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FAMILY PROCESS

Mother-Stepfather Coparenting in Stepfamilies as Predictor of Child Adjustment

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*Coparenting between biological parents is a strong predictor of child adjustment. To date, however, little is known about the coparenting dynamics between parent and stepparent in stepfamilies. This study aimed at exploring the links between coparenting in the mother–stepfather dyad and child behavior in stepfamilies compared with the links between mother–father coparenting and child behavior in first-marriage families. Two modes of coparenting were assessed: overt coparenting, that is, coparental behaviors in the presence of the child, and covert coparenting, that is, the way each parent speaks of the other parent to the child. The sample (*N = *80) comprised 48 stepfamilies and 32 first-marriage families with a child between 7 and 13 years old. Overt coparenting was assessed through direct observation in the standardized situation of the PicNic Game. Covert coparenting and child behavior were assessed through mother-reported questionnaires. Results showed (a) more covert coparenting behaviors in first-marriage families, (b) no differences in overt coparenting, (c) more child difficulties reported in stepfamilies, (d) less optimal overt coparenting being linked with more difficulties in children in both family structures, and (e) an interaction effect between family structure and coparenting, showing that overt coparenting is linked with child behavior mainly in stepfamilies.*

Keywords: Mother–Stepfather Dyad; Coparenting Support; Coparenting Conflict; Stepfamilies; Child Adjustment

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Coparenting, defined as "the ways that parents and/or parental figures relate to each other in the role of parent" (Feinberg, 2003, p. 96), is critical for child and family functioning. It has been shown to be linked with the social and cognitive development of the child as early as the first years of life and up to adolescence (McHale, 2007; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Specifically, disturbances in the coparental relationship are predictive of adaptive problems and psychopathology, such as slower development of theory of mind abilities (Favez et al., 2012), difficulties in adjustment at school (Dopkins Stright & Neitzel, 2003), difficulties in relationships with peers (Leary & Katz, 2004), externalizing symptoms (McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001), and internalizing symptoms (McHale, Kuersten, & Lauretti, 1996). As a consequence,

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coparenting has become a specific target of intervention for family therapists and educators (Feinberg, 2002; Frascarolo, Fivaz-Depeursinge, & Favez, 2011).

Two main dimensions of the coparental relationship have been highlighted (for reviews of the theoretical models of coparenting, see Favez & Frascarolo, 2013, and Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). The first one is "support," which refers to cooperation between parents at an instrumental level (parents help each other in everyday tasks related to the child) and at an emotional level (parents mutually validate their respective parenting behaviors, support is brought to each other with warmth, and positive comments are made to promote family integrity). The second one is "conflict," which refers to enduring disagreements between parents, unresolved disputes (parents may argue in front of the child or compete to get her attention), critical attitudes, and disparagement. Low support and high conflict are considered indexes of disturbances of the coparental relationship (McHale, 2007; Van Egeren & Hawkins, 2004). Lack of support forms a nonoptimal context of development for the child, as emotional exchanges are impoverished and the behaviors of the parents are uncoordinated; high conflict tends to undermine the sense of security of the child and to entrap her between the parents, a situation that has been amply documented in the family therapy literature as a triangulation process, whose effect is especially detrimental for the development of the child (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Feinberg, 2003). Coparenting support and conflict behaviors have different modes of expression: They are overt when both parents interact with one another in the presence of the child, or they are covert in the comments—positive or negative—that one parent makes to the child about the behavior or the personality of the other parent (McHale, 1997). Both modes are interdependent and they are most often congruent, but they do not totally overlap (McHale & Rasmussen, 1998): Parents may, for example, be engaged in hidden conflict, where there are no overt clashes between them, but where each of them tries covertly to engage the child in a coalition against the other (Minuchin, 1974).

Coparenting has been mainly studied in biological parents, be it in intact families or in postdivorce families. Regarding stepfamilies, studies have focused on the resident-nonresident parent relationship, with two main aims: first, to assess the psychological consequences for the child of an enduring postdivorce conflict (Ahrons, 2007; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Pasley & Garneau, 2012; Pasley & Lee, 2010), and second, to identify the conditions for a successful continuation of the relationship between the nonresident parent—usually the father—and the child (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Braver, Griffin, Cookston, Sandler, & Williams, 2005; Claessens, 2007). Whereas interest has been brought to the stepparent in order to understand the specificities needed for a successful stepparent–stepchild relationship (Braithwaite et al., 2010; Dunn, O'Connor, & Cheng, 2005; Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999; King, Amato, & Lindstrom, 2015; Vogt Yuan & Hamilton, 2006), the coparenting relationship in the new couple unit between the parent and the stepparent has been less considered (see Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001, for one of the rare studies in this field). The data available regarding the new couple concern mainly the marital features of the relationship and the risk factors of dissolution of the new union, and not coparenting per se (King & Scott, 2005; Whitton, Stanley, Markman, & Johnson, 2013).

