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Jean-François Bureau, Audrey-Ann Deneault, Kim Yurkowski, Jodi Martin, Jeffrey Quan, Sage Sezlik, and Camille Guérin-Marion

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The Interaction of Child–Father Attachment and Child–Mother Attachment in the Prediction of Observed Coparenting

Jean-François Bureau, Audrey-Ann Deneault,
and Kim Yurkowski
University of Ottawa

Jodi Martin
York University

Jeffrey Quan, Sage Sezlik, and Camille Guérin-Marion
University of Ottawa

A number of studies have examined the role of coparenting relationships on the development of children’s attachment to their mothers and fathers. However, previous research tends to interpret this link as unidirectional, thereby ignoring the possibility that, in reverse, child–parent attachment relationships could also predict the quality of the coparenting relationship. Furthermore, there is limited work examining how the child–father and the child–mother attachment relationships may interact to predict coparenting. In response to these limitations, the current study drew from an integrative family systems framework and observational measures to examine these possible relations in biparental heterosexual families. To assess child–parent attachment security, 144 preschool-aged children (83 girls; $M = 46.89$ months, $SD = 8.77$) completed independent separation–reunion procedures with their mother and father during counterbalanced laboratory visits. During a subsequent home visit, parents engaged in triadic play with their child, from which coparenting cooperation and competition were evaluated. Results showed that child–mother and child–father attachment security were not independent predictors of coparenting; rather, their interaction significantly predicted the quality of the coparenting relationship. In line with theoretical models calling for a family systems approach, study findings highlight the importance of considering the interactive effects of child–father and child–mother attachment relationships when examining family dynamics.

Public Significance Statement

The current study suggests that the *interaction* between children’s attachment security toward their father and mother is a more important predictor of the quality of the coparenting relationship than is either individual child–parent attachment relationship. On a broader level, these results show the need to consider the interplay between the child–father and the child–mother relationship when assessing family dynamics. At a more specific level, we also show that there is lower cooperation and higher competition when child–mother security is high but child–father security is low, whereas there is higher cooperation and lower competition when both child–parent attachment relationships present high levels of security. These results suggest that when mothers are successful in fostering a secure attachment relationship, whereas fathers are not, the coparenting relationship may suffer as a result of increased competition and decreased cooperation between parents. As such, assuming positive family dynamics based on the examination of one relationship in isolation might be short-sighted.

Keywords: coparenting, child–father attachment, child–mother attachment, triadic play

Societal changes in Western countries over the previous decades (e.g., women’s increased participation in the workforce) have led to greater paternal involvement in childcare (Fagan, Day, Lamb, &

Cabrera, 2014; Pleck, 2010), especially during the preschool years (age: 3–5 years; Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999; Lamb, 2004). As a result, many researchers are increasingly interested in elucidating

 Jean-François Bureau,  Audrey-Ann Deneault, and Kim Yurkowski, School of Psychology, University of Ottawa; Jodi Martin, Department of Psychology, York University;  Jeffrey Quan, Sage Sezlik, and  Camille Guérin-Marion, School of Psychology, University of Ottawa.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jean-François Bureau, School of Psychology, University of Ottawa, 136 Jean-Jacques-Lussier, ON K1N 6N5, Canada, E-mail: jbureau@uottawa.ca

fathers' roles in family dynamics and child development (Volling et al., 2019). One important aspect of fathering that should be taken into consideration is the quality of the relationship they develop with their child. Research suggests that fathers are legitimate attachment figures, providing comfort and protection when the child is distressed (*haven of safety*) and supporting the child's return to exploration once he or she is comforted (*secure base*). This is the case for both the infancy (Lucassen et al., 2011) and preschool periods (Bureau et al., 2017; Deneault, Bureau, Yurkowski, & Moss, 2019).

