

## **Psychosocial interventions for conflict management in families and for support during separation/divorce: structures, uses, challenges**

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My name is Ulrich Hoffmann. Since 1990, I have been working as a mentor and counsellor to couples and families.

### **1. The situation**

Year after year, thousands of children and young people are affected by their parents' divorce or experience the separation of their unmarried parents.

Many of the children and young people affected by divorce or separation are exposed long-term to greatly escalated parental conflict. Neither judicial nor extra-judicial interventions are able to solve this conflict or at least mitigate its effects. Attempts to clarify questions of custody and contact law regularly fail in these cases of "highly controversial" or "highly conflictual" parenthood. Such a persistently high level of conflict between parents is undoubtedly associated with considerable risks for the development of the children concerned, as relevant research has shown. And it is not surprising that these developmental risks, which usually persist for years, often result in actual threats and damage to the well-being of the child.

If the aim is to minimise the highly problematic intra-family consequences of escalated parental conflicts, it is vital that the actors involved in legal proceedings relating to the family and young people's welfare are quick to recognise these conflicts and intervene with the families to offer them help that is tailored to their specific situation. It is particularly important that the various institutions and professionals, each with their own professional backgrounds, are involved in the work and cooperate in a coordinated way.

### **2. Family conflicts around separation and divorce**

Distinguishing between the couple and parent level is a guiding principle in professional work with families.

For parents going through separation and divorce and especially for parents with a high level of conflict, however, this can prove to be particularly difficult.

Mothers and fathers are not able to put aside their negative feelings towards their former partner in order to cooperate for the good of their children. Rather, a negative and emotionally charged perception of the other person can make the other doubt his or her competence as a parent – which in turn makes the pursuit of amicable arrangements more difficult. This also often leads to the instrumentalisation of the child.

The research results of the project "Child Protection in Highly Disputatious Parenthood" have identified six characteristics and behavioural traits that appear to be typical for this

group of families experiencing separation and divorce – in a less extreme form, they also apply to other parents experiencing separation and divorce:

1. *Reduced openness to new experiences*

Mothers and fathers show only a weak interest in new experiences, adventures and impressions. Traditionalism, firm, unalterable views and an avoidance of innovation are marked.

2. *Reduced tolerance*

Mothers and fathers are more inclined to distrust others and to hold distant, critical attitudes. Cooperation, trust and compliance are almost non-existent.

3. *Self-efficacy experienced as low in the parental relationship*

Self-efficacy is the personal conviction that one's own room for manoeuvre must be preserved in escalating conflicts. The less pronounced it is, the more the parents feel at the mercy of the conflict dynamics and their former partner. In types of family with a high level of conflict, parents tend to experience themselves as helpless and their scope for action as limited.

4. *Inflexible ways of thinking*

Parents are fixated on their own views and images of the enemy and are therefore not able to understand the reactions of their – former – partners and/or perceive the needs of their children.

5. *Distortions of perception*

Mothers and fathers who are highly conflictual often experience themselves as victims. "The whole world" seems to be against them. Such parents interpret the behaviour of their former partner as a permanent attempt to sabotage their own plans. What is striking here is a strongly developed "black and white" pattern of perception: there is a self-image of being the better, more capable parent, while the other parent is assessed as "evil" or "incapable".

6. *Limited regulation of emotions*

Parents' ability to regulate their emotions related to the separation is limited, and they also lack coping strategies for dealing with negative feelings.

### **3. What do children experience in separation and divorce?**

Studies show that parental conflicts are among the factors with the highest predictive power for childhood developmental problems, regardless of the family structure. Through inadequate child-focused behaviour in the (post-)separation process, parents promote not only a delayed adaptation of their children to the new family reality but also serious individual developmental disorders in their children.

Children feel helplessly exposed to parental conflict. They do not know what to do and live in fear that everything could get worse.

It becomes serious and increasingly stressful for the children when parents want to share their own emotional burdens with the children and expect or even demand the support of the children.

Children often experience their parents undergoing separation and divorce as inconsistent with their roles as educators. Tendencies towards parentification, i.e. a reversal of roles between parents and child (e.g. when the child is frequently called upon as a partner in discussion about the emotional problems of one parent), are frequently encountered in counselling.

It is therefore not surprising that the children in the family feel undervalued as children and often tend to have self-esteem problems, as well as fear of separation and loss. As a result, the children suffer from a higher level of stress, to which they usually react with physical stress symptoms. This is because they lack the means and the skills to reduce the stress themselves.

