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### Coparenting and child anxiety

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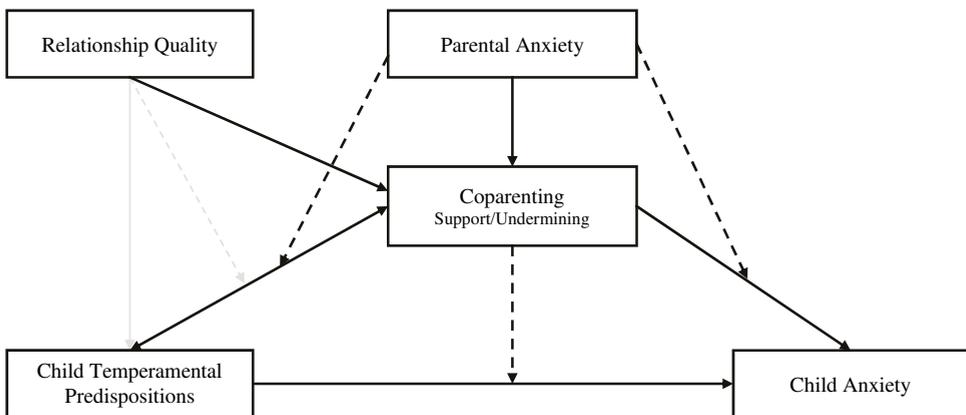
# CHAPTER

General Discussion

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The aim of this thesis was to empirically test the bidirectional associations between coparenting and family member anxiety and the differential role of fathers and mothers in these associations, as was proposed in a model by Majdandžić and colleagues (2012). The results suggest that (precursors of) child anxiety and coparenting are correlated (*Chapters 2 – 5*). Coparenting was associated with parental anxiety (*Chapter 2*) and parental anxiety moderated the association between coparenting and child anxiety (*Chapter 3*). In addition, parents' relationship satisfaction is a strong predictor of later coparenting quality (but not of later child anxiety; *Chapter 5*), and the associations between coparenting and (precursors of) child anxiety differ for fathers and mothers (*Chapter 4 and Chapter 5*). See Figure 1 for a graphical representation of the tested associations.



**Figure 1.** Graphical representation of the associations tested in this thesis. Dashed lines represent moderation effects. Lines in black are the effects for which evidence was found in this thesis; lines in grey are the effects for which no evidence was found in this thesis. Differences in the associations between supportive and undermining coparenting and between mothers and fathers are addressed in the text.

## Associations between coparenting and (precursors of) child anxiety

Several scholars have pointed to coparenting as a central aspect in family processes (Minuchin, 1974; Weissman & Cohen, 1985). Specifically, it has been hypothesized that coparenting plays an important role in association with family member anxiety, as coparenting is a construct that ties the whole family together and can explain the transmission of anxiety from parents to their children (Majdandžić et al., 2012). In this thesis, we investigated the concurrent associations between coparenting and children's temperamental predispositions to anxiety (*Chapter 2 and Chapter 5*) and the longitudinal paths from infants' fearful temperament and negative affectivity to later coparenting, and from coparenting to later child anxiety (*Chapter 2, Chapter 3 and Chapter 4*).

### ***Concurrent associations***

With regard to the concurrent associations between coparenting and precursors of child anxiety, we found that children's higher parent-reported fearful temperament and negative affectivity related to higher self-reported undermining coparenting, and to fathers' but not mothers' higher levels of supportive coparenting when children were 4 months to 4.5 years old (*Chapter 2* and *Chapter 5*; this result is discussed more elaborately in the section about 'Differences between mothers and fathers'). Thus, coparenting and child fearful temperament are intertwined and covary with each other over time. Given that child fearful temperament and negative affectivity predict later levels of child anxiety, these findings give support to the hypothesis that coparenting plays a role in the development of child anxiety. It should be noted that both child temperament and undermining coparenting were stable over time (*Chapter 2*); hence, the discontinuation of either of these behaviors could discontinue the negative spiral between highly temperamentally fearful children and highly undermining parents. As infants are difficult to target in intervention, it seems intuitive to target the coparenting relationship in interventions. Studies have indeed demonstrated that targeting the coparenting relationship before birth and just after birth results in better child outcomes (Feinberg & Kan, 2008; Feinberg, Jones, Kan, & Goslin, 2010).

