



When Co-Parenting Becomes A Battlefield: The Impact of A High-Conflict Divorce on Father–Child Relationships

Phuti Nathaniel Kgadima¹ , Andrew Spaumer²

Article History:

Received: 22-07-2025

Revision: 30-09-2025

Accepted: 04-10-2025

Publication: 01-01-2026

Cite this article as:

Kgadima, N. P., & Spaumer, A. (2026). When Co-Parenting Becomes A Battlefield: The Impact of A High-Conflict Divorce on Father–Child Relationships. *Innovation Journal of Social Sciences and Economic Review*, 8(2), 01-09. doi.org/10.36923/ijsser.v8i2.326

©2026 by author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License.

Corresponding Author(s):

Phuti Nathaniel Kgadima

Department of Social Work,
University of South Africa. Email:
kgadinp@unisa.ac.za

Abstract: Fathers are traditionally seen as the patriarchal heads of households. However, in many societies, mothers exert substantial influence over the extent of paternal involvement post-divorce. Non-resident fathers often face significant barriers, particularly maternal gatekeeping, which limits access to their children and undermines their parental role. These dynamics contribute to persistent societal narratives that depict such fathers as “deadbeats” or “irresponsible.” This study challenges the prevailing notion of the “absent father” by examining the emotional, social, and legal barriers to paternal involvement following divorce. Specifically, it explores how maternal gatekeeping affects father–child relationships and child development outcomes. A semi-systematic literature review was conducted using a six-step process to identify, select, and analyse over 100 scholarly sources related to post-divorce co-parenting, maternal gatekeeping, and father involvement. PRISMA principles were used to ensure transparency in the selection process. The review indicates that paternal involvement plays a critical role in promoting children’s emotional well-being, resilience, and social adjustment. Children who experience consistent and responsive parenting from fathers tend to form secure attachments and exhibit more favorable long-term outcomes. Maternal gatekeeping, however, can disrupt this process and lead to psychological and relational harm for both the child and the non-resident father. While legal systems remain the primary site for addressing post-divorce parenting disputes, the findings highlight the urgent need for social work intervention. Social workers are uniquely positioned to mediate high-conflict co-parenting relationships, promote equitable parental involvement, and advocate for the child’s best interests.

Keywords: Divorce and Child Development, Fathering, Non-Resident Fathers, Parental Alienation, Maternal Gatekeeping, Parental Alienation, Social Work Intervention

1. Introduction

Divorce constitutes a profound disruption in the family life cycle, often accompanied by emotional distress, legal conflict, and the restructuring of daily routines. This transition typically requires the establishment of new living arrangements, the renegotiation of parenting roles, and the development of alternative structures that support children’s adaptation to a post-divorce environment (Kim & Woo, 2011; Keating et al., 2016). While the legal bond between spouses may be dissolved, the responsibilities of parenthood persist beyond marital breakdown. Consequently, many families shift to a co-parenting arrangement, which demands ongoing collaboration between separated partners in raising their children (Hong & Welch, 2013).

Traditionally, parenting has been conceptualised within the framework of an intact nuclear family, wherein two married adults jointly raise their children (Gupta, 2023). However, co-parenting deviates from this model by foregrounding shared parenting responsibilities between individuals who are no longer romantically involved. As Forehand et al. (2016) explain, co-parenting entails the coordinated care and upbringing of children by both parents, regardless of their marital status. This enduring parental engagement is further emphasised by Buchanan and LeMoyne (2020), who underscore the continuity of parenting obligations even after the dissolution of the romantic relationship. Similarly, Wade et al. (2023) define co-parenting as how parents collaborate in their roles, highlighting both the practical and emotional efforts required to sustain a functioning family unit in the aftermath of divorce.

Effective co-parenting hinges on the ability of former partners to redefine interpersonal boundaries. Drawing on family stress theory, Moore (2016) introduces the concept of boundary ambiguity, an experience wherein family members are uncertain about who is responsible for specific tasks or roles within the restructured family system. When these boundaries remain blurred, post-divorce adjustment becomes increasingly complex, as former partners struggle to disentangle their spousal roles from their ongoing parental duties. Cohen and Finzi-Dottan (2013) similarly assert that the successful transition from a spousal/parental system to a solely parental system is crucial for the emergence of cooperative post-divorce relationships.

However, achieving cooperative parenting is often fraught with emotional and relational challenges. The aftermath of divorce frequently evokes feelings of betrayal, anger, grief, and resentment, emotions that can undermine effective communication and deepen conflict between parents (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2013). Attaining what scholars refer to as “optimal co-parenting” thus requires parents to suppress personal grievances in order to prioritize the emotional and developmental needs of their children. This ideal, while aspirational, is often unachievable in high-conflict divorces, where interpersonal hostility persists long after legal

^{1,2}Department of Social Work, University of South Africa, South Africa

proceedings conclude. As a result, children may become entangled in parental disputes, exposing them to psychological distress and social instability (Bouchard & Doucet, 2011).

One particularly harmful dynamic that frequently arises in high-conflict divorces is the strategic use of children as instruments of control or manipulation. In such cases, one parent, most often the custodial mother, may actively inhibit or undermine the other parent's involvement in the child's life. This pattern, commonly referred to as maternal gatekeeping, involves the restriction of access, communication, or emotional closeness between the child and the non-resident father. These practices raise critical questions regarding the long-term consequences of gatekeeping, including its impact on father-child relationships, the psychological development of the child, and the stability of the broader family system. Accordingly, this article explores the following central questions: How does maternal gatekeeping manifest in post-divorce family contexts? In what ways does it affect the child and the non-resident father? And how might social workers intervene to support equitable co-parenting while safeguarding the best interests of the child?

