Coparenting And Child Behavior In Different Family Configurations

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Abstract

The quality of the coparental relationship impacts child behavior across different family configurations. The present study, which was cross-sectional and employed a convenience sampling method, aimed to investigate the predictive effects of coparenting dimensions on aspects of child behavior in both married and divorced families. A total of 344 participants with children aged between 3 and 11 years (261 from married families and 83 from divorced families) completed the Coparenting Relationship Scale and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Multiple linear regression results indicated that family type (married or divorced) was not a predictor of any child behavior variables in statistically significant models. In the overall sample, Coparenting agreement significantly reduced all child behavior problems and increased prosocial behavior. In married families, Coparenting agreement negatively predicted all child behavior problems except emotional symptoms. In divorced families, Coparenting agreement was a negative predictor of hyperactivity, externalizing problems, and overall difficulties. The Exposure to conflict variable positively predicted conduct problems and child difficulties in the general sample, as well as emotional symptoms and internalizing problems in the divorced families. The Endorse partner's parenting variable negatively predicted emotional symptoms, peer relationship problems, and internalizing problems in married families only. Therefore, it was concluded that coparenting dimensions, particularly agreement and conflict, impact child behavior differently in married and divorced families.

Keywords: child behavior, family relations, family structure, nuclear family, divorce

COPARENTALIDADE E O COMPORTAMENTO DA CRIANÇA EM DIFERENTES CONFIGURAÇÕES FAMILIARES
Coparentalidade e Comportamento da Criança

Resumo

A qualidade do relacionamento coparental repercute no comportamento infantil em diferentes configurações familiares. O presente estudo, de corte transversal e amostra selecionada sob critérios de conveniência, objetivou investigar efeitos preditores das dimensões coparentais sobre aspectos do comportamento da criança em famílias casadas e divorciadas. Os 344 participantes com filhos entre 3 e 11 anos (261 de famílias casadas e 83 de famílias divorciadas) responderam à Escala de Relacionamento Coparental e o Questionário de Capacidades e Dificuldades. Os resultados, a partir de regressão linear múltipla, indicaram que a variável tipo de família (casada ou divorciada) não foi preditora de nenhuma variável do comportamento da criança nos modelos estatisticamente significativos. Na amostra geral, o acordo coparental teve efeito estatisticamente significativo na redução de todos os problemas de comportamento infantil e no aumento da prossociabilidade. Nas famílias casadas, o acordo coparental foi um preditor negativo de todos os problemas de comportamento infantil, exceto os sintomas emocionais. Nas famílias divorciadas, o acordo parental foi um preditor negativo em relação à hiperatividade, problemas externalizantes e dificuldades gerais. O conflito coparental foi um preditor positivo dos problemas de conduta e dificuldades da criança na amostra geral, e dos sintomas emocionais e problemas internalizantes nas famílias divorciadas. O reconhecimento da parentalidade da dupla coparental foi um preditor negativo dos sintomas emocionais, problemas de relacionamento com os pares e problemas internalizantes nas famílias casadas. Portanto, conclui-se que as dimensões coparentais, principalmente o acordo e o conflito, impactam o comportamento infantil de forma distinta em famílias casadas e divorciadas.

Palavras-chave: comportamento infantil, relações familiares, estrutura familiar, núcleo familiar, divórcio

COPARENTALIDAD Y COMPORTAMIENTO INFANTIL EN DIFERENTES CONFIGURACIONES FAMILIARES
Coparentalidad y conducta infantil

Resumen

La calidad de la coparentalidad afecta el comportamiento infantil en diversas estructuras familiares. El estudio actual, que es transversal y empleó un método de muestreo por conveniencia, tuvo como objetivo investigar los efectos predictivos de las dimensiones coparentales en los aspectos del comportamiento infantil en familias tanto casadas como divorciadas. En total, 344 participantes con hijos de 3 a 11 años (261 de familias casadas y 83 de divorciadas) completaron la Escala de Relación Coparental y el Cuestionario de

Capacidades y Dificultades. Los resultados de la regresión lineal mostraron que el tipo de familia (casada o divorciada) no predijo el comportamiento infantil en modelos significativos. En general, un acuerdo coparental significativo se relaciona con menos problemas de comportamiento y más comportamiento prosocial. En familias casadas, el acuerdo coparental fue un predictor negativo de todos los problemas de comportamiento, excepto los emocionales. En familias divorciadas, el acuerdo se relaciona con menos hiperactividad, problemas de conducta y dificultades generales. El conflicto coparental fue un predictor positivo de los problemas de comportamiento y dificultades del niño en la muestra general y de los síntomas emocionales y problemas internalizados en las familias divorciadas. El reconocimiento de la parentalidad fue un predictor negativo de los síntomas emocionales, problemas de relacionamiento con los pares y problemas internalizados solamente en las familias casadas. Por tanto, se concluye que las dimensiones coparentales, principalmente el acuerdo y el conflicto, impactan el comportamiento infantil de manera diferente en familias casadas y divorciadas.

Palabras clave: conducta infantil, relaciones familiares, estructura familiar, núcleo familiar, divorcio

Coparenting is identified in empirical studies as a robust predictor of child adjustment in both married families and divorce contexts (Karberg & Cabrera, 2020; Lamela & Figueiredo, 2016). According to the Model of Internal Structure and Ecological Context of Coparenting proposed by Feinberg (2003), the coparental relationship plays a central role in mediating between conjugality, the relationship between the parental figure and the child, and children's adjustment. According to this theory, a high-quality coparental relationship, permeated by high levels of positive factors, such as coparenting support and agreement, and low levels of conflict and coparenting undermining, can be considered a protective factor that moderates the relationship between risk factors and family adjustment (Campbell, 2023).