### ***Predictive associations***

When using questionnaire data, we found no evidence for predictive associations between parent-reported child fearful temperament and self-reported undermining coparenting when children were 4 months to 2.5 years old (*Chapter 2*). However, when using observations of infants' fearful temperament at 1 year and global observations of coparenting in the family while parents were claying an animal with their 2.5-year-old, we found that higher levels of fearful temperament predicted lower levels of later observed undermining coparenting, but only if one or both parents in the family were highly anxious (*Chapter 3*). Also, if one or both parents were highly anxious, higher levels of observed undermining coparenting at 2.5 years predicted higher levels of later parent-reported child anxiety when children were 4.5 years old, whereas higher levels of observed undermining coparenting predicted lower levels of later parent-reported child anxiety if parents were low-anxious (*Chapter 3*; this result will be discussed further on, in the section 'Parents' readiness to become (co) parents: parental anxiety and relationship satisfaction'). In this study, we also investigated the indirect effect of fearful temperament through coparenting on child anxiety; however, we did not find evidence for this hypothesized mediation effect (*Chapter 3*). Taken together, these results imply that predictive associations do exist between child fearful temperament, undermining coparenting, and child anxiety, and these results lend support to the role of coparenting in the development of child anxiety. However, we did not find evidence for the role of coparenting as a mechanism of change, as we did not find that anxiety development occurs through coparenting. Also, unexpectedly, we did not find associations between

supportive coparenting and child anxiety. It might be the case that supportive coparenting is unrelated to parent-reports of child anxiety and to observations of child fearful temperament, as previous research did not investigate child anxiety and mostly investigated parent-reports of child temperamental characteristics.

Next to global observations of coparenting, we observed coparenting at the micro-level while parents were dressing up their 1-year-old infant and investigated parents' simultaneous coparenting (i.e., both parents being supportive or undermining at the same time) and parents' divergent coparenting (i.e., one parent being supportive or undermining while the other parent was neutral; *Chapter 4*). We found that when parents perceived their 4-month-old child as high on negative affectivity, parents displayed higher levels of divergent coparenting at 1 year; for simultaneous behaviors, we did not find meaningful relations with negative affectivity. Thus, parents were more often supportive individually when the child was rated as having a less negative temperament. These results suggest that parents may be more confident in acting individually when they have a less negative infant, which could enforce turn-taking patterns between parents. We did not find direct associations between simultaneous coparenting at 1 year and child anxiety at 2.5 years, but we did find that in families in which it occurred often that father was supportive while mother was neutral, parents reported their children to be less anxious (*Chapter 4*; this result is discussed more elaborately in the section about 'Differences between mothers and fathers'). Thus, also here we found predictive associations from infant temperamental characteristics to later coparenting and from coparenting to later child anxiety, again supporting the notion that coparenting does play a role in the development of anxiety (Majdandžić et al., 2012).

To conclude, we found evidence for the concurrent associations between parents' perceptions of child negative affectivity and child fearful temperament for mothers' and fathers' self-reported undermining coparenting and for fathers' supportive coparenting (*Chapter 2* and *Chapter 5*). Also, we found longitudinal associations from observed and parent-reported child fearful temperament to observed undermining and divergent coparenting, and from observed undermining and observed divergent coparenting (*Chapter 3* and *Chapter 4*) to child anxiety. These results are in line with the hypothesis that coparenting relates to temperamental precursors of child anxiety and to child anxiety itself (Majdandžić et al., 2012). However, our results do not lend clear support to the idea that these associations are bidirectional: even though we found predictive associations from child temperament to coparenting and from coparenting to child anxiety, we did not find predictive associations from coparenting to child temperament or from child anxiety to undermining. Thus, it remains unclear whether the bidirectional associations between coparenting and child anxiety, as they were proposed by Majdandžić and colleagues (2012), exist. However, our results do lend support to the hypothesis that infants' temperament influences their parents' coparenting and also that this coparenting later on influences their children's anxiety symptoms. This implies that the interaction between coparenting and

child characteristics is indeed transactional and that practitioners need to take the dynamics between child characteristics and coparenting into account when treating child anxiety

