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Child Exposure to High-Conflict Divorce and Subjective Well-Being in Early Adulthood: The Mediating Role of Attachment to Parents

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Abstract

When parental separation is marked by chronic conflict, children must adapt not only to the separation itself but also to disruptions in the family relationships that ordinarily provide security. These experiences may remain relevant long after childhood, as relationships with parents continue to play an important role in young adulthood. This cross-sectional study examined associations between childhood exposure to high-conflict divorce (HCD), subjective well-being, and parental attachment in 363 French young adults (85.4% women; mean age = 20.39 years) whose parents separated before age 16. HCD exposure was assessed retrospectively using a factor score derived from 12 indicators of the family and separation context. Subjective well-being and attachment were assessed using self-report questionnaires. Bivariate correlations were examined, followed by three multiple mediation models with four parallel attachment mediators, estimated using 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Greater HCD exposure was associated with lower positive affect and life satisfaction, higher negative affect, and greater attachment anxiety and avoidance toward both parents. For positive affect, the total indirect effect was significant, whereas the direct effect was not. For life satisfaction, both direct and total indirect effects were significant. In both models, attachment anxiety toward the mother was the only significant specific indirect pathway. For negative affect, the direct effect remained significant but the total indirect effect was not. These findings highlight distinct associations between childhood HCD exposure and the emotional and cognitive components of well-being in early adulthood, with parental attachment playing different roles across outcomes.

Keywords: High-conflict separation; Parent-child relationship; Attachment to parents; Emerging adulthood; Legal conflict

1. Introduction

Parental separation is not a uniform experience for the children who go through it. Their subsequent adjustment trajectories are shaped by the family processes surrounding and following the separation. Over the past several decades, interparental conflict has emerged as the most extensively studied factor in understanding children's adjustment following parental separation (Cao et al., 2022). Although separation often involves an initial period of tension between former partners, such tensions generally decrease over time (Drapeau et al., 2009). However, in 10% to 33% of cases, separation is instead characterized by persistent conflict dynamics involving chronic tensions, pronounced interparental hostility, poor coparental cooperation, potential violence, and intractable legal disputes (Beckmeyer et al., 2019; Fischer et al., 2005; Smyth & Moloney, 2019). Such configurations are commonly referred to as high-conflict divorce.

Children's exposure to HCD has been a recurring concern in clinical, legal, and educational settings for more than three decades (Johnston, 1994). Professionals working with these families frequently describe children affected by chronic parental conflict, exposed to ongoing tensions, experiencing loyalty conflicts, and subjected to various forms of parental pressure (Chay, 2025; Podwinski & Laletas, 2025; Sudland, 2023; Tremblay, 2024). Furthermore, available research suggests that children's exposure to HCD is associated with an increased risk of emotional, behavioral, and parent–child relationship difficulties (Ayoub et al., 1999; Lamela et al., 2016; Lange et al., 2022; Procaccia et al., 2020).

Although the potential adverse effects of HCD on children's adjustment are well documented, a notable limitation of the literature is that research has primarily focused on childhood and adolescence. Specifically, a recent scoping review of children's exposure to HCD found that only three of the 31 quantitative studies identified had examined individuals exposed during childhood who had since reached adulthood (Lahaye Cauchy et al., 2026). These studies reported lower psychological well-being, poorer social skills, and greater psychopathology in adulthood, whereas no differences were found in alcohol dependence (Basta, 2022; Bernet et al., 2015; Radetzki et al., 2022). Given their limited number and the heterogeneity of the outcomes examined, these studies do not yet provide a clear understanding of whether childhood exposure to HCD remains associated with functioning in

adulthood. The present study aimed to address this gap by examining the associations between childhood exposure to HCD and subjective well-being in adulthood, assessed through life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect. We also examined the potential mediating role of attachment to each parent in these associations.

1.1. High-Conflict Divorce: A Risk Factor for Development

Children's adjustment to adversity cannot be reduced to the presence or absence of psychopathological difficulties and can also be examined through their subjective well-being (SWB). SWB refers to how individuals cognitively evaluate and emotionally experience their lives. It is traditionally understood as comprising three complementary components: life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 2018). SWB is thus distinct from psychological (or eudaimonic) well-being, which focuses on meaning, self-realization, and optimal psychological functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989).

Prospective evidence suggests that interparental conflict may have immediate effects on children's emotional experiences. Using daily data collected from families, Cummings et al. (2003) found that destructive marital conflict was associated with greater negative emotionality (e.g., anger, sadness, fear) and fewer expressions of happiness during conflict episodes. In a subsequent study using a similar design, Fosco and Lydon-Staley (2019) found that, on days characterized by higher levels of interparental conflict, adolescents experienced greater feelings of threat and were more likely to blame themselves, which was associated with lower positive well-being and more negative mood on the same day. These findings are consistent with two major theoretical frameworks explaining the effects of interparental conflict on children: the Cognitive-Contextual Framework (Grych & Fincham, 1990), which emphasizes the role of threat and responsibility appraisals, and Emotional Security Theory, which posits that individual development is influenced not only by the quality of the parent–child relationship but also by the sense of security experienced in response to the interparental relationship (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Dysfunctional interparental relationships may also affect children's cognitive evaluations of their lives. Among adolescents, perceived interparental conflict has been identified as a

unique predictor of lower life satisfaction, above and beyond other family stressors (Chappel et al., 2014).

The effects of interparental conflict may extend beyond transient reactions. In a longitudinal study, Westrupp et al. (2018) found that interparental conflict reported before the age of 6 was associated with poorer mental health at ages 10–11, even when conflict had been reported at only one time point during early childhood. Similarly, other evidence suggests that these associations may persist into adulthood: childhood exposure to intimate partner violence has been linked to lower life satisfaction among adults who were exposed during childhood (Miller-Graff et al., 2016). Taken together, these studies provide insights into the effects of interparental conflict more broadly, but were conducted across diverse family contexts.

In the specific context of HCD, evidence regarding adult outcomes remains particularly limited. Radetzki et al. (2022) are the only researchers to have examined a dimension of well-being. Among young adults from divorced families, higher levels of interparental conflict were associated with lower eudaimonic well-being. Other studies have focused on general psychopathology (Bernet et al., 2015) and alcohol dependence (Basta, 2022), without examining subjective well-being. To our knowledge, no study has therefore examined all three components of SWB simultaneously among adults exposed to HCD during childhood. More broadly, little is known about the mechanisms that may explain the associations between childhood exposure to HCD and psychological functioning in adulthood.

