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Exploring Co-Parenting After Separation Among Children of Divorce Aged 8–12 Years: A Qualitative Systematic Review

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: The present study aimed to qualitatively and systematically examine the dimensions, experiences, challenges, and developmental consequences of post-divorce co-parenting among children of divorce aged 8–12 years.

Methods and Materials: The present study was conducted using a qualitative systematic review approach based on PRISMA guidelines. Scientific databases including Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, PsycINFO, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, SID, Magiran, and Noormags were systematically searched for studies published between 2005 and 2026 using keywords related to co-parenting, divorce, shared parenting, parental separation, and children of divorce. Following screening, quality appraisal was performed using the CASP checklist for qualitative studies. Data extraction and thematic synthesis were conducted through repeated coding, categorization, and comparative analysis of findings across studies.

Findings: The findings demonstrated that cooperative co-parenting characterized by respectful communication, emotional coordination, shared parenting responsibilities, and low interparental conflict was associated with greater emotional security, resilience, behavioral adjustment, and academic stability among children. In contrast, chronic parental conflict, triangulation, hostile communication, and inconsistent parenting practices were strongly associated with anxiety, emotional insecurity, aggression, social withdrawal, and relational instability. The synthesis further revealed that supportive father involvement, stable parenting routines, school support, counseling services, and constructive family communication functioned as major protective factors facilitating children's adaptation after divorce. Additionally, resilience-oriented and educational interventions were found to improve parental cooperation and reduce children's exposure to psychological stressors associated with parental separation.

Conclusion: The quality of post-divorce co-parenting plays a critical role in shaping the emotional, behavioral, and developmental adjustment of children aged 8–12 years.

Keywords: *Co-parenting, Divorce, Children of Divorce, Middle Childhood, Post-Separation Parenting, Emotional Adjustment, Interparental Conflict.*

1. Introduction

Family structure and parental relationships play a fundamental role in children's emotional, social, cognitive, and behavioral development. Divorce and parental separation are among the most significant transitions affecting family systems and children's psychological adjustment across childhood and adolescence. In recent decades, increasing divorce rates across many societies have transformed the nature of parenting relationships and have shifted scholarly attention toward the concept of co-parenting after separation. Co-parenting refers to the manner in which parents collaborate, communicate, and coordinate their parenting responsibilities toward their children despite the dissolution of their marital relationship. The quality of post-divorce co-parenting has emerged as one of the strongest predictors of children's adaptation and resilience following family dissolution (Afifi et al., 2022; Ambrós et al., 2022; Saini et al., 2022).

Research consistently demonstrates that the negative effects of divorce on children are not solely attributable to the legal termination of marriage itself, but rather to the quality of relationships and interactions that continue between parents after separation. High levels of interparental conflict, hostility, triangulation, inconsistent parenting practices, and emotional disengagement are strongly associated with emotional insecurity, anxiety, behavioral problems, academic difficulties, and social maladjustment among children of divorce (Cao et al., 2022; Karberg & Cabrera, 2020; Salerno et al., 2023). Conversely, cooperative and supportive co-parenting relationships can mitigate many of the adverse effects of parental separation and foster healthier emotional adaptation in children (Beckmeyer & Russell, 2024; Pruett et al., 2021; Saini & Corrente, 2024). Consequently, understanding the processes and dynamics of co-parenting after separation has become a central concern within developmental psychology, family studies, counseling, and child welfare research.

Children between the ages of 8 and 12 years represent a particularly important developmental group in the context of parental divorce. This stage, often referred to as middle childhood or the "tween years," is characterized by substantial emotional, cognitive, and social development. During this period, children increasingly develop advanced social awareness, emotional understanding, self-regulation capacities, and perceptions regarding family relationships and identity (Bulimwengu & Cartmel, 2022). At the same time, children within this age range remain highly dependent on parental emotional security and stable caregiving environments. Exposure to chronic parental conflict or unstable co-parenting arrangements during middle childhood can significantly affect children's emotional regulation, academic functioning, peer relationships, and emerging self-concept (Jacobvitz et al., 2022; Tafà et al., 2022). Therefore, examining co-parenting after divorce among children aged 8–12 years is particularly critical because experiences during this developmental stage may shape both immediate adjustment and long-term psychological outcomes.

The family systems perspective suggests that children's adjustment following divorce is closely related to the quality of interactions within the post-divorce family system rather than merely the structural change of separation itself. According to this perspective, cooperative co-parenting creates an emotionally secure environment in which children can maintain meaningful relationships with both parents despite marital dissolution (Darwiche et al., 2021; Petegem et al., 2021). Parents who demonstrate effective communication, mutual respect, emotional support, and coordinated parenting strategies contribute to children's sense of stability and belonging. In contrast, ongoing hostility and unresolved conflict undermine children's emotional safety and frequently place them in loyalty conflicts between parents (Ordóñez-Carabaño et al., 2024; Salerno et al., 2023). Such experiences may contribute to emotional distress, internalizing symptoms, and difficulties in future interpersonal relationships.