### **Parents' readiness to become (co)parents: parental anxiety and relationship satisfaction**

Even though we found that children who have a negative or a fearful temperament also have parents who display less optimal coparenting behaviors, several factors can moderate the relationship between coparenting and child temperament or anxiety. Crockenberg and Leerkes (2003) have proposed a transactional model in which the infants' temperamental characteristics interact with parents' readiness to become parents. The authors argue that some parents are more ready to become parents than others, for example because of a poor economic situation, parental psychopathology (such as anxiety), or a poor relationship quality before child birth. Those couples who are poorly equipped to become parents may drift apart when their newborn is highly negative in its temperament, because the problems that the couple already had make it difficult for the parents to work together collaboratively in this difficult situation. On the other hand, couples who are ready to become parents may pull together when their newborn infant is highly negative in its temperament, because they approach the challenge together and are capable of supporting each other throughout this challenge. Another explanation could be that too much adversity in a family (e.g., parental psychopathology and having a highly negative infant) may put too much pressure on the family and this may disable the parents to construct a functional and supportive coparenting relationship. Crockenberg and Leerkes (2003) emphasized that especially predictors measured before child birth can provide important information on the moderating role of couple function in the association between child negative temperament and coparenting behavior, because these prenatal measures are not yet influenced by the child's temperament. In this thesis, I investigated prenatal parental anxiety disorder severity and prenatal parental relationship satisfaction as moderators in the associations between child temperament, coparenting, and child anxiety.

Parents who reported higher levels of anxiety disorder severity in a clinical interview before child birth reported that they were more inclined to display undermining coparenting behaviors when children were 4 to 30 months old (*Chapter 2*). Parents' anxiety was unrelated to their supportive coparenting. Of note, when mothers were anxious, fathers reported to be less supportive (*Chapter 2*). On the other hand, parental anxiety was unrelated to observations of coparenting in a claying task when children were 2.5 years old (*Chapter 3*). The associations between parental anxiety (disorder) and coparenting were unexplored: thus far, only one previous study specifically related parental anxiety to lower levels of coparenting quality (Delvecchio, Sciandra, Finos, Mazzeschi, & DiRiso, 2015). Our results give partial support to the hypothesis that anxious parents are more undermining than non-anxious parents, as was put forward by Majdandžić and colleagues (2012). These

authors proposed several mechanisms through which anxiety may relate to coparenting, and suggested that parents may either become more supportive due to their own insecurities, or more undermining due to a lack of trust in their partner or the need to (over)protect their child (see *Chapter 1*). Our results are in line with the hypothesis that anxious coparents are prone to increased levels of stress, which can induce childrearing disagreements and, thereby, higher levels of undermining coparenting (Majdandžić et al., 2012). Majdandžić and colleagues (2012) also stressed the role of the non-anxious partner in the effects parental anxiety may have on their coparenting. Our results suggest that it may be the case that especially fathers become less supportive when they have an anxious partner. This suggests that couples in which the mother is anxious, both partners are more undermining and the father is less supportive of the mother. This may result in children's exposure to a family environment in which the father does not support the parental role of his anxious partner – thereby possibly making the anxious partner more insecure and anxious, which can result in even more undermining coparenting and more anxiety in the parent. In the current research, we did not investigate how the additive role of low support and high undermining affects the child's development, but it seems likely that these kinds of family interactions lead to a more unsafe family environment, thereby inducing anxiety in the child (Majdandžić et al., 2012).

We investigated the moderating role of parental anxiety disorder severity both in the associations from child fearful temperament to coparenting, and from coparenting to child anxiety. We found that parental anxiety disorder severity did not moderate the concurrent associations between parent-reports of child fearful temperament and self-reported supportive and undermining coparenting when children were 4 months old to 2.5 years old (*Chapter 2*). However, we did find that when observers rated a 12-month-old infant as highly anxious, and one or both parents were highly anxious, parents were observed to be less undermining when the child was 2.5 years old (*Chapter 3*). This result suggests that, contrary to our expectations, anxious parents may be highly sensitive to their children's high levels of fear, and thereby provide a less undermining coparenting environment. This result is not in line with the finding that self-reported undermining is higher for highly anxious parents. It may be the case that observed and self-reported coparenting attend to different family processes, which are differently affected by parental anxiety; however, this needs to be studied in the future. For now, we can only conclude that it remains unclear how parental anxiety relates to undermining coparenting.

