Types of Interparental Conflict Associated with Child Triangulation: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Interparental conflict frequently extends beyond the couple, escalating into a systemic dysfunction that directly involves the child, a clinical phenomenon known as triangulation. Despite widespread recognition of its harmful impact, the empirical understanding of which specific conflict types and underlying mechanisms actually draw children into these disputes remains fragmented. Consequently, this Systematic Literature Review (SLR) aims to synthesize how different characteristics of interparental conflict relate to variations in child triangulation, alongside the psychological and structural mechanisms that drive this shift. Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, we reviewed 20 primary empirical studies (published between 2015 and 2025) from Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and APA PsycINFO, evaluating their methodological quality using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). The narrative synthesis challenges the assumption of a simple, linear relationship between conflict severity and child involvement. Instead, triangulation is highly multidimensional and is most strongly triggered by child-related disputes, open hostility, covert tension, and coparenting breakdowns. The transition from a dyadic conflict to triangulation operates through a continuous feedback loop of individual factors (e.g., self-blaming attributions, threat appraisals, and emotion dysregulation) and systemic vulnerabilities (e.g., blurred intergenerational boundaries and detouring). This complex interaction ultimately creates a deeply unhealthy but stable family adaptation termed "illusory harmony." These findings confirm that clinical interventions must go beyond traditional dyadic conflict resolution by actively restructuring healthy family boundaries and helping children develop better emotion regulation skills.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict between couples is an expected part of family life and a natural aspect of marital dynamics. Differences in values, needs, and goals, often worsened by socio-economic stress, can easily spark daily disagreements or arguments [1]. In family psychology, this is widely known as interparental conflict (IPC), a term covering various disputes, emotional tensions, and antagonistic behaviors between parents [2]. Up to a certain point, IPC can actually be adaptive if managed constructively, as it helps partners negotiate, clarify roles, and adjust their relationship. Consistent with early coparenting studies [3]When parents interact supportively during conflicts, their children face a much lower risk of developing internalizing and externalizing problems [1], [4], [5].

However, as Grych and Fincham's [6] The classic Cognitive-Contextual framework points out that not all interparental conflicts have the same impact. When disputes become chronic, intense, or rely on destructive communication, the fallout spreads beyond the couple and affects the whole family system. Repeated exposure to this kind of hostility can hinder a child's ability to regulate their emotions, increase their anxiety, and trigger various behavioral issues. In turn, a child's dysregulated behavior can make the parents' conflict even worse, creating a vicious cycle of ongoing family dysfunction [7], [8]. In these situations, children are no longer just passive observers; they get pulled directly into the parents' dysfunctional communication loop.

One of the most severe psychological risks occurs when unresolved parental conflict turns into a pattern known as triangulation. Rooted conceptually in Bowen's Family Systems Theory [9] and Minuchin's Structural Family Therapy [10]Triangulation is more than just a child accidentally getting involved. Instead, it acts as a systemic mechanism that kicks in when parents experience tension but cannot resolve it directly. To cope, parents implicitly or unconsciously draw the child in as a third party to diffuse the stress and keep the family balanced. This often happens through *detouring*, where negative emotions, frustration, or criticism meant for the partner are unfairly redirected at the child. As a result, the child essentially becomes a "scapegoat," sacrificing their own well-being so the parents can avoid facing their marital issues head-on. [11].

Because of this systemic involvement, the healthy boundaries between generations start to blur [12], [13]. Children find themselves pushed or forced into the middle of the disputes, often having to act as mediators or messengers, or feeling pressured to take sides with one

parent against the other. This entanglement typically leaves the child feeling profoundly "caught in the middle" [14], [15]. While pulling the child in might bring a temporary, "illusory harmony" to the marriage [10], the real underlying issues remain completely unresolved. Worse, this dynamic severely damages the child's mental health. Triangulated children often become hypervigilant, constantly scanning for signs of family tension. They tend to blame themselves for their parents' fights [16] and proactively try to de-escalate arguments, sometimes stepping in even before a conflict fully breaks out [11]. Over time, this can turn into a permanent family habit, with parents unknowingly relying on their child to regulate their own marital distress.

To study these concepts empirically, researchers usually measure triangulation using two main approaches, each looking at a different side of the child's involvement. The first approach relies on self-reports, focusing on the child's own psychological experience. Here, triangulation is defined by that feeling of being caught in the middle, the pressure to choose loyalties, and the heavy emotional toll of navigating the parents' disputes. Researchers typically measure these internal feelings using standardized tools like the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict (CPIC) scale. [17]. The second approach, on the other hand, uses clinical or laboratory observations to look directly at the child's actual behavior and how the family structure shifts during a conflict.

On a theoretical level, researchers explain a child's involvement in these conflicts using distinct but complementary frameworks. From the perspective of Family Systems Theory (FST), Bowen suggests that a distressed couple pulls a third person into their dynamic to spread out the tension and keep the family from falling apart [9]. Looking through this structural lens, parents essentially use the child as a tool to maintain emotional balance. Emotional Security Theory (EST), however, focuses entirely on what is happening inside the child. According to EST, children do not just passively get pulled into fights; they get involved because they view the conflict as a major threat to their emotional safet [18]. Their own cognitive evaluations, specifically, feeling threatened or blaming themselves, are what push them to intervene. Therefore, EST highlights how a lack of emotional security is the core psychological reason why interparental conflict leads to adjustment problems for the triangulated child.

These two ideas, the structural pull from the parents in FST and the child's reactive response in EST, can be connected through the spillover hypothesis. This idea suggests that tension starting in one part

of the family, like the marriage, can easily leak into other areas, such as the parent-child relationship [19]. More specifically, when a couple cannot manage their negative emotions, that frustration often spills over into how they parent. This compromises their ability to parent together effectively and leads to less sensitive interactions with their children [20], [21]. Ultimately, this creates a structural imbalance, opening the door for the child to become directly or indirectly caught up in the conflict [12]. The spillover hypothesis provides a practical way to understand exactly how a troubled marriage translates into a triangulated child.