1.1. Problem Formulation

Although the importance of fathers in child development is increasingly recognised (Zou, Wu & Li, 2020), their role continues to be marginalised in both academic literature and post-divorce parenting discourses. Historically, parenting has been framed predominantly around the maternal figure, often relegating fathers to a secondary or absent role, particularly in the aftermath of marital dissolution (Forehand et al., 2016). However, this maternal-centric view fails to acknowledge the diversity of paternal involvement and its critical influence on children's emotional, cognitive, and social outcomes (Wade et al., 2022). Non-resident fathers, in particular, face a distinct set of challenges following divorce. Beyond the logistical barriers of reduced contact, many encounter psychological and legal obstacles, such as the effects of maternal gatekeeping, a phenomenon whereby the custodial mother controls or limits paternal involvement under various pretexts (O'Gara, 2024). While literature on father-child relationships post-divorce is growing, much of it still presents non-resident fathers through a deficit lens, often labelling them as "deadbeat dads" (O'Gara, 2024) or "reluctant fathers" (Rehel, 2014). These pejorative narratives obscure the experiences of fathers who are eager to maintain active roles in their children's lives but are systematically hindered from doing so.

This scholarly gap signals an urgent need to reconsider the role of non-resident fathers in the post-divorce parenting ecosystem. Importantly, the absence of a biological father does not necessarily equate to an absence of paternal care, particularly in collectivist and African cultural contexts where caregiving may be distributed across extended networks (Makusha, Richter, Knight, van Rooyen & Bhana, 2013). Nonetheless, from both a psychosocial and developmental standpoint, continued paternal engagement remains a significant determinant of child well-being. In line with O'Gara's (2024) call for a more nuanced understanding of fatherhood post-separation, this study seeks to critically explore how maternal gatekeeping acts as a structural and emotional barrier to paternal involvement. By interrogating how gatekeeping manifests and how it impacts both the father-child bond and the child's developmental outcomes, the article contributes to reframing non-resident fatherhood not as absence, but as interrupted presence. It also brings attention to the systemic and interpersonal dynamics that limit equitable co-parenting and highlights the potential role of social work practitioners in mitigating these barriers.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical lenses: Attachment Theory and Parental Alienation Theory. Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive basis for analysing the emotional, psychological, and relational dynamics underlying maternal gatekeeping and its impact on post-divorce father-child relationships. Specifically, they illuminate how disrupted caregiving structures and power imbalances shape the developmental trajectories of children and the parenting efficacy of non-resident fathers.

2.1. Attachment Theory

Originally developed by John Bowlby in the 1940s and later expanded through the empirical work of Mary Ainsworth, Attachment Theory has become a foundational paradigm in developmental psychology and family systems research (Sieben & Gürcüoğlu, 2020; Ali, Letourneau & Benzies, 2021; Coffman & Swank, 2021; Stroebe, 2021). At its core, the theory posits that children form emotional bonds with primary caregivers, and the quality of these bonds, secure or insecure, significantly influences emotional regulation, cognitive development, and interpersonal functioning across the lifespan (Cassidy, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2025). Although conceptualisations of attachment have evolved, most scholars agree that early caregiving experiences give rise to internalised "working models" of relationships. These models shape the child's sense of self-worth, expectations of others' availability, and beliefs about intimacy, support, and trust (Coleman, Cowan & Pape Cowan, 2022). Disruptions to these foundational attachments, such as those precipitated by parental separation, can result in emotional dysregulation, insecurity, and behavioural difficulties (Coffman & Swank, 2021).

Wilson-Ali, Baratt-Pugh, and Knaus (2019) highlight a key distinction within attachment theory: that between primary and secondary attachment figures. While the primary figure (often the mother or a consistently available caregiver) serves as the child's principal source of emotional security, secondary attachment figures, typically including the father, play vital complementary roles in shaping identity, trust, and social competence (Ali et al., 2021). Consistent, responsive care from both figures fosters secure attachment, whereas rejection, neglect, or restricted contact can lead to insecure or disorganised attachment patterns (Banks, 2024). In high-conflict divorce cases, maternal gatekeeping significantly threatens these attachment processes. By blocking or restricting the non-resident father's involvement, gatekeeping disrupts the development or preservation of a secure father-child relationship. As Stroebe (2021) points out, attachment behaviors are particularly triggered during separation, stress, and emotional uncertainty, which are common in post-divorce settings. Therefore, Attachment Theory offers an essential perspective for understanding how gatekeeping behaviors can destabilize a child's emotional base, weaken family continuity, and harm both the child's and father's psychological health.

2.2 Parental Alienation Theory

While Attachment Theory elucidates the emotional foundations of caregiving, Parental Alienation Theory explains the mechanisms through which one parent may undermine the relationship between the child and the other parent. Originally developed in family psychology and later adopted in legal and clinical domains, the theory describes a dynamic in which a child's unjustified rejection of one parent is shaped by the alienating behaviours of the other (Willemsen, 2023). These

behaviours typically manifest as manipulation, denigration, or obstruction, and are most frequently observed in high-conflict divorces where power asymmetries are reinforced through custodial arrangements. According to Nascimento and Almeida (2024), common strategies of alienation include discrediting the non-resident parent, restricting visitation, fostering dependency, and manipulating the child's emotional responses. Over time, such tactics distort the child's perception of the targeted parent, often the father, engendering loyalty conflicts and suppressing opportunities for relational repair. The result is a deterioration of the father-child bond, emotional triangulation, and a psychological environment that deprives the child of secure and balanced attachments.

The psychological and developmental consequences of parental alienation are substantial. Children subjected to this dynamic frequently exhibit symptoms of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, and may encounter difficulties forming stable interpersonal relationships in adulthood. The alienated parent, in turn, experiences intense psychological distress, feelings of rejection, and a diminished sense of parental identity (Willemsen, 2023). Moreover, parental alienation, whether conscious or unconscious, has been identified as a form of emotional coercion, with long-term effects on children's autonomy and psychological resilience. Within this framework, maternal gatekeeping may be understood as a subtle or systemic form of parental alienation, wherein the mother's custodial authority is exercised to limit, delay, or obstruct paternal involvement. Often framed as a protective measure, such behaviours frequently result in the erosion of paternal authority and the child's exclusion from a balanced parental experience. Framed through this theory, gatekeeping becomes not merely a relational conflict but a psychological intervention with far-reaching developmental consequences.

