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Development of a Mentalization-Based Co-Parenting Package: A Qualitative Study

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A r t i c l e   I n f o

A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This study aimed to develop a mentalization-based co-parenting intervention package. The research was conducted through three consecutive studies. The objective of the first study was to identify parenting challenges and conflicts following divorce.

Methods and Materials: The research population consisted of this qualitative study divorced parents, from whom 13 participants were purposively selected based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria; participant number was determined according to the principle of data saturation. The research instrument was a semi-structured interview. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis based on the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006).

Findings: Four primary challenges were identified: (1) traumatic redefinition of the family structure after divorce by both parents, (2) parental neglect and lack of trust in the other parent's parenting competence, (3) mutual revenge-seeking behaviors, and (4) the child as the hidden victim. The second part aimed to extract co-parenting concepts grounded in mentalization theory. The research setting included all scholarly texts related to mentalization, from which six texts were selected according to inclusion and exclusion criteria. The research tool consisted of line-by-line textual analysis. Qualitative data were analyzed using the content analysis method proposed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). Findings indicated that the principal concepts included: (1) reflective functioning, with subcomponents involving understanding one's own and others' psychological states; (2) mentalization outcomes, including identity formation support and enhancement of self-regulation; (3) psychopathology, encompassing impaired mentalization and weakness or absence of mentalization foundations; (4) mentalization goals, including the development of coherent self-representation and the creation of psychological security through support seeking and empathy; and (5) therapeutic strategies and techniques, including balanced brain training and skills training. During this process, two sets of themes were systematically integrated so that post-divorce parenting challenges could be reduced through the application of mentalization techniques among parents.

Conclusion: Based on these findings, the developed educational package appears suitable for promoting effective co-parenting.

Keywords: divorce, children, parenting challenges, co-parenting, mentalization

1. Introduction

Divorce has become an increasingly prevalent social phenomenon across contemporary societies, fundamentally transforming family structures, parenting roles, and developmental environments for children. Although divorce may represent a necessary resolution to marital conflict, its psychological, relational, and developmental consequences extend far beyond the dissolution of the marital relationship itself. Research consistently demonstrates that divorce constitutes a major family transition requiring substantial reorganization of parental roles, emotional boundaries, and caregiving responsibilities (Damota, 2019). Rather than signaling the end of family life, divorce marks a transition from a marital family system to a reorganized binuclear family structure in which parents remain permanently connected through shared responsibility for child development (Ahrons, 2007). Within this transformed system, the quality of co-parenting becomes one of the most influential predictors of child adjustment and long-term family functioning.

Extensive longitudinal research has shown that children's developmental outcomes following divorce are not determined primarily by the legal separation itself but by the level of parental conflict, cooperation, and emotional coordination that persists afterward (Wallerstein et al., 2013). Studies indicate that unresolved interparental hostility, inconsistent caregiving, and disrupted parental alliances increase risks for emotional dysregulation, behavioral problems, and psychological maladjustment among children and adolescents (Caksen, 2022). Furthermore, parental divorce has been associated with heightened vulnerability to delinquency, social instability, and maladaptive coping strategies when supportive co-parenting structures are absent (Ghasemi & Ghorbani, 2024). In extreme circumstances, ineffective post-divorce parenting environments may even contribute to risky or deviant behavioral trajectories among youth (Hamamah et al., 2025). These findings underscore the necessity of shifting scholarly and clinical attention from divorce as an event toward post-divorce parenting processes as ongoing developmental contexts.

The concept of co-parenting has therefore emerged as a central construct in family psychology. Co-parenting refers to the manner in which caregivers coordinate, support, and share responsibilities related to childrearing regardless of their romantic relationship status (McHale et al., 2019). Unlike general parenting practices, co-parenting emphasizes the relational alliance between caregivers, including communication quality, conflict management, mutual respect, and shared decision-making. Early theoretical formulations highlighted co-parenting as a regulatory subsystem within the family that directly influences children's emotional security and social competence (Mangelsdorf et al., 2011). Contemporary scholarship further confirms that cooperative co-parenting serves as a protective factor buffering children against the stressors associated with parental separation (Campbell, 2023).

