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Inter-parent childrearing disagreement, but not dissimilarity, predicts child problems after
controlling for parenting effectiveness

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Abstract

Parental differences regarding childrearing may be operationalized as actual dissimilarity in the parenting actions or goals of the parents, or as perceived conflict or disagreement related to these dissimilarities. This study tested whether these two types of parental differences are each associated with child problems, independent of the contributions of parenting effectiveness. A community sample of 160 couples with a first-born child participated. Mothers and fathers independently completed measures of childrearing disagreement, parenting behaviors and goals, and child behavior. Inter-parent childrearing disagreement accounted for unique variance in child internalizing and externalizing problems, even after controlling for family income, marital satisfaction and parenting effectiveness. Dissimilarity in mother and father parenting behaviors (but not goals) was associated with child problems at the bivariate level, but not after controlling for parenting effectiveness.

Keywords: childrearing disagreement, coparenting, preschool age, internalizing, externalizing

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The coordination of mothers' and fathers' parenting efforts, or coparenting, is a central component of family functioning, and is conceptualized as sharing transactional influence not only with child outcomes, but also with factors such as intraparent adjustment, marital functioning, and social context (Feinberg, 2003; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, Lauretti, & Rasmussen, 2000; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Studies of coparenting confirm the importance of this construct not only among married couples, but also in divorced parents (Kamp Dush, Kotila, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011), nonmarried couples (Hohmann-Marriott, 2011), and foster parents (Linares, Rhodes, & Montalto, 2010). Multidimensional models of coparenting have been elucidated in attempts to understand the mechanisms underlying the relations between coparenting and other aspects of family and child functioning. For example, Margolin, Gordis, and John (2001) highlighted dimensions of conflict regarding parenting issues, cooperation or support between parents, and triangulation of the child into parental conflicts. Alternately, Feinberg (2003) proposed coparenting aspects encompassing the couples' division of labour, support for each others' parenting efforts, joint management of family interactions, and childrearing agreement.

Although defined in slightly different ways, mother-father differences regarding childrearing hold a prominent place in most multidimensional conceptualizations of coparenting. In this paper, we focus on inter-parent differences regarding childrearing as a core component of the broader construct of coparenting. We extend previous research by two aspects of interparent differences - differences in the parenting behaviors and goals reported by mothers and fathers, and the conflict or disagreement that mothers and fathers report regarding their parenting

differences. Importantly, we test whether these two aspects of parental differences are related to child problems independent of each other and of other aspects of inter- and intra-parental functioning.

Consensus in the literature supports a distinction between coparenting, including childrearing differences, and adjustment in the marital relationship (e.g., Katz & Low, 2004; Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Frosch, & McHale, 2004). However, these aspects of family functioning are clearly related and research has shown that issues related to children and childrearing are among the most common sources of couples' conflict (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, & Papp, 2004), and that childrearing differences may mediate the relation between marital adjustment and child outcomes (Sturges-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006).

Understanding the unique influences of childrearing differences and marital adjustment on child outcomes has important implications for tailoring clinical assessments and interventions in a manner that is sensitive to both of these dimensions of parental functioning. In this study, we control for marital adjustment in our analyses in order to assess the relation of childrearing differences to child outcomes, independent of functioning in the marital relationship.

Block, Block, and Morrison (1981) conducted a seminal study showing that couples' childrearing differences, operationalized as the dissimilarity between the mothers' and fathers' independent reports of their parenting practices, were related to better social, impulse-control, and coping abilities in sons (but not daughters) both concurrently, and 4 years later. This finding is summarized in a recent meta-analysis by Teubert and Piquart (2010). Teubert and Piquart found that coparenting dissimilarity, defined as the level of disagreement between parents in parenting values and attitudes, was significantly related to both internalizing and externalizing child problems. However, it also has been suggested that dissimilarity in mothers' and fathers'

childrearing is not a unique construct, but rather reflects a lack of parental agreement with overarching stereotypes regarding good or effective parenting. For example, Deal, Halverson, and Wampler (1989) suggested that parents with high inter-parent childrearing similarity also use more effective parenting practices, defined as supportive, inductive control techniques with less authoritarianism. In two studies, Deal and colleagues (1989; 1999) demonstrated that, although the dissimilarity in mothers' and fathers' reports of childrearing was related to child outcomes, this relation was accounted for by the agreement of parents' reports to stereotypes of parenting effectiveness. That is, after controlling for parenting effectiveness, mother-father childrearing dissimilarity was not significantly correlated with child problems. Although the meta-analysis by Teubert and Pinquart (2010) attempted to address this issue and found that significant associations between coparenting and child problems remained after controlling for individual parenting, these relations were very small and it was not possible to examine the relations separately for only the childrearing dissimilarity aspect of coparenting. Thus, the question of the possible contribution of parenting effective in accounting for the link between parenting dissimilarity and child problems remains open.

Across studies, parenting dissimilarity (or conversely, similarity) has been operationalized in a variety of ways, including observations, questionnaires, and as the correlation between mothers' and fathers' reports on measures of childrearing practices (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Unfortunately, these measures often tap dissimilarity across a mixture of parenting constructs, including beliefs, specific behaviors, goals and expectations, and even parents' enjoyment of their children. Given such a wide range of dimensions, the meaning of the dissimilarity between mothers and fathers is difficult to interpret or compare across studies. In the present study, in the pursuit of greater specificity in the construct of childrearing differences,

we distinguished mother-father dissimilarity in their reported parenting goals versus dissimilarity in reported parenting behaviors.

