

HOW SOCIETY CAN HELP CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS COPE WITH DIVORCE

1. Introduction

Divorce is one of the most stressful events in the lives of family members who see their coexistence transforming. Children are especially vulnerable to negative effects. Numerous studies substantiate the negative impact of divorce on the lives of children, but different circumstances determine what consequences the divorce will have on a child's development¹. These factors comprise risk factors and protective factors, and both contribute to how children will cope with divorce and how it will affect them.

Generally, three factors are crucial to determine the direction of this impact: the quality of the parents' relationship with their child, the conflict between the spouses, and the social support network. These factors commonly identified in the literature are associated with children's well-being².

The purpose of this paper is to present some examples of good practice which help parents and children during divorce, drawn from authors who work in the USA. In Slovenia, the help available to parents and families during divorce is only in the state of infancy, and this article can be a starting point for the development of such programmes.

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¹ P. Amato, *The consequences of divorce for adults and children*, "Journal of Marriage and the Family" 62 (2000) 4, p. 1269-87.

² J. B. Kelly, R. E. Emery, *Children's adjustment following divorce: Risk and resilience perspectives*, "Family Relations" 52 (2003) 4, p. 352-362; J. Pedro-Carroll, *Putting children first: Proven parenting strategies for helping children thrive through divorce*, New York 2010, Avery/Penguin.

In the last decade, various programmes have been developed for divorced parents as well as for their children, especially to make the transition easier. Such programmes focus either on education or on mental health, integrating contents which efficiently support easier adaptation to a new life and reduce risk for negative outcomes; they include parents' cooperation, parents' adaptation and their mental help, stable financial conditions and supportive social and family network. The majority of the programmes focus on the help necessary for parents to readjust the parental role after divorce, in order to reduce the negative effects of divorce for the child as much as possible.

2. The consequences of divorce for children

Research confirms that the negative consequences of divorce for children can be temporary as well as long-term. In comparison to their peers, the children of divorced parents experience various changes in their emotional and social lives, as shown by the analysis of 13 studies³. Children's typical reactions to the process of divorce are negative emotional states such as sadness, anxiety, anger (towards others and themselves), guilt, shame, helplessness etc⁴. Their painful emotions are either expressed or internalized; the feeling of guilt is especially destructive since they often feel they are responsible for and guilty of their parents' divorce. The children of divorced parents have more emotional problems including depression, anxiety, aggression, and delinquency; these dimensions persist into adulthood and are mirrored in other areas such as social relationships. It has been found that the children of divorced parents have twice as many problems in their social and intimate relationships. With divorce, friendships and relationships with relatives change; a child's feelings of loneliness are reinforced by the loss of friendships, the loss of one of the parents, of their grandparents and, due to the change of residence, even the loss of a wider social network⁵. Mental and physical health are interconnected. Internalized distress, stress and emotional insecurity often

³ J. Pryor, B. Rodgers, *Children in changing families: life after parental separation*, Oxford 2001, Blackwell Publishers.

⁴ C. R. Ahrons, *Family ties after divorce: Long-term implications for children*, "Family Process" 46 (2007) 1, p. 53-65; P. Amato, *The consequences of divorce for adults and children*, "Journal of Marriage and the Family" 62 (2000) 4, p. 1269-87; P. Amato, A. Booth, *Consequences of parental divorce and marital unhappiness for adult well-being*, "Social Forces" 69 (1991) 3, p. 895-914; A. Cherlin, P. Chase-Lansdale, P. L., C. McRae, *Effects of parental divorce on mental health throughout the life course*, "American Sociological Review" 63 (1998), p. 239-249; G. M. Haugen, *Children's perspectives on everyday experiences of shared residence: time, emotions and agency dilemmas*, "Children & Society" 24 (2010) 2, p. 112-122.

⁵ J. Wallerstein, J. Lewis, *The unexpected legacy of divorce: Report of a 25-year study*, "Psychoanalytic Psychology" 21 (2004) 3, p. 353-370.

cause health-related problems. Those children who live with both parents are healthier than those of divorced parents⁶.

Not only does divorce interfere with children's emotional, physical, and social development: children from dissolved families are deprived of educational incentives and achievements in childhood as well as later in adulthood⁷. Divorce often leads to the loss of financial sources for children and lower economic status is related to negative outcomes for children. Meta-analyses of research⁸ show that the biggest difference between children who have experienced divorce and others is in family and partner relationships. Children with the experience of divorce form different image of and expectations from partnerships and family relationships. In the process of rearrangement of their families they face the loss of the presence of one parent, witness their parents' building new partnerships (and families); due to these experiences they build their own intimate relationships in ways different from those of their peers coming from stable families.

