Associations between Depressive Symptoms, Coparenting, and Behavior Outcomes in Children with Previously Incarcerated Fathers
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**Background & Hypotheses**

- Five million children have experienced a residential parent go to jail or prison (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). Parental incarceration can be as deleterious to children's health as other adverse family experiences (e.g., parental death, divorce, witness of parental abuse, drug problems; Turney, 2014).
- We examined young children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors in the context of post-paternal incarceration by focusing on both risks (i.e., parental depressive symptoms), protective factors (i.e., coparenting alliance), and their combined impact.
- **H1**: Higher maternal or paternal depressive symptoms will be associated with more behavior problems in children.
- **H2**: Higher maternal or paternal coparenting alliances will be associated with fewer behavior problems in children.
- **H3**: Maternal or paternal coparenting alliances will alter the association between parental depressive symptoms and children's behavior problems.

**Participants**

- Data were from Building Strong Families, a longitudinal study of mostly unmarried couples expecting their first child together.
- Data collection began near the child's birth, 15- and 36-months later.
- Subsample of previously incarcerated fathers (N = 426) and biological mothers of their 3-yr-old children.
- Most fathers identified as Black (68%). Fathers were on average 27 years old (SD = 6.4).

**Methods**

- **Measures**
  - Parental depressive symptoms: 12-item version of CES-D ($\alpha$ =.87 fathers and mothers).
  - Coparenting alliance: Parenting Alliance (10 items; $\alpha$ =.97 mothers; $\alpha$ =.95 fathers).
  - Behavior Problems Index: Children's externalizing ($\alpha$ = .74) and internalizing ($\alpha$ = .81) behaviors were averaged across parents' responses to create a couple average score.
  - Controls: Child age, child sex, parents' income, education, employment status, fathers' race/ethnicity, intervention or control group; parental depressive symptoms at 15 months.

**Results**

- **H1**: Partial support: Higher paternal depressive symptoms were associated with higher externalizing behavioral problems in children. Unexpectedly, higher maternal depressive symptoms were associated with lower externalizing behavioral problems.
- **H2**: Not supported.
- **H3**: Partial support (see figure): When mothers reported lower coparenting alliance, negative associations between fathers' depressive symptoms and children's internalizing behavioral problems were higher.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Possible targets for intervention:
- Focus on all members of the family (i.e., father, mother, child outcomes) vs. focus on only one member of the family system
- Fathers' depressive symptoms
- Mothers’ coparenting as a moderator vs. IV

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**Table 1. Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Children's Internalizing and Externalizing Behaviors (N = 426)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Internalizing Behaviors</th>
<th>Externalizing Behaviors</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>From final step of models</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Controls</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fathers’ employment status</td>
<td>-.12*</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal depressive symptoms at 15 months</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.21**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conditional Effects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maternal depressive symptoms at 36 months</td>
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<td>-.11**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paternal depressive symptoms at 36 months</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.14**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interaction Terms</td>
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<td>Mom coparenting at 36 months X Dad depressive symptoms at 36 months</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
<td>-.06</td>
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Note. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. 

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**Figure 1. Interaction between coparenting alliance reported by mothers and paternal depressive symptoms on children's internalizing behavior problems**

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