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Positive co-parenting in conflictive divorces and its effects on children's mental health: systematic review

Coparentalidad positiva en divorcios conflictivos y sus efectos en la salud mental infantil: revisión sistemática

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Abstract

Divorce not only generates conflict between parents, but also affects the overall health of children and adolescents when there is no adequate process or agreement in place. This study analyzes, through a systematic review, the relationship between positive and negative co-parenting and its influence on the mental health of children and adolescents, emphasizing the context of conflictive divorces in Latin America and the Caribbean. Articles from the last five years were reviewed in several consolidated databases, using the PRISMA method, in which 27 articles were found that showed results in various contexts. The findings show that there are negative effects when co-parenting is negative and there is conflict (internalizing and externalizing behaviors). On the contrary, positive co-parenting benefits the overall development of children and adolescents, especially in terms of their self-esteem and resilience. Further research on intervention programs and adaptations to the cultural reality of different populations is proposed.

Keywords: divorce, mental health, psychology

Resumen

El divorcio no solo genera conflictividad entre progenitores, sino también afecta a la salud integral de los niños y adolescentes cuando no existe un proceso o acuerdos adecuados. Este estudio analiza, por medio de una revisión sistemática, la relación entre la coparentalidad, tanto positiva como negativa, y su influencia en la salud mental de los niños, niñas y adolescentes, enfatizando el contexto de divorcios conflictivos en América Latina y El Caribe. Se revisaron artículos de los últimos cinco años en varias bases de datos consolidadas, utilizando el método PRISMA, en el cual se encontraron 27 artículos que mostraron resultados en diversos contextos. Los hallazgos demuestran que existen efectos negativos cuando la coparentalidad es negativa y existe conflicto (conductas internalizantes y externalizantes). Por el contrario, la coparentalidad positiva beneficia al desarrollo integral del niño, niña o adolescente, sobre todo en su autoestima y resiliencia. Se propone realizar investigaciones sobre los programas de intervención, así como adaptaciones a la realidad cultural de las poblaciones.

Palabras clave: divorcio, salud mental, psicología

Introduction

The family is a social entity characterized as the primary structure that provides continuous support and development for the individual. Consequently, the emotional stability and psychological well-being of the child and adolescent population are paramount, as these factors are imperative for society and the public health system (López-Pereyra et al., 2021). In families, divorce represents one of the most significant life changes experienced by this social system globally, directly impacting the psychological and emotional development of children and adolescents (henceforth referred to as C&A), particularly when separations occur under conflictual circumstances (Reyes & Pinto, 2021; Sánchez-Chiquito & Solanilla, 2021).

Internationally, patterns reveal similar figures. In Europe, statistics indicate a fluctuation over recent decades, with divorce rates doubling (from 0.8 to 2.0 per 1,000 individuals by 2023). In that same year, countries such as Latvia (2.8), Lithuania (2.5), and Finland (2.1) led this trend (European Commission, 2024).

In the United States, only 60% of C&A live with their married biological parents. The economic costs associated with this reality amount to approximately $33 billion annually, with at least $7 billion linked to adolescent

pregnancies arising from dysfunctional or markedly unstable families (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2025).

In Latin America, a similar problem regarding divorce rates is evident. This phenomenon is attributed to the negative connotations that young people—particularly university students—have developed concerning marriage (Reyes & Pinto, 2021; Ruiz-Vallejo & Solsona, 2021). In Ecuador, according to data from INEC (2025), a total of 25,555 divorces were recorded in 2024, reflecting an 8.4% increase from 2023, with approximately 71 separations occurring daily. Divorces occur more frequently in urban areas, where socioeconomic and sociodemographic conditions have transformed traditional family structures, thereby heightening the need to understand these changes and their implications for the well-being of C&A within these contexts (Chávez, 2023; Mendoza-Burgos et al., 2023).

The risk factors for divorce encompass various issues. Ochoa-Jiménez et al. (2021) noted that such factors may arise from changes in the spouses' lifestyles, leading to conflicts or critical situations derived from socioeconomic (educational and economic levels) and cultural (ethnic differences) influences. Additionally, having children acts as a risk factor, contrary to the popular belief that children strengthen marriage, due to the stress associated with their care and upbringing.

