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Keeping Your Coparent in Mind: A Longitudinal Investigation of Mindfulness in the Family System

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Abstract

Recent studies have increasingly focused on mindfulness as it relates to interpersonal processes. In particular, cross-sectional research has shown that parents' dispositional mindfulness is associated with increased mindful parenting and coparenting, as well as improved coparenting relationship quality. The current study replicates and extends such work, representing the first longitudinal investigation of mindful coparenting. A sample of 449 parents (60% mothers) of children between the ages of 3 and 17 years were recruited online through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) as part of a larger study on the assessment of parenting. Parents reported on their dispositional mindfulness, mindful coparenting, and coparenting relationship quality at three time points across an 8-month period. Results from a path analysis model using maximum likelihood estimation suggested that higher levels of parental mindfulness at baseline were related to higher levels of mindful coparenting at 4 months, which, in turn, were related to higher quality coparenting relationship at 8 months. Support for this model was found for both mothers and fathers and across all examined child age groups (i.e., early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence), highlighting the robust nature of these effects. Overall, findings suggest that increasing mindfulness at an individual level can promote meaningful change within a family system, specifically through improvements in coparenting and parent-child interactions.

Keywords: mindfulness; mindful coparenting; coparenting

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Mindfulness is the intentional, non-judgmental awareness of one's moment-by-moment experiences (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). According to Kabat-Zinn (2003), a sense of well-being can be achieved when one recognizes that a current experience will pass and accepts the corresponding feelings and thoughts within that moment. An impressive body of knowledge documents various positive outcomes that are associated with higher levels of mindfulness, including better coping and emotion regulation abilities (e.g., Brown et al., 2007; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Keng et al., 2011). Further, mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to reduce anxiety, depression, and stress (e.g., Khoury et al., 2013). In fact, mindfulness-based interventions have comparable effectiveness to well-established evidence-based treatments, demonstrating superior effects to no treatment and specific active controls (see Goldberg et al., 2018 for a systematic review and meta-analysis).

Moving beyond the individual-level, mindfulness is also believed to impact interpersonal interactions, including those that occur within the family system. Specifically, Duncan and colleagues (2009) outline a model of mindful parenting that includes five dimensions along which parents can act in a mindful manner (i.e., listening, nonjudgmental acceptance, emotional awareness, self-regulation, compassion). For example, parents can remain nonjudgmental and aware of their emotional experiences as well as those of their child. By doing so, parents are more likely to make conscious decisions on how to manage difficult interactions instead of engaging in reactive behaviors that could undermine parenting practices (Duncan et al., 2009). In a similar vein, Dumas' (2005) mindfulness-based model of parent training outlines how parental mindfulness can shape parenting behaviors, reduce automaticity, and promote healthy parent-child interactions. According to his model, parents with higher levels of mindfulness will be less likely to follow automatic—and potentially maladaptive—parenting practices,

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referred to as “automatized transactional procedures” (e.g., habitual interactions), and instead respond with more awareness and sensitivity in their interactions with children (Dumas, 2005).

The view that mindfulness at the individual level may influence interpersonal interactions aligns with family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1985). Family systems theory suggests that individual family members fundamentally influence one another, as they are all part of a “complex, integrated whole” (Minuchin, 1988, p. 8). Accordingly, it is conceivable that mindfulness at the individual level could exert an effect on dyadic relationships that occur within the system. For example, coparenting, which describes the joint caretaking of a child (Feinberg, 2003), could be influenced by each parent’s dispositional mindfulness. The concept of mindful coparenting arose from this idea and involves parents maintaining present-moment awareness during coparenting interactions, demonstrating nonjudgmental receptivity to the articulation of thoughts and emotions by their coparent, and regulating reactivity to their coparent’s behavior (Parent et al., 2016). Evaluating this concept from a family systems lens, an individual’s dispositional mindfulness could impact the coparenting dynamic by promoting less negative reactivity and more mindful interactions, thus enhancing the quality of the relationship. In fact, a budding area of research has begun to yield support for this theoretical model.