Integrating these two theories, Attachment and Parental Alienation, offers a multidimensional understanding of the challenges faced in post-divorce parenting. Attachment Theory underscores the emotional necessity of maintaining stable, nurturing bonds with both parents, while Parental Alienation Theory highlights the relational and behavioural pathways through which such bonds are sabotaged. Taken together, these perspectives reveal how maternal gatekeeping operates at both psychological and structural levels, affecting child development, co-parenting equity, and the preservation of fatherhood in post-divorce contexts.

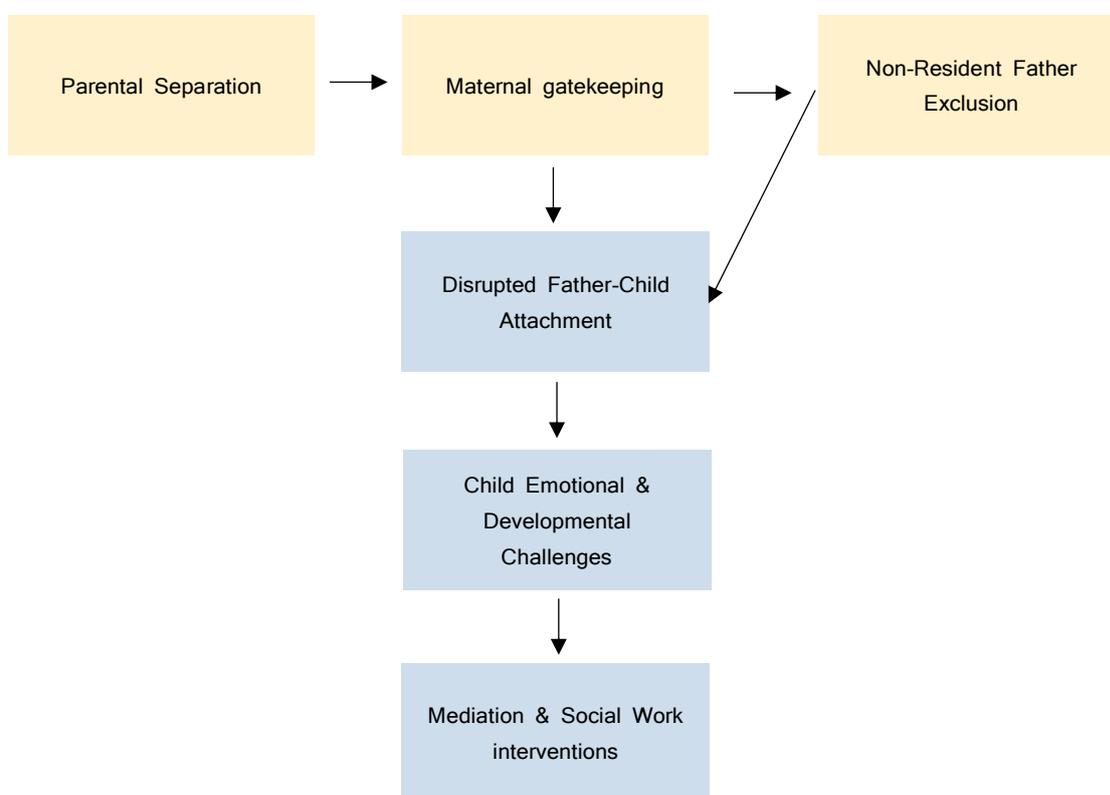


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: The Impact of Maternal Gatekeeping on Father-Child Relationships

2.3. Post-Divorce Conflict and Animosity

Following a divorce, the likelihood of parental conflict often increases. Notably, the concept of “high conflict” is somewhat elusive, as its definitions vary across contexts (Archer-Kuhn, 2019; Buchanan & LeMoyné, 2020). Co-parenting conflicts typically involve disagreements and tensions between parents regarding the upbringing and care of their child (Pinto, Feinberg & Figueiredo, 2024). These disputes often revolve around financial responsibilities and/or unresolved personal grievances, reflecting the complex nature of human relationships under emotional stress (Muldoon, 2023).

Estimates suggest that post-divorce parental conflict can persist for more than two to three years after separation (Keating et al., 2016; Archer-Kuhn, 2019). During this time, couples may resort to hostility, and the resulting emotional upheaval often disrupts the consistency of contact between children and the non-custodial parent (Levite & Cohen, 2012). These difficulties are further exacerbated by prevailing societal norms, which traditionally assign primary caregiving responsibilities to mothers, thereby marginalising fathers, particularly after divorce (Hatch, 2023). Such ongoing conflict can lead to maternal gatekeeping behaviours, where negative perceptions of one parent provoke restrictive actions from the other (Walper, Amberg, Thönnissen & Christ, 2020). These behaviours may be motivated by genuine concerns for the child's well-being or rooted in unresolved resentment toward the former partner. In either case, they often reduce the frequency and quality of father-child interactions.

Importantly, post-divorce conflict can have profound effects on children's emotional well-being. Studies have linked prolonged exposure to parental discord with heightened levels of depression, social anxiety, and emotional insecurity. These conditions, in turn, adversely affect children's psychological development and may impair their long-term well-being. Archer-Kuhn (2019) highlights the importance of distinguishing between child-centred and parent-centred decision-making in this context. In the former, parents prioritise the child's need to maintain relationships with both parents, extended family, and social networks. In the latter, parents remain entrenched in personal grievances, often struggling to redefine their parental roles, resulting in poor communication and an inability to share decision-making responsibilities. This shift in focus away from the child's needs may further entrench conflict and diminish co-parenting effectiveness.

