Mental Health and Lifestyle Journal

Year 2026
Volume 4
Issue 4

Exploring Barriers to Co-Parenting After Divorce: An In-Depth Thematic Analysis Case Study

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Article type:
Original Research

Article history:
Received 27 October 2025
Revised 18 February 2026
Accepted 22 February 2026
Initial Publish 11 May 2026
Published online 01 July 2026

ABSTRACT

Post-divorce parenting is a complex process that exerts profound effects on children's psychological well-being and adjustment. Despite the importance of this period, the challenges and perspectives of parents navigating post-divorce parenting require deeper understanding in order to develop effective co-parenting conflict-resolution protocols. The present study was conducted to achieve a deeper understanding of the experiences of parents engaged in parenting after divorce. This qualitative study examined post-divorce co-parenting challenges and conflicts using inductive thematic analysis based on the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). The study population consisted of all parents experiencing co-parenting conflicts following divorce. Participants included 13 divorced parents selected according to the principle of data saturation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis procedure proposed by Clarke and Braun (2006). The findings identified five major themes related to barriers to co-parenting: conflicts arising from improper redefinition of parenting roles after divorce, conflicts caused by parental neglect and misdirected parenting focus, lack of trust in the other parent's parenting competence, reciprocal revenge-seeking behaviors, and instrumental use of the child within the parenting relationship. The findings of this study provide valuable implications for achieving deeper understanding and identifying patterns associated with co-parenting conflicts, offering practical insights for researchers and counselors working in the field of co-parenting.

Keywords: Divorce, Co-parenting Conflicts, Thematic Analysis, Post-Divorce Parenting

How to cite this article:
Rabiee, Z., Yousefi, Z., & Bahramipourisfahani, M. (2026). Exploring Barriers to Co-Parenting After Divorce: An In-Depth Thematic Analysis Case Study. *Mental Health and Lifestyle Journal, 4*(4), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.61838/mhlj.192

Introduction

arital relationships constitute one of the most central and influential interpersonal systems in adult life, playing a critical role in psychological well-being, social functioning, and overall quality of life. When marital interactions are characterized by chronic conflict, emotional distancing, or ineffective communication patterns, couples are at increased risk for marital dissatisfaction, burnout, and relational instability. Marital burnout, conceptualized as a state of emotional, physical, and psychological exhaustion within the marital context, has been associated with decreased intimacy, reduced empathy, and diminished relational commitment (1, 2). In addition, impaired marital self-regulation—defined as the capacity to manage emotions, cognitions, and behaviors constructively within the relationship—can exacerbate conflict cycles

and hinder adaptive problem-solving (3, 4). Given the increasing prevalence of marital conflicts in contemporary societies and their adverse psychological consequences, identifying effective, evidence-based couple therapy approaches has become an essential priority in clinical psychology and family studies (5, 6).

Among the prominent relational intervention models, Olson's Circumplex Model of marital functioning has received considerable empirical attention. This model conceptualizes healthy marital systems along the dimensions of cohesion, flexibility, and communication, emphasizing balance rather than extremity in relational patterns. Marriage enrichment programs based on the Olson model aim to enhance adaptive cohesion, promote flexible role structures, and strengthen communication competencies (7, 8). Empirical evidence has demonstrated that interventions grounded in the Olson model effectively improve marital satisfaction and reduce conflict in various populations. For example, premarital counseling based on the Olson framework has been shown to reduce engagement-period problems and strengthen communication patterns among couples (5). Similarly, comparative studies indicate that Olson-based enrichment programs significantly enhance marital satisfaction compared to alternative relational interventions (8, 9). Furthermore, Olson-oriented approaches have demonstrated positive effects on communication beliefs and relational adjustment among university students and married women (6, 7).

