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Lived Experiences of Co-Parenting After Divorce: Challenges, Negotiations, and Adaptive Strategies

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of divorced mothers and fathers in Spain regarding the challenges, negotiation processes, and adaptive strategies involved in post-divorce co-parenting.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative study used a phenomenologically informed design and reflexive thematic analysis. Participants were 28 divorced parents, including 16 mothers and 12 fathers, recruited purposively from family mediation centers, community family-support services, parent associations, and online groups in Madrid and Valencia, Spain. Eligible participants had been legally divorced for at least one year, had at least one child younger than 18 years with their former spouse, and maintained ongoing co-parenting responsibilities. Individual semi-structured interviews lasting 58–104 minutes explored communication, decision-making, residential arrangements, financial responsibilities, conflict, household differences, children's transitions, and adaptive responses. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, coded inductively, and analyzed iteratively to identify recurrent patterns of meaning. Reflexive memos, negative-case analysis, an audit trail, secondary researcher review, and participant feedback were used to strengthen analytic rigor.

Findings: Four overarching themes were identified: carrying the emotional residue of the former partnership into parenting; negotiating two-household parenthood; protecting children while preserving parental legitimacy; and developing adaptive co-parenting through boundaries, predictability, and selective flexibility. Participants described how unresolved marital hurt and mistrust often intensified routine parenting interactions, while disagreements regarding schedules, household rules, finances, and parental authority repeatedly required negotiation. More adaptive arrangements emerged when parents used structured communication, shared calendars, delayed responses, child-centered decision-making, direct parent-to-parent information exchange, and clearly defined boundaries.

Conclusion: Post-divorce co-parenting is a dynamic process in which sustainable adaptation depends on separating former-partner conflict from parenting responsibilities, establishing predictable boundaries, protecting children from interparental tension, and combining structured coordination with context-sensitive flexibility.

Keywords: *co-parenting; divorce; lived experience; phenomenology; parental conflict; shared parenting; qualitative research; family adaptation*

1. Introduction

Divorce represents not only the legal termination of a marital relationship but also a profound reorganization of family roles, boundaries, routines, identities, and interpersonal responsibilities. When former partners share children, the dissolution of the conjugal relationship does not ordinarily end their relational interdependence. Instead, parents are required to reconstruct their relationship around the continuing responsibilities of childrearing, often while simultaneously coping with emotional loss, financial restructuring, residential transitions, new relationships, and unresolved interpersonal grievances. Post-divorce co-parenting therefore involves the paradoxical requirement that two individuals disengage as intimate partners while remaining sufficiently coordinated as parents. This transition may be particularly demanding because former spouses must negotiate communication, decision-making, schedules, financial responsibilities, disciplinary practices, healthcare, education, holidays, and emotional boundaries under circumstances in which trust and goodwill may already have been weakened. Contemporary research consequently conceptualizes post-divorce adjustment as a dynamic family process rather than a single legal event, with parenting arrangements and post-separation relationships continuing to evolve long after the formal dissolution of marriage (Markoç, 2023; Zartler, 2021).

Co-parenting can broadly be understood as the ways in which two parental figures coordinate, support, undermine, divide, and negotiate their responsibilities toward a shared child. Following divorce, this relationship becomes structurally distinct from the former marital relationship because cooperation must often occur across separate households and increasingly independent personal lives. Effective post-divorce co-parenting may include respectful communication, predictable exchanges, mutual recognition of parental authority, information sharing, flexibility, and the capacity to protect children from adult conflict. Conversely, problematic co-parenting may involve hostility, triangulation, inconsistent rules, restricted information, disputes over time with children, loyalty conflicts, or the use of children as intermediaries. The importance of this relational domain is emphasized by evidence indicating that the quality of co-parenting may explain part of the association between post-separation residence arrangements and children's psychological functioning (Steinbach, 2023). Accordingly, the practical success of a custody arrangement cannot be understood solely from its formal structure; attention must also be paid to how parents actually enact, negotiate, and experience that arrangement in everyday life.

Shared physical custody and other forms of substantial involvement by both parents have become increasingly visible in policy and family practice. Comparative evidence from North American and European countries indicates that joint physical custody is associated with important dimensions of adolescent life satisfaction, although benefits cannot be assumed to be uniform across family contexts (Steinbach et al., 2020). Research in Germany similarly illustrates the growing significance of shared physical custody as a post-separation family arrangement and emphasizes the importance of examining the social and relational conditions under which it operates (Walper et al., 2021). Sandberg's investigation of shared parenting and father involvement after divorce further demonstrates that parenting arrangements have implications for the continuity and quality of fathers' involvement rather than merely determining where children sleep (Sandberg, 2023). From this perspective, physical custody is only one dimension of post-divorce family organization; the relational processes through which parents coordinate their involvement may be equally consequential.

Evidence concerning children's adjustment reinforces this distinction. Joint physical custody has been studied in relation to children's mental health, yet the association appears contingent on relational mechanisms such as loyalty conflict (Augustijn, 2021b). Children who perceive themselves as caught between parents may experience stress even when substantial contact with both parents is maintained (Augustijn, 2021a). Moreover, interparental conflict can alter the psychological meaning of shared custody and may weaken its potential advantages (Augustijn, 2021c). Research addressing children's physical and mental health in joint physical custody likewise suggests that custody arrangements must be interpreted in conjunction with the broader family environment rather than as isolated predictors of well-being (Riser, 2024). Such findings underscore why parents' subjective experiences of making co-parenting arrangements function are important: apparently similar formal arrangements may involve markedly different emotional climates, communicative practices, and levels of parental strain.

The consequences of continuing interparental conflict are particularly important in post-divorce families. Cao and colleagues proposed that children's adaptation trajectories after divorce are shaped by conflict occurring both before

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and after marital dissolution, demonstrating that divorce is better understood as a process embedded in a longer relational history than as an isolated disruption (Cao et al., 2022). Post-separation conflict can also interact dynamically with parent–child contact. Larouche and colleagues found bidirectional associations between parental conflict after separation and father–child physical contact, illustrating how relational tensions and parenting involvement may mutually reinforce or constrain one another over time (Larouche et al., 2024). The persistence of acrimony is sufficiently central to post-divorce family functioning that specialized measures have been developed to assess co-parenting conflict across separated-parent populations (Peixoto et al., 2022). These findings suggest that parental conflict is not merely an emotional residue of marital breakdown; it may become embedded in everyday parenting negotiations and shape access, information exchange, flexibility, and the child's relationships with both parents.