2.4. The Impact of the Father's Absence on Children

"I mean, growing up without a father is not an easy thing, more especially we, as men, because there are things that sometimes you would like to share with your father, but you can't, because he is not always around.", Dave

While some children raised by single mothers may fare just as well as those raised in two-parent households, the absence of a father, particularly in post-divorce scenarios, can have significant developmental repercussions. Fathers often disengage when they encounter repeated barriers to exercising their parental rights and responsibilities (Matjila & Wilson, 2021). One such barrier is maternal gatekeeping, which restricts meaningful father-child relationships, especially among non-resident fathers (Madhavan, Richter & Norris, 2016). Evidence from the literature confirms that paternal absence contributes to various life adversities. For instance, in the quote above, Dave, a participant in the study by Ratele, Shefer & Clowes (2012), reflects on his experience of growing up without his biological father. His account echoes a broader trend in which individuals raised without fathers often report a sense of incompleteness or emotional void. While such consequences may affect all children, they appear particularly detrimental to boys. Nonetheless, Kelly (2017) argues that it is equally important for daughters to maintain a close, continuous relationship with their fathers following parental separation.

The literature also outlines the benefits of sustained father-child relationships. Children who maintain contact with their fathers report fewer stress-related illnesses, such as insomnia, headaches, chest pains, and gastrointestinal problems. Conversely, those who experience limited paternal involvement post-divorce are more likely to suffer from emotional instability, troubled romantic relationships, and difficulties with intimacy and trust. These individuals are also at greater risk for substance abuse, poor academic performance, and prolonged emotional insecurity (Kim & Woo, 2011). High levels of parental conflict, both during and after divorce, further exacerbate these issues, often leading to emotional dysregulation that can persist into adulthood (Nangia, 2023). Such dysregulation affects children's ability to engage in healthy social interactions and develop stable, trusting relationships. Rosenstein (2024) characterises prolonged parental conflict as a form of developmental trauma, which may hinder a child's emotional growth and capacity for intimacy. Over time, the child may replicate dysfunctional relational patterns witnessed during the parental conflict, resulting in enduring psychological and interpersonal challenges.

2.5. The Emergence of Modern Fatherhood

Although social constructions of fatherhood vary across cultures and countries (Gregory & Milner, 2011), traditional narratives often portray fathers as strict disciplinarians and emotionally distant figures (Zhang, Li, Bai, & Chen, 2021). Within this framing, the father is commonly seen as a symbol of authority and power within the household (Lasser, Fite & Wadende, 2011). Historically, the dominant fatherhood identity has been characterised by the role of the "good provider," with societal expectations placing value on long working hours to meet the material needs of the family (Grundetjern, Copes & Sandberg, 2021). In contrast, mothers were expected to embody nurturing, emotionally attentive caregiving roles (Hong & Welch, 2013).

However, the traditional breadwinner model of fatherhood is increasingly being challenged. Many contemporary fathers now recognise that their role encompasses far more than financial provision alone (Churchill & Craig, 2022). The modern conception of fatherhood includes emotional involvement, shared caregiving responsibilities, and nurturing engagement with children (Randles, 2018; Churchill & Craig, 2022). In particular, younger fathers today often demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility and desire to be actively involved in their children's lives (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015). This evolving model of "new fatherhood" stands in stark contrast to dominant discourses of absenteeism, such as the "deadbeat dad" stereotype (O'Gara, 2024) or the notion of reluctant fathers (Rehel, 2014). Emerging evidence suggests that many fathers are now participating more actively across all aspects of parenting, contributing to improved outcomes for both parent and child (Mogro-Wilson & Cifuentes Jr, 2020). The shift has gained institutional support in various countries, where governments have introduced policies to help fathers balance work and family life (Gregory & Milner, 2011; Churchill & Craig, 2022). Such efforts reflect broader societal moves toward gender equality in parenting roles (Zhang, Li, Bai, & Chen, 2021).

Historically, parental leave policies were primarily geared toward mothers, reinforcing the notion that childcare is a maternal duty while men were viewed as financial providers (Gregory & Milner, 2011). However, this narrative has changed significantly. In countries like France (Gregory & Milner, 2011), Australia (Churchill & Craig, 2022), and Singapore (Zhang, Li, Bai, & Chen, 2021), fathers are now legally entitled to paternity leave. In South Africa, new fathers are granted 10 days of parental leave under the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997, as amended by the Labour Laws Amendment Act 10 of 2018. These developments reflect a societal response to growing concerns over "fatherlessness" and its implications for child well-being and social development (Randles, 2018). Collectively, they signal a significant transformation in both the discourse and practices surrounding fatherhood in recent decades.

2.6. Mediation in Custody Matters

When a marriage ends in divorce and children are involved, the legal dissolution of the marital relationship does not terminate the parental responsibilities. Former spouses remain connected through their shared role as parents. However, the parental relationship must be reorganised, both between the parents themselves and between each parent and the child (Bastaitis & Pasteels, 2019; Buchanan & LeMoyné, 2020). Markham et al. (2017) suggest that in order to co-parent effectively, former partners must redefine their relationship, maintaining their parental roles while disengaging from the romantic bond.

In high-conflict divorces, however, intense animosity may lead parents to believe that meaningful communication is no longer possible. As a result, they may resort to litigation to settle disputes (Bosch-Brits, Wessels & Roux, 2018). While legal

frameworks govern child custody decisions in most countries (Archer-Kuhn, 2019), some parents choose, or are required, to resolve custodial arrangements through family mediation. Mediation is a structured conflict resolution process facilitated by a neutral third-party mediator, aimed at reducing the emotional and legal fallout of separation (Feresin et al., 2018). Family mediation is especially relevant in cases involving children, as it helps parents draft comprehensive parenting plans. These plans detail arrangements such as living schedules, education, contact with extended family, and financial responsibilities. Once agreed upon, parenting plans can be formalised through court orders (Partridge et al., 2020).

While some jurisdictions permit voluntary access to mediation, others have adopted mandatory mediation policies. For example, in South Africa, courts can impose mediation with or without the consent of both parties. Central to such interventions is the principle of the best interests of the child, which has been enshrined as a foundational standard in child custody decisions in many countries. In the United States, for instance, this principle includes maintaining ongoing relationships with both biological parents, where feasible (Russell et al., 2021). Despite these legal provisions, the system has been criticised for its limited support for alienated or marginalised parents, particularly non-resident fathers. In South Africa, many fathers continue to be denied meaningful contact with their children after separation from the mother, highlighting persistent challenges and systemic gaps in the enforcement of equitable co-parenting rights (Matjila & Wilson, 2021).