While leading theories like the Cognitive-Contextual model [6] and broader coparenting research provide a strong foundation, but they mostly focus on how children process conflict in a general sense. They do not clearly map out how different *types* of conflict lead to specific patterns of triangulation. Moreover, previous reviews have mostly focused either on extreme physical violence (like Intimate Partner Violence) or broad clinical outcomes. As a result, they overlook the wider range of everyday disputes, from normal disagreements to highly destructive arguments, that happen in typical families. The present review narrows its focus specifically to triangulation, meaning the child's structural and emotional entanglement in their parents' fights. It purposefully excludes parentification, which is a separate phenomenon where the child takes on adult caregiving or practical duties.

Looking through this lens, a major gap in the literature quickly becomes clear. The available data is highly fragmented, scattered across a wide spectrum of conflict types, ranging from open hostility to hidden tension, and from purely adult disputes to arguments explicitly about the child. Beyond just the type of conflict, the research suggests that triangulation does not look the same for every family. Instead, it depends heavily on variables like the child's age, their gender, and the parents' specific child-rearing behaviors. It is urgently necessary to address this fragmented research because of the profound implications for clinical practice. Right now, therapists and practitioners lack a clear, evidence-based map that links specific types of parental conflict to the different ways a child might be triangulated. Because of this, family interventions risk being too generic and failing to target the actual systemic dysfunctions at play. By systematically bringing all this scattered evidence together, the present study holds significant value. It advances Family Systems Theory by clarifying these complex relational mechanics and provides the necessary groundwork to translate research into highly targeted therapy. Without this synthesis, the field remains limited in its

ability to properly identify, intervene in, and ease the psychological burden that triangulation places on vulnerable youth.

Therefore, this Systematic Literature Review (SLR) aims to synthesize the existing research to identify which types of interparental conflict are most likely to pull children into triangulation dynamics. To guide this review, the study is designed to answer three main research questions: (RQ1) What specific characteristics and typologies of interparental conflict are correlated with child involvement? (RQ2) How are different forms of conflict linked to the various patterns of triangulation reported in the literature? and (RQ3) What psychological and structural mechanisms explain the shift from a two-person parental conflict to the triangulation of a child within the family network? By answering these questions, this study seeks to provide a much more nuanced understanding of how conflict characteristics and child involvement intersect, ultimately offering a solid conceptual foundation for developing better, evidence-based family interventions and policies.

2. METHOD

This study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to synthesize empirical evidence on how interparental conflict characteristics relate to patterns of child triangulation. An SLR was chosen to provide a transparent and replicable summary of cross-study findings and to map the links between specific conflict types and how children become involved. We followed the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines throughout the review process to maintain methodological standards and ensure clear reporting [22]. While we did not pre-register the study protocol in a database like PROSPERO, we used the PRISMA checklist at each stage to guide the methodology and ensure transparency [23].

We searched four major databases: Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), PubMed, and APA PsycINFO. These platforms were selected because they broadly cover the core literature in psychology and family sciences. The search strategy targeted primary empirical studies using a mix of Boolean keywords adapted for the TITLE-ABS-KEY fields: ("marital conflict" OR "interparental conflict" OR "parental conflict" OR "spousal conflict" OR "intimate partner violence" OR IPV OR "domestic violence" OR "high-conflict families") AND (triangulat* OR "child involvement" OR "loyalty conflict" OR "parent-child coalition" OR "child mediator" OR "child messenger") AND (child* OR adolescen* OR youth*). This syntax accounts for different ways researchers describe child involvement and aims to

capture the key literature in this area. To keep the review current and relevant to modern family dynamics, we limited the search to articles published in the last ten years (2015–2025) [24]. We also restricted the results to English-language publications to avoid potential translation errors during data extraction.

We established specific eligibility criteria before screening the literature [25]. Studies had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) primary empirical research published in peer-reviewed journals; (2) quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs; (3) family samples with two parental figures experiencing conflict; (4) child or adolescent participants (ages 0–18), or young adults providing retrospective reports; and (5) a clear focus on the link between interparental conflict and the child's active involvement. This meant studies needed to present actual empirical data, either statistical associations or qualitative themes, showing how triangulation works. We excluded studies that only looked at a child's passive exposure to conflict without measuring their active role. We also excluded research focused solely on child abuse rather than dyadic couple conflict, studies about parentification that lacked triangulation elements, and non-empirical work like reviews, editorials, or commentaries.

We used the Rayyan web application to manage screening and data extraction. This platform allowed for blinded screening, meaning the two independent reviewers could not see each other's decisions until the unblinding phase [26], [27]. While we did not calculate a statistical inter-rater reliability (IRR) score, which we recognize as a limitation, we minimized selection bias through a consensus-based approach. Whenever the two reviewers disagreed on an article's eligibility, they discussed the study in detail. If they could not reach an agreement, a third reviewer was consulted until a full consensus was achieved [22], [26], [28]. The complete screening process is detailed in the PRISMA flow diagram.

Because the included studies varied widely in their research designs, we used the 2018 version of the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) to assess methodological quality and risk of bias [29]. The MMAT evaluates studies based on five core criteria specific to their design, whether qualitative, randomized quantitative, non-randomized quantitative, descriptive, or mixed methods. We looked closely at factors like the clarity of the research questions, how representative the sample was, the suitability of the measures used, and whether confounding variables were controlled. Overall, the appraisal showed that most

studies had moderate to high methodological quality. We then used these quality ratings to help weigh and interpret the findings during the synthesis stage.

For data extraction, we created a standardized codebook matrix to maintain a clear audit trail. We extracted key information from each article, including study details, sample characteristics, the types of conflict examined (such as child-related, overt, or covert), and the specific triangulation patterns found. Because the studies defined and measured these variables quite differently, running a quantitative meta-analysis was not possible [30], [31]. Instead, we used a narrative synthesis approach based on thematic analysis. This process involved carefully reading the papers, coding the data, and grouping themes together to see how different conflict types map onto specific triangulation patterns. When studies reported conflicting results, we reconciled those differences by looking at potential moderating variables and the overall methodological quality of the research.

