



Longitudinal Linkages Between Coparenting and Subsequent Friendship Quality in Middle Childhood

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Abstract

Children who have a good relationship with a best friend experience better social and emotional adjustment, making it critical to identify factors that foster the development of high-quality friendships. We examined whether the quality of the coparenting relationship, as perceived by each parent in middle childhood, predicted children's perceptions of the quality of their best friendship two years later. Eighty-eight families (50 girls) completed data collection at two timepoints. When children were in second grade (T1; mean age = 7.88 years), mothers and fathers each reported on the quality of their coparenting relationship. In fourth grade (T2; mean age = 9.79 years), children reported on the quality of their best friendship. Results from regression analyses showed that mothers who perceived a supportive coparenting relationship with their spouse had children who subsequently reported a relationship of higher quality with their best friend, and a post-hoc interaction analysis demonstrated that this association was magnified when fathers also perceived a supportive coparenting relationship. No direct links were found between fathers' perceptions of their coparenting relationship and children's friendships. These results suggest that the quality of the coparenting relationship, at least as perceived by mothers, relates to children's ability to establish and sustain important, intimate relationships with friends longitudinally. They also suggest that these effects are particularly pronounced when both parents agree on the quality of their coparenting relationship. Therefore, interventions aimed at promoting coparenting teamwork may help foster children's ability to form and maintain intimate friendships in middle childhood and beyond.

Keywords Coparenting · Friendship quality · Best friendship · Middle childhood · Longitudinal

Highlights

- Research is scarce on longitudinal links between coparenting and child friendships.
- Mothers' coparenting reports relate to children's ability to form friendships.
- Links are magnified when fathers perceive a supportive coparenting relationship.
- Results are independent from parents' marital satisfaction.
- Future work should examine friendship reciprocity as well.

Learning to initiate and maintain friendships is one of the key developmental tasks of middle childhood (Bukowski 2001). At this age, children place an increasing importance on their relationships with friends as a function of their emerging needs for acceptance, companionship and

intimacy (Brogaard-Clausen and Robson 2019; Monahan and Booth-LaForce 2016). Friendship is typically defined as a close, mutual relationship between two individuals who have reciprocated positive feelings for one another (e.g., Fink et al. 2015). Friendship confers important developmental advantages, promoting school-aged children's cognitive and social growth (Furman and Rose 2015; Wentzel et al. 2018).

Best friendships differ from relationships with other peers in that they are characterized by greater closeness, companionship, loyalty, equality, shared values, and emotional and instrumental support (Gifford-Smith

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and Brownell 2003; Newcomb and Bagwell 1995). Children who have a best friend have higher self-esteem (Maunder and Monks 2019) and feel more competent (Erdley et al. 2001), and are less likely to suffer from bullying and victimization (Bollmer et al. 2005), anxiety (Adams et al. 2011), and depression (Troop-Gordon et al. 2019). In addition to simply having a best friend, having a high-quality friendship confers additional benefits (Maunder and Monks 2019). High-quality friendships are characterized by high levels of prosocial behavior, self-disclosure, intimacy, self-esteem support, and low levels of conflicts and rivalry (Berndt 2002). For children, greater friendship quality has been linked to better social and academic adjustment (Mikami and Normand 2015). Given the potential benefits conferred by high-quality friendships, it is essential to understand the reasons why children vary so widely in their capacity to develop and maintain these important relationships.

Family Influences on Children's Friendships

Given that the family is a central context for children's socialization, family factors are likely to be associated with the quality of children's friendships. The family is the first arena in which children learn about relationships; thus, it is widely theorized that children's capacity to develop supportive friendships may be acquired, at least in part, through family processes (e.g., Davies et al. 2018). And indeed, studies have shown that several aspects of the family environment, such as parents' sensitivity, personal characteristics, parenting behavior, and disciplinary interaction patterns are associated with the quality of children's friendships (Blair and Perry 2018; Dickson et al. 2018; Wang and Fletcher 2016).

Coparenting

The way that problems are solved in the family context may influence children's friendship quality, and coparental interactions are likely to be particularly important in this regard (Davies et al. 2018). Coparenting is defined as the quality of coordination between adults in their roles as parents and is characterized by the extent to which they either support or undermine each other's parenting of the child (Margolin et al. 2001). Effective coparenting signifies that parents agree on a range of child-related topics, including parenting practices, discipline, educational standards, and peer associations (Kotila and Schoppe-Sullivan 2015). A large body of research suggests that the quality of the coparenting relationship in early childhood is directly and indirectly linked to children's adjustment concurrently and longitudinally (McHale et al. 2000; Teubert and

Pinquart 2010). For instance, better coparenting predicts increased child effortful control, parent-child attachment security, and school readiness, and is linked to fewer internalizing and externalizing problems in school-age children (Cabrera et al. 2012; Jahromi et al. 2018; Zemp et al. 2018; Zou and Wu 2020).