Regarding care and upbringing, it is essential to consider that the family, as a nuclear structure comprising parents, is foundational in providing these functions to children; this is termed co-parenting. In this context, co-parenting is established even when the couple is no longer romantically involved; it operates during separation or divorce through custody arrangements or visitation regimes (Romero, 2009).

However, when separation processes are fraught with high levels of parental conflict, where co-parenting transforms from positive to negative, the situation becomes more complex. C&A exposed to highly conflictual divorces exhibit significantly higher rates of internalizing disorders, such as depression and anxiety, as well as externalizing problems that include behavioral issues, aggression, social relationship difficulties, and academic deficits, which may persist into adulthood (Lamela & Figueiredo, 2016; Souza & Aparecida Crepaldi, 2019).

Conversely, when parents undergoing divorce or who are already divorced manage to establish patterns of collaborative and constructive coordination in their parenting approaches, research indicates that such positive co-parenting effectively safeguards the psychological well-being of their children, even amidst residual conflicts (Yarnoz-Yaben, 2010).

A longitudinal study by Ahrons (2007) indicates that children with better long-term psychological adjustment are those whose parents maintained a positive and collaborative co-parenting relationship. Amato and Anthony (2014) revealed that exposure to parental conflicts significantly increases the risk of mental health issues, contrasting with cooperative or positive co-parenting, which serves as a protective factor. Recently, Zhao et al. (2022) demonstrated that high-quality co-parenting positively contributes to the family environment and climate. Lamela and Figueiredo (2016) found significant associations between behavioral problems and symptoms of anxiety, depression, and somatization in the context of parental conflict.

In light of the above, a systematic review of studies and scientific literature published between 2020 and 2025 in the Latin American and Caribbean context is proposed to analyze the impact of positive co-parenting versus negative co-parenting on the mental health of children and adolescents in situations of conflictual divorces.

Methodology

This study adhered to the normative guidelines of the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology (Page et al., 2021) to identify current articles exhibiting rigorous scientific quality. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the issue at hand and addresses the research question while fulfilling the previously stated objectives.

The study is descriptive in nature, focusing on elucidating the current situation regarding the relationship between co-parenting and mental health in the child and adolescent population in both positive and negative scenarios. This understanding may yield timely solutions based on the gathered data.

To locate relevant information, searches were conducted across various repositories with specialized criteria, emphasizing the most significant electronic databases in recent years. The key databases include SciELO, Dialnet, Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, Taylor and Francis, and Google Scholar, supplemented by manual searches. Notably, the information obtained is limited to the Latin American, Caribbean, and Ecuadorian contexts.

Searches in the databases utilized terms such as "parenting," "psychology," "divorce," "mental health," and "child*," in Spanish, English, and Portuguese, complemented by Boolean operators, primarily AND, to adjust the breadth of the search.

Various inclusion criteria were established for the study regarding the temporal scope (studies from January 2020 to December 2025) and the examination of co-parenting and mental health within the child and

