

Childhood Vulnerability during Divorce Processes: The Role of Professional Intervention

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Abstract

This study examines two contrasting variants of divorce process and their impact on children's well-being. The study analyzes how professional intervention during divorce may influence children's adjustment and reduce adverse developmental outcomes. A case study methodology was employed with two families undergoing divorce. One family sought professional guidance proactively to minimize the separation impact, while the second family experienced a high-conflict divorce process without structured intervention. Findings revealed that children exposed to guided and structured communication demonstrated greater emotional security and developmentally appropriate interpretations of family restructuring. In contrast, children exposed to conflictual dynamics without intervention expressed themes of guilt, abandonment, and emotional distress. Findings suggest early professional involvement may reduce children's vulnerability during divorce. From this perspective, and by means of contrasting case studies, the objective is to examine how diverse family conditions, coping mechanisms, and the absence or presence of professional intervention intersect with the experience of child vulnerability during processes of family restructuring.

Keywords

Divorce, Childhood, Vulnerability, Childhood Intervention, Ecological Systems Theory

1. Introduction

According to Alwang et al. (2001), the concept of vulnerability has been examined

across multiple fields of knowledge, including anthropology, sociology, political ecology, geosciences, and engineering. In this sense, vulnerability encompasses factors that determine context, specific timing, and immediate circumstances, as well as the sociohistorical trajectory of the individual experiencing it. It does not, in itself, constitute an isolated condition that can or should be uniformly defined or described across different situations.

Ruiz (2012) conceptualizes vulnerability as always defined in relation to some form of threat. Within this framework, vulnerability refers to conditions that are destructive, disruptive, or that fragment the immediate context in which individuals function. For children, the family constitutes this proximal context, where immediate needs are met and where foundational structures of values and security are established.

Following the same author, vulnerability refers to the characteristics of an individual or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a threat (Ruiz, 2012). This capacity to anticipate crisis situations develops progressively across developmental stages and is typically refined in adulthood through the accumulation of life experiences. During childhood, however, this capacity is limited by the cognitive abilities inherent to each developmental stage. Infants and young children, particularly in early life stages, lack the cognitive capacity to adequately process, evaluate, or anticipate risk situations they are about to encounter. As noted by Paolini et al. (2017), early childhood is a critical period for development, and periodic assessment across domains (cognition, motor skills, language, and social behavior) contributes significantly to the early detection of developmental risks.

Likewise, we must not forget that children acquire many elements that become part of their personality by observing and imitating their parents' interactions (Bandura & Walters, 1963).

Within this context, when children are exposed to processes that increase their vulnerability, developmental capacities are naturally constrained. Functions such as language acquisition, sphincter control, autonomy, and cognitive processing may be progressively hindered. It is important to note that the manifestations of these effects vary depending on each child's developmental characteristics and family context.

Although vulnerability is often associated with critical events, it is also a phenomenon with deeply rooted chronic dimensions. In the context of childhood, Ruiz (2012) identifies divorce as a critical event of particular significance, as it entails the loss of the immediate family nucleus, as well as the disruption of the primary source of affection, security, and belonging. In this sense, divorce represents far more than the dissolution of a couple's relationship, particularly when children are involved. Children experience the greatest negative impact and the highest degree of vulnerability across multiple domains, with physical and psychosocial dimensions being especially affected.

From a developmental perspective, Papalia and Martorell (2023) conceptualize

human development as comprising physical, cognitive, and psychosocial domains. The family serves as the primary context in which these domains are nurtured and consolidated referred to as the microsystem within ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1987; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The physical domain includes self-perception, identity formation, self-evaluation, and self-esteem. The cognitive domain involves the processing of environmental information, including cultural codes, meanings, and belief systems embedded within the microsystem. The psychosocial domain reflects the dynamic interaction between psychological and social processes.

Together, these domains constitute the foundational structure of the individual. It is therefore essential to provide children with solid bases of self-care, self-knowledge, and self-esteem to enable healthy development within their immediate social context. Evidence suggests that the quality of family relationships is the most significant factor influencing children's emotional health (Gasteiz, 2021). Accordingly, it becomes critical to examine how family relational quality is affected during divorce, how such situations should be managed, and, most importantly, how to minimize the impact on children, who represent the most vulnerable population in this process.