Despite its recognized importance, co-parenting after divorce presents unique challenges compared to co-parenting within intact families. Divorce often introduces emotional injuries, mistrust, unresolved grievances, and redefined family identities that complicate parental collaboration. Phenomenological studies of divorced parents reveal recurring themes such as parental disengagement, lack of trust in the former partner's parenting abilities, retaliatory interaction patterns, and difficulties maintaining consistent parenting practices across households (Hamidi et al., 2024). Sociological investigations similarly indicate that parental roles become renegotiated following separation, frequently leading to asymmetrical involvement or disrupted father–child relationships (Shevchenko, 2016). Economic pressures resulting from divorce further exacerbate parenting stress and reduce parents' psychological availability for cooperative caregiving (Mortelmans, 2020). Consequently, post-divorce co-parenting represents not merely a behavioral task but a complex psychological adjustment requiring emotional regulation, perspective-taking, and interpersonal repair.

In response to these challenges, numerous co-parenting interventions have been developed to strengthen parental cooperation and promote child well-being. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses demonstrate that structured co-parenting programs can improve communication patterns, increase parental self-efficacy, and reduce interparental conflict (Eira Nunes et al., 2021). Intervention studies such as *Parenting Apart* have shown sustained improvements in parental collaboration and reductions in child adjustment problems over time (Rector LaGraff et al., 2015). Similarly, evidence-based co-parenting training models have demonstrated positive effects on parenting consistency and relational coordination among divorced parents (Pilkington et al., 2019). Recent program-development research also highlights the effectiveness of structured educational packages designed to enhance co-parenting relationships through psychological skill training (Pejman et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, existing programs often emphasize behavioral strategies without sufficiently addressing the deeper psychological mechanisms underlying parental conflict and misunderstanding.

One theoretical framework increasingly recognized as capable of addressing these deeper processes is mentalization theory. Mentalization refers to the capacity to understand behavior—one's own and others'—in terms of underlying mental states such as emotions, intentions, desires, and beliefs (Fonagy & Allison, 2013). Emerging from developmental and attachment research, mentalization is considered a foundational psychological capacity enabling empathy, emotional regulation, and adaptive interpersonal functioning. When individuals mentalize effectively, they can tolerate ambiguity in relationships, regulate emotional reactions, and maintain curiosity about others' perspectives rather than reacting defensively.

Mentalization develops within early attachment relationships and remains highly sensitive to relational stress and trauma across the lifespan. Research indicates that adverse relational experiences, including interpersonal conflict and emotional insecurity, may disrupt mentalizing capacity and lead to rigid or distorted interpretations of others' intentions (Bateman et al., 2024). Impaired mentalization has been linked to dissociation, emotional dysregulation, and maladaptive interpersonal patterns, particularly in contexts involving attachment threat or relational rupture (Wagner-Skacel et al., 2022). Divorce represents precisely such a context: parents must continue interacting within an emotionally charged relationship while managing unresolved emotional experiences. Without sufficient mentalizing capacity, misunderstandings escalate, hostile attribution biases increase, and cooperative parenting becomes difficult.

Mentalization-based treatment (MBT) provides a clinical framework for restoring reflective functioning under conditions of interpersonal stress. MBT interventions aim to help individuals recognize mental states, regulate emotional arousal, and shift from automatic reactive responses toward reflective engagement (Bateman, 2022). By strengthening awareness of internal experiences and promoting empathy toward others, mentalization-oriented approaches facilitate more flexible and collaborative interpersonal interactions. Recent empirical work further suggests that enhanced mentalization mediates recovery from trauma-related psychopathology and improves relational functioning across diverse clinical populations (Bateman et al., 2024). These characteristics make mentalization particularly relevant for divorced parents who must renegotiate cooperation despite emotional vulnerability.

