

## CHILD COUNSELING IN PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH PARENTS' DIVORCE

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**Abstract:** The issue of divorce is far too vast to be treated exhaustively. With regard to child and adolescent counseling about socio-cognitive and emotional issues when faced with parents' divorce, we review several theoretical approaches of divorce, a number of specific problems that occur with children and parents according to age, proposals for solving them, examples of programs of prevention and intervention and a series of objectives which should be fulfilled in counseling children and parents in case of divorce. The examples above are just some of the whole lot of factors that lead to increased stress and tension in the family and it can result in a change of emotional reactions to the stimuli created in the family. Divorce affects child development very differently depending on many variables: age at the moment of separation, the sex of the child, the reason of the parents' divorce, nature and frequency of conflicts in the family, the children's role in these conflicts, the relationship with the custodial parent and the absent one, any some chronic diseases (of children or parents), changing social status.

**Key words:** divorce, child counseling, effects of the divorce

The issue of divorce is far too vast to be treated exhaustively. With regard to child and adolescent counseling about socio-cognitive and emotional issues when faced with parents' divorce, we review several

theoretical approaches of divorce, a number of specific problems that occur with children and parents according to age, proposals for solving them, examples of programs of prevention and intervention and a series of objectives which should be fulfilled in counseling children and parents in case of divorce.

### **1. Incidence of divorce cases**

Socio-metric studies show that one third of the children under 18 years in the U.S. are emotionally affected by their parents' divorce. This percentage gets explained at the time when we find out that 50% of U.S. marriages end up in divorce, namely 2 million American children pass through the experience of divorce each year. In Europe the situation is amazing, over 300 marriages out of 1000 fray (Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Hungary, Germany).

### **2. Research and theoretical approaches on the history and consequences of divorce on child development**

Analyzing the demolishing effects the experience of divorce has on the emotional, behavioral, cognitive and social development of the child, at first look one might compare the event of divorce to the death of a parent, the latter consisting in the loss of all backup and need of adapting to the new situation. Regarding this aspect Rutter (1981) sustains that divorce is a more stressful event from the perspective of a child than the death of a parent because they will be forced to live without the latter, adapting to the idea that the parent is not coming, not because he or she cannot come, but because he or she does not need the child anymore.

Researchers have examined the effects of divorce on children at the behavioral and emotional development in terms of gender and age at the time of the event respectively.

*Sex of the child*

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) studied the immediate reaction to divorce of the children of 60 Californian families and found out that, regardless of age, boys presented more signs of trauma than girls, these effects are more intense and extensive, but 5 years after the divorce, the differences in behavior and attitudes between the two genders attenuate. Immediately after the event, it has been observed that girls were better adapted to new situations, have open relationships with parents (both the custodial and the absent) were more independent of their parents, were more easily engaged in social relationships and have found many friends, on the contrary, boys have a higher level of stress, frequent aggressive behavior, depressive reactions, and often non-compliance. Developmental psychologists explain these differences through the children's different reaction to the lack of paternal parental model.

Hetherington (1972-1989) studied the long-term response of children to divorce: he notes for the first time the delayed emotional reactions in the case of girls to the trauma of divorce and he called it the sleeping effect: even if in the first years after the divorce they do not present too obvious reactions, at maturity, one third of these girls experience problems in interpersonal relationships, sexual relationships and they often show a tendency towards substance abuse and aggressive behavior.

Studies show that generally, children living with the parent of the opposite sex show more antisocial behavior, are cold and live more intensely the trauma of the divorce.

Nicholas H. Wolfinger, in an article on the effects of parental divorce on smoking and alcohol consumption in children, including adult children claims that parents' divorce facilitates the consumption of alcohol and smoking, through 3 mechanisms:

- reduced-social-control;
- lower socio – economic status;
- reducing psycho- social adaptation.

The conclusion reached by Wolfinger shows that parental divorce increases the chance that their children would become smokers - for both sexes, may be faced with problems related to alcohol – especially boys. On the contrary, parents' remarriage decreases the likelihood of children becoming alcoholic, but has no effect on smoking. Remarriage brings in a foster family, which has the role of a secondary source of authority and discipline. Despite this, the structure of this family is lower than the structure of the original family, so we do not expect to find a more powerful control of the part of the stepfather. (Wolfinger, 1998)

Other studies (Armato, 1996 apud Wolfinger, 1998) note as effects of divorce a lower well - being – in the case of adult children, including the stability of marital and psychological health status.

