



Helping Families to Build Supportive Coparenting Relationships

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The Thrive Initiative



 **Positive Parenting Practices**

 **Parent and Child Stress Management**

 **Promoting Healthy Lifestyles**



Universal Programming



Thrive Initiative Program Areas			
Universal Parenting Programs			
Take Root	Sprout	Grow	Branch Out
Infants (0 to 6 months)	Preschool (3 to 5 years)	Grades K-5 (5 to 10 years)	Grades 6-12 (10 to 18 years)
Infants (6 to 12 months)			
Infants and Toddlers (1 to 3 years)			
Parenting Programs for High-Needs Populations			
Take Root Home Visitation		Grow Safe and Secure	
Infants and Toddlers (0 to 3 years)		Grades K-5 (5 to 10 years)	





Today's Presenter

Dr. Regina Kuersten-Hogan
Assumption University

Learning Objectives (Part 1)

- Describe characteristics of supportive and unsupportive coparenting relationships.
- Identify common coparenting challenges experienced by military families during transitions across the deployment cycle.

What is Coparenting?

- Related to parenting qualities and the couple relationship, but not the same.
- Coordination of care for children that occurs between two or more caregivers (McHale, 1997).
- Teamwork between caregivers.
- Ranges from supportive, harmonious coparenting alliances to antagonistic and undermining coparenting relationships (McHale & Lindahl, 2011).



Who are Coparents?

- Coparenting teams consist of two or more adults who share the responsibility of caring for a child/children.
- Often children's biological or adoptive parents, but can include other caregivers (aunts, uncles, siblings, grandparents, step-parents etc.).
- *Who in children's lives takes care of their physical & emotional needs, makes decisions for them?* (McHale & Irace, 2011)
- Coparents do NOT need to:
 - be married
 - romantically involved
 - live in the same household
 - have biological/ adoptive relationship with child.

Why is Coparenting Important?



- **Supportive coparenting alliances foster:**
 - greater social competence, secure attachment relationships, and fewer internalizing and externalizing behavior problems in children (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010).
 - better academic functioning and fewer attentional problems in school (Dopkins Stright & Neitzel, 2003).
 - development of conscience (Groenendyk & Volling, 2007).
- **Coparenting conflict** during infancy predicts later aggressive behavior in preschool (McHale & Rasmussen, 1998).
- **Lack of coparental cooperation** during toddler years associated with preschool boys' inhibition (Belsky et al., 1996).
- **Unsupportive coparenting** during adolescence predicts greater risk-taking behaviors and greater antisocial behaviors (Baril et al., 2007; Feinberg et al., 2007).



Supportive Coparenting

(McHale et al., 2000)

- Active *cooperation* in setting limits and reinforcing rules for children.
- *Consistent parenting approach* - shows children that coparents agree and back each other up (present united front).
- Encourage children's relationship with the other caregiver.
- Show *warmth* in interactions with partner and children.
- *Respect* each other's parenting decisions and approaches, even if they do not always agree.
- *High level of involvement* in children's care and nurturance (*quality* not quantity of involvement is important).

Unsupportive Coparenting

(McHale et al., 2000)

- Active *competition* between coparents to take charge over child-related decisions.
- Try to lure child's attention and love away from other caregiver.
- Align with child against other parent.
- Caregivers try to follow their own agendas, ignore/contradict other caregiver's parenting intentions (*do not present united front* – confuses children).
- Disagreements about rules for children's behavior or *open critique of* other caregiver in front of children.
- *Low warmth* with one another and with children.
- *Low involvement* in children's care/ discrepancy in involvement between caregivers.

Childrearing Agreement

(Feinberg, 2003)

- Part of coparenting relationship (coordination of *caregivers' ideas about parenting*).
- Extent to which coparents agree on expectations for children's behaviors, approaches to discipline, standards of safety, etc.
- **Supportive coparents:**
 - tend to agree on their general approach to child rearing.
 - share similar goals and values for their roles as parents.
 - are aware of and able to discuss differences in their attitudes and expectations.
 - plan for how to address differences as they come up during coparenting interactions.

