



Systematic review

Systematic Review of the Impact of Parent-Child Separation on Children's Mental Health and Development

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ABSTRACT

A large number of children around the world are separated from their parents either by social services or due to parental decisions. The causes are multiple and include child violence, parental abandonment, illegal immigration, parental imprisonment, etc. The purpose of the present study is to review scientific research on the effects on children of being separated from their parents. For this, a Systematic Review was carried out using the PRISMA statement on the scientific bases DOAJ, Scielo and Redalyc. Open access articles in English have been included. The filtering, screening and final selection are expressed in a flowchart and tables. According to the analysis it was identified that the effects are not specific to the type of separation and include a high incidence of neurological changes as a result of psychological trauma, early sexual development, physical and sexual abuse, school dropout, subpar academic performance, strained peer relationships, symptoms of psychosomatic and psychiatric disorders, as well as internalizing and externalizing behavior. It is also associated with anxiety, depression, delinquency, substance abuse, inappropriate sexual behavior and self-harm. Evidence suggests that separation can lead to ongoing cycles of family division. Research has shown that children are most at risk between the ages of 9 months and 9 years. Particularly high-risk conditions include separation during the preschool years, abrupt separation without prior notice to the child, being cared for by strangers and simultaneous change of residence.

Revisión Sistemática sobre el Impacto de la Separación de Padres e Hijos en la Salud Mental y el Desarrollo Infantil

RESUMEN

Un gran número de niños de todo el mundo son separados de sus padres por decisión de los servicios sociales o de los propios padres. Las causas son múltiples e incluyen la violencia infantil, el abandono parental, la inmigración ilegal, el encarcelamiento de los padres, etc. El objetivo del presente estudio es revisar la investigación científica sobre los efectos que la separación de los padres tiene en los niños. Para ello, se ha llevado a cabo una revisión sistemática utilizando la declaración PRISMA en las bases de datos científicas DOAJ, Scielo y Redalyc. Se han incluido artículos de acceso abierto en inglés. El filtrado, cribado y selección final se expresan en un diagrama de flujo y tablas. Según el análisis, se identificó que los efectos no son específicos del tipo de separación e incluyen una alta incidencia de cambios neurológicos como resultado de traumas psicológicos, desarrollo sexual temprano, abuso físico y sexual, deserción escolar, bajo rendimiento académico, relaciones conflictivas con los pares, síntomas de trastornos psicósomáticos y psiquiátricos, así como conductas de tipo internalizante y externalizante. También se asocia a ansiedad, depresión, delincuencia, abuso de sustancias, comportamiento sexual inadecuado y autolesiones. La evidencia sugiere que la separación puede dar lugar a ciclos continuos de separación familiar. Las investigaciones han demostrado que los niños corren mayor riesgo entre los 9 meses y los 9 años de edad. Entre las situaciones de especial riesgo se encuentran la separación durante los años preescolares, la separación brusca sin previo aviso al niño, el ser cuidado por extraños y el cambio simultáneo de residencia.

Palabras clave:

Toma de decisiones en los tribunales de familia
Apego
Adopción
Separación familiar
Trauma infantil

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The fundamental purpose of this systematic review is to carry out an objective and rigorous synthesis of academic literature and empirical studies that address the consequences of parental separation on children. Through an exhaustive search of the literature, we have identified and selected the most relevant studies that address this issue, with the aim of providing a complete and updated view on the various dimensions and consequences of this situation to facilitate the work of professionals in charge of children affected by this problem as well as those in charge of designing public policies related to this issue.

The separation of children from their parents is a complex and intricate phenomenon which can occur in a variety of contexts, such as migration, adoption, forced displacement, conflictual divorce and natural disasters. Over the years, this issue has attracted increasing interest from the scientific community, society in general and public policy makers, due to its profound implications for children's development and welfare (Crittenden & Spieker, 2023).

Despite increasing awareness and research efforts, many challenges persist in understanding the complexities of child-parent separation and its effects on children across different socio-cultural settings. Key questions remain unresolved, including the specific mechanisms through which separation impacts child development, the differential outcomes based on varying contexts of separation, and the effectiveness of interventions aimed at mitigating the negative consequences of separation. Moreover, the influence of factors such as socio-economic status, cultural background, and the quality of parent-child relationships further complicates the understanding of this phenomenon. Addressing these gaps in knowledge is crucial for informing evidence-based policies and interventions aimed at promoting the well-being and resilience of children experiencing parental separation. Therefore, this review seeks to explore the intricacies of child-parent separation, examine its diverse manifestations, and critically evaluate existing research to identify avenues for future inquiry and intervention.

A systematic review of the consequences of parental separation on children serves as a valuable tool for advancing knowledge, guiding practice, and improving outcomes for children and families experiencing this challenging circumstance since it provides a comprehensive overview of the existing literature, consolidating findings from multiple studies to offer a nuanced understanding of the topic. It also helps to identify patterns, trends, and gaps in research, facilitating evidence-based decision-making for professionals working with affected children and policymakers. It can also be useful to design relevant interventions, inform the outcomes of policies, and support services aimed at mitigating the negative effects of parental separation on children's well-being. In addition, by highlighting areas where evidence is lacking or conflicting, a systematic review can guide future research efforts, directing attention towards unanswered questions or emerging areas of interest.

The present study focused on three types of separations: First, separation with parents due to adverse family conditions, among which we can list conflictive parental separation, being placed in foster care, and being given up for adoption. Secondly, separation due to a parent's job, such as parents who are sent on a military mission or work far from where their family resides, and lastly, involuntary separation such as when parents are illegal immigrants who are deported or are incarcerated.

Separation Due to Adverse Family Conditions

Parental Abuse and Neglect

Child maltreatment and abuse involve several forms of physical, emotional, or sexual violence and is a significant concern for both society and the academic community due to its profound impact on the well-being and development of children. It creates a traumatic experience for young individuals, resulting in long-lasting and severe consequences, which vary based on the type and severity of the abuse, as well as the support provided by the environment (Crittenden & Spieker, 2023).

Children who have experienced maltreatment face a higher risk of developing psychological conditions such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder. The emotional impact of maltreatment may hinder their capacity to manage emotions and handle stress as adults (Crittenden, 2016; Milozzi & Marmo, 2022).

