

I do it for the children, and it's not a walk in the park: Parents' stories about how to maintain cooperative co-parenting during the divorce process

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Abstract

This article explores the transition of cooperative co-parenting during the divorce process. Eighteen parents, representing eight co-parenting pairs and two individuals who had just undergone mandatory mediation for parents applying for separation, participated in the study. Through in-depth interviews with parents who were classified as cooperative during the mediation process, we examined how they *reason* and the struggles they face during the divorce transition. The study applied a sociocultural perspective, focusing on the cultural ideals of equal parenthood, and used the concepts of *boundaries* and *shared care* as analytical tools. A main finding is that maintaining cooperative co-parenting requires hard work, even in no-or low-conflict divorces, but the parents do it for their children. The results showed that the transforming process involved efforts to (1) continue established parenting practices, (2) shield the children and (3) deal with their own emotions. The underlying premises for successful co-parenting are trust in each other's ability to take care of the children and their own knowledge of the emotional bonds between the children and each parent. In turn, these premises motivate parents to manage their own emotional turmoil.

KEYWORDS

boundaries, cooperative co-parenting, cultural values, divorce, shared care, transitions

1 | INTRODUCTION

Family relationships change with divorce, but it is not obvious *how* the changes will be (Emery & Dillon, 1994). A divorce can be disruptive for both adults and children because it requires a challenging and often stressful reorganization of households and family relationships (Amato, 2000; Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Bergstrøm et al., 2014; Bertelsen, 2021; Jamison et al., 2014). As parents learn to manage the new context of their co-parenting relationship, they remain engaged in the daily tasks of parenting and taking care of their children's physical and emotional well-being (McHale et al., 2004). This transition

period involves processes of deciding how to share the children's time between the two homes, finding ways to communicate and share information about the children and handling the emotional, practical and financial dimensions of the divorce (Emery, 2012; Jamison et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2016). Parents' relationships with each other, particularly their conflict level and how they involve the children in these conflicts, are strongly related to children's adjustment after the divorce (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Stokkebekk et al., 2019; van Eldik et al., 2020). Substantial evidence has suggested that cooperative co-parenting positively contributes to children's socioemotional

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and behavioural development (Amato, 2000; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Kelly, 2000; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). A positive co-parenting alliance can also help reduce parenting stress (Choi & Becher, 2019). Therefore, understanding how ex-spouses establish cooperative co-parenting relationships during and after the divorce is useful for professionals who aim to assist families in the divorce.

The term 'cooperative co-parenting' has various definitions, which involve certain common characteristics. In contrast to conflicted and parallel co-parenting, cooperative co-parenting is characterized by joint planning about the children's lives, coordination and flexibility in arranging schedules and offers of parental support to each other (Kelly, 2007). Teubert and Pinquart (2010) defined cooperation as the extent to which parents exchange information about their children, support and respect each other as parents and communicate with the children in a climate of mutual loyalty. Furthermore, cooperative co-parents trust each other to take good care of their children and affirm, appreciate, respect and support the other's parenting efforts, competency and contributions (Emery, 2012; Jamison et al., 2014; Kelly, 2007; Russell et al., 2016). Jamison et al. (2014) stressed that a successful *transition* from married to divorced co-parenting requires cognitive, affective and behavioural reorganization. They suggested that parents who focus on their children, regulate their emotional responses and choose their battles about time and money are more effective co-parents than those who have difficulty relinquishing anger associated with the divorce or engage in frequent conflicts.

This study explores cooperative parenting during the divorce transition. Building on in-depth interviews with 18 Norwegian parents (eight co-parenting pairs and two individuals), we examine how parents describe how they deal with and make meaning to their co-parenting situation during the divorce process. While extensive research has explored parents in high-conflict divorce (e.g., Anderson et al., 2010; Bertelsen, 2021; Cummings & Davies, 2010; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Jevne & Andenæs, 2017; Stokkebekk et al., 2021; van Eldik et al., 2020), this study adds to the body of research on post-divorce parenting by exploring the experiences of low-conflict, cooperative parents.

The study builds on a sociocultural theoretical framework, stressing that people's meaning-making interacts with social, cultural, historical and material contexts (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogoff, 2003). As Smart (2003) observed, 'The meaning of being a father, mother, husband, wife, partner, son, daughter is likely to be changing. Moreover, how some people "do" being a father or wife, for example, may be changing as a consequence of these changing meanings' (p. 3). Therefore, the reasoning of divorcing parents must be understood in the context of the society in which they occur.