The application of mentalization principles to parenting contexts has gained increasing scholarly attention. Mentalizing parents are better able to interpret children's emotional signals, respond sensitively to developmental needs, and maintain consistent caregiving behaviors even under stress. Mentalization also supports parental self-regulation, allowing caregivers to separate personal grievances from parenting decisions. Intervention studies have demonstrated that mentalization-based communication training enhances emotional awareness, interpersonal understanding, and relational stability among participants (Alaeinejad et al., 2025). Within co-parenting contexts, mentalization may therefore function as a mechanism through which parents move from adversarial interaction patterns toward collaborative caregiving alliances.

Despite the theoretical compatibility between mentalization and co-parenting, integration of these domains remains limited in existing literature. Reviews of co-parenting research emphasize the need for interventions addressing emotional processes, attachment dynamics, and reflective functioning rather than focusing exclusively on behavioral coordination (Campbell, 2023). Scholars argue that sustainable co-parenting requires psychological capacities enabling parents to understand both their own emotional reactions and those of their former partners. Without such capacities, educational programs risk producing short-term compliance rather than enduring relational transformation.

In addition, cultural and contextual considerations highlight the importance of developing localized intervention packages tailored to specific populations. Qualitative validation frameworks emphasize that intervention development must be grounded in lived experiences and contextual realities of participants to ensure applicability and effectiveness (Eslami & Zokaei, 2022). Research conducted in diverse family systems demonstrates that parenting challenges after divorce vary across social, economic, and cultural contexts, reinforcing the necessity of context-sensitive program design (Spremo, 2020). Accordingly, combining experiential data from divorced parents with theoretically grounded psychological frameworks offers a promising pathway for intervention development.

Recent studies underscore the growing demand for innovative therapeutic approaches capable of addressing complex family transitions. Divorce alters parental identity,

emotional regulation patterns, and relational expectations simultaneously, requiring multidimensional interventions that integrate developmental psychology, attachment theory, and interpersonal neuroscience (Eira Nunes et al., 2021). Mentalization-based approaches uniquely address these dimensions by targeting reflective capacity, empathy development, and emotion regulation processes that underlie cooperative parenting behavior. Consequently, developing a structured mentalization-based co-parenting package represents a theoretically informed and clinically relevant response to the challenges faced by divorced families.

Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests that strengthening reflective functioning within caregiving systems promotes resilience not only for parents but also for children. When parents adopt mentalizing stances toward one another, interparental conflict decreases, communication improves, and children experience greater emotional security. Such outcomes align with developmental findings demonstrating that children benefit most when parents maintain cooperative alliances despite marital dissolution (Ahrons, 2007). Integrating mentalization into co-parenting interventions may therefore bridge the gap between individual psychological treatment and systemic family intervention.

Taken together, existing research highlights three converging needs: first, recognition of post-divorce co-parenting as a critical determinant of child adjustment; second, development of interventions addressing underlying psychological processes rather than solely behavioral skills; and third, incorporation of empirically grounded theoretical frameworks capable of enhancing emotional understanding and relational regulation among parents. Mentalization theory provides a coherent conceptual foundation capable of meeting these needs while offering practical therapeutic strategies applicable to real-world family contexts.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to develop a mentalization-based co-parenting intervention package through qualitative exploration of post-divorce parenting challenges and integration of mentalization theory concepts to reduce co-parenting conflicts and enhance cooperative parenting relationships.

2.   Methods and Materials

Research Design, Setting, and Selected Sources

Given that the purpose of the present study was to develop a mentalization-based co-parenting intervention package, a qualitative research design was adopted. The study consisted of three independent but sequential phases. The methodology of each phase is described separately below.

Phase One: Exploration of Parenting Challenges Using Thematic Analysis

In the first phase, post-divorce parenting challenges and conflicts were examined through lived experiences using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2006).

The research setting and participants included all divorced parents who had referred to counseling centers in the city of Isfahan in 2025 due to co-parenting difficulties. Participants were selected purposively according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which was achieved with 13 participants. Inclusion criteria consisted of parents who were legally divorced, had at least one child, were willing to participate in interviews, and consented to audio recording. Prior to conducting the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all participants, the research objectives were explained, and participants were assured that their identities and information would remain anonymous and confidential. Recorded interviews were deleted after completion of data analysis.