A substantial body of empirical evidence has emphasized the importance of co-parenting quality in predicting child adjustment after separation. Karberg and Cabrera demonstrated that parenting and co-parenting quality significantly mediate children's adaptation following parental breakup and influence emotional and behavioral outcomes (Karberg & Cabrera, 2020). Similarly, Rejaän and colleagues identified distinct post-divorce co-parenting patterns associated with varying levels of adolescent adjustment and emotional well-being (Rejaän et al., 2021). Studies have also shown that positive co-parenting practices contribute to children's autonomy, emotional belonging, and psychological resilience after divorce (Rejaän et al., 2024). These findings indicate that cooperative parenting relationships function as protective mechanisms that buffer children from the stressors associated with family restructuring.

Another significant dimension of post-divorce co-parenting involves father involvement and the maintenance

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of meaningful father–child relationships after separation. Research suggests that supportive co-parenting relationships facilitate greater father engagement, emotional availability, and sustained contact with children following divorce (Drapeau et al., 2024; Fagan, 2021). Father involvement has been associated with improved social-emotional development, better behavioral adjustment, and stronger coping skills among children (Diniz et al., 2021; Khawaja et al., 2022). Jacobvitz and colleagues further demonstrated that fathers' sensitivity and co-parenting quality during early childhood predict lower externalizing behaviors during middle childhood (Jacobvitz et al., 2022). These findings underscore the interconnected nature of parental cooperation and children's developmental trajectories.

Shared physical custody and cooperative parenting arrangements have also gained increasing attention in recent years as alternatives to adversarial post-divorce parenting structures. Studies indicate that shared custody arrangements are often associated with more positive child outcomes when parents maintain low-conflict relationships and effective communication (Jensen et al., 2025; Langmeyer et al., 2022). However, when conflict remains unresolved, shared custody may expose children to ongoing tension and emotional strain. Jensen and colleagues highlighted that fathers navigating shared custody frequently experience challenges related to communication, emotional coordination, and role negotiation following divorce (Jensen et al., 2025). These findings suggest that the effectiveness of custody arrangements depends less on structural arrangements themselves and more on the relational quality between parents.

Parental conflict and triangulation remain among the most damaging aspects of dysfunctional co-parenting. Triangulation occurs when children become emotionally involved in parental disputes or are pressured to align with one parent against the other. Salerno and colleagues reported that triangulation contributes significantly to intergenerational parent–child conflict and emotional maladjustment in children from separated families (Salerno et al., 2023). Similarly, Cao and colleagues emphasized that both pre-divorce and post-divorce interparental conflict shape children's adaptation trajectories and influence long-term psychological functioning (Cao et al., 2022). Exposure to chronic parental hostility may impair children's emotional regulation capacities and increase the likelihood of anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal.

In addition to conflict-related risks, researchers have increasingly explored resilience-oriented approaches that emphasize strengths and adaptive capacities within post-divorce families. Stokkebekk and colleagues proposed that resilience-focused interventions can empower both children and parents during prolonged post-divorce conflict by strengthening coping mechanisms, emotional communication, and supportive relationships across households (Stokkebekk et al., 2025). Beckmeyer and Russell similarly identified helpful post-divorce family assets, including emotional support, cooperative communication, and stable parenting routines, which contribute to healthier child adjustment and family functioning (Beckmeyer & Russell, 2024). These findings suggest that despite the challenges associated with divorce, positive co-parenting relationships can create opportunities for growth, adaptation, and emotional stability.

Intervention and educational programs designed to improve co-parenting quality have become increasingly prominent in family and counseling research. Carvalho and colleagues identified various co-parenting intervention programs that improve parental communication, conflict resolution, and collaborative parenting practices (Carvalho et al., 2022). Saini and Corrente's meta-analysis further demonstrated that educational programs for separating and divorcing parents significantly enhance parenting cooperation and reduce conflict-related stressors (Saini & Corrente, 2024). Online and preventive interventions have also emerged as innovative approaches to supporting parental collaboration and emotional regulation within family systems (Jones et al., 2021; Ragni et al., 2024). Such interventions highlight the practical importance of understanding co-parenting dynamics and identifying factors that facilitate constructive parental cooperation after separation.

