

# **Family Structure, Divorce and Parental Conflict as Predictors of Social-Emotional Difficulties in Early Childhood** (Extended abstract)

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## ***1. Introduction***

In contemporary societies, a growing proportion of children do not live with both their biological parents throughout their childhood, primarily due to the increasing prevalence of parental separation and divorce. A substantial body of research suggests that divorce tends to negatively impact various aspects of children's development (e.g. Kang et al., 2025; McLanahan et al., 2013; Amato, 2001, 2010, 2014; Strohschein, 2005; Schick, 2002; Kelleher, 2002; Brown et al., 1998). However, studies have also shown that divorce affects children differently; some are more vulnerable, while others are more resilient (e.g. Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). It is important to note that negative outcomes may not stem directly from divorce itself, but rather from high levels of interparental conflict (Schick, 2002; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2000; Amato & Keith, 1991). Children in post-divorce families often experienced considerable parental conflict prior to separation (Cherlin et al., 1991). Nevertheless, adverse effects can be mitigated if separations are peaceful and parents maintain cooperative relationships, enabling children to continue having close contact with both parents (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Although divorce is associated with increased parental conflict, not all high-conflict relationships end in separation, often due to emotional, financial, or practical considerations. Nevertheless, children growing up in families where there is conflict may suffer emotional harm comparable to that experienced by children in divorced families (Amato & Keith, 1991). While extensive research has examined the effects of divorce, parental absence and interparental conflict separately, few studies have explored how these factors interact. Our study aims to address this gap by investigating whether parental conflict or not living with both biological parents exerts a stronger influence on children's socio-emotional difficulties.

## ***2. Theoretical background***

The cognitive, social and emotional development of children can be examined from different theoretical perspectives. Conflict theory emphasises that persistent interparental conflict, rather than divorce itself, has the strongest negative impact on children. In contrast, family systems theories emphasise the structural role of the family. From this perspective, divorce or separation represents a major disruption to the family system and can affect children's development, even in the absence of overt conflict. Similarly, attachment theory stresses that parental separation during early childhood can undermine a child's secure attachment to one or both parents, not necessarily due to conflict, but because of a parent's emotional and physical absence.

## ***3. Analytical strategy and research questions***

Firstly, we examine whether emotional and social difficulties experienced by three-year-old children are associated with not living with both biological parents. Secondly, we investigate whether these difficulties are related to the presence of interparental conflict, assuming that parental divorce and interparental conflict both increase the likelihood of children experiencing emotional and social difficulties in early childhood. We will examine the relationship between SDQ difficulties and parental conflict among biological parents of three-year-old children within the total sample and within specific subgroups: those who have lived with their

biological parents for three years ('intact families'), those who lived with a single mother at age three, and those who lived with a stepfather at age three. As our main research question concerns whether not living with both biological parents or interparental conflict plays a greater role in shaping children's emotional and social difficulties, we also tested a complex model. This model grouped children by family structure (living with two biological parents throughout the three-year study period; living with a single mother at age three; or living with a stepfather at age three) and the type of relationship between the biological parents (conflictual, not conflictual, or no information). Our models control for the biological and demographic characteristics of the children and their mothers.

#### **4. Data and method**

The data come from the Hungarian Birth Cohort Study (Cohort '18), a nationally representative longitudinal survey conducted by the Hungarian Demographic Research Institute between 2017 and 2024. From the six data collections until 2025, we are using data from the first, second and fifth waves (pregnant women in their seventh month of pregnancy, mothers of six-month-old children, and mothers of three-year-old children). The unit of analysis is 5,868 biological mothers who participated in the prenatal, 6-month and 3-year waves and who did not give birth to twins.