2 | PARENTING IN NORWAY

To support divorcing parents, Norway has established mandatory mediation when parents with children below 16 years of age want to separate. As a no-cost public service offered at family counselling

offices, this mediation is intended to help parents forefront the children's best interest when they write their custodial agreement and to assure that the parents speak with their children and involve them in the process (The Children's Act § 48, 51 and 52; The Marriage Act § 26). Embedded in these mediation practices are *cultural ideals* that compel parents to maintain contact and cooperate in the children's best interest. Furthermore, ideals of symmetry and devotion are active in post-divorce Nordic life: Symmetry implies that good post-divorce parenting requires a symmetrical distribution of time, whereas parental devotion implies that good parents are devoted to their children, prioritizing the children's needs over their own feelings (Westerling, 2016).

In Norway, *practices* of gender-equal parenting and dual residence have become increasingly common recently. Currently, 3 among 10 children in separated families have shared residences, compared to less than 10% at the beginning of the century¹ (Kitterød et al., 2014; Kitterød & Wiik, 2017). Legally, an agreement on shared residence for children does not necessarily presuppose an equal division of parenting time. Nevertheless, survey data indicate that shared-residence arrangements in Norway typically involve 50–50 time splits (Kitterød & Lyngstad, 2014). This development reflects active fathering practices combined with paid work for mothers, as well as policies promoting more equal parental roles (Kitterød & Lidén, 2021). While Norwegian studies (e.g., Kitterød & Lidén, 2021; Skjørten & Barlinhaug, 2007) have suggested that shared residence works well for many children, it might not be the best solution for everyone. In Norway, like in other Western countries, the ideals of gender-equal parenting might put children exposed to high conflict or family violence at risk (e.g., Bjørnholt, 2021; Jevne & Andenæs, 2017).

When living together, parents who practice extended sharing are both accountable for the children's well-being on a continuous basis, knowing the details of and maintaining an overview of the children's everyday life (Andenæs & Haavind, 2018). These experiences of shared care are not erased at the point of separation. Rather, parents who most actively practiced shared and cooperative parenting while living together continue to do so after the divorce (Kitterød et al., 2014). Moreover, even if the Norwegian policy promotes mothers' labour-market participation and fathers' involvement at home, statistics show that women still do more housework and are paid less than men (Egeland et al., 2021).

3 | BOUNDARIES AND SHARED CARE

In the transition from being parents in one household to two households, established relationships between them need to be negotiated and reshaped. On one hand, one parent must leave the children in the other's care, which requires a basic trust that the other parent is 'good enough'. On the other hand, even if one parent no longer lives with the children all the time, they remain a parent all the time. To grasp these processes, the terms *boundaries* (Emery & Dillon, 1994) and *shared care* (Andenæs & Haavind, 2018) offer useful theoretical perspectives. We use the term *boundaries* as an analytical tool to

understand the co-parents' negotiations of the boundaries between them and between the two households. According to Emery and Dillon (1994), boundaries are the explicit or implicit rules that define the structure of family relationships and the psychological territory of an individual or a relationship. They serve to protect the family's autonomy and its subsystems by managing proximity and hierarchy (Minuchin, 1974). Emery and Dillon (1994) suggested that divorcing parents need to redefine the *boundary of intimacy* between them, for example, by handling the emotional aspects of the divorce. They also need to redefine *power boundaries in parental authority*, such as how closely rules will be coordinated across households, what decisions each parent will make autonomously and how to communicate with each other.

While the term *boundaries* is useful for understanding the processes necessary to regulate relational proximity and distance, the term *shared care* highlights how parents who share care across locations also assume continuous responsibility for the children. It acknowledges that care involves face-to-face contact with the children, as well as the practices of keeping an overview and remaining responsible when the children are in another location (Andenæs, 2011; Andenæs & Haavind, 2018; Jevne & Andenæs, 2017; Singer, 1993). When parents practice shared care, they keep track of and are available to both the other parent and professional caregivers (such as teachers) while being aware of the boundaries between the different locations and parents' responsibilities (Andenæs & Haavind, 2018). However, when divorced parents share care, they might struggle when negotiating how they can involve themselves and take continuous responsibility for their children across households (Jevne & Andenæs, 2017).