The divorced parent–parent coparental relationship thus seems to most often have been implicitly considered as the only one that is meaningful for the child. However, the growing number of studies on the development of relationships in contemporaneous families in their diverse forms has shown that the coparenting construct may be applied to any and all adult teams engaged in the daily rearing and education of a child, the parent–stepparent duo being one of these teams in stepfamilies (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; McHale et al.,

2002; Svare, Jay, & Mason, 2004). Indeed, the definition of coparenting fits with the functional agenda of the parent-stepparent relationship: Both partners have to coordinate regarding daily life with the child(ren) and bring each other instrumental and emotional support in family tasks. Moreover, acknowledgement by the parent of the potential help brought by the stepparent in caring for the child indirectly reinforces the development of the stepchild–stepparent relationship (Papernow, 2013; Rodwell, 2002), and, conversely, the way the child sees the stepparent is a direct function not only of the way the child assesses the behavior of the stepparent toward her, but also of the way the child assesses the behavior of the stepparent toward the parent (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011). Qualitative studies, focused on the experience of both partners in the new couple, have shown that parents and stepparents mention coordination of roles in the family, agreement about educational values, and cooperation in daily activities with regard to the family as central to the success of their relationship, that is, a set of relational processes that pertains to the coparental relationship (Arnaut, Fromme, Stoll, & Felker, 2000; Michaels, 2006; Pylyser, Buysse, & Loeys, 2017; Wilkes & Fromme, 2002). This relationship is thus associated with the adjustment of the child to the process of constructing the new family (Bray & Easling, 2005; Bray & Hetherington, 1993). Factors favorable to the development of the child are all the more important in that children in stepfamilies tend to present more difficulties in several areas of development than do children living with both parents (Barrett & Turner, 2005; Brown & Rinelli, 2010; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1996; Jeynes, 2006; Saint-Jacques, Godbout, Drapeau, Kourgiantakis, & Parent, 2017).

Data are therefore lacking regarding coparenting in the parent–stepparent dyad and the extent to which this specific coparental relationship is linked to child adjustment. In a previous study, in the context of a community survey on social and psychological dimensions related to the functioning of stepfamilies, we investigated through questionnaires the presence of coparenting behaviors between mothers and their new partners compared with a control group of first-marriage families. Our results showed that behaviors such as conflict, promotion of family integrity, and disparagement are reported by mothers in the parent–stepparent relationship, although with reduced frequency than in first-marriage families (Favez, Widmer, Doan, & Tissot, 2015). This previous study (the main study) thus validated the relevance of considering coparenting in the mother–stepfather relationship. The links between coparenting and child adjustment were, however, not assessed. Moreover, coparenting was assessed only through questionnaires, not more directly through observation, which is especially warranted for the assessment of mutual behaviors (Kerig, 2001). We have thus designed an ancillary study with a subsample of the main study to include these missing facets.

AIMS OF THE PAPER

The study presented in this paper had two aims: first, to describe mother–stepfather coparenting in a sample of stepfamilies by focusing on both overt and covert behaviors; second, to assess the links between coparenting and child adjustment, taking into account the impact of family structure. For comparison purposes, the study thus included a sample of first-marriage families.

METHODS

Two methodologies were used. First, we directly observed interactions in a standardized situation to assess overt coparenting. Relying on observational data enabled us to

assess the quality of interactions through systematic coding. Second, we used questionnaires to assess covert coparenting and child adjustment.

Sample

The sample included families (N = 80) with children between 6 and 13 years old. The first-born child was designated as the "target child" of the study, in reference to whom the measures were performed. Forty-eight families were stepfamilies and 32 were first-marriage families. Inclusion criteria were defined as follows: (a) for stepfamilies, mothers live with a partner (married or cohabitant), the mothers have at least one child from a previous marriage living in the household, and the custody rate is 40% of the time or more; (b) for first-marriage families, mothers live with the father of their child (married or cohabitant), there is at least one child living with them, and neither parent has children from a previous marriage. The 80 families were a convenience subsample of the 300 families of the main study and were recruited during the last part of the recruitment period of the entire sample. They were volunteer participants from a random sampling of the state population, who were contacted by phone by a polling institute. Demographic characteristics of the subsample are described in Table 1. No differences appeared between the entire sample and the subsample for these variables.

On average, there were 2.1 children (SD = 0.9) in stepfamilies (minimum one, maximum five) and 2.4 children (SD = 0.8) in first-marriage families (minimum one, maximum seven). The mean age of the target child in stepfamilies was 10.42 years versus 9.78 in first-marriage families. Twenty-four (50%) of 48 children were girls in stepfamilies versus 17 (53%) of 32 children in first-marriage families. The custodial rate was on average 83.95% (SD = 17.83%) in stepfamilies.