It is important to note that the dissolution of a couple constitutes a transitional crisis for the family system. Although the decision to separate pertains exclusively to the couple, the entire family system is affected by this process (Bolaños, 1998). This crisis particularly impacts the most vulnerable members of the family—children—who often lack the cognitive capacity to understand the changes taking place, including the restructuring of family dynamics and the anticipated reorganization of the household. While divorce involves the dissolution of the nuclear family, the termination of the couple's relationship, and adjustments in cohabitation, it also represents the onset of a focused crisis that requires attention from its earliest stages.

According to Uri Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development, individual characteristics are intrinsically linked to environmental contexts. Children learn to identify and reproduce patterns present in their immediate surroundings. This theory proposes five interconnected systems that significantly influence development. The first is the microsystem, the level closest to the individual, where behaviors, roles, personality formation, and values are directly shaped. This system is particularly critical during childhood, as it underpins developmental trajectories and the formation of the future adult, making it central to the present analysis (Bronfenbrenner, 1987; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

The second level is the mesosystem, which encompasses the interactions between different microsystems, such as the relationship between school and family or between work and family environments. The third level, the ecosystem, includes broader structures such as educational systems, legal frameworks, religious institutions, and other societal systems that indirectly influence the family. The fourth level is the macrosystem, which refers to overarching cultural values, policies, and social structures. Finally, the chronosystem captures the temporal di-

mension of development, including life transitions, developmental stages, and the timing of crises and significant events.

Within this framework, and particularly in the face of crisis situations, professional intervention and specialized support become critically important. Such intervention aims to foster the development of reasoning capacities that may be compromised during adverse experiences. De Los Ríos et al. (2020) defines intervention as a continuous and organized process designed to overcome barriers that hinder human development and the improvement of quality of life among social agents.

This organized action becomes especially crucial in childhood when families undergo significant changes and foundational structures are disrupted. The primary objective of intervention in this context is to provide children with the necessary tools to understand that divorce, along with its broader implications, is an adult matter. It is an indirect event that introduces substantial changes, the responsibility for which lies exclusively with the parents.

In accordance with the aforementioned considerations, it is pertinent to ask the following: Does the divorce process significantly affect the psychosocial life of children?

Do professional interventions play an important role in children who face these processes?

2. Methodology

This study is framed within a qualitative approach, employing in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with two families and their children, in which the parental couple is undergoing a divorce process. The first family consists of a couple who aim to manage the divorce in a manner that minimizes the impact on their children, with both parents demonstrating willingness to adhere closely to professional guidance to achieve this outcome. The second family is characterized by a couple primarily focused on maximizing personal gain from the separation, without regard for the potential impact or harm inflicted on children. In this case, the children have been exposed to conflictual dynamics, including verbal and physical aggression, insults, and blame.

With regard to the participating families, both were composed of heterosexual couples undergoing divorce. Family A included two daughters aged 5 and 3. At the time of the investigation, the couple had reached a consensual decision to divorce following the identification of infidelity within the relationship. Consequently, they were situated in the initial phase of the divorce process, characterized by separation planning and the proactive establishment of a therapeutic alliance through professional counseling. In contrast, Family B comprised two daughters aged 5 and 4. This couple's relational dynamics were marked by a systemic pattern of recurrent conflict, persistent arguments, and episodes of significant violence. At the time of the study, they were in an advanced phase of the divorce process, having already disclosed the parental rupture to their daughters, communicated the underlying conflicts, and expressed emotional manifestations associated with the

dissolution, thereby highlighting the need for a systemic therapeutic approach to address both parental and child vulnerabilities.

Data collection was conducted in a private clinical setting, where intervention sessions took place following the signing of informed consent. Case selection was based on convenience sampling, as well as the relevance of the cases to the research topic and the presence of contrasting variants in the management of the divorce process.