After a divorce family routine is lost. Usually, after the divorce, the child is given to the mother (in approximately 80% of cases). Mothers pass through a period of emotional distress affecting their parental skills. They are frequently working, so they spend less time supervising their children. The father's visit is often irregular and it is rather a social type (fun and less strict supervision of the child). Due to these changes in structure, parental control will be lower in families with one parent, which will facilitate the child the experience of cigarettes and alcohol consumption. These experiences increase the likelihood of children later smoking cigarettes, or drinking alcohol on a regular basis. (Wolfinger, 1998).

Alcohol consumption is often seen as a coping mechanism, through which the child attempts to defend himself from the stress caused

by parents' divorce by joining various groups of friends through experiencing new sensations. Moreover, school performance is affected by the divisions in his family – lower marks at school, absenteeism, learning difficulties, etc.

#### *The age of the child*

It was found out that the problems that arise in a divorce vary according to the age of the children implied. The child is at different levels in developing social and cognitive skills, depending on his age, and this is one of the reasons why they react differently to conflicts and division; their reaction differs from one age to another.

Preschool children (3-5 years) often show separation anxiety, regression to earlier behaviors procurement (refuses to use the toilet), refusal of communication, the occurrence of sleep disorders (nightmares), the occurrence of depressive reactions and various other psychosomatic symptoms. At this age children are dependent on the relationships with their parents, know the family situation very confusedly, they specially respond to parents' emotional reactions (especially to the one which represents a secured benchmark), which they communicate verbally, nonverbally, or by changing their style of taking care. Children feel the effects of parental conflicts after which they note the lack of a parent (Gavrilă-Ardelean, Horvath, 2009).

Between 6 and 8 years, children perceive more accurately the situation of the family, they frequently feel guilty, blame their parents for their irresponsibility, they make up unrealistic expectations to gather the family and from an emotional point of view they feel left alone, rejected, defeated and deceived. It is often observed the decrease in school performance starting with this age.

Between 9 and 12 years, the child perceives parental conflict very intensely from an emotional point of view, both before and after divorce, and manifests obvious aggression especially against the parent whom they believe that has caused the divorce, or cooperate with the custodial parent to regain the stability of the new family environment. This is the age at which, due to anxiety resulting from experienced uncertainty children easily develop somatic symptoms, antisocial behavior and reduce efforts to obtain good results at school; they are also very influential, forming alliances with the custodial parent against the absent one, or ambivalent behavioral reactions.

In adolescence, they acknowledge the effects of divorce on their own personality, and not only its influence on their parents. They struggle for independence living an emotional conflict and dualism, sprinkled with reproach from both parents, with disdain for people who have similar problems to those of his parents' and with the fear of failing in their own interpersonal relationships.

#### *Parental conflicts*

Another special effect on children's emotional problems has the frequency and intensity of parental conflict before and after the divorce. Basically, these are the traumatizing events, not the divorce itself. After the event parents often feel depressed, stressed, guilty, change parental style and find it difficult to maintain a consistency in their behavior towards the children.

Hess and Camara saw the divorce as an event that disturbs the development of a child in 3 ways: the increasing the risk of developing anxious and depressive reactions, becoming carriers of a conflict of loyalty between their parents, which is the reason why it is difficult for

them to establish securing social relationships, increasing possibility of altering their mental representations about the role of family members.

Emery (1982) illustrates the two mechanisms by which marital discordance leads to the effects listed above: modeling mechanism - lack of control in parents' behavior is adopted by the children and subsequently translated into their own personal relationships and the inconsistency mechanism – the fact that parents do not stand each other is reflected in inconsistent parental style and approaches to child discipline, so they cannot assist to consistent behavior on the part of their parents.

Addressing the event of divorce from two perspectives:

As we could notice, the issue of divorce is complex and heterogeneous, problems that occur depend on many variables, which is the reason why it is difficult to build a comprehensive theoretical model which addresses all aspects of the divorce issue. The most useful and realistic approach seems to be that one belonging to Bronfenbrenner (1977), which provides an ecological perspective on divorce, recognizing the complexity of it and proposes to discuss five perspectives: social, cultural, economic and psychological. Child development has to be seen as a result of these five factors that interpenetrate in the immediate surroundings.