Procedure

After the mothers agreed to participate following phone contact, an appointment was made for a first visit at home in order to conduct an interview with an experimenter (for the main study) and to complete questionnaires that aimed to assess several psychological variables, among which were the coparental relationship and child adjustment. A second

TABLE 1
Sample Characteristics

Demographic variable	Total (N = 80)	First marriage families (N = 32)	Stepfamilies (N = 48)
Child's age, years (SD)	10.16 (2.05)	9.78 (2.06)	10.42 (2.03)
Time with custodial parent, % (SD)	–	–	83.95 (17.83)
Mother's education			
Up to 11 years of school	1	0	1
Apprenticeship or vocational school	27	9	18
High school	8	3	5
College	9	5	4
University	35	15	20
Mother's occupation rate			
Full	14	2	12
Partial	53	22	31
No occupation	13	8	5
Duration of current relation, years (SD)	10.61 (7.68)	18.53 (5.56)	5.33 (2.77)
Currently married, N (%)	45 (56.3)	30 (93.8)	15 (31.3)
Duration of previous union, years (SD)	–	–	9.00 (3.95)
Time since separation, years (SD)	–	–	7.18 (3.02)

visit at home was then set to perform the observation (this second visit was specific to the ancillary study), in which the entire family was involved.

The study and its protocol were approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Geneva, State of Geneva, Switzerland, where the study was held.

Situation of Observation

To assess overt coparenting, we used the standardized situation of the PicNic Game (PNG; Frascarolo & Favez, 2005). The entire family is invited to engage in a pretend game of having a family picnic: arrival, preparing and having the picnic, playing together if they want, and finally cleaning up. Dishes in a basket and toys in bags are provided to the family. The instructions allowed the family to determine the duration of the game (but a global indication of a quarter of an hour was given). This situation, first designed to be used in a laboratory setting, has been adapted to be used at home. The entire game was video recorded with a camera installed on a tripod.

Interactions in the PNG were coded according to the Revised-PicNic Assessment Scales (Re-PAS; Favez, Frascarolo, & Grimard, 2016). The main focus of the Re-PAS coding system is the relationship between the parents and the overall tone of family interaction. Five dimensions are assessed on 5-point Likert scales with scores ranging from 1 to 5. The higher the score, the better the family functioning. The dimensions are as follows: (1) structure of the task (different parts of the game are distinguishable, such as preparing the meal, dressing the table, eating, playing, and cleaning); (2) coparenting (parents work together and support each other in their parental tasks, or, on the contrary, they show competition or even hostility); (3) conjugal relationship (parents share moments of intimacy with positive affects as marital partners besides being parents); (4) limit setting (parents are lax, giving no limits to the child(ren), authoritarian (rigidly maintaining limits), or authoritative; (5) family warmth (family members share positive affects and express their affection to each other).

Coding Strategy

An expert in the coding system (the third author of this paper) trained two coders who were involved in this study. To establish inter-rater reliability, the two coders rated 20% of the PNG independently, one coder being blind to the structure of the family. Intraclass correlation coefficients were between 0.71 and 0.91. These indexes are considered good to excellent, according to Cicchetti (1994). Disagreements were discussed and consensus was found to establish the final coding used for the analyses.

Questionnaires

To assess covert coparenting, we used specific dimensions of the Coparenting Scale (McHale, 1997; French version by Frascarolo et al., 2009). This 17-item questionnaire is built along four dimensions: family integrity (items reflecting active parental attempts at promoting a sense of togetherness among family members), disparagement (items reflecting active disparagement of the coparent and undermining of his or her authority or credibility), conflict (items reflecting overt interparental disagreement or conflict in the child's presence), and affection (items reflecting mutual affection expressed by the parents in the child's presence). For this study, we focused on the first two dimensions of integrity ($\alpha = .85$) and disparagement ($\alpha = .82$), which are specific to covert coparenting. The other two dimensions, which refer to overt coparenting, were not considered, as they are related to items to be answered in reference to situations when the three members of the family are together, which are by definition less frequent in stepfamilies than in first-marriage families (child

residency is around 80% in stepfamilies vs. 100% in first-marriage families). Items were answered in reference to the stepfather in stepfamilies and in reference to the father in first-marriage families. An example of an item related to family integrity is, "How often in a typical week do you say something that enhances your child's mental image of your absent partner? (e.g.,"Your stepdaddy/daddy loves you very much")"; an example of an item related to disparagement is, "How often in a typical week do you make a comment about your partner that might create a somewhat negative feeling state in your child? (e.g.,"You'd better not do that, stepdaddy/daddy will get mad")". Each item is rated from 1 *(almost never)* to 7 *(almost constantly)*, a mean score being computed for each dimension.

To assess child adjustment, we used the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997), P 4/16 French version, which comprises two parts. The first part presents 25 items about strengths or difficulties in the behavior of the child that the parent has to rate on Likert scales (0 = *not true*, 1 = *somewhat true*, 2 = *certainly true)*. These items relate to five dimensions (five items per dimension; a score is obtained for each dimension by summing the answer to the five items). Four dimensions are negative: emotional symptoms (in our sample $\alpha = .64$), conduct problems ($\alpha = .58$), inattention-hyperactivity ($\alpha = .79$), and peer problems ($\alpha = .60$); the last dimension is positive: prosocial behavior ($\alpha = .64$). A total score of difficulties is obtained by summing the four negative dimensions ($\alpha = .45$). The higher the score, the more problematic the behavior of the child. The second part comprises eight questions assessed on 4-point scales with different labels that aim to assess the chronicity and the impact of the possible difficulties on the child and/or on the family. For the present study, because our sample is nonreferred, we used the first part of the questionnaire only.