In this first attempt at refining our understanding of the construct of childrearing dissimilarity, we dissected the construct into two constituent components that may be important for understanding and assisting families and children – parental dissimilarity in parenting goals and dissimilarity in parenting behaviors, and examined whether both components are linked to child problems. Within the domain of parenting cognition, we chose to assess parenting goals because these may be a more proximal and distilled representation of parents' broader philosophy or beliefs about childrearing. Additionally, although parenting goals have been shown to be related to, or perhaps even direct, parents' responses to their children (Hastings & Grusec, 1998), it is also conceivable that when faced with the same child-related situation, parents may set out to accomplish the same goal but differ in the execution of this intent (i.e., parenting behavior), or they may respond behaviorally in similar ways even though their initial goals were different. Dissimilarities in parenting goals and parenting behaviors therefore both have the potential to create clinically meaningful inter-parent inconsistencies in responding to children, or even intra-parent inconsistencies in discipline practices if the parent fluctuates between parenting goals or changes their behavior in order to appease the partner. Given the important role of parental inconsistency as a promoter of child behavior problems (e.g., Stormshak, Bierman, McMahon, & Lengua, 2000), understanding the parental dissimilarities that may underlie this inconsistency has the potential to illuminate new targets for parenting interventions. We predicted that dissimilarity in parenting goals and in parenting behaviors would be independently related to child behavior problems after controlling for parenting effectiveness and marital adjustment.

Beyond studies that have assessed coparenting by looking at mother-father dissimilarity in parenting orientation or actions, other studies have focused on conflict or disagreement between parents with regard to their approaches to parenting. Whereas parenting dissimilarity reflects differences between actual childrearing practices of the partners, childrearing disagreement represents each parent's *perception* of inter-parent disagreement about their childrearing. Thus defined, the degree of childrearing disagreement reported by each parent is based on their subjective evaluation. As with parenting dissimilarity, numerous studies, conducted across a range of child ages and in both community and clinical samples (e.g., King, Radpour, Naylor, Segal, & Jouriles, 1995; Mahoney, Jouriles, & Scavone, 1997; Snyder, Klein, Gdowski, Faulstich, & LaCombe, 1988) have linked childrearing disagreement to child behavior problems. The recent meta-analysis by Teubert and Pinquart (2010) confirmed that childrearing disagreement, termed conflict in their report, is significantly linked to both internalizing and externalizing child problems. In addition, studies have found that, at least in some cases, childrearing disagreement continues to relate to child behavior problems, even after controlling for marital adjustment and children's exposure to marital conflict (e.g., Dadds & Powell, 1991; Jouriles et al., 1991). However, exceptions to these findings do exist (e.g., Jenkins & Smith, 1991). In summary, childrearing disagreement is often correlated with child problems, even with marital adjustment controlled, although the relation appears to be moderated to some extent by child gender and whether internalizing or externalizing problems are examined.

Interestingly, studies linking parents' childrearing disagreements to child problems have seldom controlled for parenting effectiveness despite Deal et al.'s (1989; 1999) findings with regard to the importance of this control in studies of childrearing dissimilarity. One recent study did examine this question, but was narrowly focused on overreactive parenting behaviors. Using

a community sample of parents with 3- to 7-year-old children, O’Leary and Vidair (2005) found that childrearing disagreement consistently accounted for the relation between marital adjustment and child problems (regardless of child gender, type of child problems, and whether analyses were based on mother or father reports), and this link was accounted for by overreactive parenting in three of the eight models tested. Thus, although this study suggests that one aspect of ineffective parenting, overreactivity, may account for some of the relation between childrearing disagreement and child problems, in many cases the link between disagreements and child problems remained significant even with the effectiveness of parenting controlled. The present study used a comprehensive parenting measure to test whether controlling for the quality of parenting and for marital adjustment would eliminate the link between childrearing disagreement and child problems. As such, this study addresses an important gap in the existing coparenting literature and will assist in clarifying whether there is a need to specifically address childrearing disagreements within interventions focused on parenting behavior.

In summary, we predicted that parents’ dissimilarity related to parenting goals and parenting behaviors, as well as their disagreements about childrearing would each be uniquely associated with child problems. In addition, we predicted that these associations would survive control for marital adjustment and effective parenting. Previous findings have been mixed regarding the moderating effect of child gender on the relation between coparenting and child behavior, with some studies finding associations only for boys (e.g., Block et al., 1981; Dadds & Powell, 1991), but other studies showing relations across both genders (e.g., Mahoney et al., 1997; O’Leary & Vidair, 2005). Thus, we tested our hypotheses with child gender as a potential moderator. Finally, we focused on parents whose first born children were in the preschool age range. We expected that in such families coparenting issues would be prominent for several

reasons. Coparenting relationships are still relatively recent in such families, and previous studies have found, compared to infancy, that fathers are more involved in child care during this period (Belsky, Rovine, & Fish, 1989), children's behaviors are particularly challenging to manage (Campbell, 2002), and issues of discipline gain salience (McHale et al., 2000). In addition, understanding coparenting in families of preschool children has clinical relevance, given the evidence supporting the use of parenting interventions for this age group (Eyberg & Bussing, 2010).

Method

Participants

Parents were recruited from community notices for a study about how mothers and fathers parent their children as a couple. To be included, parents needed to 1) have spoken English for at least 3 years and be able to read English at the grade seven level, 2) have a first-born child between 2 and 5 years of age, 3) be married or cohabiting, and have coparented the child for at least 2 years, 4) both agree to participate, and 5) have access to the Internet. To reduce heterogeneity in the number of years of parenting and coparenting, only parents with a first-born child within the target age range were included. Families with adopted children or step-parents who met criteria were included, although only three mothers and two fathers indicated they were adoptive parents and an additional two fathers were step-parents.

Screening was completed with 179 couples, and of these, 8 were excluded due to fathers' lack of interest; 5 withdrew due to lack of time; and 6 were excluded because only one member of the couple completed the survey. The final dataset therefore contained 160 couples (84 with a first-born son and 76 with a first-born daughter). Although the presence of physical, mental, or behavioral problems in the child was not an exclusionary criterion, according to parent

report, none of the children had been so diagnosed. Demographic information is summarized in Table 1. The average family income corresponds to the median family income of couples residing in the province of British Columbia (\$68,900 per year; Statistics Canada, 2006).