This article focused on married and divorced families; however, it is known that the coparental subsystem can be composed of other configurations, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or biological ties to the child, as long as these adults assume the function and responsibility of sharing the child's upbringing (McHale, & Sirotkin, 2019). This is because, for the model proposed by Feinberg (2003), coparenting exists independently of family structure and corresponds to the exchange between two or more adults who are co-responsible for raising and making decisions about the child's life.

The contemporary family has been undergoing transformations in its organization, dynamics, and configuration, according to the various historical and social changes in Western society (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). The growing inclusion of women in the labor market (Baltar & Omizzolo, 2020) and the greater involvement of men in childrearing (Backes et al., 2018) are aspects that impact the daily experience of coparenting in families. Although the biparental family, that is, one composed of a couple with children, is still the main family configuration found in Brazil, its prevalence has decreased, falling from 50.1% of the total family arrangements in 2005 to 42.3% in 2015 (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2016). This highlights the relevance of researching coparenting not only in biparental families (Campbell, 2023) but also in other family configurations (McHale & Sirotkin, 2019), since family dynamics differ according to the context.

Parallel to the decrease in biparental families, the number of divorces has grown in Brazil, especially among people with children, including adolescents, (55.8% of total divorces in 2021) (IBGE, 2021). There has also been a significant increase in the number of binuclear families, formed by two nuclei, each administered by a parental figure and that do not have the factor of conjugality (intimate affective relationship between the parents) in family interactions, with a jump from 7.5% to 34.5% in the proportion of divorces with shared custody of children between 2014 and 2021 in the country (IBGE, 2021). These data indicate the importance of understanding how coparental dynamics occur in binuclear families resulting from divorce. It seems that the increase in this type of family configuration in Brazil is related to the enactment of Law 13,058, of 12/22/2014, which prioritized shared custody in the context of divorce when both parents are considered capable and wish to exercise parenting, even if there is no agreement between them (IBGE, 2021). Shared custody can be beneficial for the family system, especially

for children, by providing greater coexistence with both parents; in this type of custody, the existence of a coparental dynamic becomes compulsory, even in the face of parental conflict (Staudt & Wagner, 2019).

An integrative literature review on children's experience with shared custody after parental divorce (Staudt & Wagner, 2019) found that some studies highlighted that this type of custody can be a risk factor for children when: 1) there was high interparental conflict, 2) it was used as a mechanism of control and for the perpetuation of domestic violence experienced by women during the marriage, and 3) for maintaining instability in children's routines, making it difficult to exercise parenting. However, many studies cited in the aforementioned review pointed out benefits of shared custody for children with better developmental outcomes regarding self-esteem, and emotional and behavioral development. The quality of pre-divorce parenting and coparenting were predictors of satisfactory shared custody for children. Accordingly, the authors concluded that there is no ideal model of custody, as each family has its context with particularities that are more important than the family arrangement itself (Staudt & Wagner, 2019).

Marital dissolution can be a stressful period not only for adults but also for children, as children may have difficulties dealing with the stressors of separation, especially in situations of interparental conflict, which end up triggering emotional reactions such as fear and anger (Roseiro et al., 2020). For this reason, Roseiro et al. (2020) recommend guiding parents in divorce situations to maintain cooperative coparenting aiming to minimize the emotional impacts of family rupture on child development.

An analysis of judicial separation records in Spain, conducted by Jiménez-Garcia et al. (2019), found that the number of children with behavioral, emotional, and academic problems was higher in families where coparenting was impaired by lack of communication and cooperation between parents after divorce. In comparison, in families where parents maintained positive coparenting even after separation, this number was lower. This result is in line with the systematic review by Ambrós et al. (2022) of studies of parents in divorce situations, concluding that a conflictual coparental relationship resulted in negative effects on children's behavior, even when there was good communication and coparenting support.

The study conducted by Schrodt and Afifi (2019) with married and divorced families indicated that supportive coparental communication was associated with higher levels of satisfaction and closeness in families, while hostile coparental communication was associated with lower levels of these aspects for both family configurations. This indicates that the effects of the type of coparental communication in the family context go beyond the type of family configuration.

Regardless of family configuration, the negative dimensions of coparenting: 1) conflict – disagreements and arguments between parents that occur in the presence of children (McHale et al. 2004) and disagreements about the child, in which hostile situations and attempts to hinder the parenting of the couple may occur (Feinberg, 2003; Margolin et al., 2001); 2) undermining – sabotaging the other parent in their parental role (Feinberg, 2003; McHale et al.,

2004); and 3) triangulation – when one parent excludes the coparental couple from family dynamics by inserting the child into parental conflicts and forming an alliance with the child against the other parental figure can be risk factors for child behavior (Margolin et al., 2001).

In this sense, in the meta-analysis conducted by Zhao et al. (2022), coparental conflict, undermining, and triangulation were associated with higher levels of externalizing problems – behavioral dysregulations such as aggressiveness, hyperactivity (Hentges et al., 2021) and conduct problems (problems in self-control of emotions and behavior – American Psychiatric Association, 2013) – and internalizing problems in children – emotional and mood difficulties such as depression and anxiety.