Division of Caregiving Responsibilities



(Pape Cowan & Cowan, 1988)

- Part of coparenting relationship (how caregiving roles/tasks divided between caregivers and how well each carries out their responsibilities).
- **Supportive coparents:**
 - openly discuss division of caregiving roles.
 - mutually decide on who should carry out which role/responsibility.
 - understand that revisions and flexibility are required to adapt to children's ever-changing caregiving needs
 - feel sense of ownership/responsibility for their roles.
 - are ready to step in when their partner needs help, circumstances change and roles need to be shifted.
 - ask partner for help when needed.



Recap: Supportive Coparents



- Highly cooperative, present united front, show warmth to partner and children, and highly involved in care for children.
- Generally agree on childrearing values and approaches, but are aware of differences and discuss how to handle them.
- Divide childcare responsibilities to meet family's needs, follow-through on their caregiving roles, and flexibly adapt plans when needed.



Coparenting in Military Families



(DeVoe et al., 2020)

- Limited research to date.
- Unique coparenting experiences and challenges of military families.
- Experience *frequent transitions in family structure and coparenting relationship* across deployment phases:



- Pre-Deployment
- Deployment
- Post-Deployment-Reintegration



Coparenting Challenges Across Deployment Cycle



(DeVoe et al., 2020)

- **Coparenting Stress During Transitions:**
 - Shifts in caregiving responsibilities and roles.
 - Giving up control/ assuming primary control over parenting decisions.
 - Maintaining/ facilitating parent-child relationships during family separation.
 - Communication difficulties between coparents.
- **Pre-Deployment – Preparing for Transition:**
 - Coparents' stress depends on:
 - timing of notification – pressure to spend quality family time.
 - training schedule (multiple good-byes).
 - child's developmental level – preparing child for upcoming separation from parent.



Coparenting Challenges Across Deployment Cycle



(DeVoe et al., 2020)

- **Throughout Deployment – Adapting to Changes in Coparenting:**
 - **Home Front Parent**
 - Overwhelmed with additional responsibilities.
 - Caregiving role changes.
 - Difficulties meeting deployed parent’s needs for connection with child.
 - **Deployed Parent**
 - Difficulties giving up control to coparent at home.
 - May move to “outsider role” in parenting decisions.
 - Believe that coparenting is impossible while deployed.
 - Disengage from child.
 - Avoid/ limit contact with family to cope with emotions or minimize distractions from family life.



Coparenting Challenges Across Deployment Cycle



(DeVoe et al., 2020)

- **Post-Deployment/ Reentry – Renegotiation of Coparenting:**
 - **Home Front Parent**
 - Reassigning parenting responsibilities to coparenting partner (relief, reluctance).
 - Relinquishing control, sharing again with coparent (ambivalent, hesitant, worried).
 - **Deployed Parent**
 - Transition from military to family *communication style*.
 - Out of touch with family routines and children's developmental growth- difficulties resuming coparenting role.
 - Concerns about being respected in coparenting role.
 - Difficulties setting limits with children.
 - Reluctance to get actively involved in caregiving role.

➔ ***Home front parent has central role in facilitating coparenting throughout deployment cycle***



Need for Coparenting Interventions in Military Families



- Currently *no intervention programs* specifically targeting coparenting challenges in military families throughout deployment cycle.
- Additional stressors experienced by military families during deployment cycle place them *at risk for coparenting problems* that affect parental and child well-being.
- Military families are diverse group – important to assess each family’s unique coparenting challenges.
- Boosting coparenting relationship prior to deployment is likely to protect families from some of the challenges during deployment and reentry.



Learning Objectives (Part 2)



- Assess quality of caregivers' coparenting relationship, differences in parenting philosophies, and satisfaction with division of caregiving roles.
- Prepare Coparenting Plan to foster supportive coparenting in military families.
- Discuss problem-solving strategies to meet coparenting challenges throughout deployment cycle.
- Facilitate caregivers' communication throughout the deployment cycle.
- List additional stressors to address in order to improve the coparenting relationship.