In the broader literature base, mindfulness has been associated with marital satisfaction amongst married couples (Burpee & Langer, 2005; Wachs & Cordova, 2007) and relationship quality amongst cohabiting couples (Parent et al., 2014). Intervention work has shed light upon underlying processes by documenting that mindfulness-based interventions improve couples’ levels of marital satisfaction, autonomy, relatedness, and closeness (Carson et al., 2004; 2007). Specifically, the positive associations between mindfulness and marital outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, autonomy) appear to be at least partially mediated by “partners’ sense that they were participating in exciting self-expanding activities together” (Carson et al., 2007, p. 517). To date, few studies have explored the influence of mindful coparenting on

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coparenting relationship quality; however, what does exist provides similar support, with a significant positive cross-sectional association being observed between the two constructs (Parent et al., 2016; Parent et al., 2014). Further, the studies described above provide a viable foundation on which this research can continue to be built, as previous findings support the idea that mindfulness can have significant implications for relationship functioning and quality.

Despite the benefits of increasing mindfulness in the family system, there is evidence that mothers and fathers differ with regard to both their practice of mindful parenting and their receptivity to mindfulness-based interventions. Specifically, mothers appear to exhibit higher levels of mindful parenting compared to fathers (Gouveia et al., 2016; Medeiros et al., 2016). Research has shown that women, on average, tend to be more empathetic than men, a difference that is not solely explained by cultural influences (Christov-Moore et al., 2014) and that might contribute to why women are more likely to engage in mindful parenting practices with their children. Further, Moreira & Canavarro (2015) found that fathers report higher levels of attachment-related avoidance as well as lower abilities to recognize and respond to the needs of their children, potentially adding to this explanation. However, when fathers are able to engage in mindful parenting, they are less likely to exhibit non-supportive practices of emotion socialization (e.g., dismissal, criticism, punishment) with their children—an association found to be, in fact, stronger for fathers than for mothers over time (McKee et al., 2018). Given these findings, it is not surprising that research has observed more pronounced treatment effects for fathers participating in mindfulness-based interventions compared to mothers (Coatsworth et al., 2015). Considering the previously highlighted relationship between mindful parenting and improved parenting behaviors, these gender differences have important implications for youth outcomes and overall family functioning, thus warranting further exploration.

Although the cited work has advanced our knowledge in important ways, these studies include

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several limitations. For example, few investigations to date have considered multiple variables within the same study; a majority of research so far has examined mindfulness as it relates to one domain of functioning (e.g., parenting behaviors, coparent relationship quality). In accordance with family systems theory, it is recognized that individual-level processes are related to various interpersonal processes. As such, it is important to consider mindfulness as it relates to *multiple* family-level variables and processes. Further, many of the prior studies used cross-sectional designs, thereby limiting the degree to which causal inferences can be made. The present study therefore sought to fill existing knowledge gaps by replicating a prior cross-sectional study by Parent and colleagues (2016). Specifically, the current study examined the prospective association between parental dispositional mindfulness, mindful coparenting, and coparenting relationship quality across three waves. The primary aim of this study was to test this conceptual model, thereby shedding light onto underlying mechanisms. We hypothesized that our results would replicate findings of the cross-sectional investigation, in that parent dispositional mindfulness would be indirectly related to coparenting relationship quality through mindful coparenting. A secondary aim of the current study was to examine moderators of the conceptual model to ascertain for whom the associations are strongest. Given that prior research suggests significant gender differences in mindful parenting, parent gender was included in this study as a potential moderator and we hypothesized larger mediation effects for fathers compared to mothers. Similarly, and based on research indicating that child age shapes parenting behaviors (e.g., Locke & Prinz, 2002), child age was also tested as a potential moderator. Previous cross-sectional results (Parent et al., 2016) support the impact of mindful coparenting on coparenting relationship quality being similar across child developmental stages. Thus, we hypothesized that child age would not moderate the indirect effect of parent mindfulness on coparenting relationship quality.

