UDC 614.2:364.4-053.2:347.627.2
https://doi.org/10.31612/2616-4868.6.2026.19

BARRIERS TO FAMILY SITUATION ASSESSMENT IN CASES OF PARENTAL DISPUTES AS A FACTOR IN THE EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF CHILD PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF CHILD PROTECTION WORKERS

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Abstract

Introduction. Family situation assessment in parental disputes is an important part of child protection practice. In high-conflict divorce, social workers must consider legal and social circumstances as well as psychosocial risks affecting the child's wellbeing, safety and mental health. Identifying barriers to assessment is therefore essential for early intervention and effective support.
Aim. The study analyses which factors child protection workers perceive as the main barriers to family situation assessment in high-conflict divorce and how these barriers influence risk identification, understanding of the child's needs and intersectoral cooperation.
Materials and methods. A qualitative design was used. Data were collected in December 2025 through a focus group with five child protection workers from different regions of the Czech Republic who had experience with parental disputes. The data were analysed using thematic analysis and open coding in ATLAS.ti.
Results. Six interconnected areas of barriers were identified: parental cooperation, court involvement, the influence of legal representatives, cooperation with other professionals, expert reports, and organisational and systemic conditions. These barriers may complicate the identification of the child's actual needs, the distinction between parental conflict and possible child endangerment, and the formulation of recommendations for further intervention.
Conclusions. Family situation assessment in high-conflict divorce should be understood not only as an administrative or legal procedure, but also as a tool for the early identification of psychosocial risks and the protection of child wellbeing. The findings highlight the need for clearer methodological guidance, stronger professional and systemic support, and improved cooperation between child protection authorities, courts and specialised services.

Keywords: **high-conflict divorce, family situation assessment, psychosocial risks, child wellbeing, intersectoral cooperation, social and legal protection of children**

INTRODUCTION

Parental conflict can be understood as a significant source of stress for the entire family system, especially when characterised by high intensity, conflict escalation, the presence of violence, manipulation, or a serious disruption of the child's relationship with one of the parents [4]. In the Czech context, social and legal protection in these situations is provided by the authorities for the social and legal protection of children (hereinafter OSPOD), whose task is to respond to the child's adverse social situation and contribute to the protection of the child's healthy development. In the above-mentioned cases, the child's situation may meet the criteria for being at risk under Section 6 of Act No. 359/1999 Coll., on the Social and Legal Protection of Children [1].

The OSPOD must respond to this situation by completing the «Assessment of the Child's and Family's Situation» form [7], based on which it assesses whether the criteria for a child at risk are met and subsequently prepares an Individual Child Protection Plan (hereinafter

IPOD) pursuant to Section 10(3)(d) of this Act [1]. This plan is a key tool, as it identifies the causes of the child's risk, establishes the necessary protective and supportive measures, and simultaneously sets the timeframe for their implementation.

During the assessment, OSPOD staff may encounter many barriers that significantly complicate this process. Parental disputes are a burden not only for the family itself but also for the professionals involved in resolving these situations. From their perspective, these cases are often perceived as exhausting, frustrating, and exceptionally difficult, particularly given the low level of parental cooperation and the considerable time and emotional demands of these cases [12]. At the same time, child welfare workers face increased stress, work overload, and a lack of methodological support or the professional expertise needed to work effectively in the context of highly conflictual parental disputes [11]. Overall, these cases are associated with greater pressure on workers, increased demands for maintaining impartiality, and feelings of helplessness and uncertainty when choosing appropriate procedures [3].

Although some Czech academic publications address the issue of parental disputes and the practices of social and legal authorities from the perspective of resolving them [3], the obstacles involved in assessing the family situation in these cases remain insufficiently clarified. To date, research has focused primarily on the general assessment of children at risk [8, 9], while significantly less attention has been devoted to the process of assessing children at risk in the context of contentious divorces.

AIM

The present study aims to address this research gap by examining how child protection workers perceive and interpret the main barriers to assessing the situation of children and families in cases of high-conflict divorce. The focus is on everyday professional practice and on factors that may complicate early identification of psychosocial risks, understanding of the child's needs and the coordination of further support.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To achieve the study's objective, the following research question was formulated: What factors do social workers at child protection authorities perceive as the most significant barriers when assessing a family's situation in cases of parental conflict? A qualitative research strategy was chosen to explore participants' experiences, meanings and interpretations inductively.

Data were collected through a focus group, which made it possible to capture not only individual experiences, but also interaction among participants and the shared reflection of barriers encountered in assessment practice. The research sample consisted of five OSPOD workers from different regions of the Czech Republic, all of whom had experience with assessing family situations in cases of contentious divorce. The group included two OSPOD managers and three frontline social workers, with professional experience ranging from 6 to 30 years.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on professional relevance and voluntary participation. In the first stage, OSPOD workplaces and potential participants from the Liberec, Ústí nad Labem and Karlovy Vary regions were contacted, as these regions have high divorce rates. In the second stage, additional experts in high-conflict divorce were contacted through an expert on the Cochem approach. The focus group was conducted in December 2025, lasted approximately 90 minutes, was moderated by the author, was audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim.

