

Family Conflict and Emotional Adjustment among Adolescents after Parental Divorce

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Article Info

Article History:

Received July 26th, 2026

Revised Aug 8th, 2026

Accepted Aug 14th, 2026

Keyword:

Adolescents; Family conflict; Emotional adjustment; Family belonging.

ABSTRACT

Parental divorce was examined as a continuing change in family relationships rather than a single legal event. This research use integrative qualitative review on family conflict and adolescent emotional adjustment after divorce. The reviewed studies showed that adjustment was shaped less by divorce status alone than by the relational conditions surrounding separation. Persistent interparental conflict, triangulation, boundary diffusion, unstable parent contact, and pressure to take sides were repeatedly associated with emotional insecurity and poorer adjustment. Adolescents responded differently depending on the quality of parenting, the degree of cooperation between parents, and the stability of relationships across households. Support from teachers, peers, and trusted adults also reduced vulnerability when family routines were unsettled. Emotional adjustment therefore appeared as a relational process tied to security, belonging, and the adolescent's position within a reorganized family. The findings suggested that support after divorce should focus on reducing adolescents' exposure to adult conflict and preserving reliable relationships rather than treating divorce itself as the sole source of emotional difficulty.



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INTRODUCTION

Parental divorce is often recorded as a change in family structure, yet adolescents usually encounter it as a longer change in everyday relationships. Conflict may have started well before separation. Afterward, residence schedules may change and contact with one parent may become less regular. School routines can also be affected. Holidays or a parent's new relationship may bring further negotiation into daily family life. Raley and Sweeney (2020) describe divorce and repartnering as processes that reorganize family life rather than isolated events. Longitudinal evidence also shows that mental health problems can increase after parental divorce and remain visible into young adulthood for some adolescents (Tullius et al., 2022). Neither finding supports a simple claim that divorce produces the same outcome for every young person. Conflict is one reason the trajectories differ. Meta-analytic work on divorced families links interparental conflict with child adjustment and shows that parenting is part of the pathway through which conflict is experienced (van Dijk et al., 2020). A broader meta-analysis reaches a similar conclusion across family structures, where destructive conflict is associated with maladjustment and with children's responses to parental discord (Van Eldik et al., 2020). Separation can reduce daily exposure to a hostile relationship in some families. In others, the dispute continues in a new setting, so the adolescent has left one household arrangement without leaving the conflict that surrounded it.

Adolescence gives the problem a particular social form. Young people seek greater independence while still relying on parents for security and recognition. They may also understand more of the parental dispute than younger children. Post-divorce conflict has been linked with fear of abandonment and later mental health problems (O'Hara et al., 2021). Across family structures,

interparental conflict is also tied to adolescent emotional insecurity (O'Hara et al., 2024). Understanding the separation does not remove uncertainty about how to remain close to both parents.

Lebanese national data associate parental divorce with depression and social fear among adolescents (Obeid et al., 2021). Other studies from the same national context report anger and aggression (Zakhour et al., 2023) and some addictive behaviors (Jabbour et al., 2020). These studies are observational. They do not show that divorce mechanically produces a clinical problem. Their value lies in showing that post-divorce strain can appear in several parts of adolescent life.

Attachment to parents does not operate separately from the wider family climate or from the adolescent's own characteristics and sense of belonging. Finkelstein and Grebelsky-Lichtman (2022) found substantial variation among adolescents in divorced families, while Lan and Sun (2022) identified different adjustment profiles among Chinese adolescents. Sense of belonging across family and wider social settings is also associated with adolescent adjustment (Rejaän et al., 2022b). Indonesian evidence points in the same direction by linking social support and self-efficacy with resilience among adolescents from divorced families (Murniasih & Irvan, 2023). These findings make a purely clinical reading too narrow. Emotional adjustment develops through relationships at home and through the social settings that remain available outside it. The same symptom can also carry different meanings when family conditions differ, which makes the surrounding relationship important to interpretation.