Next to the moderating role of parental anxiety in the association from child fearful temperament to coparenting, we also investigated the moderating role of parental anxiety in the association from coparenting to later child anxiety (*Chapter 3*). Here, we found that undermining coparenting only related to higher levels of parent-reported child anxiety when fathers or mothers had higher levels of anxiety disorder severity, whereas undermining coparenting related to less later child anxiety when fathers or mothers had lower scores

on anxiety disorder severity (*Chapter 3*). These results suggest that, as expected, family member anxiety and coparenting are intertwined: anxious family members' undermining coparenting appears to influence the anxiety of the child in an adverse way, while the same coparenting behavior is a protective factor in families in which parents are not anxious. We hypothesized that parents' undermining coparenting serves as a stressor in the family environment; if this stressor is paired with the second stressor of having an anxious parent, children are more anxious, whereas if undermining coparenting is not paired with the stressor of having an anxious parent, children become less anxious. The finding that children of anxious parents become more anxious when their parents are undermining is in line with the reasoning of Majdandžić et al. (2012), who suggested that an unsafe family environment can provoke anxiety in the child. The finding that children become less anxious over time in families with low levels of parental anxiety disorder severity who display high levels of undermining seems to be in line with the hypothesis that undermining coparenting can toughen up children (Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1996; Park, Belsky, Putnam, & Crnic, 1997). Our results add to this theory that it may be the case that only undermining coparenting of non-anxious parents serves this beneficial outcome in children initially at risk for developing anxiety, whereas anxious parents' undermining coparenting does have detrimental effects on children's anxiety development, in line with the majority of empirical findings (Cook et al., 2009; Lindsey et al., 2005; McHale & Rasmussen, 1998).

The second factor that we studied as an indicator of parents' readiness to become coparents was prenatal relationship satisfaction. We found that parents who had a high prenatal relationship satisfaction displayed more supportive coparenting and less undermining coparenting (*Chapter 5*). Thus, parents who had a high relationship satisfaction before they had their child appear to be more equipped to become supportive coparents. However, we did not find the hypothesized effect that parents with a lower relationship satisfaction become more undermining if they have a highly negative child (*Chapter 5*), even though others have found this effect (McHale, Kazali, Rotman, Talbot, Carleton, & Lieberston, 2004; Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2007). Possibly, relationship satisfaction only serves as a moderator when children are very young, because the association between coparenting and child temperament becomes more stable as the child gets older. It may also be the case that several methodological differences underlie the differences in findings, as discussed in Chapter 5.

The finding that supportive and undermining coparenting relate to child temperament even after controlling for romantic relationship satisfaction (*Chapter 5*) demonstrates that the unique part of the variation in couple functioning that consists of undermining and supportive coparenting (and not the common variation of coparenting with relationship satisfaction) is accounted for by child temperament. This suggests that parents' perceptions of child fearful and negative temperament are especially important in relation to their coparenting, more so than in relation to their relationship satisfaction. This gives support

to the idea that it is indeed coparenting, rather than romantic couple functioning, which is interconnected with child anxiety (Majdandžić et al., 2012). Additional support for this idea is provided by the lack of correlations between relationship satisfaction and child negative affectivity (*Chapter 5*). Coparenting may be an especially proximal determinant of child anxiety, because it captures the dynamics within the triadic family system (i.e., including father, mother and child) rather than only the dynamics within the romantic and dyadic couple relationship.

To conclude, we found that parents' anxiety disorder severity before the birth of the child as well as parents' relationship satisfaction before the birth of the child are important predictors of later coparenting behaviors. Parental anxiety predicted higher levels of undermining coparenting (*Chapter 2*) and high relationship satisfaction predicted higher levels of supportive coparenting and lower levels of undermining coparenting (*Chapter 5*). However, we did not find the hypothesized vulnerability of parents with high anxiety or low levels of relationship satisfaction to the negative temperament of their infant based on the transactional model of Crockenberg and Leerkes (2003). It appears that the adverse effects of parental anxiety and relationship satisfaction on coparenting apply to all families, not only to those families who have a highly negative infant.