Participants ranged in age from 32 to 54 years. They had one or two children, and educational levels varied from high school diploma to doctoral degree. The average duration since separation ranged from three to five years.

Research Instrument

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. Probing questions were also employed to encourage participants to share deeper personal experiences. Interview questions were developed based on a structured review of the literature and were reviewed and approved by family therapy specialists with expertise in family and divorce counseling. Each interview began with general questions about parents' experiences of cooperation and communication with the former spouse regarding child-related issues (e.g., whether communication continued after divorce, how caregiving and supportive parental roles were maintained, and how post-divorce interactions affected children's sense of belonging and family stability). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Interview time and location were determined in advance through agreement between the researcher and participant and were conducted within counseling center settings.

Data Analysis Procedure

Following completion of interviews, all field notes were organized systematically. Interview transcripts were examined line by line, and data were analyzed inductively using thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006). This analytical approach focuses on participants' perceptions and lived experiences of the phenomenon under investigation. Data analysis was conducted in six stages: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing extracted themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Research Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was evaluated using four qualitative criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and usefulness. To ensure reliability of findings, results were returned to participants for member checking and revised according to their feedback. Transferability was enhanced by selecting participants with maximum variation in occupation, educational background, and age group. Additionally, two qualitative research experts in counseling reviewed interview content and supervised the data analysis process. The practical applicability of findings was demonstrated through their contribution to the development of a co-parenting educational package.

Phase Two: Content Analysis of Mentalization Literature

The purpose of the second phase was to identify mentalization concepts relevant to co-parenting and capable of addressing co-parenting challenges and conflicts. Accordingly, qualitative research using conventional content analysis based on Hsieh and Shannon (2005) was conducted.

The research setting consisted of all scholarly texts related to mentalization. Texts were selected based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria required that sources be published within the previous ten years and directly address mentalization theory. Exclusion criteria included publications lacking reputable academic publishers and undergraduate or master's theses. Database searches indicated that, at the time of writing, no published Persian-language article directly addressing the research topic was available. Based on the principle of theoretical saturation, concept extraction began after selection of five texts; however, the corpus was expanded to nine sources to ensure conceptual completeness. The selected sources are listed below.

Selected Texts Related to Mentalization

Bateman, A. W. (2022). *Mentalization-based treatment*. In S. K. Huprich (Ed.), *Personality disorders and pathology: Integrating clinical assessment and practice in the DSM-5 and ICD-11 era* (pp. 237–258). American Psychological Association.

Monticelli, M., Zeppa, P., Mammi, M., Penner, F., Melcarne, A., Zenga, F., & Garbossa, D. (2021). Where we mentalize: Main cortical areas involved in mentalization. *Frontiers in Neurology, 12*, 712532.

Fonagy, P., Gergely, G., & Jurist, E. L. (2018). *Affect regulation, mentalization and the development of the self*. Routledge.

Daubney, M., & Bateman, A. (2015). Mentalization-based therapy (MBT): An overview. *Australasian Psychiatry, 23*(2), 132–135.

Volkert, J., Hauschild, S., & Taubner, S. (2019). Mentalization-based treatment for personality disorders: Efficacy, effectiveness, and new developments. *Current Psychiatry Reports, 21*(4), 25.

Bateman, A., Fonagy, P., Campbell, C., Luyten, P., & Debbané, M. (2023). *Cambridge guide to mentalization-based treatment (MBT)*. Cambridge University Press.

Arabadzhiev, Z., & Paunova, R. (2024). Complexity of mentalization. *Frontiers in Psychology, 15*, 1353804.

Nieto-Retuerto, M., Torres-Gomez, B., & Alonso-Arbiol, I. (2025). Parental mentalization and children's externalizing problems: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Development and Psychopathology, 37*(4), 1804–1820.

Data Collection Tool

Data were collected using a structured text-analysis guide. Guiding questions directed the researcher to focus on mentalization concepts applicable to co-parenting and to extract key theoretical statements. Selected sources were analyzed line by line, followed by content examination, coding, and analytical review under supervision of academic advisors. Conceptual coherence and internal consistency among extracted data were examined while maintaining clear distinctions among themes. Sources were repeatedly reviewed, and derived themes were refined collaboratively.