Research has also highlighted the relevance of communication patterns and empathy in marital adjustment. Olson-based interventions have been associated with improvements in communication styles and reductions in marital burnout among women affected by infidelity (1). Moreover, marital adjustment is influenced by factors such as religiosity, forgiveness, and spousal empathy, which align conceptually with the cohesion and communication components of the Circumplex Model (10). These findings suggest that Olson's model provides a systemic and skills-oriented framework for strengthening marital functioning through targeted relational competencies.

Parallel to systemic and enrichment-based models, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) has emerged as a third-wave behavioral intervention emphasizing psychological flexibility, mindfulness, acceptance, and value-driven action. ACT conceptualizes relational distress as arising from experiential avoidance, cognitive fusion, and rigid behavioral repertoires. By cultivating acceptance of internal experiences and commitment to valued relational behaviors, ACT seeks to enhance adaptive functioning within intimate relationships (4, 11). Empirical investigations have documented the effectiveness of ACT-based couple therapy in improving marital quality of life, emotional regulation, and intimacy among distressed couples (4, 12).

ACT has demonstrated efficacy across diverse relational contexts, including couples experiencing marital conflict, infidelity, or psychological distress. For instance, ACT-based interventions have been shown to increase marital forgiveness, reduce marital burnout, and enhance emotional regulation among women affected by extramarital relationships (2). Similarly, ACT has proven effective in modifying irrational beliefs and strengthening differentiation of self among women with marital conflicts (3). Comparative studies further indicate that ACT may be as effective as, or superior to, other therapeutic approaches in enhancing emotional expression, resilience, and intimacy within distressed couples (13, 14).

Recent evidence suggests that ACT contributes to improvements in self-compassion, marital commitment, and quality of life among women seeking divorce (15). Moreover, ACT-based couple therapy has demonstrated positive effects on attitudes toward marital infidelity and emotional regulation in married

women (16). In infertile women experiencing relational strain, ACT-based counseling has been associated with improved emotion regulation and marital relationship quality (17). These findings highlight ACT's capacity to foster psychological flexibility and adaptive relational behaviors, which are critical for mitigating marital burnout and enhancing self-regulation.

Comparative investigations of ACT with other interventions further illuminate its therapeutic value. For example, ACT has been compared with schema therapy and emotion-focused couple therapy, showing significant improvements in emotional expression and marital forgiveness (13, 18). Additionally, ACT has been evaluated alongside paradox-based and compassion-focused approaches, demonstrating beneficial effects on family adaptability and mental well-being among women with marital conflicts (19). These findings underscore the growing empirical support for ACT as a flexible and contextually sensitive intervention for marital distress.

Despite the documented efficacy of both Olson-based enrichment programs and ACT-based couple therapy, limited research has directly compared these two theoretically distinct approaches within the same empirical framework. Olson's model emphasizes systemic balance, communication skills, and structural relational patterns, whereas ACT focuses on intrapersonal processes such as acceptance, mindfulness, and value-based action. Both approaches aim to reduce maladaptive interaction cycles and enhance relational functioning, yet they operate through different mechanisms of change. Understanding the comparative effectiveness of these interventions on key marital outcomes—such as burnout and self-regulation—can inform evidence-based clinical decision-making and tailored intervention planning.

Given the multidimensional nature of marital conflict, interventions that address both interpersonal dynamics and intrapersonal regulatory processes may yield differential outcomes. Olson-based therapy may be particularly effective in restructuring communication patterns and restoring relational balance (1, 9). In contrast, ACT may exert stronger effects on emotional regulation, psychological flexibility, and internal coping mechanisms (4, 11). Furthermore, studies examining ACT's impact on self-criticism, pessimistic marital expectations, and resilience suggest that this approach can significantly alter maladaptive cognitive-emotional patterns that contribute to marital dissatisfaction (14, 20).

In the Iranian cultural context, where family cohesion, relational commitment, and social expectations strongly influence marital dynamics, culturally adapted interventions are particularly relevant. Research conducted in Iran has consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of both Olson-based and ACT-based programs in improving marital satisfaction, reducing conflict, and strengthening emotional bonds (8, 21). Moreover, ACT-based couple therapy has shown promising results in reducing communication dysfunction and infidelity-related distress among married individuals (22). These findings emphasize the importance of culturally sensitive comparative studies to determine which therapeutic model yields more robust outcomes for couples experiencing conflict.