Coparenting is a particular dimension of the marital relationship that does not include the romantic, emotional, financial and legal aspects of the relationship that do not relate to childrearing (Feinberg 2003). Coparenting requires the presence of one or more children, involves the sharing of children's education, and is maintained even after marital separation (Kotila and Schoppe-Sullivan 2015; Lamela et al. 2016). Further, because coparenting involves a concern for the children's well-being, even partners engaged in a dissatisfying marital relationship can be motivated to protect their children from exposure to disagreements and to be supportive of each other as coparents (Margolin et al. 2001). In fact, variations in the quality of the coparenting relationship contribute uniquely to child development, over and above general marital variables (Teubert and Pinquart 2010). Indeed, child-related coparental disagreements may be more distressing to children than conflicts about issues not pertaining to them (Parkes et al. 2019; van Eldik et al. 2020). When parents quarrel, children often try to determine the cause of the conflict; if they determine themselves to be the cause, they are likely to experience more distress than if they attribute the conflict to other factors (Parry et al. 2020; van Eldik et al. 2020). Additionally, hearing or seeing parents quarrel over a subject that concerns them may be particularly stressful to children, as it may lead them to question their parents' feelings about them, or they might blame themselves for family turmoil (Cummings et al. 2015; McDaniel et al. 2017; van Eldik et al. 2020). On the contrary, parental agreement about child-rearing creates a more structured, predictable, and controllable environment and conveys to the child a sense of solidarity and common purpose (Parry et al. 2020).

Theory also leads us to expect that the coparenting relationship is linked to children's social functioning with peers, including children's ability to form and maintain high-quality best friendships. Social learning theory suggests that children develop schemas about how relationships work through observations of their parents' interactions as coparents (Bandura 2001). When young children regularly observe negative coparenting processes, they may learn suboptimal ways of handling conflicts, and use such strategies with their friends (Davies et al. 2018). Conversely, children whose parents have a healthy coparenting relationship observe and learn prosocial behaviors (Scrimgeour et al. 2013) as well as appropriate conflict resolution skills (Kopystynska et al. 2020). Overall, the quality of children's friendships may reflect in part what children have learned

about cooperation and conflict management within intimate dyadic relationships by observing their parents (Davies et al. 2018).

Although little work has examined the associations between coparenting and the quality of children's friendships, previous studies have documented links between coparenting relationships and children's social adjustment, more broadly. For example, Barnett et al. (2011) found that mothers' perceptions of coparenting cooperation were moderately, positively associated with their reports of their 4- and 6-year-old children's social competence. Scrimgeour et al. (2013) found that a more cooperative coparenting relationship, as observed in a triadic interaction between both parents and their 3-year-old child, predicted greater maternal report of children's prosocial behavior. In fact, a meta-analysis examining associations between coparenting and children's adjustment documented that children's social functioning was positively associated with coparental cooperation and negatively associated with coparental conflict, after accounting for parents' marital satisfaction (Teubert and Pinquart 2010). Overall, studies demonstrate a clear link between the quality of the coparental relationship and children's overall social functioning and social skills. However, these studies do not assess the quality of children's best friendships, the embodiment of these social skills.

To our knowledge, only one study has examined the association between the quality of the coparenting relationship and children's interactions with a best friend. Leary and Katz (2004) assessed coparenting during a family interaction when children were 5 years old and coded a play interaction with a peer that the mother had identified as the child's best friend, at both 5 and 9 years. The results indicated that positive coparenting, which included parents' support, validation and warmth towards one another, was associated with lower concurrent levels of observed conflict in the friendships of 5-year-old children, although not with any positive features. They also indicated that hostile-withdrawn coparenting when children were 5 years old predicted children's observed conflict in their friendships at age 9 years. These results suggest a link between coparenting and the quality of children's best friendship, at least when the best friend is identified by the mother. Additionally, although structured observational data are noteworthy for not being subject to the biases inherent in self-reports, they constitute a snapshot of the targeted construct, based on a few minutes of observation in one context (McElwain et al. 2011). Self-report measures provide a different window onto relationships, as they tap into cognitive and emotional aspects of parents' personal experience of their coparenting relationship and children's experience of their friendship that may not be detected in an observational assessment (Brown et al. 2010;

McDaniel et al. 2017). As such, parents' reports of their coparenting relationship and children's perceptions of their friendships provide useful complements, in that they can assess more subjective, less easily observable features of relationships (e.g., perceptions of support or intimacy), as these relationships unfold over time and across different contexts.