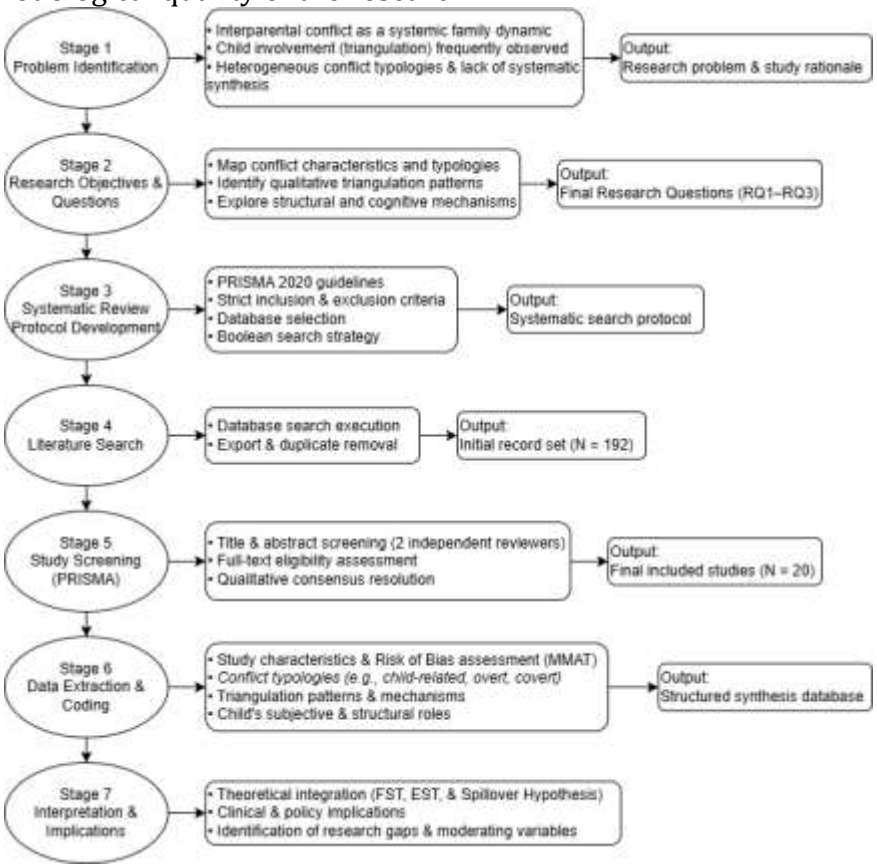

Figure 1. Research Flow Diagram

3. RESULTS

3.1. Study Selection and Characteristics

We selected and identified studies following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The initial search across Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, and APA PsycINFO resulted in 192 records. After removing duplicates, we screened 124 unique abstracts. We excluded 90 articles during this phase, mostly because they did not explicitly measure child involvement or focused only on adult populations. We then reviewed the full texts of the remaining 34 articles. Of these, 14 were excluded because they lacked a clear measure of triangulation or did not test relevant associations. This process resulted in a final sample of 20 primary empirical studies (see Figure 2).

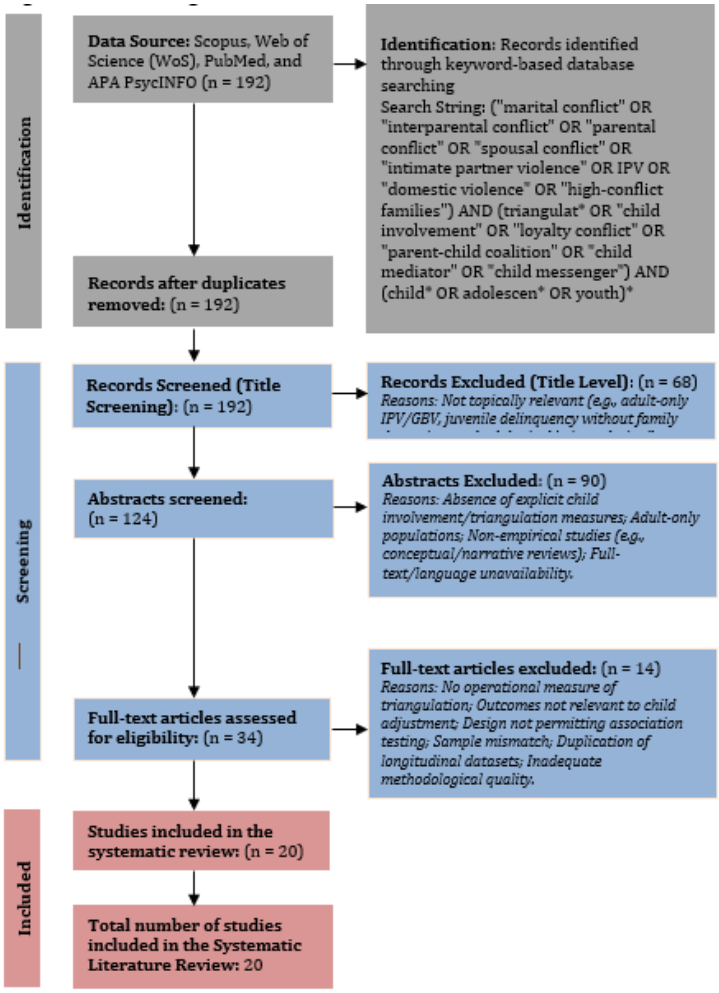

Figure 2. Prisma Diagram

Table 1 outlines the characteristics of the 20 included studies. Most of the research used a quantitative cross-sectional design (n = 12). The remaining studies used longitudinal designs (n = 6), daily diary methods (n = 1), or mixed-methods approaches (n = 1). The samples varied widely, including community populations, clinical groups, and post-divorce families across multiple countries. Based on the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) [29]All 20 studies demonstrated moderate to high methodological quality, though the heavy reliance on cross-sectional data and self-report measures (such as the CPIC scale) was a common source of potential bias.