Furthermore, low levels of positive coparenting are also considered risk factors for child development, as they would be associated with more internalizing and externalizing problems in children and adolescents (LeRoy et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 2016). Satisfaction with the coparental relationship, on the other hand, can be a protective factor for child development, according to the aforementioned reviews. This is because coparenting support was related to a significant improvement in child psychological adjustment and consequently in family relationships, as indicated by the study by Ambrós et al. (2022). In addition, coparental cooperation – the amount of support, recognition of the partner's parenting, and sharing of attributions and responsibilities that allow accessibility to the child offered by parents (Margolin et al., 2001), and family integration – parental behavior in the presence of the child to include the coparental couple so that the child perceives family unity (McHale et al., 2004) were attenuating factors for externalizing and internalizing problems (Zhao et al., 2022) in children. Accordingly, positive coparenting is associated with lower rates of internalizing, externalizing, and behavioral problems in general in children, adolescents, and young adults (Choi et al., 2019; Favez et al., 2019; Lamela et al., 2016; Schrodt & Afifi, 2018), with coparental cooperation also being positively related to the prosocial behavior promotion of other people's well-being – (Pfattheicher et al., 2022) of the child (Lam et al., 2018; Scrimgeour et al., 2013).

More specifically in Brazil, three studies have considered negative coparenting a risk factor for the development of psychopathologies in children (Mosmann et al., 2017; Mosmann et al., 2018; Machado & Mosmann, 2019). The research by Mosmann et al. (2017) with parents of biparental families of children and adolescents showed that coparental competition, exposure of the child to coparental conflict, parental practice of intrusiveness, low coparental approval, and behavior supervision were predictors of externalizing symptoms in children. In the case of internalizing symptoms, prediction was negatively related to marital adaptability and coparental approval. On the other hand, the coparental dimension of recognition of the couple's parenting (how one parent supports and positively recognizes the exercise of the parental function of the other) was a predictor for the reduction of internalizing and externalizing problems in children.

In the second study (Mosmann et al., 2018), also conducted with parents of biparental families, through statistical analysis, negative dimensions of the marital and parental relationship (marital conflict, coparental competition, parental practice of intrusiveness, and exposure of the

child to coparental conflict) were identified as discriminants of children with clinical symptoms. Conversely, the main factor in the sample of children without psychological symptoms was coparenting agreement. Finally, the third study (Machado & Mosmann, 2019), conducted with adolescents, indicated that children's emotional regulation has a mediating role in the association between negative dimensions of coparenting (triangulation and coparental conflict) and adolescents' internalizing problems.

Also in the Brazilian context, Weber et al. (2021) analyzed the coparenting perceptions of separated parents with shared custody of children and found continuity in the quality of the coparental relationship in the pre- and post-divorce moments. Families that reported not having developed functional coparenting after marital dissolution already did not present satisfactory quality in the coparental relationship when the parents were still married. This may indicate that when the couple faces difficulties in managing responsibilities towards their children, these difficulties are likely to persist after divorce.

Accordingly, Brazilian studies found in the literature on coparenting and child behavior align with the results of international studies; however, they are still insufficient to elucidate the relationships between these variables in different family configurations, as emphasized by literature reviews conducted by Brazilian researchers. In this way, Fidelis et al. (2022), in a literature review on relationships between coparenting, conjugality, and parenting, indicated the need for enrichment in the production of research on coparenting in the Brazilian context, given the scarcity of data in the literature with only one national study included in the sample. This fact was also noted by Souza et al. (2020) in a systematic literature review on coparenting and parental involvement in binuclear families, as well as in the systematic review produced by Ambrós et al. (2022) on coparenting and child behavior in the context of divorce.

Furthermore, among national studies, positive dimensions of children's behavior, such as prosociality, were not investigated. The measurement of this variable becomes important as it may be associated with better developmental outcomes in children and adolescents, being a protective factor in the face of behavioral problems (Knafo-Noam, 2015). A gap was also found in the area related to family configurations regarding the divergence of research instruments and data analysis methods. Only two international studies were identified that simultaneously investigated more than one family configuration with the same research instruments and methods for the analysis of results (Schrodt & Afifi, 2018; Schrodt & Afifi, 2019). This makes it difficult to understand the similarities and differences in the coparental relationship and its effects on child behavior in married and divorced families. This, in turn, can hinder the development of more effective interventions and public policies to promote adequate coparenting that supports child adjustment.

Consequently, the present study may contribute to the gaps identified in the literature for understanding the relationships between coparenting and child behavior in different family configurations, since coparenting plays a fundamental role in children's behavior. In this sense, conducting this study is justified by the relevance of investigating whether the type of family configuration predicts child behavior and what different effects coparenting exerts on child

behavior. Understanding the differences in coparenting between married and divorced families, and their implications for child behavior, is fundamental to developing effective support and intervention strategies aimed at promoting children's well-being in different family contexts. Therefore, the aim was to investigate the predictive effects of coparenting (agreement, support, division of labor, undermining, exposure to conflict, recognition of the couple's parenting) and family configuration (married and divorced families) on child behavioral dimensions (hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, conduct problems, peer relationship problems, externalizing and internalizing behaviors, and prosocial behavior).