The Current Study

The goal of this study was to examine whether the quality of the coparenting relationship, as reported independently by mothers and fathers, predicted children's subsequent perceptions of the quality of their best friendship in middle childhood. Since the coparenting relationship necessarily occurs in the context of a relationship between two individuals, the experience of each parent is unlikely to operate independently from the other's; therefore, we examined both main and interactive effects of mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their coparenting relationship. To focus on what is unique to the coparenting relationship, above and beyond the marital relationship, we controlled for both parents' perceptions of their marital satisfaction. We also controlled for child sex, family SES and the number of siblings in the family, given documented relations between family SES and social competence (Hosokawa and Katsura 2017), known sex differences in middle childhood friendship functioning (Nielson et al. 2020), and evidence that sibling relationships shape children's ability to form and maintain relationships with peers (Yucel et al. 2018). We expected that higher-quality coparenting when children were in grade 2 would predict a higher quality best friendship when children were in grade 4. We did not make assumptions regarding parental gender or interactive effects, given the lack of pertinent literature.

Method

Participants

Eighty-eight families (child, father, and mother) living in a large Canadian metropolitan area were assessed twice. Families were recruited from random birth lists generated by the Ministry of Health and Social Services, and we properly obtained parental informed consent. The study protocol was approved by our institution's review board. Criteria for participation included a full-term pregnancy and the absence of any known child physical or mental disability. At the first timepoint, mothers were between 27 and 52 years old ($M = 37.42$) and had an average of 15.60 years of education (varying from 11 to 18 years). Fathers were between 29 and 61 years old ($M = 40.21$) and had 15.43

years of education on average (varying from 11 to 21 years). Twenty-eight (28.4) percent of parental couples were at least five years apart from one another in age. Family income (in Canadian dollars) varied from less than \$20,000 to over \$100,000, with a mean situated in the \$60,000–\$79,000 bracket. The majority of mothers (88.1%) and fathers (83.3%) were Caucasian and French-speaking (78.7% of mothers and 75.9% of fathers). Other ethnicities included Caribbean (4.8% of mothers and 1.2% of fathers), Latino (2.4% for both mothers and fathers), of African descent (1.2% of mothers and 2.4% of fathers), Middle-Eastern (1.2% of mothers and 6.0% of fathers) and other (2.4% for both mothers and fathers). Fifteen (15.9%) percent of the couples were biracial. Other languages than French included English (2.3% of mothers and 4.6% of fathers), Italian (4.6% for both mothers and fathers), Arabic (2.3% of mothers and 1.1% of fathers), Spanish (3.4% of mothers and 2.3% of fathers) and other languages (3.3% of mothers and 8.9% of fathers). The sample comprised 50 girls and 38 boys. At the second timepoint, when friendship was assessed, 11.8% of the children had no siblings, 43.1% had one, 31.4% had two, 9.8% had three and 3.9% had four.

Procedure

The current data are drawn from a larger longitudinal study on child socio-emotional and cognitive development that consisted of yearly home visits. When children were in second grade (M age = 7.88 years, $SD = 0.34$), mothers and fathers reported on the quality of their coparenting relationship and on their overall marital satisfaction. Parents were asked to complete the questionnaires separate from one another and invited to return them by mail in provided prepaid envelopes. Two years later, the children, who were now in fourth grade ($M = 9.79$ years, $SD = 0.31$), reported on the perceived quality of their best friendship. Children were asked to write down the names of their five closest friends in class. If children could not provide five classroom friends, they could provide the names of other friends at school. Then, the experimenter asked children to identify their very best friend from that list and children were instructed to think about that friend while answering various questions about their relationship (the Friendship Quality Questionnaire described below). In order to ensure that children had read every part of the question, understood it, and had their friend in mind, and to overcome problems that may emanate from children's varying degrees of literacy, the experimenter read the questions aloud and included the name of the chosen best friend in each question.

Given the stabilization of the coparenting relationship over time after the preschool years (Feinberg et al. 2012), coparenting was measured when children were in second

grade. Children's friendship quality was measured in fourth grade, as learning to initiate and maintain intimate friendships is a key developmental task of middle childhood (Bukowski 2001), and to allow for a time delay (two years) between the assessment of the predictor and outcome variables, thus decreasing shared method variance.

