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# Constructing coparenthood: First-time parents' experiences and meanings on coparental cooperation at 4–6 months postpartum

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## **Abstract:**

In the reorganization of the family that inevitably follows childbirth, parents need to develop strategies for coparental cooperation. Drawing on the theoretical framework of family systems theory and coparenting, this study explores how Finnish heterosexual first-time parental couples ( $n = 30$ ) construct coparental cooperation at 4-6 months postpartum. Qualitative survey and diary data were analyzed using thematic analysis and typification. Seven areas that couples saw as promoting or hindering coparental cooperation, and three different coparenting family types (*alternating parents, equal sharers, and stressed searchers*) were identified. Many couples experienced working together in an equal, supportive, and mutually satisfying way. Parents' daily communication and experiences of mutual support were perceived as necessary for well-functioning coparental cooperation. However, couples' daily lives were complicated by various challenges (e.g., fathers' overtime work, imbalance in parenting roles). Parents' egalitarian aspirations should be considered in political decision-making, the work culture, and the services offered to families.

**Key words:** Coparenting, couples, baby-stage, transition to parenthood, gender equality

## INTRODUCTION

The triadic coparenting system consists of two parental figures and a child (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015; Schoppe-Sullivan et al, 2016). Coparenting has been defined as a central feature in parental adjustment (Feinberg, 2012; McHale et al, 2004), denoting the quality of coordination and communication between adult caregivers in raising children together (McHale et al, 2004).

Furthermore, knowledge of the interaction between parents and between parent and child is important for understanding the child's adjustment (Cox & Paley, 2003). It is worth noting that there is no one right way to implement coparenting; instead, couples create their own ways (Feinberg, 2003). Previous studies (Kuersten-Hogan, 2017; Ranta et al, 2023) have indicated that coparental relationships begin to develop during the prenatal period when the partners commence discussing and planning their cooperation as parents. However, in seeking to coordinate their expectations, parenting goals and demands, and along with their individual capacities, partners may develop into parents at different rates (Van Egeren, 2004). This can make it challenging for new parents to find effective ways of implementing shared parenting after childbirth (Lévesque et al, 2020). The early coparenting models which parents create during their child's first few years are important in their management of the many complex conflicts that arise in later family life (Schoppe-Sullivan et al, 2004).

This qualitative study investigated experiences of coparenthood in families in which the heterosexual parents (N=60) live together and have cared for their first child for 4-6 months. Drawing on the family systems theory and earlier coparenting research, this study explored issues that promote coparental cooperation and build early coparenthood and the challenges that render cooperation difficult. Families were approached as systems comprising interrelated parts; thus, what happens to one family member may affect the entire family system (Allen & Henderson, 2017). Therefore, to understand parents' coparental behavior, it is important to understand family systems

holistically through parents' experiences. Coparenting does not always go well, and various challenges can lead to an insufficiency of resources. A weak financial situation, the parents' life histories, internal family factors such as relationship quality, the demandingness of the child, and various everyday-life situations, such as work-related stress, can threaten coparenting quality (Durtschi et al, 2017; Schoppe-Sullivan et al, 2016). Cultural expectations and norms (e.g., the demands of intensive motherhood) also shape parenting roles in the transition phase (Allan, 2008; Lévesque et al, 2020). Moreover, fathers' and mothers' own cultural ideals and position in the labor market also predict how they share their duties (Närvi & Salmi, 2019). Understanding the different structures of early coparenting (and parental practices) can provide socially meaningful information that supports families' relationships and well-being.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Parenthood and family policy in the Finnish context**

In Finland, most parents with babies seem largely satisfied with their parenting, relationships, well-being, and the smoothness of their everyday lives (Klemetti et al, 2018). However, a third of parents with babies report symptoms of exhaustion, with lack of sleep most commonly affecting their ability to cope. Finland's family policy (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2013) aims at creating a safe growing environment for all children and supporting parents with the material and psychological means required to have and raise children. Such family support consists of services (e.g., maternity and child health clinics), financial support, and paid parental leave, which has been a parental right since 1985. As in other Nordic countries, parents can, for the most part, choose how they divide the total leave period (Eydal et al, 2015).