Taken together, existing literature provides substantial evidence supporting the efficacy of both Olson's Circumplex Model–based couple therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy in enhancing marital functioning, reducing burnout, and improving emotional regulation. However, the relative effectiveness of these two approaches in simultaneously addressing marital burnout and marital self-regulation among couples experiencing conflict remains insufficiently explored. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to compare the effectiveness of Olson's Circumplex Model–based couple therapy and Acceptance and

Commitment Therapy (ACT) on marital burnout and marital self-regulation in couples experiencing marital conflict.

1. Methods and Materials

Given that the purpose of this study was to explore barriers to co-parenting after divorce, a qualitative research design using inductive thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed. In this method, raw data are summarized through inference and interpretation in order to extract core themes and categories grounded in participants' experiences.

The research population consisted of all couples who had divorced and had at least one child. These individuals, or their former spouses, had referred to counseling centers in Isfahan during the summer of 2025 due to conflicts related to parenting and child-rearing. The participants included 13 divorced parents selected through purposive sampling based on predefined inclusion criteria: one or both parents had sought counseling for co-parenting conflicts; the divorce process had been legally finalized; child custody had been assigned to one of the parents rather than another caregiver such as grandparents; willingness to participate in the interview; and provision of informed consent. Data were collected through interviews with participants. Participant recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which additional interviews yielded no new information. Prior to conducting the interviews, informed consent was obtained, the study objectives were explained, and participants were assured that their identities and information would remain confidential and anonymous. Recorded interviews were deleted after completion of data analysis. Participants' ages ranged from 32 to 54 years. They had one or two children, and their educational levels ranged from high school diploma to doctoral degree. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

No.	Gender	Age	Education	Time Since Divorce (Years)	Number of Children
1	Male	42	Bachelor's degree	4	1
2	Male	46	Master's degree	2	1
3	Male	35	Master's degree	2	1
4	Male	41	Associate degree	1	1
5	Female	51	Bachelor's degree	10	2
6	Female	38	Master's degree	7	1
7	Female	32	High school diploma	6	2
8	Female	41	Bachelor's degree	6	2
9	Female	35	Bachelor's degree	9	1
10	Female	41	Bachelor's degree	8	1
11	Female	38	Doctoral degree	1	1
12	Female	41	Bachelor's degree	1	1
13	Female	54	Bachelor's degree	7	2

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Interview questions were designed collaboratively with the supervisor and academic advisor. The questions addressed participants' experiences regarding parenting challenges, perceptions of the other parent's responsibilities toward the child, patterns of interaction with former spouses, and conflicts emerging during attempts to resolve parenting-related problems. Probing questions were also employed to encourage participants to elaborate on their lived experiences (e.g., "Could you explain further?"). The interview protocol followed a

coherent structure grounded in the researcher's professional experience in post-divorce parenting. The interview questions were reviewed and validated by subject-matter experts. Each interview began with general questions concerning parents' experiences of cooperation and communication with the other parent after divorce (e.g., whether communication regarding child-related matters continued after divorce; how supportive and educational parenting roles were maintained; and how post-divorce interactions influenced the child's sense of family belonging and stability). The sequence of questions varied depending on interview flow and participants' responses and was not identical for all participants. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Interview time and location were determined in advance through agreement between the researcher and participants and were conducted in counseling centers. Following the interviews, all field notes were organized systematically.

Interview transcripts were examined line by line, and data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's inductive thematic analysis method. This analytical approach focuses on participants' perceptions and lived experiences of the phenomenon under investigation. The analysis proceeded through six stages: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing extracted themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the thematic report. Trustworthiness of the data was evaluated using four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To enhance credibility, findings were reviewed by participants and revised according to their feedback (member checking). Transferability was strengthened by selecting participants with maximum variation in occupation, educational background, and age group. Furthermore, two experts experienced in research and counseling related to post-divorce parenting reviewed interview content and confirmed the study findings.