Tests compared the demographic characteristics of families of boys and girls (see Table 1) and the only significant differences concerned ethnicity where, relative to girls, more boys, $\chi^2(1) = 6.43, p = .01$; their mothers, $\chi^2(1) = 6.42, p = .01$; and fathers, $\chi^2(1) = 5.82, p = .02$ were from Asian backgrounds.

Measures

Inter-parent dissimilarity in parenting behaviors. The degree of dissimilarity between mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviors in response to child misbehavior was measured using a modification of the child behavior stimuli and parenting behaviors developed by Hastings and Grusec (1998) and the method of calculating dissimilarity used by Block et al., (1981). Statements describing 13 parenting behaviors (punitive control, induce guilt, remove affection, remove privilege, isolate socially, firm control, surrender, reason, empathic reason, model, share control, show warmth, and divert) were used, with attention to wording so that all items were judged to elicit comparable degrees of socially desirable responding. The 13 parenting behaviors were presented after parents read child behavior vignettes and parents indicated the likelihood of engaging in each behavior using a scale from 1 (*would definitely not do*) to 7 (*would definitely do*). In support of the validity of this measure, in this study, parents' ratings for the eight positive parenting behaviors (i.e., behaviors that fall within the directive, reasoning, and responsive categories) were positively correlated with their scores on the Parent Practices Scale [$r(146) = .22, p < .01$ for mothers and $r(144) = .21, p = .01$ for fathers]; parents' ratings on the five dominating behaviors were negatively correlated with their scores on the

Parent Practices Scale [$r(146) = -.38, p < .01$ for mothers and $r(144) = -.28, p = .01$ for fathers]. In total, mothers and fathers each made 65 ratings (they rated 13 parenting behaviors for each of five vignettes) and these ratings were used to calculate an intra-class correlation (ICC) reflecting the degree of inter-parent dissimilarity on parenting behaviors (ICC for Behaviors). Using the ICC to represent an index of dissimilarity between members of a dyad has been recommended as it allows for the use of standard statistical techniques in analyses, and considers both the absolute values and rankings between the dyad's scores (Maguire, 1999). The index of dissimilarity obtained using this method has a possible range of -1 to +1, with -1 indicating complete dissimilarity between mother and father ratings, 0 indicating no greater relation between mothers and fathers than between each parent and all other parents, and +1 indicating perfect similarity between mother and father ratings. A high ICC score for a couple indicates that both parents tend to give identical ratings on the same items in a measure.

Inter-parent dissimilarity in parenting goals. After rating the 13 parenting behaviors for each child behavior vignette, parents were presented with six parenting goals and indicated, using a 7-point Likert-scale (1 = *not at all important* and 7 = *very important*), how important each of the goals would be for them in the situation depicted by the vignette. The parenting behaviors were rated before the parenting goals because previous research shows that parents' choice of parenting behaviors varies as a function of the goals that they are primed to focus on (Hastings & Grusec, 1998). The six goals included two parent-centered goals ("get my child to behave properly right away" and "reduce my own anxiety"), two child-centered goals ("make my child happier" and "help my child get along better in life and enhance my child's well being"), and two relationship-centered goals ("maintain a loving and trusting relationship with my child" and "teach my child how the two of us can problem-solve together"). Hastings and Grusec (1998)

found that 95% of parents' self-generated goals were reliably coded into these categories. Supporting the validity of the measure, parents high on authoritarianism focus less on child- and relationship-centered goals when dealing with children's misbehavior (Coplan, Hastings, Lagace-Sequin & Mouton, 2002) and endorse more parent-centered goals (Hastings & Rubin, 1999). Mothers and fathers each made 30 ratings that were then used to calculate the ICC for inter-parent dissimilarity on parenting goals (ICC for Goals).

Childrearing Disagreements Scale (CRD; Jouriles et al., 1991). This scale assesses the frequency of disagreement between parents regarding 21 childrearing topics in the last 6 months using a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*daily*). Item scores were summed with a possible range of 0 and 126, with higher scores reflecting greater disagreement. The scale has excellent internal consistency (Lee, Beauregard, & Bax, 2005), and is positively associated with both marital conflict and children's exposure to conflict (Jouriles et al., 1991). In this sample, the internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) was .89 for mothers and .88 for fathers. Scores for mothers and fathers were significantly correlated, $r(159) = .45, p < .001$ and were averaged to create a composite measure of childrearing disagreement reflecting both parents' views¹.

Parent Practices Scale (PPS; Strayhorn & Weidman, 1988). Each parent completed the PPS to measure parenting effectiveness. This 34-item scale measures the frequency with which parents engage in parenting practices considered favorable for child development including high levels of warmth and involvement with the child, consistent discipline, and low levels of punitive discipline such as shaming or physical punishment. The scale was developed

¹ Composite scores reflecting both mother and father views have the advantage of offering some control over mono-informant bias and provide a comprehensive assessment of the construct. Analyses conducted using single informant (e.g., mothers' scores as both predictors and outcomes) and cross informant (e.g., mothers' scores predicting fathers' ratings of child behavior) approaches revealed a pattern of results that was very similar to that obtained with the composite scores.

specifically for use with preschool children and includes items like “how often do you tell your child to do something, with an irritated or angry tone of voice” (reverse scored), and “how often do you and your child laugh together”. Each item is answered using either a 6-point or a 7-point Likert-scale with answer choices specifically constructed for the question. The scores of the items were summed with a possible range of 3 to 193, and higher scores reflect more positive parenting. In a sample of low-income families, the scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency and 6-month test-retest stability (Strayhorn & Weidman, 1988). PPS scores correlate positively with observer-ratings of friendly and cooperative parent-child interactions and negatively with mothers’ endorsement of unreasonable commands, and child problems (Strayhorn & Weidman, 1988). In this sample, the internal consistency was .81 for mothers and .74 for fathers. Mother and father scores were significantly correlated, $r(159) = .51, p < .001$ and were averaged to form a composite measure of effective parenting in the family.

Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976). This 32-item scale measures the quality of marital adjustment, across scales reflecting satisfaction, cohesion, consensus, and affectional expression. Parents’ ratings on the 32 items were summed to yield a total score with a possible range of 0 to 151, and higher scores reflect better marital adjustment. The scale has excellent reliability and married couples score significantly higher than divorced couples (Spanier, 1976). The DAS also correlates with other measures of marital adjustment (Spanier, 1976). In this study, the internal consistency was .89 for mothers and .86 for fathers. Again, scores were significantly correlated, $r(159) = .38, p < .001$, and were averaged.

Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL/1.5-5; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000). The Internalizing and the Externalizing Scales of the CBCL were used as measures of child problems. The CBCL/1.5-5 contains 99 items depicting behavioral and emotional problems seen

in children aged 1.5 to 5 years. Each parent completed the measure separately by using a scale from 0 (*not true*) to 2 (*very or often true*) to indicate how much each problem is observed in their child. Items were summed for total scores with a possible range of 0 to 72 on the Internalizing scale and 0 to 48 on the Externalizing scale, with higher scores reflecting greater child problems. To maximize the variability in scores within this community sample, total raw scores were used in the analyses. The CBCL is a widely used measure that has demonstrated good psychometric properties (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000). The scale developers reported correlations of .59 (Internalizing scale) and .67 (Externalizing scale) between ratings of mothers and fathers, with no significant difference in their mean scores (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000). In this sample, the internal consistency was .91 for mothers and .89 for fathers on the Externalizing scale, and .85 for mothers and .83 for fathers on the Internalizing scale. Mother and father scores were significantly correlated for both Internalizing, $r(159) = .46, p < .001$, and Externalizing, $r(159) = .53, p < .001$, and were averaged for both into composite scores combining mothers' and fathers' perceptions of child behavior problems.

Paulhus Deception Scales (PDS; Paulhus, 2002). The 20-item Impression Management scale of the PDS was completed by each parent to measure their tendency to positively inflate self-descriptions. This scale was included because many constructs measured in this study (e.g., marital adjustment, childrearing disagreement, parenting practices) have the potential to elicit socially desirable responses. Parents indicated, using a scale from 1 (*not true*) to 7 (*very true*) how much they agreed with each statement (e.g., "I never cover up my mistakes", "I sometimes drive faster than the speed limit"). One point is added to the respondent's score for each item answered in a socially desirable manner (i.e., ratings of 6 or 7), resulting in a total score ranging from 0 to 20. The PDS correlates positively with other measures of socially

desirable responding and with various lie scales (Paulhus, 2002). The internal consistency in this sample was .72 for mothers and .75 for fathers. Given the individual nature of impression management, these scores were retained as separate for each parent.

Procedure

Approval for this project was obtained from the University's ethical review committee. When a parent contacted the lab, a research assistant described the study and conducted a brief phone screening. We also established contact with the other parent directly to confirm consent and to address questions. Eligible mothers and fathers were each provided with participant numbers and passwords to access the website containing the study materials. Parents were told to complete their own measures without consulting with their partner, and all parents explicitly agreed to this. Parents were randomly assigned to complete the questionnaires in one of four orders. All parents began with the General Family Information, and ended with the CBCL and the PDS IM. The remaining four questionnaires were counterbalanced and no significant differences were found among parents who completed the questionnaires in different orders (all $ps > .05$). Collecting data over the Internet was considered a methodology well suited for this study. Studies of strategies for promoting fathers' involvement in research have found the success rates to be enhanced by the use of "family-friendly" research methodologies, such as telephone interviewing (Kirsch & Brandt, 2002; Phares, Lopez, Fields, Kamboukos, & Duhig, 2005). We reasoned that a web-based approach shares the advantage of a telephone interview in the reduced demand that the study places on participants, and in addition, offers the flexibility of completing the measures whenever is most convenient for the fathers. We also believed that the use of the Internet would discourage mothers and fathers from completing their surveys simultaneously or comparing their responses. More generally, electronic surveys have been

shown to be psychometrically comparable to paper-and-pencil questionnaires (e.g., Meyerson & Tryon, 2003). Each parent received \$15 as a token of appreciation for their time and participation.

Results

Data Inspection and Description

To allow comparison with previous studies, the means, standard deviations, and ranges of the individual mother and father variables are presented in Table 2. Visual inspection revealed that all variables were continuously distributed, with all responses falling within 3.5 standard deviations of the means. Mothers' ratings on the CBCL Internalizing subscale, fathers' ratings on the CBCL Internalizing subscale, and mothers' ratings on the CRD were slightly positively skewed (skewness indices between 1.06 and 1.41). Square root transformations were applied and were successful in bringing the distributions closer to normality. The combined M-F Internalizing score was based on these transformed scores. For the CRD, mothers' transformed scores and fathers' nontransformed scores were each standardized before being combined into a composite M-F CRD score.

Mothers' and fathers' mean scores on the CRD corresponded roughly to the mean reported in the original study (i.e., 38.5) based on a community sample of mothers from intact marriages with 3-year-old sons (Jouriles et al., 1991). The mean of the ICCs (.58 for Behaviors and .38 for Goals) suggested moderate dissimilarity between partners with respect to parenting behaviors and goals. With regard to parenting effectiveness, PPS scores fell between the 45th and 70th percentile, suggesting average or above average parenting skills. The mean DAS scores in this sample were only slightly lower than the mean of the married sample (mean = 114.8) reported by Spanier (1976). Although CBCL raw scores were used for analysis to increase the variability in scores, mother and father ratings placed the children between the 46 and 51 percentile on the CBCL Externalizing and Internalizing Scales with approximately 12% and 18% of the children showing borderline or higher

levels of externalizing and internalizing behaviors respectively. Finally, parents scored within the average range on impression management (T scores between 55 and 60).

