

Post-Separation Parenting Apps in the Context of Family Violence: Harm Minimisation versus Harm Facilitation

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Abstract

Post-separation parenting apps are designed for separated parents to use as a dedicated space for child-related communication and organisation. Their enhanced record-keeping features often lead to recommendations for their use within the context of family law and they are likely to appeal to victim/survivors of family violence. However, concerns have also been raised about their potential misuse by perpetrating parents. Using responses to an online survey about post-separation parenting apps, this study explores the tension between the harms and benefits of app use under these circumstances. Data were examined from 33 mothers who reported experiencing family violence via parenting apps. Comparative methods were used to contrast those who endorsed beneficial outcomes from app use with those whose outcomes were detrimental (*net-benefit case group* [$n = 24$] vs *net-detriment case group* [$n = 9$], respectively). Overall, mothers in the *net-benefit case group* reported a shorter time since separation ($M = 3$ years) and fewer experiences of app misuse by the other parent. For these mothers, apps worked to minimise harmful perpetrator conduct by deterring and/or capturing abusive behaviours and affording containment and boundary setting around interactions. By contrast, those in the *net-detriment case group* were separated longer ($M = 6.9$ years) and reported a higher incidence of app misuse and fear. These participants experienced a range of app-facilitated harms centred on perpetrators' false narratives and manipulation. These results suggest that while post-separation parenting apps may be useful harm-minimisation tools for many victim/survivors of post-separation family violence, they are not a panacea for parenting communication in all such contexts – particularly where there is entrenched coercive control.

Keywords: Family law; separation, family violence; technology-facilitated coercive control; record-keeping; parenting communication.

1. Introduction

Post-separation parenting can be a long-term, complex and sometimes dangerous arena – especially in the context of family violence.¹ Although definitions vary, family violence is commonly understood as a pattern of physical and/or psychological behaviours used by one family member or intimate partner to control another.² Many studies have explored how perpetrators

¹ Douglas, National Domestic and Family Violence Bench Book; Spearman, “Post-separation Abuse,” 1225.

² While many countries have a legal definition of family violence (e.g., the *Family Law Act 1975* in Australia), descriptions and terminology used in research and practice are not fixed. Ongoing lively debate continues about the implications of language in this space. Within Australia, commonly used terms are ‘family violence’, ‘domestic violence’, ‘domestic abuse’, ‘family and domestic violence’ and ‘intimate partner violence’. This article uses the umbrella term ‘family violence’ owing to the focus on separated parents. However, it is acknowledged that this term can over-simplify the diverse, complex and nuanced ways in which individuals and families experience such behaviours. See, for example, Douglas, National Domestic and Family Violence Bench Book; Harris, “Weaponising Technology in Intimate Relationships,” 13; Muehlenhard, “The Social Construction of Violence,” 234–45; Murray, “‘What’s the Problem?’,” 532–35.



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of family violence use the coparenting connection to continue the victimisation of their former partners, both in person³ and on digital platforms (email, SMS, messenger apps).⁴ Perversely, such abuses may even be facilitated by legal interventions intended to reduce harms – for example, where a court order stipulates that interparental communication be restricted to child-related matters, but the perpetrating parent manipulates this access (e.g. by putting a child's name in the subject heading of an email) to continue to confer abuse and harassment.⁵ While not explicitly designed for situations involving family violence, the increasing availability of post-separation parenting apps may offer some hope to those dealing with these challenges, appealing to both separated parents and the professionals who work with them.

Post-separation parenting apps usually offer several features, including a messenger, shared calendar and expense tracker.⁶ They are generally distinguished from other communication and organisation apps by their enhanced record-keeping functionality.⁷ It is this additional functionality that may particularly attract victim/survivors and their advocates. Enhanced record-keeping occurs through features such as: (1) unalterable messaging (sent messages cannot be deleted or edited); (2) highly detailed send and read receipt details; and/or (c) a means to download all relevant app data into a date-stamped document (e.g. a PDF), which can assist as evidence of wrong- (or right-) doing. Some apps also allow for third parties to join (e.g. lawyers, mediators or other professionals) and a small number include forms of language-control (e.g. censoring of swear-words, sentiment feedback, chatbot suggestions, text length restrictions). While the population of parents using post-separation parenting apps is unknown, at the time of writing there are dozens available for use on Apple and Android devices, as well as on desktops.⁸ They are promoted through parenting and family law websites;⁹ their uptake is sometimes encouraged by mediators, lawyers and other professionals;¹⁰ and, in some cases, parents have been mandated to use them through the family law courts.¹¹

The specialised features of post-separation parenting apps are designed to produce positive outcomes for users, including reducing conflict, increasing accountability and simplifying parenting communication.¹² However, some family law professionals and researchers have raised concerns about their suitability in contexts where parents do not use them cooperatively and have suggested that there are both potential benefits and risks within the dynamics of family violence.¹³ Logically, aspects of both benefit and risk are possible depending on parents' circumstances. This study aims to shed light on this issue by examining a sub-set of responses to a user survey collected as part of a broader research project on co-parent app use.¹⁴ Specifically, the article investigates separated mothers' experiences and views about using post-separation parenting apps in the context of family violence.