The theoretical model underlying this study is Feinberg's Model of Internal Structure and Ecological Context of Coparenting (2003), whose contextual aspects have already been presented at the beginning of the introduction. The internal structure of this construct is composed of four dimensions that interact recursively with other individual, familial, and extra-familial factors in an ecological context (Feinberg, 2003). The first dimension, called childrearing agreement/ disagreement, refers to the understanding between parents regarding child-related values, education, care, and needs. The dimension division of labor is related to the sharing of care in the child's daily routine, the division of responsibilities and financial, medical and legal matters, and the sharing of household tasks. Support/undermining of the coparental couple's parenting role consists of the way adults value or undermine each other's parenting practices and endorse the partner's parenting. The joint family management dimension focuses on the interaction between adults and includes how parents manage their own behaviors, how they establish family communication and manage triadic or larger interactions, and how they assess the presence and intensity of conflicts between themselves.

Based on the aforementioned studies, it was hypothesized that family configuration would not be a predictor of child behavior, but positive coparental dimensions (Coparenting agreement; Division of labor; Coparenting support; Endorse partner's parenting) would negatively predict child behavior problems (emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, conduct problems, peer relationship problems, internalizing problems, externalizing problems, and total difficulties) and positively predict child prosocial behavior in married and divorced families; however, negative coparental dimensions (Coparenting undermining and Exposure to conflict) would positively predict behavior problems and negatively predict prosociality in children, in both family configurations.

Method

Design

This was a cross-sectional study with a sample selected using convenience criteria.

Participants

In total, 344 Brazilian families with children between 3 and 11 years of age participated in the study, which were evaluated in two groups according to type of family configuration: married and divorced families. The majority of participants declared themselves to be of white

ethnicity, with a high level of education, with female children, as presented in Table 1 which characterizes the sample.

Table 1

Characterization of sociodemographic variables of parents and children

Sample	Age	Relationship		Ethnicity			
	M (SD)	Mother n (%)	Father n (%)	White n (%)	Mixed Race n (%)	Black n (%)	Asian n (%)
General (n = 344)	37.75 (5.89)	285 (82.8)	59 (17.2)	276 (80.2)	47 (13.7)	18 (5.2)	03 (0.9)
Married families (n = 261)	37.88 (5.72)	214 (82.0)	47 (18.0)	203 (77.8)	40 (15.3)	15 (5.7)	03 (1.1)
Divorced families (n = 83)	37.36 (6.40)	71 (85.5)	12 (14.5)	73 (88.0)	07 (8.4)	03 (3.6)	–

	Education level of participants n (%)				
	Elementary	High School	Technical	Undergraduate	Graduate
General	7 (2.0)	55 (16.0)	9 (2.6)	84 (24.4)	189 (55.0)
Married families	3 (1.1)	37 (14.2)	7 (2.7)	60 (23.0)	154 (59.0)
Divorced families	4 (4.8)	18 (21.7)	2 (2.4)	24 (28.9)	35 (42.2)

	Age of child	Sex of child	
	M (SD)	Female n (%)	Male n (%)
General	6.28 (2.495)	184 (53.5)	160 (46.5)
Married families	6.17 (2.473)	137 (52.5)	124 (47.5)
Divorced families	6.65 (2.544)	47 (56.6)	36 (43.4)

Note: M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

The inclusion criteria for participants were: (a) being a father or mother, married or divorced, with at least one child aged between 3 and 11 years, 11 months and 29 days, with typical development; (b) having had the focal child after the age of 18; (c) residing in Brazil; (d) cohabiting for at least six months in the case of married respondents; and (e) being divorced for at least 6 months and exercising coparenting in the case of divorced respondents. The group of participants from married families reported being married or cohabiting with the child's other parental figure. The group of participants from divorced families reported not cohabiting with the child's other parental figure due to divorce or informal separation. The exclusion criteria for the sample were: participants who did not fully respond to the instruments used in this study, who were not residing in the country, who had children with atypical development, and who became parents before turning 18, as these aspects can influence the exercise of coparenting.

Instruments

For data collection, the following instruments were used:

1) Coparenting Relationship Scale (CRS): assesses coparenting, created by Feinberg et al. (2012) and culturally adapted to Brazilian Portuguese by Carvalho et al. (2018). Six of the seven subscales of the instrument were used: a) Coparenting agreement; b) Division of labor; c) Coparenting support; d) Endorse partner's parenting; e) Coparenting undermining; f) Exposure to conflict. The Coparenting Closeness subscale was not used in this study, as it is a factor that assesses couple intimacy, and its use is not recommended in divorced families (Lamela et al, 2016). Participants respond to each item on a seven-point scale ranging from not true of us (0) to very true of us (6), except for the Exposure to conflict subscale, where response categories range from never (0) to very often (6). The reliability indices of the dimensions in this study were: (a) Coparenting agreement (α=.80); (b) Division of labor (α=.33); (c) Coparenting support (α=.91); (d) Endorse partner's parenting (α=.89); (e) Coparenting undermining (α=.82); and, (f) Exposure to conflict (α=.86).

2) Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997, 2001): consisting of 25 items divided into five subscales. The four subscales of child difficulties can indicate a total index of child behavior problems or highlight internalizing behavior problems by summing the factors of emotional symptoms and peer relationship problems; and externalizing behavior problems through the scales of conduct problems and hyperactivity. Finally, the fifth subscale assesses the child's prosocial behavior. The questionnaire was answered by parents using a three-point Likert-type scale ranging from false (1), somewhat true (2) to true (3) for the child's behaviors in the last six months. The Brazilian version of the SDQ was used (Fleitlich et al., 2000). The reliability indices of the SDQ with the population of the present study were: emotional symptoms (α=.58); conduct problems (α=.72); hyperactivity (α=.81); peer relationship problems (α=.61); prosocial behavior (α=.62), total child difficulties (α=.83); externalizing problems (α=.85); and, internalizing problems (α=.69).