### **Differences between mothers and fathers in the associations between coparenting and (precursors of) child anxiety**

Fathers' parenting behaviors have been hypothesized to be especially important in the development of child anxiety (Bögels & Phares, 2008). This is based on the idea that fathers tend to focus on preparing children to interact with the world outside the family (Paquette, 2004), which may be especially important in the development of child anxiety (Bögels & Perotti, 2011). Mothers are hypothesized to focus more on the internal and caring world inside the family (Paquette, 2004). Due to these possible specializations of fathers and mothers, it has been hypothesized that fathers and mothers play a different role in the development of child anxiety (Bögels & Phares, 2008; Bögels & Perotti, 2011). Based on these theories, it may also be the case that fathers' and mothers' coparenting relates differently to child anxiety, and also that fathers' and mothers' own anxiety relates differently to their coparenting (Majdandžić et al., 2012; see also *Chapter 1*). We found that the associations between mothers' and fathers' anxiety disorder severity and coparenting did not differ (*Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*). Thus, our results do not lend support to the hypothesis that fathers' anxiety is more strongly related to his coparenting than mothers' anxiety is related to her coparenting, or that anxious fathers' and mothers' coparenting relates differently to the child's anxiety. In this study, anxiety related in the same way to coparenting and associations with child fearful temperament and anxiety for both fathers and mothers.

Even though we did not find differences in the role of fathers' and mothers' anxiety disorder severity, we did find differences in the associations between fathers' versus mothers' coparenting and child temperament. Only for fathers, higher levels of negative affectivity in the child related to higher levels of self-reported supportive coparenting, whereas negative affectivity was unrelated to mothers' supportive coparenting (*Chapter 5*). Thus, fathers' supportive coparenting behavior may be especially sensitive to the (perceived) characteristics of the child. Previous research also illustrates that fathers are more sensitive to their child's temperamental characteristics than mothers (Bornstein, Lamb, & Teti, 2002; Möller, Majdandžić, & Bögels, 2014; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). We have suggested that fathers' increased supportive coparenting may serve as a buffer in the relationship between the mother and her negative child (*Chapter 5*). It could be that whereas mothers' supportive coparenting is always high, fathers' coparenting may be more variable and more susceptible to the environment (Bornstein, Lamb, & Teti, 2002). Even though fathers' levels of supportive coparenting were on average lower than mothers' levels of supportive coparenting, we did not find differences in the variance of fathers' and mothers' supportive coparenting (*Chapter 5*). Thus, fathers' coparenting has more possibilities to increase, but the lack of difference in variances does not support the idea that the range of fathers' coparenting behaviors is larger than the range of mothers' behaviors. An approach using a ratio between mothers' and fathers' coparenting behaviors may shed more light on these findings, as this can inform us about whether it is the absolute score of fathers' supportive coparenting that is of importance, or whether it is the relative part of coparenting behaviors that consists of fathers' support. It may be the case that only in those families in which fathers' coparenting behaviors reach a certain threshold of the total amount of coparenting behaviors, fathers' supportive coparenting carries salience in the development of child anxiety. Through this methodology, we could also gain more insight into the way coparenting behaviors are normally distributed between mothers and fathers and how these ratios relate to child development.

We found that the type of divergent coparenting in which fathers are supportive while mothers were neutral related to less child anxiety, whereas the type of divergent coparenting in which mothers were supportive while fathers were neutral related to more child anxiety (*Chapter 5*). Thus, while fathers' supportive coparenting (while mother is neutral) serves as a protective factor in the development of child anxiety, mothers' supportive coparenting (while father is neutral) serves as a risk factor in the development of child anxiety. Here, it appears that it is especially those fathers that are wanting to and capable of initiating or continuing coparenting interactions on their own who protect highly negative children from becoming anxious. On the other hand, the finding that mothers' supportive coparenting serves as a risk factor may be due to maternal gatekeeping, which are behaviors that hinder the collaboration with their partner (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Given that the two categories of divergent behaviors were correlated ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ), it may also be the case that parents

who involve in divergent behaviors are the type of parents who are capable of taking turns. Turn taking has been associated with higher satisfaction with coparenting (Dienhart, 2001), as has flexibility (e.g., Hollenstein, Granic, Stoolmiller, & Snyder, 2004). Also, turn taking may enable parents to respond in a more adaptive way to their child's needs.