Assessment of Coparenting Quality



- Parents are often unaware of their coparenting behaviors
clinician observations of whole family interactions helpful!
- **Observation of Coparenting Dynamics in Family (McHale et al., 2000):**
 - **Active Competition** – Does one/ both caregivers try to control interaction, draw child’s attention away from partner?
 - **Active Cooperation** – Do partners join in each other’s suggestions, mirror their directives, facilitate child’s attention to partner?
 - **Verbal Sparring** – Do caregivers make joking/ sarcastic remarks about partner’s parenting? Directly critique their parenting? Any signs of hostility/antagonism between caregivers in front of children?
 - Caregivers’ **Level of Investment with Children**- How engaged with/ responsive is each? Discrepancies between partners?
 - **Coparental Warmth** – Are partners expressing warmth towards one another? Are they connected to each other (smiles, touches, warm tone of voice, complimenting the other)?
 - **Parent-Child Warmth** – Is each parent expressing warmth towards the child (hugs, kisses, touches, tone of voice, smiles etc.)?



Assessment of Coparenting Quality



- **Interview each Caregiver about Coparenting Relationship: (Based on Coparenting Interview, McHale, 1997):**
 - Exact questions depend on child(ren)'s age.
 - **Caregiver's coparenting perception of:**
 - Own behaviors
 - Partner's behaviors
 - Integrity-promoting, positive behaviors
 - Disparagement, reprimanding, conflictual, competitive behaviors.
 - **Explore caregivers' perceptions of coparenting relationship across different family contexts:**
 - Whole family together
 - Alone with their child
 - Alone with coparenting partner



Sample Coparenting Questions



(McHale, 1997)

- **When you are together with your child and partner, how often...**
 - Do you make a complimentary or affirming remark about your partner to your child? (integrity-promotion)
 - Jump in to be the first to interact with your child without giving your partner a chance to do so? (competition)
 - Contradict or undermine your partner's parenting decision? (conflict)
- **When you are alone with your child, how often...**
 - Do you make a positive comment to your child about your absent partner? (integrity-promotion)
 - Do you make a negative/ critical comment to your child about your absent partner? (disparagement)
- **When you are alone with your partner, how often...**
 - Do you discuss how the two of you are parenting your child?
 - Do you actively seek your partner's opinion on a child-related issue? (integrity-promotion)



Assessment of Parenting Philosophies



- ***Common source of coparenting conflict:*** Caregivers' disagreement on how to raise children.
- Supportive coparenting relationships are based on *shared parenting philosophy* and discussions about *how to handle disagreements* (Feinberg, 2003).
- Assess coparents' *awareness* of their own and partner's parenting ideas and childrearing philosophies.
- Identify areas of *shared attitudes*, expectations and goals for children, and areas of *disagreements*.
- Parenting and coparenting ideas often based on *family-of-origin experiences* (Kuersten-Hogan, 2017) – ask about these too!



Assessment of Satisfaction with Childcare Division



- ***Common source of coparenting conflict:*** Inequitable distribution of childcare and household responsibilities (sense of unfairness, feeling overburdened/ overwhelmed).
- Each *caregiver's satisfaction* with division of responsibilities matters most, not their actual division (Pape Cowan & Cowan, 1988).
- Assess coparents' discussions (if any) of division of childcare responsibilities and identify sources of disagreement/ dissatisfaction:
 - How did coparents divide childcare tasks?
 - How did they arrive at this particular division?
 - How do childcare duties actually performed compare to their expectations and preferences?
 - How satisfied are they with their allocated roles and childcare duties?
 - What steps, if any, have they attempted to resolve conflicts around childcare responsibilities?