Measures

Coparenting

The Coparenting Questionnaire (CQ; Margolin et al. 2001) consists of 14 items assessing spouses' perceptions of one another's coparenting behavior in terms of cooperation (5 items), conflict (5 items) and triangulation (4 items), which are then summed into a total score for each parent (after reverse-scoring triangulation). Items are rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The total coparenting scores reflect each parent's perceptions of the quality of their coparenting relationship. Parents were asked to fill out the questionnaire with the target child in mind. Examples of items include "My spouse argues with me about this child" (reversed) and "My spouse fills me in on what happens during this child's day". Higher scores indicate a parent's perceptions of a coparenting relationship of higher quality. Consistent with Feinberg et al. (2012) recommendations as well as previous coparenting research, we used the total coparenting score (e.g., Abbass-Dick et al. 2015; McDaniel and Teti 2012; Parent et al. 2016). Margolin et al. (2001) reported internal consistencies ranging from 0.84 to 0.87 for the total CQ score in three different community samples. In this study, internal consistency (Cronbach's α) was 0.85 for mothers and 0.87 for fathers.

Marital satisfaction

The four-item Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-4; Sabourin et al. 2005; Spanier 1976) assesses individuals' satisfaction with their current romantic relationship using a 6-point Likert-type scale: 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 6 (*very satisfied*). Examples of items include "How often do you discuss or have you considered divorce, separation, or terminating your relationship?" (reversed) and "In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?". The DAS-4 shows very good internal consistency (α consistently above 0.80), excellent temporal stability over a 1-year period for men ($r = 0.87$) and women ($r = 0.83$), high predictive validity with regards to couple dissolution, and it is less subject to socially desirable responding than longer versions of the DAS (Sabourin et al. 2005). In the current study, internal consistency was 0.87 for mothers and 0.86 for fathers.

Friendship quality

The Friendship Quality Questionnaire (FQQ; Parker and Asher 1993) is a self-report measure assessing children's perception of the quality of their relationship with their chosen best friend, and their perceptions of various qualitative aspects of that friendship. The original questionnaire contains 40 items organized into six subscales: validation and caring (e.g., "Makes me feel good about my ideas"), conflict resolution (e.g., "Make up easily when we have a fight"), help and guidance (e.g., "Helps me with schoolwork so I can get done quicker"), companionship and recreation (e.g., "Always sit together at lunch"), intimate exchange (e.g., "Always tell each other our problems"), and conflict and betrayal (e.g., "Argue a lot"). The FQQ shows good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.95$; Franco and Levitt 1998) and test-retest reliability ($r = 0.75$; Baker and Hudson 2013). Due to logistic considerations, a shortened 12-item version was developed for the current study. The three items that showed the highest factor loadings on four subscales of interest (conflict resolution; help and guidance; companionship and recreation; conflict and betrayal) in Parker and Asher's (1993) original factor analysis were selected. Items were rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*not true at all*) to 5 (*really true*). In the current sample, upon preliminary analyses, one item ("always sit together at lunch") from the companionship and recreation scale was removed, as its correlations with the other items were low (possibly due to mandatory seating assignments at several schools) and reduced the overall scale's internal consistency. Thus, we used a total friendship quality score (consistent with previous research using this measure; e.g., Kingery et al. 2011; Parker and Asher 1993) consisting of the sum of the 11 remaining items. Cronbach's α was 0.70.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Owing to attrition due to parental separation or families moving out of town, as well as some parents' or children's failure to complete measures, there were missing data on the following variables: fathers' coparenting ($N = 16$), mothers' ($N = 10$) and fathers' ($N = 22$) marital satisfaction, and friendship quality ($N = 28$). We examined whether complete and incomplete cases differed on any available data. The analyses revealed no group differences on any of the available data, including the following: mothers' coparenting, fathers' coparenting, family socio-economic status,

Table 1 Ranges, means (M), and standard deviations (SD) for all main variables

Variables	Range	M	SD
Maternal coparenting	18.00–70.00	55.98	7.97
Paternal coparenting	35.00–70.00	59.06	6.41
Maternal marital satisfaction	7.00–21.00	15.32	3.62
Paternal marital satisfaction	7.00–21.00	15.55	3.80
Friendship quality	18.00–55.00	43.04	7.66

number of siblings, mothers' marital satisfaction and fathers' marital satisfaction (all $ps > 0.08$).

Consequently, to preserve the sample size ($N = 88$) and minimize bias (Enders 2010), cases with missing values were included in the analyses by estimating the missing data. In line with recommendations for best practices for handling missing data, multiple imputation was employed to estimate the missing values (Enders 2010) using the Markov Chain Monte Carlo procedure (Geyer 1992). Multiple imputation works well even on smaller samples ($N = 50$) and when as much as 50% of the data are missing (Graham 2009). As per recommendations, 10 imputations were used, with data imputed from all other data available to maximize the precision of the imputation algorithm (Enders 2010; Graham 2009).