2. Findings and Results

Based on Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following refinement of interview transcripts and statements, 117 initial codes, 59 basic codes, 30 organizing categories, and 5 overarching themes were extracted. Table 2 presents the results obtained from the thematic analysis of interviews conducted with parents regarding barriers to post-divorce co-parenting.

Table 2. Results of Thematic Analysis of Interviews on Barriers to Post-Divorce Co-Parenting

Overarching Theme	Organizing Theme	Basic Code	Initial Code
Conflicts arising from improper redefinition of post-divorce parenting	Authoritarian parenting instead of co-parenting	Reduction of negative emotions through rejection of co-parenting	Inability to regulate personal desires for co-parenting due to resentment and hostility
		Parenting motivated by fear of losing the child	Fear of child loss as the basis of parenting
	Desire to defeat the other parent	Child possession as parenting motivation	Experience of victory within a parenting "battlefield"
	Ambiguity of stepparent role	Cognitive inflexibility toward stepparent involvement	Non-acceptance of stepparent role in parental cognitive schema
		Distrust toward stepparent intentions	Defensive reactions toward stepparent involvement
	Stepparent–parent inconsistency	Inappropriate stepparent interference	Conflict escalation due to stepparent intervention
Lack of trust in the other parent's parenting	Distrust based on past marital functioning	Weak responsibility performance in previous marital roles	Failure to organize responsibilities in a timely manner
		Lack of responsibility toward spouse, child, and family	Historical irresponsibility

	Distrust based on previous parenting performance	Maladaptive psychological parenting patterns before divorce	Lack of accountability in parenting responsibilities
	Distrust based on current parenting performance	Psychological instability in parenting after divorce	Failure to provide psychological security
		Minimal parenting engagement	Unpredictability in fulfilling parenting duties
	Desire to control the other parent	Imposition of rigid parenting standards	Negative perfectionism toward the other parent's parenting
		Persistent monitoring and dissatisfaction	Blame-oriented evaluation of parenting performance
Parental neglect and misdirected parenting focus	Ignoring the other parent's efforts	Disregard of maternal efforts	Father's inattention toward maternal parenting contributions
		Disregard of paternal efforts	Mother's inattention toward paternal parenting contributions
	Neglect of child developmental needs	Paternal inattention to developmental stages	Failure to fulfill developmentally appropriate paternal roles
		Maternal inattention to developmental stages	Failure to complement the other parent's developmental role
	Neglect of personal parenting errors	Failure to recognize counterproductive responses	Ignoring escalation of child–parent conflict
		Maladaptive parental reactions	Failure to establish psychological safety through appropriate rules
	Excessive focus on one's own efforts	Perception of superior parental effort	Overestimation of personal parenting effectiveness
		Inflated self-importance in parenting	Exaggeration of personal impact on child development
	Hostile focus on the other parent's mistakes	Error-seeking to regulate emotional pain	Searching for minor mistakes to soothe attachment wounds
		Devaluation of the other parent	Emotional harm through criticism
	Excessive focus on specific child needs	Paternal overemphasis on selected needs	Psychological harm due to overattention to one need
		Maternal overemphasis on selected needs	Imbalance in addressing child developmental needs
	Neglect of role-specific parental duties	Neglect of paternal responsibilities	Failure to provide financial support
			Failure to provide emotional, service, and organizational support
		Neglect of maternal responsibilities	Failure to provide emotional and caregiving support
Instrumental use of the child in parenting	Child as a tool for personal goals	Father's instrumental use of the child	Achieving personal objectives through involving the child in personal plans
			Inability to achieve goals without instrumentalizing the child
		Mother's instrumental use of the child	Pursuit of personal goals through the child
	Child as a means of harming the other parent	Father's use of child to harm mother	Emotional harm directed at the other parent via the child
		Mother's use of child to harm father	Undermining the parent's functioning through the child
Reciprocal revenge-seeking	Revenge as compensation for emotional loss	Sense of empowerment following revenge	Satisfaction derived from retaliatory behavior
		Restoration of control over former spouse	Belief in dominance achieved through revenge
	Revenge for emotional relief	Soothing attachment wounds	Emotional relief through witnessing the other parent's suffering
	Creation of new failures for the other parent	Strategic attempts to weaken former spouse	Psychological and behavioral planning to diminish the other parent's competence
		Inducing regret in the former partner	Efforts to evoke remorse about the divorce and nostalgia for past stability