2. Literature

The relevant literature spans post-separation abuse, systems abuse in the context of family law and the role of technology. However, first a note on the concept of coercive control, which is fundamental to most of this literature and is increasingly being recognised as one of the dynamics of family violence, often driving the most insidious and deeply entrenched

³ Beckwith, *Coercive Control Literature Review*, 13; Fitch, "Vexatious Litigation in Family Law and Coercive Control," 103; Hay, "Mothers' Post-separation Experiences of Male Partner Abuse," 1276; Morrison, "'All Over Now?'," 274; Orr, "The Psychological Impact on Mothers Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence When Navigating the Family Court System," 1; Reeves, "Family Violence, Protection Orders and Systems Abuse," 91; Thiara, "Absent Presence," 137.

⁴ Dragiewicz, "'What's Mum's Password?'," 137; Markwick, "Technology and Family Violence in the Context of Post-separation Parenting," 143.

⁵ e-Safety, *Children and Technology-facilitated Abuse*, 11.

⁶ Examples of popular apps include: 2Houses, AppClose, Divvito, Fayr, Our Family Wizard and Talking Parents.

⁷ Heard, "Risks and Benefits of Post-separation Parenting Apps," 143.

⁸ Smyth, "Australian Post-separation Parenting on the Smartphone," 53; Smyth, "Popular Post-separation Parenting Smartphone Apps," 563.

⁹ See, for example, Garvey, "The Best Co-Parenting Apps for Healthy Communication"; Love, "12 Best Co-Parenting Apps and Software 2024"; Genuine Legal Family Lawyers, "What are the Best Apps for Separated Parents in 2024?"; Mediations Australia, "The Best Apps for Separated Parents in Australia."

¹⁰ Payne, "Family Law Professionals' Views of Post-separation Parenting Apps."

¹¹ For examples in Australia, see *Aubert & Cranmore* [2021] FamCA77; *Lenkov & Serada* [2021] FamCA192.

¹² For examples of advertised outcomes see the Appstore descriptions for popular apps such as: AppClose (<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/appclose/id1019290876>), Fayr (<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/fayr-co-parenting-simplified/id1170670072>), Our Family Wizard (<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/ourfamilywizard-co-parent-app/id497405393>) and Talking Parents (<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/talkingparents-co-parent-app/id1092220726>).

¹³ Barsky, "The Ethics of App-assisted Family Mediation," 31; Heard, "Risks and Benefits of Post-separation Parenting Apps," 143; Smyth, "Australian Post-separation Parenting on the Smartphone," 53.

¹⁴ Bruce Smyth et al, 'Post-Separation Parenting Apps: Can they Help to Reduce Conflict' (Grant Application, Australian Research Council: LP200100413).

perpetrations.¹⁵ Coercive control has been conceptualised as a course of conduct that involves a cumulative, systematic attack on another person's autonomy and liberty.¹⁶ Coercive control is most often perpetrated by men¹⁷ and, while it may involve overt acts such as physical violence, sexual violence and stalking, it can also take the form of nuanced or covert acts such as emotional and psychological abuse, financial abuse, gaslighting, surveillance, systems abuse and social isolation.¹⁸ The concept of coercive control is particularly important for understanding post-separation abuse because it helps to explain why ending a relationship does not necessarily end the perpetration of family violence, though it may change how it is enacted.¹⁹ For example, if face-to-face interactions cease or are reduced after separation, perpetrators may co-opt alternative means of reaching their victims. This can include the utilisation of children, the legal system and/or technology – as discussed below.

2.1 Post-Separation Family Violence

Family violence and coercive control are much-studied phenomena, and research on their enactment in the post-separation parenting arena is increasing. Empirical work suggests frequent experiences of ongoing abuse, involving both the victim/survivor (usually mothers) and often their children as well.²⁰ Davies and colleagues, for example, examined data from a longitudinal, prospective survey of 309 female victim/survivors who, at baseline, had left their abuser in the preceding three years.²¹ Only a small minority (11.5 per cent) did not experience any post-separation abuse, while approximately half experienced ongoing abuse and harassment at the three-year mark – roughly split between those with high frequency and those with low frequency (27.2 per cent and 23.3 per cent respectively). Mothers were over-represented among those who experienced ongoing, high-frequency abuse. The authors suggest that motherhood increases women's risk of continuing victimisation.²²

Several qualitative studies have explored maternal experiences of ongoing family violence following separation. Crossman and colleagues used a small cross-case analysis to query the experiences of eight mothers who had separated from a partner who had used non-violent coercive control.²³ Most ($n = 6/8$) reported continued experiences of harassment, stalking, threatening and controlling behaviours in the context of post-separation parenting, raising concerns about the deliberate use of children as pawns and as a way to access mothers. Similarly, Hay and colleagues undertook in-depth interviews with ten mothers who were coparenting with a violent ex-partner. The phenomenological analysis found that post-separation abuse was an extension of pre-existing family violence, exacerbated by systemic challenges related to family law and coparenting.²⁴

More recently, Spearman and colleagues published a concept analysis to better understand the antecedents and impacts of post-separation abuse, which frequently involves parenting dynamics.²⁵ After reviewing 140 publications, they found that post-separation abuse consisted of a pattern of deliberate behaviours, including intimidation, legal abuse, economic abuse and the use of children in threats, harassment and stalking. Coercive control and manipulation of legal systems – particularly family law – appeared to play central roles in the ongoing perpetration of such abuses against mothers.²⁶

2.2 Systems Abuse and Family Law

Data from the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia suggest that 80 per cent of parenting cases involve allegations of violence.²⁷ After separation, where the victim/survivor no longer co-resides with the perpetrator, pathways to enact family violence and coercive control in-person are reduced. As such, perpetrators may seek out other avenues.²⁸ In Australia and

¹⁵ Hill, *See What You Made Me Do*, 11–82; Stark, *Coercive Control*.