1.2. From Conflict to Well-Being: The Role of Attachment

To explain how dysfunction in the interparental relationship affects children, researchers have proposed the spillover hypothesis (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). This hypothesis suggests that tensions, negative emotions, and interaction patterns within the interparental relationship tend to carry over into parent–child interactions. Early support for this hypothesis came from a meta-analysis reporting a moderate association between the quality of the marital relationship and the quality of the parent–child relationship ($d = 0.46$; Erel & Burman, 1995). More recently, a study using daily assessments found that interparental conflict at one point during the day predicted parent–child conflict later that same day and on the following day (Sherrill et al., 2017). Indeed, the stress and hostility associated with

interparental conflict appear to undermine parents' emotional availability to their children, foster hostile or even violent parenting behaviors, and increase the use of harsh discipline, inconsistent parenting, and lower parental acceptance (Benson et al., 2008; Sears et al., 2016; Sturge-Apple et al., 2006; Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2009).

Repeated interactions with parental figures form the foundation of attachment development. From Bowlby's (1969) perspective, children's relational experiences gradually lead them to develop internal working models, or representations of themselves and others, that shape their expectations regarding the availability and support of their attachment figures (Bosmans et al., 2022). When parent–child interactions are characterized by low sensitivity, inconsistency, and/or unavailability, the development of secure attachment may be compromised (Benoit, 2004; Braungart-Rieker et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2017). Attachment security developed through relationships with parental figures during childhood is associated with emotion regulation abilities, exploration of the environment, and the development of social competence (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Groh et al., 2014; Waters et al., 2010).

In adulthood, attachment is generally conceptualized along two continuous dimensions: anxiety and avoidance (Brennan et al., 1998). Low levels of both dimensions characterize more secure attachment, whereas elevated levels of anxiety and/or avoidance reflect different forms of attachment insecurity (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Fraley et al., 2011). Attachment anxiety primarily refers to fears of rejection or abandonment and an increased need for reassurance, whereas attachment avoidance is characterized by discomfort with emotional closeness and a tendency to limit dependence on others (Fraley et al., 2011). These dimensions may represent one pathway through which attachment representations associated with childhood exposure to HCD remain relevant to psychological functioning in adulthood. A recent meta-analysis found that higher levels of anxiety and avoidance in adult attachment orientations, primarily assessed in general terms or within romantic relationships, were associated with lower positive affect, higher negative affect, and lower life satisfaction (Zhang et al., 2022).

Several studies have examined whether attachment to parents may represent a pathway through which interparental conflict is associated with children's adjustment. Cross-sectional studies have

shown that more destructive or more intensely perceived interparental conflict is associated with greater attachment insecurity toward parents, which in turn is linked to various indicators of poorer adjustment during childhood and adolescence, including internalizing and externalizing problems and suicidal ideation (Davies et al., 2002; El-Sheikh & Elmore-Staton, 2004; Wang et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2022). Longitudinal studies have extended these findings by showing that attachment insecurity also represents a prospective explanatory pathway linking interparental conflict to subsequent academic, relational, and behavioral difficulties (Brock & Kochanska, 2016; Jeong et al., 2020; Lindsey et al., 2009; Sturge-Apple et al., 2008).

In adulthood, the hypothesis that attachment to parents mediates these associations remains largely unexplored. The few available studies have used various measures of parent–child relationship quality, yielding mixed findings: some suggest a mediating role in the association between interparental conflict and later adjustment (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Yang et al., 2016), whereas others have not found such an effect (Neighbors et al., 1997). Given the scarcity and heterogeneity of the available research, it remains difficult to determine whether the processes associated with immediate adjustment following exposure to interparental conflict are the same as those involved in longer-term adjustment (Miller-Graff et al., 2016).

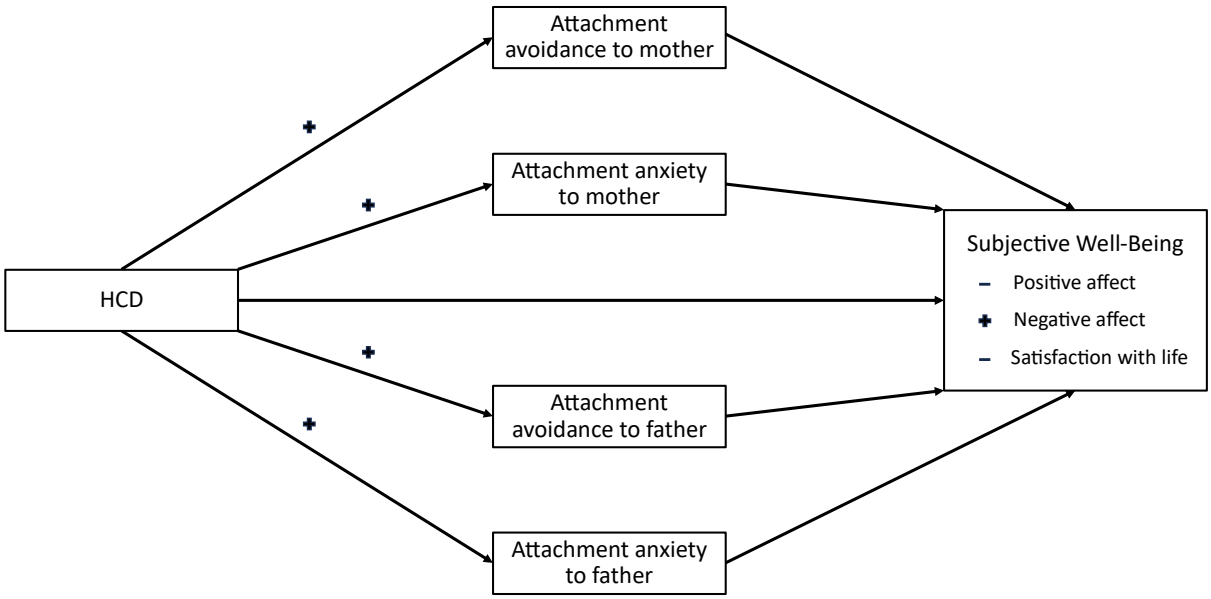
1.3. The Present Study

The present study focused on young adults who experienced parental separation during childhood. Given that HCD has frequently been operationalized using a single dimension (for a review, see Lahaye Cauchy et al., 2026), we assessed it using a continuous factor score integrating multiple dimensions of the separation context. This operationalization aimed to capture the multidimensional nature of HCD by jointly considering interparental conflict and violence, legal disputes, parental maltreatment, parental support, and loyalty conflicts. Subjective well-being was assessed separately across its three components: life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect. Although related, these dimensions retain some degree of independence and may therefore not be associated in the same way with a given adverse experience (Busseri, 2015). Attachment was assessed separately toward the mother and the father, as these relationships are not interchangeable and may make distinct contributions to children's

development and adjustment (Bacro et al., 2021; Forslund et al., 2022). The focus on early adulthood was intended to allow some reflective distance from childhood experiences while maintaining relative temporal proximity to them. Retrospective assessments of interparental conflict have previously been used in research with adults (Cusimano & Riggs, 2013; Radetzki et al., 2022). More specifically, Lev-Wiesel et al. (2024) showed that young adults exposed to high-conflict parental separations during childhood were able to retrospectively report various aspects of their family experiences, including interparental conflict and violence, loyalty conflicts, and parental controlling and manipulative behaviors. Although such assessments remain susceptible to recall bias, findings from Bell and Bell (2018) suggest that retrospective reports of the family environment can retain substantial information, particularly regarding emotionally salient experiences.