In addition, children from conflict-laden families tend to concentrate primarily on the emotional states and needs of their parents. Such a focus on the (irritating) parental emotionality leads them to lose sight of their own well-being and their own needs. They become insecure about others and just as insecure about their own feelings.

Some children can play a worrying role in the conflict because of the continuing disagreement of their parents. They are dealt the power to manipulate by the parents' failure to set limits on the conflict and they begin to participate actively in the conflict by taking sides (forging alliances).

#### **4. Helpful interventions**

Effective interventions in cases of separation and divorce, especially in high-conflict separations, must take into account the interests of both parents and children: it is not satisfactory to focus solely on either the parents or the children.

Children tend to experience family meetings as negative. In joint counselling sessions with both parents, the children repeatedly witness the destructive conflict behaviour of their parents. This can be calamitous if the counsellors are unable to stop the escalation and to persuade the parents to deal with each other in a more measured fashion in front of the children. Children are more likely to benefit from offers of support that are personally tailored to them.

Children often have specific and viable ideas, which parents fail to acknowledge because of their disagreement. Taking children seriously and giving them a voice can go a long way towards mitigating the helplessness that children often feel.

Childlike attempts at solutions should be understood as an "internal working model", as per attachment theory. This means that children should be supported in modelling their solutions to cope with their experiences, in particular through counselling services that help them to make sense of the confusion arising from a highly conflictual separation and to limit their own insecurity.

Children can survive destructive parental conflicts relatively free of psychological burdens if they have been able to develop personal strengths and resilience and live in a stable social environment.

Counselling can help children to develop an inner vision of how their behaviour can make a difference – even in an environment where hardly anything seems capable of being changed. In addition, the perception, understanding and handling of their own feelings (emotion regulation) must be supported, as parents under great stress owing to separation or divorce are scarcely able to do so.

Now let me offer some guidelines for psychosocial interventions for conflict management in families and for support in cases of separation/divorce:

- Scheduling consultations with highly conflict-ridden parents is immensely important. Counselling should begin as soon as possible to prevent conflicts from escalating further and to provide initial clarification of urgent issues.
- Co-consultation, preferably in a mixed-gender team, seems sensible or even necessary – on the one hand, in order to respond appropriately to the different personalities and troubles of the parents, and, on the other hand, to reduce the considerable burdens on the counsellors by offering collegial support.
- Clear clarification of the possible objectives of counselling and also of the ways of dealing with one another in counselling is necessary. An explicit counselling assignment must be drawn up, supported by both parents. It is very important that the counsellors use the correct wording. Moreover, rules of conduct for non-destructive handling of conflicts and anger in counselling must be defined right at the beginning. The consequences of breaking these rules must also be clear to both parents at the beginning of the counselling. These consequences may include verbal admonitions or brief interruptions of the current session up to the suspension or termination of the consultations. It is important for counsellors and parents to be able to clearly assess these reactions in advance.
- It is essential for counsellors to seek relief from high-conflict counselling. This can be done, for example, by not condensing consultations into a short period of time and instead conducting only one per day if possible. It is important that counsellors know their limits and actively seek respite. This is the only way to ensure the high psychological commitment that such counselling requires.

The expectations of highly conflict-ridden parents are often low: they see their problems as too specific and unusual for counselling to help.

Parents with a high level of conflict usually have quite a lot of experience of different forms of counselling or legal intervention. The more these interventions run in parallel, the more dissatisfied the parents are with them.

From the families' point of view, the following factors are important for the success of psychosocial interventions for conflict management within the family and for support in cases of separation/divorce:

- Even the temporary relief of conflict in the absence of a permanent resolution of the conflict is experienced as helpful.
- The personal relationship with the counsellor is a decisive criterion for how the counselling is evaluated by the parents: they should have the assurance that the counsellor understands their position. The counsellor should be perceived neutral and completely non-partisan.
- An important "sense of achievement" in counselling can be felt when family members regain a sense of mutual understanding, i.e. when they feel that the other person can understand them better and they themselves can understand the other person better.
- In principle, conditions that permit quick and spontaneous self-determined solutions for open questions tend to increase the parents' satisfaction. Solutions should therefore not be prescribed by directive. However, this does not apply to all: some parents want a court settlement and may even break off consultations in order to reach a court decision.
- For the clients, their autonomy and the reliability of agreements are essential.

It seems particularly important to show the parents and also the children appreciation for their efforts and empathy for the tremendous pressure they are labouring under.

Thank you for your attention!

Ulrich Hoffmann  
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