared action models for their childcare and household duties.

Finally, the results indicated that the development of coparenting requires time and patience. Finding common ways of coparental cooperation can take 1.5 years, and even after that, negotiation and communication skills are needed to continue coparenting. The fourth developmental pathway (*a challenging coparenting rollercoaster*) was a varied and challenging process of constructing coparental cooperation.

Initially, these couples faced different life challenges, such as depression, maternal identity crisis, or anxiety. In addition, the parental couples' expectations and experiences differed, resulting in cooperation being difficult to build. These findings are in line with those of earlier studies (Halford & Petch, 2010; McDaniel & Teti, 2012; McHale & Sirotkin, 2019; Tissot et al., 2017; Williams, 2018) indicating that the transition into parenthood often involves real-life stressful and challenging periods that can cause parents to experience health challenges (e.g., depressive symptoms, sleep disruption, and fatigue), which may lead to a weakened perception of coparenting and lack of mutual support while shaping parents' perceptions of their cooperation. Moreover, among these couples, the mothers' priority and dissatisfaction with childcare were emphasized, and both parents also sought to find their places as parents and/or balance between their old and new lives. As a process, this kind of learning (Illeris, 2014) and transformation can be extremely demanding and challenging for parents; thus, the outcome becomes withdrawal or regression when one parent does not have the strength to cope with something. Additionally, conflicts and arguments between parents relating to psychological challenges and changes in different roles (e.g., spousal and parental roles) might lead to dissatisfaction, communication problems, and lower levels of psychological and emotional support (Karimi et al., 2021). Furthermore, Illeris (2014) incorporated the concept of identity and emphasized the significance of emotions for learning in the family context. Thus, it is important for parents to interact with and consider each other in this significant transitional phase of life. Over time, these parents experienced some positive turning points in the form of solutions to their challenges (e.g., finding medication, clarifying their parenting identity, and strengthening the father's involvement). Their coparental team worked better after the first year due to more equal sharing of responsibilities and personal and collective coping strategies learned by both partners. Despite dealing with significant fatigue and workloads, these parents still strove to find better ways of cooperating and finding common ground after 18 months postnatal.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to existing knowledge on the development of early coparenting by examining longitudinal qualitative multimethod data. Overall, it seems that coparenting develops very differently among first-time parents. As studies have shown in the past, the development of coparenting can start during pregnancy (Kuersten-Hogan, 2017; Ranta et al., 2023); however, in the processes of adult development and learning, this phenomenon becomes much more complex. Early coparenting during the transition into parenthood can be a smooth and linear

progression for couples or a highly variable or upward growth curve over time, starting at the time of childbirth and continuing even after 1.5 years. This research helps us understand the interconnectedness of individual and collective development and learning processes. While it is crucial to acknowledge the importance of individual adult development, it is equally vital to comprehend the interconnected processes that contribute to it. The different ways in which parents adapt to parenthood, the varied communication and interaction skills of parents, and the diverse life challenges within the family are at least contributing factors to the development of coparenting. Comprehending how coparenting develops over time is essential to addressing the challenges families face and ensuring they receive the support they require. Especially in family services and childcare centers, it is important to recognize this interconnected development to support parental cooperation beginning early in a child's life and prevent the accumulation of familial problems.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Although the multimethod data enriched the exploration of each couple's and partner's perceptions, enabling similarities and differences to emerge, the findings may be limited in terms of generalizability because the sample consisted solely of heterosexual two-parent families. This limitation is particularly relevant in relation to cultural, ethnic, and sexual diversity. Additionally, the generous Finnish parental leave (approximately 11 months at the time of the data collection) (see Nygård & Duvander, 2021) may provide a distinctive social context for new parents that differs from those of other countries. While the Nordic context may have facilitated the implementation of more equal parental aspirations, the data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have affected the challenges partners faced and their opportunities to work together. During this time, most fathers worked remotely and were able to share household duties. Despite these limitations, this study makes an important contribution to understanding this period of change involving the reconciliation of work and family life and how couples cope with new responsibilities and learn to adapt to parenthood using available resources. Furthermore, future studies that recruit a more diverse group of couples and utilize longitudinal assessments can ascertain whether similar developmental pathways are observed in other economically developed countries among families with disparate formats, cultural backgrounds and other socioeconomic groups. Therefore, research should be conducted with families whose financial situations play a greater part in determining their daily lives and parental roles.