Our first hypothesis was that higher levels of childhood exposure to HCD would be associated with lower positive affect, higher negative affect, and lower life satisfaction in adulthood, as well as higher levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance toward both the mother and the father. Our second hypothesis was that the associations between HCD and subjective well-being would be mediated by these four dimensions of parental attachment. Available evidence suggests that attachment to parents is likely only one of several mechanisms linking interparental conflict to later adjustment, alongside processes such as peer attachment, self-esteem, and emotional insecurity (Jeong et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2016, 2022). Accordingly, we hypothesized that attachment to parents would partially mediate these associations. In other words, we did not expect attachment to fully account for the total effect of HCD and therefore expected a direct effect of HCD on subjective well-being to remain after accounting for the dimensions of attachment to parents (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 Hypothesized Mediation Model



Note. The signs indicate the expected directions of the associations. Higher levels of HCD exposure were expected to be associated with greater attachment anxiety and avoidance toward each parent. These dimensions, in turn, were expected to be associated with lower positive affect, higher negative affect, and lower life satisfaction. A residual direct effect of HCD on each component of subjective well-being was also expected, consistent with the partial mediation hypothesis.

2. Method

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of [Anonymized for blind review]. Before beginning the questionnaire, participants were provided with detailed information about the study's objectives and procedures, the voluntary nature of their participation, data confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time. They then provided informed consent. Given the potentially sensitive nature of questions concerning past family experiences, participants were also informed that they could contact the principal investigator if they experienced distress and, if necessary, be referred to a mental health professional.

2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 363 young adults, with a mean age of 20.39 years (SD = 2.08). The sample included 310 women (85.40%), 49 men (13.50%), and 4 participants (1.10%) who did not identify with either category[1]. The vast majority of participants were students at the time of the survey (93.66%), while 6.34% were not. Among students, 2.06% were pursuing a high school diploma or equivalent, 11.18% a two-year college degree, 57.35% a three-year university degree, and 29.41% were enrolled in or had reached graduate-level education.

Regarding family characteristics, 71.07% of participants reported that their parents had been married before separating, whereas 28.93% reported that they had not. Participants were, on average, 10.09 years old (SD = 3.42) at the time of parental separation. Following the separation, 39.39% had lived equally with both parents. Most participants had lived primarily with their mother (53.72%), with relatively frequent contact with their father for 34.71% of participants, relatively infrequent contact for 15.70%, and no contact for 3.31%. A smaller proportion had lived primarily with their father (6.61%), with relatively frequent contact with their mother for 4.68% of participants and relatively infrequent contact for 1.93%.

Participants were recruited through advertisements posted on social media (i.e., Facebook and LinkedIn), emails sent to students at French universities, primarily [Anonymized for blind review], and posters displayed on campus. Recruitment materials described the study as psychological research on childhood and parental separation, targeting young adults aged 18 to 25 who had experienced parental separation during childhood. They indicated that the anonymous questionnaire would address participants' personal histories, without explicitly mentioning interparental conflict, violence, or potential psychological difficulties. To be eligible, participants had to be between 18 and 25 years old, have experienced parental separation before the age of 16, and hold French nationality. Individuals receiving treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were asked not to participate in order to minimize the risk of reactivating traumatic experiences through questions about their past family experiences.

[1] The overrepresentation of women in the sample may be explained by the fact that participants were primarily recruited from university departments of humanities and social sciences, which have a predominantly female student population in France.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. High-Conflict Divorce

HCD was retrospectively assessed using 12 indicators: interparental conflict before and after separation, assessed using the *Children's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict Scale* (CPIC); interparental violence before and after separation, assessed using the *Revised Conflict Tactics Scales* (CTS2) separately for each parent; maternal and paternal maltreatment, assessed using the *Adverse Childhood Experiences International Questionnaire* (ACE-IQ); post-separation legal disputes, assessed using author-developed questions; loyalty conflicts, assessed using the *Caught in the Middle Scale*; and post-separation maternal and paternal support, assessed using the support subscale of the *Egna Minnen Beträffande Uppfostran* (EMBU). The construction and dimensionality of the HCD measure were examined in a separate methodological analysis conducted using the same dataset. To summarize the 12 indicators into a single HCD score, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis of the 12 measures and calculated an individual factor score for each participant. This involved summing the standardized scores for each measure, weighted by their respective loadings on the general factor underlying all 12 measures. This approach was supported by the identification of a general factor on which all measures loaded, yielding a continuous score reflecting the intensity of childhood exposure to HCD.

2.2.2. Subjective Well-Being

The French version of the *Positive and Negative Affect Schedule* (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988) was used to assess the affective components of SWB, namely positive and negative affect. This self-report scale assesses various affective states within a time frame specified by the instructions. Ten items assess positive affect (e.g., "interested," "enthusiastic," "proud"), and ten assess negative affect (e.g., "distressed," "irritable," "nervous"). Participants were asked to indicate, for each adjective, the extent to which it described how they felt at the present moment. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*). Scores for each dimension were calculated as the mean of the corresponding items, with a theoretical range of 1 to 5. Higher scores on each scale indicate higher levels of positive and negative affect, respectively. A French-language adaptation was validated using two samples of athletes spanning a broad age range, from adolescence to adulthood, and

demonstrated good psychometric properties (Gaudreau et al., 2006). In the present study, internal consistency was satisfactory for both dimensions, with McDonald's total omega coefficients of .83 for positive affect and .86 for negative affect.

Life satisfaction was assessed using the French version of the *Satisfaction With Life Scale* (SWLS; Blais et al., 1989; Diener et al., 1985), a five-item self-report scale measuring the cognitive component of SWB (e.g., "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing"). Responses were provided on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). The mean score, with a theoretical range of 1 to 7, reflects higher life satisfaction as scores increase. In the original validation study conducted with young adults, Diener et al. (1985) reported good internal consistency and good test–retest reliability over a two-month interval. In the present study, the scale demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with a McDonald's total omega coefficient of .84.