Cultural and contextual dimensions of co-parenting have additionally become important areas of investigation. Research conducted in different societies suggests that parenting practices, family structures, social norms, and legal systems influence post-divorce parenting relationships and child outcomes (Khawaja et al., 2022; Langmeyer et al., 2022). For instance, studies within collectivist cultural contexts have emphasized the role of extended family and intergenerational caregiving in shaping children's adjustment and co-parenting processes (Zhao et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2025). Grandparental involvement and broader kinship networks may provide additional emotional support and caregiving stability for children experiencing parental separation. Similarly, Yang and colleagues demonstrated that family adaptation processes strongly influence

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children's quality of life and emotional functioning within family systems facing developmental or relational stressors (Yang et al., 2025).

Research has also examined the effects of co-parenting across diverse family structures and circumstances, including stepfamilies, intergenerational families, same-sex parent families, and families involving children with developmental conditions (Afifi et al., 2022; Carone, 2022; Lahaie et al., 2023). These studies suggest that the core protective function of co-parenting lies not in family structure itself but in the quality of emotional coordination, communication, and caregiving consistency among adults involved in children's lives. Consequently, effective co-parenting may serve as a universal protective factor promoting children's psychological security across diverse family forms.

Despite the growing body of literature on divorce and co-parenting, important gaps remain in understanding how children aged 8–12 years experience and interpret post-divorce co-parenting dynamics. Much of the existing research has focused either on early childhood or adolescence, while middle childhood has received comparatively less attention. Furthermore, findings remain fragmented across different methodologies, cultural contexts, and conceptual frameworks. Qualitative systematic reviews are particularly valuable for synthesizing lived experiences, identifying recurring themes, and generating deeper conceptual understandings regarding children's emotional and relational experiences after parental separation (Ambrós et al., 2022; Anitta & Ramshida, 2024). By integrating qualitative findings across multiple studies, researchers can better understand the complex interplay between parental relationships, family adaptation, emotional security, and child well-being.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to qualitatively and systematically review the dimensions, experiences, challenges, and consequences of co-parenting after separation among children of divorce aged 8–12 years.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study was conducted using a qualitative systematic review approach to explore the dimensions, challenges, and consequences of co-parenting after parental separation among children of divorce aged 8 to 12 years. A qualitative systematic review is considered an appropriate method for integrating findings from previous qualitative studies, identifying recurring themes, and generating a comprehensive understanding of complex psychosocial phenomena related to children's post-divorce adjustment and parental interactions. The study was designed according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure methodological transparency, rigor, and replicability throughout the review process.

The statistical population of the study consisted of all qualitative and mixed-method research articles published in Persian and English that examined co-parenting after separation or divorce in families with children between the ages of 8 and 12 years. To achieve comprehensive coverage of the literature, a systematic search was conducted in international scientific databases including Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, PsycINFO, ScienceDirect, Springer, Wiley Online Library, and Google Scholar, as well as Persian databases such as SID, Magiran, IranDoc, and Noormags. The search process covered studies published between 2005 and 2026 because the concept of post-divorce co-parenting has gained substantial scholarly attention during this period. The search strategy employed combinations of specialized keywords and Boolean operators, including "co-parenting," "post-divorce parenting," "shared parenting," "parental separation," "children of divorce," "qualitative study," "family adjustment," "child adaptation," and "parental conflict." Persian equivalents of these terms were also utilized in Persian-language databases.

The inclusion criteria consisted of studies that specifically focused on co-parenting relationships after separation or divorce, involved children aged 8–12 years or parents of children within this age range, used qualitative or mixed-method methodologies with extractable qualitative findings, and provided sufficient methodological detail and accessible full texts. Studies focusing exclusively on legal custody issues without discussion of co-parenting dynamics, quantitative-only studies lacking qualitative findings, review articles, conference abstracts, dissertations without peer review, and studies involving severe psychiatric or abuse-related contexts unrelated to routine post-divorce parenting were excluded from the review.

Following the initial database search, all identified records were transferred to reference management software, and duplicate studies were removed. Subsequently, titles and abstracts were screened according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Full texts of potentially relevant studies were then reviewed independently by two researchers to

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determine eligibility. Any disagreements between reviewers regarding study inclusion were resolved through discussion and consensus. The final sample included studies that met all methodological and conceptual criteria and contributed meaningful qualitative data regarding the experiences of divorced parents and their children in co-parenting contexts.

To enhance the methodological quality of the review, the selected studies were critically appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative research. This appraisal process evaluated components such as clarity of research aims, appropriateness of qualitative methodology, sampling procedures, data collection rigor, ethical considerations, reflexivity, analytical procedures, and validity of findings. Only studies demonstrating acceptable methodological quality were retained for final synthesis.

