

# Associations between Depressive Symptoms, Coparenting, and Behavior Outcomes in Children with Previously Incarcerated Fathers

Alexandria S. Pech<sup>1</sup>, Melissa A. Curran<sup>1</sup>, Mary Smith<sup>1</sup>, Katie Paschall<sup>2</sup> & Melissa A. Barnett<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The University of Arizona, <sup>2</sup>The University of Texas at Austin Population Research Center

## Background & Hypotheses

- Five million children have experienced a residential parent go to jail or prison (Murphey & Cooper, 2015). Parental incarceration can be as deleterious to children's health as other adverse family experiences (e.g., parental death, divorce, witness of parental abuse, drug problems; Turney, 2014).
- We examined young children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors in the context of post-paternal incarceration by focusing on both **risks** (i.e., parental depressive symptoms), **protective factors** (i.e., coparenting alliance), and their **combined impact**.
- H1:** Higher maternal or paternal depressive symptoms will be associated with more behavior problems in children.
- H2:** Higher maternal or paternal coparenting alliances will be associated with fewer behavior problems in children.
- H3:** Maternal or paternal coparenting alliances will alter the association between parental depressive symptoms and children's behavior problems.

## Methods

### Participants

- Data were from Building Strong Families, a longitudinal study of mostly unmarried couples expecting their first child together.
- Data collection began near the child's birth, 15- and 36-months later.
- Subsample of previously incarcerated fathers (N= 426) and biological mothers of their 3-yr-old children.
- Most fathers identified as Black (68%). Fathers were on average 27 years old (SD= 6.4).

### Measures

- Parental depressive symptoms: 12-item version of CES-D ( $\alpha = .87$  fathers and mothers).
- Coparenting alliance: Parenting Alliance (10 items;  $\alpha = .97$  mothers;  $\alpha = .95$  fathers).
- Behavior Problems Index: Children's externalizing ( $\alpha = .74$ ) and internalizing ( $\alpha = .81$ ) behaviors were averaged across parents' responses to create a couple average score.
- Controls: Child age, child sex, parents' income, education, employment status, fathers' race/ethnicity, intervention or control group; parental depressive symptoms at 15 months.

## Results

**H1:** Partial support: Higher paternal depressive symptoms were associated with higher externalizing behavioral problems in children. Unexpectedly, higher maternal depressive symptoms were associated with lower externalizing behavioral problems.

**H2:** Not supported.

**H3:** Partial support (see figure): When mothers reported lower coparenting alliance, negative associations between fathers' depressive symptoms and children's internalizing behavioral problems were higher.

## Conclusions and Implications

Possible targets for intervention:

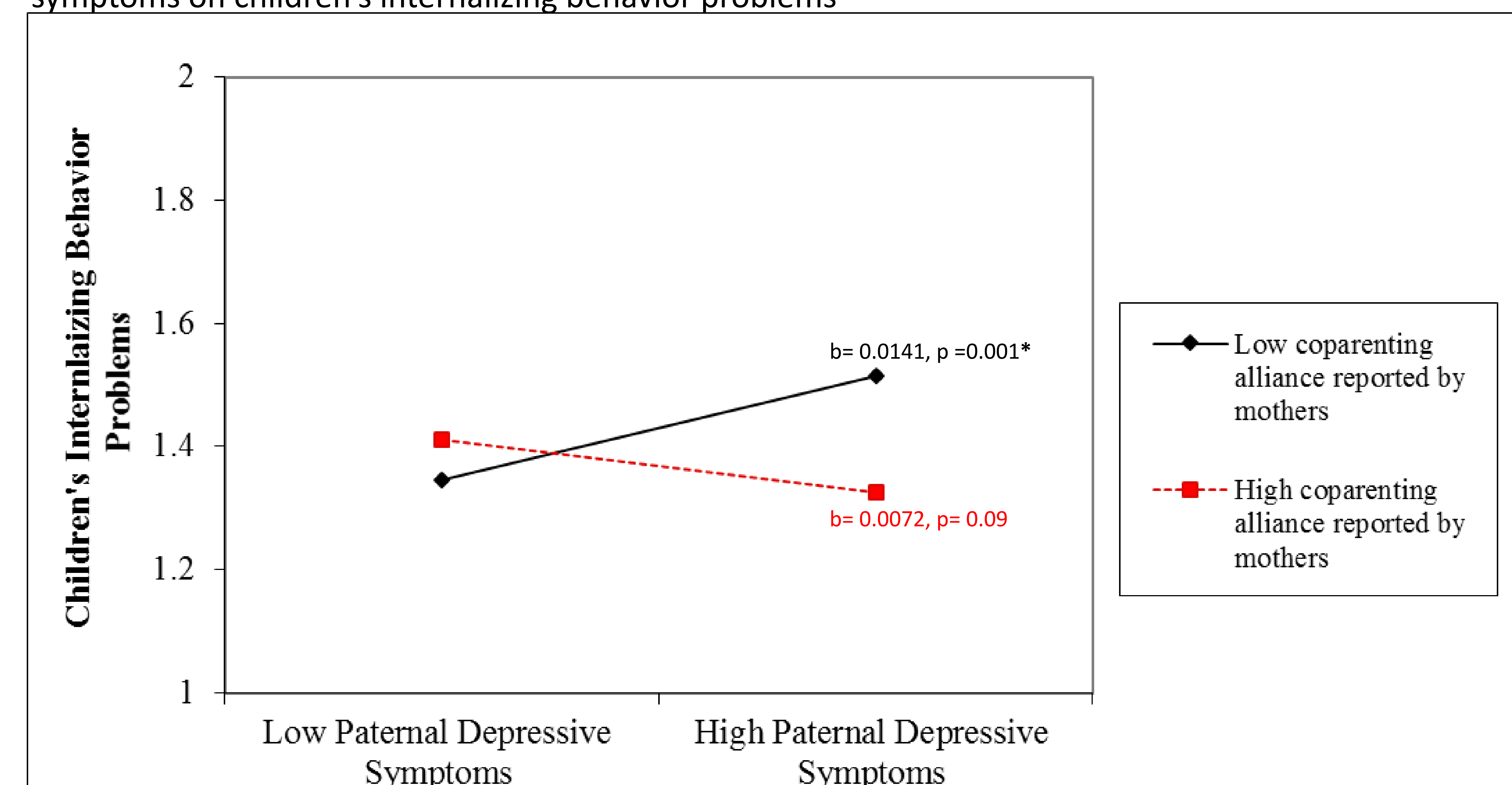
- Focus on all members of the family (i.e., father, mother, child outcomes) vs. focus on only one member of the family system
- Fathers' depressive symptoms
- Mothers' coparenting as a moderator vs. IV

Table 1. Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Children's Internalizing and Externalizing Behaviors (N = 426)

	Internalizing Behaviors	Externalizing Behaviors
From final step of models:	$\beta$	$\beta$
<b>Controls</b>		
Fathers' employment status	-.12*	-.04
Maternal depressive symptoms at 15 months	.27***	.21***
<b>Conditional Effects</b>		
Maternal depressive symptoms at 36 months	-.07	-.11**
Paternal depressive symptoms at 36 months	.06	.14**
<b>Interaction Terms</b>		
Mom coparenting at 36 months X Dad depressive symptoms at 36 months	-.18**	-.06

Note. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*  $p < .05$ .

Figure 1. Interaction between coparenting alliance reported by mothers and paternal depressive symptoms on children's internalizing behavior problems



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