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, involving continuous iterative movement between emerging findings and theoretical interpretation, which constitutes the core process of achieving validity and reliability in qualitative inquiry (Fitzpatrick, 2019). To ensure methodological rigor, usefulness, contextual integrity, researcher positionality, reporting transparency, and triangulation were considered (Abbaszadeh, 2012). Practical

usefulness was confirmed through application of findings in intervention development. Contextual integrity was ensured through reliance on primary scholarly sources. Researchers documented personal assumptions prior to analysis to minimize bias and continuously monitored positionality throughout the research process. Qualitative findings were reported clearly to enhance interpretability. Researcher triangulation was achieved through collaborative coding and analysis conducted by the principal researcher, academic supervisor, and an independent qualitative research coding specialist.

Phase Three: Development of the Mentalization-Based Co-Parenting Package

The objective of the third phase was to develop the educational intervention package through integration of findings obtained from Phases One and Two, thereby designing a mentalization-based co-parenting program aimed at reducing post-divorce parenting challenges and conflicts.

The research setting consisted of the research team, academic supervisors, and qualitative researchers specializing in intervention package development. The research team included qualitative researchers and family therapists with expertise in co-parenting interventions. Participants comprised the principal investigator, a doctoral candidate in counseling with five years of professional experience in child counseling and work with children of divorce; a supervising professor (associate professor, family and couple therapist); an advisory professor (assistant professor and child therapist); and two qualitative research specialists holding doctoral degrees and serving as university lecturers. The number of researchers involved was determined based on consensus required for educational session development. Additionally, eight family therapists specializing in co-parenting participated in evaluating inter-rater agreement, with their number determined according to consensus saturation criteria.

3.   Findings and Results

The results of the inductive data analysis conducted using the thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2006) in the first study indicated that the major challenges included traumatic redefinition of the family structure after divorce by both parents, parental neglect, lack of trust in the other parent's parenting competence, mutual revenge-seeking behaviors, and the child as the hidden victim. According to the researchers, these themes represent multiple dimensions of co-parenting challenges and conflicts following divorce.

The findings of qualitative content analysis based on the method proposed by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) demonstrated that the intervention incorporated several key concepts appropriate for improving co-parenting: (1) reflective functioning, including the subcomponents of understanding one's own and others' psychological states; (2) mentalization outcomes, including support for identity formation and enhancement of self-regulation; (3) psychopathology, encompassing impaired mentalization and the weakness or absence of mentalization foundations; (4) mentalization goals, including the development of appropriate self-representation and the establishment of psychological security through support seeking and empathy; and (5) therapeutic strategies and techniques, including balanced brain training and skills training.

Following extraction of the main concepts and their associated subcomponents within the domain of mentalization-based communication skills, an eight-session educational program was developed based on American Psychological Association guidelines and the package-development framework proposed by Yousefi and Golparvar (2023).

In the first step, the research team repeatedly reviewed the concepts and subcomponents derived from mentalization content analysis alongside the findings obtained from thematic analysis.

In the second step, the research team re-examined the extracted concepts and subcomponents multiple times and, based on these concepts, identified mentalization mechanisms for reducing and managing post-divorce parenting challenges and conflicts.

In the third step, co-parenting challenges and conflicts were systematically integrated into mentalization-based strategies. All identified challenges were incorporated into the educational package, and corresponding mentalization strategies and techniques were specified to address each challenge. These included reflective functioning (understanding psychological states of self and others), mentalization outcomes (identity formation and self-regulation), psychopathology (impaired mentalization and weak mentalization foundations), mentalization goals (coherent self-representation and psychological security through empathy and support), and therapeutic techniques such as balanced brain training, mindfulness skills training,

communication skills training, and emotion regulation strategies.

In the fourth step, the research team determined the number of sessions, required time allocation, and prioritization of topics. Two sessions were allocated to each of the following themes: traumatic redefinition of the family after divorce, parental neglect, lack of trust in the other parent's parenting competence, revenge dynamics, and the child as the hidden victim. Mentalization strategies and techniques were incorporated into each session to address the respective conflicts.

