

First-Time Parents' Expectations About the Division of Childcare and Play

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The current study examines violated expectations regarding the division of childcare and play in first-time parents during the initial transition to parenthood. The study's goal was threefold: (a) to compare prenatal expectations with the reported postpartum division of childcare and play, (b) to compare the influence of the reported division versus violated expectations on postpartum relationship satisfaction and depression, and (c) to examine the role of persistent violations of expectations on these outcomes. Couples expecting their first child were interviewed during the third trimester of pregnancy and at 1 and 4 months postpartum. Results indicated both mothers and fathers have unrealistic expectations during pregnancy; interestingly, the direction violation was opposite but converging for mothers and fathers. As found in prior research, mothers experienced *unmet* expectations with fathers doing *less* than mothers expected. Fathers, on the other hand, experienced *overmet* expectations with mothers doing *more* than fathers expected. Violated expectations were also a stronger predictor of depression and relationship satisfaction than the reported division, although again in opposite directions for mothers and fathers. Unmet expectations were negative for mothers, while overmet expectations with regard to childcare tasks were beneficial for fathers. The one caveat was for fathers' overmet expectations with play; in this case, a mother playing with the baby more than a father expected was related to *less* relationship satisfaction. A similar pattern of results was found for mothers and fathers with persistent violations. This study highlights the importance of understanding violated expectations in *both* mothers and fathers, as well as examining play separately from childcare.

Keywords: parenting, childcare, play, depression, relationship satisfaction

The birth of a couple's first child brings about many changes to the household; one of the most obvious changes is the increase in household labor due both directly and indirectly to caring for the baby (Deutsch, 2001). Prior to the baby's arrival, soon-to-be parents construct expectations for how this labor will be divided. Because the transition to parenthood is a new experience for first-time parents, they may hold unrealistic expectations about how they will parent as a couple. Furthermore, if they simply assume the division of labor will remain the same as before they became parents, they may not communicate their expectations with their partner. As a result, new parents will be disappointed when their expectations are not met in the postpartum period, and these violated expectations may lead to less satisfaction with the transition to parenthood (e.g., Belsky, 1985; Khazan, McHale, & Decourcey, 2008). Although it is clear that violated expectations are detrimental to individuals during the transition to parenthood, what remains unclear is whether first-time mothers and fathers are impacted more by the reported division of childcare and play or by violated expectations about the division. Additionally, does the direction of violated expectations matter? In other words, if one

parent does *more* than their partner expected them to do, is this type of violation beneficial? In the current study, we seek to understand both how the reported division of childcare and play as well as violated expectations influence new mothers and fathers in the earliest stages of parenthood.

Division of Childcare and Play

The transition to parenthood changes a marital relationship in many ways, including increasing household labor and creating new roles, which can lead to role overload and dissatisfaction with how tasks are divided. One of the greatest sources of conflict for couples during the transition to parenthood is the division of labor within the household (Belsky & Pensky, 1988). In generations past, it was clear what role mothers and fathers would take on once the baby arrived. Typically, fathers would take on the role of financial provider, while mothers would take on the role of caregiver for the home and family. As a result, expectations across the transition to parenthood were less likely to be violated because gender roles were more traditional and prescribed (Belsky & Kelly, 1994). As women have increased their paid work since the 1960s, they have decreased the amount of time they spend on housework and men have increased their involvement in childcare (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000). In other words, egalitarian gender roles are becoming more common as couples enter the marital relationship (e.g., Twenge, 1997). But, when these couples enter into parenthood, their expectations about the division of childcare tasks are less clearly prescribed. Thus, it may only become apparent in the postpartum period that differences in expectations exist between coparents.

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Of particular salience to modern couples, Crohan (1996) argues that the most common source of tension in a relationship is over how decisions and roles are divided, because it reflects fairness in marriage. By introducing children into the mix, existing inequalities between partners can be exacerbated (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003). And, while fathers today are more involved in childcare tasks than in the past, mothers still spend up to twice as much time on childcare as fathers (e.g., Laflamme, Pomerleau, & Malcuit, 2002; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). Importantly, research has found a father's involvement in childcare activities can be significant in lowering a mother's level of stress (e.g., Kalil, Ziol-Guest, & Coley, 2005), and lower maternal stress has been found to be related to less conflict in the relationship (e.g., Milkie, Bianchi, Mattingly, & Robinson, 2002).

While mothers still perform a majority of childcare tasks, one way fathers do engage with their children is through play activities. During pregnancy, fathers report looking forward to playing with their children more than mothers do (Delmore-Ko, Pancer, Hunsberger, & Pratt, 2000). Moreover, McBride and Mills (1993) examined parents of preschool children and found mothers usually assumed leadership for the majority of childcare tasks, whereas fathers were more often engaged in play activities with their children. Finally, Grossmann et al. (2002) found fathers in traditional families developed a bond to their children through rough-and-tumble play activities. Despite these findings showing the unique impact of play for fathers, the literature has focused on the division of childcare tasks exclusively, or has combined playing with the baby in with other childcare tasks. In the current study, we will examine childcare and play separately with respect to mothers' and fathers' expectations during pregnancy and their reported division in the postpartum period. We predict that the division of play will show an unequal split with fathers playing more than mothers, while other childcare tasks will be unequally divided with mothers doing more than fathers.