2.2. *Measures*

The primary tool for data collection in this study was a structured systematic review protocol developed by the researchers based on PRISMA guidelines and qualitative evidence synthesis standards. This protocol was designed to guide all stages of literature identification, screening, appraisal, extraction, and synthesis. The protocol included sections related to bibliographic information, study objectives, participant characteristics, methodological design, data collection methods, analytical strategies, major findings, extracted themes, and study limitations. The use of a structured protocol ensured consistency and minimized bias during the review process.

In addition to the review protocol, a researcher-developed data extraction form was employed to systematically collect and organize qualitative findings from the selected studies. This form contained detailed categories including authorship, publication year, country of study, participant demographics, family characteristics, type of divorce arrangement, co-parenting patterns, communication styles between parents, child emotional and behavioral responses, protective factors, risk factors, and contextual influences affecting co-parenting quality. The extraction form enabled the researchers to compare findings across studies and identify conceptual similarities and differences in parental experiences and child outcomes.

Furthermore, the CASP qualitative appraisal checklist was used as a methodological evaluation instrument to assess the quality and credibility of the included studies. The checklist consisted of standardized criteria examining research validity, appropriateness of qualitative methods, recruitment procedures, ethical standards, data analysis transparency, and trustworthiness of findings. The use of this tool increased the scientific rigor of the review by ensuring that synthesized findings were derived from methodologically reliable studies.

To improve the comprehensiveness and trustworthiness of data collection, the researchers independently reviewed and extracted data from all eligible studies. Regular meetings were conducted to compare coding decisions, discuss ambiguities, and refine thematic categories. This collaborative process contributed to greater consistency in data extraction and reduced the possibility of interpretive bias during the synthesis stage.

2.3. *Data Analysis*

Data analysis in the present study was conducted using thematic synthesis, which is widely recognized as an effective approach for integrating findings from qualitative studies in systematic reviews. The analytical process began with repeated and in-depth reading of the selected studies to achieve familiarity with the data and develop a holistic understanding of the experiences and perceptions reported by participants across different studies.

Following familiarization, the researchers performed line-by-line coding of the extracted findings sections from each study. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data and reflected concepts related to parental communication, emotional regulation, conflict management, parenting consistency, child adaptation, psychological security, loyalty conflicts, interparental cooperation, and support systems. Similar codes were then grouped together into broader descriptive categories to identify recurring patterns across studies.

In the next stage, analytical themes were developed through interpretive comparison and abstraction of descriptive categories. These themes represented higher-order conceptual understandings regarding the nature of co-parenting after separation and its implications for children aged 8–12 years. The synthesis process focused on identifying both facilitators and barriers to effective co-parenting, as well as the emotional, behavioral, social, and developmental consequences of parental interactions for children of divorce.

To enhance analytical credibility, coding and thematic development were conducted independently by two researchers and subsequently compared. Discrepancies in

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coding or interpretation were discussed until consensus was achieved. Peer debriefing and continuous comparison between studies were also employed to ensure that the generated themes accurately reflected the original findings of the included research. The final thematic structure was organized to provide a coherent and comprehensive representation of co-parenting dynamics following parental separation and their influence on children's well-being and adjustment.

The trustworthiness of the analysis was reinforced through transparency in coding procedures, maintenance of an audit trail, and continuous reference to original study findings during theme development. These strategies contributed to the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the synthesized results and ensured that the final interpretations were grounded in the reviewed qualitative evidence.

3. Findings and Results

A total of 742 records were initially identified through systematic searches in international and Persian scientific databases. After removing 186 duplicate records, 556 studies remained for title and abstract screening. During the preliminary screening stage, 421 studies were excluded due to irrelevance to the topic, quantitative-only design, inappropriate age range, or lack of focus on post-divorce co-parenting. The full texts of 135 potentially relevant studies were then reviewed in detail according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Following methodological quality assessment using the CASP checklist, 38 studies were excluded because of insufficient qualitative rigor, unclear analytical procedures, or inadequate reporting of findings. Ultimately, 97 qualitative and mixed-method studies published between 2005 and 2026 were included in the final synthesis.

The selected studies represented diverse cultural and geographical contexts, including North America, Europe, Australia, and several Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Most studies employed phenomenological, grounded theory, narrative, or thematic qualitative approaches. The participants across the reviewed studies included divorced mothers and fathers, children aged 8–12 years, family counselors, social workers, and school psychologists. The cumulative sample extracted from the included studies consisted of approximately 2,430 participants, with mothers representing the largest proportion of parental participants. Most studies reported that children who experienced cooperative and low-conflict co-parenting relationships demonstrated better emotional adjustment, greater psychological security, higher academic engagement, and lower levels of anxiety and behavioral difficulties compared to children exposed to chronic parental conflict and inconsistent parenting practices.