A series of questions were asked about the number of days the child is at home in stepfamilies, the marital status of the mother, her socioeconomic status (education and occupation), the duration of her current couple partnership, and the time since separation/divorce in stepfamilies.

Description of the Data and Statistical Analyses

A full set of descriptive statistics (including mean and standard deviation) was computed for all variables of the study. Qualitative case descriptions were made to illustrate overt coparenting processes in the PNG. We then performed multivariate analyses to study the links between the family structure, overt coparenting, and covert coparenting on the one hand, and child adjustment on the other. Examination of the data set showed that there were no missing data. Between-group data were independent, as both groups consisted of different individuals and within-group data were collected separately for each individual. On the other hand, the data did not meet the assumption of normality (Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests were significant). As a consequence, we used generalized linear model (GLM) analyses. The link with the linear model was set to loglinear in the GLM procedures. Because internal consistency of the SDQ was low, we considered each dimension separately; as a consequence, five models were tested (one per SDQ dimension).

In addition, to control for the influence of sex, age, and socioeconomic characteristics, we performed correlational analyses to select the relevant variables to be included in the models as control variables (see Figure 1 for an outline of the analyses). All statistical analyses were performed with IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 24.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA).

RESULTS

Descriptive Data

Descriptive data are provided in Table 2. Mothers in first-marriage families reported more disparagement than did mothers in stepfamilies; on the other hand, there was no difference in family integrity. Moreover, in both families, mothers reported significantly more behaviors related to family integrity than to disparagement, $t(47) = 7.76$, $p < .001$, in stepfamilies, and $t(31) = 4.32$, $p < .001$, in first-marriage families. Regarding interactions in the PNG, scores tended to be higher in stepfamilies for all dimensions, overt coparenting included, but no differences between the types of families were significant. Finally, there was no link between overt coparenting and the two dimensions of covert coparenting in stepfamilies, whereas overt coparenting was negatively linked with disparagement in first-marriage families ($r = -.43$, $p = .014$).

Regarding child adjustment, mean scores were in the normal range for all dimensions for both types of families. However, scores were higher for difficulties and lower for

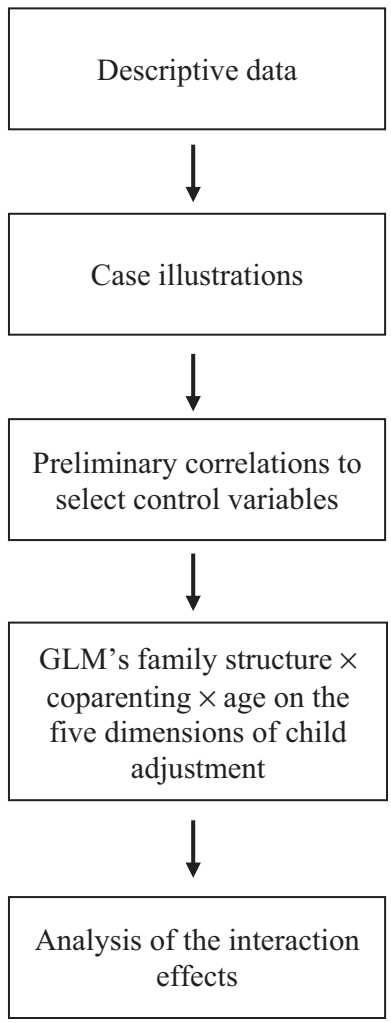

FIGURE 1. Outline of the analyses. GLM = generalized linear model.

TABLE 2

Descriptive Data of Coparenting, Family Interactions, and Child Behavior (Mean and Standard Deviation)