Expectations About Childcare

Although prior research suggests the reported division of childcare may have a role in depression and relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood, the focus of this research has vacillated between reported division and violated expectations. On the side of violated expectations, researchers have argued actual division of childcare is *less* important than whether the division meets one's expectations. Parents who have their expectations about parenthood violated by reality view the transition as more difficult and report more psychological distress (e.g., Harwood, McLean, & Durkin, 2007; Kalmuss, Davidson, & Cushman, 1992). For mothers specifically, Ruble, Fleming, Hackel, and Stangor (1988) found those who perform more childcare tasks than they anticipated view their marriages more negatively than mothers who more accurately predicted the amount of childcare they would be doing. In other words, mothers spending the same amount of time on childcare may evaluate their situations differently depending on their prior expectations. Others researchers have similarly found that these unmet expectations about the division of childcare can lead to dissatisfaction and distress for mothers (e.g., Kessler & McCrae, 1982). Looking specifically at the comparison between reported division and violated expectations, Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins (2004) found violated expecta-

tions about the division of household labor was *more* detrimental than the actual division to mothers' mental health.

These violated (or unmet) expectations are more likely for first-time parents—as their expectations are not based on prior experience, but rather their hopes for how they see the situation playing out. These hopes become problematic because many parents underestimate the difficulties adjusting to parenthood. Kalmuss, Davidson, and Cushman (1992) found first-time mothers were inaccurate in their expectations about how the transition to parenthood would impact a number of areas of their lives, including their relationship with their spouse, help with childcare from their spouse, and amount of support they would receive from their extended family. These women also thought things would be better a year after the baby was born than actually occurred.

As with the majority of the literature on transition to parenthood, the unique perspective of both mothers and fathers has been understudied with respect to violated expectations. However, it is important not to generalize the perspective of the mother to the fathers as one major difference for fathers is their potential great flexibility of choice in how involved to be in childcare—as opposed to mothers who may have a more constrained range of involvement due to their potential role in breastfeeding and as primary caregiver. Yet, we do not know if violated expectations influence fathers' depression or relationship satisfaction more or less than the reported division of childcare. Second, as fathers' involvement in childcare has been increasing over the past couple of decades (e.g., Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004), it begs the question of whether the direction of violation matters. In other words, because prior research in this area has focused exclusively on mothers, it is typically assumed violated expectations refer to your partner doing *less* than you expect. As stated above, research has repeatedly found that when positive expectations are violated in a negative way (i.e., when the father does not participate in parenting as much as the mother had anticipated), detrimental results will likely occur (Belsky, Ward, & Rovine, 1986; Hackel & Ruble, 1992). However, at least one study has also found negative outcomes when fathers are *more* involved in parenting than mothers expected them to be (Hackel & Ruble, 1992). Therefore, at least with respect to mothers, a violated expectation in either direction has the potential to negatively influence them. Yet, it is unclear not only *what* the direction of violated expectations is for fathers, but whether or not violated expectations influence fathers' depression or relationship satisfaction.

To fill this void in the literature, the current study will examine the direction and relationship of violated expectations about childcare and play on relationship satisfaction and depression in both mothers and fathers. We will assess violated expectations in two different ways. First, to examine the extent and direction of violated expectations, parent's expectations about the division of childcare and play during pregnancy will be compared with the reported division of childcare and play at 1-month and 4-months postpartum. Second, we will analyze perceived violations by specifically asking parents if the division of each childcare task and play met their expectations at each wave of the study. Based on the prior literature, we predict that *unmet* expectations with respect to both childcare and play will be related to *less* relationship satisfaction and more depression for both mothers and fathers. With respect to *overmet* expectations (i.e., when your partner does more than you expect), we predict mothers will show a similar negative

influence on relationship satisfaction and depression (cf., Hackel & Ruble, 1992). For fathers, we predict *over*-met expectations with play (but not childcare) will have a negative relationship on their relationship satisfaction and depression as prior research has suggested fathers are more likely to bond with their children through play.

Persistent Violations

One final aspect of violated expectations that has received no attention in the literature is whether violations are persistent or transient. While prior studies have shown mothers to be negatively impacted by violated expectations about childcare (e.g., Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004), to our knowledge, no one has examined whether repeated violations of expectations is more detrimental to depression and relationship satisfaction in new parents than a one-time violation. A study by Nicolson (1990) shows that violations of expectations may, in fact, change over the early stages of parenthood. Specifically, Nicolson found some mothers felt their perinatal expectations were met at 1-month postpartum but were violated at 6-months postpartum. Nicolson's study emphasizes the importance of examining violated expectations over time rather than only once in the postpartum period. In the current study, we will examine the implication of having childcare and/or play expectations persistently violated during the early adjustment to parenthood. We predict fathers and mothers with repeated violations will report less relationship satisfaction and more depression than parents with only one violation.