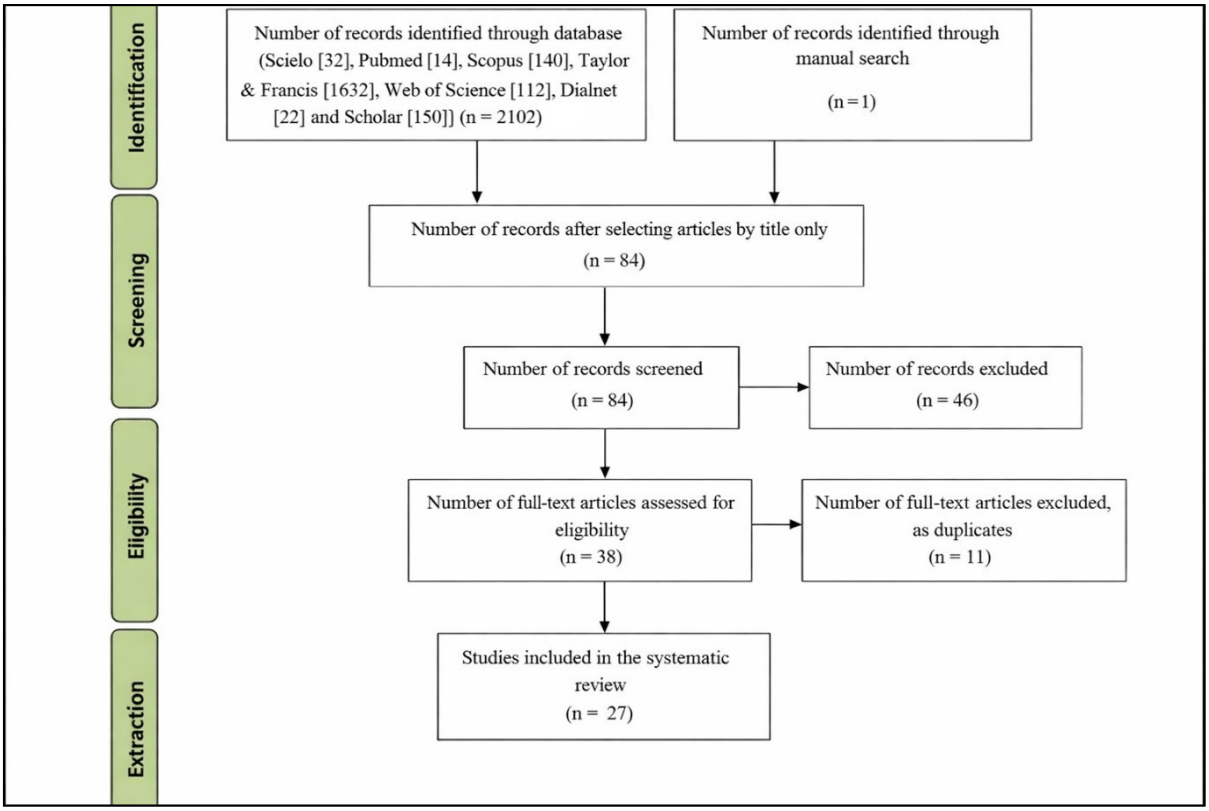
adolescent population. Additional criteria pertained to family structure (single-parent families that are separated or divorced), and only studies conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean were included.

Results and discussion

The initial review using the aforementioned terms yielded a total of 2,102 articles, along with one identified through manual review. Articles not meeting the inclusion criteria (demographic characteristics, language) were subsequently eliminated. Following this, results were filtered first by title and then by abstract. Finally, duplicates were removed, resulting in a total of 27 studies.

Figure 1

Application of the methodology and number of records included in the research



Note. Adapted from Page et al. (2020).

Subsequent to the analysis, the extracted information was systematically organized (Table 1), highlighting the most relevant findings, which are presented below:

Table 1
Extracted information from the articles

Author and Year	Type of Co-Parenting	Key Findings
Paz et al. (2022)	Negative (single-parent) and positive (shared)	Shared co-parenting strengthens emotional stability, fosters holistic development, and upholds the best interests of the child.
Alcántara et al. (2025)	Negative (parental alienation)	Parental alienation adversely affects emotional development and psychological stability in minors.
De Loreto & Raposo (2023)	Negative (conflict contexts) and positive (support tools)	Divorce-related conflicts directly impact child welfare.
Reyes-Crespo et al. (2023)	Predominantly negative co-parenting (89% high conflict, 10% moderate, 1% low)	High parental conflict is associated with increased mental health issues in C&A: distress (48%), sleep problems (31%), anxiety (37%), depression or sadness (43%), and concentration difficulties (31%).
Muñoz & Méndez Fajardo (2021)	Positive (assessed via Positive Parenting Scale, E2P)	Quality of co-parenting directly influences attachment, resilience, emotional security, and psychosocial well-being in children.
Polanco-Roman et al. (2021)	Negative	Early adversities, especially conflicts between parents, correlate with a higher risk of suicide attempts in young adulthood.
Sánchez-Cabezas et al. (2025)	Positive and presence of negative practices	Positive parenting benefits children's emotional, social, and cognitive development, enhancing self-esteem, communication, and responsibility.
Valdés Cabello et al. (2023)	Positive and negative	Supportive co-parenting promotes prosocial behavior, better socio-emotional adjustment, and fewer behavioral issues; excessive control, parental criticism, and depression correlate with increased aggression, lower self-concept, and difficulties in children's prosocial conduct.
Tay-Karapas et al. (2023)	Negative (in parental divorce cases) and relatively positive (in intact families)	Children of divorced parents reported lower life satisfaction, less paternal attachment (reduced communication and trust, increased alienation), but no significant differences in maternal attachment.
Fuentes & Ocaña (2024)	Positive and negative	Positive co-parenting enhances emotional stability, self-esteem, and healthy adaptation in children, while negative co-parenting elevates stress, tension, and risks of emotional and behavioral problems.
Romero Quiñones et al. (2021)	Negative (parental alienation)	In conflictual homes, Parental Alienation Syndrome emerges as a form of emotional child abuse, leading children to develop pathological hatred towards one parent, resulting in anxiety, depression, insecurity, behavioral issues, academic difficulties, toxic dependency relationships, and risks of substance abuse and suicide.
Rodríguez et al.	Positive	Positive co-parenting enhances parenting skills, protects