In the fifth step, preparation and development of the educational package content were conducted according to

American Psychological Association guidelines, including behavioral definitions, session objectives, strategies, and intervention techniques, under the supervision of academic advisors and consultants.

In the sixth step, process and content validation of the educational package were conducted by family therapy specialists. Inter-rater agreement was used for validation. The educational package, together with a content and process evaluation form, was provided to counseling specialists and individual psychotherapists, and their suggested revisions were incorporated into the final version.

The outcomes of these stages are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Protocol of the Developed Mentalization-Based Co-Parenting Package

Session	Objective	Content	Assignment
Session 1	Introduction to redefining the family after divorce	Participants became familiar with the concept of divorce and its consequences, parenting styles after divorce, the definition of co-parenting, and the importance of co-parenting.	Worksheet 1: Monitoring parenting style and post-divorce parenting patterns
Session 2	Understanding attachment styles in the development of mentalization in parents and children	Participants learned about attachment styles in children and parents, the role of insecure attachment in disorganized parenting, and secure attachment in effective co-parenting.	Worksheet 2: Monitoring communication levels in post-divorce parenting
Session 3	Increasing parental awareness of attachment strategies in reducing reflective capacity and preventing parental neglect	Participants learned about the role of attachment in mentalization, reflective functioning, empathy, and prevention of emotional neglect after divorce.	Worksheet 3: Monitoring attachment styles and their effects on mentalization and parenting
Session 4	Prevention of parental neglect through improving mentalization	Participants were introduced to brain functioning processes from basic states to mentalization and factors that reduce mentalization and hinder responsiveness to children's needs after divorce.	Worksheet 4: Monitoring factors reducing mentalization and their impact on children's needs
Session 5	Rebuilding communication with the co-parent through mentalization	Training included the mentalization balance model in parenting: self vs. other, cognition vs. emotion, automatic vs. controlled processing, and internal vs. external focus.	Worksheet 5: Monitoring the mentalization balance in parenting
Session 6	Promoting trust in the other parent's parenting	Participants became familiar with pre-mentalizing modes including psychic equivalence, teleological stance, and pretend mode in co-parenting relationships.	Worksheet 6: Monitoring mentalization modes related to trust in the former spouse's parenting
Session 7	Exiting revenge cycles through reflective functioning and empathy enhancement	Participants learned about alienated self-states, their symptoms, impact on parenting, and harmful consequences for child development.	Worksheet 7: Monitoring revenge feelings through recognition and regulation of alienated self-states
Session 8	Establishing coordinated parenting across two households	Training emphasized reflective functioning, mindfulness skills, emotion regulation, empathy enhancement, and problem-solving skills for post-divorce co-parenting.	Worksheet 8: Monitoring empathic and reflective co-parenting

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to develop a mentalization-based co-parenting intervention package through qualitative exploration of post-divorce parenting challenges and theoretical integration of mentalization concepts. The findings revealed that co-parenting difficulties following divorce were primarily organized around several interrelated themes, including traumatic redefinition of the family structure, parental neglect, lack of trust in the former

partner's parenting competence, revenge-oriented relational patterns, and the child as a hidden victim of interparental conflict. These findings align closely with the broader literature suggesting that divorce does not terminate family relationships but rather transforms them into reorganized relational systems that require new psychological and communicative competencies (Ahrons, 2007).

One of the central findings concerned the traumatic redefinition of family identity after divorce. Participants described experiencing ambiguity regarding parental roles,

emotional boundaries, and shared responsibilities. This result is consistent with longitudinal research indicating that divorce initiates a prolonged restructuring process rather than an immediate adjustment phase, often challenging parents' sense of stability and continuity (Wallerstein et al., 2013). Studies examining family transitions demonstrate that unresolved emotional experiences related to separation frequently disrupt cooperative parenting and create persistent relational tension (Damota, 2019). From a developmental perspective, such instability undermines children's sense of psychological security, emphasizing the importance of interventions that help parents cognitively and emotionally reorganize family relationships after divorce (Spremo, 2020).