At the same time, co-parenting after divorce should not be reduced to conflict. Many separated parents develop functional arrangements through gradual negotiation, clearer boundaries, emotional distancing, and practical problem-solving. An exploration of parallel narratives of co-parenting illustrates that former partners may experience the same parenting relationship in divergent ways, highlighting the importance of giving equal attention to subjective interpretation and relational asymmetry (Anitta & Ramshida, 2024). Research on helpful post-divorce family assets likewise points toward resources that support adjustment, including constructive parenting relationships and adaptive family capacities (Beckmeyer & Russell, 2024). Evaluation research on divorce education further suggests that post-divorce adaptation can be strengthened by attending to markers of functioning that extend beyond compliance with legal arrangements (Ferraro et al., 2024). These perspectives support examining not only difficulties but also the practical strategies parents develop to maintain workable relationships despite disappointment, mistrust, or continuing disagreement.

Negotiation represents a central mechanism in this process because co-parenting requires repeated decisions in domains that frequently change as children grow. Residential schedules, school activities, medical needs, transportation, digital communication, expenses, travel, celebrations, discipline, and new partners may all require renegotiation. Some parents establish highly collaborative arrangements, whereas others rely on more bounded or parallel forms of parenting in which direct interaction is minimized. A co-parenting model examined in the context of child-custody disputes among urban Muslim families demonstrates how structured cooperation and negotiation can provide alternatives to prolonged adversarial disputes (Sururie et al., 2024). Karahan's review of co-parenting and joint custody similarly emphasizes that the effectiveness of shared parental responsibility depends on the relational and organizational conditions within which formal custody arrangements are implemented (Karahan, 2021). Thus, negotiation is not a one-time settlement achieved at the point of divorce but an ongoing process of recalibrating parental roles and expectations.

The legal environment also shapes these negotiations by establishing presumptions, procedural options, and normative expectations regarding parental involvement. Recent evidence concerning divorce-law reform demonstrates that legislative changes can influence divorce processes and subsequent parenting arrangements (Park et al., 2026). Comparative legal analyses show that custody and access rights differ across jurisdictions, affecting how parental authority and children's interests are interpreted following separation (Kenneth, 2024). Comparative discussion of Brazil and England likewise highlights the continuing tension between legal decision-making and the principle of the best interests of the child (Josimar Antônio de Alcântara & Ormerod, 2021). In Japan, debates around joint custody have additionally revealed how family-law reform reflects broader assumptions concerning the state, family responsibilities, and post-divorce parenting (Hamano, 2021). Such studies indicate that parents do not negotiate co-parenting in an institutional vacuum; their possibilities and constraints are partly structured by legal and cultural expectations regarding parental rights, responsibilities, and child welfare.

Legal decision-making itself may introduce further uncertainty. Child-custody disputes often require decisions under conditions of incomplete information and competing interpretations of children's best interests. Studies of uncertainty in custody cases have emphasized both contextual complexity and the cognitive demands involved in decision-making after parental separation (Josimar Antônio de Alcântara & Ormerod, 2022a, 2022b). More recent work examining cognitive strategies used in child-custody decision-making further demonstrates the importance of how uncertainty is interpreted and managed within professional and legal contexts (Josimar Antônio de Alcântara & Ormerod, 2024). Collaborative models of international family justice have consequently been

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proposed as alternatives to exclusively adversarial processes, emphasizing coordinated problem-solving and family-centered resolution (Menon, 2024). For parents, however, legal resolution does not necessarily eliminate everyday uncertainty, because written agreements cannot anticipate every future circumstance that will arise in children's lives.

The way custody and support arrangements are resolved may also have implications for parental well-being. Crapo and colleagues showed that the method through which custody and support plans are determined can be associated with parents' well-being during the divorce process (Crapo et al., 2024). These effects are important because parents experiencing psychological strain may simultaneously be expected to engage in complex negotiation with former partners. Riyaz's exploratory study of men's post-divorce experiences illustrates that divorced fathers may encounter psychological, social, economic, and parenting-related difficulties that are insufficiently captured by formal custody categories (Riyaz, 2024). Qualitative evidence concerning fathers who share custody of young children likewise reveals the practical and emotional work involved in navigating caregiving across households (d'Orsi & Diniz, 2025). Family professionals' attitudes toward post-divorce fatherhood may further affect how paternal roles and involvement are interpreted within service systems (Autonen-Vaaraniemi, 2022). Together, these findings indicate that a comprehensive understanding of co-parenting should incorporate the lived experiences of both mothers and fathers rather than presuming uniform experiences on the basis of legal status.

Parental cooperation may be particularly vulnerable during periods of external stress. Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that separated and divorced parents faced distinctive challenges involving custody transitions, safety concerns, altered routines, and disagreements regarding family management (Goldberg et al., 2021). Related research examining child-custody laws and partner cooperation during the pandemic illustrated that institutional arrangements may influence cooperation between parents under conditions of heightened uncertainty (Wong & Bansak, 2025). Such exceptional circumstances make visible a broader feature of post-divorce co-parenting: parenting plans must operate in a changing environment. Illness, employment changes, relocation, financial problems, school transitions, new relationships, developmental changes in children, and emergencies may all test whether parents can move beyond rigid agreements toward adaptive coordination.

This adaptability has direct implications for children. Research involving separated families undergoing child physical-custody proceedings demonstrates that parenting styles and co-parenting processes are interconnected with children's early adjustment (Pires & Martins, 2021). More broadly, parental educational and developmental environments can have both immediate and longer-term implications for child outcomes (Jacob, 2023), reinforcing the significance of preserving effective parental involvement despite family restructuring. Children's own experiences also demonstrate that post-divorce family life cannot be reduced to movement between residences. Reimann's work on how children "do family" across their mother's and father's homes shows that children actively construct meanings of belonging and home within joint physical custody arrangements (Reimann, 2023). Consequently, co-parenting negotiations concern not only parental convenience but also children's continuity, security, relationships, and sense of family membership.

Adaptation after divorce may therefore depend on parents' capacity to differentiate former-partner emotions from current parenting responsibilities. Co-parenting interventions have emphasized communication, conflict management, child-focused decision-making, and collaborative parental roles, although shared physical custody presents particular opportunities and challenges for such programs (Darwiche et al., 2021). Divorce education similarly aims to reduce destructive conflict, improve parenting practices, and support adjustment, yet recent work has called for closer attention to which post-divorce assets and outcomes should be targeted (Beckmeyer & Russell, 2024; Ferraro et al., 2024). Successful adaptation may consequently involve multiple strategies rather than one ideal co-parenting model. Some parents may benefit from frequent coordination and flexibility, whereas parents with high conflict may function more effectively with written communication, highly predictable routines, or parallel parenting arrangements.