The discussion was guided by the main research question and focused on identifying the factors perceived by OSPOD workers as barriers to family situation assessment in cases of parental conflict. The data were analysed using thematic analysis and open coding. The transcript was read repeatedly, meaningful segments were identified and assigned initial codes, which were subsequently revised, compared and grouped into broader thematic categories. The analysis was conducted by the author using ATLAS.ti software.

The research was conducted as part of a dissertation focused on evaluating the tool «Assessment of the Situation of the Child and Their Family» [7], particularly in relation to the importance of individual areas, the realistic possibilities of assessment and the identification of risk factors in families undergoing contentious divorce. Participants were informed about the study objectives and data use, provided informed consent and agreed to audio recording. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences.

RESULTS

The analysis of data obtained from the focus group focused on identifying the factors that OSPOD social workers perceive as the most significant obstacles when assessing a family's situation in cases of parental conflict. During the analysis, thematic areas were identified from the participants' statements, which were subsequently grouped into six categories representing the main types of perceived barriers. The relationships between individual themes and their organisation are illustrated by a diagram created in the ATLAS.ti program (see Figure 1).

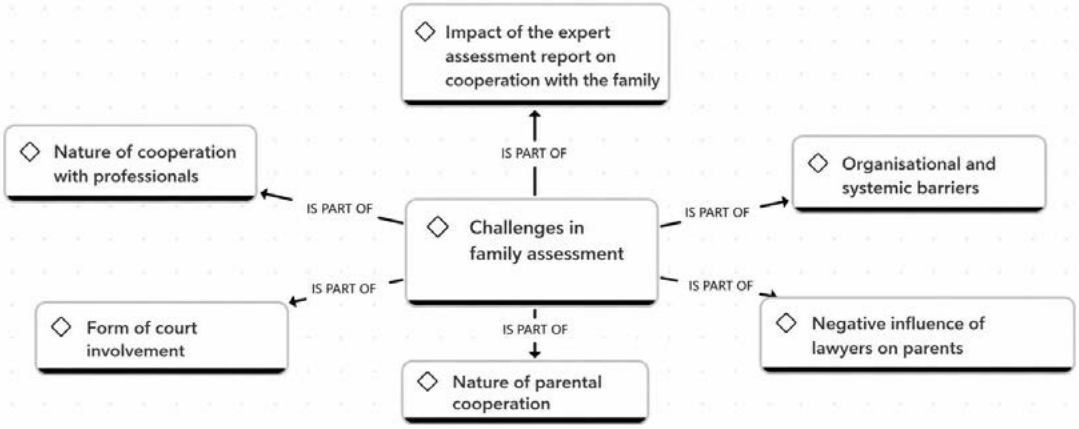

Figure 1. Complications in family assessment.

Source: Original research, data collected as part of the GAJU 140/2025/S project «Conflictual Divorces»; processed in ATLAS.ti.

Nature of Parental Cooperation. According to respondents, the nature of parental cooperation represented a significant area of obstacles in assessing the family situation (see Figure 2). It was precisely the quality of their mutual communication and willingness to cooperate that were perceived as factors fundamentally influencing the possibilities of a professional assessment of the family situation.

Respondents described how, in cases of parental disputes, collaboration with parents is often significantly complicated by the high emotional intensity and low willingness to cooperate that are characteristic of these situations. At the same time, parents' inability to share relevant information can hinder the timely identification of serious issues, such as domestic violence or other forms of risky family dynamics, as confirmed by Statement R1: *«… The parents' unwillingness to share information – which, of course, can have various causes – makes it very difficult to identify undiagnosed pathologies such as domestic violence and other issues in the context of a conflictual divorce.»* Failure to comply with agreements and resolutions was also perceived as problematic, particularly in connection with child handover or adherence to the established custody arrangement. Respondents also noted that parents' declared willingness to cooperate is often only temporary and lasts only as long as the OSPOD's approach meets their expectations. As soon as a decision is made with which one of the parents disagrees, a refusal to cooperate further may follow. At the same time, there were also efforts by some parents to view OSPOD not as an impartial child protection agency, but as a source of support in a dispute against the other parent (R2: *«And we've also had a lot of experience where, at first, they act like they want to cooperate – but the moment that cooperation isn't exactly to their liking, because they think they can take advantage of us, that they'll use it against the other parent, and when it doesn't go their way, that's when they start attacking…»*). Respondents also noted that in some cases, parents do not respect not only OSPOD procedures but also court decisions, and repeatedly turn to the court in an effort to overturn conclusions that have already been reached.