4 | METHODS

4.1 | Sampling strategy and participants

The sample comprised 18 parents, representing eight co-parenting pairs and two individuals attending divorce mediation. Two mothers participated in the study, although their male partners did not. Thus, in most cases, we had both parents' perspectives on the divorce and co-parenting processes and the possibility of exploring each parent's understandings of their co-parental transformations. Family mediators at five different family counselling offices in the eastern part of Norway recruited the participating parents based on the following criteria: they (a) had applied for divorce mediation, (b) had children between 6 and 12 years of age and (c) agreed that their children would speak with the mediator. The participants received written information and signed a written consent form. When agreeing to participate, the parents agreed that their children and one or both parents would be interviewed after the mediation. Being part of a larger study exploring children's mediation experiences (Eikrem & Andenæs, 2021), the children and parent samples are closely linked. For both samples, we followed the purposeful sampling principle, aiming to identify varied and information-rich cases (Patton, 2002).

The data collection was ended when we reached data saturation (Saunders et al., 2018), having a rich diversity of data with detailed and varied descriptions of the parents' co-parenting experiences and the children's mediation experiences.

The participants mainly represented white middle-class families. Most couples portrayed themselves as part of an equal parenthood before the divorce, stressing that they were responsible for household chores and the practicalities of the everyday care of their children. The parents practiced or planned a 50–50 time split after the divorce, except for one ethnic minority family, where the mother had the main residence. The participants were mainly in their forties and had been married for 10–20 years. They had one to four children, with at least one child being 6–12 years old. Most couples had approximately the same education level, workload and salary, except for two couples, where the father had an above-average salary, while the mother had average salary. The families were from big cities and small settlements in various areas of Norway. The sample was diverse, including one same-sex couple (females), one couple with an ethnic minority background and one couple with mixed ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

When parents order mediation, they must answer seven questions about their conflict level, which places them in different categories: no or low conflict, moderate conflict, high conflict and in risk of using violence/drugs/alcohol (Dittman et al., 2021). Because of the mandatory mediation, we were informed that all participants were classified as having no or low conflict, being in the same group as 70% of Norwegian parents mediating in the same period.²

The participants were at different stages of practicality of the divorce process. While most participants had moved into different households, three co-parenting couples still lived together at the time of the interviews. One couple was planning to do so for a while, while two couples were close to moving apart. Four couples had not yet finished the economic divorce settlement.

4.2 | Procedure, interviews and ethics

The first author conducted individual, in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with parents a few days after they had attended mediation and after the children had been interviewed. The interviews were not conducted as part of the mediation process or by a person working with the mediators. We wanted to explore parenting in transition as part of a continuous parental relationship. Informed by the life mode interview (Haavind, 1987), we used the flow of events in chronological time as the structuring principle, exploring the timeline of parenting before, during and after the separation. The informants were invited to share their history of marriage, their division of care and labour before the break-up, why the marriage ended and how they were experiencing the current relationship with their ex-spouse. The participants were encouraged to not only reconstruct *specific events* but also include their *interpretations* of and *reflections* on the events. By focusing on their reflections about their actions, we could move beyond generalized descriptions (Haavind, 1987).

The interviews, which lasted between 60 and 80 min, were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were anonymised, and the participants were given fictitious names. The results are presented in a combination of narratives and quotations. The project was approved by the Regional Committees for Medical and Health Research Ethics (REK Nord).³ Because a divorce is a sensitive topic that may generate vulnerable feelings, the parents had the opportunity to contact the mediator after the interview if the interview prompted them to realize that they required further follow-up. As an experienced family therapist trained in dealing with difficult emotions, the interviewer could contain the parents' emotional reactions that appeared during the interview.