Method

Overview

All study procedures were approved by a university Institutional Review Board. Parents were recruited online through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) as part of a larger study on the assessment of parenting. MTurk is currently the dominant crowdsourcing application in the social sciences (Chandler et al., 2014), and prior research has demonstrated that data obtained via crowdsourcing methods are as reliable as those obtained through more traditional data collection methods for adult populations (e.g., Buhrmester et al., 2011; Casler et al., 2013; Paolacci & Chandler, 2014; Shapiro et al., 2013) as well as specifically for youth psychopathology research (Parent et al., 2017; Schleider & Weisz, 2015). On MTurk, parents responded to a study on parenting that was listed separately for three age groups to ensure roughly equal sample sizes in these three age ranges: early childhood (3 to 7 years old), middle childhood (8 to 12 years old), and adolescence (13 to 17 years old).

Participants

Data from 449 parents of children between the ages of 3 and 17 were included in the current study. Overall, parents were on average 36.40 years old ($SD = 7.91$) and approximately 60% were mothers. Participants reported the following racial/ethnic identities: White (80.2%), Black (9.8%), Hispanic (4.9%), Asian, (3.8), and Other (1.3%). Parents' education level ranged from not completing high school (0.4%), obtaining a H.S. degree or GED (12.7%), attending some college (29.4%), earning a college degree (41.6%), and attending at least some graduate school (15.8%). A majority of parents were employed full-time (62.1%) with 18% reporting employment at a part-time level, and 19.8% reporting unemployment. Reported family income was 19.8% for less than \$30,000 per year, 28.3% between \$30,000 and \$50,000, 18.7% between \$50,000 and \$70,000, 18.9% between \$70,000 and \$100,000, and 14.3% at least \$100,000. Parent marital status was organized into three categories with 6.3% reporting being single, 73.9% being married, and 19.8% being in a cohabiting relationship. Approximately half of

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all youth were boys (55.5%). Overall retention, as defined by completing an assessment at any wave after the 2-week follow-up, was 86.4%.

Procedure

Parents consented online prior to beginning the survey and were compensated \$4.00, \$2.00, \$4.00, \$4.00, and \$8.00 for completing the baseline, two-week, 4-month, 8-month, and 12-month surveys, respectively. To participate, respondents needed to be residents of the United States and have an approval rating of 95% on MTurk. A computer algorithm randomly selected one child for families who had multiple children in the target age range. All measures asked about parenting specific to the selected child and his/her behavior. Ten attention check items were placed throughout the survey. Participants were not included in the study if they had more than one incorrect response to these ten items in order to ensure that responses were not random or automated. Further, demographic questions were repeated across waves and participants were excluded if they provided more than one inconsistent response to the demographic questions. Data analyzed in the present study were from the baseline (Wave 1), 4-month (Wave 2), and 8-month (Wave 3) assessments.

Measures

Demographic information. Parents responded to demographic questions about themselves (e.g., parental age, race/ethnicity, education), their families (e.g., annual household income, marital status), and the target child's demographic information (e.g., gender, age).

Parent dispositional mindfulness. The 15-item Mindfulness Attention and Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003) assesses global and daily experiences of mindfulness, including respondents' "...awareness of and attention to actions, interpersonal communication, thoughts, emotions, and physical states" (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 825). Parents indicated how frequently they had the experience described in each statement (e.g., "I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the

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present”). Statements were scored on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *almost always*; 6 = *almost never*). Higher scores reflected higher levels of mindfulness. The MAAS has demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .80-.90$) as well as convergent and discriminant validity (Brown & Ryan, 2003). The omega coefficient for the current study was .92.