2.2.3. Attachment to the Mother and Father

The French version of the *Experiences in Close Relationships - Relationship Structures Questionnaire* (ECR-RS; Fraley et al., 2011) was used to assess attachment to the mother and father. This self-report measure assesses two continuous dimensions of attachment, namely avoidance and anxiety, across different relationship figures. For each figure, avoidance is assessed using items 1 to 6 (e.g., "I don't feel comfortable opening up to this person"), and anxiety using items 7 to 9 (e.g., "I'm afraid that this person may abandon me"). Responses were provided on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). For each parent, mean anxiety and avoidance scores have a theoretical range of 1 to 7. Higher scores indicate greater attachment insecurity on the corresponding dimension. A French adaptation was developed by Chaperon and Dandeneau (2017), demonstrating generally satisfactory psychometric properties in the context of romantic relationships. However, the authors noted that this adaptation had yet to be specifically validated for assessing attachment to mothers or fathers. In the present study, internal consistency was satisfactory, with McDonald's total omega coefficients of .92 for attachment avoidance to the mother, .86 for attachment anxiety toward the mother, .92 for attachment avoidance to the father, and .86 for attachment anxiety toward the father.

2.3. Procedure

Data were collected through an online questionnaire administered via LimeSurvey, comprising several standardized measures. Participants first completed the measures of attachment to their mother and father, followed by the measures of positive and negative affect and life satisfaction. Questionnaires assessing adverse childhood experiences and the context of parental separation were presented afterward. The estimated completion time was 25 to 45 minutes.

2.4. Data analysis

To identify potential outliers that could influence the multivariate analyses, multivariate outlier detection was performed using Mahalanobis distance across the eight study variables (HCD, the four attachment dimensions, positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction). Using a critical threshold based on the $\chi^2(8)$ distribution at $p < .001$, two cases were identified as having significantly elevated Mahalanobis distances and were excluded from subsequent analyses, reducing the sample size from 365 to 363 participants.

The main analyses consisted of three multiple mediation models estimated using the *lavaan* package in R version 4.5.1. Childhood exposure to HCD was specified as the predictor variable, attachment anxiety and avoidance toward the mother and father as four parallel mediators, and positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction as the respective outcome variables. Direct and indirect effects were estimated simultaneously in each model. Specifically, HCD exposure was specified as a predictor of the four attachment dimensions, each of which, in turn, predicted the relevant well-being outcome. A direct effect of HCD exposure on the outcome variable was also estimated. Covariances among the four mediators were freely estimated. Direct effects, specific indirect effects, total indirect effects, and total effects were evaluated using 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals based on 5,000 resamples. An effect was considered statistically supported when its confidence interval did not include zero.

Given the unequal gender distribution in the sample, exploratory comparisons between men and women were conducted across the eight study variables using independent-samples Welch's *t* tests.

Unadjusted *p* values and Cohen's *d* effect sizes were reported. To assess the robustness of the main findings to the high proportion of women in the sample, the three mediation models were also re-estimated using only female participants. These analyses were treated as sensitivity analyses rather than formal tests of gender differences.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

OpenAI's ChatGPT was used to assist with translating the manuscript from French into English, developing R code for statistical analyses, and providing suggestions to improve the writing and clarity of the manuscript. All AI-assisted content, including statistical code and outputs, was reviewed and verified by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final content.

3. Results

3.1. Associations Between High-Conflict Divorce, Subjective Well-Being, and Attachment

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 1. Consistent with our first hypothesis, higher levels of childhood exposure to HCD were associated with less favorable subjective well-being in early adulthood. HCD was associated with lower positive affect ($r = -.11$, $p = .043$), higher negative affect ($r = .30$, $p < .001$), and lower life satisfaction ($r = -.30$, $p < .001$). Higher HCD scores were also positively associated with attachment avoidance ($r = .36$, $p < .001$) and anxiety ($r = .36$, $p < .001$) toward the mother, as well as attachment avoidance ($r = .37$, $p < .001$) and anxiety ($r = .26$, $p < .001$) toward the father.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for the Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. HCD exposure	-0.01	0.94	1.00							
2. Attachment avoidance to mother	3.06	1.59	.36***	1.00						
3. Attachment anxiety to mother	2.11	1.60	.36***	.43***	1.00					
4. Attachment avoidance to father	4.50	1.80	.37***	.04	.05	1.00				
5. Attachment anxiety to father	2.80	1.82	.26***	.14**	.35***	.44***	1.00			
6. Positive affect	2.92	0.62	-.11*	-.15**	-.22***	-.10	-.13*	1.00		
7. Negative affect	2.40	0.79	.30***	.17**	.24***	.11*	.22***	-.11*	1.00	
8. Satisfaction with life	4.35	1.34	-.30***	-.25***	-.29***	-.22***	-.26***	.51***	-.40***	1.00

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. Correlations were computed on the full sample ($N = 363$). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

3.2. Multiple Mediation Analyses

The multiple mediation models are presented in Fig. 2–4, the direct, indirect, and total effects in Table 2, and the detailed path coefficients in Supplementary Material 1. Standardized coefficients are reported in the figures. Solid lines indicate effects whose 95% bootstrap confidence intervals do not include zero, whereas dashed lines indicate effects whose confidence intervals include zero. Confidence intervals were based on 5,000 bootstrap resamples.

For positive affect, a significant total effect of HCD was observed (β = −.11, 95% CI [−.20, −.003]). The direct effect of HCD on positive affect was no longer significant after including the mediators (β = .02, 95% CI [−.10, .15]), whereas the total indirect effect was significant (β = −.13, 95% CI [−.21, −.06]). Among the specific indirect effects, only the pathway through attachment anxiety toward the mother was significant (β = −.07, 95% CI [−.12, −.02]). The indirect effects through attachment avoidance to the mother, attachment avoidance to the father, and attachment anxiety toward the father were not significant. For negative affect, both the total effect of HCD (β = .31, 95% CI [.21, .39]) and its direct effect after including the mediators (β = .24, 95% CI [.12, .35]) were significant. However, the total indirect effect was not significant (β = .06, 95% CI [−.01, .13]). Among the specific indirect effects, only the pathway through attachment anxiety toward the father was significant, although its magnitude was small (β = .04, 95% CI [.002, .08]). The other three specific indirect effects were not significant. Finally, for life satisfaction, HCD showed a significant total effect (β = −.30, 95% CI [−.39, −.21]) and a significant direct effect after including the mediators (β = −.14, 95% CI [−.26, −.02]). The total indirect effect was also significant (β = −.16, 95% CI [−.23, −.09]). Among the specific indirect effects, only the pathway through attachment anxiety toward the mother was significant (β = −.05, 95% CI [−.10, −.02]).