Kurdek (1985) continues the ecological perspective, restricting the number of levels of analysis. He believes that divorce should be seen at the ontogenetic level, specifically through the socio-cognitive and emotional development of the child which describes the opportunities to react to tense situations, at the level of the intra-familial system (parents' emotional conflicts, the possible reconstitution of the relationship with both parents, the nature of the relationships between parents before and after divorce, etc.) to external factors (exosystem) - which encompasses

all factors that can disrupt the children's adaptation to new social and emotional situation (moving to a new home, the mother's finding a job) and at the level of the macro-system regarding the cultural pattern of the social environment (the prejudices and discriminations against divorced families).

### **3. Types of programs for prevention and intervention in matters of divorce**

Starting with the problems outlined so far, we can define several types of programs addressed to children and their parents.

*Target group* – initially, attention was focused on activities with children, but the assessment showed that they become effective only by working with parents. Subsequent implementation of the programs pursued the objectives particularly established for parents who were going to divorce or raised their own children after divorce.

*Type of program* - Individual counseling focuses on the specific problem highlighted after the conflicts related to divorce, both for parents and children, it has proven to be effective as are support groups for children of a certain age and their parents, which face similar problems. It seems most useful to combine these two forms.

Prevention programs in matters of divorce are usually implemented when traumatic events occur and are organized for secondary prevention of emotional and behavioral disorders. We describe an illustrative example: Divorce Adjustment Project (DAP), Stolberg & Garrison (1985) - which consists of group activities for children who have just gone through a divorce situation and a support group of parents. It addresses to children between 7 and 13 years old who have an increased risk for developing emotional and behavioral problems associated with divorce. The basic objectives of the program consist of informing children about major life events related to divorce, and with



parents they discuss issues of child discipline and possibilities of improvement for financial difficulties encountered in the new social state.

Intervention programs organized in schools have the same objectives in sight, but they put greater emphasis on supporting children in optimizing feelings about divorce. They are focused on specific stress factors, arising in this situation: divorce-related anxiety, future expectations, disappointment over the behavior and feelings of the parents. Support groups for parents (Single Parents Support Group) offers the opportunity to share experiences and provide information related to the behavioral and emotional control of both himself and the child.

After the assessment, these programs focusing on support groups led to the best results because they provide emotional support and educates problem solving skills - both are necessary in preventing stress and non-adapting reactions related to divorce, it offers children and adolescents the ability to match the coping mechanisms to the controllability perceived in stressful situations.

#### **4. The objectives of a possible program of intervention in case of divorce**

##### **General objectives:**

##### *I. Educating the child to overcome problems*

I.1. Providing information about divorce in general (related to child age) leading to a realistic view of family problems

I.2. Educating problem solving skills for the optimal management of stress

I.3. Develop effective coping mechanisms to overcome and / or avoid emotional problems

##### *II. Educating parents*

II.1. Informing parents about the specific problems arising from family conflicts related to divorce, according to child age

II.2. Providing the necessary emotional support and some examples of alternative behaviors of solving problems related to divorce

II.3. Provide behavioral techniques for overcoming children's problems

*III. Informing teachers* of the symptoms manifested by children through the event of divorce .

### **Specific objectives in child counseling**

#### **1. Awareness of the reality that parents were divorced**

Children often have terrifying fantasies, they feel abandoned, have negative emotions and in order to avoid these experiences, they tend to deny the reality of the family situation. They show insufficiently matured coping skills and psychosomatic symptoms. The adviser's role is to give parents explanation about the intellectual and emotional capacities of the child depending on his level of development and to train them to discuss clearly with the child the changes that will occur in their lives from now on, to explain that although parents can no longer live together, their love to the child has not changed.

#### **2. The conflict and lack parental distress**

To distance the crisis in home maintenance is recommended completion of routine tasks (to keep out with colleagues, have extrafamilial activities to continue to prepare for school tasks). Parents are advised not to give detailed information about the conflict and have no emotional reaction exaggerated, uncontrolled, not to worsen the child's daily activities.

Recommended techniques in counseling: active listening, reflection, clarification, problem solving, relaxing techniques and controlled imagery.

#### **3. Not getting implied in the parental distress and conflict**

In order to apart the child from the crisis from home the completion of routine tasks (keep going out with colleagues, have extra-familial activities, continuing to prepare for school tasks) are recommended. Parents are advised not to give detailed information about the conflict and not to have exaggerated and uncontrolled emotional reactions, in order not to worsen the child's daily activities.