Mindful coparenting. The Interpersonal Mindfulness in Coparenting Scale (IMCS; Parent et al., 2016) consists of 8 items reflecting parents’ ability to maintain: (1) awareness and present-centered attention during coparenting interactions (e.g., reverse-coded: “I rush through activities with my coparent without being really attentive to him/her”); (2) non-judgmental receptivity to their coparent’s articulation of thoughts and displays of emotion (e.g., “I listen carefully to my coparent’s ideas, even when I disagree with them”); and (3) the ability to regulate their reactivity to their coparent’s behavior (e.g., “When I’m upset with my coparent, I notice how I am feeling before I take action”). Parents responded to each item using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never true*; 5 = *always true*) with higher scores reflecting higher levels of mindful coparenting. The IMCS was adapted from the Interpersonal Mindfulness in Parenting Scale (Duncan, 2007) for use in the original study, which demonstrated the scale’s acceptable fit and reliability (Parent et al., 2016). Reliability for the IMCS in the current study was .82.

Coparenting relationship quality. Parents completed the brief version of the Coparenting Relationship Scale (CRS; Feinberg et al., 2012). The CRS assesses coparenting relationship quality by examining five domains of coparenting: agreement, support/undermining, conflict in front of the child, division of labor, and closeness (Feinberg, 2003). The brief CRS is an excellent approximation of the full CRS and has demonstrated good reliability (Feinberg et al., 2012). Items in the brief CRS were adjusted to refer to a coparent (rather than partner) to allow the measure to be applicable to parents who did not identify their romantic partner as their primary coparent. The omega coefficient for the current study was .93.

Data Analytic Plan

A longitudinal path analysis was conducted to evaluate prospective associations in a single mediator model in which mindful coparenting was observed as a possible mediator of the relationship between parent dispositional mindfulness and coparenting relationship quality. Both the mediator and outcome variable were accounted for at baseline to strengthen interpretations from the analyses, which were conducted using Mplus 8.0 software (Muthen & Muthen, 2010). Any potential violations to the assumptions of regression were addressed using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors and bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals based on 5,000 bootstrapped samples. The fit statistics employed to evaluate model fit included the following: Chi-square, χ^2 : $p > .05$ excellent, Comparative Fit Index (CFI; $> .90$ acceptable, $> .95$ excellent), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR; $< .08$ acceptable, $< .05$ excellent), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; $< .08$ acceptable, $< .05$ excellent) (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The mechanism of missingness was treated as missing at random, and full information maximum likelihood estimation techniques were used for inclusion of all available data. Covariates of parent marital status (0 = single, 1 = two-parent) and family income were included in all models. Additionally, a multiple-group path analysis was conducted to determine the moderating effect of youth developmental stage and parent gender on the indirect association between parent dispositional mindfulness and coparenting relationship quality. Testing for cross-group invariance involved comparing a model with paths constrained to be invariant across groups to one where paths were freely estimated for each group. The use of the MLR estimator required the use of a scaled chi-square difference test (Satorra, 2000) for making comparisons among nested models.

Results

Standardized estimates for the observed direct and indirect pathways are provided in Table 1. All pathways accounted for baseline levels of the variables. Overall, the proposed model demonstrated

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excellent fit, $\chi^2(2, N = 449) = 3.83$, RMSEA = .045, 95% CI [.000, .114], CFI = .99, SRMR = .017. As shown in Figure 1, findings indicate that higher levels of parent dispositional mindfulness at Wave 1 predicted higher levels of mindfulness in coparenting at Wave 2, $\beta = .152$, 95% CI [.066, .239], $p = .004$, which predicted higher levels of coparenting relationship quality at Wave 3, $\beta = .213$, 95% CI [.109, .316], $p = .001$. The indirect effect of parent dispositional mindfulness on coparenting relationship quality through mindful coparenting was significant, $\beta = .032$, 95% CI [.008, .057], $p = .03$. The ratio of the indirect effect to the total effect indicated that 30% of the total effect of parent dispositional mindfulness on coparenting relationship quality was mediated by mindful coparenting. The direct effect of parent dispositional mindfulness on coparenting relationship quality was not found to be significant, $\beta = .073$, 95% CI [-.019, .165], $p = .19$. In addition, of the two covariates included in the model, only family income at Wave 1 was significantly related to coparenting relationship quality at Wave 3 (see Table 1).