Coparenting Plan for Military Families



Goals:

- Increase coparents' awareness of disagreements in childrearing philosophies and plan how to handle them.
- Create equitable/ workable plan for shared childcare responsibilities prior to and during deployment.
- Increase supportive, collaborative coparenting and integrity—promoting remarks between coparents, if possible prior to pre-deployment phase (when stress is reduced).
- Increase direct, open, respectful communication between coparents (focus conversation on beliefs about coparenting during deployment, feelings about separation, continued relationship building with children).
- Develop communication plan for deployment – how/when to connect.
- Increase understanding of common coparenting challenges before, throughout, and after deployment; increase problem-solving skills.
- Increase family's support system (within family, with other military families, mental health professionals).



Plan *Prior* to Deployment

Facilitate discussions & plan how to handle disagreements between caregivers' views on:



- Parenting goals
- Rule for children's behaviors
- Consequences for misbehavior/ noncompliance
- Level of supervision for children
- Children's responsibilities/chores
- Children's privileges/ rights
- Protection for children/ safety issues
- Level of structure vs. freedom for children
- Involvement in children's education
- Attitudes re: children's emotional expressions and own opinions

Plan *Prior* to Deployment



Create plan for childcare responsibilities prior to deployment:

- **List all childcare-related duties and discuss partners' contribution:**
 - What childcare duties need to be performed (daily, weekly, as needed)?
 - Determine: Who should do what? How often? Who is best at it? Who prefers specific tasks?
- **Resolve conflicts in division of responsibilities:**
 - Division needs to be acceptable to both caregivers.
 - Satisfaction with division more important than actual division.
 - Different arrangements work for different families
- **Flexibility in division of roles/ childcare responsibilities is important!**
 - Times of stress during transitions (such as deployment cycle) require flexibility of partners (Feinberg, 2003).
 - Rigid adherence to a predetermined plan is unlikely to be helpful.
 - Continuous evaluation and adaptation of plan is necessary.

➔ **Pre-deployment plan needs to be re-evaluated and adapted during reentry.**



Plan *Prior* to Deployment



Create plan for childcare responsibilities during deployment:

- How to/ can they coparent while apart?
- What level of coparenting support would home front parent like?
- What level of support would deployed parent envision they can provide? – this plan may change once deployed!
- How will **parenting decisions** be handled?
 - What decisions require discussion?
 - Which do not?
 - What are partners' preferences and concerns around this?
- **Division or childcare responsibilities- the “temporary plan”:**
 - Good team work: One takes over when the other cannot
 - Identify additional caregivers who can help home front parent



Plan *Prior* to Deployment



Teach caregivers to *engage in supportive* coparenting behaviors:

- **Provide psychoeducation on supportive vs. unsupportive coparenting.**
- **Increase coparental cooperation:**
 - Repeat/ elaborate on what partner directed child to do.
 - Actively include partner in activity with child.
 - Help child to focus attention on partner.
 - Work together to get child to do something.
 - Share toys/ materials with partner when playing together with child.
- **Increase warmth** towards children and partner:
 - Kind words, warm tone of voice, physical affection.
- **Increase consistent involvement/ engagement** with children/ in family activities:
 - Give undivided attention to family members (no cell phones/ TV on/ other distractions).
 - Observe and track what members are doing.
 - Ask questions and suggest activities.
 - Consistently respond to questions or concerns by family members.



Plan *Prior* to Deployment



Teach caregivers to *avoid unsupportive* coparenting behaviors:

- **Help caregivers to identify when they engage in unsupportive coparenting**
 - Video-taping family interactions for review/ analysis with parents helpful – point out their supportive coparenting and their undermining, critical, or unsupportive coparenting.
- **Avoid coparental competition**
- **Avoid undermining, contradicting, critiquing partner's parenting**
- **Increase general parenting skills & reduce stress:**
 - Behavior management training with both parents is helpful in reducing parenting stress (DeVoe et al., 2017), though not sufficient to create supportive coparenting relationships.
 - Stressed parents who lack parenting skills are unlikely to be successful coparents!