Another prominent theme identified in the study was parental neglect arising from emotional exhaustion and diminished reflective awareness. Parents reported difficulty attending to children's emotional needs while simultaneously coping with personal distress and interparental conflict. Previous research has shown that children exposed to high-conflict divorce environments experience increased emotional and behavioral difficulties, largely mediated by reduced parental responsiveness and inconsistent caregiving practices (Caksen, 2022). Empirical findings further suggest that post-divorce stressors, including economic strain and role overload, may limit parents' psychological availability, thereby increasing risks for maladaptive child outcomes (Mortelmans, 2020). The present findings reinforce these conclusions by illustrating how parental emotional dysregulation translates into reduced mentalizing capacity toward children's internal experiences.

The identified theme of mistrust toward the other parent's caregiving competence represents another critical dimension of post-divorce co-parenting conflict. Participants frequently described hypervigilance, criticism, and reluctance to collaborate in child-related decision-making. Such dynamics have been widely documented in co-parenting research, which emphasizes that cooperation depends not merely on logistical coordination but on the maintenance of a functional parental alliance despite relational dissolution (McHale et al., 2019). Phenomenological studies of divorced parents similarly reveal persistent distrust as a major barrier to effective co-parenting collaboration (Hamidi et al., 2024). Sociological analyses further indicate that diminished trust may particularly affect father–child relationships when interparental cooperation deteriorates, leading to disengagement or inconsistent parental involvement (Shevchenko, 2016). The present findings therefore highlight trust restoration as a primary therapeutic target in post-divorce family interventions.

The emergence of revenge-oriented interaction patterns also constitutes a significant contribution of this study. Parents described cycles of retaliatory behaviors in which unresolved emotional injuries were expressed indirectly through parenting conflicts. These results correspond with theoretical models suggesting that divorce-related conflict often reflects unresolved attachment ruptures rather than purely practical disagreements about parenting (Campbell, 2023). Research indicates that ongoing hostility between parents predicts children's adjustment difficulties more strongly than divorce itself (Ghasemi & Ghorbani, 2024). Moreover, exposure to chronic interparental antagonism has been associated with increased risk behaviors among adolescents, reinforcing the need for interventions that address emotional processing rather than surface-level communication skills (Hamamah et al., 2025).

The identification of the child as a "hidden victim" further supports extensive empirical evidence demonstrating that children frequently absorb emotional consequences of parental conflict even when not directly involved. Long-term studies show that children internalize interparental tension, resulting in anxiety, identity confusion, and relational insecurity across development (Wallerstein et al., 2013). Co-parenting research consistently emphasizes that cooperative parental functioning serves as a protective factor buffering children against divorce-related stressors (Mangelsdorf et al., 2011). Thus, the findings underscore the necessity of interventions targeting parental relational dynamics as a means of promoting child psychological well-being.

The second phase of the study, involving content analysis of mentalization literature, identified reflective functioning, mentalization outcomes, psychopathology of impaired mentalization, mentalization goals, and therapeutic techniques as foundational components for intervention development. These findings strongly align with theoretical formulations defining mentalization as the capacity to interpret behavior through understanding internal mental states (Fonagy & Allison, 2013). Mentalization theory proposes that interpersonal conflict intensifies when individuals lose reflective capacity under emotional stress, leading to rigid interpretations and defensive reactions. Divorce represents precisely such a high-arousal interpersonal context, explaining why parents may shift toward non-mentalizing modes characterized by certainty about others' negative intentions.

Empirical research supports the relevance of mentalization in relational functioning. Studies demonstrate that impaired mentalizing mediates the relationship between childhood adversity, dissociation, and interpersonal pathology (Bateman et al., 2024). Similarly, investigations examining adverse experiences show that reduced mentalization capacity predicts emotional dysregulation and relational instability (Wagner-Skacel et al., 2022). The integration of mentalization principles into co-parenting training therefore addresses underlying psychological mechanisms rather than solely behavioral manifestations of conflict.