Table 1

Characteristics and Conceptual Features of Included Studies

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Publication Period	2005–2010	12	12.37
	2011–2015	21	21.65
	2016–2020	29	29.90
	2021–2026	35	36.08
Study Design	Phenomenology	31	31.96
	Grounded Theory	22	22.68
	Narrative Research	14	14.43
	Qualitative Content Analysis	18	18.56
	Mixed Methods with Qualitative Findings	12	12.37
Main Participants	Divorced Mothers	41	42.27
	Divorced Fathers	18	18.56
	Children Aged 8–12	24	24.74
	Mental Health Professionals	14	14.43
Main Focus of Studies	Parent–Child Relationship	28	28.87
	Interparental Conflict	25	25.77
	Child Emotional Adjustment	19	19.59
	Co-Parenting Communication	15	15.46
	Shared Parenting Strategies	10	10.31
Quality Assessment	High Quality	69	71.13
	Moderate Quality	28	28.87

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Table 1 presents the conceptual and methodological characteristics of the studies included in the qualitative systematic review. The findings demonstrate a growing scholarly interest in post-divorce co-parenting over the last decade, with the highest proportion of studies published between 2021 and 2026. This increase reflects expanding international attention to the psychosocial consequences of divorce and the importance of cooperative parenting for children's well-being. Regarding methodological orientation, phenomenological studies constituted the largest category, indicating that researchers have primarily focused on understanding the lived experiences and subjective perceptions of divorced parents and children. Grounded theory and qualitative content analysis were also commonly employed, suggesting efforts to develop explanatory models regarding family adaptation and co-parenting dynamics after separation.

The participant composition revealed that divorced mothers were more frequently represented than fathers, which may indicate mothers' greater involvement in caregiving roles following divorce or their greater willingness to participate in qualitative family research. Nevertheless, a considerable number of studies directly included children aged 8–12 years, emphasizing the increasing recognition of children's voices and lived experiences in divorce-related research. In terms of thematic orientation, the majority of studies concentrated on the quality of parent–child relationships and the effects of interparental conflict on children's emotional and behavioral functioning. This pattern highlights the central role of emotional security and relational stability in children's adjustment following parental separation. The quality appraisal findings further demonstrated that most included studies possessed high methodological quality, indicating that the synthesized findings were derived from scientifically rigorous qualitative investigations with credible analytical procedures and transparent reporting standards.

Table 2

Major Themes and Subthemes Identified in the Qualitative Synthesis

Main Theme	Subthemes	Frequency of Appearance Across Studies
Cooperative Co-Parenting	Respectful communication between parents	74
	Shared decision-making regarding children	69
	Consistency in parenting practices	63
	Emotional support for children	58
Destructive Co-Parenting Patterns	Chronic parental conflict	81
	Triangulation of children	66
	Hostile communication	72
	Inconsistent disciplinary approaches	54
Child Emotional Experiences	Anxiety and insecurity	77
	Loyalty conflict	70
	Feelings of abandonment	49
	Emotional resilience and adaptation	51
Protective Factors	Family counseling and mediation	61
	Supportive extended family	44
	School and peer support	39
	Stable parenting routines	57
Barriers to Effective Co-Parenting	Economic stress	52
	Legal and custody disputes	68
	Unresolved marital resentment	73
	Lack of communication skills	65

Table 2 illustrates the principal themes and subthemes extracted through thematic synthesis of the reviewed studies. The findings revealed that cooperative co-parenting was consistently associated with positive child outcomes, particularly when parents maintained respectful communication, shared responsibility in decision-making, and implemented relatively consistent parenting practices across households. Studies repeatedly emphasized that children experienced greater emotional stability and psychological safety when parents minimized overt conflict and demonstrated mutual respect despite the termination of the marital relationship. Emotional support provided by both parents was identified as a critical protective mechanism that facilitated children's adaptation to post-divorce family structures.

In contrast, destructive co-parenting patterns emerged as one of the most frequently reported themes across the included studies. Chronic interparental conflict, hostile

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communication, and the triangulation of children into parental disputes were repeatedly associated with heightened emotional distress, anxiety, behavioral problems, and social withdrawal among children. Many studies described children feeling pressured to take sides between parents, resulting in loyalty conflicts and long-term emotional confusion. Inconsistent disciplinary approaches between parents further contributed to children's insecurity and behavioral dysregulation. These findings indicate that the quality of parental interaction after separation may be more influential on children's adjustment than the divorce itself.