The psychological adjustment of caregivers is also relevant because parenting takes place within broader systems of stress, coping, identity, and available resources. Although developed in a different caregiving context, conceptual work on caregiver psychological adjustment demonstrates the usefulness of viewing adaptation as multidimensional and influenced by individual, relational, and contextual factors (Stock et al., 2024). This broader

perspective is applicable to divorce because parents must frequently adapt simultaneously to the loss of the marital relationship, changed living conditions, reduced time with children, new financial pressures, and altered social identities. Co-parenting strategies may therefore function not merely as interpersonal techniques but as mechanisms through which parents restore predictability, regulate emotional exposure, and develop a viable post-divorce family identity.

Importantly, what appears to be "successful" co-parenting from an external perspective may conceal substantial emotional work. Parents may suppress anger during exchanges, repeatedly revise expectations, relinquish control over the other household, or tolerate differences in parenting in order to reduce conflict. Fathers and mothers may also differ in their perceptions of fairness, access, caregiving burdens, and decision-making influence. Formal equality in parenting time does not necessarily produce experiential equality, while apparently unequal arrangements may sometimes reflect mutually negotiated adaptations to work, geography, children's preferences, or caregiving capacities. These complexities help explain why qualitative investigation is necessary. Quantitative studies can identify associations among custody, conflict, well-being, and child outcomes, but they are less able to reveal how parents interpret turning points, develop informal rules, decide which disagreements warrant confrontation, or reconstruct trust after relational injury.

Existing research therefore provides substantial evidence concerning custody arrangements, interparental conflict, children's adjustment, father involvement, divorce education, and legal decision-making, but important questions remain concerning how divorced parents themselves experience the continuing process of co-parenting. In particular, there is a need to understand how practical challenges, interpersonal negotiations, and adaptive strategies coexist within the same post-divorce trajectories. Parents may move between conflict and cooperation, rigidity and flexibility, disengagement and collaboration depending on the issue, the developmental stage of the child, or changes in the wider family system. Investigating these processes phenomenologically can illuminate not only what parents find difficult but how they make sense of those difficulties and what enables them to establish more sustainable arrangements.

This issue is especially relevant in contemporary Spain, where changing family forms, shared parental responsibilities, and diverse post-separation living arrangements have increased the importance of understanding how co-parenting functions beyond formal legal agreements. A contextualized qualitative account can clarify the everyday mechanisms through which parents negotiate authority, manage emotions, coordinate separate households, respond to children's needs, and gradually construct workable forms of family continuity after marital dissolution. Such knowledge can inform family counseling, mediation, divorce education, legal practice, and preventive interventions by identifying both points of vulnerability and naturally occurring adaptive strategies.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to explore the lived experiences of divorced mothers and fathers in Spain regarding the challenges, negotiations, and adaptive strategies involved in post-divorce co-parenting.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how divorced parents experienced, interpreted, and adapted to the continuing demands of co-parenting after marital dissolution. A phenomenological approach was selected because the study sought to understand the meaning participants attributed to everyday interactions with former partners, rather than to test predetermined relationships among variables or evaluate a specific custody arrangement. Participants were recruited from family mediation centers, community family-support services, parent associations, and online groups for separated and divorced parents in Madrid and Valencia, Spain. Purposive maximum-variation sampling was used to capture heterogeneity in gender, time since divorce, custody arrangement, number and age of children, and perceived quality of the co-parenting relationship. Eligibility criteria included being at least 18 years of age, having been legally divorced for at least one year, having at least one child younger than 18 years with the former spouse, maintaining some degree of shared parental responsibility, residing in Spain, and being able to participate in a Spanish-language interview. Parents were excluded when there was no ongoing contact concerning the child, when the divorce had occurred less than 12 months previously, or when an active legal proceeding made participation potentially disruptive to an unresolved child-protection investigation. Recruitment continued until the research team judged that later interviews were elaborating established patterns without generating substantively new dimensions of experience.

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The final sample consisted of 28 divorced parents, including 16 mothers and 12 fathers, aged 31 to 52 years, with a mean age of 41.18 years. Seventeen participants resided in Madrid and 11 in Valencia. Time since legal divorce ranged from 1.4 to 9.2 years, with a mean duration of 4.36 years. Eleven participants had one child with the former spouse, 13 had two children, and four had three children. The children ranged from 4 to 17 years of age. Twelve participants reported a shared or approximately equal physical-custody arrangement, nine described a primary-residence arrangement with regular overnight contact with the other parent, and seven described more individualized schedules that had changed substantially since the divorce. Nineteen participants reported having completed university education, six had completed upper-secondary or vocational education, and three had completed compulsory secondary education. Eleven participants were in a new committed relationship at the time of the interview, while 17 were single or not cohabiting with a new partner. All participants received written and verbal information regarding the study, provided informed consent before participation, and were informed that participation was voluntary and could be discontinued without consequence. Identifying information was removed during transcription, pseudonyms were used throughout analysis, and quotations were edited only to remove details that could reveal identity.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected using individual semi-structured phenomenological interviews guided by an interview protocol developed specifically for the study. The interview guide was designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' experiences rather than short evaluative responses. Initial questions invited participants to describe how parenting changed after divorce and how they would characterize their current relationship with the other parent. Subsequent prompts explored communication regarding the child, decision-making, residential transitions, financial responsibilities, disagreements, differences in parenting practices, school and healthcare decisions, holidays and special occasions, involvement of new partners and extended family, experiences of fairness or imbalance, children's responses to interparental interactions, and changes in the co-parenting relationship over time. Participants were also asked to describe particularly difficult incidents, turning points, unsuccessful approaches, strategies that had reduced tension, situations in which cooperation had worked well, and advice they would give to parents beginning the post-divorce co-parenting process. Probes such as "Can you describe what happened?", "What did that mean to you at the time?", "How did you respond?", and "What changed after that experience?" were used to deepen experiential descriptions.