The contents of Table 2 indicate that there are five main themes regarding barriers to co-parenting: barriers arising from improper redefinition of post-divorce parenting, conflicts stemming from parental neglect and misdirected parenting focus, lack of trust in the other parent's parenting, reciprocal revenge-seeking, and instrumental use of the child in parenting. In what follows, each of these overarching themes is described together with its underlying organizing categories.

The overarching theme of **barriers arising from improper redefinition of post-divorce parenting** indicated that although these parents recognized post-divorce changes in parenting and understood the necessity of cooperation and coordination in child-rearing, one or both parties were unable to engage in co-parenting. Additionally, they were unable to accept the role of the stepparent, defined here as the new spouse of their former partner. This overarching theme comprised two organizing categories:

1. **Conflicts stemming from self-serving/authoritarian parenting grounded in negative emotions toward the former spouse.** In this regard, one parent stated: "I didn't want my son to see his mother anymore at first. I hate her, honestly. I want her to suffer the way she brought us to this point."
2. **Ambiguity regarding the stepparent's role in parenting.** In this regard, one father stated: "My son doesn't get along with my new wife. She wants him to keep up with his schoolwork and to mother him, but on weekends when he goes to his mother's, it's all just games, parties, and television. That's why he thinks my wife is bad. I think it would be better if he didn't go to his mom's house at all."

The overarching theme of **lack of trust in the other parent's parenting** was another major theme showing that one source of post-divorce parenting conflict is distrust of the former partner. This reflects that divorced parents, due to a history of relational conflicts across various domains of life, have limited trust in one another, including trust in parenting performance. This is particularly salient for the parent who holds custody and believes that the other parent is not an effective parent. This overarching theme included three organizing categories:

1. **Distrust arising from the belief that the other parent had poor past functioning in married life.** In this regard, one parent stated: "What did they ever do for these kids before that they would do anything now? When I came home, my daughter was dirty and her foot was burned; my son was wandering around the house, and both were hungry—while she was just watching TV."
2. **Distrust arising from the belief that the other parent has poor current parenting functioning.** One participant stated: "I don't accept her 'mothering.' Do you think someone who calls at three o'clock to come pick up her son is a mother? Can you entrust a child to her?"
3. **Desire to exert control over the other parent's parenting.** One participant stated: "He thinks I'm stupid and that I don't notice what he's doing—leaving the kids with his mother. I won't let his mother interfere in raising this child."

The overarching theme of **parental neglect and misdirected parenting focus** was another extracted theme indicating that one barrier to post-divorce co-parenting stems from one or both parties neglecting their responsibilities. This theme encompassed several forms of neglect and distorted focus:

1. **Neglect of one's own parenting duties.** For example, one parent stated: "I told him Neela really misses you; she hasn't seen you for two weeks. He said I can't come this Thursday and Friday."
2. **Neglect of the other parent's parenting efforts.** For example, one mother disregarded all of the father's efforts and stated: "From the beginning I said Avina's custody should be with Saeedeh, but he doesn't understand that I want Avina too. I said I'll take the child from Wednesday evening to Thursday evening and I just want her to have fun. He says, 'What about her homework?' Fine—if

you claim you work on lessons with the child all week, why is the school unhappy with her academic situation? ..."