Table 1. Characteristics of Included Studies and Thematic Synthesis of Interparental Conflict, Triangulation, and Mechanisms

Author & Year	Design & Sample	Conflict Characteristics (Domain & Expression)	Triangulation Patterns & Mechanisms	Key Associations (Findings)
Wang et al., 2024 [32]	Cross-sectional (SEM); N = 761 adolescents (China)	General IPC; Destructive /unresolved	Coalition, detouring; Mechanisms: Insecurity, boundary dissolution	IPC leads to coalitions/detouring, increasing depressive symptoms; grandparent support acts as a buffer.
Thompson et al., 2022 [33]	Longitudinal; N = 243 preschoolers + parents (USA)	General IPC; Hostile, constructive, disengaged	Coercive, caregiving, cautious; Mechanisms: Threat sensitivity, role confusion	Hostility predicts coercive involvement; disengagement predicts caregiving and cautious involvement.
Camisasca et al., 2019 [34]	Cross-sectional; N = 168 children + parents (Italy)	General IPC; Hostile, psychological aggression	Direct involvement, feeling caught; Mechanisms: Parenting stress, guilt	IPC triggers triangulation; parenting stress mediates forced triangulation and feeling caught.
Warmuth et al., 2018 [7]	Longitudinal; N = 235 children +	Destructive marital conflict;	Behavioral involvement; Mechanisms:	Conflict predicts child behavioral dysregulation,

Author & Year	Design & Sample	Conflict Characteristics (Domain & Expression)	Triangulation Patterns & Mechanisms	Key Associations (Findings)
	parents (USA)	Physical/verbal aggression	Emotional insecurity, dysregulation	which in turn escalates future conflict (feedback loop).
McCauley & Fosco, 2022 [35]	Longitudinal; N = 174 adolescents + mothers (USA)	General IPC; High intensity, poor resolution	Explicit triangulation (feeling caught); Mechanisms: Family cohesion, parent depression	Low cohesion and parental depression increase triangulation; emotion coaching reduces it.
Camisasca et al., 2019 [36]	Cross-sectional; N = 75 children + parents (Italy)	Child-related vs. adult-related conflict	Explicit triangulation; Mechanisms: Threat, self-blame	Child-related conflict strongly increases triangulation and self-blame; adult-related conflict increases threat.
Bukhari & Masood, 2019 [37]	Cross-sectional; N = 521 adolescents (Pakistan)	General IPC; Verbal aggression, hostility	Explicit triangulation; Mechanisms: Threat, self-blame, birth order	IPC predicts triangulation; self-blame is a strong mediator; only children are at the highest risk.
Lucas-Thompson et al., 2015 [38]	Cross-sectional; N = 105 adolescents (USA)	General IPC; Observed verbal /nonverbal aggression	Perceived triangulation; Mechanisms: Self-blame, cortisol dysregulation	Marital conflict increases self-blame, linking to flattened cortisol and internalizing problems.
Mosmann et al., 2022 [39]	Cross-sectional; N = 229 adolescents (Brazil)	Coparental & parent-adolescent conflict	Direct triangulation; Mechanisms: Spillover, role differentiation	Triangulation leads to parent-adolescent conflict; paternal triangulation is strongly linked to externalizing.

Author & Year	Design & Sample	Conflict Characteristics (Domain & Expression)	Triangulation Patterns & Mechanisms	Key Associations (Findings)
Trbojević et al., 2017 [40]	Cross-sectional; N = 146 children (Serbia)	Child-perceived IPC; Frequency, intensity	Direct triangulation (mediator, ally); Mechanisms: Security, threat	Triangulation links to destructive family views; effects are stronger/more maladaptive in younger children.
Vanwoerden et al., 2017 [41]	Cross-sectional; N = 301 adolescents (USA)	Parent-child boundary violations; Guilt induction	Direct triangulation; Mechanisms: Interpersonal hypersensitivity	Boundary violations increase BPD features; triangulation is harmful mainly when perceived as high by the child.
Pires & Martins, 2021 [42]	Cross-sectional; N = 207 separated parents (Portugal)	Negative coparenting (post-divorce)	Direct triangulation (child alliance); Mechanisms: Spillover	Triangulation and conflict combined with strict/permissive parenting lead to poorer child adjustment.
Liguori, 2017 [43]	Cross-sectional; N = 34 triads (France)	Coparenting conflict: Overt vs. covert	Direct triangulation; Mechanisms: Boundary diffusion	High triangulation links to internalizing; overtly expressed conflict may paradoxically reduce perceived triangulation.
Khaleque et al., 2016 [44]	Cross-sectional; N = 524 adolescents (Bangladesh)	General IPC; Frequency, covert conflict	Indirect triangulation; Mechanisms: Threat, self-blame, rejection	IPC leads to maladjustment via threat and rejection; triangulation is related but not the sole mediator.
Coe et al., 2020 [45]	Longitudinal; N = 218	Family system	Direct (triadic	Detouring strongly predicts