(2024)		rights, and fosters resilience, although it is impacted by structural violence, precariousness, and inequality, affecting C&A's mental health.
Gómez Sánchez et al. (2020)	Positive and negative (depending on family dynamics)	Children's mental health is contingent upon how the separation is managed; dialogue, communication, and professional support are protective factors.
Suárez & Rodríguez (2024)	Positive (ideal) and negative (when there are parental conflicts or single custody)	Adequate co-parenting benefits children's emotional, psychological, and social development, diminishing the negative impacts of divorce. Lack of effective co-parenting leads to discrimination, inequality, and affects emotional stability.
Robles-Martínez et al. (2022)	Positive	Positive parenting programs improve parental skills, reduce stress, and strengthen mental health in both children and families, demonstrating high effectiveness for prevention and intervention.
Ambros et al. (2022)	Positive and negative	Positive co-parenting results in fewer adjustments and greater child well-being; conflictual or negative co-parenting increases behavioral issues, emotional symptoms (anxiety, depression), and adjustment difficulties.
Mariana (2022)	Negative	Parental conflict hampers parenting performance and complicates bonding with children.
Rodríguez-Zuñiga et al. (2023)	Negative	Conflictual parental separation generates stress, anxiety, depression, isolation, aggression problems, low academic performance, decreased self-esteem, and risk of suicidal thoughts or attempts in children.
Martins de Souza et al. (2020)	Positive and negative	Positive co-parenting and parental involvement correlate with protective factors for child mental health (fewer internalizing and externalizing problems, better social skills). Negative/conflictual co-parenting correlates with increased anxiety, depression, aggression, and behavioral difficulties in children.
Yanchapanta Paredes & Roque (2022)	Negative	Children experience loyalty conflicts and behavioral and emotional disorders.
Weber et al. (2021)	Predominantly negative, with communication difficulties, unequal division of caregiving, and post-divorce conflicts	Co-parenting significantly influences child mental health, negatively affecting children's emotional well-being.
Valencia (2020)	Negative	Divorce directly impacts the socio-affective dimension of children.
Barón Hernández & Tamargo	Negative	Co-parental conflicts and the absence of emotional divorce are associated with guilt, loyalty conflicts, and relational

Barbeito (2020)		difficulties. Parallel parenting is linked to blame.
Palhares et al. (2021)	Positive and negative	Shared custody, by balancing time with both parents, acts as a protective factor and promotes emotional and academic well-being; in contrast, parental alienation constitutes a form of psychological violence with lasting negative effects.
Lizarazu & Cracco (2021)	Positive and negative	Paternal involvement serves as a protective factor: cooperative co-parenting correlates with greater child well-being, while conflictual co-parenting increases emotional and behavioral problems in children of separated parents.
Kostulski & Arpini (2024)	Positive and negative	Active fatherhood and positive co-parenting enhance well-being, self-esteem, and lower symptomatology in children; conversely, paternal absence or negative co-parenting in conflictual contexts fosters feelings of insecurity, abandonment, and risk of emotional problems.
Martínez (2021)	Complementary and co-responsible	Co-responsible co-parenting, facilitated through shared custody, serves as a protective factor for C&A.