3) Sociodemographic Questionnaire: was used to measure context variables of each participant, composed of open and multiple-choice questions covering age, sex, ethnicity and education of the parents; characterization, composition and income of the family, and sex, age, affiliation, year of schooling and ethnicity of the child.

Ethical procedures and data collection

This research is part of the umbrella project entitled "Parenting and child socio-emotional development II" submitted and approved by the Ethics Committee for Research with Human Beings (CEPSH/UFSC), under number CAAE 31205420.4.0000.0121. The research complied with Resolution No. 510 of April 7, 2016 of the National Health Council. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research was conducted in a virtual environment, via the SurveyMonkey platform, through a personalized link to access the instruments. First, participants needed to accept the Consent Form and provide an email for later feedback. The study was disseminated

through social networks, institutional channels and by the snowball method, with the collection carried out between the years 2020 and 2022.

Data analysis

Data were exported and analyzed using the SPSS version 20.0 software. For the characterization of phenomena, univariate descriptive statistical analyses (mean and standard deviation) were performed. The reliability of questionnaires, scales and subscales was measured using Cronbach's Alpha.

To achieve the objective of this study, multiple linear regression analysis models were used with the level of perception of each dimension of child behavior (emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, conduct problems, peer relationship problems, internalizing problems, externalizing problems, total difficulties, and prosocial behavior) as an outcome and the coparenting dimensions (Coparenting agreement, Exposure to conflict, Endorse Partner's parenting, Division of labor, Coparenting support, and Coparenting undermining) and family configuration (married and divorced families) as predictors in the general sample. Consequently, eight models were tested in the general sample. The same models were also tested for each family configuration (subtracting this variable as a predictor) to determine which dimensions of coparenting would be predictors of the child's behavioral dimensions in each group of participants (married and divorced parents). The adjustments of all models were evaluated using the ANOVA test and the contribution of each model variable was verified using the beta coefficient. The significance level adopted in this study was .05.

Results

All multiple linear regression models presented here were created and tested with all dimensions of coparenting (Coparenting agreement, Division of labor, Coparenting support, Endorse partner's parenting, Coparenting undermining, and Exposure to conflict) with the predictors of each dimension of child behavior as an outcome in the general sample, in divorced families, and in married families. For better data visualization, it was decided to present only the independent variables in the tables that showed statistically significant predictions for the models. First, the multiple regression models of the behavioral dimensions of children in the general sample are presented; followed by the subsample of participants from divorced families; and, finally, the model with participants from married families.

Prediction of child behavior according to the family configuration and coparenting

When analyzing the participants in general, all prediction models of child behavior dimensions, through multiple linear regression analyses, with the six dimensions of coparenting and family configuration as independent variables, were statistically significant. More specifically, coparenting agreement was a negative predictor of all dimensions of child behavior problems and the only positive predictor variable of child prosocial behavior (Table 2). Although the

positive predictive power of the Coparenting conflict variable for child conduct problems and total difficulties is noteworthy, the predictive strength of the Coparenting agreement variable was greater. Furthermore, the explained variance coefficient (adjusted R^2) that determines how much the predictor variables explain the outcome variables, shows that the dimensions of coparenting and family configuration together explained 5.9% of emotional symptoms; 11.3% of conduct problems; 10.9% of hyperactivity; 11.0% of peer relationship problems; 19.4% of total child difficulties; 4.1% of prosocial behavior; 14.1% of externalizing problems; and 11.6% of internalizing problems.

It can be seen that the type of family configuration (married or divorced) was not in itself a predictive factor of child behavior, with the same being the case for the dimensions of Endorse partner's parenting, Coparenting undermining, Division of labor and Coparenting support, in the general sample.

Table 2

Statistically Significant Variables of Coparenting and Family Configuration Predicting Child Behaviors in the General Sample

Dependent Variable	Predictor Variables of the Model	Beta	p	Adjusted R^2	F (df;df)p
	Family type	−.124	.059		
Emotional symptoms	Coparenting agreement	−.179	.027*	.059	$F(6;337)=4.561***$
	Family type	−.093	.148		
Conduct problems	Coparental conflict	.126	.038*		
	Coparenting agreement	−.321	.000***	.113	$F(6;337)=8.253***$
	Family type	−.071	.266		
Hyperactivity	Coparenting agreement	−.342	.000***	.109	$F(6;337)=8.072***$
	Family type	−.042	.515		
Peer relationship problems	Coparenting agreement	−.233	.003**	.110	$F(6;337)=7.994***$
	Family type	−.115	.059		
Child difficulties	Coparental conflict	.116	.045*	.194	$F(6;337)=14.747***$
	Coparenting agreement	−.385	.000***		
	Family Type	.051	.443		
Pro-social behavior	Coparenting agreement	.212	.009**	.041	$F(6;337)=3.423**$
	Family type	−.091	.148		
Externalizing problems	Coparenting agreement	−.333	.000***	.141	$F(6;337)=10.361***$
	Family type	−.103	.108		
Internalizing problems	Coparenting agreement	−.244	.002**	.116	$F(6;337)=8.533***$

Note: Beta = Standardized regression coefficient; *p* = Statistical significance; Adjusted R^2 = Adjusted regression coefficient; *F* = ANOVA; df = degrees of freedom.