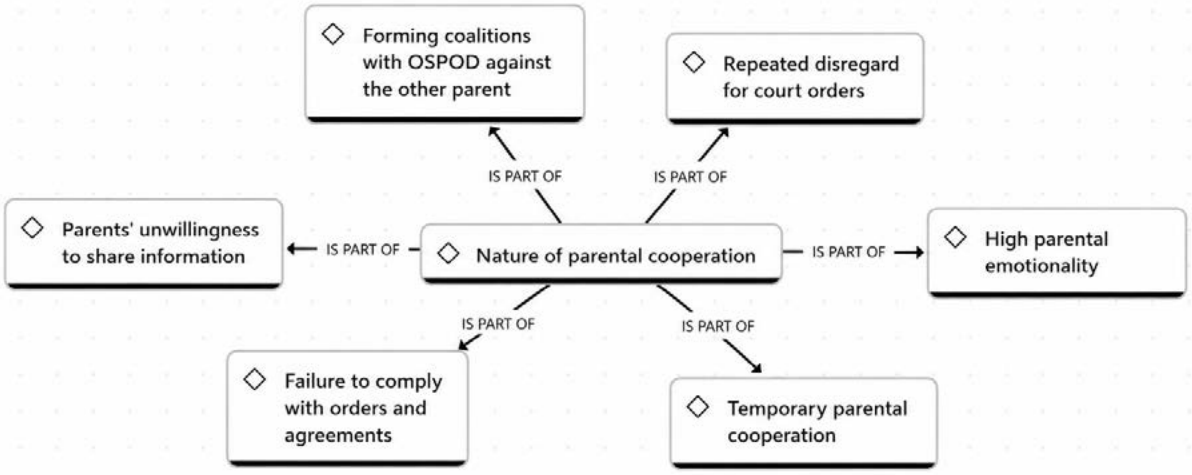

Figure 2. Nature of parental cooperation.

Source: Original research, data collected as part of the GAJU 140/2025/S project «Conflictual Divorces»; processed in ATLAS.ti.

The Court's Involvement. According to respondents, another significant area of obstacles in assessing the family situation was the manner of the court's involvement in resolving the parental dispute (see Figure No. 3). Respondents perceived the court's role as a factor that can either significantly complicate the course of the case or, conversely, contribute to its stabilisation.

Respondents repeatedly noted in their answers that court proceedings are often protracted in some cases and fail to respond flexibly enough to developments in the family situation. Slow decision-making, delays in establishing facts relevant to the case, and the court's limited ability to respond to situations where parents fail to comply with issued orders or court decisions were seen as particularly problematic (R2: *«That's where professional cooperation is needed, and as far as I'm concerned, strict enforcement of certain orders, decisions, and issuing preliminary injunctions and so on. Because the moment you realise something is happening – the parent isn't complying – a preliminary injunction is issued. Parent 2 should have at least some contact; if the mother doesn't, or the father doesn't comply, then there's the enforceability of that. Then, at that point, it drags on, and the longer it goes on, the more it drags on.»*). Respondents emphasised the need for more consistent enforcement of court decisions and a more active court role in setting boundaries for parental behaviour. They also expected courts to guide parents more effectively toward cooperation and professional support. Delayed or inconsistent court responses were perceived as prolonging the process and negatively affecting the child. Although respondents also mentioned delays in ordering expert evaluations, some described the court as an important partner capable of supporting timely and effective resolution.