3. Methodology

This study adopted a semi-systematic literature review approach, which is particularly suited to exploring broad or under-researched topics. Unlike fully systematic reviews, semi-systematic reviews may not strictly adhere to rigid protocols and can accommodate both qualitative and quantitative literature (Opondo et al., 2020). This method aims to synthesise existing knowledge, identify dominant themes, and highlight gaps in the literature, rather than to evaluate the quality of individual studies.

To guide the review process, the researcher followed the steps outlined by Creswell (2016), as detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Conducting a semi-systematic literature review

Step	Action
1. Identify relevant keywords	During preliminary reading, the researcher identified key terms central to the topic, including: <i>parenting, fatherhood and motherhood, marital dissolution/divorce, co-parenting, co-parenting conflicts, gatekeeping, and parenting plans</i> . These keywords were used to initiate the literature search.
2. Search digital databases	An official request was submitted to the University of South Africa (UNISA) Subject Librarian. The response yielded over 300 sources from databases such as EBSCO, Academic Search Premier, and Google Scholar. These included peer-reviewed journal articles, newspaper articles, Google Books, and e-books.
3. Apply inclusion criteria	a) Only peer-reviewed, English-language sources were included. b) Due to the scarcity of focused literature, the review covered a 20-year period, with exceptions for seminal older works. c) All articles addressing the identified keywords were considered during initial screening.
4. Conduct reference mining	The researcher examined the reference lists of selected journal articles to identify additional sources not captured in the initial search, expanding the literature base.
5. Select relevant studies	Over 100 articles were ultimately selected based on their relevance to the study objectives. While not exhaustive, this corpus provided a substantial foundation for the analysis.
6. Summarise key findings	Summaries were created for each relevant article to maintain organisation and reduce cognitive overload. These summaries were then grouped by thematic relevance.
7. Organise by key themes	The literature was categorised into conceptual themes, which now structure the main discussion of this article: (1) post-divorce conflict and animosity, (2) effects on father-child relationships, (3) benefits of healthy paternal engagement, (4) emergence of the “new father,” and (5) mediation in custody arrangements.

Source: by the author

To ensure rigour and transparency, each article was summarised in terms of its core findings, methodological approach, and relevance to the guiding research questions. The literature was then categorised into themes, which later formed the analytical sections of this article. This thematic structure allowed the author to synthesise divergent strands of scholarship while maintaining a coherent narrative aligned with the study's objectives.

4. Thematic Analysis

To ensure analytical rigour and transparency in the interpretation of the selected literature, this study employed a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative method that enables researchers to identify, organise, and interpret patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. In this case, the dataset consisted of 50 peer-reviewed articles selected through a semi-systematic literature review process. Following the widely accepted model proposed by East, Jackson, and O'Brien (2006), the analysis proceeded through six key phases: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This allowed for a comprehensive and systematic synthesis of the findings while retaining conceptual depth and interpretative richness. The analysis was conducted using a hybrid approach, combining inductive coding (allowing themes to emerge from the data) and deductive analysis (guided by the theoretical frameworks of Attachment Theory and Parental Alienation Theory). Each article was read thoroughly, and key concepts were extracted and categorised manually based on their relevance to the research questions.

A total of five major themes emerged from the data, each representing a significant strand in the literature on post-divorce family dynamics and paternal involvement:

1. Post-divorce conflict and animosity: Recurring tensions and unresolved disputes between parents that continue well beyond the legal separation, often affecting the quality of parenting and communication.

2. Manifestations of maternal gatekeeping: Patterns through which custodial mothers restrict or condition access to the child by the non-resident father, often under the pretext of protecting the child.
3. Impact on father–child relationships: Emotional, psychological, and behavioural consequences of paternal exclusion on both the child and the father, including attachment disruption and identity struggles.
4. The emergence of modern fatherhood: Evolving discourses around fatherhood that emphasise nurturing, emotional presence, and shared caregiving responsibilities beyond traditional provider roles.
5. Mediation and legal negotiation in custody arrangements: The role of legal interventions, family mediation, and parenting plans in resolving high-conflict custody disputes and promoting child-centred co-parenting.

These themes provided the foundation for the structure of the discussion in this article. The thematic coding allowed the researcher to move beyond mere description toward a deeper interpretive understanding of how maternal gatekeeping affects family dynamics post-divorce. Furthermore, the identified themes informed the integration of theoretical frameworks, offering a nuanced lens through which the implications of post-divorce parenting can be analysed. While the analysis was conducted manually without the use of qualitative data software, the coding process was carefully documented and revisited iteratively to enhance reliability. Where applicable, thematic saturation was reached, indicating a sufficient depth of analysis across the selected literature.

5. Discussion

This study challenges the dominant narrative of the “absent father” by exploring how non-resident fathers experience and respond to maternal gatekeeping in the post-divorce context. By examining the emotional, behavioural, and legal dimensions of this phenomenon, the study underscores the critical yet often obstructed role that fathers continue to play in their children's development following marital dissolution. From the perspective of attachment theory, the findings reaffirm the importance of sustained paternal involvement for fostering emotional stability and psychological resilience in children. Fathers who provide responsive, nurturing, and engaged care contribute meaningfully to secure attachment formation, identity development, and long-term emotional well-being. As Broesch et al. (2023) emphasise, the presence of a supportive father figure is not merely complementary but essential in shaping children's social competence and self-worth.