Present Study

Based on previous literature, a clear association exists between the division of childcare and maternal outcomes across the transition to parenthood. Yet, very little, if any, research has focused on how division of childcare (and specifically play) influence paternal outcomes. Moreover, although it is evident that violated expectations are equally, if not more, important for maternal adjustment, research is again lacking on the direction and relationship of violated expectations for fathers. The present study seeks to understand the unique relationship of the reported division and violated expectations of childcare and play on personal and relational adjustment in new mothers and fathers. While the majority of the prior literature has examined the division of childcare later in parenthood, we are interested in the expectations about the division formed during pregnancy and the reported division of childcare and play in the early months of parenthood. We believe that this early stage of parenthood is important because it maybe when expectations are adjusted based on initial experiences with childcare divisions. It is important to note that we are *not* interested in how parental sex moderates these associations. Rather, because of the lack of research on fathers, we are interested in examining the distinct processes for fathers and mothers. In the present study, we conducted interviews with couples expecting their first child, and reinterviewed them at 1-month and 4-months postpartum.

Method

Participants

The sample was composed of 104 heterosexual married or cohabiting couples ($N = 208$ individuals) who were primiparous

(i.e., expecting their first child). Couples on average had been married (or cohabiting) for 3 years with a range of 1 month–12 years (Mothers: $M = 3.38$ years; $SD = 2.23$ years; Fathers: $M = 3.29$ years; $SD = 2.10$ years). The majority of the sample was White (fathers: 91%; mothers: 94%) and approximately 70% of the participants reported having a college education or an advanced degree and a household income of \$60,000 or more. The mean participant age was 34 years (ranging from 18 to 52 years) with fathers ($M = 30$ years; $SD = 4.77$ years) being significantly older than mothers ($M = 28$ years; $SD = 3.80$ years), $t(103) = 6.80$; $p < .001$. Of the 104 couples who completed the baseline interview, 90 couples completed the interview at 1-month postpartum and 84 couples completed the interview at 4-months postpartum. Reasons for attrition included dissolution of the relationship (approximately 1%), declining to further participate in the study (approximately 2%), and unable to reach after numerous attempts (approximately 7%). We conducted descriptive analyses and did not find any differences on demographic (e.g., age, education, income, relationship variables, etc.) or baseline study measures (e.g., mental health, relationship satisfaction, etc.) between those who attrited and those who remained in the study.

Procedure

Expectant mothers and fathers (hereafter referred to simply as mothers or fathers) who were in their third trimester of pregnancy and fluent in English were eligible to participate in the Baby Transitions in Marital Exchanges (T.I.M.E.) Study. Participants were recruited from local birthing classes in Akron, Ohio and online message boards where participants were located around the United States. Couples who agreed to take part in the study completed interviews in their third trimester (between 24 and 32 weeks of pregnancy), 1-month postpartum, and 4-months postpartum. Participants completed online questionnaires and then completed a second portion of the interview over the phone with trained interviewers. Participants completed both the online and phone questionnaire independent of their partner and an effort was made for both partners to complete their interviews within the same day. The combined online and phone interview took each participant approximately 1 hour to complete and couples were compensated \$25 for their time for each wave completed. Sociodemographic information was asked during pregnancy at the initial interview. However, depression, relationship satisfaction, and the division of childcare and play were asked at all time points.

Materials

Sociodemographics. The following demographics were collected from participants and considered as potential control variables: *age* (which ranged from 18 to 52); *time living with partner* (which ranged from 1 month to 12 years); *relationship status* (married or cohabiting), *household income*, and the *percentage of income* each spouse contributed. *Education level* was categorized as some high school, high school, some college, college education, or advanced degree.

Depression. To assess general depressive symptomatology, the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) was used as it has repeatedly been shown to be a valid and reliable measure of depressive symptoms (see McDow-

ell, 2006, for a review). Participants were asked to report how they had felt in the past week in regards to 20 different items (e.g., “felt sad”; “felt lonely”). Possible responses ranged from 0 = *none/rarely (< 1 day)*, 1 = *a little (1–2 days)*, 2 = *moderate (3–4 days)*, or 3 = *most (5–7 days)*. A sum score was created from the responses, with higher scores indicating higher levels of depression (Pregnancy: Mothers: $\alpha = .88$; Fathers: $\alpha = .87$; 1-Month Postpartum: Mothers: $\alpha = .88$; Fathers: $\alpha = .85$; 4-Months Postpartum: Mothers: $\alpha = .87$; Fathers: $\alpha = .85$). The sample was not highly distressed as participants reported only moderate levels of depression (Women: $M = 11.04$; Men $M = 8.70$). Traditionally, a score of 16 or higher on the CES-D has been used as a marker for individuals who may suffer from a clinical level of depression (McDowell, 2006). See Table 1 for means and ranges for the current sample.