Comparison of Boys vs. Girls

T-tests were conducted comparing the measures across child gender. For childrearing disagreement, the composite M-F CRD score was higher for parents of boys than parents of girls, $t(1, 158) = 2.28, p = .02$. However, parents of boys and girls did not differ in their dissimilarity on the ICC for Behaviors or the ICC for Goals ($ps > .14$). Parents of girls scored higher on the composite score of positive parenting practices (M-F PPS) than those of boys, $t(1, 158) = 3.10, p = .002$. With respect to child problems, boys and girls did not differ in averaged reports of Internalizing problems, but parents of boys reported more Externalizing child problems than parents of girls, $t(1, 158) = 2.94, p = .004$. Finally, there were no child gender differences in marital adjustment (M-F DAS) or mother and father impression management scores. Overall, the families of boys and girls appeared to be largely comparable. Higher externalizing scores for boys are consistent with previous findings (e.g., Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008), and it makes sense that these greater externalizing behaviors in boys co-exist with less positive parenting and more childrearing disagreement. Given the significantly greater number of boys in the sample of Asian ethnicity compared to girls, we also reran the above tests with ethnicity (Asian vs. nonasian) covaried and the gender differences remained.

Given these significant differences between boys and girls, in subsequent regression analyses, child gender and its interaction with the predictors was entered. However, child gender never significantly moderated the relations between parent predictors and child outcomes. All regressions are thus presented with the main effect of child gender retained but the interaction terms omitted from the models. Bivariate correlations are presented for boys and girls combined.

Correlations for Childrearing Differences, Marital Adjustment, Parenting, and Child Problems

The correlations between parents' childrearing disagreement, their dissimilarity in parenting behaviors and goals, parenting practices, marital adjustment, and child problems are presented in

Table 3. All of the correlations were in the expected direction. Suggesting that both dissimilarity and disagreements measure aspects of the general construct of coparenting, the ICC for Behaviors and the ICC for Goals were both significantly correlated with the CRD (correlations are negative as higher ICCs reflect greater similarity). In addition, both the CRD and the ICC for Behaviors were significantly related to the child CBCL Externalizing and Internalizing scores. The ICC for Goals was not significantly correlated with either CBCL scale. Thus, child problems are related to mother-father dissimilarity in parenting behaviors but not goals. As expected, parents who reported more childrearing disagreement and greater parenting dissimilarity, also generally reported less effective parenting skills. More effective parenting was consistently related to fewer child problems. Marital adjustment was related to child-rearing disagreement, but not to mother-father parenting dissimilarity. Marital adjustment was significantly, although not strongly, correlated with child externalizing problems, but was not related to internalizing child problems in this sample.

The Role of Parenting Effectiveness

We used hierarchical regressions to test whether childrearing differences, both dissimilarities and disagreement, were associated with child behavior problems after controlling for parenting effectiveness. To identify possible control variables to be used in these regressions, child age, family income, and parents' impression management scores (PDS IM) were correlated with the parenting practices (M-F PPS), childrearing differences (M-F CRD or ICCs), and child internalizing and externalizing behaviors (M-F CBCL) scores. Family income was significantly correlated with parents' reports of child Externalizing and Internalizing problems and with childrearing disagreements [$r(159) = -.17, p = .03$; $r(159) = -.17, p = .03$; and $r(159) = -.22, p = .006$]. Mothers' PDS IM scores were significantly correlated with parenting practices, $r(159) = .25, p = .001$ and fathers' PDS IM scores were significantly correlated with childrearing disagreements, $r(159) = -.23, p = .004$. All other correlations were not significant. Family income and parents' PDS IM scores

were therefore controlled in all regression models. In addition, to control for the influence of marital adjustment, the M-F DAS score was included as a control variable in all analyses.

Two hierarchical regressions were performed, separately for child externalizing and internalizing problems as the dependent variables. At Step 1 of the regressions, marital adjustment, family income, mother and father impression management scores, and child gender were entered. At Step 2, M-F PPS was entered to control for parenting effectiveness. Finally, at Step 3, the ICCs for Parenting Behavior and Parenting Goals and the M-F CRD were entered to examine the effects of childrearing differences. At each step, the model was tested for significance, and at Steps 2 and 3 the incremental change in R^2 was examined.

Child externalizing problems (Table 4). For M-F CBCL Externalizing scores, the full model was significant, $R^2 = .38$, $F(9, 149) = 10.31$, $p < .001$. The variance and the incremental variance accounted for respectively in Steps 1 and 2 were significant, $R^2 = .11$, $F(5, 153) = 3.73$, $p = .003$ and $R^2_{\text{change}} = .16$, $F(1, 152) = 33.21$, $p < .001$, respectively. In addition, at Step 3, the measures of childrearing differences added significant incremental variance, $R^2_{\text{change}} = .12$, $F(3, 149) = 9.29$, $p < .001$. Examination of the betas indicated that childrearing disagreements accounted for significant unique variance and had a positive relationship with child externalizing problems. Mother-father dissimilarity in parenting behaviors did not have a significant unique relationship with child externalizing problems, and the unique relation of the ICC for parenting goals to child problems was unexpectedly positive (greater parenting similarity related to more child problems). This relationship was not strong, is counter to the bivariate relations between the variables, and likely reflects a suppressor effect occurring when the three measures of childrearing differences are considered simultaneously.