¹⁶ Beckwith, *Coercive Control Literature Review*, 9–11; Stark, *Coercive Control*.

¹⁷ Beckwith, *Coercive Control Literature Review*, 12; Hill, *See What You Made Me Do*, 135–57; Johnson, “Patriarchal Terrorism and Common Couple Violence,” 293–94; Stark, *Coercive Control*.

¹⁸ Beckwith, *Coercive Control Literature Review*, 14–16; Crossman, “‘He Could Scare Me Without Laying a Hand on Me’,” 454–73; Hill, *See What You Made Me Do*; Stark, “Coercive Control: Update,” 81–104.

¹⁹ Douglas, *Legal Systems Abuse*, 84–99; Hay, *Mothers’ Post separation Experiences*, 1276–1300; Humphreys, *Neither Justice nor Protection*, 195–214.

²⁰ While perpetrators can be any gender, family violence is predominantly experienced by women and perpetrated by men. As such, most studies in this space focus on the experiences of women and children.

²¹ Davies, “Gender Inequality and Patterns of Abuse Post Leaving,” 27–39.

²² Davies, “Gender Inequality and Patterns of Abuse Post Leaving,” 33.

²³ Crossman, “‘He Could Scare Me Without Laying a Hand on Me’,” 454–73.

²⁴ Hay, “Mothers’ Post-separation Experiences,” 1276–1300.

²⁵ Spearman, “Post-separation Abuse,” 1225–46.

²⁶ Spearman, “Post-separation Abuse,” 1227–29.

²⁷ Federal Circuit and Family Law Court, “Media Release.”

²⁸ Douglas, “Legal Systems Abuse,” 84–99.

elsewhere, the family law system has been identified as being one such avenue and of frequently facilitating family violence.²⁹ A number of studies have presented evidence for this standpoint, providing a range of terms that describe perpetrator tactics and the systems that support them.³⁰

Implicit in research findings across these diverse tactics is a unifying construction of post-separation systems abuses as both disingenuous and persistent, yet difficult for mothers to combat. As such, the perpetrating parent rarely faces consequences. The role that technology can play in aiding or foiling these tactics remains poorly understood. The scant research on post-separation parenting and technology nevertheless suggests that it is often enabling for perpetrators.³¹

2.3 Technology-Facilitated Abuse

The increasing uptake of smartphones and apps has given perpetrators of intimate partner violence a range of additional tools.³² Like systems abuse, technology provides an auxiliary avenue to continue to enact harms on victim/survivors, both before and after separation.³³ Despite recognition that post-separation parenting is a key context for ongoing abuse,³⁴ there is a dearth of empirical research at this specific intersection.³⁵ Two small Australian qualitative studies are an exception. They demonstrate the potential for technology to facilitate overt acts of family violence (e.g. abuse and harassment) as well as those which are more covert (e.g. systems abuse). Drawing on interviews with mothers who have experienced technology-facilitated coercive control, both studies found that children and children's objects were manipulated through such means as installation of spyware on children's devices or asking children for the mother's passwords.³⁶ In one study it was also observed that some fathers used false narratives through digital communication to enact a 'performative type of image management', deliberately building a misleading, positive impression of themselves or a negative impression of the mother.³⁷ These actions were understood as deliberate tactics, employed to impact future parenting arrangements and as a form of systems abuse.

Given the emphasis on record-keeping as a key feature of many post-separation parenting apps, the potential for its nefarious misuse is of particular concern. At the same time, its potential value in aiding victim/survivors by deterring or capturing perpetrator behaviour could be of enormous significance. The literature on post-separation family violence and its enactment through systems abuse suggests that it is crucial to investigate whether these apps help or harm, as well as who they help and under what conditions.

3. Aims and Research Questions

This study seeks to gain insight into some of the beneficial and non-beneficial outcomes for mothers who use a post-separation parenting app with a family violence perpetrating co-parent. Two questions guided the research:

RQ1. Are there any indicators of differences between mothers who use post-separation parenting apps in the context of family violence and who experience harms, versus those who experience benefits?

RQ2. What are the different types of harms and benefits experienced?

4. Method

This research draws on secondary quantitative and qualitative data from a survey that was part of a larger investigation into the use of post-separation parenting apps.³⁸ The survey recruited separated parents living in one of five countries (Australia, New

²⁹ See, for example, Hill, *See What You Made Me Do*, 261–96; Stark, "The 'Coercive Control Framework'," 33–49.

³⁰ Examples include: custody stalking (e.g. Elizabeth, "Custody Stalking," 185–201); judicial terrorism (e.g. Tucker, "The [E]X Factor," 352); paper abuse or procedural stalking (e.g. Miller, "Paper Abuse," 637–50); persistent and vexatious litigation (e.g. Fitch, "Vexatious Litigation in Family Law," 103–15) and image management (e.g. Douglas, *Women, Intimate Partner Violence, and the Law*).

³¹ Dragiewicz, "Digital Media and Domestic Violence in Australia," 377–93.

³² Cuomo, "New Tools, Old Abuse," 224–32.