Relationship satisfaction. The Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988) was used to determine relationship satisfaction (e.g., “How well does your partner meet your needs?”, “How good is your relationship compared to most other couples?”), as it has been found to be a reliable and valid measure of relationship satisfaction (Vaughn & Baier, 1999). The measure consisted of seven questions with potential responses ranging from 1 = *never* to 7 = *very often*. Appropriate items were reverse-coded and a sum score of the seven items was created, with higher scores indicating more relationship satisfaction (Pregnancy: Mothers: $\alpha = .81$; Fathers: $\alpha = .77$; 1-Month Postpartum: Mothers: $\alpha = .78$; Fathers: $\alpha = .82$; 4-Months Postpartum: Mothers: $\alpha = .81$; Fathers: $\alpha = .82$). See Table 1 for means and ranges for the current sample.

Division of baby care activities. Participation in baby care activities was assessed through a measure created by the researchers, which sought to identify mothers’ and fathers’ perceptions of the division of childcare in their household. In the perinatal period, parents were asked to indicate in increments of 10% (from 0% to

100%) how much child care and playing with the baby they expected their spouse to do when the baby arrived. In the postpartum period, participants reported how much their spouse actually did in the past week. Five categories of baby care were assessed: feeding the baby, changing diapers or clothes, soothing, nighttime waking, and baby’s laundry. Additionally, we asked what percentage of the time they believed their spouse played with the baby. We felt that taking the parent’s report of childcare performed by their partner to be most appropriate for our study because we are interested in examining parent’s expectations about their partner’s participation in the division of childcare and play. Cronbach’s alpha was not calculated for childcare as participation in one category is not necessarily indicative of participation in other categories. See Table 1 for means and ranges for the current sample.

Violated expectations of baby care activities. Violated expectations were examined in two different ways. First, to examine the extent and direction of violated expectations, we compared parent’s expectations about the division of childcare and play during pregnancy with the reported division of childcare and play at 1-month and 4-months postpartum. Second, for analyses on the influence of violated expectations, we asked parents if the division of each childcare task and play met their expectations (0 = *yes, expectation met* or 1 = *no, expectation not met*). If they replied that their expectations were not met, we then asked what percentage of the task they preferred their coparent to complete to get an indication of the direction of the violation. We decided to use parents’ current perceptions of violated expectations rather than taking the difference between their perinatal expectations and reported division at 1-month (or 4-months) for two main reasons: (a) a simple difference score between expected and reported division relies on the assumption that individuals remember their reported expectations from several months earlier, and (b) it would

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Major Study Variables

	Mothers			Fathers		
	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	Range	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	Range
Depression						
Pregnancy	11.52 _a	(7.50)	1–38	8.78 _b	(6.71)	0–40
1-Month	11.73 _a	(8.10)	1–38	9.12 _b	(6.77)	0–27
4-Months	9.86 _a	(7.40)	0–34	8.20 _a	(6.55)	0–34
Relationship Satisfaction						
Pregnancy	5.03 _a	(0.53)	3.25–6.00	5.03 _a	(0.51)	3.50–6.20
1-Month	4.81 _a	(0.73)	2.40–6.20	4.80 _a	(0.75)	2.50–6.20
4-Months	4.74 _a	(0.74)	2.33–6.00	4.74 _a	(0.70)	2.83–5.67
Care for the Baby (%) (as reported by coparent)						
Pregnancy	69.46 _a			48.85 _b		
1-Month	74.27 _b			38.80 _a		
4-Months	72.57 _b			39.88 _a		
Play with the Baby (%) (as reported by coparent)						
Pregnancy	52.88 _a			48.85 _b		
1-Month	58.71 _b			38.80 _a		
4-Months	59.42 _b			39.88 _a		

Note. Similar subscripts indicate no significant differences between mothers and fathers while different subscripts indicate a significant difference.

not tell us whether individuals really felt that their current expectations were violated.

Overview of Analyses

In the current study, we first tested for differences on the main study variables between mothers and fathers using one-way ANOVAs and for mothers and fathers across time using paired *t* tests. A check of the data revealed no violations of assumptions or problems with multicollinearity. Prior to conducting the analyses, a number of potential demographic covariates were entered into an initial regression model (e.g., age, education level, household income, time living with partner); the variables age, income, and years married were significant and included in subsequent analyses. In order to meet the assumption of independent observations and because we were interested in understanding the unique process for mothers and fathers, all of the analyses were conducted separately for mothers and fathers. To limit the number of analyses and because of the similar pattern of division in childcare tasks, the different areas of childcare (e.g., feeding, diapers, night-time waking, laundry, and soothing) were collapsed into one childcare variable; however, we did retain playing with the baby as a separate variable because of its conceptually and empirically distinct qualities.