Among studies that have taken interest in this question, there is a tendency to examine the child–father relationship in isolation from the child–mother relationship, based on assumptions that each makes independent contributions to child development (Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2018). However, previous research has shown that the attachment relationships that children develop with their mothers and fathers are not completely independent (van IJzendoorn & De Wolff, 1997), especially in the preschool years (Deneault et al., 2019). Parents who live and raise children together may influence each other through modeling, discussion about children, or even competition and jealousy. As such, it is possible that the child–mother attachment relationship could interact with the child–father attachment relationship to influence other family dynamics, including the extent to which parents form an effective team as coparents. Such an interaction effect would be in line with the integrative attachment model recently presented by Dagan and Sagi-Schwartz (2018), which was formulated with a focus on child developmental outcomes but is informative for the study of attachment relationships and family dynamics more generally. This model posits that the network of child–mother and child–father attachment relationships may predict outcomes more strongly than either child–parent attachment relationship in isolation from the other. As part of their integrative hypothesis, Dagan and Sagi-Schwartz (2018) described different interaction models explaining the potential combinations of attachment to mother and father (i.e., secure to both parents, secure_{mother}–insecure_{father}, insecure_{mother}–secure_{father}, and insecure to both parents). These models are guided by two governing questions. First, does the number of secure attachments matter (i.e., one or two secure attachments)? They suggest that this question could result in two possible models: (a) an additive model whereby a secure attachment to both parents predicts better outcomes than other combinations or (b) a buffering model in which having a secure attachment to at least one parent is as protective as having two secure attachments. The second guiding question is whether the attachment to one parent holds greater contribution than attachment to the other parent. Dagan and Sagi-Schwartz (2018) suggested two potential models to answer this question: (a) a hierarchical model in which a secure attachment to one parent leads to more optimal outcomes as compared to a secure attachment to the other parent or (b) a horizontal model whereby a secure attachment to one parent predicts similar outcomes compared to a secure attachment to the other parent. In general, Dagan and Sagi-Schwartz's (2018) integrative hypothesis aligns with a family systems approach to the study of child–father relationships (Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley, & Roggman, 2014; Cowan & Cowan, 2019), which deems it necessary to notably consider the extent to which parents influence one another, to understand family dynamics. Both the integrative hypothesis and the family systems approach highlight the need for

studies that go beyond each individual child–parent relationship to also examine the interaction between child–mother and child–father relationships.

Child–Parent Attachment and the Coparenting Relationship in a Triadic Context

An important aspect of family dynamics is the coparenting relationship, referring to the ways that parents relate to each other in their parenting roles (Feinberg, 2003). In his model of coparenting relationships, Feinberg (2003) proposed four different components that make up a coparenting relationship: (a) agreement on child rearing issues, (b) division of child-related labor, (c) support for the coparental role, and (d) the joint management of family interactions. This last component refers to an important part of the family life, given that it relates to how mothers and fathers behave and collaborate with each other in the presence of their child. Children who live in biparental families, for instance, spend a significant amount of time with their mothers and fathers together at the same time, especially postinfancy. Researchers have argued that family dynamics are more complex and emotionally diverse in mother–father–child triads than child–parent dyads (Lindsey & Caldera, 2006). Triads have their own dynamic, which may not be a mere reflection of the ways that each member of the triad interacts one-on-one with another. A possible explanation for the change in parental behavior in a triadic context may be that parents adjust their behavior according to their partner's parenting style. The quality of the child–parent attachment relationship is one factor that may influence how parents perceive themselves as a parental figure and how they compare themselves to their partner. This may thus give rise to a coparenting climate that is more or less cooperative or competitive in a triadic context.

A number of studies have considered the relation between coparenting and child–parent attachment. For example, Caldera and Lindsey (2006) found that competition between parents in a triadic context is associated with fathers and mothers' perceptions of a less secure child–parent attachment relationship (using the Attachment Q-Sort). Similarly, Newland, Coyl, and Freeman (2008) observed that father-reported coparenting consistency is associated with the child's felt security, as assessed by their fathers (Preschool Attachment Q-list). Lastly, Brown, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, and Neff (2010) reported that coparenting supportiveness at 3.5 months predicted higher child–father attachment security, as assessed with the strange situation procedure a year later, but not higher child–mother attachment security.

Although these findings are correlational in nature, they are commonly interpreted based on the assumption of a unidirectional pattern by which early coparenting behavior predicts the formation of child–parent attachment relationships—that is, a supportive coparenting relationship would foster the formation of a secure child–parent attachment, and a conflictual coparenting relationship would contribute to the development of an insecure child–parent attachment. However, as specified in Cabrera and colleagues' (2014) heuristic model of fathering, the dynamic interplay between the different family systems suggests the presence of the reverse pattern as well, wherein child characteristics (including felt security) may predict the quality of the coparenting relationship. For example, a parent who has established a secure relationship with their child may be triggered by a seemingly insensitive or conflic-

tual relationship between the child and their partner (Roy & Dyson, 2005), which could contribute to a more negative coparenting relationship. Under these circumstances, the parent may intervene by trying to teach their partner more effective ways of parenting, which may be perceived as a form of criticism and could lead to more competition between parents. Alternatively, such behaviors could be perceived as supportive by the partner and may contribute to a more cooperative coparenting relationship.