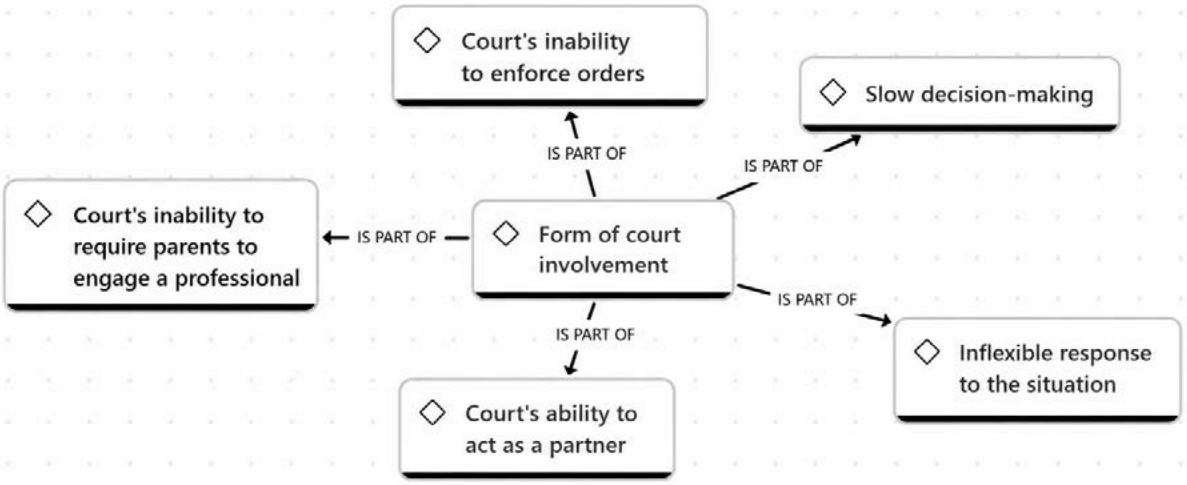

Figure 3. The court's role. Source: Original research, data collected as part of the GAJU 140/2025/S project «Conflictual Divorces»; processed in ATLAS.ti.

Negative influence of attorneys on parents. According to respondents, legal representation of parents can also have a negative impact on the assessment of the family's situation (see Figure 4). Respondents perceived the manner of lawyers' involvement as a factor that can significantly influence the course of cooperation between parents and OSPOD staff.

Respondents noted that in some cases, legal representatives encourage their clients not to cooperate with social workers, not to provide information, not to sign anything, and not to enter into any agreements (R1: *«And then sometimes the way parents are guided by those legal representatives. 'Above all, please don't sign anything; above all, don't agree to anything at the OSPOD, in mediation, and so on,' the legal representative tells the client. 'And sometimes I feel like they're making the divorce, the breakup, the proceedings, and unfortunately the court process* itself *more difficult*.'). According to the respondents, this approach hinders communication with parents and complicates the family assessment process itself. The testimonies further revealed that parents sometimes change legal representatives even in situations where the attorney recommends cooperation, but his or her recommendation does not align with their own ideas about how the dispute should be handled (R2: *«And as my colleague mentioned, most of the time they're represented by different legal representatives who keep changing, because even those legal representatives are at their wits' end with them. So I'm really talking about those extremely contentious divorces.»*). At the same time, respondents noted that when working with a family, they must also take into account who is legally representing the parents, as this fact can foreshadow the nature of communication and potential complications in the further course of the case. In a sense, they must thus reflect not only on the situation of the parents themselves, but also on the manner in which their legal representatives engage with the case.

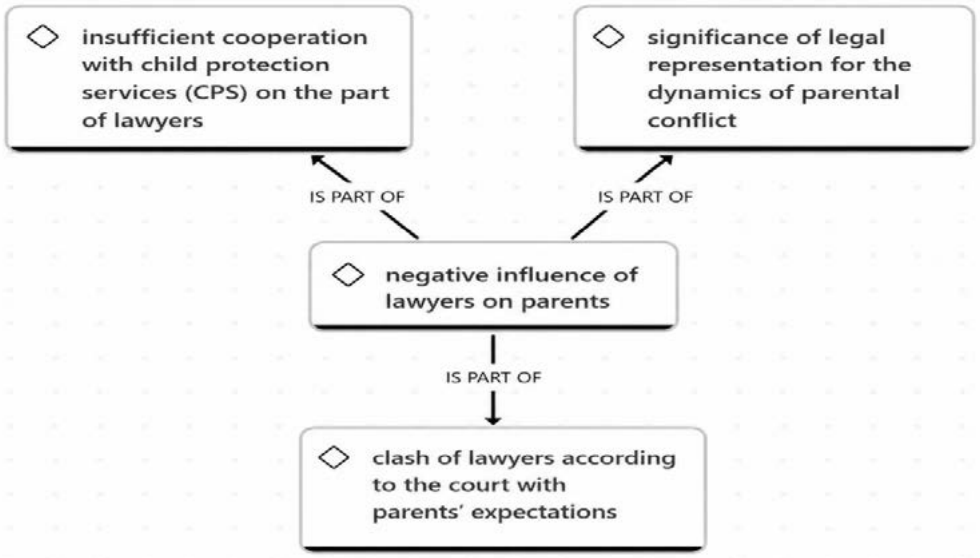

Figure 4. Negative influence of attorneys on parents.

Source: Original research, data collected as part of the GAJU 140/2025/S project «Conflictual Divorces»; processed in ATLAS.ti

Nature of cooperation with experts. The nature of cooperation with other professionals involved in the case can also negatively impact the work of social workers (Figure 5). Respondents also pointed to the limited availability of these professionals, which they perceived as a significant constraint on their practice.