**Recommended techniques in counseling: quota management - to maintain satisfactory academic results**

**4. Resignation to the loss**

Divorce does not mean only the loss of a parent from a physically close environment, but the loss of a condition which provided child support (a comfortable lifestyle, secured personal relationship etc.). In order to overcome these problems, the child should be helped to move from feelings of humiliation, reject, abandon.

Recommended techniques in counseling: preschool and young students - play therapy (games with dolls, reading, writing, playing with books - to encourage expression of emotions and feelings). For example, children between 7-12 years can be used as the so-called "puppets who feel". The child makes it himself, of a material - after a model - a puppet large enough to fit on one hand. After making it, the child (it can work both in groups and individually) is encouraged to tell a story or invent one, about the separation of two persons very dear to the puppet. The counselor will ask open questions to encourage children to communicate their emotions, fears, beliefs. Playing with puppets is an indirect means of communication or symbolic communication of what the children really feel, the way they feel what is in the child's mind.

**Diminishing the fury against parents and self-blaming**

Children understand that divorce is the result of voluntary decision of one or both parents. This motivates them to accuse their parents of

selfishness, lack of responsibility or to blame themselves. Fury can be very intense towards a parent and it comes from the difficulty of forgiving them for their failure in the relationship with each other.

#### Recommended techniques in counseling

- **Bibliotherapy:** it is important that children read books and sites where they can find other reasons why adults divorce (they cannot live together, cannot resolve disputes between them) and find out about the details of the divorce process. Later, impressions formed after lecture can be discussed. Therapeutic fairy tales for children are metaphorical stories addressed to the child who has a particular problem, but they treat it in an indirect manner, so that an anxious child can use them.

- **Group counseling:** role playing (empty seat technique - the child is asked to imagine that on a chair in front him is sitting the parent he wants to send some thoughts and feelings to. With this technique the child practices certain ways of expression of his emotions to the parent he is no longer living with), play therapy (drawings, games with objects made by children - plasticine, painting with fingers, not using the brush) to help them express their anger (let them have a pillow or a bag of sponge he can hit with a tennis racket), the feeling of defeat; group discussions focusing on problem solving: each participant explains how to solve a specific problem or what solution would be found for a situation.

### **5. Acceptance of the permanence of divorce**

Even if parents have remarried, children persist in fantasizing about family reunification.

#### **Recommended techniques in counseling:**

- **Individual therapy** – in order to accept the permanence of divorce there are some useful techniques of reality therapy (direct

confrontation with the actual events) play therapy (drawing: Draw a family before and after divorce, draw any family and then your own - assuming that the first is the ideal family for the child, then the differences between the two drawings can be discussed).

- **Group counseling** - discussion and viewing of movies about families with one parent, share experiences with other children who went through the same problems.

### **7. Formation of realistic goals for their inter-personal relationships**

In adolescence there are frequent behaviors of acting-out indicating low self-esteem (promiscuity, abuse of alcohol and drugs, etc.). Often, adolescents do not involve in intimate personal relationships because they are afraid not to be hurt or lose the loved person, it seems that they are more sensitive to being abandoned by close friends.

Recommendations in counseling: adolescents are encouraged to be open in social relations even if there is a possibility of loss. Also, he is explained the necessity of granting second chances in a social relationship.

Tips for parents:

1.) they are encouraged to talk to the children about divorce according to their cognitive level (the parent must understand how the child perceives and interprets various things they do). They are encouraged to express their emotions appropriately, in a controlled manner and not to denigrate the other parent. He is offered the necessary information to recognize as soon as possible the fears and the erroneous perceptions of the child about this problem.

2) they are encouraged to make a plan as stable and accurate as possible about the child's life (even if it requires certain changes): routines in

household activities, schedule tasks, rules of discipline. They aim to make the child understand that family environment disruption was only temporary, after which everything will return to normality. Parents are also encouraged to seek professional help.

3) they are explained the negative effects of using children as the bearer of messages or a spy to learn about the other parent's life. It should be clear to the parent that, regardless of their manipulation, the child loves both his parents and he is suffering from the conflict of loyalty between them

4) they are encouraged to respect visiting hours and phone calls to which the absent parent has the right – the latter should understand the efficiency of avoiding the child's disappointment and the custodial parent should help his child to establish an adaptive relationship with the absent father.

