Summary
Co-parenting: Never Ending Relationship Between Parents

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Co-parenting is a relatively new construct that has gained increasing interest in the last few decades. Co-parenting can be defined as "the ways that parents and/or parental figures relate to each other in the role of parenting" (Feinberg, 2003, p. 96). Co-parenting is an interplay between parental figures in which that share responsibility and management of child-related tasks (McLanahan & Beck, 2010; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Effective co-parenting requires mutual involvement of both parents in childrearing and co-parents' ability to support each other in a constructive way (Katz & Woodin, 2002; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010).

Co-parenting is a different construct than other family dynamics. There are some associations between co-parenting relationship and other levels of family interactions such as spousal/partner relationship and parent-child relationship (Feinberg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007; Hughes, Gordon, & Gaertner, 2004; Marriott, 2011). However, the co-parenting relationship is not equal to the couple or parent-child dyadic relationship (Feinberg et al., 2007). The co-parenting relationship requires two parents or parental figures with at least one child (Egeren & Hawkins, 2004) and only interactions that are child related are considered as co-parenting relationship (Sobolewski & King, 2005). In addition, co-parenting does not imply an equal distribution of parenting roles; rather, roles are negotiated. Joint decisions are made by co-parents regarding the distribution of roles and responsibilities (Egeren & Hawkins, 2004).

Minuchin (1974) theorized the co-parenting subsystem as a separate but related entity in family system. Conceptualization of co-parenting has gained its impetus with studies of post-divorce relationships (Ahrons, 1981; Camara & Resnick, 1989). While exploring children's well-being and family relationships, researchers found that the relationship between co-parents was one of the main influences that affect the quality of post-divorce relationships (Amato & Keith, 1991; Camara & Resnick, 1989; Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990).

Therefore, in the beginning, co-parenting processes were conceptualized within divorced and separated families. Researchers further looked at co-parenting relationship in married (Feinberg, 2002; Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001; McHale, 1997), remarried families (Ahrons, 2007; Braithwaite, McBride, & Schrodt, 2003; Rodgers & Conrad, 1986), and other family structures. Terms such as *shared parenting* (Deutsch, 2001), *parenting alliance* (Cohen & Weissman, 1984), and *parenting partnership* (Floyd & Zmich, 1991) are also used to refer to co-parenting relationship.

Scholars distinguished spousal and co-parental processes (Frank, Hole, Jacobson, Justkowski, & Huyck, 1986; Feinberg, 2002; Gable, Belsky, & Crnic, 1995). Co-parenting processes such as negotiating different styles of parenting, supporting co-parental decisions, managing co-parental and other family-level interactions are conceptually separate from emotional and romantic relationship attitudes and behaviors between spouses (Feinberg, 2002). Parent-child interactions and relationships are also differentiated from co-parental processes (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011). Some researchers, on the other hand, conceptualized co-parenting as a dimension of general parenting (Ferrante, 2008).

The best interests of children argument engendered more discussions on co-parenting relationships after divorce. Parents are expected to redefine their roles in relationship to one another and reestablish boundaries of the changing family system (Emery, 2011). Walker (1993) argued that it is unrealistic to make a demand on divorcing parents for them to be able to immediately discard their spousal relationship and redefine their roles as co-parents only. Especially considering pre-divorce problems and the nature of divorce as a loss for partners, it can take a while for parents to experience emotional divorce. Emotional divorce is defined as the adjustment process of partners experiencing divorce and processing negative emotions that accompany pre-divorce conflicts (Vanderkool & Pearson, 1983). Despite these arguments,

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joint-custody and the best interest of children notion maintain their popularity. Emphasis on involvement of both parents in children's lives, clearly redefined boundaries, and supportive co-parenting are advocated as everyone's best interest.

Co-parenting might become more complex within remarried/blended families. It is very likely that children who experience divorce of their parents will also experience one or both of their parents' remarriage (Ahrons, 2007). As systems theory suggests, adding a new member into the system will require the entire system to redefine roles and boundaries. Children's sense of family and their relationships with parents might change after remarriage. Additionally, they are required to bond with new stepparents (stepsiblings if applicable) and navigate the intimacy and closeness to different adults. Former spouses might experience negative emotions such as anger and jealousy in the non-coparenting subsystems (Rodgers & Conrad, 1986). The non-coparenting subsystem includes any interaction and behaviors that do not include child-related issues. The negativity in non-coparenting subsystem might spill-over to co-parenting subsystem which is already expected to be redefined after remarriage (Ahrons, 2007; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Rodgers & Conrad, 1986).

There are different conceptualization dimensions and typologies described in the literature. Feinberg's model of co-parenting (Feinberg, 2002; 2003) has gained attention from many different scholars (Egeren & Hawkins, 2004; Ferrante, 2008; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). In his model, Feinberg (2003) emphasized that co-parenting relationship does not include "the romantic, sexual, companionate, emotional, financial, and legal aspects of the adults' relationship that do not relate to childrearing" (p. 96). His model can be applied to different family compositions and structures, although it mostly captures elements of intact family co-parenting. He identified four different components of co-parenting relationships: parental support/undermining, childrearing agreement, division of labor, and joint family management (Feinberg, 2003).

In contrast to Feinberg's 4-dimension model of co-parenting framework, Margolin and her colleagues (2001) found 3 dimensions of co-parenting: conflict, cooperation, and triangulation. Even though, the dimensions seem to differ from another, they share similar tenets of co-parenting practices. Meaning, Margolin et al.'s (2001) cooperation dimension includes parental support and agreement on division of labor of Feinberg's framework (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). The conflict dimension incorporates undermining end of the parental support/undermining component in addition to interparental conflict task (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Feinberg

(2003) himself stated that some dimensions he proposed can be measured and classified as cooperation and/or conflict.