	Total	Normal range	First-marriage mother–father (N = 32)	Stepfamily mother–stepfather (N = 48)	Mean difference	95% CI *LL*, *UL*	*t* Test (*df*: 78)	Cohen's *d*
Coparenting questionnaire								
Disparagement	1.76 (0.64)	–	1.95 (0.94)	1.64 (0.67)	0.31	0.03, 0.60	2.22*	0.50
Family integrity	3.76 (0.99)	–	3.89 (0.93)	3.67 (1.03)	0.22	−0.22, 0.67	0.99	0.22
PicNic Game								
Structure of game	4.10 (1.04)	–	3.84 (1.08)	4.27 (0.98)	−0.43	−0.89, 0.03	−1.83	0.41
Coparenting	3.56 (1.03)	–	3.31 (0.96)	3.73 (1.05)	−0.42	−0.87, 0.03	−1.83	0.41
Marital exchanges	3.50 (0.82)	–	3.38 (0.75)	3.58 (0.90)	−0.20	−0.59, 0.17	−1.09	0.25
Limit setting	4.23 (0.91)	–	4.13 (1.07)	4.29 (0.80)	−0.16	−0.58, 0.25	−0.79	0.18
Family warmth	3.51 (1.06)	–	3.28 (1.09)	3.67 (1.01)	−0.39	−0.86, 0.08	−1.61	0.36
SDQ								
Emotional symptoms	2.35 (1.98)	0–3	1.91 (1.77)	2.65 (2.01)	−0.74	−1.51, 0.28	−1.37	0.31
Conduct problems	1.78 (1.74)	0–2	1.69 (1.73)	1.83 (1.75)	−0.14	−0.94, 0.65	−0.37	0.08
Inattention-hyperactivity	3.86 (2.82)	0–5	2.91 (2.84)	4.50 (2.65)	−1.59	−2.83, −0.35	−2.56*	0.58
Peer problems	1.54 (1.77)	0–2	1.03 (1.30)	1.88 (1.95)	−0.85	−1.56, −0.12	−2.33*	0.52
Prosocial behavior	7.86 (1.83)	6–10	8.41 (1.68)	7.50 (1.85)	0.91	0.09, 1.71	2.23*	0.50

Note. *CI* = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit; SDQ = Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.
*$p < .05$.

strengths in stepfamilies; specifically, mothers in stepfamilies reported more frequent behaviors associated with inattention/hyperactivity and with peer problems, and they reported less frequent prosocial behaviors than did mothers of first-marriage families (see Table 2). These results are congruent with the low-risk nature of our sample (scores are overall in the normal range), and the difference between the two types of families is in line with what has been described in the literature regarding the greater likelihood of adaptive difficulties in children of stepfamilies.

Overt Coparenting: Case Illustrations

The following excerpts are descriptions of coparenting interactions at the end of the PNG after the meal is over and the families have a moment of play before termination. Four excerpts are described: two stepfamilies and two-first-marriage families, with an example of low coparenting coordination and an example of high coparenting coordination for each type of family (with reference to the score on the Re-PAS coparenting scale).

Stepfamily, high score (Stepfather, Mother, Brian, 8 years old [the target child], and Gabi, 6)

Stepfather and Gabi propose playing with a foam dice. Mother proposes to Brian playing with the knights on the sofa to allow room for the game with the foam dice. Stepfather offers his wife coffee, with knowing glances. While Gabi explains the rules of the game, Stepfather prepares a cup of coffee for Mother and himself. Mother smiles and softly laughs, then tries to understand the rules. As Gabi's explanations are rather complicated, Mother proposes that the one who has the more points asks questions. While playing with the knights, Brian intervenes and suggests that the one who has the less points asks questions. They begin to play. Gabi throws the dice and gets a 1 and Brian says: "This is going to be hard to top." Stepfather asks Brian if he wants to join them, but Brian declines the offer. Gabi asks her mother if she already rode a horse. Mother answers yes and Gabi tells her she lost the game. Mother laughs and asks why. They all laugh and Stepfather explains that she should not have used "yes" or "no" for answering. Then both parents say that it should have been specified before the beginning of the game. They continue the game, with congratulations for the good answers. Brian still plays with the knights but looks at the others from time to time. When Stepfather asks his wife questions, they share knowing glances and laughs. Mother proposes that Brian play with them but he doesn't want to. She then asks him what he built and everyone looks to his castle. Stepfather indicates that it is time for the last question before cleaning up because a thunderstorm is arriving. Mother nods and confirms the coming of the storm. Brian says he enjoyed the toys. Mother asks Gabi to clean up the toys while the parents take care of the dishes. Stepfather proposes putting everything in the basket and washing the dishes at home. Mother agrees. Everyone gets up, and the parents fold the blanket.

This family showed a supportive coparenting style, some marital exchanges with complicity, and family warmth. They were all interested in their mutual activities. Although the first born did not participate in the game with the foam dice, he was not excluded.

First-marriage family, high score (Father, Mother, Terry, 12 years old [the target child], Alison, 10, and Emily, 8)

Mother proposes playing with the building set and this catches the attention of all family members for a while. The girls play a moment with the Barbie dolls. Terry takes the small knights out of the bag. The girls stop their play with the Barbie doll to play with the knights while the parents and Terry play with the building set. Then they play altogether with these toys again. Suddenly, the youngest says to her parents that they should have a picnic more often. They nod in approval. Father says that the quarter of an hour is

probably finished. Emily protests, saying she doesn't want to go home. Mother laughs and says: "One more moment and then we leave because it is time to go." Terry adds that there will be thunderstorms; his remark makes the parents laugh. The game is interrupted by the phone. When it rings, the mother says, "Oh, the thunderstorms. We have to leave, it is going to rain." They clean up the toys and the game is finished.

This family showed a supportive coparenting style and positive affect sharing, and they engaged in common activities.