4.3 | Data analysis

The analysis of such empirical material involves searching for patterns in the meaning content (Haavind, 2019; Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). Magnusson and Marecek (2015) describe the analytical process in three phases. The first inductive phase involves identifying and excerpting instances of conversational features to study. The second phase involves analysing the work that a particular occurrence of feature performs within the rhetorical context of the excerpted text. The third phase involves relating the analysis to the researchable questions in the study. We refined the analysis by following the steps of the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). We conducted the first round of the thematic analysis separately, and then met and discussed the differences and overlapping themes. This process was performed repeatedly during the analytical process, shaping and refining the themes. In the early stages of the analysis, we were struck by what the parents said about the divorce process. As the parents initially had scored themselves as having a no or low level of conflict, we anticipated they had gone through quite amicable break-up processes. However, our analysis showed that only half of the parents described *synchronized divorce processes*, in which both agreed about the divorce and described amicable, non-conflict divorce processes. The other half described an *unsynchronized divorce process*, in which only one parent wanted to leave the marriage, with the other shocked or surprised by the initiative. Even if the reasons for the divorce were not a recruitment criterion, the sample of unsynchronised divorces involved mothers being left because of infidelity. Divorces triggered by infidelity can create extra emotional triggers during the transition (Shackelford et al., 2000; Warach & Josephs, 2021). This made us curious about how they managed to maintain low-conflict parenting and support the children's relationship with their ex-partner.

This inspired the analytical questions we posed to the material: What emotions do these parents deal with, and how do they involve their children in their turmoil? How does each parent understand the premises for cooperative co-parenting with their ex-partner? How does each parent describe and explain their co-parenting practices during the divorce transition?

The analysis was driven by both the data and our theoretical viewpoint. We examined not only what the parents described that

they did and how they reasoned but also what they were trying to accomplish and the challenges they met. We did not analyse the ex-couples' histories against each other but compared their stories about their life before the divorce, how they shared the workload while living together, the break-up story and how they described parenthood in the time after the divorce. When we interviewed both parents, they were found to have coincident stories. For example, all former couples had corresponding stories about why the marriage ended.

5 | DOING IT FOR THE CHILDREN

The analysis showed that behind the terms 'no or low conflict' were varied experiences. An overarching finding was that transforming parenthood demands active choices and hard work for the children's sake. This choice comprised three themes: (1) continuing established parenting practices, (2) shielding the children and (3) dealing with their own emotions.

5.1 | Continuing established parenting practices

All parents shared the view that maintaining the children's relationship with each parent as consistently as possible during and after the divorce was in the best interest of the children. Most couples portrayed their parenting before the divorce as equal. They highlighted that both of them knew the practicalities of parenthood and expressed trust in each other's ability to provide adequate care. Both parents stressed that the love and emotional ties between the children and each parent should continue. Thus, they portrayed the relationship between the children and each parent as independent of the marital relationship.

A consistent feature was that the parents spoke positively about, trusted, appreciated and respected each other. This was also the case for parents with experiences of infidelity, as this extract shows:

Diana: It's important that they know that Mummy and Daddy love them no matter what (...) I believe their father has the same view. Yes, I know he loves his children very, very deeply. (...) We have always agreed about how to raise our children, about what they need to thrive, so there are no conflicts regarding that (...). He is invested in our children – he has ALWAYS been a great father.

This quotation illustrates how partners who experienced a breach of trust in the romantic relationship were conscious that there had not been a breach of trust in their roles as parents. In Diana's comment, the co-parental trust was based on her experience of the father's parental commitment and their common views on the children's needs when living together. The leaving parent also highlighted that even though the romantic feelings had changed, their view of their ex as a capable parent remained. Emil said:

It's very important for me to stress that they [the children] are lucky to have a mother like her.

Several parents emphasized having equal values and a unified view of child-rearing. Many portrayed the continuity of everyday life from before the divorce as good for their children. Frank said:

I think both of us want to give them [the children] a similar life, regardless of who they spend their week with. We do not overcompensate by offering them an amusement park every weekend, in a way.

While the two households themselves did not have to be similar, these parents stressed that practicing equal parenting implied providing the children with weekdays and normality in both homes.

However, transforming married parenting into divorced parenting was not a walk in the park. The parents described how they worked hard to maintain an adequately close relationship with each other, struggling to balance their involvement across the two households. To create a coherent life for their children, the parents frequently engaged in communication. Even if they lived with their children only 50% of the time, they stressed how they tried to be available to them 100% of the time. For example, parents attended school activities together and coached sports activities regardless of which house the children stayed in, and the children were free to contact the other parent without asking for permission.