A social-relational view treats emotional adjustment as a changing response to family reorganization rather than a fixed condition located inside the adolescent. Cao et al. (2022) make this point in their model of divorce and child adaptation by showing how pre-divorce and post-divorce conflict can shape different developmental paths. Emotional security provides a related lens because conflict can disturb confidence in family relationships even when contact with both parents continues (O'Hara et al., 2024). The present review uses these ideas without building a heavy theoretical model. Recent research is examined to understand how continued family conflict affects adolescents after parental divorce and which relationships make adjustment more difficult or more manageable. The focus remains on conflict, emotional security, belonging, and support rather than diagnosis.

RESEARCH METHODS

An integrative qualitative literature review was used because recent research on parental divorce and adolescent adjustment uses different designs. Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies are common. Meta-analyses and family studies provide another part of the evidence, while a smaller group of papers examines interventions or reviews earlier findings. A narrative synthesis allows findings from these different designs to be compared without treating their measures as interchangeable. The review was not designed to estimate a pooled causal effect. Attention was placed on recurring social and relational mechanisms that could be compared across study designs and settings.

The search was conducted in 2026 through PubMed and Google Scholar. The first searches paired parental divorce or parental separation with interparental conflict and adolescent adjustment. Later searches focused on emotional security and coparenting. Separate searches were used for family belonging and triangulation. Boundary diffusion, parent-adolescent relationships, and social support were then checked where they appeared in closely related studies. Searches were repeated with narrower combinations when a broad term returned work on adult divorce without usable evidence about children or adolescents. Twenty-seven articles were retained. Most examined adolescents directly or included adolescence within the sampled age range. Child-focused or family-level studies were used only when they clarified conflict or parent-child processes relevant to adolescents. Each article was read for its main finding and the relationship process behind it. The synthesis compared recurring patterns rather than treating any single study as decisive. Conflicting findings were retained because country, age range, and study design varied across the evidence base.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Family Conflict as the Continuing Stressor after Divorce

Divorce status does not explain adolescent adjustment on its own. The stronger pattern in recent research concerns the relational climate before and after separation. In the meta-analysis by van Dijk et al. (2020), interparental conflict was associated with internalizing and externalizing problems, while parenting also carried part of that association. Cao et al. (2022) place the same issue across time. Their divorce process model shows that pre-divorce and post-divorce conflict can shape different adaptation

trajectories. Two adolescents may therefore experience parental divorce at a similar age and still encounter very different family conditions afterward. One may move into a calmer arrangement. Another may continue to live with hostility through calls, messages, custody exchanges, or repeated arguments about contact and money. Separation can reduce direct exposure to conflict without removing the adolescent from it. Parents may no longer argue in the same room, yet the young person can still hear criticism, receive questions about the other household, or sense that ordinary information is politically charged. The conflict may become less visible to teachers or relatives while remaining active in the adolescent's daily decisions. That difference helps explain why family structure is an incomplete measure of post-divorce experience. The form of conflict matters as well. A disagreement that is contained between adults is different from repeated hostility that recruits the adolescent into the dispute. Frequency alone can miss this difference. The adolescent experiences conflict through what parents say, what they ask the young person to do, and whether the disagreement changes ordinary contact with either parent. Average differences between divorced and intact families can still be real, but those group comparisons leave wide variation inside each category. Relationship processes help account for that variation because they describe what adolescents actually encounter after separation rather than relying on family status as a substitute for daily experience.

Post-divorce triangulation places adolescents inside parental disputes that adults have not resolved directly. A young person may be asked to pass a message or provide information about the other household. Support for one parent can also be read as rejection of the other. van Dijk et al. (2022) associated this pattern with adjustment problems and identified loyalty conflict and self-esteem as relevant mechanisms. Repeated exposure is important. A single uncomfortable request may be manageable. A family routine built around taking sides changes the adolescent's position in the family and makes ordinary contact with either parent more difficult. The young person may begin to edit what is said in each household simply to prevent another argument, which can reduce open communication with both parents.