Fig. 2 Multiple Mediation Model - Positive Affect

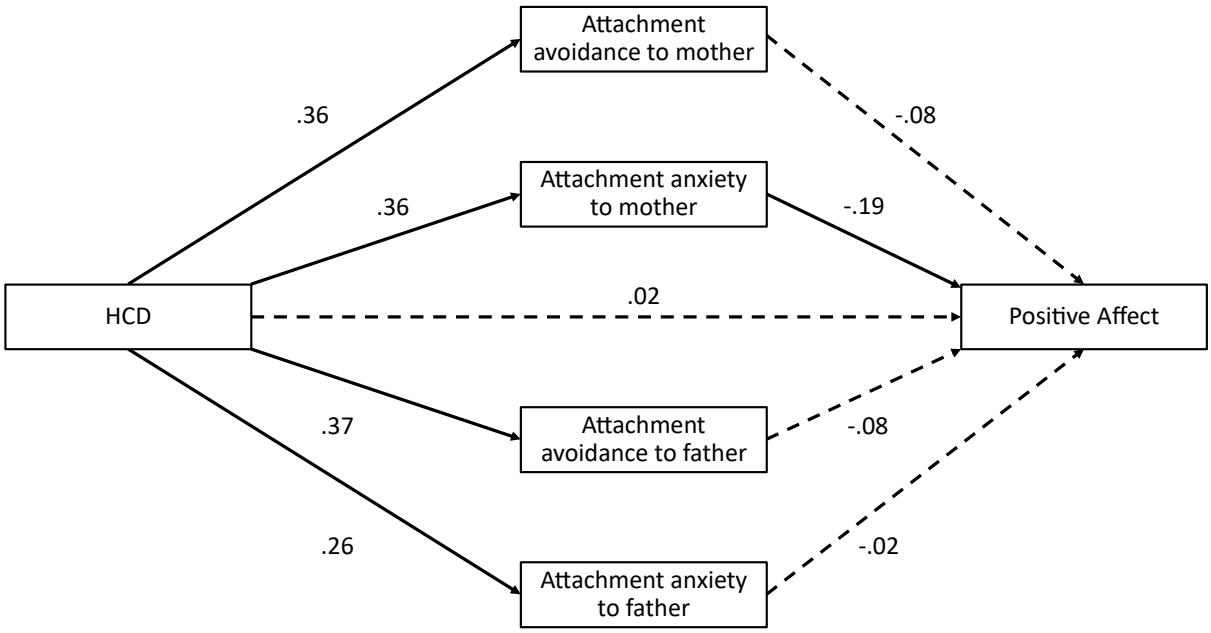


Fig. 3 Multiple Mediation Model - Negative Affect

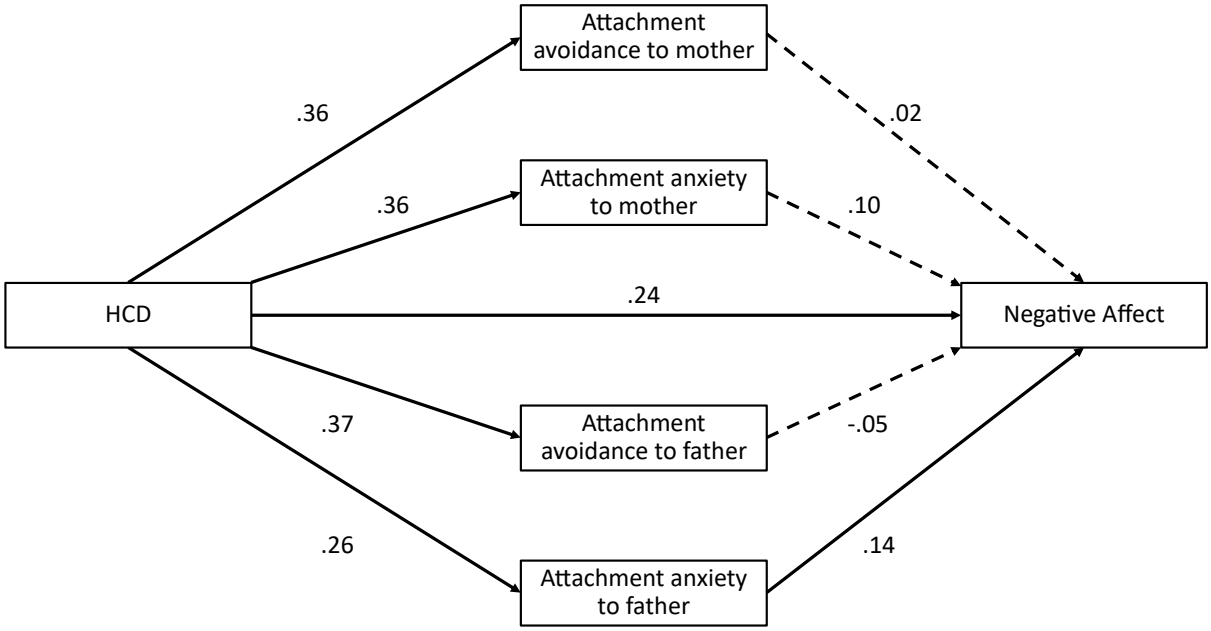


Fig. 4 Multiple Mediation Model – Satisfaction with Life

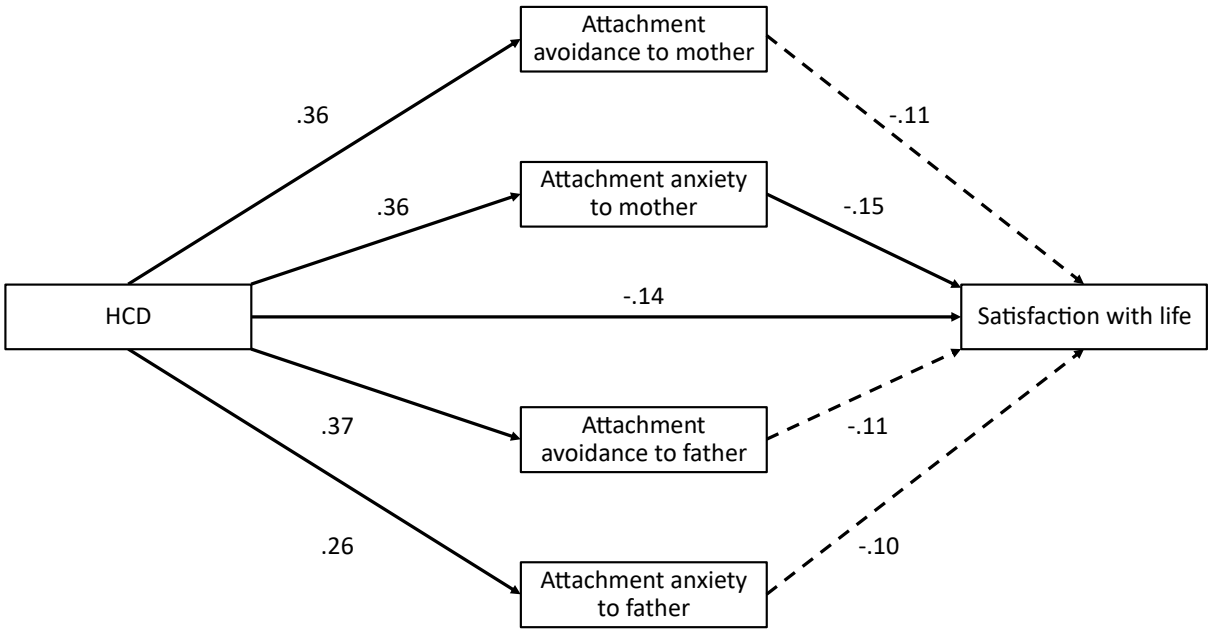


Table 2 Results of the Multiple Mediation Analyses

Effect	beta (std.)	SE (boot.)	95% CI (boot.)
Positive affect			
Total effect	-.106	.051	[-.204, -.003]
Direct effect	.024	.063	[-.095, .150]
Total indirect effect	-.130	.038	[-.207, -.058]
Indirect: avoidance to mother	-.027	.024	[-.078, .019]
Indirect: anxiety to mother	-.067	.026	[-.124, -.023]
Indirect: avoidance to father	-.030	.026	[-.083, .018]
Indirect: anxiety to father	-.005	.018	[-.039, .032]
Negative affect			
Total effect	.305	.045	[.212, .388]
Direct effect	.244	.058	[.124, .353]
Total indirect effect	.061	.036	[-.008, .132]
Indirect: avoidance to mother	.005	.021	[-.034, .048]
Indirect: anxiety to mother	.037	.024	[-.009, .088]
Indirect: avoidance to father	-.017	.023	[-.062, .029]
Indirect: anxiety to father	.036	.019	[.002, .077]
Satisfaction with life			
Total effect	-.304	.048	[-.393, -.206]
Direct effect	-.144	.060	[-.257, -.023]
Total indirect effect	-.160	.035	[-.234, -.094]
Indirect: avoidance to mother	-.040	.023	[-.087, .002]
Indirect: anxiety to mother	-.054	.021	[-.100, -.017]
Indirect: avoidance to father	-.039	.023	[-.085, .003]
Indirect: anxiety to father	-.027	.016	[-.059, .001]

Note. Beta coefficients are fully standardized. SE denotes the bootstrap standard error. Confidence intervals are 95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals based on 5,000 resamples. Effects were considered statistically supported when the confidence interval did not include zero.

3.3. Additional Analyses by Gender

Exploratory comparisons between men and women were conducted across the study variables using Welch's *t* tests. Women reported higher levels of HCD exposure ($p = .023$, $d = -.28$), greater attachment anxiety toward the mother ($p = .021$, $d = -.30$) and father ($p = .006$, $d = -.41$), and higher negative affect ($p = .049$, $d = -.30$). No significant differences were observed for the remaining variables. The three mediation models were then re-estimated using only female participants ($n = 310$). Conclusions regarding direct and total indirect effects remained unchanged: the total indirect effect remained significant for positive affect and life satisfaction, but not for negative affect, whereas the direct effect remained nonsignificant for positive affect and significant for negative affect and life satisfaction. Regarding specific indirect effects, the pathways through attachment anxiety toward the mother remained significant for positive affect and life satisfaction. The indirect effect through attachment anxiety toward the father on negative affect was no longer significant, whereas an indirect effect through attachment avoidance to the father emerged for life satisfaction. Detailed results are presented in Supplementary Material 2.