During recent decades in Finland, increased interest has been shown in equal and shared parenting styles (Eerola et al, 2021; Ranta et al, 2023), with Finnish fathers spending significantly more time on childcare than earlier (Ylikännö et al, 2015). However, although the percentage of

parental leave taken by fathers has increased over the past two decades (Eydal et al, 2015), mothers continue to take most of the leave quota (Närvi & Salmi, 2019). Breastfeeding, recommended exclusively for the first six post-natal months by the World Health Organization (WHO), is one reason why mothers usually take parental leave during that time and fathers continue to work. In Finland, mothers and fathers have perceived breastfeeding as important (Klemetti et al, 2018). Other issues discouraging fathers from taking leave (Närvi & Salmi, 2019) are related to their possibly higher incomes and/or higher occupational position, ideals about employee commitment, and to the nature and organization of work. Nowadays, the goal of Finnish family policy is more equal parental participation in working life. The reform of family leave (launched August 2022) has extended and equalized parental leave for both parents and allows more flexibility in how family leave is shared (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2022). Each parent is entitled to 160 days of parental leave, each can transfer a maximum of 63 days from their quota to the other parent, and leave can be taken periodically until the child turns two.

### **The beginning of new parenthood**

During the first year of a child's life, challenges to couples' existing patterns of interaction arise at all levels of the family system, leading inevitably to reorganization of the family (Cox & Paley, 2003).

With childbirth and their entry into a new life stage, parents experience significant changes in their family dynamics that cause them to rearrange their strategies for cooperation (Allan, 2008) and reshape their previous operating models (Cox & Paley, 2003). Finding a balance between different roles and identities can be challenging (Lévesque et al, 2020), and can influence the relationship between partners in how they communicate and establish their new family roles (Durtschi et al, 2017). Although these changes can be surprising, coping with them is facilitated by parents' experiences of family cohesion, a clear division of labor and roles, communication, and a sense of family permanence (McHale et al, 2004). Children, along with their parents, have their own part in molding the family's dynamics at an early stage. However, families are structured differently, and

the balance they seek will not be identical for all (Allen & Henderson, 2017). The systemic family theory sees coparenting as the center of dynamic processes in the family (Weissman & Cohen, 1985) through which experiences of coparenting may improve over time as parents negotiate their parenting roles and become better skilled at cooperative caregiving (Van Egeren, 2004).

### **Successful or complicated coparenting?**

A coparenting relationship exists between two individuals when they have a binding and mutual commitment to a child's welfare (Van Egeren, 2004). A warm and supportive relationship is crucial for a positive perception of shared parenting. According to Feinberg (2003), coparenting comprises four domains: *division of labor* (parents' distribution of the daily routines involved in childcare and household tasks), *childrearing agreement* (parents' agreement/disagreement on childrearing), *support versus undermining* (parents' positive behaviors affirming the other's parenting competency or negative criticism) and *joint family management* (family interaction, e.g., parents' responsibility for controlling their mutual behaviors and communication). Furthermore, Feinberg and others (2012) have since added the domain *parenting-based closeness* to capture shared joy in the child's development. This domain resembles the more recent domain of *learning and developing* identified by Ranta and others (2023), which describes the development of coparenting through parent-parent and child-parent relationships, thereby interrelating all the other domains. For example, learning refers to finding a way to be flexible in the coparenting relationship. The broader perspective on the coparenting framework developed by Feinberg (2003) is an ecological model of coparenting, which brings out the different influences on coparenting on the individual (e.g., parent's mental health), family (e.g., interparental relationship), and extrafamilial (e.g., environmental stress) levels.

Previous studies have approached successful coparenting from three perspectives. The first is *couples' prenatal relationship quality* (Van Egeren, 2004; Kuersten-Hogan, 2017). Van Egeren (2004) suggests that the quality of the couple relationship before childbirth sets the stage for coparenting.

Couples who are satisfied with their relationship before and after childbirth are often also satisfied with their coparenting. Expectant couples' perceptions on their cooperation and parental roles are also reflected in their postnatal parenting quality (Kuersten-Hogan, 2017). The second perspective is the *division of childcaring and housework responsibilities* (Coltrane, 2000; Eerola et al, 2021; Miller, 2017). Parents often divide their parental roles in a more traditional direction after childbirth, and different roles in parental responsibilities can lead to problems between parents (Lévesque et al, 2020). Researchers (Eerola et al, 2021; Miller, 2017) have explored why gender equality within the home sphere is harder to manage when organizing childcare and household responsibilities. Equality in the division of labor affects the experience of fairness, especially among women (Eerola et al, 2021). Parents often consider childcare more agreeable, meaningful, and satisfying than housework. Hence, unfairness is more readily perceived in relation to the division of household duties, which is also determined by such factors as gender roles, the employment status of men and women, income and aspects related to the family's life situation (Coltrane, 2000). Furthermore, motherhood and fatherhood are socially constructed and culturally inflected at certain historical times (Miller, 2017). In Western societies, for example, the competing demands of parenthood and paid work have recently intensified. The third perspective is *the connection between relationship satisfaction and supportive coparenting* (Christopher et al, 2015; Young et al, 2017). The transition to parenthood is challenging as the partners have less free time together and expend more energy on childcare and housekeeping. These reasons may contribute to lower satisfaction and more conflicts in the couple relationship (Christopher et al, 2015), leading to weakening of mutual support and cooperation (Young et al, 2017). However, supportive coparenting is crucial for the well-being of the whole family (Feinberg & Kan, 2008). Previous studies (Durtschi et al, 2017; Feinberg et al, 2012) have reported that coparental support and undermining are centrally linked to parenting outcomes. Both mothers and fathers reported experiencing higher relationship quality when they felt supported by each other as coparents. However, fathers seemed to be more sensitive to the stress of parenting and have given lower ratings of relationship quality (Durtschi et al, 2017). Over time, positive