It has been emphasized that children's responses to family transitions are diverse; not all children experience the same consequences. Their responses depend on a variety of factors including their age, gender, individual relationships with parents, the appraisals of situations, and coping abilities⁹. Some children and parents during and after divorce need informal and/or professional help, also due to the lack of skills and knowledge necessary during the transition to a new form of family.

3. Changes in the family

The trend in changing family life styles in Slovenia is the same or similar to those in Western societies, whereby new forms of cohabitation are being recognized, consensual union is accepted, the number of marriages are decreasing while divorce numbers are increasing¹⁰. Current statistics cite a total of 2351 divorces in 2013, or 1.1 marriages per 1000 inhabitants¹¹. The divorce rates are rising also in the other European countries,

⁶ L. J. Waite, M. Gallagher, *The case for marriage*, New York 2000, Doubleday.

⁷ R. D. Conger, K. J. Conger, K. J., M. J. Martin, *Socioeconomic Status, Family Processes, and Individual Development*, "Journal of Marriage and Family" 72 (2010) 3, p. 685-704; J. Pryor, B. Rodgers, *Children in changing families: life after parental separation*, Oxford 2001, Blackwell Publishers.

⁸ J. Pryor, B. Rodgers, *Children in changing families: life after parental separation*, Oxford 2001, Blackwell Publishers.

⁹ P. Amato, *The consequences of divorce for adults and children*, "Journal of Marriage and the Family" 62 (2000) 4, p. 1269-87.

¹⁰ A. Švab, *Kdo se boji (raznoverstnosti) družin?: sociološki pogled/i na sodobno družinsko življenje* [Who is afraid of (diversity) family?: sociological perspectives on modern family life], "Socialno delo" 49 (2010) 5-6, p. 341-349.

¹¹ Statistical Office the Republic of Slovenia. Sklenitve in razveze zakonskih zvez, Slovenija, 2014 –končni podatki. [Marriages and divorces, Slovenia, 2014 -final data.] <http://>

but the number of divorces varies among the countries. Current data from Eurostat ¹² cite that two marriages per 1000 individuals ultimately divorced. The number of couples that divorced is certainly higher when taking into consideration that the statistical calculations do not include those couples who are not officially married or who legally live together out of wedlock. However, statistics do not show the complex issues faced by people during dissolution of their marriages, partnerships, and families. The need for help is related to the distress and intense painful feelings which all family members face during partner subsystem dissolution and loss of existing family structure. Authors emphasize that divorce is actually a loss accompanied by the process of mourning. Due to a lack of skills necessary to face family reorganization and due to emotional processing of this life event, the support of the social environment is important during this process, in order for all involved to easily adapt to the life in a restructured family, and for parents to retain or establish a quality parenting role in spite of dissolution of their marriage.

4. Helping parents cope with divorce

Quality parenting

High quality after-divorce parenting, which includes the cooperation of both parents and contacts with both parents, is closely linked with the positive adaptation of children and is one of the strongest factors protecting children from negative effects of divorce¹³. Research¹⁴ has identified family risk and protective factors which are the foundation of what parents can do and what guidance professionals can offer them. Family risk factors are: ongoing conflict between parents, especially when it is abusive and/or focused on children; diminished capacity to parent or poor parenting; lack of monitoring children's activities; parent mental health problems; chaotic, unstable household; impaired parent-child relationships; economic decline. Family protective factors include: protection from conflict between parents, cooperative parenting (except in situations of domestic violence or abuse); healthy relationships between child and parents; parents' psychological well-being; quality, authoritative parenting; household structure and stability; supportive sibling relationships, economic stability, supportive relationships with extended family.

www.stat.si/StatWeb/glavnanavigacija/podatki/prikazistaronovico?IdNovice=6303 (21.12.2015).

¹² Eurostat, Marriage and divorce statistics, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php/Marriage_and_divorce_statistics (15.07.2015).

¹³ S. A. Wolchik, I. Sandler, E. B. Winslow, V. Smith-Daniels, *Programs for promoting parenting of residential parents: Moving from efficacy to effectiveness*, "Family Court Review" 45 (2005), p. 65-80.

¹⁴ J. Pedro-Carroll, *Putting children first: Proven parenting strategies for helping children thrive through divorce*, New York 2010, Avery/Penguin.

Quality parenting is emphasized as the most crucial prevention during and after divorce. However, parents' distress accompanying dissolution of their relationship frequently blurs the boundaries between spouses' and parents' subsystems, which means that due to their own pain and hardships parents cannot draw an appropriate line between the two roles. They are not aware that their parental role during the transformation of their family becomes even more important.