The respondents' statements indicated that the professional assessment of a family's situation in cases of parental conflict often exceeds the capabilities of OSPOD workers alone and requires the involvement of other professionals, particularly psychologists, psychiatrists, or other specialised experts. However, according to the respondents, cooperation with these professionals is often insufficient or difficult to access. In some cases, OSPOD workers thus find themselves in situations where a professional assessment would require deeper psychological or psychiatric expertise, without having the necessary support immediately available (R2: *«… so for me, the complication – the biggest complication – is the unavailability of the necessary experts. That is, those who could identify the issue. We're still social workers and shouldn't just be getting into assessments and so on. So the unavailability of psychologists, psychiatrists, and so on – that's the biggest problem for me right now.»*). This reality can complicate both the assessment of the family situation itself and the subsequent decision-making regarding appropriate procedures and necessary measures.

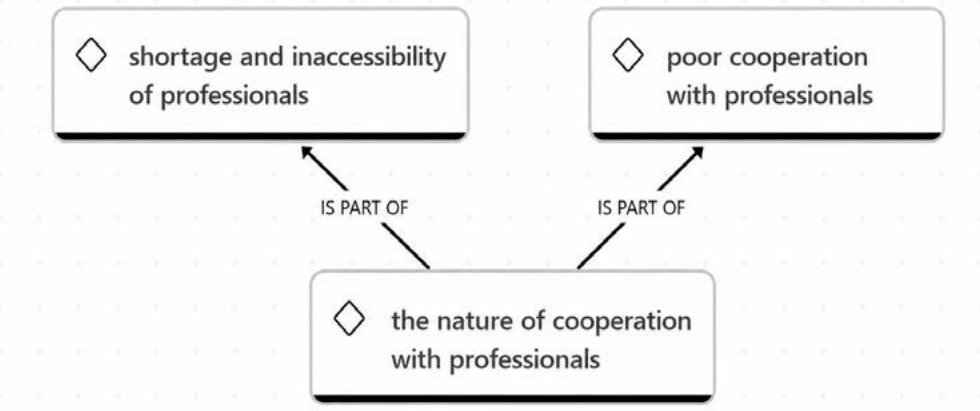

Figure 5. Nature of cooperation with experts. Source: Original research, data collected as part of the GAJU 140/2025/S project «Conflictual Divorces»; processed in ATLAS.ti.

The Impact of Expert Opinions on Cooperation with the Family. According to respondents, expert opinions represented another area of potential obstacles (see Figure 6). Respondents perceived their impact as ambivalent, as they can be beneficial for assessing a case but can simultaneously significantly complicate the entire process.

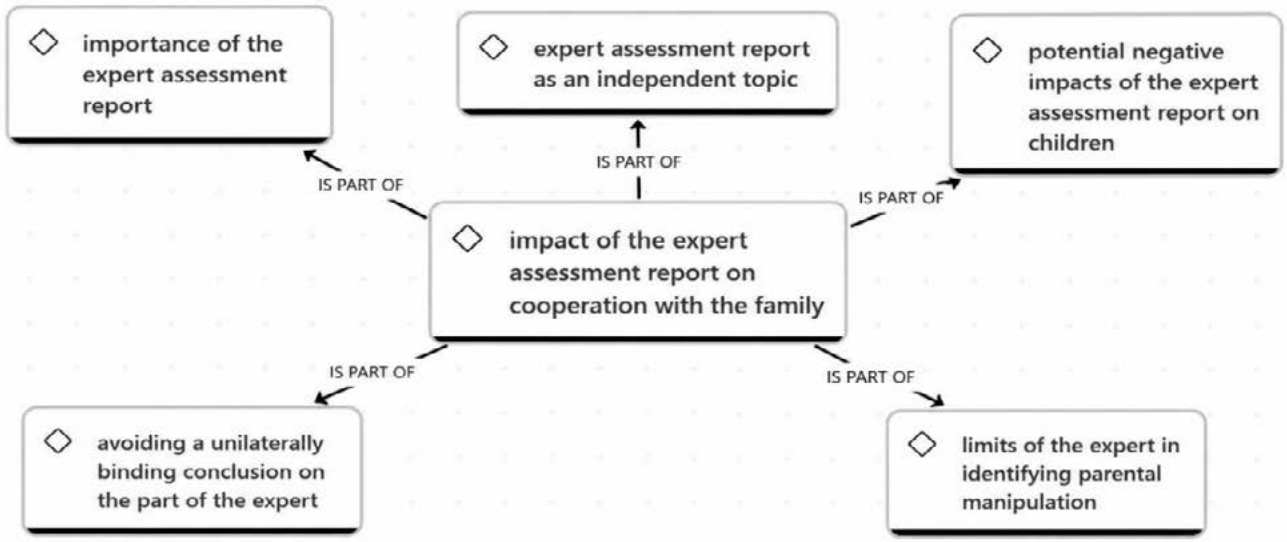

Figure 6. The Impact of Expert Opinions on Collaboration with Families.

Source: Original research, data collected as part of the GAJU 140/2025/S project «Conflictual Divorces»; processed in ATLAS.ti.