In social workers' reports, greater dispute intensity was associated with poorer parent-child relationships and child functioning (Glucklich, 2023). Corral et al. (2026) likewise identified different adaptation profiles in high-conflict divorce. Family members did not recover in the same way or at the same pace. Cooperative behavior between parents remained relevant even when individual adults appeared to function better.

O'Hara et al. (2021) found that post-divorce interparental conflict predicted fear of abandonment, which then predicted later mental health problems. Emotional insecurity therefore helps explain why conflict can remain stressful after separation. A later study by O'Hara et al. (2024) examined adolescents across different family structures and again linked interparental conflict with emotional insecurity. A good parent-child relationship was valuable, but it did not consistently remove the harmful association between conflict and insecurity. This finding complicates the common assumption that one supportive parent can fully compensate for an ongoing conflict between two adults. Support matters, although some stressors still need to be reduced at their source. Emotional security also involves confidence that family relationships will remain available during disagreement. When every change of schedule or missed call appears to signal another rupture, ordinary uncertainty can become more demanding than the legal divorce itself.

Daily and longer-term evidence from divorced families associates boundary diffusion with poorer parent-adolescent relationship quality (van Dijk et al., 2025). Adolescents may become confidants for a parent who is lonely or still preoccupied with the former partner. The problem is not emotional closeness itself. Difficulty appears when the young person is given responsibilities or information that belong to the adult relationship and cannot be managed without taking a side.

Obeid et al. (2021) and Zakhour et al. (2023) report higher levels of several mental health and aggression-related outcomes among adolescents whose parents had divorced. These behavioral findings still require careful interpretation. Jabbour et al. (2020) found associations with some addictive behaviors. These studies cannot separate every influence surrounding divorce, and they do not establish a single causal route. They do show that strain may emerge as withdrawal in one adolescent and anger in another. School problems, conflict with peers, or risk behavior may appear before a young person gives adults a clear account of distress. Cross-national differences also caution against treating one observed association as universal, since economic conditions, family norms, and access to support can change what divorce means in everyday life.

Research on problematic internet use among adolescents from divorced families found that family factors and self-esteem were relevant to patterns of use (van Dijk et al., 2021). Digital communication can also allow family conflict to continue across households. Smartphones do not create post-divorce conflict. They can allow tense contact to reach adolescents during school hours or while they are staying with the other parent. Physical distance between households therefore does not guarantee distance from the dispute.

Family conflict after divorce should be understood more broadly than the number of open arguments witnessed by a child. Denigration and loyalty pressure can keep adolescents involved in an adult conflict after the marriage has ended. The same problem appears when rules change without warning or when a parent repeatedly asks for information about the other household. Blurred parent-child roles add another source of pressure. Some of these experiences are quiet and may not be noticed by people outside the family. Their common feature is repeated uncertainty about how to remain connected to both parents without becoming responsible for their unresolved relationship. That position can persist even when neither household appears openly chaotic.

2. Emotional Adjustment after Family Reorganization

Emotional adjustment after divorce is often measured through symptoms, but recent studies show a more uneven process. Tullius et al. (2022) found that mental health problems increased after parental divorce in their longitudinal sample and could persist into adulthood. Such findings should not make sadness, anger, or anxiety equivalent to disorder. A family transition can produce difficult emotions while the adolescent continues to attend school, maintain friendships, and remain attached to both parents. Attachment remains important within this process. Lan and Sun (2022) identified different psychosocial profiles among adolescents from divorced families and found that parental attachment and gender were related to those profiles. Finkelstein and Grebelsky-Lichtman (2022) also show that attachment patterns, family environment, and personal characteristics interact. The studies do not support one psychological type of the child of divorce. Variation is substantial, and family history matters. A period of distress can therefore be serious without defining the adolescent's whole adjustment trajectory.