3. **Hostile focus on the other parent's parenting errors.** One participant stated: "The child is thin and weak and hasn't grown properly. I was in Armenia for three months; when I came back, I saw he was thinner than before I left. This child needs care. I told him, 'You didn't know how to be a husband; now you don't know how to be a parent either.'"
4. **Excessive focus on one's own efforts.** Another participant stated: "I said I'll take him for the summer to stay with me and you can go to Tabriz to see your family, but I saw that during those nine school months he did nothing. I spent two full weeks on him, but what can I do? His father's nature is in him and it didn't help..."
5. **Neglect of one's own parenting mistakes.** In this regard, one participant stated: "I did everything I had to do and I also told him what he should do, but he doesn't listen now and he didn't listen then either—he's stubborn..."
6. **Neglect of what the child needs at a specific developmental stage.** For example, one participant stated: "Throughout sixth and seventh grade, when my daughter was reaching puberty, her mother went to Canada, and that was heartbreaking for me. I was alone in Isfahan; my whole family lives in Ardabil. My daughter and I went through very hard days, just the two of us."
7. **Excessive focus by one or both parents on certain developmental features/needs of the child.** For example, one parent stated: "He doesn't tell himself what future these two kids are supposed to have. Every day they go there, he takes these two girls to the pool. He says don't even send their bags and books with them. When they get sick, he says, 'I can't stand seeing my kids ill; don't bring them to me—I can't take care of them...'"

The overarching theme of **revenge-seeking against one another through parenting** was another extracted theme indicating that these parents had been unable to forgive each other's mistakes, and one of their strategies for soothing past wounds was to weaponize parenting. This overarching theme consisted of the following organizing categories:

1. **Revenge-seeking to fill voids and compensate for defeats.** One participating mother stated: "I felt satisfied—he really suffered. He called, he sent mediators, he went to the school gate, he cried. I didn't let him see the child. About a month passed and then I saw an official notice came..."
2. **Revenge-seeking to create new failures for the other parent.** One father stated: "The day she filed to enforce the dowry, I made a vow to myself: no matter what, I won't let her see the child... Don't insist. I promised myself I won't let it go until I take revenge."

The overarching theme of **instrumental use of the child** was another major theme showing that parents viewed their child as a tool for achieving personal goals and did not attend to the consequences of this behavior for the child. This overarching theme emerged from the following organizing categories:

1. **The child as a tool for achieving personal goals.** One participant stated: "When the child goes to her mother, I don't ask any questions, but she asks about every detail of our life. My daughter said that week, 'I don't want to go to her anymore—she asks so many questions.' She tells her, 'Why don't you answer properly?' She exhausts her with questions. She even asked my daughter whether her dad had changed his car or not."
2. **The child as a tool for harming the former spouse and the other parent.** One participant stated: "He tells the child, 'Go get money from your mom—she's loaded.' I can't pay more than one million a month; sometimes I pay, sometimes I don't. I called him and said at least give the child's subsidy, and he says, 'Tell your dad to pay.'"

3. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study revealed that barriers to effective co-parenting after divorce are organized around five interrelated themes: improper redefinition of parenting roles after divorce, parental neglect and misdirected parenting focus, lack of trust in the other parent's parenting competence, reciprocal revenge-seeking, and instrumental use of the child within post-divorce relational dynamics. Taken together, these themes indicate that co-parenting conflict is not merely the continuation of marital disagreement but rather a complex psychological restructuring failure in which parents struggle to transition from a marital relationship to a cooperative parental alliance.

The first major finding concerned barriers arising from the improper redefinition of parenting following divorce. Although participants cognitively recognized the necessity of collaboration, emotionally they remained embedded in adversarial relational patterns. This result aligns with systemic family theory, which proposes that divorce disrupts family subsystems and requires renegotiation of roles and boundaries; failure to reorganize these boundaries leads to persistent dysfunction in parenting coordination (23, 24). Previous research has emphasized that successful co-parenting requires parents to differentiate marital dissolution from parental identity, a transition many individuals find psychologically challenging (25). Consistent with findings by Ahrons, long-term family ties after divorce depend on parents' ability to reconstruct cooperative roles despite emotional separation (26). The present findings demonstrate that unresolved emotional hostility interferes with this restructuring process, leading parents to adopt self-centered or authoritarian parenting positions rather than collaborative co-parenting arrangements.