5) they are encouraged to make long term plans with the child without also including the other parent - because children need realistic expectancies about the future.

6) parents are reminded that a child still passes through an emotional, behavioral and socio-cognitive stage of development. Therefore, do not oblige them to assume responsibilities inappropriate for their age, to be "family man", "the baby sitter or mother's confidant.

*Types for teachers:*

1) they are informed about the consequences of divorce (emotional, behavioral, cognitive) upon the children (by the school counselor) by reading some leaflets, brochures on the subject: the possibility that the academic performance gets lower for a period of time, adolescents may show a higher level of absenteeism, aggression in relationships with other colleagues, with teachers.

- 2) they have to monitor the child's evolution, any negative events in a grid / schedule of observation, and in case of more serious complaints to notify the parent who has obtained custody. Eventually, with his consent, teachers can make a referral to a counselor.
- 3) to avoid the stigmatization of the child at school
- 4) not to give the child a preferential treatment among the colleagues - to be more lenient with him or ask other children so
- 5) confidentiality towards the child's problems
- 6) neutral attitude towards the child's parents - not to agree with child visits from the part of the parent who has not obtained the custody of the child, in the absence of the other parent.

Change is essential for counseling. Each perspective on counseling is built on a set of ideas on how and why change is happening, but also which professionals can promote it. A particular approach on change is provided by the assimilation model developed by Stiles and co. (1990). The fundamental idea is that the individual possesses a model of the world or a set of cognitive schemes that guide his behavior. In these schemes the assimilation of new experiences is required, if the persons concerned want to be understood by others and to have a point. According to Stiles, the stages of problematic experience assimilation in counselling, include:

1. Ignoring the problem - the customer is not marked by the problem. He may be affected less, reflecting on its avoidance.
2. Occurrence of unwanted thoughts - the customer prefers not to think about that experience. The problem is caused by a counselor or by external circumstances. He shows strong feelings, but they are not centered and their connection with the contents may be unclear.

3. Vague awareness - the customer is aware of the existence of problematic situations, but cannot make it clear. He can manifest an acute painful feeling, or panic associated with the problematic experience.

4. Clarify the problem - the problem is made clear as something that exists or may exist. Leave the idea of a resolution, the client is negatively affected, but not in a panic.

5. Psychological understanding – the problematic experience is formulated or understood in a specific way. The customer may be affected by uncomfortable recognition, but also pleasant surprises like "aha!"

6. Investigation of the problem – client's understanding is required for the management of the problem. The affective tone is positive, optimistic.

7. Solving the problem - the customer reaches a successful solution for a specific problem. His mood is positive and the client is satisfied, happy with the stage reached.

8. Mastery of the problem - the client automatically generates solutions. His mood is positive or neutral, the problem not presenting anything disturbing for him.

At the beginning of the process, the problem is ignored, and the client does not complain about any strong feeling. When the problem starts to come into focus, in the center, through thoughts he is vaguely aware of, the client appears to have very strong feelings. As the process evolves towards a clarification, interiorization and solution, the states caused by the problems become less intense. The assimilation model brings together aspects of several different theoretical models. Dealing with experience makes the client not to talk about a certain topic or issue. The assimilation model is a useful incentive for the counselor-social



adviser, making him reflect upon their own repertoire of skills. The challenge for the adviser, at the closing phase, is the use of this stage of counseling in the client's maximum benefit. The goal regards the consolidation of what has been accumulated, the generalization of the things he has learned to new situations and use the experience of loss or disappointment in building strategies to cope with future situations.

The most developed strategies are those referring to the prevention of relapsing, mainly found in cognitive-behavioral tradition and in exploring close relationship issues, of the loss associated with short dynamic counseling. The answer to the question: when is the client ready to end counseling? represents a subject of analysis. Research has identified significant differences between treatment completion criteria used in the public sector and those used in the private sector. Counselors working in the public sector report that the most common causes of closure are the great number of the cases and administrative factors. A special type of ending is sending the client to another counselor or another agency. This may involve another initial evaluation or other counseling sessions. For example, some types of counseling, clients receive a limited number of meetings - sometimes not more than six – and these are followed by being sent to another specialist, once the number of scheduled meetings was exhausted.

The experience of being sent from a counselor to another is difficult sometimes to the same extent, both for the counselor and the client.

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