coparenting support and partner relationship quality have also been found to be the strongest facilitator of father engagement in father-child relationships (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2019). Giving each other space and showing warmth and respect can prevent parents feeling left out in their parenting (Christopher et al, 2015). Therefore, experiences of mutual support are also crucial in developing coparenting (Van Egeren, 2004).

## **THE PRESENT STUDY**

This study explored first-time parental couples' experiences and meanings of coparental cooperation at 4-6 months postpartum in their family-life context. To deepen understanding of the construction of coparenting in two-parent couples transitioning to parenthood, a qualitative approach was applied. This transitional stage is characterized by fluctuation and change, as parents attempt to coordinate their own expectations and their partner's behavior in learning to work cooperatively (Van Egeren, 2004). Thus, parents' coparenting experiences can be vulnerable to changing contextual factors. Applying a qualitative methodology in studying coparental systems (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015) can promote understanding of the ecological context that influences coparenting (Feinberg, 2003). Hence, it is important to consider both parents' daily experiences and individual meanings to find out how they construct coparenting. Knowledge on the issues that first-time parental couples believe promote or undermine their coparental cooperation would be useful to practitioners, researchers, and policymakers tasked with helping parents adjust successfully to their new family roles. However, to gain more in-depth information requires exploring parents' daily cooperation holistically as part of their family-life situation (e.g., work situation, education, age, health of family members). Thus, the research questions were: 1) What kinds of issues do first-time parents see as promoting or hindering their coparental cooperation? 2) What kind of coparenting family types can be identified based on couples' individual experiences and the meanings they attribute to their coparenting? How is their family-life situation reflected in the partners' experiences of coparenting?



## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

A total of 30 married or cohabiting couples (N = 60 individuals) participated in the research. Twenty-four couples were married, and six were cohabiting. The couple relationships ranged in length from 2 to 15 years (mean 8 years). As is typical in Finnish society, all the women were on maternity leave caring for their 4- to 6-month-old child. The mothers ranged in age from 23 to 39 years (mean 30.20 years). Their partners were all male, all (except 1) employed, and ranged in age from 24 to 42 years (mean 30.80 years). Of the fathers, 29 worked during the daytime, and 17 (mainly due to the Covid-19 pandemic) worked at least 75-80% of their working time at home. One father was a full-time student. Highly educated couples were over-represented in the data, with more than 80% of the women and 70 % of the men having at least a bachelor's degree. Most couples (n=23) evaluated their financial situation as quite good or very good and seven couples as tight or between tight and quite good. All participants were of ethnically Finnish descent.

### **Data collection**

This article forms part of an ongoing longitudinal, cross-national project (*Learning to coparent: A longitudinal, cross-national study on the construction of coparenting in transition to parenthood*) investigating how coparenting develops in the transition to parenthood among first-time parents. The present cross-sectional study reports the findings on the participants' postnatal follow-up data collected at 4–6 months after childbirth. Open questions were used in the survey and mobile diary. The survey data were collected first and the diary data one month later. All 60 participants answered the open-ended questions individually.

All data were collected during 2021. Finnish-literate couples living together were eligible for the study. Initially, volunteer participants were recruited from four Finnish municipalities across the country via advertisements and virtual family classes in maternity health clinics. All participants

signed consent forms before entering the study. Prior to collecting the data, the study was ethically approved by University of Jyväskylä, Finland. First, each parent was sent an online survey focusing on background factors and their present family-life situation (e.g., work status, education, financial situation). These structured questions were followed by open questions on the participants cooperation as parents since the child's birth. One such question was, "What are the most important things that help you and your partner work together as parents?" Second, the participants started a diary week, during which they answered questions via their mobile phones. Diaries can be used to study behaviors, experiences, thoughts, and emotions in their natural contexts and life as it is lived, and as follow-up to a survey or some other methodological technique (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). The open questions were asked on the last day of the seven-day diary period. The other diary days focused on quantitative data that were not used in this study. The aim of these open diary questions was to produce reflective information on each family's week (see Bartlett & Milligan, 2015) and confirm the survey data. One such question was, "What observations or insights have you made over the past week about your ways of working together as parents?" An invitation to answer the diary questions was sent to the participants via a mobile tool, developed by the University of Jyväskylä and Jamk University of Applied Sciences over several research projects focusing on daily family life (see Rönkä et al, 2010).