The dependent variable is an index of 3-year-olds' psychological adjustment, measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997), the Hungarian version for ages 2–4 (Birkás et al., 2008; Monostori, Szabó & Kopcsó, 2023, 2025). Following Dahlberg et al. (2020), socio-emotional difficulties were defined as scores above the 80th percentile of the index computed from four subscales of the 25-item questionnaire (emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems). The predictor variables are family structure and parental conflict. Family structure was recorded as living continuously with both biological parents for three years, not living with both biological parents at age three, and other family type. Children not living with both biological parents at age three were further separated into those living with a single mother and with a stepfather. Conflict between biological parents living together was measured by the negative interaction subscale of the 11-item Hungarian adaptation of the Gilford–Bengtson Marital Satisfaction Scale (Gilford & Bengtson, 1979; Silverstein & Bengtson, 2008; Kopcsó, 2018; Monostori, Szabó & Kopcsó, 2023, 2025). For separated parents, mothers rated their relationship with the child's biological father on a five-point scale, recoded into three categories: conflictual, non-conflictual, and no contact. Control variables included child characteristics (birth weight, sex, age) and maternal socio-demographics (age at first birth, education, financial difficulties at prenatal and 3-year waves). Maternal anxiety, assessed via the Hungarian GAD-2, was also included due to its impact on children's socio-emotional difficulties.

First, bivariate associations between the outcome and explanatory variables were tested using ANOVA F-tests and the robust Welch test. Multivariate regression analysis was then used, controlled for covariates, and relative risks were calculated using a generalised linear model (Poisson, log link) with robust standard errors (Karlson & Quillian, 2023; Sainini, 2001).

#### **5. Results**

19% of children who lived with both biological parents for three years experienced SDQ difficulties, compared to 36% of those who did not. Children not living with both biological parents show a higher unadjusted and adjusted risk (RR=1.9 and RR=1.2 respectively, *Model*

1). Controlling for covariates reduces but does not eliminate the effect. The highest socio-emotional risk is observed among children living in other non-intact family structures (RR=1.3).

Children with conflictual parents are more likely to show socio-emotional difficulties than children with non-conflictual parents (36% vs. 17%). The risk is significantly elevated (RR=2.2) and remains significant even after adjusting for covariates (RR=1.5), see *Model 2*. Although the parents' relationship quality is unknown for 20% of children, their SDQ risk is still higher than among children with non-conflictual parents (RR=1.4). Adjustment reduces but does not eliminate these differences.

However, the highest proportion of children experiencing SDQ difficulties was observed among those whose biological parents lived together but had a conflictual relationship (36%). Similarly high rates were found among children with parents not living together at age three and having a conflictual relationship (35%) or no relationship (34%). Children whose parents lived together without conflict had the lowest difficulties (16%). After adjusting for covariates, the risk is highest for children with cohabiting, conflictual parents (RR = 1.6) and significantly elevated among children with separated, conflictual parents (RR = 1.4), see *Model 3*. Children with separated, non-conflictual parents do not differ significantly from the reference group of children with cohabiting, non-conflictual parents (RR = 1.1), highlighting the crucial role of interparental conflict rather than parental separation alone.

Even when we consider only children whose biological parents lived together for three years, the risk of SDQ is 68% higher if the relationship is conflictual than if it is not. Although the control variables mitigate the strength of the correlation, the negative relationship remains (*Model 4*). Even when looking only at children whose biological parents did not live together when the child was three years old, the risk of SDQ is still higher among children of parents in a conflictual relationship than among children of parents in a non-conflictual relationship, but the difference is not significant (*Model 5*). The lack of a significant correlation is due to the fact that most families where the biological parents do not live together when the child is three are single-parent families, and relationships within these families are quite different from those within step families. For children aged three living in single-parent families, there is no significant difference in SDQ risk depending on whether the relationship between the biological parents is conflictual (*Model 6*). However, children living with a stepfather at age three have a significantly higher SDQ risk (3.2 times higher) if their biological parents are in conflict than if they are not (*Model 7*).

When we break down all categories according to family structure and the conflictual nature of the relationship between biological parents, we cannot prove that children whose biological parents did not live together at the age of three and who had a non-conflictual relationship are at greater risk than children whose parents lived together for three years and had a non-conflictual relationship. However, the results confirm that children whose parents lived together for three years but had a conflictual relationship are at a significantly higher risk of psychological problems (1.57 times) than those whose parents lived together and had a non-conflictual relationship (*Model 8*).