An important aspect of this theme involved ambiguity surrounding the role of stepparents. Participants expressed difficulty accepting new parental figures, reflecting challenges in redefining family hierarchy after repartnering. Earlier studies similarly indicate that repartnering introduces structural ambiguity that may intensify interparental conflict when expectations about authority and caregiving remain unclear (27, 28). The resistance observed in the present study suggests that co-parenting difficulties extend beyond the original parental dyad and involve broader family system reorganization, supporting research highlighting the ecological nature of post-divorce family adaptation (29).

The second major theme—lack of trust in the other parent's parenting—emerged as a central mechanism underlying post-divorce conflict. Participants frequently interpreted past marital failures as evidence of parental incompetence, resulting in surveillance, criticism, and attempts to control the other parent's behavior. This finding corroborates earlier research demonstrating that interparental conflict strongly predicts reduced parental cooperation and increased monitoring behaviors (30). Longitudinal evidence shows that distrust between parents undermines parental involvement and negatively influences children's adjustment over time (31). Studies examining divorce trajectories similarly emphasize that unresolved relational conflict prior to divorce shapes post-divorce parenting patterns, reinforcing cycles of suspicion and defensive interaction (32). The present findings expand this understanding by illustrating how distrust operates psychologically as a protective mechanism through which parents attempt to maintain perceived parental competence and authority.

The desire to control the other parent identified in the findings also reflects broader dynamics of power renegotiation following separation. Research on high-conflict divorces suggests that parents may attempt to regain lost relational control through parenting decisions, thereby transforming co-parenting into a

competitive rather than cooperative process (33). Such dynamics are associated with increased child exposure to conflict and reduced emotional security (34). The present results therefore support the view that co-parenting conflict is often rooted in unresolved emotional regulation difficulties rather than disagreements about childrearing itself.

The third overarching theme, parental neglect and misdirected parenting focus, provides further insight into how psychological processes interfere with cooperative parenting. Participants demonstrated patterns of ignoring their own parenting shortcomings while emphasizing the failures of the other parent. This asymmetrical attribution pattern is consistent with research showing that parental conflict heightens cognitive bias and reduces reflective functioning in parenting interactions (35). Family psychology literature suggests that when parents remain emotionally preoccupied with former partners, attentional resources shift away from children's developmental needs toward interpersonal rivalry (36). The neglect of developmental needs identified in the present study corresponds with findings that inconsistent or poorly coordinated parenting environments contribute to children's emotional instability and trauma-related symptoms in high-conflict divorce contexts (37).

Another important aspect of this theme involved excessive focus on personal parenting efforts and hostile monitoring of the other parent's mistakes. Such processes resemble what Lamb described as role competition in separated families, where parental identity becomes tied to demonstrating superiority rather than supporting the child's developmental context (38). These dynamics may increase children's exposure to loyalty conflicts, a phenomenon frequently reported by children navigating dual household environments (39). The findings therefore highlight how parental cognitive-emotional biases transform co-parenting from a shared responsibility into an arena for validation and self-justification.

The fourth theme, reciprocal revenge-seeking through parenting, represents one of the most psychologically significant findings of the study. Participants described using parenting decisions as mechanisms for emotional compensation, punishment, or restoration of personal dignity. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that unresolved grief and perceived injustice following divorce may lead parents to maintain conflict as a means of preserving emotional meaning or identity continuity (40). Contemporary studies further indicate that persistent conflict parenting often reflects attempts to regulate emotional pain rather than intentional harm toward children (41). Revenge-oriented parenting behaviors may therefore function as maladaptive coping strategies, reinforcing cycles of hostility and preventing the development of cooperative parenting alliances.