The interview guide was reviewed by two family psychologists and one family mediator familiar with post-divorce parent work and was pilot-tested with two divorced parents who were not included in the final sample. Minor revisions were made to improve the neutrality and sequencing of questions. Interviews were conducted between January and May 2026 in private rooms at participating family-support centers or through an encrypted videoconferencing platform when participants preferred remote participation. Each interview lasted between 58 and 104 minutes, with a mean duration of approximately 79 minutes. With participants' permission, all interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviewer also completed field notes after each session to document contextual observations, emotional emphases, pauses, contradictions, and preliminary analytic reflections. These notes were treated as supplementary contextual material and were not used to infer meanings that were absent from participants' accounts.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis informed by phenomenological sensitivity to participants' lived meanings. Analysis proceeded iteratively rather than as a strictly linear sequence. First, all transcripts were read several times to develop familiarity with the data, while initial notes were made regarding recurrent experiences, emotionally salient events, contradictions, and variations across cases. Second, meaningful segments were coded inductively at both semantic and interpretive levels. Early codes remained close to participants' descriptions and included expressions such as "every message becomes a negotiation," "keeping the child out of the argument," "two houses, two rule systems," "fear of losing parental influence," "using written communication," "stopping the need to win," "calendar as neutral territory," and "accepting what happens in the other home." Codes were continuously compared within and across interviews, merged when conceptually redundant, divided when overly broad, and organized into candidate patterns of shared meaning.

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Candidate themes were then developed by examining how clusters of codes represented broader experiential processes. The analysis focused particularly on the relationship among challenges, negotiation processes, and adaptive responses, while preserving divergent cases that did not fit dominant patterns. Theme development was conducted through repeated movement between coded excerpts, entire transcripts, field notes, and evolving thematic maps. The final themes were required to demonstrate internal coherence, conceptual distinctiveness, and clear relevance to the research question. To enhance methodological rigor, a second qualitative researcher independently reviewed 10 transcripts and the preliminary codebook, after which coding interpretations and thematic boundaries were discussed. Disagreements were treated as opportunities for reflexive examination rather than resolved through mechanical calculation of agreement. An audit trail documenting code revisions, theme development, and analytic decisions was maintained throughout the study. Reflexive memos were used to identify assumptions regarding "good" co-parenting and to prevent the analysis from equating high contact with successful co-parenting. Credibility was further supported through attention to negative cases, comparison across custody arrangements and genders, and participant validation with six interviewees who reviewed a concise summary of the final thematic structure and indicated that it adequately reflected the range of experiences discussed during interviews.

3. Findings and Results

The 28 participants represented diverse post-divorce family arrangements and stages of adjustment. Sixteen participants were mothers and 12 were fathers. Their ages ranged from 31 to 52 years, with a mean of 41.18 years. Seventeen participants lived in Madrid and 11 in Valencia. The duration since divorce varied from 1.4 to 9.2 years, indicating that the sample included parents in both relatively recent and more established post-divorce arrangements. Twelve participants described approximately equal shared physical custody, nine reported that children primarily resided with one parent while maintaining regular overnight stays with the other, and seven described flexible or evolving arrangements that did not fit a fixed alternating schedule. Eleven participants had one child, 13 had two children, and four had three children with the former spouse. Eleven participants had entered a new committed relationship. Across these varied circumstances, the analysis identified four overarching themes: carrying the emotional residue of the former partnership into parenting, negotiating two-household parenthood, protecting children while preserving parental legitimacy, and developing adaptive co-parenting through boundaries, predictability, and selective flexibility.

Table 1

Thematic Structure of Divorced Parents' Lived Experiences of Co-Parenting

Overarching Theme	Subthemes	Representative Codes	Participants Referring to Theme, n
Carrying the emotional residue of the former partnership into parenting	Unfinished relational hurt; mistrust of motives; conflict reactivation; communication vigilance	Reading hostility into messages; old arguments returning; fear of manipulation; emotional exhaustion after contact	25
Negotiating two-household parenthood	Schedule coordination; inconsistent household rules; financial negotiations; decision-making authority	Calendar disputes; different routines; expense disagreements; school and health decisions; holiday bargaining	27
Protecting children while preserving parental legitimacy	Avoiding triangulation; maintaining attachment to both parents; fear of being displaced; managing children's transitions	Not using the child as messenger; supporting the other parent publicly; transition distress; preserving parental role	24
Adaptive co-parenting through boundaries, predictability, and selective flexibility	Communication boundaries; structured routines; emotional detachment; child-focused compromise; acceptance of difference	Written messages; shared calendars; delayed responses; choosing battles; accepting two parenting styles	26

Table 1 shows that post-divorce co-parenting was experienced primarily as an evolving relational process rather than as the straightforward implementation of a custody agreement. The most prevalent theme, reported by 27 participants, concerned the practical work of coordinating parenting across two households. However, these negotiations were closely intertwined with emotional and relational factors. Twenty-five participants described occasions when unresolved experiences from the former marital relationship affected present-day communication, while 24 discussed active efforts to shield children from interparental tension without weakening their own parental

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position. Importantly, 26 participants described adaptations that had made co-parenting more manageable over time. Participants rarely characterized improvement as complete reconciliation. Instead, progress commonly involved establishing firmer boundaries, reducing emotionally charged communication, creating predictable procedures, distinguishing urgent from non-urgent disagreements, and accepting that the other household could function differently without necessarily threatening the child.

Table 2

Challenges Experienced in Post-Divorce Co-Parenting

Challenge	Description of Lived Experience	n	Illustrative Participant Statement
Emotional spillover from the former marriage	Previous betrayal, anger, disappointment, or mistrust shaped interpretations of present parenting interactions	22	"Sometimes the message is only about school, but I still hear everything that happened between us behind the words."
Communication escalation	Routine exchanges could become accusatory, defensive, or excessively detailed	21	"A two-line question could become forty messages about who had failed whom."
Schedule and transition conflict	Changes in work, school, holidays, illness, and extracurricular activities created repeated renegotiation	20	"The calendar looked fixed on paper, but real life was never fixed."
Differences in household rules	Parents differed regarding bedtime, homework, screen use, food, discipline, and independence	19	"I had to learn that different did not always mean dangerous."
Financial ambiguity	Conflict occurred over non-routine expenses, reimbursements, extracurricular activities, clothing, and travel	16	"The argument was rarely only about the money; it was about whether the other person was doing their share."
Fear of losing parental influence	Reduced parenting time created anxiety about emotional distance or replacement	15	"When they were not with me, I felt I was losing part of my role."
New partners and extended family	New relationships altered boundaries, authority, and perceptions of belonging	13	"The difficult part was deciding when a new partner becomes part of decisions and when they do not."
Child-mediated communication	Children were sometimes asked, intentionally or unintentionally, to transmit information	12	"At first we sent messages through our daughter because speaking was impossible, but we realized what that was doing to her."
Perceived imbalance of responsibility	One parent felt responsible for more organizational, emotional, or administrative work	18	"Equal days did not mean equal mental load."
Legal agreement–daily life mismatch	Formal arrangements were insufficiently flexible for changing developmental and practical circumstances	17	"The agreement solved the divorce; it did not solve Tuesday afternoon."