To examine the influence of the violated expectations and reported division of childcare and play on outcomes at 1-month and 4-months postpartum we conducted multiple regression analyses with the reported division and violated expectation of childcare and play entered simultaneously into the models. To examine how coparent involvement and violated expectations about childcare and play at 1-month influenced 4-month depression and relationship satisfaction, we conducted regression analyses. We conducted separate models for depression and relationship satisfaction, controlling for covariates (age, income, years married) and prior relationship satisfaction and depression in each model. Finally, we examined the influence persistent childcare and play violations on outcomes at 4-months postpartum. For this, we used multiple regression analyses separately for mothers and fathers controlling for income with separate variables for persistent childcare and play violations entered simultaneously into each model. These variables were coded as follows: 0 = *no violations*, 1 = *violations at 1 time point*, and 2 = *violations at both time points*.

Results

With respect to the major study variables (see Table 1 for study variables means, standard deviations, and ranges), the parents in the current study were not highly distressed as both mothers and fathers reported only moderate levels depression across the three time points (Mothers: $M = 11.04$; Fathers: $M = 8.70$). Additionally, our sample reported relatively high relationship satisfaction across the three wave (Mothers: $M = 4.86$; Fathers: $M = 4.86$). We examined depression and relationship satisfaction for significant differences across time using paired *t* tests. Mothers reported significantly lower depression at 4-months postpartum than during pregnancy ($t(87) = -2.27$; $p < .05$) or at 1-month postpartum ($t(83) = -2.51$; $p < .05$); however, there was no significant difference between pregnancy and 1-month depression ($t(92) = 0.19$; $p = .85$). We also did not find any differences for fathers

across the three time points for depression. In regards to relationship satisfaction, both mothers and fathers reported higher relationship satisfaction during pregnancy than at 1-month (Mothers: $t(92) = -2.41$; $p < .05$; Fathers: ($t(91) = -3.18$; $p < .01$) or 4-months postpartum (Mothers: $t(85) = 3.87$; $p < .001$; Fathers: ($t(84) = 4.14$; $p < .001$); however, there were no significant differences between relationship satisfaction at 1-month and 4-months (Mothers: $t(81) = -1.92$; $p = .06$; Fathers: ($t(81) = -1.46$; $p = .15$). Looking at differences between mothers and fathers, as shown in Table 1, ANOVA analyses showed mothers had significantly higher levels of general depression than fathers during pregnancy, $F(1, 206) = 7.71$, $p < .05$ and at 1-month postpartum, $F(1, 184) = 5.66$, $p < .05$ but similar levels at 4-months postpartum, $F(1, 173) = 2.47$, $p > .05$. Mothers and fathers reported similar levels of relationship satisfaction at all waves.

Division of Childcare and Play

To examine expectations during pregnancy and the reported division of childcare and play in the postpartum period, we first took the percentage of childcare and play parents expected their partner to do and compared it to what parents reported actually occurred at 1-month postpartum. Fathers reported that mothers completed more childcare in each of the six categories at 1-month postpartum than they had expected during pregnancy. In contrast, mothers reported that fathers completed less childcare and play at 1-month postpartum than they had expected during pregnancy in all categories, except changing diapers and clothes (see Table 2). Therefore, both mothers and fathers had their pregnancy expectations violated; however, as predicted the violations occurred in opposite directions with mothers participating *more* than fathers anticipated while fathers participated in tasks *less* than mothers anticipated. Contrary to our prediction, both childcare tasks and play were unequally divided with mothers doing more than fathers in both domains.

In addition, to understand the association between an individual's perception of violation and the calculated violation score, we

Table 2
Expected and Reported Division of Childcare

	Expected	1-Month	4-Months
Reported by Mothers about Fathers			
Feeding	16.15	14.52	20.35
Diapers	34.90	34.41	28.60
Night-time waking	26.73	17.31	21.88
Laundry	27.21	22.39	17.42
Soothing	37.40	31.94	25.81
Playing	46.15	41.18	38.84
Reported by Fathers about Mothers			
Feeding	75.96	80.11	75.65
Diapers	56.92	65.11	65.41
Night-time waking	60.58	74.13	71.67
Laundry	63.65	74.24	77.53
Soothing	57.60	65.33	67.88
Playing	51.06	60.76	58.24

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

conducted correlational analyses between the prenatal-postnatal difference score and the postnatal perception of violated expectations at 1-month. For mothers, we found a significant positive correlation between these two variables for both childcare, $r(93) = .21, p < .05$ and play, $r(93) = .46, p < .001$. In other words, a positive difference score between expectation and reported childcare/play (i.e., unmet expectations) was significantly correlated with a mother's perceived violation of expectations. However, for fathers, the correlations between these two variables were negative but not significant for play, $r(92) = -.18, p = .08$ and childcare, $r(92) = -.10, p = .34$. Thus, for mothers but not fathers, their perceived violations were in accord with their pregnancy expectations and reported division at 1-month postpartum.