Lastly, multiple-group path models were tested to determine whether differences in the structural parameters between groups were statistically significant. Contrary to hypotheses, all models that fixed a, b, and c' mediation paths to be equal across mothers and fathers resulted in equivalent model fit to a freely estimated across groups model, $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 4.65$, $p = .199$. Similarly, though consistent with hypotheses, all models that fixed pathways to be equal across parents of children at different developmental stages (i.e., early childhood, ages 3 to 8; middle childhood, ages 8 to 12; adolescence, ages 13 to 17) resulted in equivalent model fit, $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 6.02$, $p = .421$. Overall, all prospective associations were equivalent for mothers and fathers as well as parents of children across all three developmental stages. Thus, no support for moderation was found.

Discussion

Mindfulness is associated with various positive outcomes, such as increased well-being (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003; Keng et al., 2011) and relationship satisfaction between married (Burpee & Langer,

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2005; Wachs & Cordova, 2007) and cohabiting couples (Parent et al., 2014), as well as more desirable parenting behaviors (e.g., Benn et al., 2012; Coatsworth et al., 2010; Coatsworth et al., 2015). Despite this support, little is known about the mechanisms influencing these relationships. In a previous cross-sectional study, Parent et al. (2016) found that parent dispositional mindfulness was indirectly related to coparenting relationship quality through mindful coparenting. To expand on this knowledge, the current study examined the prospective association between these constructs across an 8-month period. By doing so, the study aimed to shed light onto underlying mechanisms and identify moderators to ascertain for whom the associations were strongest.

Overall, results largely replicated the prior cross-sectional study. Results supported our first hypothesis in that higher levels of parent dispositional mindfulness at Wave 1 were related to higher levels of mindful coparenting at Wave 2, which, in turn, were related to a higher quality coparenting relationship at Wave 3. There was no direct relationship between parental mindfulness and coparenting relationship quality, contradicting cross-sectional research in this area (Parent et al., 2014). Instead, findings suggest that this relationship may be better explained through the influence of other processes, such as mindful coparenting. Although fewer examinations of mindful coparenting exist, the broader literature on mindfulness may assist in conceptualizing how mindful coparenting can improve relationship quality. For example, mindfulness has been highlighted as a helpful tool in reducing parenting stress, which has been shown to increase relationship satisfaction among couples (Williams & Parra, 2019). Since mindful coparenting is characterized by improved emotional regulation and receptivity between partners, it is plausible that these benefits would lead to similar reductions in parenting stress and higher perceptions of relationship quality. Indeed, research shows that supportive coparenting significantly predicts coparenting relationship satisfaction (Durtschi et al., 2016); however, more research is needed that is specific to the construct of *mindful* coparenting, as important distinctions can be made between the

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two constructs. As such, future research is warranted to further our understanding of how mindfulness – both at an individual level and dyadic level – lends to improved functioning and relationship quality in the family system.

A secondary aim was to examine moderators to ascertain whether the association between constructs within the conceptual model differed as a function of parent gender and/or child age. The current model found support across all three samples of youth (i.e., early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence), indicating that longitudinal associations did not differ as a consequence of the unique challenges faced by parents of children at different developmental stages. In the case of parent gender, our results were not in line with our hypotheses, nor with prior empirical investigations. Research evaluating mindfulness-based interventions has observed gender differences in treatment uptake and efficacy. Gouveia and colleagues (2016) found that mothers were more likely to have already adopted or been utilizing a mindful parenting style and suggested that this may indicate that fathers have more to benefit from mindfulness-based programs. This is further supported by observations of stronger intervention effects for fathers (e.g., Coatsworth et al., 2015). Differences have also been observed in the relationship between mindful parenting and decreases in parents' use of unsupportive emotion socialization practices (e.g., minimization or punitive reactions), with a stronger association observed for fathers as compared to mothers (McKee et al., 2018). In this respect, it is possible that gender differences in mindfulness may be more specific to emotion-related aspects of parenting and coparenting.