## **Data analysis**

A key concern was to discover how first-time parental couples construct coparental cooperation in the context of their family lives. The qualitative analysis was inductive, utilizing all the answers to the survey and mobile diary open questions given by the 60 first-time parents (i.e., 30 couples). All data were organized and coded using ATLAS.ti and Microsoft Excel software and analyzed by applying qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) driven by the research questions. To answer our first research question, we focused on the following five phases. Phase 1 consisted of reading and rereading the individual texts, and gathering, organizing, and merging the survey and diary data

using Excel. As the data materials yielded similar information, they were combined into a single dataset for the analysis. In phase 2, the data (on issues promoting and hindering coparenting and coparenting practices) were systematically coded using ATLAS.ti. In phase 3, meaningful themes were generated and revised, and all relevant data on each theme were assembled. As described by Braun and Clarke (2006), themes are shared meanings aimed at capturing the diversity of repeated patterns of meanings. In phases 4 and 5, the themes were reviewed, developed, and named based on their content, as shown in Table 1. Seven themes affecting coparental cooperation (RQ1) were identified. After gaining a holistic view of the dataset, the first author continued via typification to deepen knowledge of the partners' coparental cooperation as part of their daily lives. In identifying coparenting family types (RQ2) based on the seven identified themes, attention was paid to differences and similarities in how couples described their daily cooperation. The data were condensed into three illustrative types, and each couple was positioned in one coparenting family type only.

## **RESULTS**

The findings indicated that couples' experiences and meanings they attributed to their coparental cooperation tended to vary in the context of their daily family lives. Seven overarching themes were inductively identified from both data sources. Participants characterized their coparental cooperation as affected by 1) partners' daily interaction, 2) definition of parental roles, 3) parental values, attitudes, and childrearing views, 4) parents' interpretations of the child, 5) balance between father's work, mother's leave, 6) time management, and 7) mutual emotions and coping. The main issues perceived as promoting or hindering coparental cooperation are shown in Table 1.

**{Table 1. The most important issues promoting or hindering coparental cooperation}**

The first three themes (underlined) describe how coparenting works between the partners and mainly comprise issues related to the partners' daily interaction, such as how they define and negotiate their parental roles, how similar or different their parental roles are, and their practices and opportunities to participate in childcare and housework. Having shared views and values on childcare and upbringing were experienced as affecting the smoothness of coparental cooperation. Other significant influences on everyday cooperation were the relationship between time and work and how the parents were able to cope with poorly slept nights. Couples sought to balance their daily family life, with its different roles and emotions, through interaction with each family member. Hence, parents' positive interpretations of their child's well-being and mutual affection and sufficient emotional and practical support from one's partner were reported as leading to better daily coping.

Three overarching coparenting family types, labeled *alternating parents*, *equal sharers*, and *stressed searchers*, were identified. These coparenting family types holistically describe the issues that the participants reported as promoting or hindering coparental cooperation and reveal how couples constructed their daily cooperation. The three coparenting family types differed in four main dimensions: 1) parental participation in childcare and housework, 2) coparental support, 3) satisfaction with cooperation, and 4) daily challenges. The main differences are summarized in Table 2. In the quotes from the data, participants are referred to by their role in the family, i.e., mother or father. The data source is given as SY (=survey) or DY (=diary).

**{Table 2. Main differences between the coparenting family types}**

### **Alternating parents (n=12 couples)**

The first coparenting family type, *alternating parents*, was characterized by both parents' participation in childcare. These couples strove to share all responsibilities equally, even if equality

was not realized in practice. The mother was the organizer in the family, while the father helped with childcare as much as possible. The mother took care of the housework, especially during the daytime. The couples described their areas of responsibility and, according to the time of day, took turns in childcare or cared for the child together. According to one father (age 37, SY), "*We take turns caring for the child throughout the day.*" In everyday life, parenting roles were partially differentiated, the division of labor mainly following the traditional formula, with the father taking care of, for example, home repairs, car maintenance, and grocery shopping. Sharing childcare was often done to reduce the mother's workload. Although the mother performed more childcare overall, sharing enabled her to have time to herself. These parents perceived mutual appreciation and respect as important factors promoting cooperation. If the mother put the child to sleep in the evenings and undertook night feeding, the father often woke up earlier in the morning to be with the child and allow the mother to sleep longer. The direction of partner support was mainly from father to mother:

*The cooperation between us has been open and supportive, and my partner has supported me a lot because we have both noticed that becoming a mother is a complete life change and "turmoil," both mentally and physically. My partner's mental and concrete support has been of primary importance and has greatly supported my mental health. (SY)... I have trouble asking for help and easily think I can handle things. This week it was good when my spouse woke up earlier with the baby, and I was able to sleep a little longer. (Mother, age 30, DY).*

This quote illustrates the importance attributed to partner support for daily coping and adapting to a major life change. Since the mother was more used to caring for the child, she also recognized the baby's needs more readily than the father. Nevertheless, these couples emphasized their shared understanding of child-raising issues, and largely reported acting and operating based on shared principles. In two such families, the fathers reported frustration at not being able to take part in feeding the child due to breastfeeding. When, however, the father could feed the child, taking turns at night was also possible.

In light of their mutual tiredness, these parents modified their coping strategies. Cooperation generally worked in these families, and at least one of the parents described being satisfied. Furthermore, the partners balanced between everyday challenges and equal parenting. In all, 58.3% (n=7/12) of these fathers mainly worked remotely at home. They described both parents' active participation in childcare as a goal, but the father's busy work schedule often made it difficult for him to combine family and work roles. Overtime or stressful work was described as affecting the family's emotional atmosphere, and thus rendering everyday life more demanding. Tiredness and stress were especially common (n=10) in these couples due partly to the child's crying (n=2). These two families were also concerned about their child's health. However, the partners made efforts to balance the uneven division of labor resulting from the father's work by discussing and agreeing on their responsibilities. The father's support seemed to be a significant resource for the mother.

### **Equal sharers (n=11 couples)**

The second coparenting family type, *equal sharers*, was characterized by both parents' active and equal participation in childcare and household duties. According to the couples' experiences, new working practices and routines had already shaped their everyday lives. The parents worked together reciprocally and perceived an equal division of labor as important to them and as a mutual resource. As one mother (age 28, DY) put it, *"Our cooperation works really well: we strongly believe that we are equal parents, and that equality helps us to cope better."*

These parents implemented shared practices and principles that had already been agreed upon before the child was born. Furthermore, they appreciated working together and sometimes did tasks in turns. Their everyday parental roles were as similar as possible. When work took the father's time away from the family, he compensated for this by taking care of the child more in the evenings or at weekends. As one father (age 28, SY) stated, *"many weekends, I am more with the child as if to compensate for working days on weekdays"*. They also shared caring for the child by alternating their roles during nights and getting up in the morning with the child in turns, taking into consideration

each other's resources and daily coping. Both parents were allowed to rest and have time for themselves each week. In many of these families, the father also planned to take up family leave, enabling the partners to switch roles:

*Outside his working day, my husband has been as equally involved in childcare as I have. Apart from full breastfeeding, there is nothing he can't do for the child, and the child is used to both of us doing the everyday chores ...The other is also always ready to help if one of us gets tired or feels anxious. My husband will stay home with the child for two months while I return to work, and I am confident he will manage with the child at home. (Mother, age 32, SY).*

*Help is asked for and offered sensitively, so that you don't have to guess how the other is coping. We share the responsibility of childcare as evenly as possible because our goal is that both can do it equally well on their own. (Father, age 35, SY)*

As this couple explained, the partners were ready to help each other mutually and flexibly and, owing to the father's active role, the child was used to being cared for by both parents. While generally breastfed, the child (in some families) also accepted the bottle, which enabled the father to participate in feeding the child. In these families where coparental cooperation worked successfully, both partners' reported experiencing strong mutual support, satisfaction and trust. These couples did not mention any current challenges in their lives, such as concerns about their child's health or well-being. However, one thing saddened the fathers: not being able to spend more time with their child. Two of them pointed out that the mother, who was on family leave, spent more time with the child than they could. Although 63.6% (n=7/11) of the fathers mainly worked or studied remotely at home, they too would have liked more time with their child. Flexible remote working was nevertheless perceived as positive, as it increased family time. Periodic tiredness was typical of all the couples in this coparenting family type. However, strong mutual support, listening to and understanding each other, and showing closeness in the couple relationship made for balanced cooperation, thereby increasing the well-being of the whole family.