Plan *Prior* to Deployment



Create Communication Plan for Deployment:

- Effective communication important to help family cope with transition (Yablonsky et al., 2015).
- Determine *communication needs* each coparent envisions during deployment (if situation allows): – plan may change once deployed!
 - How often?
 - What format?
 - Between whom?
 - What should be shared?
 - What should not be shared?
- Emphasize direct and respectful expressions of feelings.
- Discuss each caregiver's *coping style during stressful situations* (avoidance, distraction, talking about/ unloading on partner) – likely to influence communication needs and skills during deployment.



Plan *During* Deployment



Evaluate: How is the Coparenting Plan working?

- How is home front parent coping with increased childcare responsibilities?
- Is home front parent satisfied with level of coparenting support from deployed partner?
- Is deployed parent satisfied with level of coparenting support from home front parent?
- What adjustments need to/ could be made to improve mutual support and shared decision making around parenting?
- Are additional caregivers/ helpers needed to reduce caregiving burden on home front parent?
- Are communication needs met? If not, how can the communication plan be altered to better meet needs?



Plan *During* Deployment



Maintain supportive coparenting relationship:

- **Home Front Parent:**
 - **Help deployed parent to maintain relationship with child** (DeVoe et al., 2020):
 - Display photos of deployed parent.
 - Create age-appropriate reminders (calendars marking return, maps marking location).
 - Create workable plan for communication between child and deployed parent.
 - Make affirmative, positive remarks to child about deployed parent.
 - **Keep deployed parent updated** on child's accomplishments and problems.
 - **Cooperate on parenting decisions** – ask for partner's input on parenting decisions.
- **Deployed Parent:**
 - **Provide emotional support for home front parent** – empathize with stressful parenting situations.
 - **Cooperate on parenting decisions** – trust partner's parenting decisions; provide input on partner's parenting questions.



Plan for Reintegration



Return to coparenting together – the new “normal”

➡ Review, evaluate, adapt pre-deployment coparenting plan:

- Identify caregivers’ expectations and concerns about *readiness to resume coparenting roles*.
- Recognize that reentry is a long-term process.
- **Facilitate opportunities for mutual enjoyment** with children
- **Discuss:**
 - What have we learned from coparenting apart?
 - How did this experience make us a better team?
- Recognizing new strengths and weakness in coparenting relationship.
- **Express appreciation of partner’s contribution** to and sacrifices for family during deployment (Yablonsky et al., 2015; DeVoe et al., 2020).
- **Get needed professional help** to treat trauma, depression, substance use, and other mental health problems that may emerge.
- **Home Front Parent:**
 - Beware of “gatekeeping” behaviors (Olsavsky et al., 2020) that keep returning parent away from childcare tasks and engagement with children.
 - Catch deployed parent up on missed developments in children and changes in parenting during deployment (DeVoe et al., 2020).



Additional Coparenting Stressors to Address



- **Parenting Stress:**
 - Interrelated with lower coparenting quality (Fagan & Lee, 2014).
 - Parenting child with emotional and behavioral problems associated with lower coparenting competence (May et al., 2017).
- **Parents' Mental Health Problems:**
 - Parental depression associated with greater coparenting conflict (Solmeyer & Feinberg, 2011).
 - Post-traumatic stress in servicemen returning from war can decrease tolerance to normative child distress and demands (Walsh et al., 2014)
 - likely to impact coparenting
- **Romantic/ Marital Relationship Conflict:**
 - Associated with unsupportive coparenting (Curran et al., 2009)
- **Additional stressors (financial, legal, medical, housing, etc.)**



Are Interventions Effective?