Current Study

The current study sought to explore the rarely examined relation by which child–parent attachment predicts the quality of the coparenting relationship. To do so, the study drew on an integrative hypothesis of attachment (Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2018) that also considers the role of the interaction between both child–parent attachment relationships as a potential predictor of coparenting. The study relied on independent observational assessments of child–parent attachment security and coparenting as opposed to single informant self-reported data. In line with Dagan and Sagi-Schwartz' (2018) suggestion that future studies testing the integrative hypothesis should use continuous attachment measures, the child–parent attachment coding in the current study was based on a newly validated continuous coding system of attachment (Deneault et al., 2019). The use of continuous attachment scales instead of categories offers many advantages when examining the relation between child–parent attachment and coparenting. First, the use of continuous measures of attachment is in line with the results of previous taxometric analysis supporting attachment security as a dimensional construct rather than a categorical one (Fraleay & Spieker, 2003). Second, continuous measures of attachment permit the consideration of individual differences *within* classifications, which is not possible with categorical attachment measures (Feeney, 2016). In the current study, the continuous approach allowed us to differentiate children who present low, medium, and high levels of child–parent attachment security, a distinction that could not be drawn using a categorical approach. Third, continuous measures of attachment allow increased statistical power to detect differences. This is especially an advantage, given the distribution of categorical attachment, which often means that certain attachment groups, or even combinations of attachment groups when considering multiple attachment relationships at once (e.g., insecure_{mother}–secure_{father}) have prohibitively small sample sizes. The statistical and predictive advantages of continuous measures of attachment in the preschool years were shown by Deneault and colleagues (2019), who found incremental validity of continuous scales over categories for the prediction of concurrent externalizing behavior problems. Taken together, these advantages show how the current study extends previous research through its use of continuous attachment scales.

Beyond the aforementioned contributions of the current study, its relevance is all the more significant, given the developmental period examined, namely, the preschool years. Indeed, fathers are more involved in child rearing (e.g., discipline, play, care) during the preschool years (Lamb, 2004); the quality of their relationship with their children may thus have a greater impact on family dynamics during this period. In summary, this study offers a number of unique contributions, most notably in expanding our understanding of the directionality of the association between

child–parent attachment and coparenting by examining how child–parent attachment predicts coparenting, rather than the reverse association, which has already been investigated. Likewise, our study is strengthened by its examination of the interaction between child–mother and child–father attachments, its use of continuous observational measures, and assessments conducted during the preschool years, a developmental period during which triadic interactions may be influenced particularly heavily by the involvement of fathers.

Based on previous studies, we expected that higher levels of child–mother and child–father attachment security would predict higher cooperation and lower competition between the parents. Consistent with the integrative hypothesis of attachment (Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2018), we also expected that these relations may be moderated by the quality of the child's attachment relationship to the other parent, such that the relation may only hold if the child is not at all or very secure with the other parent. Given that no hypotheses were specified as to which relationship should moderate the other, the study followed the integrative hypothesis's suggestion of examining two possible forms of moderation models in a hierarchical fashion for each outcome: (a) child–father attachment as a moderator in the relation between child–mother attachment and coparenting; 2) child–mother attachment as a moderator in the relation between child–father attachment and coparenting.

Method

Participants

The sample for the current study was part of a larger longitudinal laboratory-based study of 157 preschool children and both of their parents. From the larger sample, 13 families only completed the attachment assessment with one parent; the sample for the current study was thus based on the 144 families (83 girls; $M_{\text{age}} = 46.89$ months, $SD = 8.77$), for whom attachment data were available for both child–mother and child–father dyads. Among families who completed the two independent laboratory-based assessments of attachment security (one with each parent), 83 agreed to participate in additional testing during an optional home visit scheduled 3 months later (i.e., subsequent to the last laboratory session). This home visit allowed for the assessment of coparenting. Families were recruited through newspaper and radio advertisements and the laboratory's website from 2009 to 2012 in a large Eastern Canadian city. Families were eligible to participate if they had a child aged between 3 and 5 years who was living with both their mother and father. The study sample included anglophone ($n = 114$) and francophone ($n = 30$) families at low socioeconomic risk. Most families (79.9%) reported earning a household income of \$75,000 or more. The majority of parents had completed a university degree (77.1% of mothers and 63.9% of fathers). Mothers described their ethnic background as Caucasian (83.3%), Asian (6.9%), Middle Eastern (3.5%), Black (2.8%), Indigenous (1.4%), or "other" (0.7%), whereas fathers described their ethnic background as Caucasian (85.2%), Asian (7.6%), Middle Eastern (2.8%), Black (2.1%), Latino/Hispanic (0.7%), Indigenous (0.7%), or "other" (0.7%). These sociodemographic characteristics are in line with the regional population (Statistics Canada, 2017).