These children often have difficulties in interpersonal relationships. Child maltreatment can lead to trust and attachment problems in relationships with others. Survivors of maltreatment may have difficulty establishing healthy attachments and may experience communication problems and limited social skills.

Other related effects may include diminished self-esteem and a detrimental self-image. Children who have experienced abuse often internalize harmful messages, leading to a pessimistic self-view and a lack of confidence. Moreover, challenges in academics and employment are frequently evident.

As a coping mechanism, some maltreated individuals may resort to risky behaviors, such as substance abuse, excessive alcohol consumption or participation in dangerous activities, as a way of dealing with past trauma.

Child maltreatment is associated with a higher risk of long-term physical health problems, such as gastrointestinal and cardiovascular disorders, immune system problems, and obesity.

When children undergo severe abuse and neglect, it may result in them being placed in foster care or being adopted. Foster care is not only the outcome of detrimental living conditions but also a factor that heightens the chances of experiencing worsened physical, behavioral, and mental well-being. Moreover, when children are moved from one foster home to another, it intensifies the adverse effects they face (Rubin et al., 2007; Ryan & Testa, 2005).

In terms of Western countries, the United Kingdom stands out with the highest proportion of children residing outside their homes. This is due to four worrisome trends: the surge in investigations into families, the mounting number of children in alternative care, the decline in children being reunited with their parents, and the decrease in adoptions (UK Department for Education, 2017).

Conflicted Parental Separation

In cases of conflicted parental separation, problems between parents often affect children even before separation and have a negative impact on growth and brain structure. Children may experience intense feelings of anxiety, anger, confusion and sadness due to the breakup of their families and constant exposure to parental conflict. They may as well be caught in the middle of the parental dispute and experience loyalty to one of the parents. As a

consequence of that, they will experience great distress. When the exposure to parental conflict is constant, it might generate a state of chronic stress that negatively affects the development of key brain regions in emotional regulation such as the hippocampus and amygdala (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Sometimes, in situations of conflictive parental separation, the child loses contact with one of the two parents, which further accentuates the above-mentioned consequences and has a harmful effect on the child's physical and psychological health.

Separation Due to the Work of One of the Parents

One of the biggest challenges that any family may face is when one parent has to live far away due to their job. This could be because they are seeking economic advancement or because of the nature of their work, such as military personnel being sent on missions. An example of this is seen in the United States, where between 2001 and now, around 1 to 2 million children have been separated from their parents due to military assignments (Lester et al., 2010; Nguyen et al., 2014; Siegel & Davis, 2013). Similar to any complex situation, it affects children and teenagers as they are at stages of development where the presence of a parent at home holds great importance, and the absence of a parent naturally leads to repercussions.

In disadvantages nations, with several economic problems (such as Latin American, African or Asian countries), a high number of children are separated from their parents since they have to travel to distant regions or countries in search of employment.

Involuntary Separation

In 2018, thousands of children were separated from their parents by American immigration authorities (Kopan, 2018). That same year, more than 200.000 U.S. children were separated from their parents and placed in foster care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & Administration for Children and Families, 2022), with similar placement statistics in 2019 and 2020.

Parent-child separation is widely acknowledged as a distressing situation, yet it has been reluctantly embraced as an indispensable measure for a significant proportion of children. On a global scale, the provision of institutional care for abandoned or orphaned children is prevalent. Through diverse approaches, Desmond et al. (2020) conducted a study and approximated that in 2015, a staggering number of children, ranging from 3.2 million to 9.4 million, experienced the unfortunate reality of being separated from their parents and subsequently placed in institutional settings.

Method

A systematic review is a research methodology that involves the comprehensive and structured synthesis of existing literature on a specific topic or research question. It follows a predefined protocol that includes systematic searching, screening, and selection of relevant studies, followed by the extraction, analysis, and synthesis of data from these studies.

The aim of a systematic review is to provide an unbiased and comprehensive summary of the current evidence on a particular topic, allowing for the identification of patterns, trends, and gaps in the literature.

The methodology for this study was selected to ensure a rigorous, comprehensive, and objective synthesis of the evidence on the consequences of parental separation on children, with the aim of informing practice, policy, and future research in this critical area.

The present review follows standards of the PRISMA statement (Urrútia & Bonfill, 2010; Munive-Rojas & Gutiérrez-Garibay, 2015), according to quality steps for systematic review except for items 5, 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 22 and 27, which are specific for meta-analytic review studies.

The standards outlined in the PRISMA statement were followed to ensure a transparent and rigorous systematic review. The article selection process included four phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. In the initial phase, 5,260 potentially relevant studies were identified through an exhaustive search in the DOAJ, Scielo, and Redalyc databases, using the keywords "Consequences" and "Parent-Child Separation." Boolean operators and synonyms were employed to maximize search coverage. Inclusion criteria were: articles published in English, studies with open access, and publications from the last ten years. Studies that were duplicated, irrelevant to the primary topic, or lacked a clearly defined methodological framework were excluded.

Each article was assessed for methodological quality and thematic relevance using a scoring system adapted from criteria commonly applied in systematic reviews. The selected articles (n=35) were analyzed to extract key information regarding design, studied population, and main findings. This approach enabled the identification of common patterns and significant differences in the effects of parent-child separation on children.

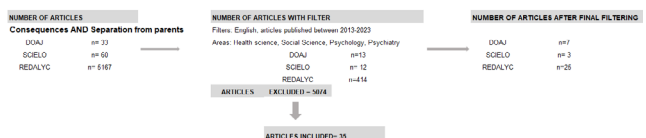
To ensure the traceability of the process, a PRISMA-style flowchart was created, highlighting exclusion stages and the corresponding justifications. Additionally, the quality of the included studies was evaluated using a checklist to ensure that all selected works met minimum standards of scientific rigor.

The Review has been registered in PROSPERO under the number 545462 for promoting transparency, preventing bias, and enhancing collaboration. This registration ensures methodological rigor, discourages outcome switching, and facilitates the dissemination of findings.

