

## Expectant parents' play with doll predicts later parenting behavior

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Having expectant parents role-play interacting with an infant using a doll can help predict which couples may be headed for co-parenting conflicts when their baby arrives.

Researchers videotaped 182 [couples](#) in the third trimester of pregnancy while they played with a doll that they were told represented the baby they were about to have. Researchers analyzed how the couple interacted with each other around the doll.

The couples were videotaped again nine months after the birth of their baby to see how they actually played together.

Results showed that couples acted similarly toward each other with the real baby as they did with the doll – in both positive and negative ways.

"The extent to which couples support or undermine each other's interactions with the doll predicts their co-parenting behavior a year later," said Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, co-author of the study and professor of human sciences at The Ohio State University.

"We saw the same kinds of behaviors between [parents](#) when they were interacting with their baby that we saw a year earlier with the doll."

Co-parenting refers to how parents work together as they raise a child.

The study appears in the August 2014 issue of the *Journal of Family*

*Psychology.*

Schoppe-Sullivan said this particular procedure using dolls with expectant parents has rarely if ever been used in the United States (it was developed by researchers in Switzerland).

"When people first hear about it, many think it is strange. They think it is silly to have adults play with dolls," she said.

"But couples in our study responded positively to the activity. They were able to take it seriously and it really does predict how they will co-parent."

Lead author Lauren Altenburger, a doctoral student in human sciences at Ohio State, said the results have important implications.

"Co-parenting has consistently been linked to child outcomes. When parents fight and undermine each other's parenting, the child suffers," she said.

"If we can identify couples who may have problems with their co-parenting before their baby is even born, we may be able to intervene."

The couples in the study were participating in the [New Parents Project](#), a long-term study co-led by Schoppe-Sullivan that is investigating how dual-earner couples adjust to becoming parents for the first time.

Researchers visited the couples' homes during the third trimester of the woman's pregnancy. The doll they used was custom-made and consisted of a footed infant sleeper sewn shut with 7-8 pounds of rice inside to make its weight similar to a newborn. A doll's head made of green fabric was sewn onto the footed sleeper.

In the videotaped procedure, an assistant playing the role of a nurse presented the "baby" to each couple. The 5-minute session was separated into four parts: Each parent-to-be played with the doll alone, then they played with it together, then they discussed their experience.

Trained researchers then viewed the videotape to look for how much the couple cooperated, their levels of playfulness, levels of family warmth, the structure of the play and how much each parent-to-be showed intuitive parenting behaviors.

Nine months after the birth of the baby, a different team of research assistants watched videotapes of the parents playing with their infant and rated the quality of the couples' co-parenting behavior.

It was striking how similarly the parents acted toward the doll and their baby, Schoppe-Sullivan said.

"Some of the couples were very positive, saying nice things to each other about their parenting. With the doll they might say 'You're going to be such a great dad.' After the birth of the baby, their talk would be very similar: 'You're such a natural.'"

But others were not so kind to their partner, whether they were playing with the doll or the baby. They might say things like "You're not going to hold the real baby like that, are you?" They were critical of each other, she said.

The researchers emphasized that the co-parenting relationship examined in this study is not the same as the couple's romantic relationship with each other.

As part of the study, each couple also completed measures of their couple relationship, which asked each person, among other items, to rate

their overall happiness in their relationship. Research assistants also observed each couple during the prenatal at-home visit and rated the quality of their interactions with each other but without the doll.

Results showed that how the couples "co-parented" the doll contributed unique information to understanding how well they would co-parent their real infant.

"The co-parenting and couple relationships are not the same," Schoppe-Sullivan said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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