Rejaän et al. (2022b) found that adolescents' sense of belonging across family and wider social settings was associated with adjustment. Belonging gives the emotional response a social context. After parental separation, family membership can become less straightforward in practice. An adolescent may remain close to both parents while routines, celebrations, and residence are divided between households. Emotional adjustment includes finding a workable sense of family membership under those changed conditions. Distress can intensify when acceptance in one household seems to depend on distancing from the other. Belonging outside the family also matters because peers and school can preserve ordinary roles when home life has become uncertain.

Contact with parents helps when the relationship remains meaningful. Rejaän, van der Valk, and Branje (2024) found that the quality of residential and digital contact with mothers and fathers was related to adolescents' post-divorce family belonging. Frequency alone did not carry the same meaning. Administrative arrangements often count nights or weekends, while adolescents experience contact through attention, reliability, and the emotional tone of transitions between homes. A schedule that looks balanced on paper can still be tiring when exchanges are tense. Less frequent contact may remain secure when the parent is reliable and the relationship is not made conditional on loyalty. Quality therefore cannot be inferred from residence percentages alone, especially when adolescents are old enough to notice whether time together is attentive or mainly procedural.

Rejaän, van der Valk, Schrama, et al. (2024) found links between parenting and adolescents' autonomy after divorce, while coparenting was also related to their sense of belonging. Adolescents need a voice in matters that affect daily life, as they age. Being heard is different from being required to settle adult disagreements. A teenager can reasonably be asked how a residence schedule affects school or friendships. Asking that teenager to decide which parent is more deserving of time transfers the conflict rather than supporting autonomy.

Hugh-Jones et al. (2025) found that the timing of parental separation was related differently to later mental health by gender. Age therefore cannot be separated from how adjustment is interpreted. Teacher autonomy support has also been associated with fewer internalizing problems among adolescents, although the pattern varied across personality profiles and family structures (Lan &

Mastrotheodoros, 2024). These differences do not weaken the broader argument. They show why family conflict needs to be examined together with developmental stage and social setting. An arrangement that is workable for a younger child may become restrictive for an older adolescent whose school, friendships, or activities require more control over time.

A small attachment-based intervention reported reductions in negative affect during follow-up among adolescents dealing with parental divorce (Tay-Karapas et al., 2024). The study was modest, so broad claims would be premature. The result still supports a useful point. Early distress is not necessarily a permanent trajectory. More stable relationships and a clearer understanding of the family change can alter how adolescents respond over time.

For this review, emotional adjustment means being able to manage mixed feelings while continuing age-appropriate daily life and meaningful relationships. The definition does not require adolescents to approve of the divorce or stop missing the former family arrangement. Quiet behavior is also not treated automatically as healthy adaptation. Some young people limit their own needs because a parent appears overwhelmed, while others avoid discussing positive experiences with one parent because they expect the other parent to react badly. Adults may call that restraint maturity even when the adolescent has taken on more emotional responsibility than is appropriate. Everyday functioning therefore needs to be read together with the freedom to express ordinary disappointment, attachment, and disagreement.

3. Protective Relationships in Post-Divorce Life

Protection is strongest when relationships reduce the adolescent's exposure to adult conflict and make daily life more predictable. Parenting quality is one part of this. van Dijk et al. (2020) show that parenting helps explain how interparental conflict is connected with child adjustment. O'Hara et al. (2021) also found that parenting quality was relevant within the relationship between conflict, fear of abandonment, and later problems, although the expected buffering effect was not uniform. O'Hara et al. (2024) similarly found that a high-quality parent-child relationship did not simply cancel the association between conflict and emotional insecurity. Supportive parenting should therefore not be treated as a cure for conflict. Adolescents benefit when parents remain emotionally available, but the family also needs to reduce the adult behavior that keeps producing insecurity. A supportive parent who continues to question the adolescent about the other household can offer comfort and create pressure at the same time.

Rejaän et al. (2022a) identified different post-divorce coparenting patterns and found more favorable adjustment where coparenting was supportive. Cooperation does not require former partners to become close again. Parents can keep disagreements away from the child, maintain reasonably predictable arrangements, and avoid treating the adolescent's relationship with the other parent as a threat.