In the postpartum period, we examined childcare and play expectations by taking parents' report about how much of each task their partner actually performed at that time point and whether or not they reported their expectations were violated. When looking at those who reported violated expectations at both 1-month and 4-months postpartum compared to those with no violations or a violation at only one time point, fathers were more likely to report violated expectations than mothers in almost every category of childcare. We found father's violated expectations were generally about wanting mothers to participate *less*, while mother's expectations were about wanting fathers to participate *more* than they actually do (see Table 3). At 1-month and 4-months postpartum, both mothers and fathers most often reported violations (in opposite directions) about night-time waking and soothing the baby.

Influence of Reported Childcare Division Versus Violated Expectations

We next examined the influence of the violated expectations and actual division of childcare and play on outcomes at 1-month and 4-months postpartum (see Tables 4 and 5). Cross-sectional results showed the reported division of childcare was important for mothers while the division of play was important for fathers. Specifi-

cally, results indicated for fathers at 1-month postpartum, the more childcare mothers engaged in the less depression fathers reported ($\beta = -.29, p < .05$). For mothers, at 1-month postpartum, the more fathers played with the baby the less depression ($\beta = -.51, p < .001$) and more relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .43, p < .001$) mothers reported. No significant results with the reported division of childcare or play were found at 4-months postpartum.

While few results were obtained for the reported division of childcare and play on outcomes at the same time point, more results were found with violated expectations about childcare and play. For fathers, those with violated expectations about childcare (i.e., overmet expectations) at 1-month postpartum also reported more relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .22, p < .05$). In addition for fathers, those reporting a violated childcare expectation at 4-months postpartum also reported more relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .24, p < .05$). In contrast, as predicted, having violated expectations about how much mothers would play with the baby at 1-month postpartum was related to fathers reporting *less* relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.24, p < .05$). For mothers, having violated expectations about play (i.e., unmet expectations) was related to mothers reporting *less* depression at 1-month postpartum ($\beta = -.38, p < .01$). With respect to violated childcare expectations, mothers reported less relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.21, p < .05$) and more depression ($\beta = .26, p < .05$) at 4-months postpartum only.

Next, we examined how coparent involvement and violated expectations about childcare and play at 1-month influenced 4-month depression and relationship satisfaction. We conducted separate models for depression and relationship satisfaction. In regards to the longitudinal findings for violated expectations having a childcare violation at 1-month postpartum was related to more depression ($\beta = .20, p < .05$) at 4-months postpartum for mothers. For fathers, having a childcare violation at 1-month postpartum was related to more relationship satisfaction at 4-months postpartum ($\beta = .19, p < .05$). We only obtained one longitudinal result with the reported division of childcare. For

Table 3
Participants With Violated Expectation Actual and Desired Percentages

	1-Month		4-Months	
	Actual	% Desired	Actual	% Desired
Actual and Desired Division of Childcare reported by Mothers about Fathers				
Feeding	14.29	24.29	33.00	41.11
Diapers	21.11	34.44	19.00	39.00
Night-time waking	10.59	34.12	18.00	41.43
Laundry	34.55	42.50	20.00	43.33
Soothing	19.52	41.43	17.00	41.58
Playing	20.91	41.82	27.00	46.15
Actual and Desired Division of Childcare reported by Fathers about Mothers				
Feeding	76.88	63.13	81.00	61.54
Diapers	73.08	52.00	73.00	53.53
Night-time waking	76.67	58.08	82.00	59.20
Laundry	93.89	58.42	82.00	51.54
Soothing	70.00	50.00	73.00	50.78
Playing	65.79	50.50	68.00	51.33

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

Table 4
Results for Correlates of Reported Childcare and Violated Expectations at 1-Month

	Fathers				Mothers			
	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	β	ΔR	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	β	ΔR
Depression				.11				.19
Reported Childcare	-.15*	(.06)	.29	.08		(.08)	.11	
Reported Play	.05	(.06)	.11		-.32***	(.08)	-.51	
Violated Childcare	-2.60	(1.44)	-.19		2.30	(1.58)		.14
Violated Play	.44	(1.78)	.03		-9.40**	(2.96)	-.38	
Marital Satisfaction				.08				.11
Reported Childcare	.00	(.01)	.02		.00	(.01)	-.01	
Reported Play	.00	(.01)	-.01		.03***	(.01)	.43	
Violated Childcare	.33*	(.16)	.22		.02	(.14)	.01	
Violated Play	-.44*	(.20)	-.24		.23	(.27)	.10	

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

fathers, the more mothers engaged in childcare tasks at 1-month postpartum the more satisfied fathers were with the relationship at 4-months postpartum ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$). No significant results were found for mothers or fathers with reported or violated play (see Table 6).

Influence of Persistent Violations

Finally, we were interested in how having a violation at both 1-month and 4-months postpartum were related to depression and relationship satisfaction in new parents. We found that 24% of mothers and 44% of fathers had childcare or play violations that were violated at both 1-month and 4-months postpartum, 33% of mothers and 26% of fathers had violations at only 1-month or 4-months postpartum, and 43% of mothers and 30% of fathers had no violations at either time point. We next examined the influence persistent childcare and play violations on outcomes at 4-months postpartum. For mothers, having a persistent childcare violation (i.e., at both 1-month and 4-months postpartum) was related to more depression ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$) and having a persistent play violation was related to less marital satisfaction ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .05$). Additionally, having a persistent childcare violation ($\beta = .22$, $p < .05$) was related to *more* relationship satisfaction for fathers at 4-months

postpartum. However, a persistent violation of play expectations was not related either outcome for fathers (see Table 7).