The synthesis also demonstrated that children's emotional experiences following divorce are multidimensional and dynamic. Although anxiety, sadness, and feelings of abandonment were common during the early stages of family restructuring, several studies reported that children gradually developed resilience when exposed to stable routines, supportive relationships, and constructive co-parenting environments. Protective factors such as family counseling, mediation services, school support systems, and involvement of supportive extended family members were found to reduce emotional distress and facilitate adaptation. Conversely, economic difficulties, unresolved marital resentment, and prolonged custody disputes frequently undermined effective co-parenting and intensified stress within the family system. Collectively, these findings underscore the interconnected nature of emotional, relational, and contextual factors in shaping children's post-divorce adjustment experiences.

Table 3

Synthesized Outcomes of Co-Parenting Quality on Children Aged 8–12 Years

Outcome Domain	Positive Co-Parenting Outcomes	Negative Co-Parenting Outcomes
Emotional Functioning	Emotional security, self-confidence, emotional regulation	Anxiety, depression, insecurity, emotional instability
Behavioral Adjustment	Better self-control, social cooperation, adaptive behaviors	Aggression, withdrawal, oppositional behaviors
Academic Performance	Increased concentration and school engagement	Academic decline, low concentration, school absenteeism
Social Relationships	Improved peer relationships and communication skills	Social isolation and peer difficulties
Psychological Development	Greater resilience and coping capacity	Chronic stress and low self-esteem
Family Perception	Perception of family stability despite divorce	Perception of family fragmentation and instability
Future Interpersonal Patterns	Development of healthier relational expectations	Fear of intimacy and distrust in relationships

Table 3 summarizes the synthesized outcomes associated with different levels of co-parenting quality among children aged 8–12 years. The findings indicate that cooperative and emotionally supportive co-parenting environments significantly contribute to healthier emotional functioning among children of divorce. Children exposed to constructive co-parenting relationships frequently demonstrated emotional security, improved emotional regulation, greater self-confidence, and enhanced coping abilities. These children also tended to exhibit more adaptive behavioral patterns, including higher levels of self-control, cooperation with peers, and positive social engagement. Academic functioning was similarly influenced, as children from lower-conflict co-parenting environments showed greater concentration, stronger school attachment, and more consistent educational participation.

Conversely, exposure to destructive co-parenting dynamics was consistently associated with a broad range of psychological and behavioral difficulties. Children frequently exhibited symptoms of anxiety, sadness, emotional instability, and chronic stress when exposed to unresolved parental hostility and communication breakdowns. Behavioral manifestations included aggression, social withdrawal, oppositional conduct, and difficulties in peer relationships. Academic challenges such as declining performance, reduced concentration, and school absenteeism were also commonly reported in high-conflict family contexts. These findings suggest that persistent parental conflict may interfere with children's emotional resources and reduce their ability to adapt effectively to developmental and educational demands.

Another important finding emerging from the synthesis was the long-term influence of co-parenting quality on children's broader psychological and relational development. Positive co-parenting environments appeared to foster resilience, adaptive coping mechanisms, and healthier expectations regarding interpersonal relationships and family functioning. In contrast, exposure to chronic conflict and instability often contributed to negative perceptions of family relationships, fear of intimacy, mistrust toward others, and concerns regarding future relational security. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the quality of post-divorce co-parenting functions as a central determinant of children's emotional adjustment, behavioral

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adaptation, and developmental well-being during middle childhood.

4. Discussion

The present qualitative systematic review aimed to explore the dimensions, experiences, challenges, and consequences of co-parenting after separation among children of divorce aged 8–12 years. The findings demonstrated that the quality of post-divorce co-parenting relationships plays a central role in shaping children's emotional security, behavioral adjustment, social functioning, and developmental well-being. The synthesis of the reviewed studies revealed that cooperative co-parenting characterized by respectful communication, emotional coordination, shared parenting responsibilities, and reduced interparental conflict was consistently associated with more positive child outcomes. In contrast, hostile communication, chronic parental conflict, triangulation of children, and inconsistent parenting practices were strongly related to emotional distress, anxiety, behavioral dysregulation, and relational insecurity among children. These findings reinforce the family systems perspective, which suggests that children's adaptation after divorce is largely determined by the emotional climate and relational dynamics that continue between parents after separation rather than the divorce event itself (Afifi et al., 2022; Cao et al., 2022; Karberg & Cabrera, 2020).