Conversely, parental alienation theory highlights the mechanisms by which maternal gatekeeping can disrupt these bonds. By limiting or obstructing contact with non-resident fathers, whether through overt control or subtle resistance, mothers may inadvertently promote emotional disconnection and psychological distress in the child. As Banks (2024) and Willemsen (2023) argue, such interference not only weakens the father–child relationship but may also result in disorganised attachment patterns, diminished self-esteem, and developmental trauma. Empirical evidence further reinforces these theoretical insights. Studies by Ratele et al. (2012) and Lopez and Corona (2012) reveal that children raised without active father figures are more likely to encounter a range of adverse outcomes, including behavioural problems, reduced academic performance, and increased vulnerability to substance abuse. Moreover, the long-term socioeconomic effects, such as higher poverty risks and unstable life trajectories, are disproportionately borne by children estranged from their fathers.

These findings point to a broader structural issue: the legal and cultural systems that continue to marginalise non-resident fathers in post-divorce parenting arrangements. While family law frameworks increasingly promote shared custody and cooperative parenting, the persistence of maternal gatekeeping behaviours undermines these efforts, perpetuating gendered assumptions about parenting roles and the primacy of maternal authority. Therefore, recognising and addressing maternal gatekeeping is not merely a private or interpersonal concern; it is a systemic issue with public policy implications. Social workers, legal practitioners, and mental health professionals must collaborate to develop interventions that safeguard the child's right to sustained, meaningful relationships with both parents. This includes educating custodial parents about the developmental risks of alienation, promoting mediated parenting plans, and ensuring that the “best interests of the child” standard genuinely reflects the importance of paternal involvement.

6. Implications for Social Work Practice and Recommendations

The findings presented in this study carry important implications for the field of social work, particularly for practitioners engaged in family counselling, divorce mediation, and child welfare. Traditional legal interventions have often proven inadequate in resolving the deeper relational and emotional conflicts that persist after divorce, especially in high-conflict cases (Blanco, Ferreira & Arias Astray, 2023). Social workers are therefore increasingly tasked with supporting non-resident fathers, who frequently face unique emotional, legal, and relational challenges (O’Gara, 2024). Preserving healthy father–child relationships after divorce is essential to safeguarding the emotional and psychological well-being of both fathers and their children. Promoting the active and responsible involvement of divorced fathers is not only beneficial to child development but also contributes to healthier and more cooperative family dynamics in the long term. As such, social workers must be equipped to engage with families undergoing high-conflict separations.

First, social workers can assist parents in adopting a child-centred focus, helping them to prioritise their children's needs above personal grievances. Archer-Kuhn (2019) emphasises that such an approach can reduce interpersonal conflict and facilitate the ongoing engagement of both parents. In practice, this can involve skills development interventions aimed at enhancing communication and collaboration between co-parents. Second, social workers should facilitate joint decision-making, ensuring that both parents are included in major choices affecting the child's life. This process is essential in rebuilding trust and restoring parental parity. Third, social workers must support parents in redefining their post-divorce roles, both with each other and in relation to the child (Archer-Kuhn, 2019). Particularly in high-conflict cases, parents may struggle to adjust to their new family roles, especially when unresolved hostility, dissatisfaction with custody arrangements, or lack of social support remain unaddressed. These factors are recognised predictors of sustained conflict and may significantly hinder the establishment of effective co-parenting structures (Keating et al., 2016; Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2013).

To mitigate these challenges, divorce education programmes can offer substantial benefits. According to Archer-Kuhn (2019), such programmes should include information on the legal and mediation processes, the emotional impact of separation, the restructuring of family roles, and access to post-divorce support services. Additionally, it is vital for social workers to

receive specialised training on parental alienation and maternal gatekeeping to understand the nuanced psychological and legal challenges faced by non-resident fathers (Bosch-Brits et al., 2018). Familiarity with the legislative framework governing child custody and parental rights is equally crucial to ensure that social workers can advocate effectively for all parties involved (Archer-Kuhn, 2019).

7. Limitations

This article does not seek to dismiss or minimise legitimate claims by mothers or children regarding paternal violence, abuse, or neglect. Nor does it aim to absolve divorced fathers of responsibility in cases where their absence results from personal shortcomings. Rather, the purpose of this study is to bring attention to the often-overlooked phenomenon of maternal gatekeeping and to examine its consequences for fathers who are willing, and in some cases, eager, to remain active and responsible in their children's lives.

Maternal gatekeeping, if left unaddressed, has the potential to generate profound emotional harm. Not only may the child suffer from the loss of a father figure, but the father himself may endure severe psychological distress. Goldberg and Goldberg (2013) describe the emotional experience of such fathers as akin to the grief experienced following the death of a child. However, in cases of gatekeeping, the loss is prolonged and often lacks emotional closure. It is also important to acknowledge that not all children of divorce raised by their mothers experience negative outcomes. Numerous studies suggest that many such children grow up to be well-adjusted and successful. Nonetheless, this article argues that the unjustified exclusion of fathers, especially those who demonstrate a willingness to remain involved, must be recognised as a social concern with psychological, relational, and systemic implications.

8. Conclusion

This article contributes to the growing discourse on post-divorce parenting by foregrounding the underexplored phenomenon of maternal gatekeeping and its impact on non-resident fathers and their children. Through the application of attachment theory and parental alienation theory, the analysis illustrates that exclusionary maternal behaviours, whether intentional or unintended, can severely disrupt the emotional and developmental well-being of children, while simultaneously marginalising fathers who are committed to maintaining a meaningful parental role. The evidence reviewed highlights that paternal involvement remains a crucial component of healthy child development, and its absence, especially when constructed through gatekeeping practices, can contribute to a range of adverse outcomes. These include emotional insecurity, behavioural difficulties, and strained interpersonal relationships that may persist into adulthood.

The study emphasises the need for a paradigm shift in how post-divorce fatherhood is understood and supported. It calls for more inclusive and responsive social work practices that not only address the legal dimensions of custody but also recognise the psychological and relational harm caused by prolonged paternal exclusion. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of equipping social workers and legal professionals with the tools to identify, address, and mitigate the effects of maternal gatekeeping in high-conflict divorces. Ultimately, this article advocates for a more balanced, child-centred approach to co-parenting after marital dissolution, one that ensures both parents, regardless of residential status, are given equitable opportunities to contribute to their child's upbringing and well-being.