Stepfamily, low score (Stepfather, Mother, Susan, 10 years old [the target child], and Jeff, 5)

Mother proposes playing together, but Jeff decrees that he wants to play only with his stepfather. Mother decides to play with her daughter. As Jeff joins them, the Stepfather finds himself alone with the foam dice, facing the others' backs. They play with the building set. Then Susan organizes a game and proposes to each of them getting up and going to one corner of the blanket to keep passing the foam dice. Stepfather obeys but not Mother, who stays seated on the floor. Jeff monopolizes the foam dice, throws it anywhere, and shouts every time his sister comes close to him. He throws the foam dice to Stepfather who does not take it, saying he will not play with him. Then Jeff throws the foam dice to the researcher. Stepfather ironically proposes that Jeff throw the foam dice to the camera. Mother says no with a laugh. Jeff gets mad when his sister catches the foam dice. Stepfather and Susan help Mother get up. As Jeff regularly goes outside the limits, Susan reminds him of the limits they are supposed to respect. Brother and sister throw each other the foam dice. Mother joins them. Stepfather, already out of the game space for a minute, proposes ending the game several times. Finally, Mother gives the signal for the end of the game.

All family members are involved in the game, but they struggle to be coordinated. The game is often interrupted, with frequent shifts from one activity to the next. Coparenting lacks mutual support. The adults seem to expect the children to be more in charge. Family members share very few pleasures altogether.

First-marriage family, low score (Father, Mother, Mary, 9 years old [the target child], and Nick, 7)

When Mary is finished with cleaning up, she makes the most of her brother's inattention by catching the foam dice. A fight ensues between them. Mother is still on her chair and notices that there are a lot of toys at their disposal, but the lack of space makes it hard to use them. She drinks her coffee. Father pretends to catch the foam dice. His wife tells him that in true life, he would be consulting his iPhone. He comments that he would not on Sundays. Her answer is just a small mocking laugh. As the foam dice catches everybody's attention, Father suggests playing with it. At the same time, Mother proposes a race of small toys on the grid made by the tiles of the blanket and Mary helps her to prepare this new game. Father expresses his disappointment; he does not listen to Mother's explanation of the rules, but becomes engaged in the game nevertheless. Everyone chooses a pawn and the game begins, peppered with disagreements about rules. Father wins but Mother imputes his victory to chance. The end of the game marks the end of the PNG.

The family members struggle to coordinate and play together; there are several solitary plays. Despite agreements on some rules, such as finishing the meal before play, coparenting is not supportive. Family members share few pleasures during this game.

General comments

These excerpts illustrate overt coparenting processes during a task requiring the coordination of family members. They show, on the one hand, within-group variability, as

there is high and low coparenting support in both first-marriage and stepfamilies, and, on the other hand, that overt coparenting behaviors are similar in both types of families. In the next section, we describe how these variations in coparenting quality relate to child adjustment.

Overt and Covert Coparenting as Predictors of Child Adjustment

Among the possible control variables, the age of the child was the only one that was correlated with the SDQ dimensions. It was thus included in the analyses. Five GLMs were performed, one for each dimension of the SDQ. The models highlighted significant predictors for conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, and peer problems (see Table 3). The two other models yielded no significant predictors for emotional problems and prosocial behaviors; they are thus not presented in Table 3.

Regarding conduct problems, the only significant predictor was the age of the child: The older the child, the more the mother reported this type of problem. Regarding hyperactivity/inattention, the only predictor was overt coparenting: The higher the score (and so the better the coparenting coordination), the less the mother reported hyperactivity/inattention problems. Finally, the most complex results were found for peer problems. First, in line with the results of the bivariate comparison, family structure was a significant predictor, less problems being reported in first-marriage families. Second, there was an effect of overt coparenting: The higher the score, the fewer the reported peer problems for the target child. In addition, two interaction effects appeared (see Figure 2): Family structure × family integrity and family structure × overt coparenting were both significant predictors of peer problems. Regarding the first effect, a simple slope analysis revealed that when taken separately, the links between the promotion of family integrity and peer problems were not significant, either in stepfamilies or in first-marriage families. Regarding the second effect, one link was significant: In stepfamilies, the more overt the coparenting, the fewer the peer problems for the child, $t(76) = 3.21$, $p = .002$.

DISCUSSION

The first aim of this study was to describe coparenting behaviors in mother–stepfather dyads in stepfamilies in comparison with coparenting in mother–father dyads in first-marriage families. We focused on both modes of expression of coparenting, that is, overt and covert behaviors. The first notable result we found is the similarity of behaviors in the two types of families for overt coparenting. Indeed, direct observation of interactions in the PNG showed that the coparental mother–stepfather dyads implemented the daily task required by the game instructions—organizing a family meal—similarly to the mother–father dyads in first-marriage families. The families of our sample were thus behaving in accordance with the idea that coparenting is teamwork, regardless of who the members of the team are (McHale et al., 2002). Moreover, we observed variations in the quality of coparenting in both groups, with some dyads struggling to coordinate and organize the game, and other dyads (most of them) being efficient and mutually supportive. Here again, these variations speak to the "universality" of coparenting, as the same interindividual differences in overt behaviors were observed within each group. As a side note, one of the coders who assessed the PNG was blind to the structure of the family; interestingly, she noticed that it would have been impossible to guess to which group each family belonged unless specific clues were apparent (when a child called her stepparent by his surname and did not refer to him as "dad," for example). These results, which emphasize the similarity between family structures, are a departure from the results of studies that compared the stepparent–stepchild relationship with the parent–child relationship, which