Discussion

While the literature on childcare is abundant, few studies have examined *both* mothers' and fathers' expectations regarding childcare. Prior research has focused almost exclusively on mothers and the impact of their unmet expectations regarding division of childcare. The current study focused on whether fathers also experience a violation of their expectations regarding who does what with respect to childcare and play. The current study also sought to understand the role of reported division versus violated expectations in new mothers' and fathers' depression and relationship satisfaction. Finally, we examined whether persistent violations had a stronger influence than one-time violations. We followed new parents across the early months of the transition to parenthood (i.e., from the third trimester of pregnancy to 4-months postpartum). Overall, in accord with prior research, mothers were more involved than fathers with childcare and play, and they were more involved than they expected to be. While fathers reported their spouses had more involvement in childcare and play than they expected. We discuss the implications and future directions of the main study findings below.

Table 5
Results for Correlates of Reported Childcare and Violated Expectations at 4-Month

	Fathers				Mothers			
	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	β	ΔR	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	β	ΔR
Depression				.03				.09
Reported Childcare	.05	(.06)	.10		-.02	(.07)	-.03	
Reported Play	.02	(.07)	.05		-.07	(.07)	-.11	
Violated Childcare	1.21	(1.53)	.09		3.85	(1.49)	.26	
Violated Play	.80	(2.16)	.05		.50	(2.38)	.02	
Marital Satisfaction				.06				.10
Reported Childcare	.00	(.01)	.07		.00	(.01)	.07	
Reported Play	.00	(.01)	.01		.00	(.01)	.07	
Violated Childcare	.33*	(.16)	.24		-.31*	(.15)	-.21	
Violated Play	-.12	(.22)	-.06		-.45	(.24)	-.21	

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

Table 6
Results for Longitudinal Analyses From 1-Month To 4-Month Postpartum

	Fathers				Mothers			
	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	β	ΔR	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	β	ΔR
Depression				.56				.36
Reported Childcare	.05	(.05)	.11		-.00	(.07)	-.01	
Reported Play	-.02	(.04)	-.05		.06	(.07)	.11	
Violated Childcare	.41	(1.04)	.03		3.01*	(1.29)	.20	
Violated Play	.56	(1.30)	.03		3.86	(2.67)	.16	
Marital Satisfaction				.53				.27
Reported Childcare	.01*	(.01)	.21		-.01	(.01)	-.12	
Reported Play	-.00	(.01)	-.04		-.00	(.01)	-.08	
Violated Childcare	.27*	(.11)	.19		-.26	(.15)	-.17	
Violated Play	-.11	(.15)	-.06		-.36	(.28)	-.16	

Note. Regression analyses controlled for income and outcome variable at prior wave.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Expectations Versus Reality

Mothers and fathers experience the transition to parenthood differently, especially when it comes to their involvement in childcare tasks. Cowan et al. (1985) argue fathers are more active during the birth and early care of the baby, but then typically assume the role of financial provider for their new family. A mother’s transition to parenthood tends to be more dramatic, with a major shift in both work and home life. Mothers tend to shift their primary focus toward caring for the baby. As with prior research, we found mothers were expected to be and were more engaged in all childcare tasks than fathers at both 1-month and 4-months postpartum. On average, mothers were expected to perform approximately 63% of the labor and actually performed more than that amount (1-month: 72%; 4-months: 72%). In alignment, fathers were expected to be (and were) less engaged in childcare and play (28% expected; 1-month: 24%; 4-months: 23%). Thus, when it came to violated expectations, it was not surprising that we found mothers experienced *unmet* expectations (i.e., fathers did less childcare and play than mothers expected them to) whereas fathers experienced *overmet* expectations (i.e., mothers did more childcare and play than fathers expected them to). We are one of the first studies to compare fathers’ expectations with their actual performance of childcare. Our results clearly suggest fathers know they are engaging in less childcare and play than they expected to. What is not clear is whether this discrepancy is due to fathers

choosing not do what they expected, or to maternal gatekeeping. On the one hand, given that mothers also report fathers doing less than they expected them to, it is easy to blame the fathers for their lack of involvement. On the other hand, it is possible fathers want to be more involved but feel as though mothers are keeping them from becoming a true *coparent*. This potential explanation has been term “maternal gatekeeping” (Allen & Hawkins, 1999), and reflects a mother’s resistance to let her husband help more with childcare for fear that her identity within the family will be invalidated. We cannot answer whether maternal gatekeeping is at play in father’s less than expected involvement in the current study—that is left for future research to determine why fathers are less involved with childcare than they expect to be.