Author & Year	Design & Sample	Conflict Characteristics (Domain & Expression)	Triangulation Patterns & Mechanisms	Key Associations (Findings)
	families (USA)	conflict; Boundary disturbance	coalition); Mechanisms: Detouring, social information processing	hostile attribution bias, externalizing, and peer rejection over time.
Schrodt & Afifi, 2018 [46]	Cross-sectional; N = 225 family triads (USA)	Coparenting conflict: Negative disclosures	Indirect (feeling caught); Mechanisms: Spillover, EST	Coparental conflict triggers negative disclosures, increasing feelings of being caught and lowering mental health.
Dallos et al., 2015 [47]	Mixed-method; N = 15 children (UK)	Triadic marital conflict	Direct + indirect (role reversal); Mechanisms: Attachment threat	Triangulation increases anxiety and the "invisible child" experience, causing severe emotional distress.
Ponappa et al., 2016 [48]	Cross-sectional; N = 154 emerging adults (USA)	Interparental conflict; Sibling context	Indirect (feeling involved); Mechanisms: Differential treatment	Triangulation links to differential parental treatment, lowering sibling warmth, and increasing depression.
McCauley et al., 2021 [11]	Daily diary; N = 150 families (USA)	General IPC; Family system	Direct (pressure to side); Mechanisms: Divergent realities	Triangulation increases the discrepancy between how parents and adolescents view family cohesion and conflict.
Machado &	Cross-sectional; N = 229	Coparental conflict:	Direct (explicit involvement)	Coparenting conflict and triangulation

Author & Year	Design & Sample	Conflict Characteristics (Domain & Expression)	Triangulation Patterns & Mechanisms	Key Associations (Findings)
Mosmann, 2020 [1]	adolescents (Brazil)	Disagreement, sabotage	; Mechanisms: Emotion dysregulation	increase emotion dysregulation, partially mediating externalizing problems.

3.2. Thematic Findings of the Literature

Based on the extracted data in Table 1, the empirical findings regarding child involvement in interparental conflict can be grouped into three main descriptive themes:

3.2.1. Theme 1: Conflict Characteristics Associated with Triangulation

Description: The studies reported that not all conflicts lead to child involvement equally. The data show that destructive, hostile, and explicitly child-related conflicts are the strongest predictors of triangulation. For instance, Camisasca et al. [36] found that when conflicts are about child-rearing, children report significantly higher levels of feeling caught compared to adult-related disputes. Similarly, overt verbal and physical aggression, as well as parental emotional withdrawal, consistently correlated with children taking on mediator or caregiver roles [7], [33], [38]. Conversely, one study noted a paradoxical finding where highly overt conflict sometimes reduced the adolescent's subjective reporting of triangulation [43].

Summary: In short, the empirical data indicate that child-centric topics and high hostility levels are the primary conflict characteristics that draw children into parental disputes.

3.2.2. Theme 2: Variations in Triangulation Patterns

Description: The literature identifies that triangulation manifests in multiple forms. Studies categorized these patterns into direct involvement (e.g., active mediation, forming coalitions, detouring) and indirect involvement (e.g., feeling caught in the middle or sensing loyalty pressure). For example, Wang et al. [32] and Coe et al. [45] documented specific structural patterns like "detouring-attacking" and "coercive coalitions," where parents actively ally against or focus on the child. Other studies highlighted

the subjective emotional experience, showing that negative parental disclosures (like badmouthing a partner) directly increase a child's feeling of being caught [46].

Summary: Triangulation is observationally reported not as a single behavior, but as a spectrum ranging from internal emotional burden (feeling caught) to active structural roles (allies or mediators).

3.2.3. Theme 3: Identified Mediators and Mechanisms

Description: The reviewed studies frequently tested variables that bridge the gap between parental conflict and child maladjustment. The most consistently reported cognitive mechanisms were threat appraisals and self-blaming attributions [36], [37], [38], [44]. Structurally, studies pointed to intergenerational boundary violations and spillover effects (where marital conflict leaks into coparenting) as the main pathways forcing the child into the dispute [39], [41], [42]. Additionally, poor emotion regulation in children was frequently identified as both a mediator and an outcome of triangulation [1], [35].

4. DISCUSSION

This systematic literature review synthesizes findings from 20 primary studies to clarify how interparental conflict connects to child triangulation. Overall, the evidence shows that a child's involvement in their parents' disputes is a complex process that depends heavily on various contextual factors. Instead of following a single, predictable path, the research indicates that different types of conflict, especially regarding their topic and emotional intensity, are linked to different ways children get involved. However, these links are not always consistent across the literature, meaning there is no simple one-to-one mapping. Moreover, the mechanisms driving this involvement span multiple dimensions, including the child's cognitive and emotional processing, as well as broader relational dynamics within the family. Because most of the reviewed studies rely on cross-sectional designs and use a wide variety of measurement tools, this discussion focuses on identifying consistent associations and conceptual pathways rather than making definitive causal claims. In the following sections, we critically evaluate these findings, highlighting variations, conflicting

results, and the limitations of the current research, to systematically address our three core research questions.

4.1. RQ1. Types of Interparental Conflict Associated with Child Triangulation

To answer the first research question, our thematic synthesis highlights four main dimensions of interparental conflict that closely relate to child triangulation. These dimensions interact with one another and include: (1) conflict content (child-related versus adult-focused issues); (2) emotional expression (ranging from hostility and high intensity to emotional withdrawal), and (3) how openly the conflict is expressed (overt versus covert); along with (4) the relational context (such as marital dynamics, coparenting issues, post-divorce tension, and blurred intergenerational boundaries). Together, the reviewed studies confirm that triangulation is not a single, uniform event. Instead, it is a complex process that depends heavily on how these four conflict dimensions overlap.

4.1.1. Conflict Content Dimension: Child-Related vs. Adult-Related

The reviewed studies clearly show that what parents fight about matters just as much as how they fight. Specifically, conflicts about child-rearing lead to different triangulation patterns than disputes over adult issues, such as finances or work [49]. When parents argue about their children, those children are much more likely to blame themselves and actively step into the middle of the fight. On the other hand, when parents argue about adult topics, children still feel threatened and may develop internalizing problems, but they are less likely to actively intervene [34], [49].

From a theoretical standpoint, this aligns perfectly with the Cognitive-Contextual framework, which emphasizes how a child's interpretation of a dispute shapes their reaction. If a child believes they are the reason their parents are fighting, they experience intense guilt and shame [36]. Because they feel personally responsible, they often develop a false sense of control, believing that if they caused the fight, they must also be the ones to fix it [47]. While both types of conflict are stressful, child-related disputes place a much heavier emotional burden on the youth [36]. The guilt essentially tricks the child into thinking they have the power to mediate the tension, pushing them directly into the triangulation trap.