Parent contact also needs to be reliable rather than merely frequent. The study of post-divorce belonging by Rejaän, van der Valk, and Branje (2024) shows why the quality of contact deserves attention. A residence schedule may distribute time evenly and still create strain when every transition brings questioning or criticism. Reliable contact with one parent can remain emotionally valuable even when physical time is more limited. Adolescents appear to need confidence that important relationships will continue without constant negotiation. Reliability also includes small routines such as keeping agreed contact times and not making the adolescent responsible for repairing missed arrangements.

Support outside the household can provide stability when family routines are changing. Murniasih and Irvan (2023) found that social support was positively related to resilience among Indonesian adolescents from divorced families and that self-efficacy partly mediated the relationship. Lan and Mastrotheodoros (2024) also show the relevance of teacher autonomy support. School may be one of the few settings that remains relatively stable during family reorganization. A teacher who understands a temporary decline in concentration or a friend who does not demand repeated explanations can reduce everyday social pressure without turning the adolescent into a patient.

Rich et al. (2023) identified family and social support as important elements in responses to adolescent mental health after parental divorce. Formal intervention is useful for some young people, especially when conflict remains severe or functioning declines. Many adolescents also need ordinary protection from avoidable family strain. Clear information, dependable adults, and freedom from acting as an intermediary can matter before clinical treatment is considered. Support is most useful when it

gives the adolescent another stable relationship rather than another setting in which the divorce must be repeatedly explained.

Pang et al. (2024) linked parental divorce with both mental health and academic outcomes among students in rural China. School performance therefore provides another view of how family change enters everyday adolescent life. Family change can affect residence, supervision, material conditions, and school routines at the same time. Emotional adjustment may therefore first appear through concentration, attendance, participation, or friendship patterns. A decline in school performance should not automatically be treated as a direct psychological effect of divorce because practical changes can also matter. Longer travel, movement between homes, or reduced supervision may alter school life even when the adolescent does not report severe emotional symptoms. Social support becomes important because adjustment takes place across these settings.

Successful adjustment should not be defined by silence or by an adolescent's willingness to move between households without complaint. A more useful standard is whether the young person can express disappointment safely, remain connected to important people, and take part in age-appropriate decisions without being made responsible for adult conflict. Post-divorce families can differ greatly in structure. Protection is stronger when adolescents are not expected to take adult roles in the conflict.

CONCLUSION

Recent research does not support treating parental divorce as a single and uniform cause of adolescent maladjustment. The more consistent concern is what happens within family relationships before and after separation. Continued interparental conflict can remain active through triangulation, negative talk about the other parent, blurred boundaries, or pressure to choose sides. Emotional insecurity becomes more likely when adolescents cannot predict whether closeness to one parent will create problems with the other. Under these conditions, sadness or anger may reflect the young person's social position inside a reorganized family. Withdrawal and behavior problems can develop in the same setting. These responses should not be read only as individual psychological problems. Recent studies also show that the same legal family status can contain very different levels of conflict and support, so family structure is too broad to explain adjustment without information about relationship quality.

Adjustment varies because adolescents do not enter divorce with the same relationships or resources. Warm parenting and workable coparenting are repeatedly associated with better adjustment. Reliable contact can provide further security. Belonging and support outside the household also matter, although none of these conditions guarantees protection when conflict remains intense. Support should reduce preventable exposure to adult disputes rather than place the full responsibility for coping on adolescents. Schools and trusted adults can help by maintaining ordinary continuity and recognizing that temporary changes in concentration or behavior may reflect family strain. Family conflict after divorce is a social problem as much as an emotional one. Separation changes daily authority, contact, and expectations of loyalty, and adolescents have to find a secure place within those changes. Research that pays attention to these relationships can explain why adjustment differs even among adolescents who share the same legal family status. The practical question is not whether every divorce harms adolescents. Greater attention should be given to whether post-divorce relationships allow them to stay connected, speak without fear, and develop autonomy without carrying unresolved adult conflict. That shift keeps the adolescent in view without reducing the family transition to a diagnosis.

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