TABLE 3

Estimates of the Fixed Effects of Family Structure and Coparenting Variables on Child Behavior (N = 80)

	Conduct problems				Hyperactivity/inattention				Peer problems			
			95% CI				95% CI				95% CI	
Parameter	***B***	***SE***	***LL, UL***	**Exp(*B*)**	***B***	***SE***	***LL, UL***	**Exp(*B*)**	***B***	***SE***	***LL, UL***	**Exp(*B*)**
Intercept	−0.37	2.01	−4.32, 3.58	0.69	8.11**	3.15	1.93, 14.28	3319.26	7.55***	1.93	3.76, 11.34	1897.11
Family structure (first marriage with reference to stepfamily)	−2.39	3.80	−9.86, 5.06	0.09	−2.37	5.94	−14.03, 9.29	0.09	−12.04**	3.68	−19.26, −4.83	4.31E−9
Child's age	0.24*	0.12	0.01, 0.47	1.27	−0.06	0.18	−0.42, 0.30	0.94	−0.17	0.11	−0.39, 0.06	0.68
Coparenting: family integrity (covert)	0.17	0.23	−0.29, 0.63	1.18	0.21	0.37	−0.51, 0.92	1.23	−0.26	0.23	−0.70, 0.18	0.77
Coparenting: disparagement (covert)	−0.28	0.36	−0.99, 0.43	0.76	−0.03	0.56	−1.14, 1.08	0.97	−0.18	0.35	−0.86, 0.50	0.83
Coparenting: observed coparenting (overt)	−0.12	0.23	−0.57, 0.34	0.89	−0.98**	0.36	−1.69, −0.28	0.37	−0.72**	0.22	−1.15, −0.28	0.49
Structure × age	0.07	0.19	−0.31, 0.45	1.08	−0.12	0.30	−0.71, 0.47	0.89	0.25	0.19	−0.11, 0.62	1.29
Structure × family integrity	−0.06	0.41	−0.87, 0.74	0.94	−0.97	0.64	−2.23, 0.29	0.38	0.79*	0.40	0.01, 1.56	2.19
Structure × disparagement	0.87	0.69	−0.49, 2.23	2.38	0.76	1.09	−1.37, 2.89	2.14	1.07	0.67	−0.25, 2.38	2.90
Structure × observed coparenting	0.08	0.41	−0.72, 0.87	1.07	1.14	0.64	−0.11, 2.39	3.12	1.00*	0.40	0.21, 1.78	2.71

Note. CI = confidence interval; *LL* = lower limit; *UL* = upper limit.
***$p < .001$. **$p < .01$. *$p < .05$.

have shown important differences between the types of families in this domain (e.g., the stepparent being in a "quasi-friendship" relationship with the child rather than taking a disciplinary stance; Bray, 1999; Fine & Kurdek, 1994).

On the other hand, a difference appeared for disparagement as one dimension of covert coparenting: Mothers in first-marriage families reported more frequent disparagement of the father compared with mothers in stepfamilies who reported disparagement of the stepfather. This is in line with the results of our previous analyses of the main study sample: Mothers reported all kinds of coparenting behaviors in both types of families, but the frequency was higher in first-marriage families. As has been highlighted in other studies, mothers in stepfamilies tend to split their "mandates" as the spouse on one hand and as the parent on the other, with a clear demarcation between the two (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Disparagement implies mixing the two relational domains, something that mothers in stepfamilies may especially try to avoid to protect the child in relation to their new partner; this demarcation may indeed prevent the child from being entrapped in a possible conflict between the mother and her new partner at the same time that the child already has to cope with the separation between the mother and father (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). An additional explanation, in the reverse direction, may be that the mother tries to protect her marital relationship: Marriage and family unity are less secured in stepfamilies in which there is a higher rate of separation (DeLongis & Zwicker, 2017). As the current partner has no biological tie to the child, such a tie still being a strong normative social constraint for parenthood (Wegar, 2000), disparagement of the partner as a parent may constitute a stronger threat to the marital bond and family unity in stepfamilies than it is in first-marriage families (Felker, Fromme, Arnaut, & Stoll, 2002). The mother may therefore try to insulate these two dyads regarding negative emotions, this time to avoid being herself entrapped between her partner and her child; mothers in stepfamilies often report the feeling of being torn between the two (Cartwright, 2005; Wilkes & Fromme, 2002).