4. Discussion

The present study, conducted among French young adults, aimed to examine the associations between childhood exposure to high-conflict divorce and subjective well-being in adulthood, as well as the potential mediating role of attachment to parents. The findings indicate that higher levels of HCD exposure were associated with lower SWB in adulthood and greater attachment insecurity toward both the mother and the father. The multiple mediation analyses suggest that attachment plays a mediating role, although this role varies across the components of well-being examined.

4.1. Childhood Exposure to HCD: Long-Term Associations with Well-Being and Attachment

The first set of findings concerns subjective well-being: higher levels of HCD exposure were associated with lower positive affect, higher negative affect, and lower life satisfaction. Research examining the associations between exposure to interparental conflict and well-being has long focused on marital conflict, with some findings indicating associations with affective balance and life satisfaction in

adulthood (Gohm et al., 1998). With the emergence of the concept of high-conflict divorce, researchers have begun to examine the effects of exposure to both parental separation and the conflicts preceding or following it (Basta, 2022; Radetzki et al., 2022). In this regard, Lev-Wiesel et al. (2024) reported that most young adults described their experience of high-conflict divorce as "a dark and chaotic time that left psychological scars" (p. 316). The distress associated with childhood exposure to interparental conflict, already well documented in the literature (Koss et al., 2011; Marshall et al., 2019), thus appears to extend into adulthood.

Interestingly, the correlation observed with positive affect was weaker ($r = -.11$, $p = .043$) than those observed with negative affect ($r = .30$, $p < .001$) and life satisfaction ($r = -.30$, $p < .001$). This difference in magnitude has not been consistently observed in the literature. Xiang et al. (2021), using a measure of childhood maltreatment, and Grusnick et al. (2020), using a measure of adverse childhood experiences, reported associations of relatively similar magnitudes between these experiences and the affective components of SWB. In contrast, Silva and Dell'Aglio (2016), who examined exposure to domestic violence, observed a pattern similar to ours, with a weaker association with positive affect than with the other components of SWB. These variations may reflect the fact that the different components of SWB, although related, retain some degree of independence (Busseri, 2015) and may therefore not respond in the same way to a given adverse experience.