p ≤ .050; ** *p* ≤ .001; *** *p* < .000

Prediction of child behavior by coparenting in divorced and married families

In the analysis with the sample of participants from divorced families, the negative predictive power of the Coparenting agreement variable for hyperactivity, total child difficulties, and externalizing problems also stands out, although in models that did not present good fits, except for the variable related to the total difficulties of the child (Table 3). However, Exposure to conflict stood out as a predictor that contributes to the emergence of emotional symptoms and internalizing problems in children in analysis models with good fits. Regarding the explained variance coefficient (adjusted R^2), the coparenting dimensions and family configuration together explained 8.8% of the children's emotional symptoms, 10.8% of total difficulties, and 10.4% of internalizing problems. Again, the dimensions of Endorse partner's parenting, Coparenting undermining, Division of labor, and Coparenting support were not predictive factors for child behavior in divorced families.

Table 3

Statistically Significant Coparental Variables Predicting Child Behaviors in the Sample of Divorced Families

Dependent Variable	Predictor Variables of the Model	Beta	p	Adjusted R^2	F(df;df)p
Emotional symptoms	Coparental conflict	0.285	0.028*	0.088	$F(5;77)=2.576$*
Hyperactivity	Coparenting agreement	−0.339	0.034*	0.054	$F(5;77)=1.931$
Child difficulties	Coparenting agreement	−0.361	0.021*	0.108	$F(5;77)=2.996$*
Externalizing problems	Coparenting agreement	−0.323	0.043*	0.060	$F(5;77)=2.051$
Internalizing problems	Coparenting conflict	0.307	0.017*	0.104	$F(5;77)=2.913$*

Note: Beta = Standardized regression coefficient; p = Statistical significance; Adjusted R^2 = Adjusted regression coefficient; F = ANOVA; df = degrees of freedom.

$p \leq .050$; ** $p \leq .001$; *** $p < .000$

The results obtained with the sample of participants from married families indicate a different pattern of prediction of child behavior through coparenting (Table 4). Coparenting agreement was a negative predictor of all child problems, except for emotional symptoms. There was also another positive dimension of coparenting, Endorse partner's parenting, which presented itself as a negative predictor of emotional symptoms, peer relationship problems, and internalizing problems in children. In married families, the regression models explained 6.8% of the child's emotional symptoms; 14.4% of conduct problems; 10.7% of hyperactivity; 13.7% of peer relationship problems; 22.9% of total child difficulties; 7.3% of prosocial behavior; 16.2% of externalizing problems; and 14.8% of internalizing problems.

Table 4

Statistically Significant Coparental Variables Predicting Child Behaviors in the Sample of Married Families

Dependent Variable	Predictor Variables of the Model	Beta	p	Adjusted R^2	F(df;df)p
Emotional symptoms	Endorse partner's parenting	−.176	.020*	.068	F(5;255)=4.788***
Conduct problems	Coparenting agreement	−.298	.000***	.144	F(5;255)=9.755***
Hyperactivity	Coparenting agreement	−.289	.000***	.107	F(5;255)=7.232***
Peer relationship problems	Coparenting agreement Endorse partner's parenting	−.228 −.148	.004** .042*	.137	F(5;255)=9.274***
Total child difficulties	Coparenting agreement	−.340	.000***	.229	F(5;255)=16.471***
Prosocial behavior	Coparenting agreement	.194	.017*	.073	F(5;255)=5.091***
Externalizing problems	Coparenting agreement	−.333	.000***	.162	F(5;255)=11.053***
Internalizing problems	Coparenting agreement Endorse partner's parenting	−.210 −.196	.007** .007**	.148	F(5;255)=10.040***

Note: Beta = Standardized regression coefficient; p = Statistical significance; Adjusted R^2 = Adjusted regression coefficient; F = ANOVA; df = degrees of freedom.

$p ≤ .050$; ** $p ≤ .001$; *** $p < .000$

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the effects of coparenting on child behavior, in both married and divorced families. The study hypothesis was partially confirmed, as family configuration was not found to be a predictor of child behavior. Additionally, the main findings were: a) Coparenting Agreement negatively predicted dimensions of child behavior problems in all family configurations and was a positive predictor of prosocial behavior in the general sample and married families; b) Endorse partner's parenting negatively predicted behavior problems only in married families; and c) Exposure to conflict was a positive predictor of child behavior problems in the general sample and in divorced families. Therefore, the positive coparenting dimensions of Division of labor and Coparenting support were not associated with child behavior, nor was the negative dimension of Coparenting undermining. The role of Exposure to conflict as a risk factor for child adjustment, especially in divorced families, and Coparenting agreement as a protective factor for child behavior is highlighted, regardless of family configuration and Recognition of the couple's parenthood in married families.

The coparenting dimensions contributed to both the positive and negative behavior of the child regardless of family type. Accordingly, as indicated by data from the literature, the quality of the coparental relationship is more relevant to family dynamics and the development of its members than the type of family configuration (Lamela et al., 2016; Souza et al., 2020; Stallman & Ohan, 2016; Weber et al., 2021). Therefore, even if divorce is considered an unexpected

horizontal stressor in the family life cycle, which requires the reconfiguration of family relationships with new patterns of coexistence, its negative impacts can be mitigated by the presence of a good coparental relationship (Roseiro et al., 2020; Weber et al. 2021).