³³ Dragiewicz, *Domestic Violence and Communication Technology*, 16–26; Harris, "Weaponising Technology," 3–23; Woodlock, "Technology as a Weapon," 368–80.

³⁴ Dragiewicz, *Domestic Violence and Communication Technology*, 19; e-Safety, *Children and Technology Facilitated Abuse*, 11.

³⁵ Markwick, "Technology and Family Violence," 143–62.

³⁶ Dragiewicz, "What's Mum's Password?," 143–44; e-Safety, *Children and Technology Facilitated Abuse*, 52–55. See also Dragiewicz, "Digital Media and Domestic Violence in Australia," 377–93.

³⁷ Dragiewicz, "What's Mum's Password?," 143.

³⁸ Bruce Smyth et al, 'Post-Separation Parenting Apps: Can they Help to Reduce Conflict' (Grant Application, Australian Research Council: LP200100413).

Zealand, the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada) who had used a post-separation parenting app. All survey responses were anonymous.³⁹

4.1 Recruitment and Sample

Recruitment was undertaken with the help of several app developers. These developers ($n = 10$), who had been identified in a related research project,⁴⁰ were approached and half ($n = 5$) agreed to send the survey to their users on behalf of the research team. An additional two Australian developers were also contacted and agreed to circulate the survey. Several not-for-profit organisations ($n = 11$) who work with separated parents in Australia were also approached and agreed to help with recruitment. Recruitment was further supplemented with Facebook advertising to try to increase the sample size. The survey was administered by a Melbourne-based fieldwork company.⁴¹ It is not possible to calculate a response rate given that we do not have the sampling frames used by developers or the not-for-profit organisations.

The focus of this article is on a subset of responses to questions about the use of an app in the context of controlling, abusive or violent behaviours. In light of the gendered nature of coercive control and family violence, and the well-documented distinct gendered differences in perpetrator and victim/survivor behaviours, only data from female respondents have been analysed. Other findings related to gendered differences will be discussed in a broader analysis paper.

5. Analysis

A total of 140 valid responses to the survey were received. Eighty-four participants (60 per cent) identified as female. The majority of female respondents endorsed a question asking whether they had experienced ‘controlling, abusive or violent behaviours from the other parent’ when using an app ($n = 50$, 59.5%). Thirty-nine of these were current users of an app and were subsequently asked about whether and how app use conferred benefits and/or challenges (non-current app users were not asked follow-up questions and were thus excluded).

Both a low number of respondents and the non-probability sampling limited the ability to undertake inferential statistical analyses. Given the relatively moderate size of the sample, aspects of a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) were utilised to explore the richness of these data⁴² and shed light on what factors could help to explain divergent outcomes.

5.1 Steps of Analysis

The analysis comprised four main steps (see Figure 1).

³⁹ Ethics approval for this project was granted by the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol H/2023/1172).

⁴⁰ Smyth, “Popular Post-Separation Parenting Smartphone Apps.”

⁴¹ The Social Research Centre, owned by the Australian National University: <https://srcentre.com.au>

⁴² Ragin, The Comparative Method.

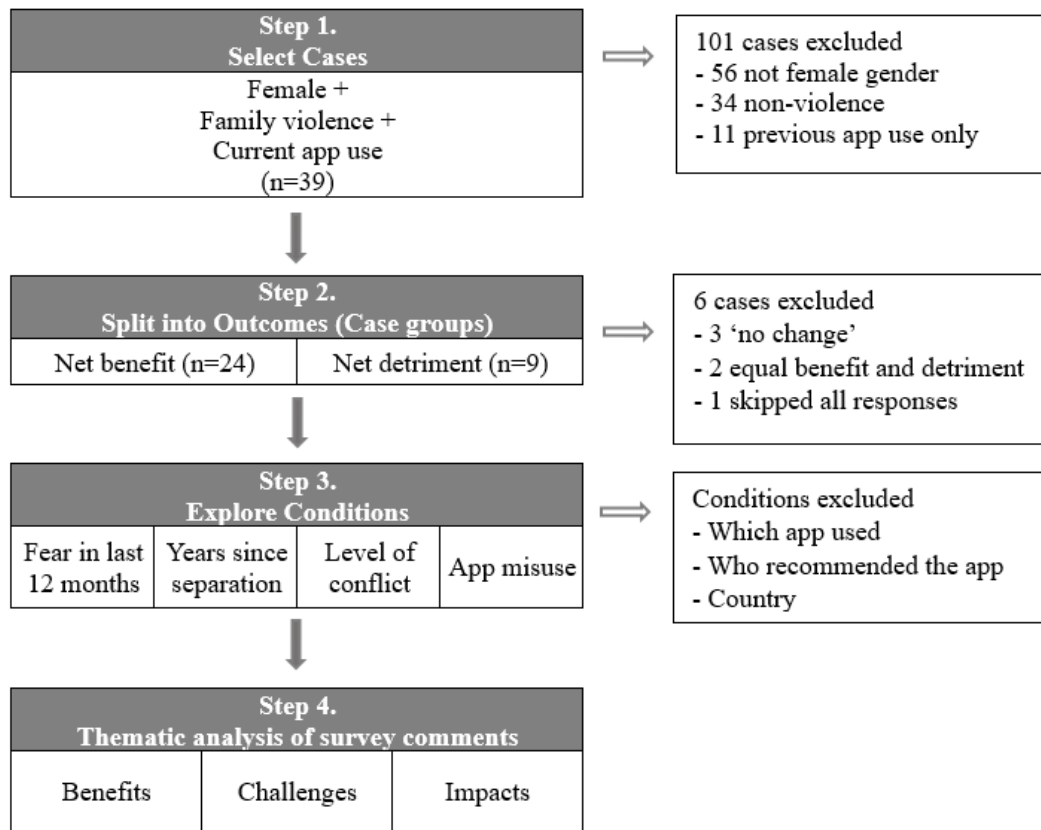


Figure 1. Steps of analysis

1. *Cases*: First, responses were extracted from mothers who indicated the experience of family violence (via endorsement of the question 'Have you experienced controlling, abusive or violent behaviour through an app?'), and who were currently using an app.