Families who agreed to participate in the optional home visit did not differ from those in the larger sample on key demographic variables such as child age, $F(1, 155) = 1.68, p = .20$; child gender, $\chi^2(157) = .01, p = .99$; household income, $F(1, 154) = 2.24, p = .14$; maternal education, $\chi^2(157) = .01, p = .96$; paternal education, $\chi^2(157) = 3.15, p = .08$; language spoken, $\chi^2(157) = 1.31, p = .18$; maternal ethnicity, $\chi^2(157) = 4.11, p = .53$; and paternal ethnicity, $\chi^2(157) = 11.12, p = .09$. There were no significant differences on the security scale between families who participated in the home visit and those who did not: for child–mother attachment, $t(142) = -.1690, p = .09$, and for child–father attachment, $t(142) = -.85, p = .40$.

Procedure and Measures

Child–father and child–mother attachment. Children participated in a videotaped session with each parent during the laboratory-based portion of the study. Independent sessions with mothers and fathers were scheduled 3 months apart, in a counter-balanced order, to minimize the child’s habituation to laboratory tasks from one session to the other. During each session, child–parent dyads engaged in a modified separation–reunion procedure (Cassidy & Marvin, 1992). This procedure consists of five separate 5-min episodes during which the child is successively separated and reunited with the parent. Three coders blinded to other participant data and to the child’s attachment rating with the other parent rated child–father and child–mother attachment on the continuous security scale of the Preschool Attachment Rating Scales (Moss, Lecompte, & Bureau, 2015). The security scale is rated from 1 to 9, with 1 representing an absence of signs of security and 9 representing the presence of security in all modalities of children’s behaviors (i.e., body orientation/proximity, speech, gaze, and affect; Cassidy & Marvin, 1992; Moss et al., 2015). Ratings are based on both duration and frequency of behavior as well as the developmental appropriateness of the behavior. The security scale of the Preschool Attachment Rating Scales possesses adequate psychometric properties to assess both child–father and child–mother attachment (Deneault et al., 2019). Interrater reliability based on coding 20% of the sample was excellent (intraclass correlation [ICC] = .81 for child–father security and ICC = .96 for child–mother security).

Observed coparenting. Approximately 3 months after the laboratory visits, research assistants led observational sessions in participants’ homes. Families participated in 10 min of video-recorded triadic play (mother, father, and child). Without providing any specific instructions, research assistants presented triads with a train set composed of train tracks, wagons, animals, and figurines. Three coders blinded to other data rated coparenting cooperation and competition between the parents during the task using the Triadic Interaction Scale (Dufresne, 2016). This scale was adapted from the Coparenting and Family Rating System (McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Lauretti, 2000) and the System for Coding Interactions and Family Functioning (Lindahl & Malik, 1996). Ratings on the Triadic Interaction Scale were based on a global assessment of the quality of the entire triadic play task. Scores on each scale ranged from 1 to 5, with 1 representing lower levels and 5 representing higher levels on the rated dimension. Specifically, for cooperation, scores of 1 are attributed to parents who are engaging in parallel activities—they are not communicat-

ing or paying attention to the other’s ideas or suggestions. Parents who receive a score of 1 for cooperation may talk directly to the child without considering the other parent, effectively separating the physical environment into two spaces. Scores of 2 on the cooperation scale are given when one parent does not attend to the partner’s comments and suggestions or when parents engage in very little interaction together. Scores of 3 on the cooperation scale represent parents who sometimes work as a team to complete the task at hand and sometimes reinforce or encourage the other’s initiatives. However, one of the parents must sometimes insist on getting such reinforcement or encouragement. Parents receive a score of 4 on the cooperation scale when they encourage their child to do what the other parent is asking or when one parent asks for the other’s advice before taking initiative. Lastly, scores of 5 on the cooperation scale are attributed to parents who mutually value each other’s initiatives. They consult and encourage one another and encourage their child to do what their partner suggests.

For the competition scale, scores of 1 are given to parents who effortlessly share the tasks and easily accept when they are not at the center of their child’s attention. Parents with a score of 1 engage in compromise and organize the physical environment in a way so everyone can participate in the task. Scores of 2 on the competition scale are assigned when one of the parents must sometimes insist for the tasks to be shared. A score of 3 is rated when parents sometimes contradict one another or use derogatory terms toward their partner, or when one parent sometimes tries to divert the child’s attention from the other parent. Scores of 4 are given for parents who often contradict one another, use derogatory terms toward their partner, or prevent the other from accomplishing an action; one of the parents demands more attention from the child and may try to get the child on their side. Lastly, scores of 5 are attributed to parents who give the child opposing tasks to complete and constantly contradict each other. Parents rated as 5 on the competition scale appear to want the child to take their side and may physically position themselves in a way that prevents the other parent from participating in the task.