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for mothers' and fathers' reports of their coparenting relationship, marital satisfaction, and children's reports of friendship quality. All variables showed satisfactory variability and screening of variable distributions revealed normal or near-normal distributions. Table 2 presents the zero-order correlations among all variables and covariates (child sex, family SES [composed of mothers' and fathers' levels of education and family income], number of siblings, and mothers' and fathers' marital satisfaction). Friendship quality was positively associated with mothers' marital satisfaction. No other significant associations were found between friendship quality and the other potential covariates.

Coparenting scores had distinct relations with the potential covariates. Mothers' coparenting scores were significantly related to family SES, yet no relations were found with child sex or with the number of siblings. Mothers' coparenting scores were significantly related to both paternal and maternal marital satisfaction. Fathers' coparenting scores, on the other hand, were unrelated to child sex, family SES or number of siblings. Significant relations were found with paternal marital satisfaction and maternal marital satisfaction. To run uniform and conservative models, mothers' and fathers' marital satisfaction were both included as covariates in all subsequent main analyses, along with child sex, number of siblings and family SES. Mothers' and fathers' coparenting scores were

Table 2 Zero-order correlations among all study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Child sex	–	–0.05	0.11	–0.05	0.07	0.02	0.01	0.04
2. Family socioeconomic status		–	0.13	0.07	0.12	0.27*	0.13	–0.01
3. Number of siblings			–	–0.14	–0.01	0.08	0.08	0.00
4. Maternal marital satisfaction				–	0.51***	0.66***	0.42***	0.24*
5. Paternal marital satisfaction					–	0.23*	0.29**	0.11
6. Maternal coparenting						–	0.63***	0.34***
7. Paternal coparenting							–	0.13
8. Friendship quality								–

Child sex: 1 = boys, 2 = girls

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

highly correlated, as were mothers' and fathers' marital satisfaction scores.

Main Analyses

In addition to the associations mentioned above, Table 2 presents the main correlations of interest. In agreement with the hypothesis, friendship quality was correlated with the quality of the coparenting relationship, as reported by mothers ($r = 0.34$, $p = 0.001$). No significant association with friendship quality was found for fathers' reports ($r = 0.13$, $p = 0.221$).

A regression analysis was conducted next to investigate whether mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their coparenting relationship, and their interaction, predicted unique variance in friendship quality after controlling for the covariates. A hierarchical order of entry of predictors was used, in which child sex, number of siblings, family SES, and mothers' and fathers' marital satisfaction were entered first (Block 1), followed by mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their coparenting relationship (Block 2), and finally by the interaction between mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their coparenting relationship (Block 3). Variables were centered before computing the interaction term to avoid multicollinearity (Dearing and Hamilton 2006).

A summary of the results is presented in Table 3. The first block explained 6.2% of the variance in friendship quality; only mothers' marital satisfaction contributed unique variance. After accounting for all covariates, mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their coparenting relationship jointly explained an additional 8.6% of the variance in friendship quality, F change (2, 79) = 3.97, $p = 0.023$. In this block, only mothers' perceptions of coparenting significantly predicted the quality of children's friendships. Fathers' perceptions of coparenting were unrelated to children's friendships. Lastly, after accounting for all covariates and main effects, the interaction between maternal and paternal perceptions of coparenting (Block 3) was significant. This interaction was decomposed and then

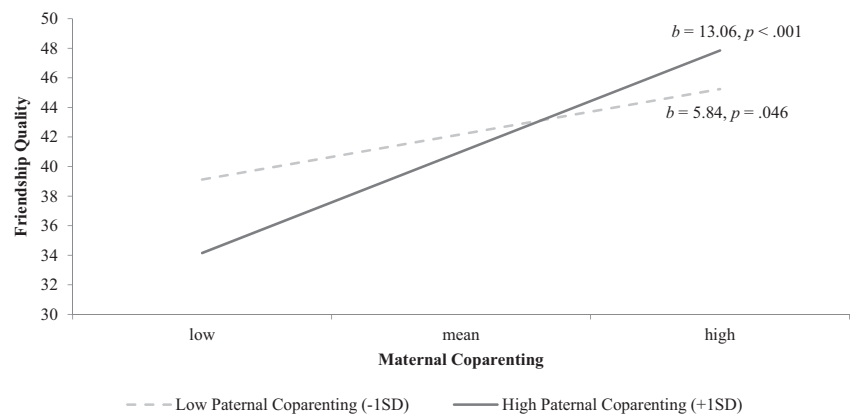
Table 3 Hierarchical regression models predicting children's perceptions of the quality of their relationship with their best friend