Results from the present study should be interpreted in the context of its strengths and limitations. Of note was the study's prospective data collection which allowed for an examination of underlying processes. An examination of mechanisms helps inform prevention and intervention efforts. Specifically, the indirect association between parent dispositional mindfulness and coparenting relationship quality through mindful coparenting suggests that parental mindfulness could represent a promising way to affect

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positive change within the family system. Further, the present study included a large sample, thereby allowing for an examination of moderating variables. Relatedly, the consistency of our results across parent gender and child age speaks to the robust nature of the examined effects and highlights the potential benefits that parental mindfulness could have for child and adolescent wellbeing. It is important to note, however, that findings from our study should be interpreted with caution as our sample was comprised of parents who largely identified as white and who had completed at least some college education. Data were also collected via a single informant and are thus susceptible to common method biases. In addition, although our findings serve as important contributions to the nascent study of mindful coparenting, we are – as a consequence - limited in our ability to bolster these findings through a comparison of those from previous investigations.

Despite the above limitations, findings of the current study have important clinical implications for working with couples and families. Most notably, our findings suggest that increasing mindfulness at an individual level can promote meaningful change within a family system, specifically through improvements in coparenting interactions and relationship quality. This presents another way in which clinicians can work with couples to improve outcomes, especially those in which one partner is less willing or able to engage in formal therapy than the other. Further, previous research has shown that by increasing parental mindfulness, one can improve child behavioral health outcomes (e.g., Bögels et al., 2013; Coatsworth et al., 2018). Given that children's behavioral difficulties can contribute to parenting stress (e.g., Williams & Parra, 2019) and to coparents' relationship satisfaction (e.g., Mark & Pike, 2017), the clinical significance of the current findings is two-fold.

Overall, our findings highlight mindfulness as an influential mechanism in promoting positive coparenting interactions. As increasing attention is paid to mindfulness in the parent-child subsystem, it is important for researchers to also examine mindfulness in the context of other relationships within the

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family. In particular, the concept of mindful coparenting represents an area of study with promising implications for future work examining and treating families. These findings are especially important given evidence that supports a spillover effect across subsystems, highlighting the way in which even individual members can impact the overall functioning of a family system. In fact, there is ample empirical support for the significant roles that both parenting practices and coparent relationship quality play in children's development. By furthering our understanding of the underlying mechanisms that contribute to improvements in these areas, we are better able to identify promising targets for intervention.

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Table 1.

Complete Effects from the Final Model

	Standardized Estimate	95% CI	<i>p</i>
Direct Effects			
W1 Parental Mindfulness – W2 Mindful Coparenting (a)	.152	.066, .239	.004
W1 Parental Mindfulness – W3 Coparenting Quality (c')	.073	-.019, .165	.19
W2 Mindful Coparenting – W3 Coparenting Quality (b)	.213	.109, .316	.001
Covariates			
W1 Family Income – W2 Mindful Coparenting	-.027	-.090, .036	.47
W1 Family Income – W3 Coparenting Quality	.094	.027, .161	.02
W1 Marital Status – W2 Mindful Coparenting	-.055	-.121, .010	.16
W1 Marital Status – W3 Coparenting Quality	.053	-.022, .129	.24
Stability Paths			
W1 Mindful Coparenting – W2 Mindful Coparenting	.654	.581, .728	<.001
W1 Coparenting Quality – W3 Coparenting Quality	.556	.468, .643	<.001
W1 Covariances			
Mindfulness with Mindful Coparenting	.487	.427, .547	<.001
Mindfulness with Coparenting Quality	.359	.291, .427	<.001
Mindfulness with Income	-.029	-.109, .052	.56
Mindfulness with Marital Status	.097	.015, .179	.05
Mindful Coparenting with Coparenting Quality	.523	.467, .580	<.001
Mindful Coparenting with Income	.047	-.030, .124	.31
Mindful Coparenting with Marital Status	.119	.038, .201	.01
Coparenting Quality with Income	.165	.092, .238	<.001
Coparenting Quality with Marital Status	.193	.111, .274	<.001

Note. W1 = Baseline, W2 = 4-month follow-up, W3 = 8-month follow-up

Figure 1.

Final Model

Note. Only primary hypothesized paths are depicted