Cooperation can be referred to the degree of interparental respect and the sense of working on the same team. Cooperative co-parents, whether divorced or married, can put their own emotional issues and problems aside for the sake of parenting their children. Regardless of family composition, *interparental conflict* has been consistently linked to negative child outcomes (Cummings et al., 2004). Conflict specific to co-parenting practices might interfere with child outcomes as well as parent-child interaction and family functioning (Macie & Stolberg, 2003; Roberson et al., 2011). *Triangulation* can be referred as parents' tendency to bring their children into their conflict by violating intergenerational boundaries (Minuchin, 1974). When children are triangulated between their parents they are more likely to experience internalizing and externalizing problems (Feinberg, 2003).

Related to the dimensions, different types of co-parenting relationship are defined and studied in the literature. These are cooperative, conflictual, and disengaged co-parenting. Co-parents with *a cooperative co-parenting style* are characterized with being high in cooperation and communication and low in conflict and triangulation (Amato et al., 2011; Maccoby, 1992). Cooperative co-parenting decreases the risks of children becoming triangulated between their parents (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). *Conflictual or conflicted co-parenting style* is characterized as co-parenting behaviors that are high on conflict dimension and low in cooperation (Garber, 2004; Kelly, 2004). Conflictual co-parents engage in constant arguments utilizing destructive communication patterns such as hostile and detached communication (Katz & Woodin, 2002). *Disengaged co-parenting style* refers to co-parenting relationship in which one of the co-parents emotionally disengage himself/herself. The communication and involvement between co-parents are minimized.

The quality of the co-parenting relationship is usually described by the degree of supportive, constructive, and cooperative exchanges between co-parents that are related to childrearing and management of parenting practices (Bonach, 2005). High quality co-parenting is characterized with low conflict and high mutual support between parents (Ahrons, 1981; Bonach, 2005). Many studies explored possible factors that might affect experienced conflict and cooperation between co-parents; hence the quality of co-parenting relationship.

As systems perspective predicts, the findings of these studies support the notion of interdependence between different individual and family level variables. The

co-parenting relationship is found to be affected from a number of individual level factors such as age (Schum & Stolberg, 2007; Stright & Bales, 2003), gender (Dush et al., 2011; McHale, 1995; Schum & Stolberg, 2007), personality traits (Baum, 2003; 2004). Dyadic level factors such as marital quality and communication styles also contribute (Kolak & Volling, 2007; Kruk, 1993). Additionally, external structural factors such as financial status (Dozier, Sollie, & Stack, 1993; Marriott, 2011), education level, (Dozier et al., 1993; Stright & Bales, 2003) and divorce process must also be accounted for (Baum, 2004; Madden-Derdich et al., 1999).

The factors included in the studies to explore predictors of co-parenting differ depending on the family structure and composition. For instance, researchers included marital satisfaction and dyadic adjustment while exploring co-parenting in intact families (McHale, 1997; Stright & Bales, 2003). Factors such as legal processes, custody decisions, and residential status were emphasized among divorced families (Baum, 2004; Madden-Derdich et al., 1999).

Studies in the literature consistently supported the finding that cooperative co-parenting is the most beneficial co-parenting type for child outcomes (Macie & Stolberg, 2003; Marriott, 2011; McHale, 1995). Mutual support and involvement of both parents in childrearing practices help children to feel more secure and stable (Macie & Stolberg, 2003). Conversely, conflictual and disengaged co-parenting have adverse effects on children's psychological adjustment (Roberson et al., 2011). In addition, co-parental conflict may involve triangulation, which in turn might result in internalizing and/or externalizing behaviors in children (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011). The co-parenting relationship affects and is affected by other dyadic relationships in the family such as parent-child and spousal. It has been shown that cooperative co-parenting relationship was positively correlated with positive parent-child and father-child relationships in both intact and divorced families (Macie & Stolberg, 2003; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998). In contrast, conflictual co-parenting style tended to result in problems in parent-child dyads (Amato et al., 2011). The triangulation aspect of conflictual co-parenting style tended to be detrimental to parent-child relationship as the child feel s/he needs to choose one parent over another (Buehler et al., 1998; Mullett & Stolberg, 1999).

The findings of literature on co-parenting relationships support the complex nature of family dynamics. There are many different factors that can affect quality of co-parenting relationship; and furthermore, co-parenting can affect individuals and dyadic relationships in many different ways. Interdependent nature of family systems emphasizes the importance of co-parenting relationship by showing its effects on multiple levels of family functioning. Different family compositions and their unique elements complicate the nature of co-parenting relationship even further. More studies are needed to explore co-parenting dynamic in different family structures. In addition, there is an immediate need to explore co-parenting in diverse families and different cultural contexts.

As can be seen from the findings of the existing literature, co-parenting relationship holds a very important place in family systems. It acts as an executive subsystem in which co-parents manage parenting and family interactions that involve children (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin, 1985). It is an integral subsystem in family system, regardless of family structure and composition (Feinberg, 2003). Although this is the premise, co-parenting relationship is conceptualized differently in different family structures. Conceptualizations have started with co-parenting among divorced families (Ahrons, 1981) and expanded to two-parent married families (Feinberg, 2003; McHale, 1997) and stepfamilies (Ahrons, 2007). There are some conceptual frameworks for never-married families; however non-traditional family structures such as families with adoption, same-sex co-parenting, and grandparents as co-parents require more careful examination and conceptualization.