The literature in the area indicates that positive dimensions of coparenting – coparenting support (Ambrós et al., 2022), supportive communication (Schrodt & Afifi, 2018), cooperation (Choi et al., 2019; Zhao et al., 2022), family integration (Zhao et al., 2022), and coparenting agreement (Mosmann et al., 2018), act as protective factors against children's behavior problems. Specifically in the present study, only Coparenting agreement, in the general sample, presented itself as a negative predictor of all child behavior problems (emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, general difficulties, internalizing problems, and externalizing problems), as well as a positive predictor of prosocial behavior. In this sense, the findings align with the national research by Mosmann et al. (2018), in which coparenting agreement attenuated internalizing symptoms in a non-clinical sample of children and adolescents.

The dimension of agreement, or coparental cooperation, represents an important positive parenting dimension as a protective factor for the development of children and adolescents, as also highlighted by other studies (Lam et al., 2018; Scrimgeour et al.2013). The prediction of children's prosociality through coparenting agreement is an important finding, as prosocial behavior is highlighted in the literature as a protective factor against the development of aggressive behaviors in children and adolescents (Jung &Schröder–Abé, 2019). Furthermore, it is associated with positive outcomes in the developmental trajectory (school adaptation, academic performance, and psychosocial well–being) of children and adolescents (Spivak & Durlak, 2016).

When analyzing divorced families separately, Coparenting agreement was a negative predictor of total child difficulties. Therefore, coparenting agreement can be a protective factor for children's mental health, because when parents can have good communication and collaborate well, children can benefit. This is indicated in the study by Herrero et al. (2020), which found that positive communication between parents after marital dissolution is indirectly related to less depression, anxiety, and aggressiveness in children, with coparenting being a protective factor for children. Also, the study by Jiménez–Garcia et al. (2019) found fewer behavioral problems in children whose divorced parents reported good coparental communication and cooperation. Furthermore, supportive coparental communication can also provide the family with benefits, regardless of family configuration, by strengthening the quality of relationships between its members (Schrodt & Afifi, 2019).

Coparenting as a protective factor for children's mental health was also found in the study by Lamela and Figueiredo (2016), which presented empirical studies published between 2000 and 2014 on the relationship between child mental health and coparenting after marital dissolution. In the studies selected, the authors found significant positive associations between the dimensions of coparenting (coparenting support, cooperation, and agreement) and the

child's academic performance, self-esteem, and mental health. Accordingly, when children perceive greater parental alliance and more affectivity from parents, they tend to have fewer externalizing symptoms, that is, greater partnership in parental relationships with harmony and balance can create healthier adolescents and children (Vian et al., 2018).

When analyzing only married families, it is clear that only the positive dimensions of coparenting predicted child behavior. Coparenting agreement was a negative predictor of all child behavior problems, except for emotional symptoms, indicating that this dimension can be a protective factor for child adjustment. It also had a significant positive relationship with prosocial behavior, showing that it can also act as a promoting factor for the child's socialization. This is in line with the study by Lamela et al. (2016) that found a relationship between positive coparenting and better indices of psychological adjustment and social skills in children. It should be emphasized that, in this study, Coparenting agreement was the dimension with the greatest predictive power for child behavior, regardless of family configuration, which indicates that it is one of the most relevant factors for coparenting, but above all for children's mental health.

Coparental conflict is considered a risk factor for the child, since, in this study, it positively predicted conduct problems and total difficulties in the general sample. This result is in line with findings from a consistent meta-analysis conducted with data from 93 empirical studies (Zhao et al., 2022). The authors identified that the presence of coparental conflict was associated with higher levels of internalizing and externalizing problems in children. In the Brazilian context, Mosmann et al. (2017) found that parental conflicts were associated with higher levels of externalizing behaviors in children and adolescents. As highlighted by Paula et al. (2015), conduct problems may be present in children who experience interparental conflict, as exposure to unfavorable environments or a lack of positive results throughout childhood increase the likelihood of developing dysfunctional behaviors.

The predictive power of coparental conflict for total child difficulties in this study confirms the evidence review by Harold and Sallers (2018), which summarized research with children exposed to high levels of interparental conflict and at risk for mental health problems. The authors highlight that interparental conflicts negatively affect the child's emotional, behavioral, social, and academic outcomes and their future interpersonal relationships, regardless of whether the parents are married or divorced. Indeed, Mosmann's (2018) research concluded that, when discriminating children in samples with clinical and non-clinical behavioral symptoms, the predictive strength of coparental conflict for behavioral problems was maintained only in parents with children from the clinical sample. This indicates the importance of intervening in coparental conflicts, especially in populations of children with behavioral problems. In conclusion, coparenting with high conflict can be considered a risk factor for child development, as it exposes the child to an adverse and hostile family system (Herrero et al., 2020).

Coparental conflict in divorced families, in the present study, was a positive predictor of emotional symptoms and internalizing problems in children. These findings corroborate international literature that highlights the negative dimensions of coparenting as risk factors for

children's mental health in divorced families, even in the presence of positive aspects of coparenting (Ambrós et al., 2022). Poorly resolved marital conflicts may be related to dysfunctional coparenting (Mendes et al., 2022), so that the conflict that existed before and after marital separation can remain and transfer to the coparental relationship (Koprowski, 2020).