Child internalizing problems (Table 5). For M-F CBCL Int scores, the full model was significant, $R^2 = .18$, $F(9, 149) = 3.70$, $p < .001$. The variance accounted for by the control variables at Step 1 was not significant. However, the incremental variance accounted for by parenting

effectiveness entered at Step 2 was significant, $R^2_{\text{change}} = .09$, $F(1, 152) = 14.82$, $p < .001$. In addition, at Step 3, the measures of childrearing differences added significant incremental variance, $R^2_{\text{change}} = .05$, $F(3, 149) = 3.20$, $p = .025$. Examination of the betas indicated that only childrearing disagreements accounted for significant unique variance in child internalizing problems.

Discussion

This study addressed two unanswered questions regarding 1) whether different aspects of childrearing differences – childrearing disagreements versus dissimilarities in parenting goals and behaviors are each related to child problems, and 2) the role of parenting effectiveness in these associations. Childrearing disagreement, as measured by mother and father reports on the Childrearing Disagreements scale, continued to be significantly associated with both externalizing and internalizing problems in children after controlling for parenting effectiveness, accounting for approximately 4 to 14% unique variance. Although this effect is small to moderate in size, controlling for the significant association between parenting effectiveness and child problems, as well as the inclusion of other control variables (i.e., income, marital adjustment, and impression management) render these conservative tests. Indeed, the effect sizes for parenting effectiveness and childrearing disagreement were comparable, lending support to considering inter-parent childrearing disagreement as an important, independent correlate of problems in children. These associations replicate previous studies, finding that childrearing disagreement is significantly correlated with both externalizing and internalizing child problems (e.g., Jenkins & Smith, 1991; Jouriles et al., 1991; Snyder et al., 1988). In addition, our findings are consistent with O’Leary and Vidair (2005) who found several unique relations between childrearing disagreement and both externalizing and internalizing child problems that remained significant after controlling for overreactive parenting.

Turning to the second aspect of coparenting examined in this study, parental dissimilarity, ours is the first study to examine the specific content of inter-parent childrearing dissimilarity. Given

that the ICC for parenting behaviors and the ICC for parenting goals demonstrated a similar pattern of associations with other parenting variables, we can assume that each ICC has adequate validity to be considered as a potential predictor of child problems. At the bivariate level, dissimilarity in parenting behaviors but not parenting goals was correlated significantly with child problems. This suggests that whether parents are dissimilar in their parenting goals is not as relevant as how dissimilar their behavior is when responding to child misbehaviors, perhaps because the latter has a more proximal relation to child behavior. However, consistent with previous research conducted by Deal and colleagues (1989, 1999), mother-father dissimilarity in childrearing was not significantly associated with child problems after controlling for effective parenting. The one exception was the positive relation between similarity in parenting goals and child externalizing problems in the regression model. As noted in the results section, this is likely to be a suppressor effect related to the collinearity among the three measures of childrearing differences, particularly since the bivariate relation between the ICC for goals and child externalizing behavior was not significant. Thus, we interpret our findings as supporting Deal et al.'s argument that parenting dissimilarity largely reflects each parent's similarity to other parents, and does not carry meaningful unique variance once parenting effectiveness is controlled.

Several reasons may underlie the difference in findings with regard to the two types of childrearing differences – the ICCs measuring inter-parent dissimilarity and parental reports of childrearing disagreements. Childrearing disagreements likely tap an important dimension of coparenting that is not assessed by the ICCs for parenting behaviors or goals, specifically parents' sense of resentment or hostility toward their partner. For example, items such as "Not trusting my judgment in certain aspects of child-rearing" and "Implying that some of our child's misbehavior is partly my fault" touch on aspects of childrearing differences that are qualitatively distinct from and most likely not captured by a measure of how dissimilar parents are in their parenting behaviors. In support of this hypothesis, marital adjustment was significantly correlated with the Childrearing

Disagreements scale, but not with the ICCs measuring parental dissimilarity. Interestingly, this would imply that, contrary to our findings, controlling for marital adjustment would have been more likely to reduce the association of childrearing disagreement to child problems, rather than the links between dissimilarity and child problems. However, we did not measure marital *conflict*, which may overlap even more than marital adjustment with childrearing disagreements. Continued research is needed to distinguish the influence of conflicts confined to the marital relationship from those within the childrearing domain.

It also is possible that our measure of parenting dissimilarity did not adequately capture the specific quality of coparenting dissimilarities that is relevant for child problems, at least within this community sample. For example, although instances of differential responses to child behavior did translate into a low ICC for parenting behaviors in the current study (e.g., if one parent endorsed “give up or avoid the situation” while the other endorsed “remove privilege” in response to the same vignette), most of the variability in the ICCs for parenting behaviors reflected more subtle types of inter-parent dissimilarities (e.g., one parent reported “would certainly remove privilege” while the other parent reported “may remove privilege”). There are likely several acceptable ways of responding to children’s misbehaviors, and subtle inter-parent dissimilarities in discipline, so long as they do not contradict each other or let misbehaviors go unhandled, may not be associated with negative child behaviors. The Childrearing Disagreements scale, on the other hand, contains several items that capture more significant inter-parent inconsistencies (e.g., my spouse has irritated me by: “being too lenient with our child”, “being too casual with our child about behavior that could lead to accidents”) as well as the element of disagreement or conflict related to these differences. Within the broader construct of coparenting, it appears to be the conflict or disagreement generated by childrearing differences, rather than simple disparity in parents’ cognitions or actions, that are most associated with child problems above and beyond effective parenting.