The findings also suggest that higher HCD scores are associated with greater attachment avoidance and anxiety toward both the mother and the father. A small number of studies have documented associations between exposure to interparental conflict and attachment during childhood (for a review, see Tan et al., 2018). In adulthood, evidence remains scarce. One study examined romantic attachment, finding greater attachment insecurity among individuals exposed to higher levels of interparental conflict (Cusimano & Riggs, 2013), while Yang et al. (2016) showed that higher levels of marital conflict were associated with poorer attachment quality toward both the mother and the father among young adults. The present study extends this research by specifically examining the dimensions of attachment anxiety and avoidance toward each parent in the context of HCD. By taxing parents' emotional resources, interparental conflict may contribute to harsher, more hostile, or frightening parenting behaviors (Buehler et al., 2006; Sears et al., 2016; Zeanah et al., 1999), fostering less secure

representations of the self and others that may remain relatively stable over time (Cusimano & Riggs, 2013; Zayas et al., 2011). Furthermore, in response to parental distress surrounding interparental conflict, some children may assume a caregiving role toward a parent (Garber, 2021; Hetherington, 1999; Peris et al., 2008). However, the lack of reciprocity and the guilt associated with being unable to meet the parent's needs may hinder the development of secure attachment (Engelhardt, 2012). In adulthood, patterns of parentification established earlier in life may persist within the parent–child relationship (Jurkovic et al., 2001) and influence relationships with others (e.g., dependency; Wells et al., 1999).

Overall, the observed associations were small to moderate in magnitude. HCD accounted for approximately 1% of the variance in positive affect, 9% of the variance in both negative affect and life satisfaction, and between 7% and 14% of the variance in the different attachment dimensions. Effect sizes of this magnitude do not appear unusual: Radetzki et al. (2022) reported a correlation of $r = -.22$ between perceived interparental conflict and psychological well-being, as well as correlations ranging from $r = .19$ to .36 with other indicators of psychological and relational functioning. In another study, Zhen et al. (2022) reported a correlation of $r = .31$ between retrospectively reported interparental conflict and depressive symptoms among young adults. These effect sizes should be considered in light of the multifactorial nature of psychological functioning in early adulthood: childhood exposure to HCD represents only one of many factors associated with such functioning.

4.2. Mixed Evidence for the Mediating Role of Attachment

The mediation analyses yielded more mixed findings than anticipated. We hypothesized that attachment to parents would partially mediate the association between HCD and each of the three components of subjective well-being. This hypothesis was supported only for life satisfaction. For positive affect, the findings were consistent with full mediation. For negative affect, the total indirect effect was not significant, despite a small specific indirect effect through attachment anxiety toward the father. In both models showing a significant total indirect effect, the only significant specific pathway was through attachment anxiety toward the mother.

The model examining life satisfaction most closely aligns with our initial hypothesis. Life satisfaction differs from affect in that it reflects a global cognitive evaluation of one's own life. The persistence of a direct effect of HCD suggests that its association with this evaluation cannot be fully explained by the current quality of attachment relationships. Growing up in a chronically conflictual family environment may also have lasting implications for other areas of life, such as social relationships (Chay, 2025; Fauteux, 2013) or educational experiences (Chay, 2025; Laletas & Khasin, 2021; Podwinski & Laletas, 2025; Soal, 2025). Thus, lower life satisfaction in early adulthood may reflect a wish that certain aspects of one's life up to that point had unfolded differently (Item 5 of the SWLS).

For positive affect, a different pattern emerged: the direct effect of HCD was no longer significant after including the mediators, whereas the total indirect effect was significant. First, the mediating role of attachment is consistent with previous research in this field. In a series of experimental studies, Mikulincer et al. (2001) showed that activating representations of attachment security increased the accessibility of positive affect, with participants subsequently evaluating neutral stimuli more favorably, even under stressful conditions. Conversely, a recent meta-analysis found that attachment insecurity was associated with less frequent positive emotions (Park et al., 2023). The disruption of the secure base resulting from interparental conflict may undermine confidence, emotional comfort, and, more broadly, openness to positive emotional experiences. Thus, in early adulthood, more insecure relationships with parents may continue to shape emotional experiences by reducing the sense of security and support that underpins positive affect. The findings from this mediation model should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously, given the small magnitude of the initial total effect ($r = -.11$). In this context, the nonsignificant direct effect after including the mediators may reflect either a full mediation process or some degree of statistical fragility.

The model examining negative affect did not reveal a significant total indirect effect. This finding contrasts with evidence showing that attachment anxiety is particularly associated with higher levels of negative affect (Tammilehto et al., 2023), as well as with studies in which the quality of the parent–child relationship contributes to the association between childhood interparental conflict and later psychological difficulties. The direct effect observed in this model, together with the direct effect

that remained significant in the life satisfaction model, suggests that other mechanisms not included in our models may help explain the association between HCD exposure and well-being in adulthood. Studies involving children and young adults exposed to interparental conflict have shown, for example, that peer attachment, self-esteem, emotional insecurity, and difficulties in romantic relationships may operate as mediators alongside the parent–child relationship in explaining mental health outcomes (Jeong et al., 2020; Turner & Kopiec, 2006; Yang et al., 2016, 2022). Furthermore, other findings have identified mediating roles for self-blame and perceived threat, highlighting the importance of cognitive processes in adjustment to parental conflict (Keeports & Pittman, 2017).

The interpretation of the observed indirect effects must take into account that attachment was assessed in early adulthood. From a developmental perspective, if interparental conflict has ended, mediation through attachment may reflect the lasting imprint of frightening, frightened, or inconsistent parenting experiences on internal working models. Indeed, although assessed in adulthood, these models remain partly shaped by early relational experiences (Main et al., 1985). In adulthood, lower trust in parental figures, reduced self-esteem, and lower satisfaction with social support, shaped by relationships with parents involved in high levels of conflict, may negatively influence life satisfaction (Kurnaz et al., 2020; Lane & Fink, 2015; Sugimura et al., 2023). From a synchronic perspective, if interparental conflict persists into adulthood, mediation through attachment may reflect the continuation of inconsistent, harsh, or unsupportive parenting. Far from being inconsequential, parent–child interactions in adulthood remain important predictors of well-being (Ma et al., 2022; Parra et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2024). Similarly, despite having, on average, more resources to cope with adversity than during childhood (Cruz et al., 2022), exposure to interparental conflict remains destabilizing in adulthood (e.g., an increased risk of depression; Kumar & Mattanah, 2018).