Table 2 demonstrates that the difficulties of post-divorce co-parenting were simultaneously emotional, logistical, and relational. Emotional spillover from the former marriage was described by 22 participants and frequently influenced apparently mundane interactions. Participants explained that distrust established during the marriage sometimes led them to interpret schedule changes, late responses, or requests for flexibility as evidence of manipulation or irresponsibility. Communication escalation was similarly common, with 21 participants describing how practical discussions became connected to earlier grievances. Yet logistical problems also had independent importance. Twenty participants emphasized the difficulty of maintaining fixed schedules when employment, school, illness, activities, and children's changing preferences required modification. Nineteen participants described differences between household rules, but their interpretations of those differences often changed with experience. Several initially attempted to impose equivalent standards across homes and later concluded that consistency in core matters of safety and responsibility was more realistic than identical parenting. Financial conflict was frequently symbolic, representing concerns about fairness, recognition, or responsibility rather than the monetary value of an individual expense. Participants also emphasized that equal parenting time did not necessarily imply equal invisible labor, particularly concerning school communication, medical appointments, clothing, extracurricular organization, and emotional monitoring.

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Table 3

Negotiation Processes Used by Divorced Parents

Negotiation Process	How It Was Used	Perceived Benefit	Main Difficulty	n
Written communication	Text, email, or parenting applications were used instead of spontaneous calls	Reduced interruption and allowed time to regulate responses	Written tone could be misinterpreted	21
Shared digital calendars	School events, exchanges, holidays, appointments, and activities were recorded jointly	Reduced repeated questions and disagreements about dates	Required consistent updating by both parents	18
Issue-by-issue negotiation	Parents avoided reopening the entire relationship when addressing one problem	Contained conflict and improved task focus	Difficult when mistrust remained high	19
Delayed responding	Non-urgent messages were answered after emotional activation had declined	Reduced impulsive escalation	Sometimes perceived as avoidance	17
Child-centered framing	Decisions were explicitly discussed in terms of the child's needs rather than parental entitlement	Shifted discussion toward shared interests	Parents sometimes disagreed about what constituted the child's best interest	23
Fixed rules for recurring disputes	Pre-agreed procedures were created for holidays, expenses, transport, and changes	Increased predictability	Could become overly rigid when circumstances changed	16
Selective flexibility	Parents accommodated occasional changes without treating them as permanent precedents	Increased reciprocity and reduced resentment	Required sufficient trust	18
Third-party support	Mediators, counselors, lawyers, or trusted professionals were used during difficult negotiations	Helped structure highly contentious decisions	Cost, accessibility, or fear of legal escalation	11
Direct parent-to-parent communication	Parents intentionally stopped using children as messengers	Reduced children's exposure to adult responsibility	Emotionally difficult during high-conflict periods	20
Explicit boundary negotiation around new partners	Parents clarified information-sharing and decision-making expectations	Reduced ambiguity and perceived intrusion	Roles evolved over time	12

Table 3 indicates that participants' negotiations became more effective when the process itself was structured. Twenty-three participants reported that explicitly returning discussions to the child's needs helped interrupt arguments about fairness between adults, although disagreements sometimes remained regarding what the child's best interest actually required. Written communication was used by 21 participants because it created temporal and emotional distance and generated a record of agreements, but several warned that ambiguous tone could also intensify conflict. Shared calendars and fixed procedures reduced the number of repeated negotiations required for predictable matters. A notable pattern was movement away from global arguments toward issue-specific negotiation. Nineteen participants described learning to discuss the immediate question without relitigating past marital grievances. Delayed responding was similarly described as an acquired skill rather than avoidance when used for non-urgent matters. Participants generally distinguished flexibility from the absence of boundaries: adaptive flexibility involved making limited accommodations within an otherwise predictable framework. Third-party professionals were especially useful when negotiations involved entrenched mistrust or major decisions, although participants preferred not to rely indefinitely on mediation or legal intervention for routine parenting.

Table 4

Adaptive Strategies and Perceived Changes in Co-Parenting Over Time

Adaptive Strategy	Early Post-Divorce Pattern	Later Adaptive Pattern	Perceived Effect
Separating partner history from parenting role	Interpreting current behavior through previous marital injuries	Evaluating the immediate parenting issue separately	Reduced emotional reactivity
Accepting non-identical households	Attempting to impose the same rules in both homes	Prioritizing shared core standards while tolerating differences	Reduced control struggles
Protecting children from adult conflict	Children overheard arguments or carried information	Adult matters were discussed directly and privately	Reduced child involvement
Establishing communication boundaries	Frequent calls and immediate responses were expected	Communication was limited to relevant matters and agreed channels	Increased emotional stability