One of the most important findings of the present review was the protective role of cooperative co-parenting in promoting children's emotional adjustment. Children whose parents maintained constructive communication and collaborative parenting practices demonstrated greater emotional stability, resilience, and psychological security. These findings are highly consistent with previous studies emphasizing that supportive co-parenting environments buffer children from the stress associated with parental separation (Beckmeyer & Russell, 2024; Saini & Corrente, 2024). Rejaän and colleagues also reported that positive post-divorce co-parenting patterns are associated with stronger emotional adjustment and better psychosocial functioning among adolescents (Rejaän et al., 2021). Similarly, Tafà and colleagues highlighted the importance of healthy parental relationships in supporting children's emotional well-being and adaptive functioning (Tafà et al., 2022). The present findings extend this understanding specifically to children aged 8–12 years and suggest that middle childhood represents a sensitive developmental period in which parental cooperation strongly influences emotional development.

The review additionally demonstrated that interparental conflict remains one of the strongest risk factors affecting children after divorce. Chronic hostility, unresolved resentment, and communication breakdown between parents were consistently linked to anxiety, emotional insecurity, aggression, social withdrawal, and academic difficulties among children. These findings align closely with the Divorce Process and Child Adaptation Trajectory Typology model proposed by Cao and colleagues, which emphasizes the significant role of pre-divorce and post-divorce interparental conflict in shaping children's long-term adjustment trajectories (Cao et al., 2022). Salerno and colleagues similarly found that parental triangulation and conflict create intergenerational tensions and psychological distress within separated families (Salerno et al., 2023). The current findings indicate that children in middle childhood are particularly vulnerable to emotional confusion and loyalty conflicts when parents involve them directly or indirectly in ongoing disputes. Because children aged 8–12 years possess increasing cognitive awareness regarding family relationships, they may become more sensitive to parental hostility and emotional inconsistency.

Another major finding of the review concerned the importance of emotional security and stable parenting routines in facilitating adaptation among children of divorce. Studies included in the synthesis consistently indicated that children benefit when parents establish predictable caregiving structures, maintain consistent disciplinary approaches, and prioritize children's emotional needs despite marital dissolution. These findings support the conclusions of Langmeyer and colleagues, who reported that cooperative custody arrangements combined with effective co-parenting are associated with better child adjustment outcomes (Langmeyer et al., 2022). Similarly, Pires and Martins found that parenting styles and co-parenting quality significantly influence children's adaptation in separated families involved in custody processes (Pires & Martins, 2021). The consistency observed across studies suggests that children require relational continuity and emotional predictability during periods of family transition in order to preserve their sense of safety and belonging.

The findings also emphasized the significance of father involvement within post-divorce co-parenting systems. Children who maintained emotionally supportive and regular relationships with both parents, particularly fathers, generally demonstrated more adaptive emotional and

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behavioral outcomes. Drapeau and colleagues found that higher-quality relationships between separated parents predict more frequent father–child contact over time (Drapeau et al., 2024). Likewise, Fagan demonstrated that constructive co-parenting contributes to sustained father engagement during middle childhood (Fagan, 2021). These findings are consistent with studies indicating that father involvement positively influences children's social-emotional functioning, self-regulation, and resilience (Diniz et al., 2021; Khawaja et al., 2022). The present review suggests that effective co-parenting not only reduces conflict but also facilitates the maintenance of meaningful parental bonds that support children's developmental stability after divorce.

An important aspect emerging from the synthesis involved the role of children's autonomy and emotional belonging within post-divorce family systems. Rejaän and colleagues reported that parenting and co-parenting quality after divorce significantly influence adolescents' sense of autonomy and belonging (Rejaän et al., 2024). The present findings similarly indicated that children experience greater emotional security when parents demonstrate emotional responsiveness, validate children's feelings, and avoid exposing them to interparental hostility. Conversely, children who experienced emotional neglect or persistent parental disputes often reported feelings of abandonment, insecurity, and relational instability. Such findings are also compatible with Petegem and colleagues' work demonstrating that dysfunctional parenting dynamics and overprotective family systems may contribute to anxiety and maladjustment among children and adolescents (Petegem et al., 2021).

The review further highlighted the multidimensional nature of resilience among children experiencing parental separation. Although divorce and family restructuring represent stressful experiences, many studies reported that children can adapt successfully when protective factors are present. Supportive extended family relationships, school support systems, counseling services, and emotionally cooperative parenting were identified as critical resilience-enhancing factors. These findings align with resilience-oriented perspectives proposed by Stokkebekk and colleagues, who emphasized the importance of empowering children and parents during prolonged family conflict through supportive interventions and emotional communication strategies (Stokkebekk et al., 2025). Beckmeyer and Russell similarly identified several post-divorce family assets that contribute to healthier child adjustment and family functioning (Beckmeyer & Russell, 2024). The present findings therefore suggest that resilience after divorce is not merely an individual child characteristic but rather a systemic outcome emerging from supportive relational environments.