It is important to note that cooperation and competition dimensions are not polar opposites of a single dimension ($r = -.51$ in the current study). For example, some parents may cooperate during some parts of the task (e.g., parents building a railroad together) while also competing at other moments of the task (e.g., parents both vying for the child’s attention). Thus, families could receive high scores on both scales. Interrater reliability based on 29 videos (35% of the sample) was good for cooperation (ICC = .79) and competition (ICC = .74).

Parents received monetary compensation for each session in which they participated, whereas children received a toy prize after each laboratory session. All tasks and procedures were approved by the institution’s research ethics board, and all research activity abided by the institution’s research ethics board.

Analytical Strategy

Before conducting main analyses, the potential covariate effect of several sociodemographic variables was considered (i.e., child age, child gender, maternal and paternal education, and family income). None of these variables were significantly associated with child–parent attachment security or coparenting. Descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables are presented in

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between Study Variables

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Possible range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Correlations between variables		
						Child–mother security	Child–father security	Cooperation
Observed child–parent attachment security								
Child–mother security	1	8	1–9	5.66	1.76	–		
Child–father security	2	9	1–9	5.36	1.91	.43***	–	
Observed coparenting								
Cooperation	1.5	5	1–5	3.57	0.96	.11	.11	–
Competition	1	4	1–5	1.89	0.84	.01	–.07	–.51***

Note. Estimates based on full information maximum likelihood, with $n = 144$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 1. Given the multicollinearity in the analysis when examining the interaction effect of child–mother and child–father attachment security, security scores were mean-centered. Mean-centered scores were then used to create the interaction of child–mother and child–father attachment security.

To test our hypotheses, we used path analyses modeling in Mplus 7 with full information maximum likelihood robust estimations to handle missing data (42.36%). We first considered a path model in which child–mother and child–father attachment and their interaction predicted coparenting dimensions (cooperation and competition). Then, because our model revealed significant interaction effects between child–mother and child–father attachment, we followed Aiken and West's (1991) recommendations to probe an interaction by examining the interaction effect for each coparenting dimension at $-1 SD$, mean, and $+1 SD$. The magnitude of effect sizes was interpreted based on Cohen's (1988) descriptive labels. We considered two models in a hierarchical fashion for each outcome: (a) child–father attachment as a moderator in the relation between child–mother attachment and coparenting and (b) child–mother attachment as a moderator in the relation between child–father attachment and coparenting.

Results

The path model including all predictors (child–mother attachment, child–father attachment, and their interaction) and coparenting outcomes (cooperation and competition) is presented in Figure

1. Fit indices appropriate for small samples ($N < 250$) indicated adequate model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999): comparative fit index = .909, standardized root mean square residual = .067. Results showed that individual child–parent attachment relationships did not predict coparenting cooperation (child–father security: $\beta = .10$, $p = .40$; child–mother security: $\beta = .11$, $p = .41$) or competition (child–father security: $\beta = -.12$, $p = .29$; child–mother security: $\beta = -.01$, $p = .93$) between the parents during a triadic task. However, the interaction of child–mother and child–father attachment security was a significant predictor of cooperation ($\beta = .23$, $p = .04$) and competition ($\beta = -.29$, $p = .01$).

Interactive Effect as a Predictor of Cooperation

We first probed the interaction using child–father attachment as a predictor of cooperation, with child–mother attachment considered as the moderator (Figure 2). At a value of $-1 SD$ below the mean (equivalent of a security score of 3.81) on the child–mother security scale, the relation between child–father attachment and cooperation was not significant ($\beta = -.07$, $p = .44$). This association was also not significant at mean levels of child–mother security (security value of 5.66; $\beta = .07$, $p = .40$). However, there was a significant positive association (intermediate effect size) between child–father attachment security and cooperation when child–mother attachment was $+1 SD$ above the mean (equivalent of a security score of 7.52; $\beta = .17$, $p = .04$). This result shows that there is lower cooperation when child–mother security is high

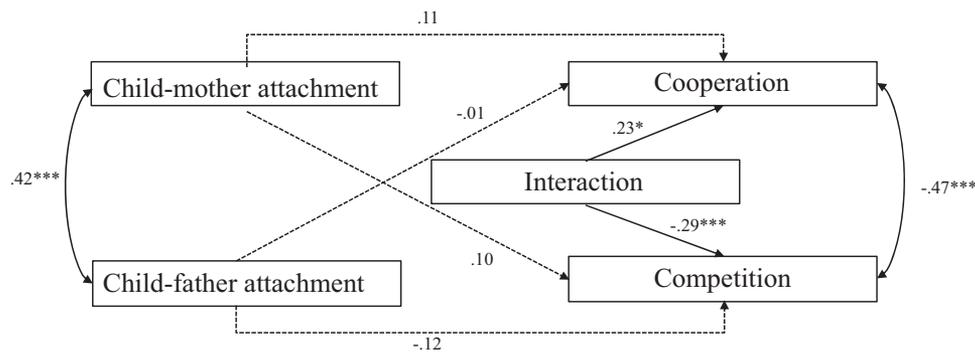


Figure 1. Model of prediction of coparenting dimensions with child–parent attachment security. * $p < .05$.
*** $p < .001$.