- **Improving quality of parenting (DeVoe et al., 2017):**
 - Effective in military families post-deployment in reducing parenting stress and distress from mental health concerns
- **Increasing family resilience (Feinberg et al., 2020):**
 - Effective in increasing mothers' perceptions of coparenting support from partners in military families.
- **Strategies suggested by STRoNG Military Families (Walsh et al., 2014):**
 - Psychoeducation re: effective parenting strategies
 - Teach parental self-care skills to lower parenting stress and mental health problems
 - Connect military families for mutual support
 - Connect families to community resources
 - Support parent-child interactions



Take-Home Messages



- Increase supportive, collaborative coparenting behaviors and integrity—promoting remarks between coparents, if possible *prior to pre-deployment phase* (when stress is lower).
- Increase coparents’ awareness of disagreements in childrearing philosophies and plan for how to handle differences in parenting.
- Create equitable plan for childcare responsibilities shared between both caregivers, and when one caregiver is deployed.
- Foster direct, open, respectful communication between coparents (focus on beliefs about coparenting during deployment, feelings about separation, how to maintain relationships with children, how/ when to communicate during deployment).
- Increase understanding of common coparenting challenges before, throughout, and after deployment – transitions may disrupt coparenting relationship!
- Increase family’s support system (between partners, with extended family, with other military families, mental health professionals).
- Address any additional risk factors (couple conflict, parents’ mental health problems, children’s emotional and behavioral problems) that increase stress and pose risks for families.



Questions





coparenting

Coordinated. Cooperative. United.



thrive



For more information about the Coparenting supplemental module, visit:

<https://thrive.psu.edu/modules/supplemental/>

In this module, you will learn how to do the following:



Explore your and your coparent's parenting ideas, values, and attitudes.



Manage differences in coparenting expectations and goals.



Discuss expectations of and preferences for childcare responsibilities with your coparent.



Construct a parenting coordination plan to support a consistent and united front approach to caregiving.



Foster supportive coparenting behaviors such as actively cooperating, investing in caring for/attending to children, showing warmth, and displaying mutual respect.



Develop a coparenting plan that addresses potential obstacles and encourages teamwork.



Discover other tips to improve coparenting unity, such as promoting parents' mental health, decreasing family stress, and providing emotional support.



Upcoming event:

Stepfamilies

<https://bit.ly/49Wu1rZ>

- Tuesday, May 21st 12 pm ET



Douglas M. Teti, Ph.D.



stepfamilies

Blending Bonds, Building Harmony

Coming Soon!

This supplemental parent-education module is designed to provide support for parents and caregivers who are part of a blended family system.

Just as individual family members have distinctive traits, all stepfamilies have their own composition and unique characteristics. When the stepfamily forms, children may face a variety of challenges that can impact their adjustment to the family and overall well-being. However, there are strategies parents can use to help themselves and their children continue to thrive as the stepfamily unit develops and grows.

This module can help parents and caregivers tackle the unique concerns and challenges that can arise as they raise their children in a stepfamily. It offers strategies and insights tailored to the types of parenting roles and coparenting dynamics that commonly occur within stepfamilies. In addition, four fictional blended families are featured throughout the module to demonstrate how parents and caregivers can apply these strategies in real-life situations to support their own stepfamilies.



This supplemental module builds on information and methods that are discussed in the four universal Thrive parenting programs – *Take Root, Sprout, Grow, Branch Out* – so it is recommended that you participate in the age-appropriate universal Thrive parenting program prior to using this supplemental module.



In this module, you will learn how to do the following:



Understand stepfamily dynamics, and identify some of the potential challenges the individuals in your family may face as you blend your family.



Explore factors that may contribute to children's adjustments to the dynamics within their stepfamily, and learn how parents can provide support to their children.



Identify parenting roles and responsibilities, and determine when it may be appropriate for stepparents to assume certain responsibilities, such as discipline.



Understand the importance of adopting an authoritative parenting style, and learn how to use specific components of authoritative parenting.



Incorporate strategies, before and after the stepfamily forms, to help ease the transition for everyone involved.



Examine the dimensions of coparenting and the impact competent coparenting can have on the stepfamily.



Foster healthy relationships within the stepfamily through open communication practices.

For more information about this supplemental module, visit:

<https://thrive.psu.edu/modules/supplemental>



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Clearinghouse Office Hours



- Monthly collaborative learning sessions.
- Real-time guidance and resources from researchers and implementation specialists.
- Open to anyone who supports military families
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Monday, March 25th
@ 3pm ET



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Thank you for
participating!



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