To conclude, we found indications that it is especially fathers' supportive coparenting behavior (both self-reported and observed) that is related to positive outcomes of child negative affectivity and child anxiety (*Chapter 4* and *Chapter 5*). We found that mothers' supportive coparenting may serve as a risk factor in anxiety development (*Chapter 4*), but this was not confirmed in our other studies. Thus, fathers' supportive coparenting behaviors may serve as a buffer between the mother and the child, thereby ensuring a better relationship between the mother and the child, which can then lead to better child outcomes. On the other hand, it may also be the case that modeling of the father as a confident and supportive partner in coparenting relates to less anxiety in the child, as can be expected based on the idea that fathers play an especially important role in the development of child anxiety (Bögels & Phares, 2008; Bögels & Perotti, 2011).

## Limitations

The studies in this thesis have some limitations and results should be interpreted within these limitations. Part of our results rely on associations between parents' self-reports of their own coparenting behavior and on parent reports of their child's fearful and negative temperament; the bidirectional associations between self-reports of coparenting and parent-reports of the child's temperament may be due to variability within the persons who were reporting (i.e., common method variance; Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002), rather than due to variability in the true, underlying behavior. Furthermore, the current thesis focused solely on the associations between negative aspects of temperament, whereas the positive aspects of temperament (such as surgency and effortful control) may serve as protective factors in the development of psychopathology (Calkins & Fox, 2002; Rutter, 1985; 1987) and anxiety disorders specifically (Lonigan & Phillips, 2001). Also, positive affectivity was found to protect 9-to-12-year-olds of divorced parents from the adverse effects of negative parenting (Lengua, Wolchik, Sandler, & West, 2000), making the investigation of the positive aspects of temperament especially relevant to the associations between coparenting and child anxiety in divorced families. Another limitation is that our results are based on a highly educated and non-clinical sample, which limits the generalizability of our results. More at risk families may profit more from coparenting interventions than the families in our sample; therefore, research on coparenting and child anxiety in clinical and/or high-risk samples is called for.

Finally, the longitudinal design of the current study only gave us limited opportunities to investigate causality in the associations between coparenting and child outcomes; therefore, future research should aim to conduct experiments in which coparenting is manipulated to

reveal causal connections between coparenting quality and child anxiety. Another option is the collection of highly frequent observations of both coparenting and child anxiety. This methodology makes it possible to draw more inferences on the direction of effects between coparenting and child anxiety – or to conclude that the associations between coparenting and child anxiety are truly bidirectional. Development occurs over long periods of time – for example, we found that children’s negative affect predicts their development into a highly anxious child 2 years later (*Chapter 4* and *Chapter 5*). Underlying to this development on the time scale of years is the development of moment-to-moment events. These moment-to-moment events partly consist of the child’s experiences with its parents’ coparenting interactions. Uncovering the way that these moment-to-moment, micro-level coparenting events develop over time can contribute to a better understanding of the development of anxiety over the years. Methodology for the measurement of triadic interactions at a microlevel are available and have demonstrated how the interactions between father, mother and their adolescent son relate to the level of depression in the adolescent (Hollenstein, Allen, & Sheeber, 2016). Application of this methodology to coparenting interactions can provide exciting and highly relevant new insights into the development of anxiety. These kinds of findings can point to clear intervention targets and can thereby serve to change the developmental course of child anxiety over the years. For example, highly frequent measures of divergent coparenting interactions may reveal that the occurrence of divergent coparenting over time relates closely to the behavior of the infant in triadic interactions, highly anxious parents may display different interaction patterns than non-anxious parents, and families with infants who are highly anxious by the time they are 7 years may display different interaction patterns than families with infants who do not become anxious later in childhood.

## Future research

Theoretically, our results carry several implications. We found that different measures of coparenting yield different results: parent-reported coparenting, global observations of coparenting, and micro-coded observations of coparenting all led to slightly different associations with temperament and anxiety. Therefore, we believe that future research should aim to understand which methodology measures which aspects of coparenting and which measures may be most meaningful in the study of child anxiety. Also, as an extension to the methodology in this thesis, I recommend to use measures in which parents’ perceptions of their partners’ coparenting are measured, since the satisfaction with the division of (co) parenting labor is an important indicator of coparenting quality (Feinberg, 2003).