Although the couples portrayed themselves as equal, many described a sense of realism connected to previous roles and the division of labour from the time they lived in the same house. They knew about each other's strengths and weaknesses as parents. Elin said:

I know who I was married to, and I know his weak spots, and he knows mine. We will continue to argue about those differences, but we would have argued about them, regardless of the divorce.

This realism was a buffer during the transition. The parents described how they tried to compensate for each other's weak spots, just as they did when they had lived together. They were aware of the balance between, on one hand, not wanting to interfere in the other household and, on the other hand, wanting to prevent information about issues important to the children, such as schoolwork and birthday parties, from slipping as the children moved between the households. Sometimes, parents interfered, and at other times, they allowed the other parent to solve the situation differently from when they lived together. They described this balance as ongoing work carried out 'for the sake of the child'.

For some, being the sole parent in the household provided an opportunity to practice parenting differently. Some said that having the children half the time made parenting more child-centred and harmonious. Harald, for example, appreciated doing things at his own pace:

Now, everything is at MY pace, or OUR [him and the children] pace and terms. This was some of the annoyance before, that my rhythm was disturbed. She came home from work, and we had to change the pace totally, and then we got into conflicts and arguing, and things like that. And now, there is only peace and harmony.

Another buffer seemed to be how parents realized that some conflicts were inevitable and that repairing was important. Many attempted to take responsibility for their own actions and described how the other parent also showed tolerance and let things pass. Anders described his communicative challenges with his ex-spouse as follows:

We keep telling each other how important it is to cooperate, and I think we both believe the other one fails. She obviously thinks I fail a lot, and she tells me, together with emotional outbursts that sometimes make sense to me and sometimes are totally out of space. (...) And I think we share this experience of trying and trying and failing and failing.

As this extract shows, cooperative co-parenting is not something that just happens but may fail and demands tolerance and conscious work.

All couples in the study had practiced a shared economy while living together. However, after the divorce, the economy was strained in both households. Some agreed to postpone the financial settlement mainly because they wanted to enable one of the parents to retain their common house. These parents were aware of the difficulties and potential conflicts of interest and tried to work out solutions that would not ruin their relationship. They seemed to agree to take one difficult transition at a time. The custody agreement made in the mediation was insurance against 'the bumpy days'.

John: Economy is a source of conflict, and envy and jealousy. Tomorrow I meet her for lunch, to plan for the next months, holidays and things like that. Then we must sit down and make the financial settlement, but, well(...)But all the practicalities concerning the children are in place and work fine.

These parents anticipated disagreements in the future but trusted their ability to find solutions.

5.2 | Shielding the children

All parents portrayed the children as innocent parties in the divorce, stressing that the children's needs were the most important. They perceived the divorce as an emotional and practical load for the children and focused on how to make this load as light as possible, even if it demanded hard work.

Anne: The children are innocent in the choices we make as their parents. But we have chosen to give birth to them, and now we need to accept the consequences, no matter how hard it is. (...) It's not a walk in the park, but I do it for the children.

One of the first issues the parents had to handle was how to inform their children about the divorce. In this process, the parents had many reflections on, and trade-offs linked to, how to best protect the children and make the divorce as gentle on them as possible. The parents emphasized having a common explanation of why they had decided to divorce. Most parents informed the children together. Frank and his ex-spouse agreed that being told by only one parent would make it less dramatic for their children. They chose the father because they both positioned him as emotionally closer to the child.

Frank: I took her on a ride in the car. We started talking, and I told her that her mother and I were just friends.

Some parents struggled to agree on when to inform their children. Timing could involve considerations about the children's need to digest the information and receive support to prepare for the changes the divorce would entail.

When the divorce was caused by infidelity, the parents carefully considered what information they should share with the children. In these families, the story about the divorce could change over time, often gradually becoming closer to the truth. Diana argued that they should adjust the story to protect the children and their relationship with the unfaithful parent. She described how she guided her ex-husband:

He had planned to tell the children that he had fallen in love with another woman. I told him that he should not do that if he cared about the children. I told him that if he did not tell them, they would continue to like him.

However, by not telling the children the whole story, the children canalized all their anger and blame for the divorce towards her. She, therefore, adjusted the story, saying that she had not wanted to divorce, gently suggesting the following reason:

I managed to make the story evolve bit by bit (...) I had to tell the children that it is impossible to have two girlfriends at the same time, [and my son's response was] 'Ah, is it like that? He got x [his current girlfriend] as a girlfriend, and then he was unable to be your boyfriend anymore?'