2. *Outcomes*: Second, these cases ($n = 39$) were split into dichotomous latent categories of beneficial or detrimental outcomes as the result of using an app. This split was made based on participant endorsement of four self-reported outcome measures: (a) level of conflict; (b) level of stress; (c) perception of safety; and (d) life complexity. Each outcome measure used a simple three-point ordinal scale to show: (a) a positive change; (b) a negative change; or (c) no change (participants could also elect to skip this question). Where participants indicated one or more negative outcomes and no positive outcomes, they were considered a 'net-detriment' case. Where participants indicated one or more positive outcomes and no negative outcomes, they were considered a 'net-benefit' case. A small number of participants indicated no change ($n = 3$) or an even a mixture of positive and negative outcomes ($n = 2$). Because of the low numbers and the aim of the study (to examine those cases where benefit or harm were experienced), data from these five participants were excluded, as were the data from a single participant who did not answer any of the outcome questions (total of $n = 6$ excluded).

3. *Conditions*: The third step was to consult other survey variables for the included cases ($n = 33$) to help describe the sample and to build a better understanding of the two groups of interest (net-benefit and net-detriment). These included length of time since separation, level of conflict, whether they were fearful and several categories of app-misuse⁴³ (see Table 1 for descriptives). The choice of app, who recommended it and the participant's country were among other conditions examined, but for which no patterns were found.

⁴³ Adapted from Burke, "Using Technology to Control Intimate Partners," 1162–67.

4. *Qualitative analysis*: Finally, after the cross-case grouping was complete, responses to open text questions pertaining to family violence were examined and thematic analysis was undertaken.⁴⁴ The aim of this last step was to provide a richer understanding of the context for negative versus positive outcomes. Open text responses tended to be only one to three sentences long and, while a phenomenological, interpretive lens drove the understanding of victim/survivor experiences, in most cases response brevity meant that meaning had to be construed at a semantic level. Open text responses were exported to a Microsoft Excel document for familiarisation and analysis. Semantic codes were generated and subsequently grouped into six themes: (1) *Reduction in abuse and harassment*; (2) *Legal accountability*; (3) *Self-protection*; (4) *Sustained app misuse*; (5) *Manipulating the record*; and (6) *Extension of trauma*.

6. Results

Table 1 shows descriptive data for app use.

Table 1. Descriptive data for app use.

	Net benefit (n = 24)	Net harm (n = 9)	All ^a (N = 33)
<i>Condition measures</i>			
Length of time since separation in years – M (SD)	3 (2.1)	6.9 (4)	4.1 (3.2)
Level of conflict with other parent on a 0–10 scale (0 none, 10 lots) – M (SD)	6.7 (2.7)	9.3 (2)	7.5 (2.8)
Relationship with other parent over the past 12 months is fearful – n	13	7	20
<i>Types of app-misuse</i>			
Other parent was slow to respond or was non-responsive	18	8	26
Other parent expected you to respond immediately to messages	22	9	31
Other parent did not update important information or calendar events	9	5	14
Other parent entered fake or false information	9	7	16
Other parent used the app to send inappropriate messages	16	8	24
Other parent used the app to send inappropriate images	1	2	3
Other parent used the app to check in on you and your whereabouts	8	6	14
Other parent blamed you personally for not being able to use a feature that did not work	8	6	14

⁴⁴ Braun, Thematic Analysis.

6.1 Case Summaries

Many of the observed differences between the net-benefit and net-detriment groups manifested in the extent of problems experienced. For example, both groups reported high current levels of conflict, but the net-detriment cases were extremely high (median of 9.3/10) where the net-benefit cases were mid to high (median 6.7/10). On measures of app misuse, the same perpetrating behaviours were frequently observed in both groups, but a higher proportion reported these behaviours in the net-detriment group (see Table 1). On average, those in the net-benefit case group reported experiencing 3.8 types of app misuse, while those in the net-benefit group reported 5.7 types. Finally, approximately half of those in the net-benefit group endorsed that their relationship with the other parent was fearful ($n = 13/24$), whereas for the net-detriment group it was more than three quarters ($n = 7/9$).

The other key difference that emerged from the survey data was the length of time since separation. A shorter time since separation (three years or less) was observed for around two-thirds of the net-benefit cases ($n = 17$), ranging between 0.5 and 8 years ($M = 3$ years), whereas all but one participant in the net-detriment group ($n = 8$) reported a separation period of greater than four years' duration, ranging from 2.5 to 15 years ($M = 6.9$ years).