Procedure

This systematic review adhered to PRISMA standards, focusing on key elements such as title, abstract, eligibility criteria, sources of information, study selection, data extraction, and results synthesis. The review process is summarized below: (see figure 1)

Figure 1
Flow Diagram



Search Strategy

As shown in figure 1, flow diagram, an exhaustive search was conducted in the DOAJ, Scielo, and Redalyc databases on July 20, 2023, using the keywords "Consequences" AND "Parent-Child

Separation.” Boolean operators and synonyms were applied to broaden the search. Articles were included if they were published in English, open access, and within the last ten years. Initially, 5,260 articles were identified.

Screening and Selection Process

Articles were filtered based on the following criteria:

- Inclusion Criteria: (a) Published in English, (b) Published within the last ten years, and (c) Relevant to the topic.
- Exclusion Criteria: Duplicate studies, articles lacking a methodological framework, or studies irrelevant to the primary research question.

Following these steps, 439 articles were screened, and 35 met the inclusion criteria. Screening was conducted independently by two reviewers, with disagreements resolved through consensus.

Justification for Criteria

English was chosen due to its predominance in scientific communication and higher peer review standards. Research from

the last decade was prioritized to reflect contemporary societal contexts and methodological advancements.

Quality Assessment

Studies were evaluated for methodological rigor using a standardized scoring system. Only studies meeting minimum quality thresholds were included.

This rigorous procedure ensures that the selected studies provide reliable and relevant evidence on the consequences of parent-child separation, enabling robust conclusions and recommendations.

Results

In the articles considered, we report: the author(s) and year of publication, instrument, sample and relevant results. The aforementioned information is reported in Table 1.

The data obtained are homogeneous, as reflected in the table of results. The different articles surveyed conclude that the separation of children from their parents has a negative impact on the child’s physical and mental health.

Table 1
Multidimensional Consequences of Paren-Child Separation. Analysis of Key Studies

	Autor/Year	Instrument	Sample	Results
1	Acion, L., Ramirez, M. R., Jorge, R. E., & Arndt, S. (2013).	Iowa Youth Survey 2010	78.240 secondary school students	Adolescents who are children of military personnel recently sent away from home on assignment are at substantially increased risk of using alcohol, marijuana, and other illegal drugs. Changes in the place of residence accentuate the problems, and those most at risk are those who do not live with the other parent or a close relative.
2	Alfano, C. A. Lau, S., Balderas, J., Bunnell, B. E., & Beidel, D. C. (2016).	Systematic Review		How children adapt to separation is strongly influenced by their stage of development. The sudden absence of parents is very stressful and incomprehensible to young children. Children of military personnel who are on a mission have decreased academic performance. It has also been observed to be associated with increased maltreatment, sexual abuse, and physical and emotional neglect. There are additional associated stressors such as moving, moving away from family and friends, or financial hardship. From 2005 to 2015, there was a notable rise of 19% in the probability of Hispanic children residing in the United States being separated from their parents and entrusted to the care of relatives or friends who were not at risk of deportation. Similarly, the likelihood of children living with an undocumented parent without the other parent’s presence has seen a 20% increase. The immediate consequences for children of detained immigrants encompass a range of physical, behavioral, and emotional issues. Additionally, developmental and speech delays have been observed. It is important to note that certain problems may persist even after the reunification of these children with their parents.
3	Amuedo-Durantes, C., & Arenas-Arroyo, E. (2019).			It was found that there is a significant association between parental divorce and the following mental health aspects: depression, anxiety, suicide attempt and ideation, distress alcohol abuse, smoking and drugs use. A decrease in symptomatology is observed in the studies published between 1999 and 2017.
4	Auersperg, F., Vlasak, T., Ponocny, I., & Barth, A. (2019).	Meta-analysis	506.299 participants	The positive impact of removing neglectful and abusive homes on girls’ schooling is evident, with a decrease of 22.8% in the need for special education and the risk of repetition. However, no significant differences are observed in boys, indicating that they do not benefit as much from the removal of such homes.
5	Bald, A., Chyn, E., Hastings, J. S., & Machelett, M. (2019).	Remove records of Rhode Island entre 2016-2018	13834 Children <6 años and 4821 niños >6 Children	The article suggests that the continuous threat of parental deportation and the chronic uncertainty surrounding family security have detrimental effects on Latin American children and youth, particularly those living in mixed-status households. Many children perceive this situation as a form of psychological violence. Childhood adversity is identified as the most influential predictor of early-onset health conditions and mental illnesses, including anxiety, depression, and psychological stress. Recent advancements in behavioral neuroscience reveal that significant fear-inducing experiences during early life can disrupt the normal development of stress regulation, learning, memory, and social behavior.
6	Barajas-Gonzalez, R. G., Ayon, C., & Torres, F. (2018).	Literature Review Study		