**Table 1: Three-year-old children with socio-emotional difficulties by family structure and the relationship between biological parents (RR unadjusted risk ratios, aRR adjusted risk ratios and 95% CI for RRs)**

		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6		Model 7		Model 8	
		RR	aRR	RR	aRR	RR	aRR	RR	aRR	RR	aRR	RR	aRR	RR	aRR	RR	aRR
Total	Living both biological parents for 3 years	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>														
	Not living with both biological parents	1,9 1,6-2,1	1,2 1,1-1,4														
	Other family structure	1,4 1,1-1,7	1,3 1,0-1,7														
	No data	1,4 1,0-1,8	1,1 0,9-1,5			1,8 1,6-2,0	1,4 1,3-1,6										
Total	Not conflictual			<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>												
	Conflictual			2,2 1,9-2,5	1,5 1,3-1,8												
	No data			1,7 1,5-1,9	1,4 1,2-1,6												
Living both biological parents for 3 years	Not conflictual					<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>							<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
	Conflictual					2,3 2,0-2,7	1,6 1,4-1,8	2,3 2,0-2,7	1,6 1,4-1,9							2,3 2,0-2,7	1,6 1,4-1,8
	No data							1,5 1,3-1,7	1,3 1,1-1,5								
Not living with both biological parents	Not conflictual					1,6 1,3-2,0	1,1 0,9-1,5			<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>						
	Conflictual					2,2 1,6-3,0	1,4 1,0-1,9			1,4 0,9-2,0	1,2 0,8-1,7						
	No relationship					2,0 1,2-3,1	1,1 0,7-1,8			1,2 0,7-2,0	1,0 0,7-1,6				2,0 1,2-3,1	1,1 0,7-1,8	
	No data									1,9 1,4-2,4	1,5 1,2-2,0				1,8 1,6-2,0	1,4 1,3-1,6	
With single mother	Not conflictual											<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>			1,6 1,3-2,1	1,2 0,9-1,5
	Conflictual											1,3 0,8-2,0	1,1 0,7-1,7			1,9 1,3-2,9	1,3 0,9-1,9
	No relationship											1,3 0,8-2,2	1,1 0,7-1,7				
	No data											2,0 1,5-2,7	1,6 1,2-2,2				
With step-father	Not conflictual													<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	1,6 0,9-2,7	1,0 0,5-2,1
	Conflictual													1,9 0,9-3,8	3,2 1,1-9,3	2,9 1,8-4,6	1,6 0,9-2,7
	No relationship													0,5 0,1-3,1	0,7 0,1-6,1		
	No data													0,8 0,3-2,1	0,7 0,3-1,9		

Source: HDRI Cohort '18 Study, 2017-2022.

## 6. Discussion

Our analysis confirms that children's socio-emotional development is most secure when both biological parents live together and have a low-conflict relationship even in the Hungarian context. However, living together does not guarantee supportive parenting, and high-conflict relationships between parents substantially increase children's risk of socio-emotional difficulties. Children whose parents are divorced but maintain a harmonious relationship often fare better than those whose parents cohabit and are in conflict. Children whose parents live together in a conflictual relationship are at the highest risk, suggesting that parental conflict exerts a stronger influence on children's socio-emotional outcomes than cohabitation status.

Interpreting parental conflict requires caution. In our study, conflict was assessed only from the perspective of the mothers, which may differ from the perceptions of the fathers. Furthermore, the presence of conflict does not reflect its intensity, whether it is constructive or destructive, or its impact on parent-child interactions. To understand the effects of conflict on child development, detailed data on conflict type, content, and resolution are needed.

Research underscores the importance of social policies that support families in resolving conflicts for the well-being of children (Walper & Matthes, 2016). Although maintaining contact with a non-resident parent is important, frequent contact in the presence of intense parental conflict can be harmful to the child (Kalmijn, 2016; Amato & Rezac, 1994). These findings emphasise the importance of addressing interparental conflict in fostering healthy socio-emotional development in early childhood.

## 7. Literature

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