The associations between childrearing differences, either dissimilarity or disagreement, and child problems were not moderated by child gender in this study. Previous studies have reported mixed gender findings. Block et al. (1981) and Dadds and Powell (1991) found associations only for boys, but other studies failed to find significant gender moderation (Mahoney et al., 1997; O’Leary & Vidair, 2005; Snyder et al., 1988). Close comparison reveals that the studies that report no significant gender moderation have all used externalizing and internalizing problems as the child outcome variables. In contrast, studies that have reported a significant gender effect used constructs such as ego control and ego resiliency (Block et al., 1981) or aggression and immaturity (Dadds & Powell, 1991). It appears that child gender may not moderate links between either type of childrearing differences and child internalizing or externalizing problems. However, interaction effects are often difficult to detect in regression analyses (Jaccard, Wan, & Turrisi, 1990) and examination of gender should continue. In particular, the influence of child gender may function differently at older ages, as child gender roles become increasingly differentiated.

The nature of the sample is one limitation to this work. Only couples where both members consented were included, and although some couples had poor marital adjustment, it is likely that significant levels of marital problems or childrearing differences were underrepresented and the generalizability of our work to families presenting with clinical levels of coparenting and/or child problems is not known. Similarly, the small number of step or adoptive parents in our sample precluded testing the importance of our coparenting constructs within such families. Finally, requiring access to the Internet may also have reduced the generalizability of the findings to less advantaged families. In addition, the cross-sectional design prohibits conclusions with respect to the directionality of the associations. Although it is reasonable to hypothesize that greater childrearing differences can contribute to child problems, it also is likely that having children with behavior problems makes consensus on childrearing issues more difficult to achieve. Future longitudinal studies are needed to clarify the direction and/or degree of reciprocal causality in these relations.

Finally, only self-report measures were employed. Although the inclusion and combination of both mother and father data is an important strength, comparisons of self-reports and observational assessment of the constructs measured in this study (e.g., observer ratings of parents' support or criticism during each other's interaction with their child) would also be important (e.g., McHale et al., 2000). This study included a significant representation of Asian families, as well as those of European heritage, however, further study of the generalizability of the links between coparenting and child outcomes across ethnic groups is needed (e.g., Vendlinski, Silk, Shaw, & Lane, 2006).

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

We found that regardless of how effective parenting practices are, greater childrearing disagreement, but not mother-father parent dissimilarity, is associated with greater problems in preschool boys and girls. The fact that childrearing disagreement is independently related to child problems when tested with stringent control over other predictors provides a strong argument for more research attention to this variable. We also argue for greater attention to the operationalization of the various aspects of coparenting. The important distinction between childrearing dissimilarity versus childrearing disagreement found in this study may depend on the manner in which each construct is measured, and the differentiation of the two constructs often is not always readily apparent across studies due to a mixture of terminology and definitions. With respect to furthering our knowledge about how we may best promote optimal child outcome by addressing inter-parent childrearing differences, our results, consistent with previous findings, would suggest that targeting childrearing dissimilarity may not be a fruitful endeavor. Instead, childrearing disagreement is the more promising variable to direct our focus.

Clinically, our findings support the importance of attending, not only to the parenting skills of individual parents, but also to how well parents negotiate and resolve disagreement regarding child-related issues. Given the alternate possibility that child behavior problems cause disagreement

between parents, it also may be important for clinicians to normalize the anxiety and frustration that parents experience in trying to reach agreement about child-related issues. Regardless of the direction of causation, these results suggest that an explicit assessment of the degree of childrearing disagreement between parents is warranted when working with families of children with behavior problems.

More generally, this study highlights the importance of including fathers in clinical interventions as childrearing disagreement is, by definition, a dyadic problem that needs to be addressed with both parties. Although few empirical tests of the effects of father involvement in parent training programs have been conducted (Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2008; Tiano & McNeil, 2005), our results showing the importance of coparenting certainly provide a strong theoretical rationale supporting continued study in this area. Interestingly, a recent study found that couples who underwent behavioral couple therapy not only experienced a decrease in childrearing conflicts, but this change was related to improved child functioning. More importantly, the decrease in childrearing conflicts mediated between increased marital satisfaction and improved child adjustment (Gattis, Simpson, & Christensen, 2008). This type of encouraging evidence underlines the theoretical and practical importance of understanding the mechanics of the association of childrearing disagreement and child problems.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics

Variables	Total (N = 160)	Boys (n = 84)	Girls (n = 76)	Statistic (df)	p	Effect Size
Age						
Child [Mean in Months (SD)]	44.51 (12.71)	44.23 (12.55)	44.82 (12.97)	t (158) = -.29	.77	d = 0.05
Mother [Mean in Years (SD)]	35.49 (4.88)	35.24 (5.48)	35.78 (4.14)	t (158) = -.70	.49	d = 0.11
Father [Mean in Years(SD)]	34.87 (5.04)	34.82 (5.20)	34.92 (4.90)	t (158) = -.12	.90	d = 0.02
Parents' Marital Status (%)				$\chi^2(1) = .55$	.46	$\Phi = .06$
Married	90.00	91.67	88.16			
Common-law	10.00	8.33	11.84			
Parent Education (M/F) (%)				$\chi^2(3) = 4.07/ 3.23$	.26/.36	V = .16/.14
High-school Graduate or Less	8.13/8.13	10.71/5.95	5.26/10.53			
Partial College	31.24/30.00	25.00/26.19	38.16/34.21			
College Graduate	42.50/36.24	45.24/38.10	39.47/34.21			
Graduate/Professional School	18.13/25.63	19.05/29.76	17.11/21.05			
Yearly Family Income (%)				$\chi^2(4) = 6.09$	.19	V = .20
< 49,999	23.13	23.80	22.36			
50,000 – 74,999	31.25	38.10	23.68			
75,000 – 99,999	21.25	17.86	25.00			
> 100,000	23.75	19.05	28.96			
Missing	.60	1.19	0.00			
Parent Employed (M/F) (%)				$\chi^2(1) = .24 / .02$	.62/.88	$\Phi = .04/.01$
Yes	62.50/93.10	60.71/92.86	64.47/93.42			
No	37.50/6.90	39.29/7.14	35.53/6.58			
Parent Status (M/F) (%)				$\chi^2(1) = 3.38/\chi^2(2) = 4.53$	.07/.10	V = .15/.17
Biological Parent	97.50	100/100	96.05/94.74			
Adoptive Parent	1.25	0/0	3.95/2.63			
Step Parent	1.25	0/0	0/2.63			
Child Ethnicity (%)				$\chi^2(2) = 6.46$	.04	V = .20
Euro-Canadian	53.75	48.81	59.21			
Asian	21.88	29.76	13.16			
Mixed	20.62	17.86	23.68			
Latino	3.75	3.57	3.95			
Identity as Canadian						
Mother [Mean (SD)]	8.04 (2.80)	7.62 (2.97)	8.51 (2.53)	t (157.47) = -.2.06	.04	d =.32
Father [Mean (SD)]	8.21 (2.70)	8.20 (2.61)	8.21 (2.81)	t (158) = -.02	.99	d <.01