	Autor/Year	Instrument	Sample	Results
7	Bell, T., & Romano, E. (2017).	Systematic Review		Various studies have shown that children placed in kinship care experience greater permanency, with lower rates of reentry, increased stability, and more placements with guardians compared to those living with foster families. However, children in kinship care have lower rates of adoption and reunification. Over time, the differences in these variables tend to diminish.
8	Bergström, M., Fransson, E., Modin, B., Berlin, M., Gustafsson, P. A., & Hjern, A. (2015).	National classroom Survey	147.839 students from 6th to 9th grade.	Children in shared custody tend to experience fewer psychosomatic problems compared to those primarily or solely living with one parent. However, they do report more symptoms than children in nuclear families. The satisfaction with material resources and parent-child relationships is associated with the psychosomatic health of children.
9	Bergström, M., Salari, R., Hjern, A., Hognas, R., Bergqvist, K., & Fransson, E. (2021).	Parental reports of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire and coparenting quality	12.845 3 yrs. Old children.	It was observed that there is an association between increased mental health problems and living mostly and only with one parent. This study suggests that the quality of shared parenting is a key determinant of mental health in preschool children and, therefore, should be the target of preventive interventions.
10	Biehal, N., Sinclair, I., & Wade, J. (2015).	Survey to Teachers and Social Workers	149 maltreated children	The study examined the progress of children six months after they returned home or, for those who did not reunite with their families, six months after the decision was made for them to remain in care. Four years later, the children were followed up again. The study found that the main factors influencing reunification were improvements in the parents' issues and the absence of unacceptably high risks to the child. Two-thirds of the children returned to improved family situations, sometimes due to changes in their home environment, while others were reunified despite lingering concerns. Remaining in care was strongly associated with positive outcomes across various aspects at the end of the follow-up period. Neglected children who were reunified, regardless of the stability of the reunification, had particularly poor outcomes. These findings highlight the potential of the care system to produce positive results for maltreated children.
11	Boyle, C. (2015).	Systematic Review		The study found that outcomes were more positive when there was collaboration between biological families and adoptive parents or foster caregivers. On the other hand, children who had ongoing contact with maltreating birth parents tended to have worse outcomes. These findings support current policies and previous research, emphasizing the need for a careful assessment and planning of contact.
12	Brown, A., Waters, C. S., & Shelton, K. H. (2017).	Systematic Review		This systematic review addresses a gap in knowledge regarding the behavioral and emotional outcomes, as well as academic achievement, of school-aged children who have been adopted from care. Adoption was associated with poorer academic achievement and higher levels of behavioral problems throughout childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood compared to non-adopted individuals.
13	Côté, S. M., Orri, M., Marttila, M., & Ristikari, T. (2018).		59476 individuals	Individuals who were removed from their homes as children were more likely to have substance-related disorders, psychotic or bipolar disorders, depression or anxiety, neurodevelopmental disorders, and other disorders compared to control subjects. Furthermore, these participants had a greater number of prescriptions for psychotropic medications and higher rates of criminal convictions.
14	Culpin, I., Heron, J., Araya, R., & Joinson, C. (2015).	Short Mood and Feelings Questionnaire	7056 14 yrs. Old girls	In the case of girls from father-absent households, it was observed that they experienced earlier menarche and reported higher levels of depressive symptoms compared to girls from father-present households. Additionally, there was evidence suggesting that girls from families residing in rented housing and those facing financial problems had higher levels of depressive symptoms and earlier menarche. Moreover, girls whose mothers had prenatal depression reported higher levels of depressive symptoms and earlier menarche compared to girls whose mothers did not experience prenatal depression.
15	Doyle, J. J. (2013).			The results of the study indicate that being placed in foster care increases the likelihood of delinquency episodes and the need for emergency medical care. However, caution should be exercised when interpreting these estimates as they are based on "marginal cases" within a natural experiment, where researchers may have differing opinions on the placement recommendation.
16	Edyburn, K. L., & Meek, S. (2021).	Literature Review Study		A review of the literature reveals that even short experiences of detention, particularly when children are separated from their parents and caregivers, have severe and long-lasting negative effects across various domains of functioning. The practices of separation, detention, and transfer to temporary camps further compound the traumatic experiences that migrant families often flee from, subsequently placing already vulnerable children on a path of continued marginalization.
17	Fisher, P. A. (2015).	Literature Review Study		While a significant portion of these populations may lack mental health support and exhibit deficits in neurobiological or developmental aspects, there is also evidence of positive outcomes. A substantial proportion of these populations lack mental health support and experience deficits in neurobiological or developmental areas. Additionally, evidence from studies on the phenomenon of catch-up among adopted children after being in institutional foster care is included. Although complete recovery from early stressful experiences may not be achievable, research in this field suggests that adoption, particularly during the early years of life, maximizes the likelihood of a positive life trajectory. It is important to note that much of the systematic peer-reviewed longitudinal research on foster and adopted children does not extend beyond early adulthood. Therefore, it remains unclear whether the observed outcomes in the literature persist later in life. This is an area of great significance for future studies.

18	Friborg, O., Sørlic, T., Schei, B., Javo, C., Sørbye, Ø., & Hansen, K. L. (2020).	SAMINOR 1 y 2	24.459 adults.	In Norway, Indigenous Sámi and Kven minority children were placed in boarding schools with the aim of accelerating their adoption of the Norwegian majority language and culture. This study, which is based on a population sample, examines the rates of health, welfare, and disability pension among these children for the first time. Participants who attended boarding schools reported higher levels of discrimination, violence, engagement in unhealthy lifestyle behaviors such as smoking, lower levels of education, and family income compared to those who were not placed in boarding schools. The findings of this study align with the existing international literature on health disparities and emphasize the risk of poor health outcomes following the placement of indigenous or minority children in boarding schools.
19	Fujisawa, T. X., Shimada, K., Takiguchi, S., Mizushima, S., Kosaka, H., Teicher, M. H., & Tomoda, A. (2018).	3-Tesla scanner Statistical Parametric Scanner	21 children diagnosed with RAD	The objective of this research was to examine how the type and timing of childhood adversities impact the structural changes in regional gray matter volume in maltreated children with RAD. The results of the study revealed that there is a potential sensitive period between the ages of 5 and 7, during which there is a reduction in gray matter volume in the left primary visual cortex (BA17) as a result of maltreatment. Furthermore, the number of different types of maltreatment experienced by the child had the most significant impact on the reduction in gray matter volume, followed by exposure to neglect. These findings provide compelling evidence that the type and timing of maltreatment experienced by children and adolescents with RAD have a significant influence on the structural abnormalities observed in their brains. This research highlights the importance of early intervention and support for children who have experienced maltreatment, as it may help mitigate the long-term effects on their brain development and social functioning.
20	Goemans, A., van Geel, M., & Vedder, P. (2015).	Meta-analysis		No significant changes in internalizing, externalizing, or overall behavior problems were observed. These findings suggest that the developmental trajectories of foster children are not affected positively or negatively by foster care. This is concerning considering that many children enter foster care with pre-existing issues.
21	Khan, M. R., Scheidell, J. D., Rosen, D. L., Geller, A., & Brotman, L. M. (2018).	Waves I (adolescence), III (young adulthood), and IV (adulthood) de la National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health	11.884 young people	The association between parental incarceration and STI/HIV risk outcomes was found to be moderate to strong, regardless of the age at which the incarceration occurred. In multivariable models, parental incarceration before the age of 8 remained strongly linked to STI/HIV risk during both adolescence and adulthood, with stronger associations observed among nonwhites. Among participants of color, parental incarceration before the age of 8 was associated with more than twice the likelihood of using marijuana and cocaine in adulthood. The relationship between parental incarceration and delinquency, drug use, and mood disorders appeared to be partially mediated.
22	MacLean, S. A., Agyeman, P. O., Walther, J., Singer, E. K., Baranowski, K. A., & Katz, C. L. (2020).	Parent-Report version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)	73 mothers	Children who were forcibly separated from their parents as immigrants faced an increased risk of developing mental health disorders, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety disorders. Research showed that these children had elevated scores in emotional problems, peer problems, and total difficulties. Interestingly, male children had significantly higher rates of peer problems compared to females. Additionally, younger children between the ages of 5 and 11 demonstrated significantly higher rates of conduct problems, hyperactivity, and total difficulties. Surprisingly, the duration of separation did not significantly affect the scores. These results highlight that children who experience separation from their parents, regardless of the duration, undergo significant distress.
23	McIntosh, J., Smyth, B. M., & Kelaher, M. (2013).	Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)	Children 0- 3 years.	In a time-sharing parenting arrangement after separation, children spend equal amounts of time with each parent during the day and night. However, there is limited data on the developmental consequences of such arrangements for infants. To address this gap, a study was conducted to investigate the association between the number of overnight stays away from the primary resident parent and infant soothing or emotional regulation with that parent. The study included three age groups and compared three levels of overnight care. After controlling for factors such as parenting style, parental conflict, and socioeconomic status, the findings revealed that more shared overnight stays for infants aged 0 to 1 and 2 to 3 predicted some unsettled and poorly regulated behaviors. However, this association was not observed for children in the 4 to 5-year-old group. These findings suggest that emotional regulation within the primary parent-child relationship serves as an important indicator of infant adjustment to parenting time arrangements.
24	Mok, P. L. H., Astrup, A., Carr, M. J., Antonsen, S., Webb, R. T., & Pedersen, C. B. (2018).	National Cohort Study	1.336.772 individuals born in Denmark between 1971 and 1997	The study found that children who experienced separation from one parent during their childhood had a higher risk of engaging in violent offending later in life compared to those who lived continuously with both parents. The risk was even higher for paternal separation than for maternal separation, especially during mid-childhood, and increased with the number of separations. If the father was separated from the child at an earlier age, the risks were higher compared to when the separation occurred at an older age. However, the age at first maternal separation did not significantly affect the risk. The study also found that the risks increased as the age at first separation from both parents increased.