The interview protocol was designed to collect detailed information regarding the couple's relational history, family structure, and the primary issues arising within the family nucleus. Additionally, it sought to document the progression of the divorce process, including the initial consideration of separation, decision-making, communication of the situation to the children, and subsequent steps taken by each family. Particular attention was given to the manner in which the parent—who, in both cases, is the one leaving the household—relocates and restructures their living arrangements.

The data analysis was conducted through an inductive thematic approach, drawing upon principles of grounded theory to ensure methodological rigor. The initial stage involved verbatim transcription and iterative readings of the interviews with both parents and participating children, with particular attention to recurrent patterns. Subsequently, units of analysis were identified in relation to family experiences across the divorce timeline, parental decision-making, household reorganization, and children's interpretations of parental separation. In the second phase, open coding procedures were systematically applied to the narratives, grouping segments into clusters of similar categories. Once the data were organized, higher-order thematic categories were constructed, providing a coherent framework for comparative analysis across the two cases. The final analytical categories comprised: 1) initial approach to the divorce process, 2) parental decision-making, 3) communication of divorce to the daughters, 4) departure from the household and family restructuring, and 5) children's understanding of divorce.

3. Results

The findings derived from the interviews were organized into four sequential phases of the divorce process: 1) initial presentation for intervention, 2) decision-making, 3) communication with children, and 4) parental departure from the household. A fifth analytical category emerged from the data, corresponding to children's conceptualization of divorce. The results are presented below according to these categories.

The development of these categories was derived from supporting literature and further informed by rapid cognitive explorations conducted during the family interviews.

3.1. Initial Presentation for Intervention

The initial phase focused on understanding the reasons that led each family to

seek professional support. Notable differences were identified in how each family conceptualized the need for intervention.

In the case of Family A, an interdisciplinary professional intervention process was initiated, incorporating social work guidance and brief psychotherapeutic interventions provided by the psychological discipline. The primary objectives of the intervention were to mitigate the impact of divorce by fostering a restructured parental relationship, oriented toward functioning as a co-parenting team across separate households.

To achieve this, two initial sessions were conducted, each lasting two hours, during the introductory phase of the intervention.

Family A sought professional guidance proactively, with the explicit objective of managing the divorce process in a manner that would minimize the impact on their children. Both parents demonstrated awareness of the potential consequences of divorce and expressed willingness to adhere to professional recommendations.

In contrast, Family B sought intervention due to behavioral and emotional changes observed in their eldest daughter. These manifestations included persistent crying, reduced engagement in previously preferred activities, and a generally low mood. At the time of consultation, the parents did not initially identify the divorce process as the underlying source of these difficulties.

These interventions drew inspiration from previous interventions focused on minimizing the psychosocial consequences of divorce for children (Angacian et al., 2015; Anderson, 2021).

The characteristics of the initial approach are summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Family approach (Initial Phase).

Family A Reason for Intervention	Family B Reason for Intervention	Similarities	Differences
Seeking professional guidance and intervention to appropriately manage the divorce, aiming to minimize the impact on their daughters.	Seeking intervention for the eldest daughter due to significant behavioral changes in preschool (e.g., frequent crying without apparent cause, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, persistent low mood).	Both families are undergoing a divorce-related adjustment process. Both have children of similar ages. Both couples have decided to proceed with divorce.	Family A seeks intervention to address the divorce process proactively. Family B seeks intervention due to the child's symptoms, without initially recognizing the divorce as the underlying cause.

These findings reflect distinct variants in the recognition of vulnerability. Family A exhibited a preventive orientation toward intervention, whereas Family B demonstrated a reactive approach focused on symptom management rather than underlying causes.

3.2. Decision-Making Process

The second phase examined how each couple arrived at the decision to divorce, revealing significant differences in emotional regulation, communication, and prioritization of children's well-being.

In Family A, the decision-making process involved individual reflection followed by a mutual agreement to proceed with the divorce. This process was characterized by open communication and a shared intention to minimize negative outcomes for their children.

In contrast, Family B displayed a pattern in which divorce was repeatedly introduced during episodes of conflict in the presence of the children, often followed by reconciliation. The final decision to separate occurred after a violent incident and was marked by an emphasis on personal benefit rather than consideration of the children's well-being.

