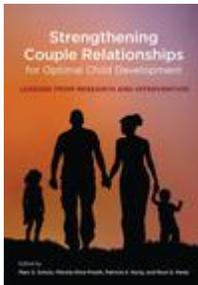


Couples and Coparents: Research and Intervention Inform Social Policy

A review of



Strengthening Couple Relationships for Optimal Child Development: Lessons From Research and Intervention

by Marc S. Schulz, Marsha Kline Pruett, Patricia K. Kerig, and Ross D. Parke (Eds.)

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010. 244 pp. ISBN 978-1-4338-0547-9. \$79.95



Reviewed by
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What aspects of parenting predict healthy emotional development in children? Unlike the months of preparation that go into receiving one's driver's license for the first time, most of the preparation for parenthood is focused on labor and delivery, the hours immediately preceding and during the birth process. *Strengthening Couple Relationships for Optimal Child Development: Lessons From Research and Intervention* asserts that empirically based parent and couples preparation interventions result in such important child outcomes that all expectant parents and children can benefit from participation. Presented in three sections and based on the seminal work of family therapists and researchers Philip and Carolyn Pape Cowan, the book's chapters establish the historical and therapeutic progress of the family systems approach, present empirically based ways to offer programs in more natural

“homes” for effective expectant parent interventions, and look ahead to policy efforts that can prevent stress on parents and children from becoming distress.

The four chapters in Part 1 (Implications of Couple Relationships for Parenting and Children’s Development) examine a broad range of family contexts: parents, for example, may be married parents, unmarried couples, parents living apart, or an extended kinship system. Research in the included chapters agrees about what facilitates the transition from expectant parenthood to developing a cohesive alliance in which the parenting adults welcome and raise a new infant.

Clearly angled toward rethinking social policy initiatives regarding families as well as family programming interventions, this portion of the book defines and establishes *coparenting*, one of the most important determinants of children’s outcomes, as worthy of being dealt with in widespread social programs. Coparenting problems disrupt children’s development, potentially resulting in undesirable outcomes such as insecure attachment, externalized and internalized behavior problems, and less-developed skills related to school readiness, including academic and peer skills. Highlighted in this section are the challenges ahead as theories developed from clinical experience must work backward to operationalize constructs for future research investigation.

The four chapters of Part 2 (Investigating Key Domains and Determinants of Couple Functioning) attempt to answer questions about the extent to which a first child’s arrival affects couples’ relationship satisfaction. Readers will find it interesting that as relatively recently as the 1950s, cross-sectional and retrospective studies indicated that adding a baby to a marriage constituted a crisis (beyond sleep deprivation!).

Other early studies suggested that marital satisfaction increased for many couples postpartum, a finding that was discounted in more powerful longitudinal studies. This research began the lean toward a normative approach that considers the addition of a first child as a transition in the life of a couple. Advances in the field built on longitudinal studies now make it possible to see the decline in couples’ satisfaction following the birth of their child and connect this to numerous negative outcomes for children.

By the beginning of the 21st century, research rather bleakly indicates that parenthood hastens marital decline. Very recent research included in *Strengthening Couple Relationships for Optimal Child Development* demonstrates both maternal and paternal deterioration of marital satisfaction following the birth of a child, as well as observed negative communication and an increase in the intensity of problems.

However bleak some of these research findings seem, they have yielded important insights about areas for couples’ work, especially in helping to develop realistic expectations for the transition to parenthood. Part 3, Promoting Healthy Couple and Family Relationships, is arguably the most important section of the book. The findings that some partners make the transition to parenthood without relationship deterioration and that some are more resilient in the face of relationship problems were to the Cowans rich areas for further development.

This book's debt to the Cowans is that their work moved beyond treatment of poorly functioning couples with children to identifying what works in healthy couples and families so that positive interventions with prevention outcomes could be developed. These last four chapters identify specific models and programs, including those from couples therapy leaders Gottman, Gottman, and Shapiro, and from the Cowans themselves.

Having strongly suggested that it is the quality of the couple's relationship that establishes well-being for a family (the title includes "for optimal child development"), the book might be expected to include more about the effects of parents' relationships on children. There is some integrated child research to support this claim, and the book does reveal creative approaches to studying processes and perceptions of children regarding their parents.

However, the stable coparenting relationship is established as the necessary foundation of a somewhat foregone conclusion. Two chapters do specifically address child development, with one reviewing effective interventions for divorcing parents and their children. Somewhat ironically, given the book's focus on building rather than repairing, it says that it is within the context of the parents' failed marriage that coparenting therapy can help improve outcomes for the kids.

I would have liked to see the final chapter of the book, which is written by the Cowans themselves, as either the introduction or first chapter since it covers both the historical background and research-based mechanisms by which the parents' relationship and couple interventions support child development. Given that most of the book focuses on the science of preventing couple problems, putting this chapter up front would reframe the rest of the book to focus on means and nutrients for supporting those relationships. *Strengthening Couple Relationships for Optimal Child Development* asks the reader to imagine a world of many kinds of families, all with well-adjusted children of coparenting adults. In so doing it opens up possibilities for more research and family policy discussions in this area.

Strengthening Couple Relationships for Optimal Child Development presents a call to action for social psychology and family policy specialists that at times seems to pathologize the very normal if admittedly challenging experience of bringing children into the world. As a parent of grown children, my own experience mirrors that of couples research that shows declining relationship satisfaction, especially in the early years of a child's life.

Would this have been different if couples' interventions had been part of childbirth classes? Screaming, sleepless nights, no free time or money, and diapers do not lend themselves to fun and intimacy. But in the context of having a job, completing one's education, having little money, furthering one's career, acquiring a home or dealing with extended family, coparenting a child can be exceptionally meaningful and provide growth opportunities (We did it!) for the parents. Because this book takes both a long and a broad view of the potential impact of couples work on children, it is probably most appropriate for

students of family studies or family policy, or for clinicians charged with designing interventions based on the handful that have been tried successfully.

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