Violated Expectations Versus Reported Division of Childcare and Play

Prior research has provided evidence that it is not necessarily how much you do but whether you do what you expected that matters most for your adjustment to parenthood (e.g., Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004). Our study replicated this finding, in that violated expectations were more predictive than reported division of childcare and play for both mothers and fathers. In addition, we found that the direction of violation showed different links with depression and relationship satisfaction. Recall that mothers’ vio-

Table 7
Results for Influence of Persistent Violations On 4-Month Outcomes

	Fathers				Mothers			
	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	β	ΔR	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	β	ΔR
Depression				.56				.39
Persistent Care Violation	.31	(.61)	.04		2.71***	(.75)	.29	
Persistent Play Violation	.32	(.87)	.03		.75	(1.14)	.05	
Marital Satisfaction				.49				.28
Persistent Care Violation	.18*	(.07)	.22		-.15	(.09)	-.16	
Persistent Play Violation	-.10	(.10)	-.09		-.26*	(.13)	-.19	

Note. Regression analyses controlled for outcome variable at 1-month postpartum.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

lations were always in the direction of being unmet while fathers' expectations were always in the direction of being overmet. As to be expected, mothers' *unmet* expectations for childcare were related to more depression and less relationship satisfaction. In contrast, fathers' *overmet* expectations for childcare were related to *more* relationship satisfaction. This finding seems to support the argument that fathers are choosing to be less involved than they expected—if mothers were keeping fathers from being involved as much as they want to be then fathers' overmet expectations should be related to worse outcomes.

Yet, our results for fathers and playing with the baby seem to provide evidence for the maternal gatekeeping explanation. Prior literature has suggested one way fathers connect with young children is through play activities (Grossmann et al., 2002; McBride & Mills, 1993), and it is one of the primary things they look forward to most about the new baby (Delmore-Ko, Pancer, Hunsberger, & Pratt, 2000). Other studies on childcare combine play with other parenting tasks; our study is the first to date to separate play from childcare to examine the influence of reported play and violated expectations with play. In our study, we found that overmet expectations about play were related to *less* relationship satisfaction at 1-month for fathers. These findings lend support to the maternal gatekeeping explanation. Fathers may resent mothers monopolizing playtime with the baby. They may also feel mothers do not trust them to spend time with the baby, which may weaken not only their bonding with the baby but how capable they feel about their parenting ability. Indeed, a recent article examining predictors of parenting efficacy in first-time parents found that the more mothers reported playing with the baby at 1-month postpartum, the less efficacious fathers felt about parenting at 4-months postpartum (Biehle & Mickelson, 2011). Taking together the childcare and play results, it appears fathers may *choose* to be less involved in childcare than they expected but feel *blocked* from playing with the baby as much as they want. These results support other research which suggests fathers prefer playing with their children to taking care of the more mundane childcare duties (e.g., McBride & Mills, 1993).

Persistent Violations Versus One-Time Violations

One final issue we examined in the current study was whether violating expectations once was as predictive of depression and relationship satisfaction as persistently violated expectations. As predicted, mothers with repeated unmet violations reported more depression than parents with no violations or only one violation. On the other hand, persistent overmet childcare violations were related to better relationship satisfaction for fathers. Persistent violations suggest to a coparent that their partner is not changing their level of involvement to match the coparent's expectations. What this research cannot answer is whether a coparent is maintaining their initial expectation or is adjusting their expectations and these adjusted expectations are also not being matched. Either way, persistent violations may predict a future continual lack of (or over) involvement. Future research needs to examine whether parents adjust their expectations over time or maintain expectations in hopes that the coparents will someday match them.

Limitations

There are several caveats to consider with respect to the current findings. One limitation is the homogenous sample. Because the sample consisted primarily of White, middle-class couples transitioning to parenthood, it is unclear how these results will generalize to other couples. Middle-class couples have more resources to deal with the transition than those with lower incomes or less education. Also multiparous parents' expectations regarding childcare and play are likely to be shaped by their experiences with their prior children. A second limitation is that we only examined the first 4 months of the transition to parenthood. While we were primarily interested in the initial adjustment to the division of childcare and play, future studies need to examine long-term adjustment issues in terms of reported division and whether expectations are adjusted. It may be that activities involving caring for the baby and playing with the baby overlap during infancy and could be studied further in older children. In addition, future studies may want to examine the role of hours worked outside the home and maternity and family leave on the division of childcare in the early months of parenthood and if it is possible that both partners' experienced violated expectations relate to their misjudgment of how much effort it would take to care for a baby. However, in the current study we unfortunately did not have access to this information. In addition, because our analyses required mothers and fathers to be analyzed separately, our power was limited. Future research is needed on larger samples to replicate these findings. Even with these limitations, our study is novel in that it examined both mothers and fathers, as well as separating play from other childcare tasks. We hope our results will lay the foundation for future dyadic studies of mothers and fathers, as well as help design intervention to teach expectant parents to discuss how they each expect to divide baby care and play.

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