In addition, the studies in this thesis lend partial support to the notion that fathers’ and mothers’ coparenting behaviors relate differently to (precursors of) child anxiety; future research should take these differences between fathers and mothers into account. The results indicate that the exposure to fathers’ supportive coparenting is especially important

with regard to child anxiety. Given that the current thesis concerned mainly intact couples (at 4.5 years, 4 couples were divorced, and 2 couples were together but not married), it remains unclear whether our results also extend to divorced couples. In the past decade in the Netherlands, divorced couples have shared child custody in 90% of cases (87 – 94%; CBS.nl); however, 74% of these children mostly live with their mother, 20% of children live as much with their father as with their mother, and 6% of children live mostly with their father (Spruijt & Kormos, 2010). This means that 80% of children grow up mostly with one parent, which may decrease the likelihood of their exposure to the patterns of simultaneity that matter in anxiety development (*Chapter 4*). Also, the supportive and buffering role of the father may change or disappear in children with divorced parents (*Chapter 4* and *Chapter 5*). In line with this, research found that living apart from the biological father poses a risk for child outcomes (Amato, 2000) and father involvement predicts child and adolescent adjustment (Vazsonyi, 2004; Williams & Kelly, 2005). Interestingly, adults who grew up in divorced families stated that they desired more father involvement (Fabricius, 2003; Fabricius & Hall, 2000; Finley & Schwartz, 2007). Thus, divorce may pose a threat to the paternal role in coparenting interactions and may jeopardize children's exposure to protective dynamics between fathers and mothers, thereby increasing the risk of the development of anxiety in children in divorced families. Future studies should address the associations between coparenting and anxiety in divorced families, because these families may be at an increased risk for high levels of undermining coparenting and family member anxiety.

## Clinical Implications

Practically, our results imply that clinicians should pay special attention to undermining coparenting when treating both anxious parents and anxious children, since we found that undermining coparenting is associated to (precursors of) family member anxiety. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that coparenting interventions are especially effective in families who were at a higher risk for developing poor coparenting during pregnancy, as measured by low levels of observed prenatal couple functioning (Feinberg et al., 2016). Next, the role of paternal supportive coparenting should receive attention in the clinical practice, as it appears that these supportive behaviors may serve as a protective factor in the development of child anxiety. Research on the effects of intervention of coparenting is needed to confirm our findings and to establish the role of coparenting in the clinical practice. Moreover, research on interventions can shed light on the way the associations between coparenting and child anxiety are most effectively influenced. The results of this thesis suggest that the associations between coparenting and family member anxiety are transactional; thus, there may not be a cause and an effect in these associations. Practitioners and intervention researchers need to demonstrate which aspects in the associations between coparenting and family member anxiety are easy to address and to change, because a change in undermining may lead to a change in family member anxiety, and vice versa.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrated that coparenting and child anxiety are related. As Majdandžić and colleagues (2012) suggested, the coparental relation plays a role in family member anxiety: children's and parents' anxiety symptoms relate to coparenting. Figure 1 represents the tested associations of the current thesis. In this figure, we placed coparenting at the center of family member anxiety, in line with our hypothesis that coparenting may be a mechanism in the transmission of anxiety. We found associations between child temperamental predispositions for anxiety to coparenting, from coparenting to child anxiety, and from parental anxiety to coparenting. These findings strengthen the idea that the interaction between coparenting and anxiety should be seen as a transactional process, in which family members' behaviors influence each other. We found that undermining coparenting is intertwined with high levels of child fearful temperament and negative affectivity for all families. However, we found that only for families in which one parent is highly anxious, undermining coparenting leads to higher anxiety in the child, demonstrating that especially anxious parents' coparenting is a risk factor for the development of child anxiety. Finally, especially fathers' supportive coparenting may serve as a protective factor in anxiety development. Therefore, future research and practice on anxiety need to take into account the role of coparenting and the specific roles of fathers and mothers in coparenting interactions, especially when parents themselves are anxious. Coming back to the introduction of this thesis, penguins appear to have found a coparenting dynamic which enables the female, the male and the penguin chick to survive the brooding process healthy. The results from this thesis demonstrate that also in humans, a functional dynamic in coparenting behavior in which both mother and father take their responsibility and leave opportunity to be a parent to their partner may yield the best outcomes for their child.