

Most unmarried, low-income couples show positive co-parenting

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Despite the many challenges they face, slightly more than half of unmarried low-income couples with children have positive co-parenting relationships, a new study found.

And those supportive relationships were linked to their [children](#) showing more empathy, less emotional insecurity and fewer behavior problems.

Parents who are good co-[parents](#) work together as a team, provide support to each other and back up each other's parenting decisions, said Susan Yoon, lead author of the study and associate professor of social work at The Ohio State University.

Those types of relationships may be particularly hard for the parents in this study, who may be more likely than others to be stressed by finances, racism, and lack of support.

"Our study specifically focused on racially and ethnically diverse [unmarried couples](#) with low incomes who are more likely to face a lot of parenting challenges," Yoon said.

"But we found that 56% of these families had good co-parenting relationships which was linked to [positive outcomes](#) for their children. Our findings really highlight the strengths these families exhibit."

The study was published online in the [Journal of Marriage and Family](#).

Participants in the study were 4,266 unmarried couples and their preschool-aged children from eight cities across the country who participated in the Building Strong Families study.

Parents in the study completed measures of how much they worked with their partner as a team to raise their child, and their perception of the other parent as a supportive co-parent.

Children's socioemotional development was measured by asking mothers a variety of questions about their child's empathy toward other children, their emotional insecurity and their internalizing problems (such as how

fearful they were) and externalizing problems (such as being overly active).

The results of the study showed couples fell into four categories based on the quality of co-parenting and how each member of the couple thought the other did as a co-parent.

The largest category, Profile 4, 56% of the sample, included couples with high-quality co-parenting in which both the mothers and fathers thought the other parent was supportive.

"This is the category where the children had the best outcomes, and it is encouraging that this was the largest group in our study," Yoon said.

Parents in the other categories showed that it wasn't just the quality of co-parenting that was related to how well the children fared—it also mattered quite a bit how much parents agreed that their partner was supportive, according to Yoon.

Children fared the worst in Profile 2, 25% of the sample, in which co-parenting was of moderate-high quality, but fathers had more negative views of how the mother co-parented.

"These findings suggest that fathers' dissatisfaction might be an important warning sign for children's poor functioning, even though co-parenting seemed relatively good," Yoon said.

Children didn't do much better in Profile 3 (12%), where co-parenting was rated moderate, but mothers were much less happy than fathers were with the co-parenting relationship.

Parents in Profile 1 (7%) had low-quality co-parenting and mothers had more negative perceptions of the co-parenting relationship. Here

children also did not fare well.

"Overall, we found that it isn't just the quality of co-parenting that matters for children, it is also important to look at whether both the mother and father are satisfied with how things are going," Yoon said.

"It is not good if there is a discrepancy between how mothers and fathers feel about the co-parenting relationship."

These results show how important it is to include fathers in studies like this, given how their agreement or disagreement with mothers on co-parenting played a key role in [child development](#).

Results also showed that when both parents had higher income and education, they were more likely to demonstrate high levels of supportive co-parenting.

"In order to strengthen families, we need to ensure that these [low-income](#), unmarried parents have access to financial and material resources," Yoon said. "That can help support the development of mutually satisfying, high-quality co-parenting relationships."

More information: Susan Yoon et al, Coparenting profiles and children's socioemotional outcomes in unmarried parents with low-income, *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/jomf.12952](#)

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