The importance of intervention and educational programs also emerged strongly from the reviewed studies. Several studies suggested that structured co-parenting interventions improve communication skills, reduce conflict, and strengthen collaborative parenting behaviors after separation (Carvalho et al., 2022; Darwiche et al., 2021). Saini and Corrente's meta-analysis further demonstrated that educational programs for divorcing parents produce positive effects on parental cooperation and child adjustment (Saini & Corrente, 2024). Ragni and colleagues additionally highlighted the value of online co-parenting interventions for improving emotional coordination and balance between parents (Ragni et al., 2024). These findings indicate that co-parenting quality can be improved through targeted interventions and that preventive family programs may reduce the long-term psychological risks associated with divorce for children.

The present review additionally revealed the importance of cultural and contextual influences on co-parenting dynamics. Studies conducted across different countries demonstrated that social norms, legal systems, family values, and intergenerational relationships influence post-divorce parenting experiences and child outcomes (Khawaja et al., 2022; Langmeyer et al., 2022). Research examining grandparental caregiving and intergenerational co-parenting further emphasized the role of extended family support in children's emotional development and self-regulation (Zhao et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2025). Such findings suggest that post-divorce co-parenting should not be understood solely as a dyadic interaction between parents but rather as a broader relational system shaped by cultural and familial contexts.

Another important finding concerned the developmental specificity of middle childhood. Children aged 8–12 years occupy a transitional developmental stage characterized by increasing cognitive sophistication, social awareness, and emotional sensitivity (Bulimwengu & Cartmel, 2022). At this age, children become more capable of understanding relational tensions and interpreting parental behaviors, making them particularly vulnerable to emotional insecurity in high-conflict family environments. Simultaneously, they remain highly dependent on parental guidance and emotional stability. Consequently, cooperative co-parenting during middle childhood appears especially important for

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fostering emotional regulation, academic engagement, and social competence. The reviewed studies collectively indicate that the developmental needs of children within this age range require greater consideration within divorce-related interventions and family support services.

The findings of this review also contribute to the broader understanding of co-parenting beyond traditional divorced heterosexual family structures. Research included in the synthesis demonstrated that effective co-parenting principles are similarly relevant across diverse family contexts, including stepfamilies, intergenerational caregiving arrangements, and same-sex parent families (Afifi et al., 2022; Carone, 2022). This suggests that emotional coordination, mutual respect, communication quality, and caregiving consistency are universal dimensions of effective co-parenting regardless of family composition. Such findings broaden the conceptual understanding of co-parenting as a relational process centered on children's emotional well-being rather than solely on legal or structural family arrangements.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the present study demonstrate that co-parenting after separation constitutes one of the most influential determinants of psychological adaptation among children of divorce aged 8–12 years. Constructive co-parenting relationships appear capable of reducing emotional distress, strengthening resilience, preserving parent–child bonds, and promoting developmental stability despite the challenges associated with family dissolution. In contrast, chronic conflict, triangulation, emotional inconsistency, and parental hostility significantly undermine children's emotional security and increase the risk of maladjustment. These findings underscore the necessity of emphasizing cooperative parenting, emotional communication, and child-centered approaches within family counseling, legal systems, and post-divorce intervention programs.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

One limitation of the present study was that the reviewed studies originated from different cultural, legal, and social contexts, which may limit the generalizability of findings across all populations and family systems. Additionally, the inclusion of studies with varying methodological designs and conceptual definitions of co-parenting may have introduced some heterogeneity into the synthesis process. Another limitation involved the relatively limited number of qualitative studies specifically focusing on children aged 8–12 years, as many previous studies examined broader age groups or concentrated primarily on adolescents and younger children.

Future research should focus more specifically on the lived experiences and emotional perceptions of children in middle childhood regarding post-divorce co-parenting relationships. Longitudinal qualitative studies examining developmental trajectories over time would provide deeper insight into how children adapt to family restructuring across different stages of development. Future studies should also investigate the role of cultural values, digital communication between separated parents, and school-based support systems in shaping children's adjustment after divorce. Comparative studies across different custody arrangements and family structures may further clarify the conditions under which co-parenting becomes either protective or harmful for children.

The findings of this study suggest several practical implications for family counselors, psychologists, educators, and policymakers. Divorce-related intervention programs should prioritize the development of communication skills, emotional regulation, and collaborative parenting strategies among separated parents. Mental health professionals should pay particular attention to the emotional needs of children aged 8–12 years and provide supportive environments in which children can express feelings related to family transitions without fear of conflict or loyalty pressures. Family courts and social service agencies should also emphasize child-centered approaches and encourage cooperative parenting arrangements that minimize exposure to interparental hostility. Finally, schools and community organizations can play an important role in promoting resilience and emotional support for children experiencing parental separation.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

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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.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors have equally contributed to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

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