### **Stressed searchers (n=7 couples)**

The third coparenting family type, *stressed searchers*, was characterized by uneven participation and division of labor in matters related to childcare and household responsibilities. The mothers reported having the main responsibility for the child's well-being and being the best expert on the child. The partners did not mention parental equality or an even division of labor as a common goal. However, all the mothers hoped for greater father involvement in childcare and housework. As the following excerpt shows, meta-work (parental decision-making) related to childcare was seen as the task of the mother, who also guided the father on childcare when she herself needed help:

*It was smooth during his paternity leave as my spouse cared for everything else while I breastfed the baby. After he returned to work, it may have been difficult for him to understand how burdensome it is to take care of the child 24/7 and the home on top of that. Of course, he helps, especially in matters related to the home, but I still feel that the meta-work is largely left to me. Especially meta-work related to the child, i.e., deciding on when to eat, sleep, and change diapers. (Mother, age 28, SY)*

This quote exemplifies the primary responsibility for the child that was typically undertaken by the mothers in this group. Moreover, the mother took sole care of the child during both night and morning awakenings. Thus, the partners' parenting roles in everyday life appeared highly differentiated. The mother could only obtain support in childcare by directly asking the father for help. Remembering or learning to do this was recommended in the answers of mothers and fathers. Agreement on practices and principles had not, therefore, been reached, and partners' differing views on how to raise a child caused conflicts from time to time. Disputes also arose over the partners' different roles in everyday life.

*The fact that my husband is out at work, and I am at home makes the arrangement lopsided. I am off all the time, but at the same time, I'm working as a babysitter. My husband has*



*working hours and a need for free time as well. When we are both tired in the evening, we have different views on who should deal with the wet diapers. (Mother, age 35, DY)*

In these seven families, dissatisfaction with coparenting was especially manifested in the descriptions given by the mothers, who felt they did not receive enough partner support in childcare. Time use and management were also perceived as a challenge, and personal or joint family time was difficult to find. Furthermore, while the father's absence at work reduced family time, remote working by some fathers (57.1%, n=4/7 mainly worked remotely) was also perceived as problematic due to lack of clarity over daytime participation in childcare. However, this was not the only reason for unbalanced parental roles. Interaction between the partners could be challenging, especially in matters related to the skewed parental division of labor, the father usually participating less than the mother in childcare and housework. However, partners belittling and underestimating each other's tasks and their performance was described as a problem by only one couple. Three of the stressed searcher families also reported challenges related to their child's health, temperament, or well-being. In turn, stress and fatigue were described as caused more by other things in life (e.g., home renovation and the mother's uncertain employment situation). These multiple challenges along with an imbalance in parental roles rendered coparental cooperation difficult and impaired the family's well-being.

The parents in all three coparenting family types emphasized the importance of having conversations in their daily interactions. Open communication, joint proactive planning, and agreeing on issues were seen as promoting cooperation. Speaking out loud about one's feelings and thoughts, sharing experiences, and bringing up one's needs were described as making everyday life easier. All the couples also reported that both parents needed to have time to themselves, the difference between the types centering on how this was achieved. Another common goal was being the best possible parents for their children.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study contributes to understanding the construction of coparenting by heterosexual Finnish couples transitioning to parenthood. By combining survey and daily diary data, the aim was to explore couples' daily cooperation holistically, as part of their family-life situation. Overall, the first-time mothers' and fathers' coparental cooperation in the context of daily family life was found to be a complex construct that could be promoted or hindered by several issues: 1) *partners' daily interaction*, 2) *definition of parental roles*, 3) *parental values, attitudes, and childrearing views*, 4) *parent's interpretations of the child*, 5) *balance between father's work, mother's leave*, 6) *time management*, and (7) *mutual emotions and coping*.

These seven areas talked about by the parents, can be considered in the light of Feinberg's (2003) ecological model of coparenting. Thus, parents' emotional and mental health, values, attitudes, and personal childrearing views are examples of individual-level influences on coparenting that may limit parents' ability to support each other and engage productively in childrearing (Feinberg, 2003). This study also identified family-level influences on coparenting related to partners' daily interaction and definition of parental roles. For example, parents' daily communication and ability to agree on their duties were perceived as necessary for well-functioning cooperation. Conversely, as described by Feinberg (2003), coparental miscoordination leads to greater unfriendliness, conflict, and dissatisfaction in the couple relationship. Furthermore, these findings highlight the child as an influencer on coparental cooperation (see Mchale et al, 2004). This study suggest that parents' interpretations of the child may play an important role in influencing coparental interaction patterns, and shaping parents' feelings and the need for mutual support. The changes occurring in the child's development were considered from the perspectives of temporality and variability. For example, teething or learning to crawl leads to interrupted sleep. When parents are exhausted, mutual interaction may not be constructive or supportive. Finally, this study foregrounded parents' experiences of the effects of the father's work on family time, stress, and daily coping. Such extrafamilial-level stress and coping factors competing for parents' time in the domestic economy, work, and family spheres also influence coparenting (Feinberg, 2003).