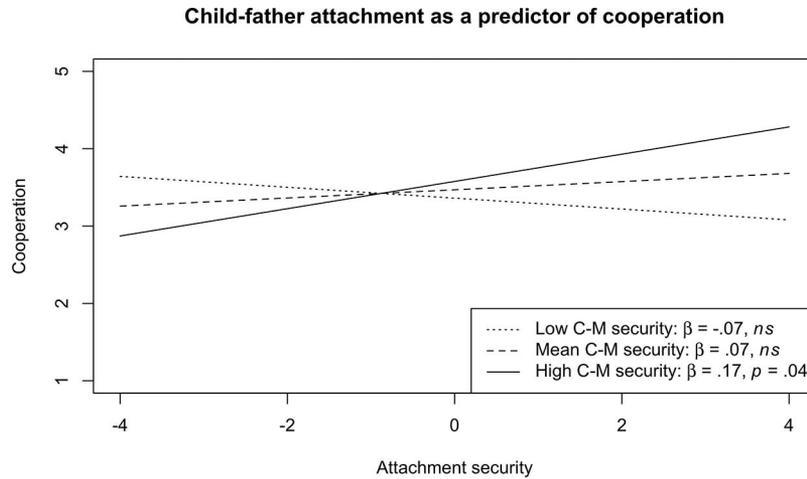


Figure 2. Significant interaction effect between child–father attachment (predictor) and child–mother attachment (moderator) in the prediction of coparenting cooperation. C-M = child–mother, C-F = child–father, ns = not significant. Low security refers to -1 SD below the mean; high security refers to $+1$ SD above the mean.

but child–father security is low, whereas there is higher cooperation when both child–parent attachment relationships present high levels of security.

The second model assessed the association between child–mother security and cooperation, using child–father security as a moderator. When child–father security was at -1 SD below the mean (equivalent to a score of 3.46), the association between child–mother attachment and cooperation was not significant ($\beta = -.07, p = .46$). This relation was also not significant at mean levels (security value of 5.36) of child–father security ($\beta = .07, p = .41$). However, when child–father security was high (at $+1$ SD above the mean, or an equivalent of 7.26 on the scale), there was a marginal albeit sizable positive association between child–mother attachment and cooperation ($\beta = .16, p = .06$).

Interactive Effect as a Predictor of Competition

We used a similar approach to examine hierarchical regression models predicting competition (Figure 3). In the first model, child–father attachment security was considered as the predictor of competition and child–mother attachment as the moderator. When child–mother security was low (at -1 SD below the mean, the equivalent of 3.81 on the security scale), the association between child–father security and competition was not significant ($\beta = .10, p = .24$). The relation was also not significant at mean levels of child–mother attachment security (a value of 5.66 on the scale; $\beta = -.08, p = .29$). However, when child–mother attachment was high ($+1$ SD above the mean, the equivalent of a score of 7.52), there was a significant negative association (intermediate effect

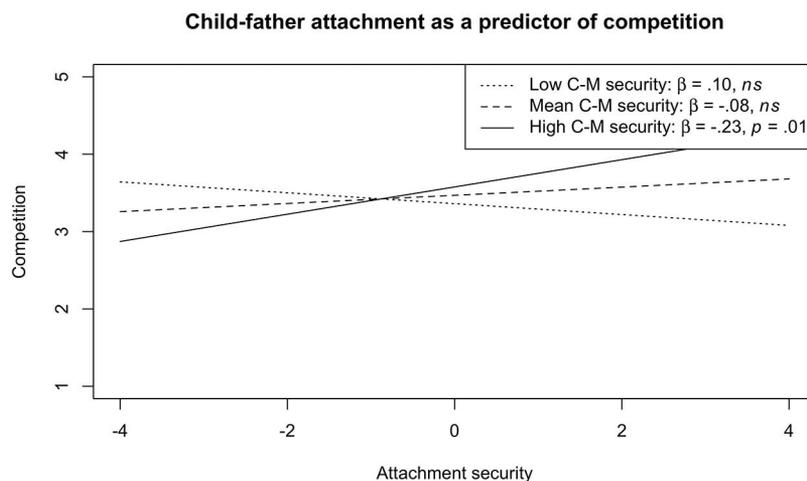


Figure 3. Significant interaction effect between child–father attachment (predictor) and child–mother attachment (moderator) in the prediction of coparenting competition. C-M = child–mother, C-F = child–father, ns = not significant. Low security refers to -1 SD below the mean; high security refers to $+1$ SD above the mean.