The second aim of the study was to assess the links between coparenting and child adjustment. In line with what has been described in the literature (see the review by Saint-Jacques et al., 2017), children were described as having more difficulties and less resources in stepfamilies than in first-marriage families. These differences were, however, related to variations within the normal range of all considered dimensions (inattention-hyperactivity, peer problems, prosocial behaviors); there was thus no demarcation line between "standard" behavior in children of first-marriage families and abnormal behavior

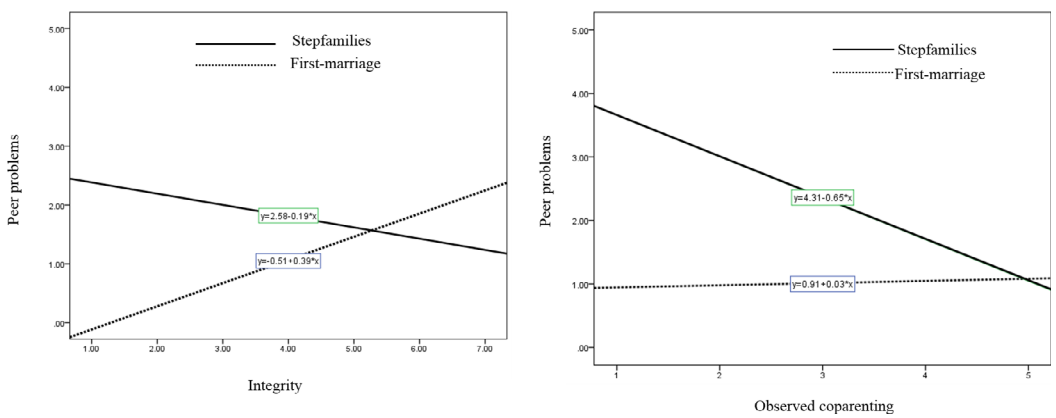

FIGURE 2. Interaction effects between family structure and family integrity on peer problems (left) and between family structure and overt coparenting on peer problems (right).

in children of stepfamilies. Regarding the contribution of coparenting to these variations, our analyses highlighted that, globally (both types of families taken together), overt coparenting was linked to two dimensions of adjustment, namely, hyperactivity-inattention and peer problems: The higher the overt coparenting score, the lower the problems on those two dimensions according to mothers. This is a classic result, the coordination between the adults being predictive of better outcomes in children, as has been amply demonstrated by studies in the field (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). However, regarding peer problems, two additional differential effects appeared: Covert coparenting (promotion of family integrity) and overt coparenting were differently linked to child adjustment in accordance with the family structure. Within these interaction effects, the link between overt coparenting and peer problems in stepfamilies was the only significant one, showing that the positive effect of coparental coordination on peer problems was specifically observed in stepfamilies. This result shows that, contrary with what has often been implicitly assumed in the literature, the parent–stepparent coparenting relationship may be linked with a behavioral developmental index in the child. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that child behavior was assessed in this study through maternal reports only and that another assessment is warranted in order to obtain a more objective view of possible problems with a child's peers; however, the results are at least an indication of more frequent concerns in mothers about their child's behavior when coparenting with the stepparent is less optimal.

Although this study provides an important indication of the relevance of considering the parent–stepparent relationship, several important limitations are to be mentioned. First, covert coparenting and the assessment of child adjustment were obtained from the mother only. This was a result of the design of the main study: For reasons of feasibility, the study first targeted mothers only, and families were contacted in a second step to perform the situations of observation for the ancillary study when mothers had already completed the questionnaires. Second, the sample size was small. A larger sample would have allowed us to include more variables, such as marital satisfaction or other coparental relationships in stepfamilies. Indeed, for a comprehensive assessment of context in the development of a child in a stepfamily, we should have assessed coparenting between parent and stepparent and between parent and parent, and we should have tested their respective influence and interaction. Studies have indeed shown that the coordination between coparenting units is related to the quality of life in both of the child's families and, by extension, has an impact on the development of the child (Schrodt, 2010; Schrodt, Baxter, McBride, Braithwaite, & Fine, 2006). Third, we did not have longitudinal data to assess possible causal relationships between coparenting and child adjustment, so that our results present the limitations inherent in a cross-sectional study.

Despite these limitations, this study is a first step in the description of parent–stepparent coparenting behaviors in stepfamilies. Our results show that this specific coparenting relationship should not be forgotten when studying the relational dynamics that are meaningful for a child living in a stepfamily, and, even more, should not be forgotten in clinical work. The support that the stepparent and the parent bring to each other plays a role in the well-being of the child, just as the coparenting relationship between the biological parents and the relationship between the stepparent and the stepchild do. Clinicians should thus pay attention to this structural complexity and take into account the parenting and coparenting experience of the stepparent, as well as the experience of the other family members (Blyaert, Van Parys, De Mol, & Buysse, 2016; Cartwright, 2005; Miran-Khan, 2017). The value of such a therapeutic strategy is attested to by the fact that educational programs that are intended to improve coparenting agreement between parents and stepparents have proven to be successful, especially by improving communication

between partners regarding the education of the children (Garneau & Adler-Baeder, 2015; Skogrand, Davis, & Higginbotham, 2011).

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