The decision-making processes are presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Decision-making process regarding divorce.

Family A Decision-Making	Family B Decision-Making	Similarities	Differences
Each partner independently reflected on the decision to divorce and mutually agreed to proceed. They sought professional guidance to minimize harm to their children.	Divorce is repeatedly mentioned during conflicts in front of the children, followed by reconciliation. The final decision occurs after a violent episode, prioritizing personal benefit over child well-being.	Both couples decide to separate due to dysfunctional relational dynamics. Both formalize the separation through legal divorce.	Family A prioritizes child well-being and seeks professional intervention. Family B prioritizes personal gain (emotional/economic) and does not consider the impact on the children.

These patterns illustrate divergent variants in the management of relational dissolution, with Family A demonstrating structured and intentional decision-making, and Family B exhibiting impulsive and conflict-driven processes.

3.3. Communication with Children

The third phase addressed how the divorce was communicated to the children, highlighting the role of communication strategies in shaping children's understanding of the process.

In Family A, communication occurred after receiving professional guidance and followed a structured approach. Parents provided developmentally appropriate explanations, ensuring that the children understood the situation without attributing blame or responsibility.

In Family B, communication was indirect and inconsistent, frequently occurring during conflict episodes. The children were repeatedly exposed to threats of divorce and, at times, were asked to choose between parents. This pattern contributed to confusion, emotional distress, and increased vulnerability.

Communication patterns with children are summarized in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Communication with children about divorce.

Family A Communication with Children	Family B Communication With Children	Similarities	Differences
Parents disclosed the divorce after receiving professional guidance, using a structured approach. Children were prepared and given developmentally appropriate explanations.	Communication is indirect and occurs during conflicts. Children are repeatedly told their parents will divorce and are asked to choose between them.	Children in both families are aware of the divorce decision. Both understand that family structure will change.	Family A communicates in a structured, direct, and supportive manner with professional guidance. Family B communicates indirectly, repeatedly, and in emotionally charged contexts, increasing distress and confusion.

These findings underscore the importance of intentional and guided communication, as inconsistent and conflict-based messaging may lead to maladaptive interpretations among children.

3.4. Parental Departure from the Household

The fourth phase examined the process by which one parent exited the family home, a critical moment in the restructuring of the family microsystem.

In Family A, the parental departure was carefully planned and guided by professional intervention. The process was structured to minimize disruption, including removing belongings in the absence of the children and maintaining environmental continuity within the household.

In Family B, the departure occurred abruptly following the decision to divorce. The children were present during the event and were exposed to ongoing conflict, including disputes over belongings. The home environment was left partially disrupted, contributing to a sense of instability.

The characteristics of the parental departure are presented in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Parental departure from the household.

Family A Departure From Home	Family B Departure From Home	Similarities	Differences
The departure is planned with professional guidance. Care is taken to avoid leaving visible “empty spaces” in the home. Belongings are removed while children are not present.	The father leaves abruptly after the decision to divorce. Children are present during the process. The home is left partially empty, and conflict occurs over belongings.	In both cases, one parent leaves the household following the divorce decision.	Family A manages the transition in a structured, child-sensitive manner. Family B conducts the departure during conflict, with children present and exposed to distressing interactions.

These differences highlight the impact of planning and professional guidance in mitigating distress during transitional family events.

3.5. Children’s Conceptualization of Divorce

A final analytical category emerged from the interviews with the children, focusing on how they conceptualized and interpreted the divorce process. Children from Family A demonstrated an understanding consistent with their developmental stage. Their responses reflected clarity regarding the changes in family structure while maintaining a sense of emotional security and continued parental support. In contrast, children from Family B expressed narratives characterized by themes of abandonment, self-blame, and emotional distress. Their language indicated internalized responsibility for the separation and perceived loss of parental affection.

Children’s conceptualizations of divorce are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Children’s conceptualization of divorce.