The three coparenting family types describe couples' coparenting practices and their daily coparental cooperation, and extend knowledge on coparenting (e.g., Feinberg, 2012; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2019). The diary method, seldom used in qualitative research, enabled a deeper understanding of the daily challenges faced by couples and other aspects of daily family life (see Bartlett and Milligan, 2015). The first type, *alternating parents*, was characterized by the participation of both parents, manifested by turn-taking in childcare, and having a childrearing agreement. Cooperation was generally successful, although these couples were not always able to balance daily challenges or achieve equal parenting. Overtime or stressful work made it difficult for fathers to combine their family and work roles. Hence, the mother ended up mainly responsible for both the child and household duties. Previous studies (Durtschi et al, 2017; McHale et al, 2012; Schoppe-Sullivan et al, 2016) have argued that various life situations (such as a demanding period at work) can weaken coparenting quality. Thus, efforts to implement childcaring responsibilities equally can be complicated (Lévesque et al, 2020). In contrast, the second coparenting family type, *equal sharers*, was characterized by the active and equal participation of both parents in childcare and household duties and strong mutual support. These couples valued working together, considered each other's daily coping, and expressed mutual satisfaction with their coparenting. Research (Eerola, 2021; Miller, 2017) has shown that couples who agree on parenting practices are more likely to participate in childcare and housework tasks and thus achieve balance in their parenting roles. Despite differences between families in the factors making for balance (Allen & Henderson, 2017), all couples transitioning to first-time parenthood are at high risk for parental stress (Durtschi et al, 2017). The third coparenting family type, *stressed searchers*, was characterized by uneven participation and an unequal division of childcare and household responsibilities. Mothers' main responsibility for childcare, differentiated parental roles, and incompatible views on childrearing had led to disputes and dissatisfaction, especially among mothers, who felt that support from their partners was lacking. In addition, these families experienced various everyday stressful and fatiguing challenges related to concerns about the child's well-being, time management, or work that made

coparental cooperation difficult. As found in previous studies, parents experiencing significant changes in family formation need to rearrange their strategies for cooperation (Allan, 2008). If parents encounter multiple challenges, their experiences of coparenting may become less stable during transitions from one period to another (Van Egeren, 2004).

Finally, this study showed the importance of mutually supportive coparenting. As Feinberg and Kan (2008) argue, supportive coparenting is crucial for the whole family's well-being. Findings indicated that couples have different ways of working together as coparents. Although the division of parental duties often leads to traditional gender roles (Lévesque et al, 2020), this study showed that parents could succeed in parenting in a mutually satisfying, fair and equal way. Both parents can be experts and active participants in their child's life and strike a balance in their coparental cooperation. However, not all couples pursue or achieve the goal of equality. Although gender equality and shared parenting styles have increased in the Nordic countries (Eerola et al, 2021), and research on Finnish family values has revealed a trend towards more involved fatherhood (Ylikännö et al, 2014), managing the domestic sphere, including childcare and housework, remains challenging. However, it would be important to ask in what other ways equality could be achieved. These findings indicate that equal coparenting does not necessarily mean an even division of labor or parental leave, but instead that both partners actively participate in everyday life in a way that satisfies each. Couples need to negotiate their daily lives in many ways: joint discussions and a fair division of labor, whether performed together or separately, shared values and principles, and strong coparental support were perceived as prerequisites for effective cooperation. Couples' experiences of mutual support seem to be important for their emotions and daily coping, and thus for the quality of their coparental cooperation. Hence, both fathers' and mothers' coping are important for the child's well-being. Parents' understanding of each other's need for help, emotional changes, and level of tiredness (see Lévesque et al, 2020), manifested by mutual affection and appreciation, promotes coparental cooperation. In contrast, imbalance in parenting roles, and insufficient partner support causes irritability, especially in mothers with an enormous workload who find asking for help

difficult. In sum, both partners' experiences of mutual support and equality are key in developing coparental cooperation.