The respondents' statements indicated that expert opinions do not always provide concrete conclusions that apply to the specific case. In particular, opinions formulated too generally were described as problematic; according to the respondents, these do not contribute to a deeper understanding of a specific family's situation and do not provide sufficient support for further decision-making (R4: *«I tend to think that expectations are sometimes simply exaggerated, just like with court-appointed experts. Yeah, because court-appointed experts come with an expert opinion that's so vague and general that it actually contributes nothing at all to the proceedings. Or – and this is an even worse scenario – it's an incompetent, senile person who just has a stamp.»*). Respondents also pointed out situations where, in their experience, the quality of the expert assessment is insufficient, which can have a negative impact not only on the course of the proceedings but also on the child themselves. They also considered cases to be complicating where the expert is unable to clearly and comprehensively describe the severity of the situation or identify problematic aspects of family dynamics (R3: *«… and consequently, a court expert who is afraid to describe the harsh reality = a useless expert opinion.»*). In such situations, according to the respondents, the value of the expert opinion is limited. At the same time, it was noted that difficulties in assessment are not avoided even by the experts themselves, particularly in cases involving manipulative behaviour or highly conflictual relationship dynamics.

Organisational and systemic barriers. According to the respondents, organisational and systemic conditions represent a significant barrier to high-quality family situation assessment. They described working under considerable time pressure, chronic workload and insufficient staffing, which limit opportunities for more in-depth work with families. These difficulties were often linked to a high administrative and bureaucratic burden, which further reduces the space for professional assessment and support (R2: *«The bureaucratic burden is insane – look at what they did with the split case files. I don't know what they don't check. Working with families is absolutely, completely disastrous for me. I don't know; I've only been in the field for about 14 or 15 years, but it's getting worse and worse. Just when I think it can't get any worse, it keeps getting worse.»*). Respondents also considered it problematic that responsibility for assessment and case management often rests primarily on a single worker, whose experience and competence may vary. This is particularly relevant in the case of less experienced or newly hired workers. Another difficulty is the absence of a tool specifically designed for assessing families in parental disputes or divorce, which forces workers to use a general framework for assessing child endangerment. Respondents also pointed to inconsistent and insufficient methodological guidance from supervisory authorities. In this context, they expressed a sense of insufficient support and uncertainty as to whether they are sufficiently backed professionally and institutionally in challenging cases (R2: *«And there's no support there; simply from my assessment, we're like pawns. So basically, do it however you want at your own risk? And if it goes wrong, we'll take you down, right? That's just how it is, in my view. I think something has to change, and that's fine. Unfortunately, right now it's happening in a not-so-good way on the part of the media and lawmakers, and I don't know who else.»*).