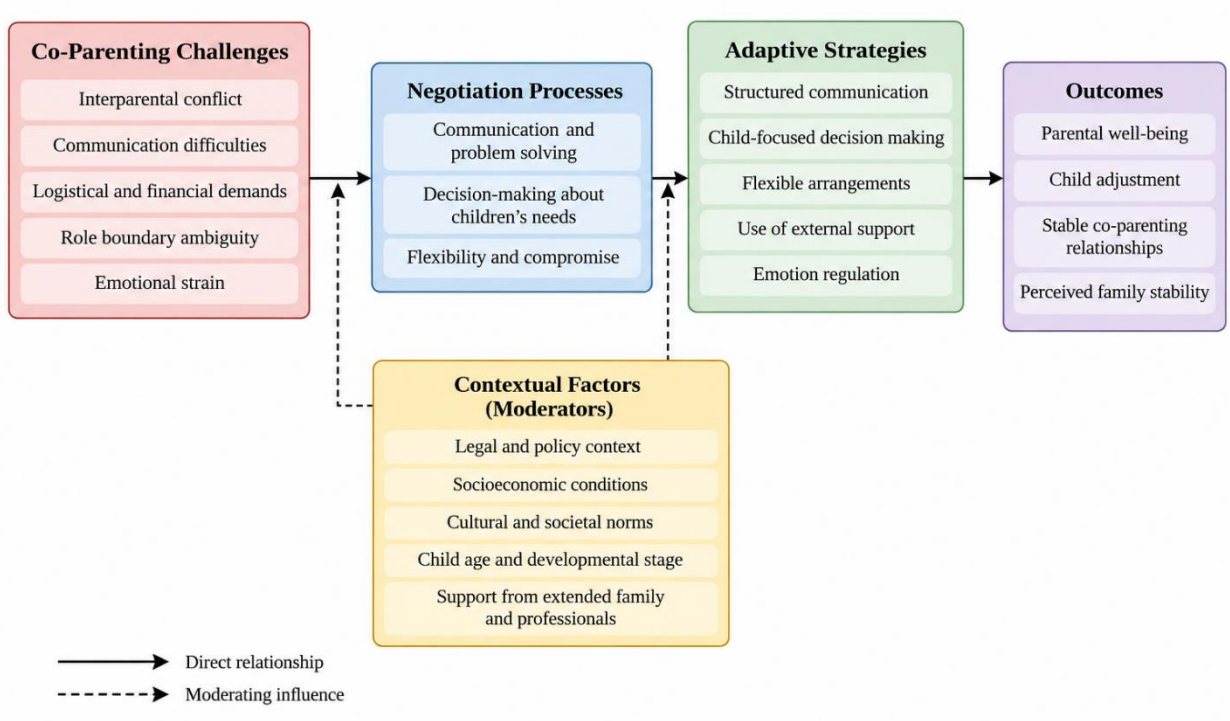
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Building procedural predictability	Repeated negotiation of routine matters	Calendars, recurring schedules, and written procedures were used	Reduced daily conflict
Choosing consequential disagreements	Most differences were challenged	Parents distinguished safety or developmental concerns from preference differences	Conserved emotional resources
Supporting the child's relationship with the other parent	Fear of losing closeness encouraged competition	Parents increasingly separated the child's attachment from adult loyalty	Reduced competition and guilt
Using selective flexibility	Changes were rejected to preserve fairness or control	Reasonable changes were exchanged reciprocally when possible	Increased cooperation
Redefining successful co-parenting	Success was imagined as friendship or complete agreement	Success was defined as reliable, respectful, child-focused functioning	More realistic expectations
Developing emotional detachment	Each interaction strongly affected mood and self-concept	The former partner's behavior became less personally defining	Greater resilience

Table 4 illustrates that adaptation generally involved a transformation in how participants understood co-parenting rather than the disappearance of disagreement. A major turning point involved abandoning the expectation that successful co-parenting required agreement on all aspects of parenting or a friendly relationship between former partners. Participants increasingly described success in functional terms: children knowing what would happen, essential information being exchanged, important decisions being made, and conflict remaining outside the child's emotional world. Several parents described learning to tolerate differences in food, bedtime, routines, or leisure activities when these differences did not create meaningful safety or developmental concerns. This reduced attempts to control the other household. Another major adaptation involved emotional differentiation. Participants described becoming better able to read a message as a parenting communication rather than as evidence about the former relationship. Protecting the child's relationship with the other parent was also described as difficult but important, particularly among participants who initially feared being replaced or losing influence. The combination of predictability and selective flexibility emerged as especially important: rigid arrangements reduced uncertainty but became problematic when treated as immutable, whereas unrestricted flexibility could recreate instability. Participants therefore tended to describe their most sustainable arrangements as structured but revisable.

Figure 1

Thematic Model of Challenges, Negotiation Processes, and Adaptive Strategies in Post-Divorce Co-Parenting



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The thematic model represented co-parenting adaptation as a recursive rather than linear process. Participants entered post-divorce parenting with varying levels of emotional residue, trust, conflict, and practical complexity. These factors shaped recurring challenges concerning communication, schedules, money, household differences, and parental legitimacy. Negotiation processes then either intensified or contained these difficulties. Reactive communication, child-mediated messages, and global arguments tended to return parents to earlier conflict patterns, whereas structured communication, issue-specific negotiation, direct parent-to-parent information exchange, and child-centered framing created conditions for adaptation. Over time, repeated successful management of concrete problems contributed to greater predictability, emotional detachment, acceptance of household differences, and more realistic definitions of successful co-parenting. These adaptive changes did not permanently eliminate conflict; instead, they altered how parents responded when new disagreements occurred. Thus, the central experiential shift was from attempting to resolve the former relationship through parenting interactions toward constructing a bounded working alliance organized around the child's continuing needs.

4. Discussion

The present study explored the lived experiences of divorced parents in Spain and identified four interconnected dimensions of post-divorce co-parenting: the persistence of emotional residue from the former partnership, the practical negotiations involved in parenting across two households, the effort to protect children while maintaining parental legitimacy, and the gradual development of adaptive strategies based on boundaries, predictability, emotional differentiation, and selective flexibility. Collectively, the findings suggest that post-divorce co-parenting is best understood not as a fixed level of cooperation but as an evolving relational practice. Participants did not simply move from "conflict" to "cooperation." Rather, they repeatedly encountered situations requiring them to regulate emotional reactions, interpret the other parent's intentions, negotiate practical arrangements, and decide which differences required intervention. This interpretation is consistent with scholarship conceptualizing family life after separation as an ongoing process of reconstruction rather than as a definitive transition completed by the legal divorce (Markoç, 2023; Zartler, 2021).

One of the most prominent findings was that unresolved experiences from the marital relationship remained active within co-parenting interactions. Participants frequently described routine communication as emotionally saturated because apparently neutral messages activated memories of betrayal, criticism, control, or unreliability. This finding helps explain why post-separation conflict can persist even when the substantive issue under discussion is relatively minor. Cao et al. emphasized that both predivorce and postdivorce interparental conflict shape children's adaptation trajectories, suggesting continuity between earlier relationship patterns and later family functioning (Cao et al., 2022). The present findings extend this perspective by illustrating the experiential mechanism through which such continuity may occur: parents interpreted current parenting behavior through relational expectations formed during the marriage. Communication therefore improved when participants became able to distinguish a present practical issue from the history of the former partnership.