Predictor	Friendship quality			
	β	t	F	p
Block 1			1.07	0.39
Child sex	0.05	0.47		0.64
SES	–0.03	–0.28		0.78
Siblings	0.05	0.41		0.68
Marital satisfaction mother	0.23	2.04		0.05
Marital satisfaction father	–0.02	–0.18		0.86
Block 2			3.97	0.02
Child sex	0.02	0.20		0.85
SES	–0.13	–1.17		0.25
Siblings	–0.01	–0.06		0.95
Marital satisfaction mother	–0.05	–0.31		0.75
Marital satisfaction father	0.08	0.63		0.53
Coparenting mother	0.50	2.80		0.01
Coparenting father	–0.17	–1.24		0.22
Block 3			2.67	0.01
Coparenting mother \times Coparenting father	0.36	2.59		0.01

graphed (Fig. 1) by computing predicted values of friendship quality according to maternal coparenting at high (+1 SD) and at low (–1 SD) values of the moderator (i.e., paternal coparenting) and computing the slope at the mean (Hayes 2013). This post-hoc test revealed that maternal coparenting was positively associated with friendship quality at both high and low levels of paternal coparenting, however this association was more pronounced for families in which fathers also reported high-quality coparenting ($b = 13.06$, $p < 0.001$) than for those in which fathers perceived a low-quality coparenting relationship ($b = 5.84$, $p = 0.046$).

On an exploratory basis, we conducted supplemental hierarchical regressions to examine the three coparenting

Fig. 1 Interactions between maternal coparenting and paternal coparenting in the prediction of child friendship quality



subscales' specific contributions to the prediction of children's friendship, following the regression sequence presented above. The results showed that 6.7% of the variance in children's friendship quality was uniquely accounted by mothers' perceptions of fathers' coparenting cooperation $F(6, 79) = 2.02, p = 0.016$. No other results were significant.

Discussion

In this study, our objective was to examine whether the quality of the coparenting relationship, as perceived by each parent, predicted children's perceptions of the quality of their best friendship longitudinally. We expected that parental reports on the quality of their coparenting relationship would predict unique variance in children's friendship quality two years later, above and beyond parents' marital satisfaction and after controlling for other relevant covariates. We also explored whether there was an interaction between mothers' and fathers' reports. We found that children's report of the quality of their best friendship was predicted by mothers' but not fathers' perceptions of the quality of their coparenting relationship: mothers who perceived a supportive coparenting relationship with their spouse when their child was in second grade had children who reported a relationship of higher quality with their best friend in fourth grade. This association was significant after controlling for family SES, child sex, number of siblings, and both parents' reports of marital satisfaction. Furthermore, this association was qualified by a significant interaction between mothers' and fathers' reports of coparenting. The association between mother-reported coparenting and child friendship was enhanced when fathers perceived a high-quality coparenting relationship.

These findings are consistent with previous studies that found associations between the coparenting relationship and children's social competence (e.g., Barnett et al. 2011; Lam et al. 2018) and prosocial behavior (Scrimgeour et al. 2013).

They are also in line with the results of the only study, to our knowledge, to have investigated the association between (observed) coparenting and children's best friendships. Leary and Katz (2004) found that a positive coparenting relationship was negatively associated with concurrent levels of observed conflict in children's best friendship, whereas hostile-withdrawn coparenting predicted higher levels of observed conflict in children's friendships longitudinally. The present study adds to these findings by suggesting that the coparenting relationship as perceived by the mothers themselves predicts children's own perceptions of the quality of their relationship with their chosen best friend. Importantly, these associations are present even after accounting for marital satisfaction, supporting the claim that coparenting and marital satisfaction are two separate constructs that relate differently to child adjustment (Feinberg 2003; Gable et al. 1995), and that coparenting is linked more strongly to children's friendship functioning.

Several explanations exist for the role of coparenting in the prediction of children's friendship quality. First, social learning theory posits that behaviors can be acquired through observation and imitation of others' behaviors (Bandura 2001). Some studies suggest that children's social difficulties, including poor peer relations, may partly be explained by coparental disagreements and conflicts (e.g., Barnett et al. 2011). The hypothesis is that children who witness overt coparental conflicts, mutual undermining, and poor resolution may learn inappropriate ways to manage arguments with friends (Davies et al. 2018; Teubert and Pinquart 2010). By observing poor coparenting processes at home, children may learn that impulsivity and relational aggression are normal and appropriate ways to treat relational partners and to resolve conflicts (Kopystynska et al. 2020; Parry et al. 2020). This is likely to hinder children's capacity to make and to keep friends, notably because relationally aggressive children are likely to suffer from peer exclusion and peer rejection (García Bacete et al. 2017).