### **Limitations and implications**

This study also has its limitations. First, the participants represented Finnish heteronormative (cohabiting or married) couples, and hence it was not possible to capture diversity in family form or cultural background. Thus, an important future direction would be to explore these coparenting family types in more diverse samples. Second, the couples were mainly well-educated. Straight and Bales (2003) argue that parents' educational level is one resource related to coparenting quality, as education can provide parents with cognitive skills (e.g., perspective-taking) that may positively affect their attitudes to cooperation. However, the parental educational level was not of crucial importance in this study, as the most educated couples were found in all three coparenting family types. Third, our theoretical approach could minimize the power dynamics relating to gender differences between family members, a typical criticism of the family systems theory (Allen & Henderson, 2017). To see if the findings of this study can be generalized to different cultural contexts, studies of mothers' and fathers' emotional work and its contribution to shared parenting should be examined more broadly. Finally, although the data were cross-sectional, describing the families' situation at only one point in time, the data sources (survey and diary) were complementary.

It is known that coparenting changes over time and that parents can also learn by experience and adapt their relationship behavior (McHale et al, 2004 ), and that the development of couple relationships may be shaped by the partners' coparenting behavior (Schoppe-Sullivan et al, 2004). Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the quality of coparental cooperation during the first postnatal months. It is not easy, especially for couples who live with multiple challenges, to build a coparenting relationship in the early stages. Therefore, support in building well-functioning coparental cooperation should be targeted to both parents and couples who have not yet reached

an agreement on parenting practices and the division of duties. Coparental support protects against challenges and helps parents cope with them together. In addition, parents' egalitarian aspirations should be considered in political decision-making, work cultures, and the services offered to families.

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## Tables

Themes	Issues promoting coparental cooperation	Issues hindering coparental cooperation
<b><u>Partners' daily interaction</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- open communication</li> <li>- expressing oneself, foregrounding one's needs</li> <li>- planning/ thinking about solutions together- your own way or a shared way</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- low level of daily communication</li> <li>- belittling and criticizing tasks done by the other</li> <li>- relationship challenges/disagreements</li> </ul>
<b><u>Definition of parental roles</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- equal division of duties</li> <li>- sharing of parental leave</li> <li>- complementing the other's actions with the child</li> <li>- partial breastfeeding: more father-child interaction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- father less involved in childcare and household tasks</li> <li>- differences in care experiences due to differences in roles</li> <li>- feeding (nursing): the child is the mother's responsibility - night awakenings</li> </ul>
<b><u>Parental values, attitudes, childrearing views</u></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- commitment/participation of both parents, prioritizing the family</li> <li>- valuing cooperation, the common goal of being good parents to the child</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- different approaches to solving child-related issues</li> <li>- different views on what it takes to raise a child, arguing</li> </ul>
<b>Parents' interpretations of the child</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- joy in the child and the child's development</li> <li>- success with childcare</li> <li>- the child sleeps well and is healthy</li> <li>- parents on the same page in identifying the child's needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the child's crying or complaining</li> <li>- the child's night awakenings - watching over the child at night due to the child's restlessness, vaccinations, teething</li> </ul>
<b>Balance between father's work, mother's leave</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- flexible and remote work</li> <li>- change in roles; parental leave and work at six months postnatal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- father's busy work schedule or traveling</li> <li>- remote working, difficulty understanding the distribution of household responsibilities</li> </ul>
<b>Time management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- joint family time and activities</li> <li>- both parents have time for themselves each week</li> <li>- a suitable daily rhythm leaves time for the togetherness of father and child</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- lack of family time together</li> <li>- parents need their own time</li> <li>- lack of one-on-one time for partners</li> </ul>
<b>Mutual emotions and coping</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- mutual affection, appreciation, and trust</li> <li>- adequate sleep - parents coping better</li> <li>- mutual support and understanding (know each other's coping abilities and recognize need for help)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- poorly slept nights -&gt; irritability, suddenness</li> <li>- mother's anxiety/ health challenges</li> <li>- insufficient support from partner</li> <li>- tiredness and stress over other things in life</li> </ul>

**Table 1.** The most important issues promoting or hindering coparental cooperation

<b>Differences between coparenting family types</b>	<b>Parental participation in childcare and housework</b>	<b>Coparental support</b>	<b>Satisfaction with cooperation</b>	<b>Daily Challenges</b>
<b>Alternating parents (n=12 couples)</b>	Both are involved, more alternation in childcare	Direct support from partner, mainly from father to mother	Partially satisfied parents	Father's work is the main challenge
<b>Equal sharers (n=11 couples)</b>	Active and equal participation of both partners	Strong mutual support	Both parents satisfied	No major challenges in life
<b>Stressed searchers (n=7 couples)</b>	Uneven participation, mother has main responsibility	Insufficient support, mother has to ask for help	Maternal dissatisfaction (or both)	Multiple challenges

**Table 2.** The main differences between the coparenting family types