Autor/Year	Instrument	Sample	Results
25 Paksarian, D., Eaton, W. W., Mortensen, P. B., Merikangas, K. R., & Pedersen, C. B. (2015).			<p>The researchers measured three types of separation that were not due to death: maternal separation, paternal separation, and separation from both parents. They collected data from a cohort of 985,058 individuals born in Denmark between 1971 and 1991 and followed them until 2011. The study also assessed the occurrence of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder in relation to separation, age at separation, and the number of years of separation. They also examined the interactions with parental history of mental disorder. The results showed that each type of separation was associated with an increased risk of schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, even after adjusting for various factors such as age, sex, birth period, calendar year, family history of mental disorder, urbanicity at birth, and parental age. The longer the duration of parental separation, the higher the risk of both schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. The associations between separation from both parents and schizophrenia were stronger when the separation occurred at older ages, while the associations with bipolar disorder remained consistent throughout development. The first occurrence of parental separation seemed to have a greater impact on increasing the risk when it happened earlier in childhood. The associations also varied depending on the parental history of mental disorder, but in no situation was separation found to be protective.</p>
26 Poitras, K., Tarabulsky, G. M., & Pulido, N. V. (2021).	Self Report, direct observation	50 pre-school age children	<p>The aim of this research was to examine the correlation between face-to-face contact with birth parents and externalizing behaviors, while considering the instability of placement and the sensitivity of adoptive parents. The study involved fifty preschool children and their foster parents, who were visited in their homes. The foster parents provided self-reports on the child's externalizing behavior problems, and their sensitivity was assessed through play observations. Information on placement was gathered through interviews with birth parents and obtained from social services data. The findings indicate that more frequent contact with birth parents and lower levels of sensitivity in foster parents are independently associated with higher levels of externalizing behavior problems in children, even after accounting for placement instability.</p>
27 Running Bear, U., Croy, C. D., Kaufman, C. E., Thayer, Z. M., Manson, S. M., & The, A. I. S. (2018).		771 Indian American .	<p>The attendance to American Indian (AI) boarding schools has been linked to poor physical health; however, there is limited knowledge regarding the specific aspects of this experience that contribute to such health issues. Five experiences, including the age at first attendance, limited family visitation, forced church attendance, prohibition from practicing AI culture and traditions, and punishment for using AI language, may each have an independent association with physical health status in adulthood. It was hypothesized that the impact would be more pronounced for individuals who started boarding at later ages. Each of the aforementioned experiences was found to have an independent association with poorer physical health compared to those who did not undergo these experiences. Furthermore, an interaction effect was confirmed for individuals who were punished for using AI language and who were 8 years of age or older.</p>
28 Sattler, K. M. P. & Font, S. A. (2021).			<p>This research study examined the rates of guardianship and adoption dissolution by analyzing a complete cohort of children from a large foster care system in a specific state. The study also explored the relationship between child characteristics and risk factors with the occurrence of dissolution. The findings revealed that more than 2% of adoption placements and 7% of guardianship placements experienced dissolution. It was observed that Black children faced a higher risk of guardianship dissolution compared to White and Hispanic children, although this association was not found in adoption dissolution. Additionally, older age was linked to a greater risk of adoption dissolution, while females had a higher risk of guardianship dissolution compared to males. Furthermore, behavioral problems, cognitive disability status, and mental health issues were associated with an increased risk of dissolution.</p>
29 Shi, H., Wang, Y., Li, M., Tan, C., Zhao, C., Huang, X., Dou, Y., Duan, X., Du, Y., Wu, T., Wang, X., & Zhang, J. (2021).	Cualitative Survey	811 children left by their parents.	<p>Among the children who were evaluated, 287 (35.4%) were taken care of by their mothers since their fathers have left them (FM-MC), while 524 (64.6%) were left by both parents and cared for by their grandparents (PM-GC). The rate of socioemotional problems among these children was 36.8%. When it came to paternal migration, the median age at which the child first experienced migration was 3 months, and the average duration per migration was also 3 months. On the other hand, for maternal migration, the corresponding values were 9 months. On average, these children had been separated from their fathers for 72% of their lifetime due to paternal migration, and from their mothers for 52% of their lifetime due to maternal migration. The study did not find any significant association between the detailed characteristics of paternal migration and the socioemotional development of young children. However, socioemotional problems were significantly associated with the proportion of cumulative duration of maternal migration in the child's lifetime. It was observed that children under the age of 3 in poor rural areas of China were at a high risk of experiencing socioemotional problems. The cumulative exposure to maternal migration was found to have a detrimental effect on early socioemotional development.</p>
30 Siegel, B. S., & Davis, B. E. (2013).	Literature Review Study		<p>The presence of war combat stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, psychiatric illness, and health risk behaviors can complicate the family life of a child. Research suggests that over 30% of soldiers returning from war have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, or traumatic brain injury. Additionally, comorbidities such as aggression and alcohol abuse are prevalent in nearly half of those with disabilities. Disturbingly, there has been a rise in suicide rates among military personnel. Children of returning soldiers who face these complications often exhibit both externalizing and internalizing behavioral changes, as well as changes in their school performance. They also report high levels of sadness and worry.</p>