Acknowledgement Statement: The authors would like to thank the reviewers for providing comments in helping this manuscript to completion.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Authors' contribution statements: Author 1 contributed to the Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, and Writing - Original Draft, Software, Validation, Data Curation, and Project Administration, and Author 2 contributed to the Methodology, Formal Analysis, and Software, and review.

Funding statements: This research did not receive a specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors.

Data availability statement: Data is available upon request. Please contact the corresponding author for any additional information on data access or usage.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect IJSSER's or editors' official policy or position. All liability for harm done to individuals or property as a result of any ideas, methods, instructions, or products mentioned in the content is expressly disclaimed.

References

- Ali, E., Letourneau, N., & Benzies, K. (2021). Parent-child attachment: A principle-based concept analysis. *SAGE Open Nursing*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23779608211009000>
- Archer-Kuhn, B. (2019). Understanding the parent experience in child custody decision-making: How social workers can help. *Families in Society*, 100(2), 200–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044389419825592>
- Banks, C. (2024). Attachment theory: Its absence and role in deinstitutionalisation strategies. *Institutionalised Children Explorations and Beyond*, 11(2), 232–241. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23493003231211563>
- Bastaits, K., & Pasteels, I. (2019). Is joint physical custody in the best interests of the child? Parent-child relationships and custodial arrangements. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 36(11-12), 3752–3772. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407519838071>
- Blanco, M., Ferreira, J. M. L., & Arias Astray, A. (2023). Parenting coordination, a new role for social workers. *Journal of Social Work*, 23(1), 143–159. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173221101241>
- Bosch-Brits, E., Wessels, C., & Roux, A. (2018). Fathers' experience and perceptions of parent alienation in high-conflict divorce. *Social Work*, 54(1), 91–110. <https://doi.org/10.15270/54-1-617>

- Bouchard, G., & Doucet, D. (2011). Parental divorce and couples' adjustment during the transition to parenthood: The role of parent-adult child relationships. *Journal of Family Issues*, 32(4), 507–527. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X10389304>
- Broesch, T., von Rueden, C., Yurkowski, K., Quinn, H., Alami, S., Davis, H. E., & Bureau, J. F. (2023). Fatherhood and child-father attachment in two small-scale societies. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 54*(5), 591–609. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220221231176788>
- Buchanan, T., & LeMoynes, T. (2020). Helicopter parenting and the moderating impact of gender and single-parent family structure on self-efficacy and well-being. *The Family Journal*, 28(3), 262–272. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480720925829>
- Cassidy, J., Stern, J. A., Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2025). Mary Main's concept of conditional strategies: Influences on studies of child-parent and adult romantic attachments. *Attachment and Human Development*, 27(1), 67–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2024.2426304>
- Churchill, B., & Craig, L. (2022). Men's and women's changing attitudes towards fatherhood and working fathers in Australia. *Current Sociology*, 70(6), 943–963. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001139212111012737>
- Coffman, E., & Swank, J. (2021). Attachment styles and the family systems of individuals affected by substance abuse. *The Family Journal*, 29(1), 102–108. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480720934487>
- Cohen, O., & Finzi-Dottan, R. (2013). Defense mechanisms and negotiation as predictors of co-parenting among divorcing couples: A dyadic perspective. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 30(4), 430–456. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407512458657>
- Coleman, J., Cowan, P. A., & Pape Cowan, C. (2022). Attachment security, divorce, parental estrangement, and reconciliation. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 39(3), 778–795. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026540752111046305>
- Creswell, J. W. (2016). *30 essential skills for the qualitative researcher*. SAGE Publications.
- East, L., Jackson, D., & O'Brien, L. (2006). Father absence and adolescent development: A review of the literature. *Journal of Child Health Care*, 10(4), 283–295. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367493506067869>
- Enderstein, A. M., & Boonzaier, F. (2015). Narratives of young South African fathers: Redefining masculinity through fatherhood. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 24(5), 512–527. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2013.856751>
- Feresin, M., Folla, N., Lapiere, S., & Romito, P. (2018). Family mediation in child custody cases and the concealment of domestic violence. *Affilia*, 33(4), 509–525. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109918766659>
- Forehand, R., Parent, J., Golub, A., & Reid, M. (2016). Positive parenting of young adolescents by male cohabiting partners: The roles of coparenting conflict and support. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 36(3), 420–441. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431614566947>
- Goldberg, W., & Goldberg, L. (2013). Psychotherapy with targeted parents. In A. J. L. Baker & S. R. Sauber (Eds.), *Working with alienated children and families* (pp. 108–128). Routledge.
- Gregory, A., & Milner, S. (2011). What is "new" about fatherhood? The social construction of fatherhood in France and the UK. *Men and Masculinities*, 14(5), 588–606. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X11412940>
- Grundetjern, H., Copes, H., & Sandberg, S. (2021). Dealing with fatherhood: Paternal identities among men in the illegal drug economy. *European Journal of Criminology*, 18(5), 643–659. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370819874429>
- Gupta, K. (2023). Parental well-being: Another dimension of adult well-being. *The Family Journal*, 31(1), 69–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10664807221090948>
- Hatch, B. F. (2023). *Spiritualists' iniquities unmasked, and the Hatch divorce case*. Books on Demand.
- Hong, R. M., & Welch, A. (2013). The lived experiences of single Taiwanese mothers being resilient after divorce. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 24(1), 51–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043659612452007>
- Keating, A., Sharry, J., Murphy, M., Rooney, B., & Carr, A. (2016). An evaluation of the parents plus-parenting when separated programme. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 21(2), 240–254. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104515581717>
- Kelly, T. M. (2017). Daughters' perceptions of their relationships with their fathers after parents' divorce. *The Family Journal*, 25(4), 376–382. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480717735023>
- Kim, J., & Woo, H. (2011). The complex relationship between parental divorce and the sense of control. *Journal of Family Issues*, 32(8), 1050–1072. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X11404521>
- Lasser, J., Fite, K., & Wadende, A. P. (2011). Fatherhood in Kenyan ethnic communities: Implication for child development. *School Psychology International*, 32(1), 49–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034310396613>
- Levite, Z., & Cohen, O. (2012). The tango of loving hate: Couple dynamics in high-conflict divorce. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 40, 46–55. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-011-0334-5>
- Lopez, V., & Corona, R. (2012). Troubled relationships: High-risk Latina adolescents and non-resident fathers. *Journal of Family Issues*, 33(6), 715–744. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X11434915>
- Madhavan, S., Richter, L., & Norris, S. (2016). Father contact following union dissolution for low-income children in urban South Africa. *Journal of Family Issues*, 37(5), 622–644. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14532255>
- Makusha, T., Richter, L., Knight, L., Van Rooyen, H., & Bhana, D. (2013). "The good and the bad?" Childhood experiences with fathers and their influence on women's expectations and men's experiences of fathering in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice about Men as Fathers*, 11(2), 138–157. <https://doi.org/10.3149/fth.1102.138>
- Markham, M. S., Hartenstein, J. L., Mitchell, Y. T., & Aljayyousi-Khalil, G. (2017). Communication among parents who share physical custody after divorce or separation. *Journal of Family Issues*, 38(10), 1414–1442. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X15616848>
- Matjila, W., & Wilson, L. (2021). Denied contact of Sepedi-speaking fathers with their children after a relationship break-up. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 62(6), 411–430. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2021.1871843>
- Mogro-Wilson, C., & Cifuentes Jr, A. (2020). Role of fatherhood identity and machismo in Latino men with problem drinking. *Families in Society*, 101(4), 514–527. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044389420921061>
- Moore, E. (2016). Delaying divorce: Pitfalls of restrictive divorce requirements. *Journal of Family Issues*, 37(16), 2265–2293. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14566620>
- Muldoon, A. (2023). Love is a battlefield. *Diplomatic History*, 48(1), 152–154. <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhad063>