Furthermore, research on coparenting suggests that in the context of conflict, coparents may exercise triangulation and scapegoating, and use children to attack one another, leaving them feeling caught in the middle (e.g., Murphy et al. 2016; Teubert and Pinquart 2010). As a result, children's sense of physical and emotional security may be affected (Davies et al. 2018; Feinberg, 2003). In accordance with the spillover hypothesis, which suggests that moods, affects, or behaviors can be transferred from one family subsystem to another (Minuchin 1974), coparental conflict may lead to parental tension and/or negative mood, which increases the likelihood of negative parent–child interactions and hinders parents' ability to provide children with sufficient soothing, thereby placing children at risk for emotional maladjustment (Feinberg 2003). In turn, children who suffer from maladjustment, for instance symptoms of depression, are at risk for poor peer relationships (Schwartz-Mette et al. 2020) and importantly, for lower friendship quality with a best friend (Brendgen et al. 2013). Thus, poor coparenting processes may jeopardize children's ability to initiate and maintain high-quality friendships by thwarting their emotional well-being, which itself is an important asset to establish friendships. Overall, interventions aimed at addressing not only poor coparenting processes, but also the difficulties with social skills and emotional maladjustment that may ensue from suboptimal coparenting, may be beneficial to children's friendships and consequently to their overall adjustment.

On the other hand, exposure to coparental cooperation, support, harmony, respect and appropriate conflict resolution may model and influence children's expectations about and interpretations of close friends' intentions during conflict (Choi et al. 2019; Lam et al. 2018). Looking at children's emotional response to inter-adult anger, Cummings et al. (1991) observed that the key to avoid child emotional negativity and to support the modeling of appropriate social behavior is adults' ability to demonstrate resolution of conflict, which returns children's physiological arousal to near-normal levels after inter-adult conflicts. Thus, perhaps exposure to coparents' constructive management of conflict, including respectful consideration of the other's viewpoints regarding standards about the child's behavior, equips children to cope more effectively with conflict that emerges with their best friend (Kopystynska et al. 2020). With time, such effective conflict-resolution can be expected to contribute to a more stable, harmonious friendship and to more mutual support and closeness, and thus to a relationship of higher quality. Overall, as they learn about relationships with others through exposure to their parents' coparental relationship, children develop expectations, beliefs and behaviors that they carry into the formation and maintenance of their close friendships.

Given the lack of previous research, we made no assumptions regarding parental gender in the associations between parental perceptions of coparenting and friendship quality. The results showed that mothers' and fathers' reports of their coparenting relationship were highly correlated with each other. Nevertheless, only mothers' reports of the quality of their coparenting relationship were uniquely associated with children's reports of friendship quality. It may be that mothers perceive the quality of their coparenting relationship more accurately than fathers. Previous research supports this interpretation. For instance, Stright and Bales (2003) found that mothers' but not fathers' perceptions of coparenting quality were correlated with observations of coparenting quality during family interactions. Similarly, McHale et al. (2000) found that mothers' reports of coparenting quality were consistently correlated with family processes in observed family interactions, whereas fathers' were not. Alternatively, although research shows that fathers have become increasingly involved in child care (Gallegos et al. 2019), other results suggest the continuation of a gendered division of labor, where mothers are still primarily responsible for child care and domestic matters, while fathers often take on secondary roles (Kotila et al. 2013). Fathers' involvement is somewhat selective, as they tend to participate in more pleasurable aspects of childcare and in activities that suit their interests, while mothers continue to do more quotidian tasks such as meal preparation and bathing (Offer and Schneider 2011). Farr and Patterson (2013) examined differences in coparenting attitudes and behaviors among lesbian, gay and heterosexual couples with young adopted children, and found that only heterosexual couples reported specialization in child-rearing, where mothers reported doing significantly more child care than fathers. Therefore, perhaps this study's mother-specific findings can be attributed to the fact that most mothers in this sample were conceivably the primary caregiver (information that was unfortunately not gathered) and accordingly, had more influence than fathers on their child's social functioning.

Although no direct effects were found for fathers' reports in the prediction of child friendship quality, the results revealed a significant interaction between mothers' and fathers' reports of their coparenting relationship. Specifically, the association between maternal report of coparenting and children's report of friendship quality was stronger when fathers also reported a coparenting relationship of high quality. One interpretation of this pattern is that fathers who perceive their coparenting relationship to be of good quality provide a context within which mothers may exercise their influence on children's friendship. It may be that those fathers, because they feel greater maternal respect and support of their parenting, are more inclined to encourage

their spouse's parenting initiatives, thus strengthening any maternal influence. In fact, Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2008) suggested that fathers' perceptions of their coparenting relationship quality are particularly relevant when mothers engage in low levels of criticism and high levels of encouragement. The current results suggest that the converse may be true as well, and that mothers' coparenting may take on particular significance for children when their partners are supportive and unlikely to criticize, interrupt, or contradict their child-rearing efforts.