This dynamic carries critical implications for family therapy. It shows that the topic of the conflict dictates how vulnerable a child is to being triangulated. Clinically, practitioners must be particularly alert to child-related conflicts, as these are the primary triggers that pull youth out of the role of an observer and into the highly stressful role of a family mediator. Interventions should specifically help children separate their own identity from their parents' marital issues, effectively relieving them of the guilt that drives their need to intervene.

4.1.2. Emotional Expression Dimension: Hostility, Intensity, and Withdrawal

The literature shows that how parents express their anger, whether through loud hostility or silent withdrawal, directly shapes how a child becomes triangulated. When conflicts are chronic, highly intense, and hostile, children usually respond with coercive involvement. In these situations, the child tries to stop the fight by acting out physically or verbally, which ends up disrupting parental authority [35], [38]. High-intensity arguments filled with unresolved anger also push children to form loyalty alliances, take sides, or fall into "detouring-attacking" patterns, where they become the target of the parents' frustration [11], [32]. Antagonistic communication between parents consistently leaves children feeling trapped in the middle [46].

Interestingly, triangulation is not only triggered by explosive fights; it also happens when parents emotionally shut down. When distressed parents use the "silent treatment" or withdraw from each other, children tend to step into adult caregiving roles to look after the emotionally vulnerable parent [33]. Furthermore, if a parent mixes this withdrawal with bursts of hostility, children generally adopt a very "cautious" or vigilant type of involvement, constantly tiptoeing around the family tension [38].

From a theoretical standpoint, these reactions perfectly illustrate Emotional Security Theory (EST) and attachment dynamics. When parents are openly hostile and intense, it shatters the child's sense of safety. Their reactive aggression is essentially a desperate attempt to regain control and restore emotional security [32]. By acting out, the child's behavioral dysregulation bridges the gap between the parents' destructive fights and their own psychological problems. On the other hand, when parents

withdraw, it leaves the child feeling "invisible" and cuts them off from a secure attachment figure [47]. The meaning here is clear: the child takes on a caregiving role not because they want to, but as a compensatory effort to fill the emotional void and keep the family connected [33].

Clinically, these findings offer a crucial takeaway: family therapists cannot only look out for shouting matches; emotional withdrawal is just as damaging and triangulating. Interventions must be tailored to the specific emotional climate of the home. In highly hostile families, therapy should focus on relieving the child's urgent need to aggressively manage the parents' disputes. In emotionally withdrawn families, practitioners need to help parents re-engage and rebuild secure attachments, ensuring the child is allowed to step down from the inappropriate role of the family caretaker.

4.1.3. Dimension of Explicitness: Overt vs. Covert Conflict

The reviewed studies demonstrate that how openly parents display their conflict plays a huge role in how a child gets involved. Both open fights and hidden tensions pull children into the mix, but they do so differently. When parents are overtly antagonistic, yelling, arguing directly, and openly badmouthing each other, children consistently report feeling trapped in the middle [45], [46]. However, covert conflicts, which involve the silent treatment or quiet manipulation, are just as common. In these quieter disputes, parents often use the child as a messenger or a sounding board to vent their frustrations [47]. Interestingly, one small clinical study discovered a "paradox of congruence." It found that teenagers actually reported *less* triangulation when their parents' conflicts were highly visible and overt [43].

Theoretically, this paradox suggests that triangulation often operates as a "clandestine" or hidden mechanism. When parents try to mask their marital dissatisfaction behind a fake illusion of harmony, they may end up pulling the child into the conflict in much more manipulative and destructive ways [43]. While overt conflict harms children by directly exposing them to aggressive negativity [38], covert conflict is insidious because it forces the child to decode and manage unspoken tension. When one parent quietly denigrates the other, it places an unfair emotional burden on the youth, making them the keeper of parental secrets and grievances [46], [47].

For clinical practice, this means that a "quiet" house is not necessarily a healthy one. Therapists must be careful not to overlook families that avoid yelling but engage in subtle, covert triangulation. Interventions need to dig beneath the surface of seemingly polite coparenting to identify hidden loyalty conflicts, focusing on stopping parents from using their children as emotional repositories. However, because the idea of "clandestine triangulation" comes from a very small clinical study (N = 34 triads) without a control group [43], researchers need to test this paradox on larger, more diverse populations before we can make broad clinical generalizations.

4.1.4. Relational Context Dimension

The relational environment where disputes take place plays a massive role in how triangulation actually happens. The reviewed literature points to several specific contexts, ranging from general marital tension to post-divorce custody battles, that each trigger child involvement in slightly different ways.

4.1.4.1. General Marital Conflict

General marital conflict is a strong predictor of child psychopathology, but its effects depend heavily on how extreme the fighting gets [32]. Interestingly, evidence shows that when marital conflict reaches extreme levels of severity, it actually suppresses "nurturing" forms of triangulation. Instead of stepping in to support or comfort the parents, children are pushed into destructive roles, such as forming coercive coalitions or becoming the target of detouring-attacking behaviors [32]. Furthermore, because parents are so emotionally drained by their own fights, their parenting quality drops, pushing children to become hyper-vigilant [33]. Grounded in Emotional Security Theory (EST), this tells us that children do not just passively endure these fights; they constantly assess them for threats [38], [44]. When persistent conflicts threaten their sense of security, children step in as a desperate compensatory mechanism to regulate the family's emotions and restore stability. This implies that the effects of marital conflict are not linear. Clinicians must assess not just the presence of conflict, but its intensity, as extreme hostility shifts a child from a protective role into a highly coercive and dysfunctional one.