## Appendix

### II INTERVIEW THEMES AND QUESTIONS

Interview of couples with a 1.5 years old child.

Individual interviews, both spouses interviewed separately. The interview form was developed in collaboration with JAMK University of Applied Sciences (PI Kaisa Malinen) and international partners from Japan (PI Chino Yabunaga, Toyo University) and Portugal (PI Marisa Matias, University of Porto).

Start

- (a) Welcome to the study
- (b) Introduction of the interviewer
- (c) Key principles followed in the interview

- confidentiality
- data security
- pseudonymization and anonymization
- participation voluntary
- duration of the interview (max 1 h), audiorecording practices

- (d) Privacy statement shown
- (e) Informed consent signed
- (f) Aim and focus of the interview:

*The last time we talked, you were still expecting your baby. Now, we are interested how this experience has been for you, together with your partner. As in the first interview, we are interested to hear about your perceptions and opinions. There are no right or wrong answers, and this is a space where you can speak freely and share your thoughts and ideas. We will first talk about how this experience has been for you personally as a mother/father and, especially, for you two as coparents; then we will talk about the importance of your other sources of support and other people of your life with whom you have shared this experience with; and, finally, about what you think about your future as coparents.*

g) Recording starts

*Interviewer speaks aloud the timing of interview, city and participant's code number*

### INTERVIEW THEMES AND QUESTIONS

(bolded = compulsory questions, not bolded = optional/additional questions, italics = introduction to questions).

#### 1. Opening question

**How is your family life now when you have a toddler?**

How has your child been doing? What is his/her name?

**How is the baby like, how would you describe him/her?**

2. Current situation: leaves, WFB and decisions made regarding the child

*We will next discuss the way you and your partner organize the time you dedicate to professional work, domestic responsibilities and family life.*

**What kind of arrangements you have at this moment with respect to the use of family leaves and childcare?**

What kind of plans do you have for the future in this respect?

**What is the work situation of you and your spouse?**

What are the aspects of your work that facilitate or limit your family life?

**How do you divide housework and child rearing activities? Who does what and how much?**

How did you come up with these choices related to division of work, housework and childcare?

How satisfied are you and your partner with these choices?

**If you think about this situation of you two, how do you see the balance between different life areas (e.g., hobbies, couple time, family time, work)? Does it work? Are there any challenges?**

#### 3. Coparenting as a journey

*The experience of becoming a mother/father is different for everyone and I would like to know how it has been for you, together with your partner. Similarly as in the first interview, we are especially interested on the cooperation of you and your partner as parents.*

**How would you describe the way you and your partner cooperate as parents?**

What works well, what does not? Could you give some examples?

**If you think of the two of you as a parenting team, how would you describe you two? What role do you see yourself playing in that team?**

**What are your strengths as a team? What would you like to change in the way you and your partner work as a team?**

**With respect to your and your partner's way to be parents together, what kind of a journey (use some other word if you like) has it been for you two from pregnancy to this moment?**

*If we now go back to the beginning of this journey and think about the expectations and wishes you had during the pregnancy concerning the way you two would cooperate as parents. How have these expectations and wishes been met?*

Has something surprised you?

**What have you learnt in being a mother/father together with your partner?**

What have been the moments you have learnt most as coparents?

How easy or difficult has it been for you to find your way to be a parent with your partner? How easy or difficult has it been for your partner?