The psychological consequences of revenge-driven parenting extend beyond parental relationships. Studies examining children exposed to high-conflict separation demonstrate increased risks for anxiety, depression, and behavioral dysregulation when children become entangled in parental disputes (42). Furthermore, ongoing interparental hostility is associated with posttraumatic stress symptoms among children, particularly when conflict remains chronic and emotionally intense (37). The present findings therefore reinforce existing evidence that unresolved emotional processes between parents constitute a major developmental risk factor for children after divorce.

The final theme, instrumental use of the child, reflects the most severe disruption of co-parenting boundaries. Participants described using children to gather information, exert pressure, or emotionally harm the former partner. This pattern closely resembles triangulation processes described in structural family

theory, whereby children become intermediaries within unresolved adult conflicts (23). Research on parental alienation and relational loss demonstrates that children exposed to such dynamics often experience identity confusion, emotional distress, and long-term relational difficulties (43). The present findings also align with qualitative studies showing that parents' lived experiences of post-divorce parenting frequently involve blurred boundaries between parental responsibility and interpersonal conflict (44, 45).

Importantly, the convergence of all five themes suggests that co-parenting failure cannot be attributed to a single factor. Rather, ineffective co-parenting emerges from an interaction between emotional processes, cognitive interpretations, relational histories, and systemic family restructuring challenges. Intervention research supports this interpretation, demonstrating that programs targeting psychological flexibility, emotional regulation, and cooperative communication can significantly improve co-parenting functioning among high-conflict parents (46). Preventive interventions aimed at supporting children after parental separation likewise emphasize the necessity of reducing interparental hostility and strengthening parental collaboration (47). Educational divorce programs have also been shown to improve parents' intentions toward cooperative parenting when emotional processing is incorporated into intervention design (48).

Overall, the findings contribute to the growing body of literature conceptualizing co-parenting as a developmental process requiring emotional transformation rather than solely behavioral coordination. Consistent with ecological models of family adaptation, successful post-divorce parenting depends on parents' ability to reorganize identities, regulate emotional reactions, and construct new collaborative meanings around parenting roles (29, 35). The present study extends prior research by illuminating how psychological barriers operate subjectively in parents' lived experiences, thereby offering a deeper understanding of why co-parenting cooperation remains difficult despite widespread awareness of its importance.

The present study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the qualitative nature of the research and the relatively small sample size limit the generalizability of results to broader populations of divorced parents. Second, participants were recruited from counseling centers, which may have resulted in the inclusion of individuals experiencing higher-than-average levels of conflict, thereby potentially overrepresenting dysfunctional co-parenting patterns. Third, the findings rely on self-reported narratives that may be influenced by personal bias, selective memory, or emotional defensiveness. Additionally, cultural and contextual factors specific to the study setting may shape parental experiences in ways that differ across societies and legal systems.

Future studies could employ mixed-method or longitudinal designs to examine how co-parenting barriers evolve over time and how emotional processes change during different stages of post-divorce adjustment. Comparative cross-cultural research would also be valuable in identifying how legal structures, gender expectations, and social support systems influence co-parenting dynamics. Investigating children's perspectives alongside parental experiences may provide a more comprehensive understanding of family restructuring after divorce. Moreover, future research could explore protective factors such as resilience, emotional intelligence, or parental reflective functioning that may facilitate successful co-parenting transitions.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of developing therapeutic and educational interventions that move beyond behavioral parenting skills and directly address emotional

wounds associated with divorce. Counseling programs should focus on helping parents separate marital grievances from parenting responsibilities, strengthen emotional regulation capacities, and foster empathy toward the co-parent. Family courts and mediation services may benefit from incorporating structured co-parenting education emphasizing psychological flexibility, communication skills, and child-centered decision-making. Mental health professionals working with divorced families should also pay particular attention to preventing triangulation and instrumental use of children by reinforcing clear parental boundaries and promoting cooperative parenting identities.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their deep gratitude to all participants who contributed to this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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