The reviewed studies primarily analyze the direct relationship between co-parenting and children's mental health. Notably, 70% of the findings pertain to negative co-parenting, with conflicts and lack of communication highlighted as significant characteristics. Externalizing behaviors, particularly those related to social interaction, were examined in 60% of the studies. The remaining 40% indicate that positive co-parenting can foster greater emotional well-being, enhance self-esteem, and promote resilience and constructive conflict resolution.

While the studies do not consistently address the age of the children, it is important to note that children under six years old display greater vulnerability, which is reflected in their emotional states and behaviors. Other studies emphasize issues related to school adaptation, manifesting in peer aggression or social isolation. Among adolescents, there is evidence of symptoms related to mood disorders, primarily depression.

Although these findings facilitate an understanding of the relationship between co-parenting after divorce and the mental health of children and adolescents, it is crucial to recognize that this does not solely depend on the dissolution of the marital bond. Instead, it is contingent upon how parents manage their co-parenting relationship. Contexts characterized by negative co-parenting often exhibit higher conflict levels (Souza & Aparecida Crepaldi, 2019). The review of adverse contexts aligns with other findings that highlight the link between conflict and internalizing symptoms (Gómez-Ortiz et al., 2017; Tay-Karapas et al., 2020). Cuervo et al. (2011) also assert that these dynamics influence externalizing behaviors such as irritability and aggression.

A particularly noteworthy phenomenon observed in the studies is parental alienation, which arises when co-parenting is either absent or highly conflictual. In such cases, when children are induced to reject one parent, it constitutes a form of emotional abuse with long-term repercussions. The study by Portilla Saavedra et al. (2021) highlights that this frequently occurs in divorce scenarios.

Furthermore, the studies indicate that single parenting can be regarded as a risk factor when there is a lack of consensus on caregiving actions between parents; children may experience feelings of abandonment and lose significant connections with the other parent (Muñoz-Ortega et al., 2008). Such adverse childhood experiences can impact later developmental stages (Pomares & Villanueva, 2022).

Positive effects are also noted when parents maintain an appropriate dynamic despite the divorce. When there is mutual respect and sound decision-making regarding parenting, children exhibit greater socio-emotional security. Thus, it can be asserted that the issue lies not within the marital dissolution itself but rather in the quality of the subsequent relationship.

According to the meta-analysis by Van Dijk et al. (2020), conflict and low-quality co-parenting are closely associated with the aforementioned internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Integration of mental health services and ongoing therapy is recommended (Nunes et al., 2021; Riser, 2025; Wang et al., 2021).

The findings suggest that research should delve deeper into problematic contexts, including contemporary issues such as crime and drug trafficking, which may undermine positive co-parenting, as well as households with histories of domestic violence, pointing analysis toward single-parenting dynamics.

Additionally, the type of studies conducted should be taken into account; many reviews focus on literature, often overlooking empirical studies. Cross-sectional designs are common, which limits the identification of long-term effects. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize the necessity of longitudinal studies that can identify risk factors beyond the adverse effects of divorce.

In the legal framework, there should be a reevaluation of how to ensure the best interests of the child, incorporating forensic studies that include standardized assessments for such cases. Moreover, the phenomenon known as parental alienation syndrome, as noted in this study, remains prevalent in the Latin American population (Cabrera et al., 2023).

Potential biases and limitations in the studies should also be considered, as the families evaluated typically participate voluntarily, and there is no regulatory body that can intervene. Furthermore, most studies are qualitative in nature or case studies rather than being presented quantitatively.

Conclusions

Divorce, both in its legal and familial processes, does not inherently dictate the deterioration of children's mental health. The literature reviewed in this study indicates that the quality of the co-parenting relationship is the most significant factor with a direct impact on mental health outcomes. Its effects can manifest in both internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

The findings align with studies from other regions. While the results are relatively homogeneous, there are nuances that could be interpreted as contradictory, particularly concerning cultural and socioeconomic factors, which warrant analysis in future research.

It is recommended to adopt longitudinal and quantitative approaches to enhance scientific rigor. Additionally, it is essential to explore the programs implemented in other countries in order to adapt a robust and standardized approach for the Latin American context.

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