**What kind of changes or important turning points there have been in your coparenting journey?** How have they affected your cooperation as parents?

**Next, I would like to ask you about your experiences of the benefits of well-functioning parental cooperation for you. According to your experience, what are the benefits of well-functioning parental cooperation for you?** What have you noticed? *You can think about the possible effects on, e.g., your child, your couple relationship and your partner and yourself as individuals.*

**How about what are the risks if the parents' cooperation does not work well?**

#### 4. Couple relationships and parenting

*Now could we discuss about your spousal relationship and support. After a child is born, there are some aspects of a couple's life that may change.*

**What has changed in your spousal relationship since you two became parents?**

**How would you describe your spousal relationship now? How do you communicate/share experiences?**

**How does your partner support your parenting? How do you support your partner in parenting?**

**What kind of feedback, positive and negative, does your partner give to you regarding to your parenthood? How does it feel?**

How do you show your appreciation to your partner's way of being a parent?

**Are there any particular topics regarding your child and parenting that you and your partner disagree or argue about? When you have disagreements, how do you deal with them?**

Do you and your partner have similar or different beliefs about you want to raise child? (in which issues similar, in which different)

#### 5. Coparenting support and models

*Now we will go beyond yourself and the couple's relationship and think of the environment and the people you have around you, the models of parenting you have and the support and barriers you found or currently find.*

**How have people around you (e.g., grandparents, relatives, friends, neighbors) supported and helped you and your partner in your parental cooperation?**

Besides your partner, with whom have shared responsibilities and joys of parenting and childcare and how, that is, who has given you emotional support or practical help? How?

**Have you received support for your parenting from services? Where and what kind of? What services have helped you the most? (*note: give examples per country*). If yes, has this included information and support for parental cooperation?**

Have you taken part in arranged parental groups or some other kind of peer support activities? What kind of activities? What does it mean to you and your baby?

**What kind of support would you have wanted to get (and have not received from people around you and/or services)?**

Think now about your friends or other important people in your life and their ways to cooperate as parents. Again, what elements helped you build a team with your partner?

Based on what you have learned from your parents and their ways to cooperate as parents, what elements helped you build a team with your partner?

**Have you experienced any outside expectations or pressures concerning the way you and your partner work together as parents?** From family and friends? From society? From your workplace? How did you as a couple deal with them?

In what way have these pressures affected your and your partners cooperation in parenting?

*Now that you have already a year and a half of experience as a Finnish parent, on the basis of what you have experienced and seen around you, what kind of issues in society make your cooperation as parents easier and what more difficult?* You could think, for example, services, work and family policy, or attitudes towards mothers and fathers

#### 6. Future prospects

*Finally, I would like you to think about the future of your parenting, and especially your parenting together with your partner.*

**If not answered before: What kind of parental cooperation do you hope for at this moment?**

**Thinking about your future, what kind of wishes do you have concerning your parental collaboration?** Is there something that you feel is most important to be maintained? Is there something you would like to change?

#### 7. Ending

*You have become parent in a very exceptional time period. Have you felt any impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on how you cooperate as parents?*

**Would you like to say something more about the two of you working together as parents?**

**Lastly, how has it been for you to participate in this project, either in the first phase of the interviews, before your baby was born, and now? Do you feel that participating in this research has affected your parenting in some way?**

**Is there something else you would like to tell us about your ways to cooperate as parents?**

- Thanking for the interview
- - Informing the participant about the following: it is preferable not to discuss interview topics with the partner before both have been interviewed

### 8. Observations from the interview situation

(The interviewer speaks aloud the answers to the relevant questions after the interview.)

How was the atmosphere like in the interview? How did the interviewee seem to experience the situation?

In which parts of the interview did the interviewee react notably emotionally? What kind of emotions did she/he express then and how?

Did something unexpected happen during the interview, what?

Is there something else relevant related to the interview situation that you want to mention here?

– Closing the recording

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### Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

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