Overall, the parents balanced several considerations during the divorce process to shield the children, support the relationship with the other parent and protect their own relationship with the children.

All parents stressed that cooperation was essential to caring for the children, which implied a conscious choice to pick their battles:

Hege: Both of us have managed to let things go (...) The goal is to make it as good as possible for the children.

This viewpoint was based on an understanding that parents must shield their children from ongoing and future conflicts. However, while the parents described the 50–50 time split as natural and indisputable, giving up time with the children was not necessarily easy. Anne said:

What is in the best interest of the child? I do not know (...) I did not become a mother to be with my children only half the time, but it is important that they experience having a caring and involved father (...) I find this very difficult (...) It is difficult to really distinguish between my needs, their father's needs and what is the best interest of the children.

This mother fulfilled her notion of good parenting after the divorce by allowing her children to continue having a strong relationship with their father, even if this meant putting aside her own needs. For all these parents, however, prioritizing their children's needs seemed to take constant effort and demand ongoing choices.

5.3 | Dealing with their own emotions

The parents invested significant time and energy into emotional work for the children's sake. Those involved in a synchronized divorce had processed many of their difficult feelings before making the decision to divorce and did not describe any anger directed at their ex-partner. Many were confident that they had given the marriage enough work and time and shared a history of growing apart over time, with their romantic relationship transforming into friendship. Some said that they had stayed married longer than they had wanted, because of the children, and that the decision was long overdue.

However, even synchronized divorce processes had substantial practical, emotional and physical costs and consequences. Many described deep feelings of sorrow about giving up on the idea of 'happily ever after' and exposing their children to the experience of divorce. Some stressed that they missed having their children around and being a nuclear family. Cathrine explained:

It was and is terrible. I lost weight and did not sleep (...) I'm still on a 40% sick leave. So many things happen in a year (...) I do not miss her father living here, but I miss, how can I put it? Having the herd gathered.

As this quotation illustrates, the practical and emotional changes that accompanied the divorce were challenging even when the couples agreed to divorce and had time to prepare for it.

Parents with *unsynchronized divorce process*, however, described the divorce as complicated, difficult and brutal. In all but one family, the divorce was triggered by infidelity, sometimes with new relationships being established after a short time. The parents being left, all of whom were mothers, talked about feelings of sorrow and shock, describing their ex-spouse's initiative to divorce as 'lightning from clear skies'. Some said they lost a lot in a short time and that they worked hard not to become 'the crazy ex', a bad version of themselves. Many described a strong commitment to hiding their anger or bitterness. To stop themselves from acting on their negative emotions, some engaged vigorously in regulating and disengaging themselves emotionally, as this extract shows:

Elin: Thinking about it, I think it has gone better than I anticipated. Of course, I was not a cake-baking supermum the first months. But we [she and the children] spoke a lot. I did not burn his suits. I did not throw anything, and I did not shout. And the children had food every day and clean clothes (...) Everything was unreal. I lost a lot in a very, very short time.

Some parents made a choice not to say anything negative about each other or the new partner. One mother described how she would write text messages to her ex in range and manage to stop herself from sending them. Many found comfort in being able to handle the daily tasks of parenting and caring for the children in challenging situations. Although the divorce was emotionally difficult, they believed the situation would improve over time.

What was pervasive was how the parents initiating the divorce described their ex-spouse with empathy and acknowledged the other's pain. The leaving spouse acknowledged their responsibility for putting their ex-spouse in a difficult situation that required significant emotional work. This was appreciated by the deceived spouse. Thus, both parents seemed to understand that their actions affected each other.

Parents with synchronized as well as parents with unsynchronized divorce processes emphasized having an external support system. Some relied on friends for advice and support, while others sought professional guidance.

Anne: I have many close friends. I have appointments with a psychologist. I like my job. And I'm lucky to be able to speak about my situation. I'm not afraid to tell it as it is: I was left for another woman. (...) But I sympathize with those without this support system. To reduce the negative effects on the children, it is important to have a support system that can help you.

Anne was also grateful to live in a country that offered free counselling for parents in the divorce process.