This result also helps contextualize evidence linking parental conflict and post-separation contact. Larouche et al. reported a bidirectional relationship between post-separation parental conflict and father–child physical contact (Larouche et al., 2024). The accounts in the present study suggest that disputes concerning contact or schedule changes can acquire meanings extending beyond logistics, including whether a parent is respected, trusted, or recognized as legitimate. Similarly, the existence of validated measures specifically targeting acrimony among divorced parents reflects the centrality of relational hostility in post-divorce family functioning (Peixoto et al., 2022). Participants in this study nevertheless indicated that conflict became more manageable when the goal shifted from correcting the former partner to creating reliable procedures around parenting.

The second major finding concerned the continuous negotiation required to coordinate two households. Participants emphasized that parenting plans provided an essential framework but could not anticipate ordinary life events such as illness, changes in employment, school activities, travel, children's preferences, and developmental transitions. This finding is compatible with research showing that custody arrangements should not be evaluated independently from the relational processes through which they are implemented. Steinbach found that co-parenting functions as an important mediator between physical custody arrangements and children's mental health (Steinbach, 2023). Likewise, evidence concerning joint

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physical custody indicates that children's outcomes depend partly on whether shared arrangements occur in a climate of manageable conflict and limited loyalty pressure (Augustijn, 2021b, 2021c). The present findings similarly indicate that a formally balanced arrangement may be experienced as highly stressful when every practical adjustment becomes a symbolic contest.

Participants also described differences in household rules as a common source of early conflict. With time, many moved from seeking identical practices toward distinguishing core principles from tolerable differences. This adaptation appears particularly relevant in shared physical custody, where children routinely move between two parental environments. Reimann's work demonstrates that children actively construct family and home across maternal and paternal residences rather than merely occupying two locations (Reimann, 2023). The current findings indicate that parents' acceptance of some variation may facilitate this process by allowing each household to develop a coherent identity without forcing children into constant comparisons. At the same time, participants maintained that differences involving safety, healthcare, schooling, or major developmental concerns required continued coordination.

The findings regarding children are particularly important. Participants frequently described a tension between wanting to protect children from adult conflict and wanting to preserve their own position as a legitimate and emotionally significant parent. Anxiety about losing influence sometimes encouraged competition, questioning after transitions, or resistance to schedule changes. Yet many parents eventually recognized that the child's close relationship with the other parent did not necessarily diminish their own role. This is consistent with findings indicating that loyalty conflict can alter children's psychological experiences within joint physical custody (Augustijn, 2021b) and that children may experience stress when parental arrangements expose them to divided loyalties (Augustijn, 2021a). The decision by many participants to stop using children as messengers therefore represented more than improved communication efficiency; it constituted a deliberate attempt to remove children from responsibility for maintaining the parental relationship.

The value participants placed on protecting relationships with both parents also corresponds with research on shared parenting and father involvement. Sandberg demonstrated the importance of post-divorce arrangements for continued father involvement (Sandberg, 2023), while qualitative research with fathers sharing custody of young children has documented the complexity of sustaining active caregiving following separation (d'Orsi & Diniz, 2025). The present findings add that maintaining meaningful involvement may require parents to tolerate the emotional difficulty of recognizing the former partner's continuing importance in the child's life. This may be especially challenging when parental identity has been destabilized by divorce. Riyaz's exploration of divorced men's experiences similarly indicates that post-divorce challenges extend into psychological, social, economic, and parenting domains (Riyaz, 2024). Family professionals should therefore avoid assuming that formal access automatically produces a secure sense of parental legitimacy.

The third major contribution of the study concerns negotiation strategies. Parents described written communication, shared calendars, delayed responses, issue-specific discussion, fixed procedures, and child-centered framing as mechanisms that reduced conflict. These findings closely align with the rationale underlying co-parenting interventions, which seek to establish workable communication and coordinated parenting after separation (Darwiche et al., 2021). They also support approaches emphasizing collaborative rather than purely adversarial family problem-solving (Menon, 2024). Importantly, however, participants did not describe collaboration as requiring emotional closeness. Several of the most functional arrangements were characterized by limited, structured, and respectful contact rather than friendship. This finding challenges idealized assumptions that effective co-parenting necessarily requires a highly integrated relationship between former partners.

The usefulness of procedural structure may be particularly relevant in cases characterized by mistrust. Studies of child-custody decision-making demonstrate the substantial uncertainty present in post-separation family disputes (Josimar Antônio de Alcântara & Ormerod, 2022a, 2022b), while more recent work emphasizes the cognitive strategies used to manage that uncertainty (Josimar Antônio de Alcântara & Ormerod, 2024). The current participants appeared to construct their own everyday uncertainty-reduction mechanisms through calendars, written agreements, communication rules, and recurring procedures. These tools did not resolve the emotional history between parents, but they reduced the number of situations in which that history needed to be activated.

The finding that formal agreements did not fully resolve everyday parenting problems also has implications for

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family law. Divorce-law reforms can shape parenting arrangements and divorce processes (Park et al., 2026), and custody frameworks establish important rights and responsibilities. Comparative legal research nevertheless demonstrates substantial variation in how post-divorce custody and access are conceptualized (Josimar Antônio de Alcântara & Ormerod, 2021; Kenneth, 2024). The present study suggests that legal clarity should be complemented by mechanisms enabling parents to adapt agreements as children's needs change. Excessively vague arrangements can create recurrent conflict, but excessively rigid arrangements may force families back into adversarial processes for relatively ordinary developmental changes.

Participants' descriptions of adaptation further showed that flexibility became useful only after sufficient predictability had been established. Early in the post-divorce period, requests for change were often interpreted as attempts at control or evidence that the other parent could not be trusted. Later, some parents developed what may be described as bounded flexibility: stable rules existed, but exceptions could be made without being interpreted as permanent concessions. This finding is compatible with evidence that the way custody and support arrangements are resolved may affect parental well-being during divorce (Crapo et al., 2024). When parents perceive procedural fairness and predictability, they may have greater psychological capacity for voluntary accommodation.

Another important finding was that participants redefined what successful co-parenting meant. Initially, some expected that successful co-parenting would involve shared values, frequent communication, or eventual friendship. With experience, they increasingly defined success in functional terms: dependable exchanges, access to important information, reduced child exposure to conflict, respect for boundaries, and adequate collaboration on consequential decisions. This shift is consistent with research emphasizing the heterogeneity of post-divorce family assets (Beckmeyer & Russell, 2024) and the need to evaluate divorce education using multidimensional indicators of post-divorce adjustment (Ferraro et al., 2024). It also reflects accounts of parallel co-parenting experiences in which parents may construct different interpretations of the same relationship (Anitta & Ramshida, 2024). Functional co-parenting may therefore be possible even without shared narratives about the divorce.