size) between child–father security and competition ($\beta = -.23$, $p = .01$). This result shows combination of high attachment security toward the mother and low attachment security toward the father predicts higher levels of competition, whereas higher security toward both parents predicts lower levels of competition.

In the last model, child–mother attachment security was the predictor of competition, whereas child–father attachment was the moderator. When child–father security was at -1 *SD* below the mean (equivalent of 3.46 on the scale), there was a nonsignificant yet sizable positive association between child–mother security and competition ($\beta = .16$, $p = .06$). The association between child–mother security and competition was not significant at means levels of child–father security (5.36 on the security scale; $\beta = -.01$, $p = .93$). Lastly, there was a marginal negative association between child–mother security and competition when child–father attachment scores were high (at $+1$ *SD* above the mean, equivalent to 7.26 on the security scale; $\beta = -.15$, $p = .09$).

Discussion

Drawing on an integrative hypothesis of attachment (Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2018), the current study sought to expand our understanding of fathering by exploring how child–father and child–mother attachment relationships assessed in the preschool years may interact to predict parenting behaviors in a triadic play setting. To date, much of the research on attachment has been conducted under a monotropic model, in which attachment to one parent (usually the mother) is examined. Noting that the attachment relationship to fathers is also important for family dynamics and child outcomes, many researchers have started examining both child–mother and child–father attachment relationships but have considered them under an independence model, whereby the attachment to each parent predicts various outcomes independently. In line with the integrative hypothesis (Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2018), this study proposed that the monotropic and independent models can no longer reflect the reality of most families' expectations regarding gender roles and parenting. Nowadays, child rearing tasks are often shared to various extents between parents, especially with fathers assuming more involved caregiving roles now than in past decades (Pleck, 2010). We thus drew on the integrative hypothesis to further our knowledge of fathering by examining the association of coparenting with child–parent attachment and their interaction. Although the integrative hypothesis was devised for child outcomes, we believe the model can serve as a guide for research exploring broader family outcomes associated with child–parent attachment. It was expected that higher levels of child–mother and child–father attachment security would predict higher cooperation and lower competition between parents, but that these associations may be moderated by the child's attachment relationship toward the other parent.

Results showed that child–mother and child–father attachment security did not independently predict coparenting quality and, instead, interacted significantly in predicting both cooperation and competition in a triadic setting. This main result provides support for Dagan and Sagi-Schwartz' (2018) integrative hypothesis, suggesting that the influence of child–parent attachment relationships cannot be fully explained by a monotropic model or an independent model of attachment. This result is an important one to note for research on fathering, as it underlines that the father–child

relationship cannot be viewed in a vacuum and instead interacts with the child–mother relationship within a broader family system. This may hold an important contribution in the prediction of various child and family outcomes.

Dagan and Sagi-Schwartz (2018) outlined a series of four possible models (i.e., an additive model, a buffering model, a hierarchical model, and a horizontal model) as guidance as to how child–mother and child–father attachment could interact to predict outcomes. It is worth noting that based on the current state of the literature, Dagan and Sagi-Schwartz (2018) did not find sufficient evidence to claim that one model is superior to the other. In an attempt to assess these models in the context of coparenting relationships, we explored whether the association between child–father attachment and coparenting was moderated by child–mother attachment and vice versa for the association between child–mother attachment and coparenting.

With respect to cooperation between parents during a triadic task, significant results showed that there was higher cooperation when both the child–mother and child–father attachment relationships presented high levels of security. The moderating effect of child–mother attachment on coparenting competition showed a complementary pattern, where higher security toward both parents predicted lower levels of competition. Although a number of other marginal findings emerged and approached statistical significance, we focus the current discussion on significant findings in the interest of reporting accuracy.