Child From family A	Child From Family B	Similarities	Differences
“Dad moved to another house because he is going to divorce Mom.”	“Dad left and abandoned us.”	Both children understand that the father no longer lives at home. Both are aware of the divorce. Both recognize changes in family structure.	The child in Family A demonstrates developmentally appropriate understanding with no strong negative emotional distortion. The child in Family B uses language reflecting abandonment, guilt, and emotional distress, indicating greater psychological impact.
“Mom and Dad explained that they will no longer be married, but we are still a family.”	“Mom and Dad fought a lot, that’s why they divorced.”		
“We can see Dad whenever we want.”	“Sometimes it was my fault.”		
“Mom and Dad still love us.”	“I am to blame for Dad leaving.”		
	“Dad doesn’t love us anymore.”		

These findings illustrate the differential psychological impact associated with each variant, emphasizing the role of intervention and family dynamics in shaping children’s interpretations of divorce.

4. Discussion

The findings of the present study illustrate how divorce processes may function as significant sources of psychosocial vulnerability during childhood, particularly when children are exposed to persistent conflict, instability, or emotionally disorganized family environments. Although both families examined in this study experienced the dissolution of the parental relationship, the results demonstrate notable differences in the manner in which children interpreted and adapted to the restructuring of the family system. These differences appear closely associated with the presence or absence of professional intervention, the quality of parental communication, and the degree of conflict to which the children were exposed throughout the separation process.

The findings support the conceptualization of divorce as a transitional family crisis rather than a singular legal event. Consistent with Bolaños (1998), the dis-

solution of the couple relationship affects the entire family system, requiring emotional and structural reorganization among all members. Within this context, children frequently occupy a particularly vulnerable position due to their developmental dependence on the stability and predictability of the family microsystem. As observed in Family B, repeated exposure to conflictual interactions, emotionally charged communication, and abrupt changes in family structure contributed to narratives characterized by guilt, abandonment, and emotional insecurity. In contrast, children from Family A demonstrated more developmentally appropriate interpretations of divorce and maintained a clearer perception of continued parental support.

These findings align with Bronfenbrenner's (1987) ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), particularly regarding the importance of the microsystem during childhood development. The family constitutes the child's primary relational environment and serves as the context through which emotional regulation, attachment patterns, communication styles, and perceptions of security are developed. Consequently, disruptions within this system may significantly influence children's emotional and psychosocial functioning. The results suggest that the impact of divorce on children is not determined exclusively by the separation itself, but rather by the relational climate surrounding the process, including parental conflict, communication patterns, and the degree of emotional stability maintained during family restructuring.

The contrasting characteristics observed between the two families also reinforce the importance of examining divorce through a developmental lens. Papalia & Martorell (2023) emphasize that physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development occur simultaneously and are shaped by environmental experiences throughout childhood. When children are repeatedly exposed to conflictual interactions, uncertainty, or emotionally unsafe environments, their capacity to process and adapt to stressful experiences may become compromised. In Family B, children demonstrated interpretations of divorce involving self-blame and perceived abandonment, responses that may reflect the limitations associated with childhood cognitive development and emotional processing. Younger children frequently lack the developmental capacity to contextualize adult relational problems independently and may internalize family conflict as a consequence of their own behavior.

The findings further support previous literature emphasizing the importance of parental communication during divorce processes. In Family A, parents communicated the separation in a direct, structured, and developmentally sensitive manner after receiving professional guidance. This approach appeared to facilitate greater emotional clarity and reduce confusion among the children. Conversely, in Family B, communication occurred primarily during moments of conflict and emotional dysregulation, contributing to instability and inconsistent interpretations of the separation process. These differences suggest that the manner in which children are informed about divorce may significantly influence their emo-

tional adjustment and perception of family continuity.

Another relevant aspect emerging from the findings concerns the symbolic importance of parental departure from the household. The transition associated with one parent leaving the home represented more than a physical separation; it also constituted a reorganization of the child's emotional and relational environment. In Family A, this transition was managed gradually and intentionally, minimizing visible disruptions within the home and attempting to preserve continuity in the children's daily environment. In contrast, Family B experienced an abrupt and conflictual departure process in which children were directly exposed to disputes and visible household disruption. These findings suggest that environmental stability and predictability may function as protective factors during periods of family transition.