The findings also contribute to understanding the distinction between equality and equity in post-divorce parenting. Several participants with approximately equal residential schedules nevertheless perceived unequal mental, administrative, or emotional labor. This observation suggests that the division of nights should not be treated as a complete measure of shared parenting. Research on shared physical custody in Germany similarly situates parenting arrangements within broader family practices rather than reducing them to formal residence patterns (Walper et al., 2021). Studies of children's health and life satisfaction in shared arrangements likewise point toward the importance of relational context (Riser, 2024; Steinbach et al., 2020). Future conceptualizations of co-parenting quality may therefore benefit from incorporating invisible coordination work alongside residential time.

New partners and extended family members represented another important boundary challenge. Participants differed in when they believed a new partner should become involved in caregiving, communication, or decisions. These experiences highlight how post-divorce families become increasingly complex systems rather than remaining stable two-parent structures. The legal and cultural meaning of parental authority may further shape these boundaries, as illustrated by debates regarding joint custody and state-family relationships in other jurisdictions (Hamano, 2021). Family professionals' attitudes toward post-divorce fatherhood can also influence how parental roles are interpreted (Autonen-Vaaraniemi, 2022). Support services should therefore avoid assuming that family restructuring ends once an initial custody agreement is established.

Participants' emphasis on adaptability was also consistent with research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Extraordinary circumstances forced separated parents to reconsider established schedules, health risks, and contact arrangements (Goldberg et al., 2021), while custody laws and institutional structures could influence parental cooperation during periods of uncertainty (Wong & Bansak, 2025). The present study indicates that the need for adaptability is not confined to major crises. Ordinary family life repeatedly introduces smaller disruptions that require the same fundamental capacities: communication, proportionality, perspective-taking, and the ability to distinguish immediate child needs from accumulated adult grievances.

The findings ultimately support a process-oriented model of post-divorce co-parenting. Parents' adaptation was not determined solely by the custody arrangement, level of initial conflict, or passage of time. Instead, it emerged through repeated cycles of challenge, negotiation, outcome, and revision. Constructive experiences gradually created

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evidence that cooperation was possible, while recurrent failures could reinforce mistrust. This process-oriented interpretation complements research linking parenting and co-parenting with child adjustment in separated families (Pires & Martins, 2021) and broader evidence regarding the developmental significance of parental environments (Jacob, 2023). It also resonates with multidimensional approaches to caregiver adjustment, in which adaptation reflects interactions among psychological, relational, and contextual resources rather than a single outcome (Stock et al., 2024).

From a phenomenological perspective, perhaps the most consequential adaptation was emotional differentiation. Participants who described substantial improvement did not necessarily report that the former partner had changed. Instead, they described being less emotionally governed by the former partner's behavior. They became more capable of postponing responses, limiting discussions to parenting matters, tolerating non-consequential differences, and refusing to use each disagreement as a referendum on fairness in the divorce. In practical terms, they ceased trying to complete the emotional work of marital separation inside the co-parenting relationship. This transformation allowed co-parenting to become a bounded working alliance rather than a continuation of the former marriage by other means.

5. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that post-divorce co-parenting is a dynamic and negotiated process in which former partners must simultaneously manage unresolved relational emotions, coordinate parenting across separate households, protect children from adult conflict, and preserve their own parental identity. Sustainable adaptation did not require friendship, identical household practices, or the complete disappearance of disagreement. Instead, participants developed more functional arrangements by creating predictable procedures, communicating directly and selectively, separating marital history from current parenting issues, protecting children from triangulation, tolerating non-harmful differences between households, and combining stable boundaries with carefully negotiated flexibility. Post-divorce co-parenting is therefore best understood as the gradual construction of a workable parental alliance whose quality depends less on the formal custody label than on how parents repeatedly manage the everyday demands of shared responsibility.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

The study has several limitations. The purposive sample was relatively small and was drawn from Madrid and Valencia, which limits transferability to other Spanish regions and to families operating within substantially different cultural, socioeconomic, or legal contexts. Participation was voluntary, and parents willing to discuss their co-parenting experiences may have differed from highly disengaged or severely conflicted parents who declined participation. The sample also excluded cases involving active child-protection investigations, meaning that the findings should not be generalized to situations involving serious family violence, coercive control, or ongoing safeguarding concerns. Because interviews were conducted with individual parents rather than matched former couples, the analysis captured participants' subjective experiences but could not compare both parents' accounts of the same co-parenting relationship. The cross-sectional design additionally limited the ability to observe changes prospectively as co-parenting relationships developed over time.

Future research should employ longitudinal qualitative designs that follow parents from the early stages of separation through later phases of family reorganization in order to identify turning points and trajectories of adaptation more precisely. Studies involving matched mother–father dyads could examine where former partners' narratives converge and diverge and how discrepancies in perceived fairness, communication quality, and responsibility influence subsequent cooperation. Greater attention should also be given to families with adolescents, blended families, same-sex parents, geographically separated parents, families undergoing relocation, and culturally diverse populations within Spain. Mixed-method research could integrate interview findings with measures of co-parenting quality, parental well-being, child adjustment, and observed communication. Future investigations should also examine children's perspectives alongside those of parents to determine whether parental perceptions of successful adaptation correspond with children's experiences of security, belonging, and freedom from loyalty conflict.

In practice, family mediators, counselors, psychologists, and divorce-education professionals should help parents develop realistic definitions of effective co-parenting rather than promoting friendship or complete agreement as universal goals. Interventions should distinguish essential child-related coordination from unnecessary interpersonal

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contact and should help parents establish clear communication channels, shared calendars, procedures for expenses and schedule changes, and explicit rules that prevent children from becoming messengers. Parents may benefit from learning delayed-response techniques, issue-specific negotiation, emotional regulation, and methods for distinguishing consequential child-welfare concerns from differences in personal parenting preference. Professionals should also help parents anticipate developmental changes rather than treating the original parenting plan as permanently sufficient. Where direct collaboration is unsafe or persistently destabilizing, more structured parallel-parenting arrangements may be preferable to repeated attempts at intensive cooperation. Across intervention models, the central practical objective should be to create a predictable, child-focused system that permits necessary coordination while reducing opportunities for former-partner conflict to dominate the continuing parental relationship.

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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.

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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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