4.1.4.2. Coparenting Dynamics

Coparenting introduces another unique layer, especially during adolescence [39]. Chronic coparenting conflicts are heavily linked to behavioral issues [42]. Interestingly, the literature shows differential patterns depending on the parent: being triangulated by a father is more strongly linked to adolescent externalizing behaviors (acting out), whereas maternal triangulation is more closely tied to anxiety and depression [39]. The clearest way to explain this is through the spillover hypothesis [46]. When parents are frustrated with each other, that negativity leaks into how they treat the child. In an antagonistic coparenting environment, parents might vent or make unilateral negative disclosures (like badmouthing the other parent) to the youth. This directly places the child in a position of split loyalty, making them feel profoundly "caught in the middle" [46]. Because active coparenting conflicts are some of the strongest predictors of child maladjustment [39], interventions must prioritize rebuilding the coparental alliance, focusing specifically on stopping parents from leaking their marital frustrations into their conversations with the child.

4.1.4.3. Post-Divorce Context and Custody Disputes

Divorce and separation do not end triangulation; they often just change how it looks. During this transition, a combination of coparenting conflicts and harsh, authoritarian parenting puts children at severe risk for emotional and conduct problems [42]. This systemic vulnerability peaks during custody disputes, where legal pressures compromise caregiving quality. Interestingly, while intact families report fewer instances of parents badmouthing each other compared to divorced families, the actual mental health outcomes for triangulated children in both groups are surprisingly similar [46]. This highlights a critical theoretical conclusion: the underlying mechanism of triangulation is universal. Whether parents live together or are separated, the pathological act of venting to the child and forcing them to feel "caught" destroys their emotional security in the exact same way [46]. Separated parents frequently pivot to relying on older children as confidantes or messengers, which only deepens the entanglement. Family courts and post-divorce counselors must recognize that legal separation does not protect the child from triangulation. Interventions in

family law must explicitly address the emotional burden placed on children who are used as messengers between hostile ex-partners.

4.1.4.4. Boundary Violations and Systemic Dysfunction

Triangulation frequently involves intrusive parenting practices, such as guilt-tripping a child, controlling them psychologically, or withdrawing affection [47]. However, studies show that these boundary violations only lead to severe psychopathology, such as borderline personality features, if the child actually perceives the involvement as a heavy, unjust burden [41]. A deeply destructive form of this occurs through *detouring*, where parents implicitly team up to attack or blame the child for the family's problems [45]. Through the lens of Family Systems Theory, this represents a complete collapse of healthy generational boundaries. Detouring creates an illusion of artificial closeness for the parents (because they finally agree on something: blaming the child), but it systemically rejects the youth [1]. Crucially, this creates a toxic negative reinforcement loop: if the child starts acting out, the parents stop fighting to focus on the child's bad behavior. The family system then unknowingly encourages the child to keep misbehaving because it serves a functional purpose, diffusing the parents' dyadic tension [45]. This reveals a profound implication for systemic therapy. Therapists cannot simply treat a triangulated child's behavioral issues in isolation. Unless the therapist breaks the negative reinforcement loop and stops the parents from using the child as a distraction, the child's problematic behavior will inevitably persist.

4.2. RQ2. Variations in Triangulation Patterns Across Types of Interparental Conflict

The reviewed studies clearly show that there is no simple, one-to-one mapping between how parents fight and how a child gets triangulated. This finding challenges older, more rigid family systems theories. For example, Wang et al. [32]. found that a single type of conflict can trigger several different triangulation patterns at once, ranging from unstable coalitions to detouring-attacking behaviors. In other words, a specific marital dispute does not automatically produce one specific type of child involvement; the process is highly fluid [47].

Even without a strict mapping, the literature does reveal some strong behavioral trends. When parents are openly hostile,

children tend to react with coercive involvement and reactive aggression [7], [33]. Theoretically, this reactive aggression acts as a desperate coping strategy to restore their own emotional security [34]. On the flip side, when parents emotionally withdraw or ignore each other, children often step into passive or caregiving roles to fill the emotional void [33]. Finally, disputes that are explicitly about the child pull them in the hardest. In these cases, children quickly develop self-blaming thoughts, feel responsible for fixing the problem, and report high levels of threat, which directly worsens their mental health [34], [36].

These varied responses show that triangulation operates across four distinct levels. *Behaviorally*, children might act as active mediators or go-betweens [47]. *Emotionally*, they carry the subjective weight of feeling "caught in the middle" and torn by loyalty conflicts [46], [47]. *Cognitively*, they are driven by a sense of threat and self-blame, which bridges the gap between the parents' fight and the child's own psychological struggles [38]. Finally, *structurally*, the family boundaries shift, turning the child into a "distance regulator" or a convenient distraction from the failing marriage [41].

A child's age and environment also heavily dictate these patterns. In post-divorce families, antagonistic coparenting often makes parents more likely to vent to their children, essentially drafting them as emotional allies [41], [45]. Developmentally, younger children usually try to intervene directly because they lack the cognitive maturity to process the conflict, which actually puts them at greater risk [47]. Teenagers, on the other hand, might understand the conflict better, but their growing independence exposes them to new pressures, as parents may demand their loyalty [47].

It is important to note that the research is not perfectly uniform. We see cultural anomalies; for instance, contrary to Western expectations, one study on a Chinese sample found that interparental conflict actually *decreased* parentification [32]. Children and parents also rarely agree on how bad the triangulation is, with teenagers usually reporting much more boundary-crossing than their parents do [50]. Clinically, these variations mean therapists must look at the broader family ecology rather than just the child's symptoms. A child's inability to regulate their emotions

amplifies the damage, whereas parental "emotion coaching" can serve as a strong protective shield [35]. Likewise, outside support, such as an involved grandparent, can successfully buffer the child against the toxic effects of coercive coalitions [32]. Interventions should therefore leverage these protective factors to break the triangulation cycle.

4.3. RQ3. Psychological and Structural Mechanisms Underlying Child Involvement

To answer the third research question, the reviewed literature shows that children do not just accidentally stumble into their parents' conflicts. Instead, their involvement is driven by a mix of psychological and structural mechanisms. By combining the Cognitive-Contextual Framework, Emotional Security Theory (EST), and Family Systems Theory (FST), we can see how dyadic tension spills over into triadic dysfunction through individual child responses, family vulnerabilities, and ongoing feedback loops.