The present study additionally highlights the importance of professional intervention during divorce processes involving children. Consistent with Pittman (1990), family crises require timely intervention aimed at reducing emotional disorganization and facilitating adaptive restructuring. In Family A, intervention functioned preventively, assisting parents in organizing communication strategies, anticipating potential emotional responses, and prioritizing the children's well-being throughout the separation process. In contrast, Family B sought support only after emotional and behavioral symptoms had become evident in the child. This distinction reflects broader differences between preventive and reactive approaches to intervention within family practice.

The findings further suggest that professional intervention may contribute to reducing children's vulnerability by helping parents differentiate marital conflict from parental functioning. One of the central difficulties observed in high-conflict divorces involves the tendency for children to become emotionally involved in adult relational disputes. In such contexts, children may feel pressured to assume emotional roles inappropriate for their developmental stage, including mediating conflict, choosing between parents, or assuming responsibility for family instability. The responses observed among the children in Family B reflect the psychological burden associated with these dynamics.

From a social work perspective, these findings underscore the importance of adopting family-centered and child-focused approaches when working with families undergoing divorce. Intervention should extend beyond addressing immediate symptoms and instead focus on strengthening protective relational factors within the family system. This may include promoting emotionally appropriate communication, supporting co-parenting practices, reducing children's exposure to interparental conflict, and facilitating stable environmental transitions during family restructuring.

The findings also reinforce the importance of understanding childhood vulnerability as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by emotional, relational, social, and contextual factors. Ruiz (2012) conceptualizes vulnerability as a condition associated with exposure to threats capable of disrupting individual func-

tioning and limiting adaptive capacity. Within the context of divorce, vulnerability does not emerge exclusively from the separation itself, but from the accumulation of destabilizing experiences surrounding the process. The presence of violence, hostility, inconsistent communication, or emotional unpredictability may intensify children's sense of insecurity and compromise their developmental adjustment.

Within the Mexican context, the study additionally reflects the growing need for specialized family intervention services addressing divorce and childhood adjustment. As family structures continue to evolve in response to broader social and economic transformations (Esteinou, 2008), professionals increasingly encounter family systems undergoing processes of reorganization and relational transition. However, intervention frequently occurs only after significant emotional or behavioral difficulties emerge among children. The findings of the present study suggest the importance of strengthening preventive services capable of supporting families during the early stages of separation, before conflict becomes chronic or emotionally disruptive.

At the same time, the findings hold broader international relevance, as divorce-related vulnerability among children has become an important area of concern across multiple social and cultural contexts. Although cultural norms surrounding divorce vary considerably, the central importance of emotional security, family stability, and supportive parental relationships appears consistent across developmental literature. Consequently, child-centered intervention models emphasizing emotional protection, communication, and family adjustment may represent important areas of development within contemporary social work and family practice internationally.

Finally, the present study reinforces the value of ecological and systemic perspectives in understanding divorce-related vulnerability during childhood. Children do not experience divorce as isolated individuals; rather, their experiences are shaped by interconnected family, social, educational, cultural, and institutional systems. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework therefore remains particularly useful for conceptualizing how relational disruptions within the family interact with broader contextual influences to shape developmental outcomes. Understanding divorce through this multidimensional perspective allows professionals to move beyond individual symptomatology and toward more comprehensive approaches centered on family functioning, emotional safety, and developmental well-being.

4.1. Study Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of the present study. First, the study employed a qualitative case study design with a small convenience sample consisting of only two families. While this methodological approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of family dynamics and children's experiences during divorce, the findings cannot be generalized to all fami-

lies undergoing separation processes. Instead, the results should be understood as illustrative of contrasting variants in divorce management and their potential implications for childhood vulnerability.

Second, the study focused exclusively on heterosexual family structures with young children, limiting the representativeness of other family configurations, including single-parent households, blended families, gender-related parent families, or families with adolescents. Future research would benefit from incorporating greater diversity in family composition and developmental stages to examine how vulnerability may manifest across different relational and sociocultural contexts.