Some parents had full- or part-time sick leave during the transition.⁴ This gave them space to deal with some of the emotional and practical transitions that accompanied the divorce, making them more able to prioritize the children's needs.

6 | DISCUSSION: IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO

By examining how low-conflict parents describe how they deal with and make meaning of parenting during their divorce, this study contributes to the knowledge about cooperative parenting in transition. What these parents showed us is that cooperative co-parents work hard for the children's sake. The analysis showed that the transforming process involved efforts to (1) continue established parenting practices, (2) shield the children and (3) deal with their own emotions.

These three themes relate to some overarching premises that are important when dealing with cooperative co-parenting in the divorce process (1) trust and balance, (2) minimizing damage and equal closeness and (3) emotional work and acceptance of faults, for the children's sake. The first two forming the basis of the work the third requires.

6.1 | Trust and balance

While most children will benefit from a co-parenting alliance that continues after the divorce (Becher et al., 2019), parents might struggle to establish a cooperative parental relationship because of the difficulties in redefining new boundaries in the relationship (Emery & Dillon, 1994; Madden-Derdich et al., 1999). This study implies two important premises for handling new boundaries and establishing cooperative parenting during the divorce.

First, this study aligns with previous research suggesting that parents who practice shared and cooperative co-parenting after the divorce also did so while living together (Kitterød et al., 2014). Furthermore, like previous studies (Jevne & Andenæs, 2017; Russell et al., 2016), we found that cooperative co-parents trust that the other parent is 'good enough' and will provide the children with culturally adequate care. This trust is based on experiences from family life before the divorce and motivates parents to facilitate and support the emotional bond the children have with each parent. Because the parents acknowledge that the divorce is demanding for their children, they work hard to minimize the potential adverse effects.

Second, practicing equal parenthood does not mean that each parent acts in the same way. The parents in this study had a high tolerance for differences. Like previous studies (e.g., Jamison et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2016; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010), the parents in our study also communicated realistic expectations to each other, tried to speak positively about each other with their children and respected each other's parenting efforts and contributions. They also worked hard to find a good balance between letting go and staying alert as parents. On one hand, the parents were coordinated, talked to each other frequently about matters concerning their children and handled the practicalities of parenting. They practiced shared care (Andenæs, 2011; Andenæs & Haavind, 2018; Jevne & Andenæs, 2017) by continuously taking responsibility for the children, even when the children were with their co-parent. On the other hand, they also remained aware of the boundaries between the homes and

did not interfere unnecessarily with how the other parent organized the children's everyday life. Thus, these parents worked actively to redefine intimacy and power boundaries in their parental relationships (Emery & Dillon, 1994).

6.2 | Minimizing damage and equal closeness

Madden-Derdich and Leonard (2002) suggested that a lack of norms to guide post-divorce co-parenting can create tension between the former spouses as they attempt to define their new family roles. In Norway, the cultural ideal of minimizing the damage one inflicts upon one's children during the divorce is reinforced through a system of compulsory mediation. The parents in this study were aware of and supported the cultural norm of cooperation after the divorce and worked hard to live up to these ideals. By stressing that the children needed to be shielded and were less negatively affected if they continued to have two equal parents present in their lives, these parents incorporated the Nordic ideals of symmetry and devotion (Westerling, 2016).

The main cultural premise for the divorce in Norway is equal parenting, which is structurally practiced by equally dividing the time parents spend with their children. This paper expands the term symmetry (Westerling, 2016) by showing that equal parenthood before the divorce seems to buffer potential conflicts during the divorce process. The history of labour division (full-time job, housework and childcare) and equality before the divorce seems to continue after the divorce, as the parents agree that their children need an everyday life and emotional closeness with two equal caregivers.

Like the parents studied by Bertelsen (2021), the parents in this study also aimed to establish a sense of constant emotional presence despite their partial physical absence by stressing to the children that they are always available. However, in this study, both parents acknowledged the other parent as having genuine equal closeness with the other parent, preventing one parent from having an upper hand in defining the children's emotional needs.