- Nangia, V. (2023). Crisis of parental conflict: Impact on children and families. *Horyzonty Wychowania*, 22(64), 71–82. <https://doi.org/10.35765/hw.2023.2264.08>
- Nascimento, E. P., & Almeida, A. A. (2024). Parental alienation: A legal analysis of civil liability and jurisprudential position towards the alienant. *Revista Ibero-Americana de Humanidades, Ciências e Educação*, 10*(6), 3170–3187. <https://doi.org/10.51891/rease.v10i6.14541>
- O'Gara, J. L. (2024). The effect of paternal economic hardship on non-resident father involvement and co-parenting among racially/ethnically diverse fathers. *Families in Society*, 105(2), 282–294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10443894231177747>
- Opondo, P. R., Olashore, A. A., Molebatsi, K., Othieno, C. J., & Ayugi, J. O. (2020). Mental health research in Botswana: A semi-systematic scoping review. *Journal of International Medical Research*, 48(10). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0300060520966458>
- Partridge, H., McAllister, L., Toohey, L., Field, R., Crowe, J., & Allcock, A. (2020). Understanding the information experiences of parents involved in negotiating post-separation parenting arrangements. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 52(1), 184–196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000618787604>
- Pinto, T. M., Feinberg, M. E., & Figueiredo, B. (2024). Coparenting conflict moderates the association between maternal prenatal depressive symptoms and infant regulatory capacity. *Infant and Child Development*, 33(6), e2549. <https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.2549>
- Randles, J. (2018). "Manning up" to be a good father: Hybrid fatherhood, masculinity, and US responsible fatherhood policy. *Gender & Society*, 32(4), 516–539. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243218770364>
- Ratele, K., Shefer, T., & Clowes, L. (2012). Talking South African fathers: A critical examination of men's constructions and experiences of fatherhood and fatherlessness. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 42(4), 553–563. <https://doi.org/10.1177/008124631204200409>
- Rehel, E. M. (2014). When dad stays home too: Paternity leave, gender, and parenting. *Gender & Society*, 28(1), 110–132. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243213503900>
- Rosenstein, D. S. (2024). Custody conflict as a developmental trauma. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 77(1), 26–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00797308.2023.2279404>
- Russell, L. T., Ferraro, A. J., Beckmeyer, J. J., Markham, M. S., Wilkins-Clark, R. E., & Zimmermann, M. L. (2021). Communication technology use in post-divorce coparenting relationships: A typology and associations with post-divorce adjustment. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 38(12), 3752–3776. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211043837>
- Sieben, A., & Gürcüoğlu, A. Y. (2020). Cultural spaces of popularized psychological knowledge: Attachment parenting in Turkey. *Culture & Psychology*, 26(3), 335–357. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X19861055>
- Stroebe, M. (2021). The study of security and separation: An unexpected forerunner of attachment theory? *OMEGA-Journal of Death and Dying*, 84*(1), 146–156. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222819880706>
- Wade, C. M., Matthews, J., Forbes, F., Vertkas, L., Burn, M., & Cann, W. G. (2023). Focus on fathers: Exploring the parenting experiences of fathers using a large population-level sample. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 52(4), 801–828. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-022-09709-6>
- Walper, S., Amberg, S., Thönnissen, C., & Christ, S. L. (2020). The role of gatekeeping in non-resident fathers' contact with their children: Mothers' and fathers' views. In L. Bernardi & D. Mortelmans (Eds.), *Parental life courses after separation and divorce in Europe* (pp. 169–191). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-44575-1_9
- Willemsen, H. (2023). Parental alienation: A case of perversion of motherhood. *The International Journal of Forensic Psychotherapy*, 5(2), 135–144. <https://doi.org/10.33212/ijfp.v5n2.2023.135>
- Zhang, X., Li, L., Bai, L., & Chen, Y. (2021). Father-child relations mediate the relations between paternal expressiveness and adolescent behaviors. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 30, 1016–1027. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-021-01901-x>
- Zou, S., Wu, X., & Li, X. (2020). Coparenting behaviour, parent-adolescent attachment, and peer attachment: An examination of gender differences. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 49, 178–191. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-019-01068-1>