Table 2

Mean Levels of Childrearing Disagreement, Inter-Parent Dissimilarity on Parenting Behaviors and Goals, Parenting Practices, Marital Adjustment, Child Problems, and Impression Management

	Mean	SD
ICC Behavior	.57	.17
ICC Goals	.38	.28
CRD		
Mother	39.63	12.91
Father	36.46	11.19
PPS		
Mother	145.34	13.91
Father	140.46	13.78
DAS		
Mother	105.44	13.86
Father	105.31	12.24

Table 2 (con't)

	Mean	SD
CBCL Externalizing		
Mother	10.97	7.86
Father	11.37	6.98
CBCL Internalizing		
Mother	8.24	6.50
Father	8.88	6.19
PDS IM		
Mother	9.01	3.75
Father	8.09	4.11

Note. ICC = Intra-Class Correlations; CRD = Childrearing Disagreement Scale; PPS = Parenting Practices Scale; DAS = Dyadic Adjustment Scale;

CBCL Ext. = Child Behavior Checklist Externalizing Scale; CBCL Int. = Child Behavior Checklist Internalizing Scale; PDS IM = Paulhus

Deception Scales – Impression Management Scale.

Table 3

Bivariate Correlations between Parents' Similarity in Parenting Behaviors and Goals, Child-Rearing Disagreements, Parenting Practices, Marital Adjustment, and Child Behaviors

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ICC for Behaviors (1)	-	.30**	-.24**	.38**	.13	-.25**	-.20**
ICC for Goals (2)		-	-.25**	.26**	.11	-.05	-.03
M-F CRD (3)			-	-.38**	-.56**	.45**	.29**
M-F PPS (4)				-	.23**	-.49**	-.35**
M-F DAS (5)					-	-.16*	-.05
M-F CBCL Ext. (6)						-	.62**
M-F CBCL Int. (7)							-

Note. ** Correlation significant at $p < .01$; * correlation significant at $p < .05$. ICC = Intra-Class Correlations; M-F CRD = Average of mother and father scores on the Childrearing Disagreement Scale; M-F PPS = Average of mother and father scores on the Parenting Practices Scale; M-F DAS = Average of mother and father scores on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale; M-F CBCL Ext. = Average of mother and father scores on the Child Behavior Checklist Externalizing Scale; M-F CBCL Int. = Average of mother and father scores on the Child Behavior Checklist Internalizing Scale.

Table 4

Regression Analyses Predicting Average of Mother and Father Reported Child Externalizing Problems from Parenting Effectiveness and Childrearing Disagreement and Disimilarities

Predictors		B	SE B	β	Partial r	t	P
Step 1	Family Income	-.17	.35	-.03	-.04	-.47	.64
	M-F DAS	.09	.05	.15	.15	1.81	.85
	Mother PDS IM	-.03	.12	-.02	-.02	-.23	.82
	Father PDS IM	.19	.11	.12	.14	1.73	.09
	Child Gender	-.14.0	11.93	-1.09	-.10	-1.18	.24
Step 2	M-F PPS	-.23	.06	-.44	-.32	-4.08	<.001
Step 3	M-F CRD	2.86	.77	.38	.29	3.71	<.001
	ICC Goals	5.50	2.23	.24	.20	2.46	.02
	ICC Behaviors	-3.41	3.69	-.09	-.08	-.92	.36

Note. M-F DAS = Average of mother and father scores on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale; PDS IM = Paulhus Deception Scales – Impression Management Scale; M-F PPS = Average of mother and father scores on the Parenting Practices Scale; M-F CRD = Average of mother and father scores on the Childrearing Disagreement Scale. ICC = Intra-Class Correlations

Table 5

Regression Analyses Predicting Average of Mother and Father Reported Child Internalizing Problems from Parenting Effectiveness and Childrearing Disagreement and Dissimilarities

Predictors		B	SE B	B	Partial r	t	P
Step 1	Family Income	-.07	.06	-.09	-.10	-1.18	.24
	M-F DAS	.01	.01	.15	.14	1.69	.09
	Mother PDS IM	-.01	.02	-.02	-.02	-.26	.80
	Father PDS IM	.01	.02	.03	.04	.43	.67
	Child Gender	.00	.15	.01	.01	.03	.98
Step 2	M-F PPS	-.02	.01	-.26	-.23	-2.93	.004
Step 3	M-F CRD	.29	.11	.26	.21	-1.10	.009
	ICC Goals	.42	.27	.12	.12	1.53	.13
	ICC Behaviors	-.51	.46	-.09	-.09	-.92	.27

Note. M-F DAS = Average of mother and father scores on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale; PDS IM = Paulhus Deception Scales – Impression Management Scale; M-F PPS = Average of mother and father scores on the Parenting Practices Scale; M-F CRD = Average of mother and father scores on the Childrearing Disagreement Scale. ICC = Intra-Class Correlations.