6.2 Outcomes of App Use

Every case in the net-benefit group ($n = 24$) indicated that using a post-separation parenting app had simplified their life. Almost all those in the net-benefit group ($n = 22/24$) reported reduced stress, two-thirds endorsed improvement in safety ($n = 15/24$) and more than half ($n = 13/24$) endorsed improvements in the level of conflict with the other parent. Conversely, in the net-detriment case group, just over half ($n = 5$) reported higher levels of conflict, higher levels of stress and decreased safety as a result of app use (Table 2).

Table 2. Reported outcomes of app use for each case group

Net-benefit case group ($n = 24$)	Net-detriment case group ($n = 9$)
Simplified life ($n = 24$)	Complicated life ($n = 9$)
Lower stress ($n = 22$)	More stress ($n = 5$)
Less conflict ($n = 13$)	More conflict ($n = 5$)
Safer ($n = 15$)	Less safe ($n = 5$)

Thematic analysis of the open-text comment fields in the survey provides further insight.

6.3 Net-Benefit Case Group: Survey Comments

Most (23 of 24) members of the net-benefit case group answered one or more of the open-text questions about app use in the context of controlling, abusing or violent behaviour from the other parent. Fifteen did not provide any comments regarding the challenges of app use. Although responses were often only one to three sentences long, three coherent themes emerged. First, many mothers reported a reduction in abusive language and harassment as a result of either the language moderation feature (e.g. filtering out abusive language) or the record-keeping feature (as a deterrent). Second, for some the apps could be used to facilitate their own self-protective behaviours, particularly regarding containment and boundary-setting. And third, despite these positives, numerous mothers in the net-benefit case group reported ways in which the perpetrating parent managed to work-around app safeguards or to resist their attempts to set boundaries. Harm minimisation is a central theme that runs through these comments. As one participant put it, 'An app reduces the behaviour, but it is still there' (Parent 394, separated two and a half years).

Reduction in Abuse and Harassment

Many mothers ($n = 10/24$) credited the apps with reducing unwanted interactions with the other parent, particularly regarding offensive language.

Because his attorney is monitoring, he uses somewhat less offensive language. (Parent 104, separated one year)

The app warns the author and the text message has an indicator on the message if a warning has been raised. This means the wording is checked first before it is sent. I feel much more at ease and safer on a whole range of issues. (Parent 98, separated two years)

Expletives are not allowed and threatening language flagged. In addition it is impossible to delete previous messages. Therefore the other parent is far more careful about how he approaches me, which has significantly lowered my anxiety. (Parent 76, separated two years)

Access by third parties or having communication ‘on the record’ were frequently cited as reasons for improvements in the perpetrating parents’ behaviour. Legal accountability through record-keeping was the most frequently reported benefit.

Legal Accountability

Half of the net-benefit case group included a comment of some sort about the record or legal benefits of app use. This benefit was both perceived (where mothers reported feeling less stressed because the app could or had captured misuse) and realised (where using data captured in the app had supported their legal case).

Knowing that a judge or attorney can access the app messages (even though we don’t currently use this function) has cut down on the number of threats and harassing messages I’ve received. (Parent 100, separated seven years)

It has provided evidence to hold the other party accountable for their actions and words. It has helped back up the court orders that are in place and makes it as easy as possible to provide evidence of this to my lawyer and the courts when the other party does not comply with court orders or agreements. (Parent 531, separated three years)

I used this function to collect evidence of an abusive message from my ex-partner. I was able to send it to my lawyer who then contacted my ex-partner’s lawyer to request them to stop this behaviour. (Parent 282, separated three years)

Several of these examples also indicated a level of ongoing engagement with legal professionals, and the reassurance this third-party involvement appears to provide.

Self-Protection: Containment and Boundary-Setting

Mothers in the net-benefit group reported additional proactive ways in which they had been able to use an app to their advantage, particularly to safeguard their mental wellbeing. As already noted, this sometimes occurred through the successful reporting of app misuse; however, further benefits were gained where mothers were able to limit interactions to the app (protecting other channels of communication) and to set boundaries around when they would access messages.

So by having a separate app the rest of life is kept separate – e.g. not monitoring Facebook and seeing them online but not responding. (Parent 394, separated two and a half years)

It enables control of communication with the perpetrator. SMS was too accessible and I would receive a bombardment of messages and be expected to reply immediately. The app has been good as I am able to commit to checking it several times per week when I feel emotionally able to do so ... (Parent 221, separated two years)

The app has allowed me to either ignore the behaviour, hold him accountable for it, and/or seek advice before responding. (Parent 60, separated five years)

Sustained App Misuse

The apps clearly provide potentially important pathways through which victim/survivors can regain some agency and minimise perpetrator harms. However, it is important to note that even within the net-benefit group, many mothers reported ways in which app use had not helped, or where their attempts to create safe communication were undermined by the other parent through the app.

Behaviour continues through the app. My ex used screenshots to call me names [circumventing the app’s language detection]. If he doesn’t get his own way [he] just keeps messaging and I can’t block it temporarily ... (Parent 394, separated two and a half years)

Sometimes the abuser doesn’t have a regard for the platform or features it has. So, regardless of the app, they will communicate in the way that they want. It doesn’t prevent the abuse from continuing. (Parent 432, separated three years)

They can say what they like and pretend it’s about the children. (Parent 499, separated six and a half years)

One mother (Parent 428, separated one year and nine months) reported that the perpetrator got rid of his phone to avoid having to use the app because it had been court-ordered; another had to back-peddle on her boundary-setting due to the angry backlash from her former partner:

The idea that my partner could not use it to rant and send long tirades made him very angry. (Parent 439, separated one year) Nonetheless, she maintained that even though he was still able to abuse her through the app, 'it's better than having my other modes of communication hijacked by him'.