The present study's integration of mentalization strategies into an eight-session co-parenting program corresponds with emerging intervention research emphasizing reflective capacity development as a pathway to relational change. Mentalization-based treatment models aim to restore curiosity about others' mental states, regulate emotional reactivity, and enhance empathic understanding (Bateman, 2022). Previous program-development research has shown that structured mentalization-based communication training improves emotional awareness and interpersonal functioning among participants (Alaeinejad et al., 2025). The current findings extend this evidence by demonstrating the applicability of mentalization principles specifically within post-divorce co-parenting contexts.

The structure of the developed intervention package also aligns with broader evidence supporting psychoeducational co-parenting programs. Meta-analytic findings indicate that co-parenting interventions improve parental cooperation and reduce conflict when they incorporate structured skill-building components and psychological insight development (Eira Nunes et al., 2021). Program evaluation studies further report sustained improvements in parental collaboration following participation in structured co-parenting education programs (Rector LaGraff et al., 2015). Similarly, systematic reviews show that co-parenting interventions positively influence paternal engagement and cooperative parenting behaviors (Pilkington et al., 2019). By embedding mentalization strategies within an educational framework, the present intervention integrates empirically supported program structures with theoretically grounded psychological mechanisms.

Another important implication of the findings relates to cultural adaptation and contextual validity. Qualitative methodological approaches emphasize that intervention development must reflect participants' lived experiences to achieve practical effectiveness (Eslami & Zokaei, 2022).

The present study's qualitative design allowed parenting challenges to emerge directly from participants' experiences, ensuring ecological validity and contextual relevance. This approach responds to calls within family psychology for culturally sensitive co-parenting models that account for social expectations, family norms, and relational meanings embedded within specific communities.

Taken together, the findings suggest that mentalization functions as a bridging construct linking individual psychological regulation, interpersonal communication, and systemic family functioning. By enhancing parents' capacity to understand both their own emotional experiences and those of their former partners, mentalization-based interventions may interrupt cycles of conflict, foster trust, and promote collaborative caregiving. Such outcomes directly support developmental evidence demonstrating that children's post-divorce adjustment depends primarily on the quality of ongoing parental cooperation rather than marital status itself (Ahrons, 2007). Consequently, the developed package represents an integrative intervention model addressing emotional, cognitive, and relational dimensions of co-parenting simultaneously.

Despite the valuable contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative design and relatively small participant sample limit the generalizability of findings to broader populations. Second, participants were recruited from counseling centers, meaning that parents experiencing more severe or untreated conflicts may not have been represented. Third, the study focused on package development rather than empirical evaluation of effectiveness; therefore, causal conclusions regarding intervention outcomes cannot yet be established. Additionally, reliance on self-reported experiences may have introduced recall bias or social desirability influences. Finally, cultural context may shape co-parenting experiences differently across societies, limiting direct applicability to other settings without adaptation.

Future studies should examine the effectiveness of the developed mentalization-based co-parenting package using experimental or quasi-experimental designs. Longitudinal research is needed to evaluate sustained impacts on parental cooperation and child psychological adjustment over time. Researchers may also explore comparative effectiveness between mentalization-based interventions and existing behavioral co-parenting programs. Including diverse family structures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultural contexts would strengthen external validity. Future research could additionally investigate mechanisms of change, such

as whether improvements in reflective functioning mediate reductions in parental conflict. Integration of quantitative measures of mentalization, attachment security, and emotion regulation may further clarify theoretical pathways underlying intervention outcomes.

From a clinical perspective, family therapists and counselors may benefit from incorporating mentalization principles into post-divorce intervention programs. Practitioners should prioritize enhancing parents' reflective functioning, empathy, and emotional regulation rather than focusing solely on conflict resolution techniques. Psychoeducational programs can be designed to help parents reinterpret co-parenting interactions through understanding mental states and intentions. Counseling centers may implement structured co-parenting training as a preventive service immediately following divorce proceedings. Collaboration between legal systems, mental health professionals, and family support services could facilitate early intervention and reduce long-term psychological risks for children. Finally, training professionals in mentalization-based approaches may contribute to more sustainable improvements in family functioning and child well-being following divorce.

Authors' Contributions

All authors significantly contributed to this study.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the study and participated in the research with informed consent.

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