Autor/Year	Instrument	Sample	Results
31 Smith, M., González-Pasarín, L., Salas, M. D., & Bernedo, I. M. (2020).	Systematic review		Out of the reviewed studies, 22 reported positive outcomes associated with contact between adoptees and their birth families, while 8 discussed potential risks. Generally, when the adoptive family is capable of maintaining open communication, contact with birth families is more likely to have positive effects on the adoptee. These findings support the current policy on open adoptions. However, it is important to note that contact arrangements should be determined on a case-by-case basis and closely monitored, as previous research has also highlighted the need for individualized approaches.
32 Turney, K., & Wildeman, C. (2016).	2011–2012 National Survey of Children's Health	3948 mothers whose oldest child was born in Manitoba, Canadá, between the 1st of abril 1992 and 31 st . March 2015	Children in foster care experience poorer physical and mental health outcomes compared to children in the general population, children from specific family types, and children from economically disadvantaged families. Some of these differences can be attributed to the demographic characteristics of the children, but the majority of the disparities can be explained by the current family environment. Furthermore, children who are adopted from foster care are more likely to have health problems compared to children who remain in foster care.
33 Wall-Wieler, E., Roos, L. L., Nickel, N. C., Chateau, D., & Brownell, M. (2018).	MRI and DMS IV complete self-report measures of child maltreatment and diagnostic interviews.		This particular study aims to investigate whether mothers who have had a child under the care of child protective services have higher mortality rates compared to their biological sisters who did not have a child in care. The researchers conducted a cohort study involving 1974 families, where one sister had a child in care and the other sister did not. The study analyzed rate differences and hazard ratios for all-cause mortality, as well as mortality from avoidable and unavoidable causes. The findings revealed that mothers who had a child in care experienced 24 additional deaths per 10,000 person-years compared to their sisters who did not have a child in care. These mothers also had higher rates of mortality from preventable causes and unavoidable causes. The hazard ratios indicated that the risk of mortality from preventable causes was 3.46 times higher for mothers with a child in care, while the risk of mortality from unavoidable causes was 2.92 times higher. Interestingly, the number of dependent children did not have an impact on the mortality rates among mothers with at least one dependent child. The higher mortality rates, particularly in relation to avoidable mortality, among mothers with a child in care highlight the necessity for targeted interventions to support these mothers. It is crucial to provide appropriate support and resources to help improve the health outcomes and overall well-being of mothers who have children under the care of child protective services.
34 Whittle, S., Dennison, M., Vijayakumar, N., Simmons, J. G., Yücel, M., Lubman, D. I., Pantelis, C., & Allen, N. B. (2013).		117 adolescents.	Childhood maltreatment has been found to have a significant impact on brain development, specifically in the left hippocampal volume and amygdala growth. Additionally, the analysis of the cortex revealed that maltreatment influenced the thickening of the superior parietal region, which was associated with the experience of psychopathology. This suggests that childhood maltreatment can lead to both immediate and long-term effects on brain development. Furthermore, it has been observed that childhood maltreatment can impair brain development during adolescence. One possible mechanism for this is the experience of Axis I psychopathology during adolescence. This indicates that the effects of childhood maltreatment on brain development can persist into the adolescent years.
35 Wildeman, C., Goldman, A. W., & Turney, K. (2018).	Literature Review		Paternal incarceration has been found to have a negative association with various indicators of child health and well-being. This association may be causal in nature. On the other hand, the evidence regarding the association between maternal incarceration and child health is mixed. While some research suggests a negative association, further studies are needed to fully understand this relationship. It is important to note that the average effects of paternal incarceration on child health and well-being are well-established. However, research has also indicated that certain factors can moderate this association. Therefore, it is crucial to consider these moderating factors when examining the impact of paternal incarceration on child health and well-being.

Separation Due to Adverse Family Conditions

Parental Abuse and Neglect

It is important to keep in mind that caregiving neglect as well as numerous caregiver transitions produce lasting imprints on the child's behavioral and biological development, Fujisawa et al. (2018) observed that there is a sensitive period between 5 and 7 years of age for reduction in primary visual cortex gray matter volume due to maltreatment. The number of maltreatment types had significant effect on gray matter volume reduction and the second most significant variable was exposure to neglect. Whittle et al. (2013) concluded that childhood maltreatment is associated with impaired brain development during adolescence. The authors conclude that psychopathology during adolescence may be one mechanism by which childhood maltreatment has ongoing effects on brain development during the adolescent years.

When home situations are very adverse removal from the family home could be the least harmful situation. Bald et al. (2019) studied a sample of 13834 children <6 years and 4821 children >6 years, finding that removal from neglectful and abusive homes has positive effects on schooling in girls by 22.8%, decreasing the need for special education and the risk of repetition. No significant differences were observed in boys, who would not benefit to the same extent from home removal.