These results suggest that coparenting is optimized—by way of increased cooperation and minimal competition—when fathers are as successful as mothers in fostering attachment security with their child. In such a context—that is, when the child shows high attachment security to both parents—mothers and fathers may be more likely to settle into a mutual sense of teamwork and solidarity in the coparenting relationship. Parents may also be more likely to align themselves with their partners' parenting decisions (i.e., increased cooperation) and give them sufficient space in the triadic interaction (i.e., decreased competition). In contrast, a greater discrepancy between attachment security scores to father and mother was generally associated with poorer coparenting dynamics, as shown by lower observed cooperation and higher observed competition. This effect was mostly apparent when children showed high security toward their mothers, but low security to their fathers. Broadly, this suggests that when parents display divergent levels of responsiveness to their child's attachment needs—more particularly, when mothers are well-attuned to the child's needs and successful in fostering security, whereas fathers are not—the coparenting relationship may suffer as a result of increased competition and decreased cooperation between parents. When considering how these findings align with the first question asked by Dagan and Sagi-Schwartz (2018) pertaining to the number of secure attachments, our results lend more support to an additive model as opposed to a buffering one. Indeed, results show that high security to both parents is associated with more cooperation and less competition when compared to high security to only one parent.

With respect to the second question from Dagan and Sagi-Schwartz (2018), which asks whether one attachment relationship has a greater predictive influence than the other, results of the current study provide support for their hierarchical hypothesis. Specifically, there was less coparenting cooperation and more

coparenting competition when child–mother attachment security was high and child–father attachment security was low. This may suggest that a child’s attachment security toward their mother drives a somewhat more substantial impact on the quality of the interactions between coparents and the child than child–father attachment security. More specifically, variations in fathers’ ability to meet the child’s attachment needs seem to generate tensions in the coparenting relationship, *but only* in the presence of a mother who is responsive and attuned to the child. This finding could be the result of complex dynamics that make up the triadic familial subsystem. Fathers who are less successful than mothers at establishing a positive and secure relationship with their child may feel unappreciated and ineffective in their parenting role, which could potentially engender more tension in the coparenting relationship. Another possible dynamic is that mothers who succeed in establishing a secure attachment bond with their child may be more likely to step in and interfere with their partner’s involvement, particularly if child–father attachment security is low. This may create more competition and less cooperation between the parents in the presence of the child, should mothers observe that fathers frequently fail to meet the child’s attachment needs (e.g., lack of sensitivity, increased withdrawal in the context of emotional activation). Such maternal resistance to paternal involvement has been observed in previous research, resulting in the elaboration of a maternal gatekeeping model (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowski, 2008).

The current results also expand upon previous findings, which primarily focused on how the quality of the coparenting relationship predicted child–parent attachment outcomes, by showing evidence of the reverse relationship (i.e., child–parent attachment predicting coparenting). Indeed, Caldera and Lindsey (2006) found that increased competition between parents was associated with discrepant levels of security in children’s attachment to their mother versus their father. They suggested that competition between parents could lead to a coalition between one parent and the child, thereby excluding the other parent. This would in turn contribute to a greater difference in attachment security shown toward each parent (e.g., one secure, one insecure). Our results suggest that the discrepancy in attachment to both parents could further contribute to a climate of competition between parents.

Limitations

A limitation of the current study was that the coparenting assessment was not available for all participants because the home visit was an optional addition to the main study. As a result, the full information maximum likelihood function was used to mitigate missing data. Ideally, observations of coparenting would have been available for all participants. In addition, we cannot rule out the possibility that the timing of assessment (three sessions scheduled at 3-month intervals) could have affected the results. Furthermore, the sample size for the study was relatively small. This limitation precluded exploration of more specific comparisons (e.g., by child gender) or additional moderators of the link between attachment security and coparenting. This study also used a continuous measure of child–parent attachment security, which did not allow an examination of other attachment behaviors (e.g., avoidant, ambivalent, or disorganized) that may have provided

further insights into the prediction of the quality of the coparenting relationship.

Conclusions and Implications

The current study suggests that the *interaction* between children’s attachment security toward their father and mother is a more important predictor of the quality of the coparenting relationship than either child–parent attachment relationship considered individually. The integrative hypothesis (Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2018) aligns with recent calls for exploring how attachment to mother and father might interact in predicting various child outcomes. This study is thus at the forefront of this movement calling for a more expansive understanding of fathering and shows that attachment research would benefit from moving beyond an independent model in which each child–parent relationship is considered in isolation from the other, to take into account the interaction between both relationships. In line with an additive hypothesis (Dagan & Sagi-Schwartz, 2018), our results also suggest that parents work better together as coparents when they are both successful in fostering a secure attachment relationship with their child. These results are particularly important when considering that children spend a considerable amount of time interacting with one parent in the presence of the other parent. Future research needs to embrace a family system view when studying child–father and child–mother attachment relationships to further our understanding of both child development (Cabrera et al., 2014; Cowan & Cowan, 2019) and family dynamics. As exemplified by our results, developing a better understanding of the ever-evolving contributions of fathers within the family is a promising and timely avenue for this research agenda.

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