Another limitation involves the contextual and cultural specificity of the study. The findings emerge from experiences situated within the Mexican sociocultural context, where family structures, gender roles, access to mental health services, and perceptions regarding divorce may differ substantially from those in other countries. Although certain findings may have broader relevance, caution should be exercised when extrapolating the results to different cultural or institutional settings.

Additionally, the study relied primarily on interview-based data collected during intervention processes. As with all self-report methodologies, participant narratives may have been influenced by emotional states, retrospective interpretation, social desirability, or selective recall. The absence of longitudinal follow-up also limits the ability to assess the long-term developmental impact of the divorce processes described in the study.

The present investigation further focused on the initial stages of divorce and family restructuring rather than post-divorce adaptation over time. Consequently, the findings do not capture potential changes in children's adjustment, resilience processes, or evolving family dynamics following stabilization of the separation. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of developmental outcomes associated with divorce-related vulnerability.

Finally, although professional intervention constituted a central analytical component of the study, the research was not designed to evaluate the effectiveness of a standardized intervention model. Rather, it explored differences observed between families with and without structured professional guidance. Future research should therefore examine specific intervention models, evidence-based practices, and measurable psychosocial outcomes associated with child-centered divorce interventions within social work practice.

4.2. Implications in Social Work

The findings of the present study highlight the critical role of social work intervention in mitigating the psychosocial vulnerability experienced by children during divorce processes. From a clinical and family systems perspective, divorce should not be understood solely as a legal dissolution of the couple relationship, but rather as a multidimensional family crisis capable of disrupting children's

emotional security, developmental stability, and relational environment. Consistent with ecological and developmental approaches, the quality of parental interaction during separation significantly influences children's adaptation and long-term psychosocial functioning (Bronfenbrenner, 1987; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Within the Mexican context, the implications for social work practice are particularly relevant due to the increasing diversification of family structures and the growing prevalence of divorce processes (Esteinou, 2008). Despite these demographic and social changes, intervention services specifically designed to support children during parental separation remain limited and unevenly accessible. In many cases, professional intervention occurs only after emotional or behavioral symptoms become evident in children, reflecting a reactive rather than preventive approach to family crisis intervention. The findings of this study suggest the necessity of strengthening preventive and family-centered models of intervention within clinical, educational, and community settings.

Social workers occupy a strategic position in the early identification of vulnerability indicators associated with high-conflict divorce, including emotional dysregulation, behavioral regression, school difficulties, social withdrawal, and self-blaming cognitions among children. Consequently, social work intervention should extend beyond symptom management and incorporate psychoeducational, preventive, and systemic approaches aimed at reducing children's exposure to conflictual family dynamics. This includes facilitating developmentally appropriate communication between parents and children, promoting co-parenting strategies centered on child well-being, and assisting families in restructuring routines and relational boundaries following separation.

At the clinical level, trauma-informed and attachment-sensitive approaches may be particularly beneficial when working with children exposed to chronic parental conflict, verbal aggression, or family instability. Research has consistently demonstrated that prolonged exposure to interparental conflict constitutes a significant psychosocial stressor associated with increased risks of anxiety, depressive symptomatology, emotional insecurity, and difficulties in social adjustment during childhood and adolescence. Within this framework, social workers should prioritize interventions that reinforce emotional safety, stability, and continuity in children's immediate environments.

The results additionally underscore the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration between social workers, psychologists, educators, pediatric professionals, and legal systems involved in family proceedings. Divorce processes frequently involve overlapping psychosocial, educational, economic, and legal dimensions that require coordinated intervention strategies. In this regard, school social workers may play an essential role in identifying behavioral changes associated with family restructuring and facilitating early referral to support services.

From an international perspective, the implications of this study align with broader discussions regarding child-centered divorce practices and preventive

family intervention models. Multiple countries have increasingly incorporated mediation programs, parental education initiatives, and family-focused psychosocial services into divorce proceedings to reduce the adverse impact of separation on children. Although the availability and accessibility of such services vary considerably across sociocultural and institutional contexts, the present findings support the importance of integrating preventive intervention protocols into family services internationally.