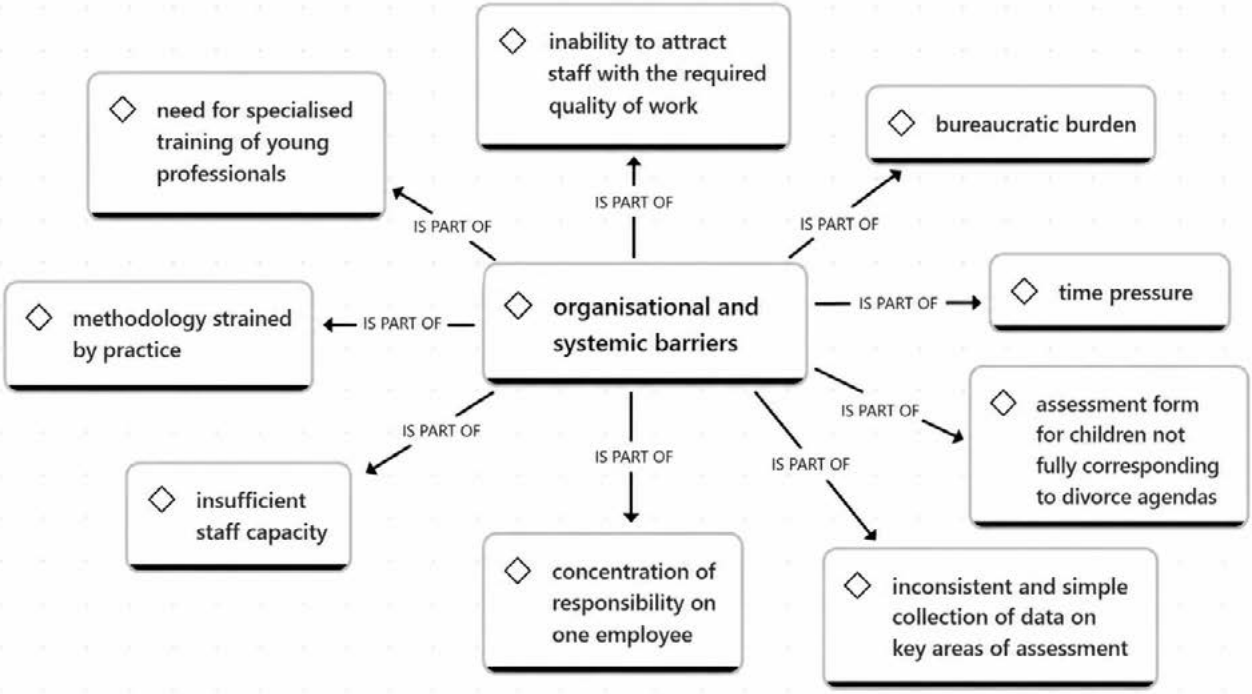

Figure 7. Organisational and systemic barriers.

Source: Original research, data collected as part of the GAJU 140/2025/S project «Conflictual Divorces»; processed in ATLAS.ti.

DISCUSSION

The study shows that OSPOD social workers perceive barriers to family situation assessment in parental conflict as interrelated factors. Although parental cooperation was seen as a key barrier, assessment is also shaped by court involvement, legal representatives, access to other professionals, expert reports, and organisational and systemic conditions. The findings confirm that assessment in parental disputes is a multi-level process in which relational, institutional and professional dimensions intersect.

This conclusion is consistent with Czech scholarly literature, which highlights the high demands of OSPOD practice in the area of parental disputes. Hejnová [3] demonstrates that resolving parental conflicts is associated with higher levels of external pressures, demands for impartiality, uncertainty in procedures, and difficult cooperation with parents. The present study further develops these findings by more specifically capturing which factors OSPOD workers perceive as obstacles when assessing a family's situation, rather than merely when resolving parental conflict in general. It turns out that parental conflict itself is a problem for workers not only because of its intensity, but also because it reduces the clarity of the case, complicates the gathering of relevant information, and makes it difficult to distinguish between the child's needs and the parents' behaviour.

Another significant finding is that respondents perceived barriers not only on the part of the family but also within the broader context of their professional practice. These findings correspond with the research [2], which highlights the inconsistency of assessment approaches, pressure to formalise work, and the difficulty of balancing the various demands placed on OSPOD workers. Similarly, another study [14] shows that quality standards can be perceived in practice not only as a support but also as a formal or regulatory framework that does not always sufficiently correspond to the real conditions of child social and legal protection work. In this study as well, respondents described intense time pressure, insufficient staffing, a heavy administrative burden, and a sense of limited support from higher authorities. It can therefore be argued that the quality of family situation assessments in cases of parental conflict is determined not only by the expertise of the individual worker but also by the level of institutional support available to them in performing their role.

Another important theme that repeatedly emerged in the results was the limited availability of other experts and the ambivalently perceived role of expert opinions. This finding suggests that OSPOD workers, in some cases, operate at the limits of their professional competencies and enter situations whose adequate assessment would require closer and more accessible interdisciplinary collaboration. The importance of such coordinated support is also emphasised by Shuranova et al. [12], who, in the context of healthcare support for Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic, point to the need for multi-level systems

of care involving health, psychological and social work professionals. Although their study focuses on a different vulnerable population, it supports the broader argument that complex psychosocial risks cannot be adequately addressed by a single profession alone. In this regard, the present findings build upon professional discussions regarding the need for a comprehensive assessment of risk and protective factors within the SPOD system [5, 6]. At the same time, they demonstrate that the practical implementation of such a comprehensive assessment may be significantly limited in the context of parental disputes.

In relation to the broader dissertation framework, the findings also indicate limitations in applying the general methodological guide *Assessment of the Situation of the Child and Their Family* [7] to cases of contentious divorce. Although the framework allows for general risk identification, it does not always sufficiently reflect the specific dynamics of parental conflict. Professionals must assess the child's needs, parental competencies, parental cooperation, possible manipulation, court involvement and systemic factors simultaneously. The results therefore suggest the need for more specific methodological guidance for working with families in high-conflict divorce.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined barriers perceived by child protection workers when assessing children and families in cases of parental conflict. The findings show that these barriers are not limited to parental conflict itself but include interrelated family, institutional, intersectoral and systemic factors that may complicate the identification of psychosocial risks, the child's needs and possible endangerment.

The main barriers concerned parental cooperation, court involvement, legal representatives, cooperation with other professionals, expert reports, and organisational conditions of child protection practice. The results suggest that family situation assessment in high-conflict divorce should be understood not only as an administrative or legal procedure, but also as a tool for early risk identification and support of the child's wellbeing, safety and mental health.