Limitations and Future Research

This study presents some methodological limitations that call for careful interpretation of the results. First, although the design was longitudinal, we were unable to measure friendship quality at Time 1, thus limiting our ability to establish a temporal sequence. As such, we cannot rule out the possibility that children's ease in their close social relationships may have been present at T1 and contributed to a more harmonious coparenting relationship. Moreover, the sample was a low-risk community sample, comprised of mostly college-educated and Caucasian parents involved in heterosexual relationships. Other studies examining coparenting have, for instance, focused on low-income, at-risk families (e.g., Choi et al. 2019; Kopystynska et al. 2020), single mothers coparenting with other adults (e.g., Li and Liu 2020), gay and lesbian couples (e.g., Farr et al. 2019), and separated and blended families (e.g., Rouyer et al. 2015). Whether the current findings generalize to such populations is an open scientific question.

Also, the coparenting relationship was measured by parental reports, which are subject to biases, such as social desirability, and may reflect a parent's psychological state (Bornstein et al. 2015). Observational measures, on the other hand, allow researchers to capture behavioral aspects of the dynamics in the coparenting relationship of which parents may not be conscious (Farr et al. 2019). However, several studies suggest that there is a moderate degree of concordance between parents' (mostly mothers', as mentioned above) account of their coparental relationship and observed coparenting, suggesting that parental reports do tap into meaningful aspects of the coparental relationship (McHale et al. 2000; Stright and Bales 2003). Still, an ideal assessment of coparental functioning should comprise multiple measures, including observed and subjective indicators (Farr et al. 2019). Also, although parent questionnaires were distributed during home visits in separate envelopes and parents were asked to complete and return them separately, we were not able to further control for mutual influence between coparents in their responses.

Furthermore, we did not examine friendship mutuality. The gold standard in friendship research is to determine

whether the friendship is reciprocal, and then to obtain reports of the quality of the relationship from both friends. However, this approach is not always feasible, as it requires a sampling frame that permits access to children's friendship partners (e.g., studies conducted in schools). Perhaps for that reason, many studies examining friendship quality obtain reports of friendship quality from only one child (Dryburgh et al. 2020). Although this approach does not provide insight into which friendships are reciprocated, it is important to note that unreciprocated friendships also contribute to children's adjustment (Berndt and McCandless 2009; Gifford-Smith and Brownell 2003). Moreover, even in reciprocated friendships, friends agree only modestly in their perceptions of the characteristics and quality of their relationship (e.g., Troop-Gordon et al. 2019). Thus, children's reports of the quality of a best friendship provide important information about their own subjective experience in that relationship. It will nonetheless be important for future work to examine whether our results differ as a function of the reciprocity of the friendship, and whether the same friendship quality is being reported by both children. Lastly, research should examine whether the associations between coparenting and children's friendship quality vary as a function of the context in which the friendship is occurring. We asked children about their best friend at school, but children have friendships in other contexts, such as their neighborhoods, extra-curricular activities, and online. Indeed, whereas school friends often do not see each other on weekends, neighborhood and online friends can play with each other every day and are more likely to vary in age and gender (Pea et al. 2012; Prazen et al. 2011).

Despite those limitations, this study contributes to the limited literature on coparenting and children's friendships by revealing that mothers' perceptions of a higher-quality coparenting relationship predicts better child friendship quality, as reported by the child, two years later, independent of parents' marital satisfaction, and that this prediction is magnified when fathers also perceive a higher-quality coparenting relationship. To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate the relation between both parents' reports of their coparenting relationship and children's own perceptions of their best friendships. The findings highlight the potential importance of coparental cooperation and modeling of appropriate social skills early in children's life, in order to foster harmonious, intimate, and stable friendships in middle childhood.

Coparenting Interventions

In a systematic review of coparenting interventions, Pilkington et al. (2019) found that when their parenting-related communication and problem-solving skills are improved, parents report a stronger coparenting relationship

post-intervention. Unfortunately, interventions aimed specifically at improving the coparenting relationship are uncommon, as such efforts are usually included in broader family-strengthening efforts or constitute a byproduct of family interventions (Pilkington et al. 2019). Additionally, this review found that fathers were more likely than mothers to drop out of the trials, resulting in interventions sometimes being delivered to only one coparent. This attrition is alarming, as research shows that interventions focusing on a single coparent can increase coparenting conflict (De Montigny and Lacharité 2004). Therefore, interventions and education programs with both parents that are specifically aimed at promoting effective coparenting teamwork are important, and may foster children's ability to form and maintain intimate friendships in middle childhood and beyond.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee (CERAS-2016-17-054-P) and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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