Fisher (2015) found that a considerable proportion of children removed from their homes have mental health difficulties and neurobiological or developmental deficits. The author also argues that while it may not be possible to fully recover from early stressful experiences; adoption, especially in the early years of life, maximizes the chances of a positive life course trajectory. This study does not extend beyond early adulthood, so it is unclear whether changes continue later in life. In contrast to these data, Goemans et al. (2015) conclude that foster care does not negatively or positively

affect the developmental trajectories of foster children. Given that many children enter foster care with problems, this is a concerning situation. [Brown et al. \(2017\)](#) found that adopted children exhibit lower academic levels and elevated levels of behavioral problems during childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood compared with nonadopted children. This is consistent with the findings of [Côté et al. \(2018\)](#), who found that those individuals who had been removed from their home as children were more likely than controls to have substance-related disorders, psychotic or bipolar disorders, depression or anxiety, neurodevelopmental disorders, and other disorders.

Study participants had more prescriptions for psychotropic medications and higher rates of criminal convictions. [Paksarian et al. \(2015\)](#) found a strong association between individuals who had been separated from both parents and schizophrenia, especially when the separation took place at older ages. Likewise, they found a correlation with bipolar disorder, but in this case no differences were found according to the age of separation. Associations differed according to parental history of mental disorder, although in no situation was separation protective.

The evidence found in this review, shows that the consequences of separation are not as severe when children are removed from their homes, but remain in the care of other relatives or friends ([Bell & Romano 2017](#)). Likewise, [Boyle \(2015\)](#), noted that outcomes were particularly positive when there was a collaborative approach between biological families and adoptive parents or foster caregivers. Outcomes tended to be worse for children who had ongoing contact with maltreating biological parents. The findings of the review support current policy and previous research in recommending a more reflective approach to assessing and planning contact. This is in line with [Smith et al. \(2020\)](#), who argue that in general, contact with the birth family is associated with positive outcomes for the adoptee, especially when the adoptive family is capable of communicative openness, although they emphasize the need for each case to be analyzed separately and for contact to be monitored.

In a study conducted with preschool children, [Poitras et al. \(2021\)](#) found that adopted children tend to present externalizing problems, and that the low sensitivity of adoptive parents is associated with a higher level of externalization. On the other hand, [Turney and Wilderman \(2016\)](#) found that those children in foster care have poor physical and mental health compared to children in the general population, children from specific family types, and children from economically disadvantaged families. This is a worrisome situation considering that adopted children who are older or who have behavioral problems, cognitive difficulties, and mental health difficulties have a higher likelihood of adoption or guardianship dissolution ([Sattler & Font, 2021](#)). Child-parent separation appears to affect not only the young children, but also the parents. In a study by [Wall-Wieler et al. \(2018\)](#), those mothers who had a child in child protective services care were found to have higher mortality rates compared with their biological sisters who did not have that experience. Higher mortality rates, particularly avoidable mortality, among mothers who had a child in care indicate the need for more targeted interventions for these mothers.

Overall, the synthesis of evidence underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of the consequences of parental separation on children and parents. While some studies suggest potential benefits

of removal from adverse home environments, others emphasize the long-term challenges faced by children in foster care or adoptive families. Additionally, the mental health and neurobiological implications of child-parent separation are significant, highlighting the importance of comprehensive support and intervention strategies for affected individuals and families.

Conflicted Parental Separation

[Auersperg et al. \(2019\)](#) concluded in their meta-analysis study that there is a significant association between parental divorce and the following aspects of mental health: depression, anxiety, suicide attempt, suicidal ideation, distress, alcohol and drug use and smoking. When the separation is on bad terms, the problems are accentuated. [Bergström et al. \(2021\)](#) observed an association between increased mental health problems and living mostly and only with one parent. This study suggests that the quality of shared parenting is a key determinant of mental health in preschool children and should therefore be targeted for preventive interventions. In another study of 147,839 Swedish students, [Bergström et al. \(2015\)](#) found that children in shared custody suffer fewer psychosomatic problems than those living mostly or only with one parent but report more symptoms than those in nuclear families. Satisfaction with material resources and parent-child relationships was associated with the psychosomatic health of the children in that study. Consistent with these data, [Culpin et al. \(2015\)](#) found that girls from absent father households had higher levels of depressive symptoms and earlier menarche. These problems increased when girls resided in rented housing and financial problems were experienced.

In regard to the shared parenting regime with equal number of overnight stays in both parents' homes, it was found that a higher number of shared overnight stays for the 0 to 1 year and 2 to 3 year groups predicted some less settled and poorly regulated behaviors, but none for children in the 4 to 5 year group. The findings suggest that emotional regulation within the primary parent-child relationship is a useful index of infant adjustment to parenting time arrangements ([McIntosh et al., 2013](#)).

When studying the relationship between separation from a parent and delinquent behavior, [Mok et al. \(2018\)](#) observed that separation from a parent during childhood is associated with an elevated risk of later violent offending compared to those living continuously with both parents. The associations are stronger for paternal separation than for maternal separation at least until mid-childhood and increase with the number of separations. Separation from the father for the first time at an earlier age is associated with higher risks than if paternal separation first occurs at an older age, but there is little variation in risk associated with age at first maternal separation. Increasing risks are associated with increasing age at first separation from both parents.

Overall, these findings highlight the complex interplay between parental separation and children's well-being, underscoring the importance of considering factors such as the quality of parental relationships, the nature of separation, and the timing of events in understanding the diverse impacts on children's mental health and behavior. Effective interventions and support strategies should be tailored to address the specific needs and circumstances of children and families experiencing parental separation.

Separation Due to the Work of One of the Parents

All the articles surveyed present concordant results. [Acion et al. \(2013\)](#) found that adolescents who are children of military personnel recently sent away from home on assignment have a substantially increased risk of using alcohol, marijuana, and other illegal drugs. Changes in the place of residence accentuate the problems, and those most at risk are those who do not live with the other parent or a close relative. [Alfano et al. \(2016\)](#) concluded that sudden parental absence is very stressful and incomprehensible to young children. Military children on assignment decrease their academic performance. It has also been observed to be associated with increased maltreatment, sexual abuse, and physical and emotional neglect. There are additional associated stressors such as moving, moving away from family and friends, or financial hardship.