Prospects for Future Research. The findings point to the need for clearer methodological guidance, stronger professional and systemic support, better access to follow-up services and improved intersectoral cooperation. Future research should verify these findings on a broader sample and include the perspectives of other actors, such as judges, expert witnesses, psychologists, mediators, legal representatives and parents.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL REQUIREMENTS

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, University of South Bohemia. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. All data were anonymised and processed in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants.

Research Limitations. The study has several limitations. It is based on one focus group with five OSPOD workers, and the findings therefore cannot be generalised to all child protection practices in the Czech Republic. The focus group format may also have influenced participants' statements, particularly due to group dynamics. Another limitation is that the analysis was conducted by a single researcher, which may have increased the risk of subjective interpretation. The study also reflects only the perspective of OSPOD workers. It does not include the views of other actors involved in parental disputes, such as judges, experts, psychologists, legal representatives or parents. Despite these limitations, the findings provide valuable insight into barriers perceived in everyday assessment practice and may serve as a basis for further research and methodological discussion.

Primary data and materials. The primary data used in this study consisted of an audio recording and an anonymised transcript of the focus group discussion, together with the coding and analytical materials created in ATLAS.ti. The data are securely stored by the corresponding author. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the small number of participants, the conditions of informed consent and the need to protect participants' confidentiality, the primary data are not publicly available and cannot be shared with third parties.

Declaration on the use of artificial intelligence. Generative artificial intelligence tools were used solely for language editing, stylistic refinement and improvement of the clarity of selected parts of the manuscript. Artificial intelligence was not used for data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings or formulation of the scientific conclusions. The authors reviewed, verified and approved all AI-assisted content and take full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

FUNDING AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest. This study was conducted as part of the grant project «Conflictual Divorces,» registration number GAJU 140/2025/S, supported by the Grant Agency of the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice. The project ran from February 1, 2025, to December 31, 2025. The principal investigator of the project is Mgr. Petra Vašinová.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Vašinová P.[A, B, D, E, F]

Vacková J.[E, F]

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Резюме

ПЕРЕШКОДИ В ОЦІНЮВАННІ СІМЕЙНОЇ СИТУАЦІЇ У ВИПАДКАХ БАТЬКІВСЬКИХ СПОРІВ ЯК ЧИННИК РАННЬОГО ВИЯВЛЕННЯ ПСИХОСОЦІАЛЬНИХ РИЗИКІВ ДЛЯ ДИТИНИ: ПОГЛЯД ПРАЦІВНИКІВ ОРГАНІВ ЗАХИСТУ ДІТЕЙ
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Вступ. Оцінювання сімейної ситуації у випадках батьківських спорів є важливою складовою практики захисту прав та інтересів дитини. У ситуаціях висококонфліктного розлучення соціальні працівники мають ураховувати не лише правові та соціальні обставини, а й психосоціальні ризики, що можуть впливати на благополуччя, безпеку та психічне здоров'я дитини. Тому виявлення перешкод, які ускладнюють проведення оцінювання, є необхідною передумовою раннього втручання та надання ефективної підтримки.
Мета. Дослідження спрямоване на аналіз чинників, які працівники служб захисту дітей вважають основними перешкодами для оцінювання сімейної ситуації у випадках висококонфліктного розлучення, а також на з'ясування того, як ці перешкоди впливають на виявлення ризиків, розуміння потреб дитини та міжсекторальну взаємодію.
Матеріали та методи. У дослідженні застосовано якісний дизайн. Дані було зібрано у грудні 2025 року під час фокус-групи за участю п'яти працівників служб захисту дітей із різних регіонів Чеської Республіки, які мали досвід роботи з батьківськими спорами. Аналіз даних здійснювали методом тематичного аналізу із застосуванням відкритого кодування у програмному забезпеченні ATLAS.ti.
Результати. Було визначено шість взаємопов'язаних груп перешкод: співпраця з батьками, участь суду, вплив юридичних представників, взаємодія з іншими фахівцями, експертні висновки, а також організаційні та системні умови. Ці перешкоди можуть ускладнювати визначення реальних потреб дитини, розмежування батьківського конфлікту та можливого ризику для дитини, а також формулювання рекомендацій щодо подальшого втручання.
Висновки. Оцінювання сімейної ситуації у випадках висококонфліктного розлучення слід розглядати не лише як адміністративну чи правову процедуру, а й як інструмент раннього виявлення психосоціальних ризиків і захисту благополуччя дитини. Отримані результати вказують на необхідність чіткіших методичних рекомендацій, посилення професійної та системної підтримки, а також удосконалення співпраці між органами захисту дітей, судами та спеціалізованими службами.

Ключові слова: **висококонфліктне розлучення; оцінювання сімейної ситуації; психосоціальні ризики; благополуччя дитини; міжсекторальна взаємодія; соціально-правовий захист дітей**

Received: 11.05.2026
Accepted: 29.06.2026
Published: 11.09.2026