4.3.1. Individual (Child-Driven) Mechanisms

On an individual level, how a child processes the conflict in their own mind heavily dictates their involvement. Specifically, when children, especially in child-related disputes, blame themselves or feel highly threatened, they often rely on "magical thinking." They mistakenly believe it is their personal responsibility to stop the parents from fighting [36], [38]. This cognitive evaluation acts as a bridge that leads directly to clinical adjustment problems [3]. Emotionally, watching parents fight shatters a child's sense of security and creates intense distress. Teens who already struggle to regulate their emotions are particularly vulnerable; they tend to act out or proactively jump into the dispute (forced triangulation) simply because they lack the internal tools to handle the stress quietly [1], [35].

4.3.2. Systemic (Family-Driven) Mechanisms

From a systemic angle, triangulation happens when the family fails to maintain healthy boundaries between generations. Boundary dissolution occurs when the invisible line separating the marriage from the children breaks down [14]. Structurally, this often looks like "detouring," where warring parents essentially pause their own fight to gang up on or focus entirely on the child [45]. The data strongly link this diversion tactic to children developing hostile attribution biases and becoming victims of peer

bullying [45]. In coparenting, this boundary failure creates cross-generational coalitions: one parent aligns with the child to exclude the other, which undermines parental authority and leaves a gap that forces the child to act as a family mediator [46].

4.3.3. Transactional Processes and Moderating Factors

Furthermore, triangulation is not a one-way street; it operates as a continuous feedback loop. Longitudinal data reveal that destructive marital conflict worsens a child's behavior, and that worsened behavior, in turn, causes more parental conflict down the road [1]. Certain factors can speed up or slow down this cycle. For instance, low family cohesion and parental depression make triangulation much more likely because the family lacks the energy to resolve conflicts properly [35]. On the flip side, support from extended family members, like an involved grandparent, can act as a strong buffer, shielding the adolescent from developing depressive symptoms even when the parents are fighting [32].

4.3.4. Synthesis: The Phenomenon of "Illusory Harmony"

When we bring all these mechanisms together, a striking phenomenon emerges: "illusory harmony." Triangulation can actually create a fake sense of peace within the home. Children who are constantly triangulated become hyper-vigilant; they often step in and calm the situation before the parents even realize a fight is brewing [16]. As a result, the parents might become completely disconnected from their own marital issues, leaving the child to carry the heavy emotional weight of keeping the family stable. This shows that triangulation is not just a side effect of fighting; it is a deeply unhealthy but functional coping mechanism that families use to survive. For clinical practice, this means that simply teaching parents how to communicate better is not enough. Effective therapy must completely restructure the family's boundaries, rebuild cohesion, and help the child develop better emotion regulation skills. Ultimately, practitioners must treat triangulation as a multi-layered problem if they want to break the cycle and protect the child's long-term well-being.

4.4. Limitations of the Reviewed Literature and Future Directions

While this review provides a comprehensive look at child triangulation, we must acknowledge several methodological limitations in the current literature. First, based on our

methodological appraisal, the field relies heavily on cross-sectional designs. Because these studies capture only a single snapshot in time, they cannot definitively prove cause and effect. We only know that conflict and triangulation are linked, but we cannot be certain which causes which. To truly understand how triangulation develops and worsens over time, future research urgently needs to adopt more longitudinal study designs.

Second, many of the reviewed studies fail to strictly control for important background factors, such as the family's socioeconomic status (SES), pre-existing parental mental health issues, or the child's natural temperament. Without isolating these variables, it is difficult to determine if a child's psychological distress comes purely from being triangulated or from other overlapping family stressors.

Third, researchers currently rely almost exclusively on self-report questionnaires, particularly the CPIC scale. While useful for capturing the child's subjective feelings, these tools are prone to bias. Children might exaggerate or downplay their involvement, leading to ceiling effects or mismatched reports where parents and teens completely disagree on what is happening at home. To overcome this, future studies should combine self-reports with objective, biopsychological data. For example, tracking cortisol levels to measure the child's actual physiological stress response is a highly promising approach that only a few pioneer studies have started to explore [38].

Finally, the empirical samples in the current literature are heavily skewed toward Western populations and adolescent age groups. Triangulation might look very different in cultures that prioritize collective family harmony over individual boundaries. Therefore, future research must expand into different cultural contexts and look much closer at early childhood to see if these triangulation patterns are truly universal across different societies and developmental stages.

5. CONCLUSION

This systematic review offers a clear picture of how interparental conflict pulls children into triangulation. By synthesizing 20 empirical studies, this research challenges the old assumption that children simply get caught in the crossfire by

accident. Instead, triangulation acts as a complex family survival mechanism. A child's risk of being drawn into the conflict is highest when parents argue specifically about child-rearing, when they use open hostility or the silent treatment, and when the coparenting relationship structurally breaks down.

The evidence also confirms that marital tension turns into child involvement through a mix of personal and family-wide pathways. Individually, children are driven by a sense of threat, self-blame, and a struggle to regulate their own emotions. Systemically, they are pulled in by broken family boundaries and "detouring" behaviors where parents gang up on them to distract from marital issues. Together, these factors create a vicious cycle that often results in an "illusory harmony." In this state, the parents might feel their conflict has died down, but the reality is that the child is now carrying the emotional weight of the family, living in constant hyper-vigilance just to keep the peace.

Because much of the current data is correlational, these findings should be applied carefully in clinical settings. However, the overarching message for family therapy is clear: interventions must go beyond simply teaching couples how to argue better; they must actively address and dismantle the child's entanglement in those arguments. To do this effectively, the field urgently needs to develop and validate standardized screening tools for triangulation. Creating reliable ways to measure this phenomenon will be an invaluable step forward, giving family counselors and family courts the practical resources they need to identify, intervene, and protect vulnerable youth.

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