[Shi et al. \(2021\)](#) conducted a study on Chinese children whose parents had to leave home in poor rural areas to work in other areas. They found that the children tested had high rates of socio-emotional problems, especially when the separations were repeated and before the age of three years. Many of these children had been separated from their mother or father for more than half of their lives.

These findings underscore the pervasive and detrimental effects of parental absence on children's well-being, including increased risk behaviors, academic difficulties, and socio-emotional problems. These challenges are particularly pronounced among children of military personnel and those affected by parental migration for work, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and support to mitigate the adverse impacts of parental absence on children's development and mental health.

Forced Separation

[Barajas-Gonzalez et al. \(2018\)](#) argue that the persistent threat of parental deportation and chronic uncertainty regarding family safety is detrimental to Latino children and youth, especially those living in mixed-status households, and many children experience it as a form of psychological violence. They concur with [MacLean et al. \(2020\)](#) who found that immigrant children who faced forced separation from their parents are at increased risk of developing. Finally, studies of children whose fathers were incarcerated were surveyed. [Wildeman et al. \(2018\)](#) found that parental incarceration is negatively associated with a variety of indicators of child health and well-being. Although the evidence for the average effects of parental incarceration on child health and well-being is strong, research has also suggested that some key factors moderate these consequences. [Khan et al. \(2018\)](#) found that parental incarceration at any age was moderately to strongly associated with STI/HIV risk. In multivariable models, parental incarceration at age <8 years remained strongly associated with STI/HIV risk in both adolescence and adulthood, with stronger associations among nonwhites. Among black participants, parental incarceration before age 8 was associated with more than twice the odds of marijuana and cocaine use. Delinquency, drug use, and mood disorders appeared to partially mediate the relationship. mental health disorders, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety disorders. Younger children (ages 5 to 11) also demonstrated significantly higher rates of conduct problems, hyperactivity, and overall difficulties. Scores did not differ significantly by duration of separation. The results reveal that

children who are separated from their parents experience high levels of distress regardless of the duration of separation. Similar results were found for children who were separated from their parents and sent to boarding schools or language acquisition camps for members of different native tribes.

In summary, the synthesized findings underscore the pervasive and deep impact of parental separation on children's mental health, emotional well-being, and behavioral development across diverse circumstances. These findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive support and intervention strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of parental separation and promote resilience among affected children and families.

Discussion

An exhaustive analysis was carried out in the Scielo, Redalyc and DOAJ networks of publications on the effects on children of separation from their parents. The search terms used were Consequences AND parent child separation. Originally 5260 articles were found. English language articles published in the last ten years were used as a search filter. A final screening was carried out in which duplicate articles and those that did not fall within the selected topic were excluded. A total of 35 articles were finally surveyed.

After an in-depth and critical analysis of the articles, the results were grouped into three categories: separations caused by adverse family situations, separations due to the work of one of the parents, and forced separations.

The evidence found consistently highlights the detrimental effects of these experiences on children's mental health, emotional stability, and behavioral development. According to the results of this study, the effects are not specific to the type of separation and include high rates of neurological changes due to psychological trauma, early sexual maturation, physical and sexual abuse, school dropout, poor academic performance, poor peer relations, psychosomatic symptoms, psychiatric disorders and internalizing and externalizing behavior.

Parent-child separation is also associated with problems such as depression, anxiety, delinquency, self-harm, substance abuse and inappropriate sexual behavior. Evidence was found that separation within one generation leads to intergenerational cycles of family separation. According to the data collected, children are most vulnerable between the ages of 9 months and 9 years. Particularly risky conditions included separation during the preschool years, separation without notice to the child, simultaneous change of residence, and care by strangers.

In all cases, the authors agree that being separated from parents in childhood is a powerful predictor of physical and mental health complications, being found to be associated with early-onset mental illness. Advances in behavioral neuroscience indicate that this early separation experience provokes fear early in life and has the potential to disrupt the typical development of stress regulation, learning, memory and social behavior. An association was observed between separation from parents and substance and alcohol use, decreased academic performance, and the presence of psychopathology in adolescence. Some factors appear to buffer the impact of separations, such as being left in the care of relatives or friends when children have been removed from the home by child protective services or deported. Likewise, when children are adopted by sensitive families,

and especially when there is good communication between birth and adoptive families, there is room for resilient outcomes. It is suggested that when parents separate, shared parenting, cooperative care and affectionate access to both parents appears to be a very important factor in lessening the impact of separation on children.

The findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and support services to address the complex challenges faced by children and families experiencing parental separation. These interventions should prioritize early identification of at-risk children, access to mental health resources, and comprehensive support for families navigating the complexities of separation.

The data obtained are intended as a contribution to the development of child protection policies and decision making, which should be adapted to each particular case and whose results should be carefully monitored and evaluated.

This systematic review is subject to several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the inclusion criteria were restricted to articles published in English, which may have excluded high-quality research published in other languages. This language bias could limit the comprehensiveness of the review, particularly in regions where non-English publications predominate.

Second, the review only considered open-access articles available in DOAJ, Scielo, and Redalyc databases. While this approach ensured accessibility and transparency, it may have excluded relevant studies indexed in other databases or those published in subscription-based journals.

Third, the reliance on studies published within the last ten years was intended to capture contemporary research and insights. However, this temporal constraint may have excluded seminal studies or historical data that could provide a more nuanced understanding of parent-child separation.

Additionally, variations in the methodological rigor of the included studies could introduce bias. While efforts were made to evaluate the quality of each study, differences in sample sizes, measurement tools, and contextual factors across studies may affect the comparability and generalizability of the synthesized findings.

Finally, potential biases related to the selection and interpretation of data cannot be entirely ruled out. The researchers' own perspectives and the scope of the search strategy may have influenced the results and conclusions of this review.

To address these limitations, future studies should aim to include publications in multiple languages and expand the database sources to enhance the diversity and comprehensiveness of the review. Longitudinal research designs and cross-cultural studies are also recommended to provide deeper insights into parent-child separation's long-term and context-specific impacts.

Conflict of Interest

The author declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this manuscript.

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