Finally, the correlation matrix shows that attachment anxiety toward the mother was the dimension most strongly associated with the two components of well-being for which a significant total indirect effect was observed, namely positive affect ($r = -.22$, $p < .001$) and life satisfaction ($r = -.29$, $p < .001$). The other attachment dimensions showed weaker correlations with these variables, which may help explain why the observed indirect effects operated through attachment anxiety toward the mother. Overlap among the attachment dimensions may also play a role, as the mediators were

correlated with one another: attachment avoidance and anxiety toward the mother (r = .43, p < .001), attachment anxiety toward the mother and father (r = .35, p < .001), and attachment avoidance and anxiety toward the father (r = .44, p < .001). In a multiple mediation model, these dimensions share some of the explained variance. It is therefore plausible that the avoidance dimensions and attachment anxiety toward the father, although associated with HCD and well-being in the bivariate analyses, no longer showed significant specific indirect effects once their shared variance with attachment anxiety toward the mother was accounted for.

4.3. Limitations and Future Directions

The findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. The first concerns the retrospective and self-reported assessment of HCD. Participants were asked to recall family events that occurred during childhood, making the data susceptible to recall and reconstruction biases. Bell and Bell (2018) reported only moderate correlations (r = .30–.45) between prospective assessments of the family environment collected during adolescence and retrospective accounts provided 25 years later. Furthermore, attachment insecurity has been associated with a tendency to reconstruct past family conflicts more negatively. For example, Feeney and Cassidy (2003) found that adolescents with more insecure attachment representations recalled interactions with their parents more negatively after a delay than they had reported immediately following the conflict. In the present study, it is therefore possible that some of the observed associations between HCD, attachment, and well-being also reflect recall biases or retrospective reconstruction. The use of a cross-sectional design relying on a single informant (the young adults themselves) does not provide the same level of validity as a longitudinal, multi-informant approach (e.g., involving parents and professionals). Such approaches, which remain relatively uncommon in HCD research, should be encouraged in future studies.

The generalizability of the findings is limited by the study sample, which consisted predominantly of students and women and was recruited exclusively in France. University students represent a specific population frequently used in psychological research, although concerns about their representativeness have long been raised (Cheung et al., 2017; Sears, 1986). Similarly, the substantial overrepresentation of women warrants caution. Exploratory analyses revealed higher mean levels of

HCD exposure, attachment anxiety toward the mother, attachment anxiety toward the father, and negative affect among women in the sample. Nevertheless, sensitivity analyses conducted exclusively among women yielded the same conclusions regarding the direct and total indirect effects in the mediation models. Finally, participants' ethnic backgrounds and cultural contexts of socialization may influence their perceptions of what is considered normative within the family (Lansford et al., 2018), meaning that findings obtained in France may not necessarily generalize to different cultural contexts. The need to consider cultural dimensions has long been emphasized in HCD research (Johnston, 1994).

Using an overall HCD score entails a trade-off: it does not allow us to isolate the specific association of each constituent dimension with well-being and attachment. This limitation is particularly relevant given that the boundaries of the HCD concept remain debated. From a theoretical perspective, some authors have suggested that the "HCD" label may encompass several distinct phenomena, including parental alienation and intimate partner violence (Johnston, 2017). From an empirical perspective, some researchers have therefore chosen to include both separations characterized by an inability or unwillingness to cooperate in coparenting and separations involving family violence, in which safety concerns affect the parent and/or child (Francia et al., 2019). From our perspective, a promising avenue for advancing these debates would be to document, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, the differential impact of various forms of post-separation parental dysfunction on children. Empirically comparing the effects of distinct configurations, such as HCD without interparental violence, HCD involving conflict-related violence, or situations involving violence embedded in a pattern of unilateral coercive control, could provide support for the hypothesis of a gradation in risk levels and contribute to a more refined categorization of the phenomenon. Such an approach could also help explain the heterogeneity of developmental trajectories observed among children exposed to HCD, ranging from profiles characterized by relative resilience to those marked by a greater burden of posttraumatic symptoms (van der Wal et al., 2019). Not distinguishing between the types of violence to which children were exposed constitutes a limitation of our study. Conducting such analyses would require the development of instruments specifically designed to assess children's exposure to coercive controlling violence, which are currently lacking (Hamberger et al., 2017).

4.4. Clinical Implications

Professionals working with families experiencing high-conflict separation already recognize that HCD can have substantial consequences for children (Kosher & Katz, 2022; Laletas & Khasin, 2021). Nevertheless, the findings of the present study extend this understanding in three ways. First, our findings suggest that greater exposure to HCD is associated with an increased risk of poorer well-being in adulthood, although the modest magnitude of this association does not imply that all exposed individuals necessarily experience difficulties. From a clinical perspective, this highlights the importance of exploring individuals' family experiences before, during, and after parental separation, without making assumptions about their impact on current functioning.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that exposure to higher levels of interparental conflict may be associated not only with an increased risk of psychopathology, as previous research has shown (Cusimano & Riggs, 2013; Turner & Kopiec, 2006), but also with poorer emotional well-being and lower life satisfaction. Thus, a young adult may not present with a major psychological disorder while nevertheless reporting low life satisfaction, considerable nervousness, and little pleasure in everyday activities. Laumann-Billings and Emery (2000) found that, despite generally low levels of depression and anxiety, many young adults from separated families continued to report painful feelings, distressing memories, and concerns about their family history several years after the separation. Some of these manifestations of distress were also associated with higher levels of interparental conflict. Negative affect warrants particular attention, as it may contribute to other adjustment difficulties. A recent study involving adolescents and young adults found that negative emotions mediated the association between exposure to interparental conflict and behavioral problems (Riaz et al., 2024).

Finally, the mediating role of attachment to parents in the association between HCD exposure and well-being in adulthood highlights the importance of considering individuals' current relationships with their parents. Indeed, parent–child relationships remain particularly important in early adulthood (Fang et al., 2021). From a socioeconomic perspective, the transition to adulthood has become increasingly prolonged, with young adults leaving the parental home later and generally continuing to receive parental support during this period (Lee & Manzoni, 2023). From a psychological perspective, the quality of relationships with parents remains a predictor of well-being at this age (Ben-Shlomo et

al., 2022). Accordingly, clinical assessment should not be limited to whether individuals maintain contact with their parents, but should also explore the current quality of these relationships, including relational insecurity, the need for reassurance, emotional distance, and the extent to which individuals feel they can rely on their parents. These representations may reflect both early relational experiences and the quality of current interactions, although our study does not allow us to disentangle their respective contributions. Attachment-informed clinical interventions could then focus on relational boundaries, expectations of close others, self-esteem, perceived social support, and, more broadly, the ways in which past family experiences continue to shape individuals' present emotional and relational functioning.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset supporting the findings of this study, the R code used for statistical analyses, and the supplementary materials are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at: https://osf.io/nv95p/overview?view_only=2bc33a0eb8904656bde579a142251e9a

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