In this study, undermining was not a predictor of child behavior in any of the family configurations, which goes against the results of national studies that identified an association between undermining and children's internalizing and externalizing problems (Mosmann et al., 2017, 2018). As the sample for this study was composed by convenience, with the data collection self-applied and virtual, it is possible that the absence of predictive power of Coparenting undermining on child behavior problems was due to a sampling bias. This may be due to a cultural issue of social desirability, which reporting the presence of coparental conflicts is more socially accepted than behaviors that harm the parenting of the coparental couple.

In this study, Endorse partner's parenting, in married families, negatively predicted emotional symptoms, internalizing problems, and peer relationship problems. This result may indicate that parents, by supporting the parenting of the other, express to their children that they support the childrearing practices of their coparental partner. This finding corroborates the study by Mosmann et al. (2017) who found that in coparenting, the less endorsement of the partner's parenting, the more emotional and behavioral symptoms in children. According to the authors, this association may have occurred because coparenting disapproval can provoke tensions expressed implicitly or explicitly, which, in the same way, affects the child's behavior through internalizing or externalizing symptoms.

Final Considerations

This study aimed to investigate the predictive effects of coparenting and family configuration (married and divorced families) on child behavioral dimensions. Although progress has been made in terms of research on the effects of coparenting on children's behavior in different family configurations, this topic has not yet been fully explored, especially in the national context. From the results obtained, it was possible to verify that, in the present study, family configuration was not found to be a predictor of child behavior. This suggests that the way coparenting is experienced affects the child's behavior more than the family configuration in which they live (Schrodt & Afifi, 2019).

Regarding coparenting and its effects on child behavior, Coparenting agreement was the dimension with the greatest predictive power for child behavior in all family configurations, acting as a protective factor for child development. In the general sample, Coparenting agreement negatively predicted all child behavior problems and positively predicted prosocial behavior. Exposure to conflict constituted a risk factor for child behavior by positively predicting general difficulties and conduct problems in children, in the general sample.

In divorced families, Coparenting agreement maintained its role as a negative predictor of hyperactivity, general difficulties, and externalizing problems, while Exposure to conflict was the dimension that positively predicted emotional symptoms and internalizing problems. In married families, Coparenting agreement was a negative predictor of all child behavior problems, except for emotional symptoms, and a positive predictor of prosocial behavior. Furthermore, the Endorse partner's parenting dimension negatively predicted emotional symptoms, peer relationship problems, and internalizing problems in the children, only in the married families. Perhaps the Endorse partner's parenting did not appear in divorced families because these parents probably do not reside in the same house, which makes it difficult to observe the execution of the parental function of the other parent.

It is clear that coparenting influences child development, as it can contribute to both the promotion of behavior problems and the development of prosocial child behavior. From the results of this study, it is possible to identify the differences and similarities in the effects of coparenting on the behavior of children from married and divorced families. Even though the coparental dynamics have different repercussions on children from these family configurations, Coparenting agreement was the only variable that predicted behavior problems in all samples, showing it to be a necessary element for a healthier child development. Negotiation and agreement between parents regarding the child's upbringing, routine, goals, and behaviors creates family coherence, which positively affects the child. Similarly, it can be thought that coparental conflict negatively affects child behavior, because when the child witnesses arguments, fights, or hostile conversations between parents, they do not have the necessary psychic elements to deal with the situation.

It should be emphasized that these results provide support for the implementation of interventions and public policies that help parents exercise quality coparenting, regardless of family configuration, with a main focus on coparenting agreement and conflict management as measures to promote family mental health. This is because the literature review by Carvalho et al. (2022) highlights that coparenting intervention programs showed efficacy in improving the quality of the coparental relationship over time by attenuating conflicts and promoting greater coparenting support. Furthermore, coparenting interventions with two-parent families should also consider the Endorse partner's parenting dimension in the intervention program, focusing mainly on the positive dimensions of the coparental relationship, in view of the positive results for child development.

Regarding the limitations of this study, there was a considerable difference in the number of divorced families compared to married families participating in the study, and most families had only one informant, that is, the research was conducted with only one parental figure of the child. It is also important to highlight that men continue to be a minority when it comes to research on the family context. Some studies, such as the systematic review by Ambrós et al. (2022) and the literature reviews by Coltro et al. (2020) and Samdan et al. (2020), also demonstrated the predominance of mothers in the samples of studies related to the family

context. Therefore, it is suggested to conduct future research with a case-control study design focusing on the type of family configuration and parental gender.

Regarding education, most participants reported having postgraduate degrees, a factor that can be considered a bias in the present study. One of the possible explanations for this bias is that data collection was carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic, and had to be done online, which may have hindered access to people with lower levels of education and/or in vulnerable situations.

It is relevant for future research to aim at verifying how the coparenting changes after divorce and how often. Whether there is a difference in coparenting between divorced families with different types of child custody arrangements, such as shared and unilateral custody, could also be investigated, given that the current literature is still scarce and mainly international (Steinbach, 2023). In addition to investigating possible associations with other important parental variables for child development, such as parenting, marital relationship, and parents' mental health. It is also recommended to conduct studies with qualitative methods to complement the quantitative data, in order to deepen the understanding of family dynamics of couples in stable unions, in the process of separation, or divorced. Furthermore, future studies could expand the knowledge of these variables in other family configurations such as adoptive families, same-sex families, single-parent families (when only one person assumes the child's parenting, i.e. widowed, single and/or divorced parents), families with children with atypical development, etc.

It is hoped that this study will support mental health professionals in identifying new insights for understanding the effects of coparenting on child development and for the development of interventions that favor the proper functioning of the coparental subsystem in all family configurations.

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