6.3 | Emotional work and acceptance of faults

In their 2014 study of what inhibits and promotes cooperative co-parenting, Jamison et al. demonstrated that co-parenting is an intrapersonal and interpersonal process and that reorganizing the inner life is a foundation for co-parenting resilience. Our study aligns with these findings. To achieve cooperative co-parenting, the parents strived to regulate their emotional responses, which required a high degree of self-regulation and an ability to seek external support. Previous studies (Lunde et al., 2017) have indicated that seeking professional help is more common among people with educational and economic resources. Representing mainly middle-class families, the parents in this study might have embodied this capacity to ask for help dealing with their emotions. This meant that they worked hard to prevent conflicts.

This study shows that cooperative co-parenting is not a linear process. The parents tried and sometimes failed in their efforts to establish cooperation, yet they accepted failure and trusted their ability to repair the relationship with each other. The couples had a shared understanding of the divorce process, acknowledging the emotional work being done by their co-parents to deal with the loss of family life as they knew it. Behind the terms *cooperative co-parenting* and *divorces with low conflict* are varied experiences. Yet all parents have in common that they put considerable emotional efforts into living up to the cultural ideal of divorcing in the best possible way for their children.

7 | CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The concepts 'boundaries' and 'shared care' have shown that trusting the other parent as a suitable caregiver is key to cooperative co-parenting after the divorce. An equal parenthood before the divorce makes the transition easier, as the established form of parenthood continues after the divorce. Accordingly, professionals working with divorced parents should explore the history of care (Jevne & Andenæs, 2017), how divorcing parents practiced parenthood before the divorce and their trust in each other. As cooperative co-parenting after the divorce demands hard work from both parents, professionals must also recognize the parents' efforts to regulate their emotions and repair mistakes and explore their surrounding support systems. However, highlighting cooperative parenthood after the divorce as something taken for granted might hide the hard work involved. Having contact with professionals can be helpful for parents in the no-or low-conflict divorce categories as it provides an opportunity to talk about the transitions and expectations of parenting during and after the divorce. This recognition can help parents shield and support their children during this transition.

8 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Like 70% of divorcing families in Norway, the parents in this study were also categorized as no-or low-conflict parents in the mediation process. Thus, the results are relevant not only for understanding co-parenting in transition in Norway but also for low-conflict parents in other countries, such as parents not needing court mediation. We would like to point out some possible limitations. The parents in this study agreed to allow their children to participate in mediation and the research project, which may indicate that they were more attuned to their children's needs than most parents in this situation. For some families, the interviews occurred early in the divorce process, and the parents had not yet agreed on the financial terms of the divorce. Previous studies have shown that the divorce often reduces financial security, which in turn might affect the quality of cooperative co-parenting (Amato, 2000; Russell et al., 2016). Some parents in this study acknowledged financial issues as a risk factor for their future.

With one exception, all parents positioned themselves as belonging to a family that practiced gender-equal parenting before the divorce. We have not challenged their understanding by asking for timetables or objective measurements because we emphasize their subjective understandings. Their positionings are supported by the couples' similar stories about each other's contributions to childcare and their strengths and weaknesses as parents.

While gender significantly influences parenthood before and after the divorce, we have not conducted an in-depth analysis of gender. Mothers and fathers in this study stressed their equality when describing their commitment to work and their practical and emotional caregiving. Yet they might have been influenced by how to live up to the idea of 'divorcing' in the preferred cultural way, trivializing actual differences regarding gender. Furthermore, in this study, only mothers were left because of infidelity. It would therefore be interesting to study how fathers make meaning of and deal with such experiences.

Finally, even if the sample contained some diversity, most of the informants represented middle-class cultural values about how the divorce should occur in Norway at a certain time in history. A larger and broader selection can offer more expansive input on how to maintain cooperative co-parenting after the divorce. Furthermore, longitudinal studies of families can provide deeper insights into the transitions of the divorce over time. Studying how cooperative co-parenting evolves as children grow older and perhaps as new partners (and their children) are included in the changing family constellations might highlight additional challenges to parental cooperation over time.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest with respect to the research and publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Authors elect to not share data. Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The latest nationally representative survey was conducted in 2012. There are no recent surveys, but from our experience, the number is higher now.

² Numbers from family counselling offices statistics Fado for 2018 and 2019, 22.9.2020.

³ Ref 2017/143/REK nord, as a part of the project 'Family Dynamics Study' at Fhi (The Norwegian Institute of Public Health).

⁴ In Norway, one receives full salary from the first day of sick leave, and psychological stress and sorrow are diagnoses that can qualify for sick leave.

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