Furthermore, the study reinforces the relevance of ecological approaches within contemporary social work practice. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides a clinically useful framework for understanding how divorce-related stressors extend beyond the immediate family nucleus and interact with broader educational, institutional, cultural, and social systems. Effective intervention therefore requires consideration not only of intrafamilial dynamics but also of the contextual factors that shape children's adaptation processes.

Finally, the present findings suggest the need for greater professional training in family intervention, divorce mediation, childhood development, and crisis management within social work education programs. Strengthening specialized training may contribute to the development of evidence-informed practices capable of minimizing childhood vulnerability and promoting healthier family transitions during divorce processes.

5. Conclusion

The present study examined two contrasting variants of the divorce process and their implications for childhood vulnerability, emphasizing the role of family dynamics, parental communication, and professional intervention during periods of family restructuring. Although both families experienced the dissolution of the parental relationship, the findings demonstrate that the psychosocial impact on children differed substantially according to the relational climate surrounding the separation and the presence of structured professional support.

The results suggest that children exposed to high-conflict divorce processes characterized by instability, hostility, and emotionally disorganized communication may experience heightened vulnerability across emotional and psychosocial domains. Feelings of guilt, abandonment, confusion, and emotional insecurity emerged more prominently among children exposed to chronic parental conflict and inconsistent communication patterns. In contrast, children whose parents approached the separation process in a structured and collaborative manner demonstrated greater emotional clarity, preserved perceptions of parental support, and more developmentally appropriate understandings of divorce.

These findings reinforce the importance of conceptualizing divorce as a family transition requiring intentional emotional and relational management rather than solely a legal process. The manner in which parents communicate separation, regulate conflict, and reorganize family routines may significantly influence children's capacity to adapt to changing family structures. Consequently, minimizing

children's exposure to conflict and promoting emotional predictability should constitute central objectives during divorce intervention processes.

The study further highlights the importance of preventive and family-centered professional intervention. Families receiving structured guidance appeared better able to organize communication, anticipate children's emotional needs, and reduce potentially harmful interactions during the separation process. This finding supports previous literature emphasizing the value of early intervention and psychosocial support during family crises (Pittman, 1990; Roizblatt et al., 2018). Professional intervention may therefore function as a protective factor capable of reducing childhood vulnerability and facilitating healthier adaptation during periods of family transition.

From a social work perspective, the findings underscore the need for intervention models that prioritize children's emotional well-being while simultaneously addressing broader family dynamics. Social workers are uniquely positioned to identify early indicators of psychosocial vulnerability, facilitate preventive intervention strategies, and promote collaborative co-parenting practices centered on child development and emotional safety. Likewise, interdisciplinary collaboration between social work, mental health, educational, and legal systems remains essential when supporting families undergoing divorce.

The present study also reinforces the relevance of Bronfenbrenner's (1987) ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) as a framework for understanding childhood experiences during divorce. Children's adaptation to family restructuring cannot be understood independently from the relational and contextual systems surrounding them. Family conflict, communication patterns, environmental stability, institutional responses, and broader sociocultural factors interact dynamically in shaping developmental outcomes during periods of crisis and transition.

Within the Mexican context, the findings reflect the growing necessity of strengthening specialized intervention services for families experiencing separation and divorce. As family structures continue to diversify, there is an increasing need for preventive, accessible, and child-centered psychosocial services capable of supporting families before conflict becomes chronic or emotionally harmful. At the same time, the findings may hold relevance beyond the national context, particularly in relation to the development of intervention approaches that prioritize children's emotional security during divorce processes internationally.

Ultimately, the study suggests that the impact of divorce on children is not determined exclusively by the dissolution of the parental relationship itself, but by the emotional and relational conditions surrounding the process. Children appear more capable of adapting to family restructuring when conflict is minimized, communication remains developmentally appropriate, and emotional stability is preserved within the family environment. In this sense, professional intervention represents not only a mechanism for crisis management, but also an opportunity to promote healthier developmental trajectories during one of the most significant

transitions within family life.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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