6.4 Net-Detriment Case Group: Survey Comments

Eight of the nine participants in this group did not convey any benefits to app use, with only a single statement from one participant noting, 'There is a court record' (Parent 33, separated five years). Feedback about app use therefore relied on survey comments regarding the impact of using an app and/or the challenges. These comments signalled two main sources of harm: (1) the deliberate misuse of the apps by the other parent; and (2) engagement with the other parent through the app as a source of ongoing anxiety.

App Misuse: Manipulating the Record

More than half of the nine net-detriment participants ($n = 5$) disclosed that the other parent used the enhanced record-keeping functionality of an app to create a 'false record', to paint themselves in a positive light or to paint the other parent in a negative light:

It isn't monitored so my ex will often make statements that are untrue or controlling – but it is difficult to prove without the context. (Parent 205, separated four years)

Several participants conveyed concerns that this record was going to be used against them in a legal capacity (i.e. in court):

They screen shot messages after you reply to their fake information – or they say you never answer when they send messages – but they send false information and lies and I don't want to engage then [they] use my silence against me to police or lawyers ... (Parent 145, separated 15 years)

I am now extremely anxious again because his lies might have extra weight in court, given the weight given to these apps as a fair 'record' of what is going on. It is not a fair record, it is whatever parenting fantasy he wants to make up. (Parent 137, separated four years)

App misuse was also thought to occur through a deliberate corruption of child-related communications. These were perceived to be motivated by the other parent's desire to monitor, convey veiled threats or simply cause distress.

Some of this information to people not trained in these tactics can't see the lies and can seem innocent information about a child. (Parent 145, separated fifteen years)

Asking for information to monitor whereabouts, but disguised as wanting to know about the child. Leaves me exposed, and a risk to safety. (Parent 271, separated four years)

My ex-partner uses the app to disrupt my life. On mother's day he did the darndest thing – he texted me a lovely message about how good a mother i was and how much my daughter loved me. In the courts, this would 'play' well and i would look like a fucking crazy person for having a problem with it. But i DO have a problem with my rapist ex-partner interrupting my day to pontificate about his opinion of my parenting. I wanted peace. And as my abuser, he knew that interrupting me like that would trigger me and ruin my lunch with my daughter ... (Parent 137, separated four years)

Extension of Trauma

As with the above comment, several participants in this group referenced the ongoing, triggering impact of having to receive communication from an abusive former partner over such a medium:

Makes me spiral when I hear/see the notification, scared 'what now', impacts my current relationship and ability to parent because I'm usually upset but the messages. The only thing this app has ever helped with is signaling 'control and abuse incoming'. (Parent 226, separated two and a half years)

Communicating with the abuser causes me significant distress and anxiety. I avoid communicating at all to the greatest extent possible. (Parent 141, separated eight years)

An increased sense of ‘being watched’ through the app was reported by one user (Parent 145). An overarching observation from these mothers’ comments is that the apps have not afforded the net-detriment case group substantial harm minimisation or increases in agency, as was seen in the net-benefit case group. Instead, the apps are perceived as facilitating harm – giving the perpetrating co-parent the upper hand by providing an avenue to cause the victim/survivor deliberate distress and, in some cases, as a platform for systems abuse.

7. Discussion

This study sought to explore the tension between positive and negative outcomes of app use in the context of family violence. More than half of the separated mothers who participated in this survey reported using a post-separation parenting app in this context. This is a potential indicator that victim/survivors and perpetrators of family violence constitute a substantial proportion of the customer base for these kinds of apps.

7.1 Signals of Enduring Coercive Control

Were there any indicators of differences between those who experienced benefits compared with those who experienced detriment (RQ1)? The cross-case analysis provided some clear signalling about potential differences between the two groups, most notably in relation to the length of time since separation and the proportion of respondents who experience fear. The median time since separation for net-benefit cases (3.0 years) was less than half of that in the net-detriment group (6.9 years). This difference may be an indication that mothers in the net-detriment case group are experiencing more entrenched patterns of family violence and coercive control. Adding weight to this possibility is the lower instance of fear for those in the net-benefit case group ($n = 13/24$), compared with the net-detriment group ($n = 7/9$). Some research indicates that fear is an important indicator of the presence and/or severity of coercive control.⁴⁵

7.2 Harm Minimisation and Harm Facilitation

What were the different types of harms and benefits experienced (RQ2)? Benefits and harms were distinct for each case group. Significantly, the record-keeping function was at the heart of both. In the net-benefit case group, record-keeping was reported as an aid to harm minimisation, curbing abuse and harassment and keeping the other parent accountable for their behaviour. By contrast, most mothers in the net-detriment case group referenced the communication record as a facilitator rather than a minimiser of harm. Their concerns did not tend to encompass overt behaviours such as abuse and harassment, but instead centred on subtle and covert misuse – such as the perpetrator manipulating the app messaging record to create a false narrative that would make the victim/survivor look bad, or make themselves look good. Concerns about such misuse of digital communications have been noted in earlier research regarding systems abuse and performative image management, particularly within the conduct of coercive control.⁴⁶ Although many post-separation parenting apps extol a permanent record of interactions aimed at reducing discord and increasing accountability, such covert abuse of an app’s features is difficult, if not impossible, to prove to others – or to combat. As one participant from the net-detriment case group put it:

I think the apps are just another ‘legal’ way for the abusive parent to keep [in] touch with their victims and control them, keep them on their toes, and the victim is made to pay to be a part of it. (Parent 226, separated two and a half years)

Despite providing a platform for some perpetrating parents to potentially carry out family law-related systems abuse, it is important to acknowledge the agency that apps afforded to the majority of victim/survivors in this sample. Many mothers in the net-benefit case group reported that the apps allowed them to put in place protective measures that increased their mental wellbeing and enhanced perceived safety – over and above what had been experienced through other communication media. This was achieved primarily through their ability to report app misuse, contain interactions to a single platform and set boundaries around when to read and reply to messages. Again, these benefits suggest the apps’ potential as tools for harm minimisation: app use in these cases does not appear to be fundamentally shifting the drivers behind perpetrator behaviours, nor is it eradicating all perpetrator behaviours (many in the net-benefit case group still reported substantial challenges). Yet, for some participants, post-separation parenting apps do help to reduce the scope of harm. While ‘safety work’⁴⁷ should not be

⁴⁵ Hardesty, “Toward a standard approach to operationalizing coercive control,” 833–43; Johnson, “Patriarchal Terrorism,” 283–94; Spearman, “Post-separation Abuse,” 1225–46; Stark, Coercive Control.

⁴⁶ Dragiewicz, “‘What’s Mum’s Password?’,” 142.

⁴⁷ ‘Safety work’ refers to the societal expectation that is placed on women to adjust their behaviours in order to discourage, encourage or in some way control men’s behaviours. For discussions regarding family violence, see Dragiewicz, “Digital Media and Domestic Violence in Australia,” 377–93; Harris, “Digital Coercive Control,” 539–41.

the domain of victim/survivors alone, tools that enhance the capacity to find ‘spaces for action’⁴⁸ – particularly in the absence of any better alternatives – are clearly valuable.

The tension between harm and benefit has been explored above, but it cannot be resolved using this outcomes-based data. There is not yet enough information to flesh out who will benefit from using a post-separation parenting app, and under what circumstances. That said, the indications so far are that where there is entrenched, long-term coercive control by a perpetrator, an app may benefit the perpetrator’s agenda over and above that of the victim/survivor. Where separation is relatively recent, however, and in the absence of entrenched coercive control, apps may help some victim/survivors to minimise the frequency and impact of harmful perpetrator interactions.

8. Study Limitations

This is a small non-probability purposive sample, which should not be seen to be representative of the general population of app users who experience family violence, including coercive control; the response rate was low and survey comments were brief. In addition, the results were constrained to those participants who had ultimately persisted with an app; those who were no longer using an app were not asked questions about outcomes or family violence. The latter is an important group in its own right. Exploring the views of those who no longer use a post-separation parenting app might offer greater insight into potential harms (or lack of benefits) than examining the views of those who persist with an app, and may have given more balance to the case group sizes (logically, those who have persisted with app use are likely to have done so because they have found it beneficial, and vice versa).

9. Future Research

Several lines of inquiry warrant investigation in this context. An obvious place to begin would be to delve into which apps, or app features, have greater benefits to victim/survivors than others. While the research presented in this article proposed some possible conditions for beneficial outcomes of app use, a larger data set targeting more specific conditions (including a better profile of the types of family violence experienced) would allow for confirmation and expansion of these ideas. Additionally, while this research has suggested some harm-minimisation benefits that victim/survivors can derive from app use, an important question is whether there are some app features that could go further than harm minimisation. Is it possible for these sorts of technologies to ‘nudge’ perpetrating parents into better ways of communicating, as some of the language moderation features claim to be able to do? Might they be able to help perpetrators who want to change their behaviours and improve their communication (e.g. those in men’s behaviour change programs)? For victim/survivors, are such technologies capable of improving justice outcomes? More research on the value (or otherwise) of having a third-party (e.g. family law professional, such as a mediator) monitor communication in these complex cases also warrants investigation – again, both for the potential to improve outcomes for victim/survivors and to contribute to authentic change for perpetrators – results that could greatly benefit children. This research scrapes the surface of the potential issues experienced by victim/survivors of family violence. There is likely much more to be learned through future in-depth investigations.

10. Conclusion

Although the scope of findings is limited due to the small sample size, this research is the first empirical study to explore the polarised experiences of separated mothers who have used a post-separation parenting app with a family violence-perpetrating co-parent. Data from those who reported beneficial outcomes (*net-benefit* case group) were contrasted against data from those who experienced only negative ones (*net-detriment* case group). For those in the net-benefit case group, using a post-separation parenting app appeared to aid in minimising harm from a perpetrating co-parent. In marked contrast, those in the net-detriment group reported that the apps aided the perpetrator to facilitate harm. Even in many of the net-benefit cases, survey comments provided numerous examples of the perpetrating parents’ continuous victimisation of participants, including working around both the app safeguards and the protective steps taken by victim/survivors. Ultimately, while post-separation parenting apps had substantial benefits for some mothers in this research, they did not work as a panacea in situations of sustained, pernicious app misuse by a perpetrating parent. Parents and practitioners are urged to consider the potential for both benefits and risks in each individual set of circumstances.

⁴⁸ Kelly, “The Wrong Debate,” 139–44; Lundgren, “The Hand that Strikes and Comforts,” 169.

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