Helping parents cope with divorce aims to establish quality parenting which includes the concept of the so-called positive parenting. The latter, supported by empirical studies, reduces harmful effects of parents' conflict for children¹⁵, since high conflict between spouses as one of the most outstanding disruptive elements negatively affects a child's adaptation, also determining the relationship between children and parents. In case of high conflict between parents, children are close to only one or none of the parents; in case of low conflict, children are closely connected with both parents. When parental conflict is high, a good relationship with at least one parent is beneficial. Persistent, unsolved conflicts and physical conflicts are especially devastating for the child's development¹⁶. It has been argued that parental separation may benefit children experiencing persistent conflict perceived in violence towards the child, e.g. physical violence and sexual abuse, but that children adjust less well when parental separation occurs in the context of low parental conflict¹⁷.

Conflicts are intertwined with negative reactions to ex-spouses and can include verbal and physical violence which causes anger, poor emotional and cognitive functioning, the risk of fears, self-consciousness, worries, aggression, and hyperactivity in children¹⁸. Specific dimensions of conflict, e.g. physically aggressive conflict or child-directed conflict, are especially harmful for a child's adaptation since they trigger strong feelings of guilt which the child has difficulties in regulating¹⁹. Work with parents focused on reduction or elimination of spouses' conflict and building positive parenting is central among preventive programmes.

¹⁵ S. A. Wolchik, I. Sandler, E. B. Winslow, V. Smith-Daniels, *Programs for promoting parenting of residential parents: Moving from efficacy to effectiveness*, "Family Court Review" 45 (2005), p. 65-80.

¹⁶ J. Wallerstein, J. Lewis, *The unexpected legacy of divorce: Report of a 25-year study*, "Psychoanalytic Psychology" 21 (2004) 3, p. 353-370.

¹⁷ M. E. Hetherington, J. Kelly, *For better or for worse: Divorce reconsidered*, New York 2002, Norton; B. Simonič, T. Rahne Mandelj, R. Novšak, *Religious related abuse in the family*, "Journal of Family Violence" 28 (2013) 4, p. 339-349.

¹⁸ S. A. Wolchik, I. Sandler, E. B. Winslow, V. Smith-Daniels, *Programs for promoting parenting of residential parents: Moving from efficacy to effectiveness*, "Family Court Review" 45 (2005), p. 65-80.

¹⁹ J. L. Pedro-Carroll, *Fostering resilience in the aftermath of divorce: The role of evidence-based programs for children*, "Family Court Review" 43 (2005) 1, p. 52-64.

Interventions for parents

Help for parents consists of various forms of education, psycho-education and psychotherapy. Education for parental roles includes several methods, from educative interventions and trainings to informal forms of education, all aiming at teaching skills necessary to manage problems and situations with children²⁰. The majority of programmes are short, lasting two to four hours, while longer ones consist of up to thirty hours.

These programmes are focused on learning techniques to reduce conflicts between spouses and improving parental skills; To achieve this, they include the following: informing parents about the negative consequences of conflict for children, presentation of motivation films about the effects of conflicts on children, informing about the sources of help for children, and learning efficient conflict-solving techniques and communication skills. Part of these effective parenting practices is establishing open communication where parents listen respectfully, acknowledge their children's feelings and stay connected²¹.

One of the structured forms is psycho-education, which has among its goals to normalize children's experience, to show the importance of parents-child relationship, and to teach how to be a parent in mutual co-parenting.

Psychotherapy is a crucial form of help addressing and regulating emotional states, therefore contributing to psychological well-being and development of parenthood competences.

There are various services, interventions and programmes for divorced parents, from counselling, telephone helplines, websites, books, to meditations, parents' classes, parenting plans and contact centres. These deal with topics such as personal adaptation to divorce with the emphasis on the process of mourning and loss, coping with change after divorce and the sources and possibilities of help. Where parenting is concerned two aspects are emphasized: a child's responses to divorce (development stages of children, typical reactions of children, the impact of divorce on children) and help for children coping with divorce (appropriate responses to a child's distress, harmful interactions, support for children during adaptation)²².

Along with the support for parents in their parenting role during the family transformation it is necessary to offer other consulting and information services, including financial advice, practical help in seeking bal-

²⁰ J. L. Pedro-Carroll, *Fostering resilience in the aftermath of divorce: The role of evidence-based programs for children*, "Family Court Review" 43 (2005) 1, p. 52-64.

²¹ J. Pedro-Carroll, *Putting children first: Proven parenting strategies for helping children thrive through divorce*, New York 2010, Avery/Penguin.

²² J. Hawthorne, J. Jessop, J. Pryor, M. Richards, *Supporting children through family change: A review of services*, London 2003, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

ance between the demands of home and workplace, and support with creating adult relationships. It is important to inform parents how they can influence external factors that impact children during changes that occur with divorce by developing a support network, seeking legal procedures that focus on children's developmental needs, and seeking professional help and preventive services for themselves and their children.

Here it is necessary to emphasize the importance of occasional learning, learning in everyday life and various forms of informal learning, where parents get encouragement and opportunities to recognize and reflect on their experience, developing their potential with which they will optimally help their children.

The effectiveness of parent education programmes

Research has evaluated the efficiency of various educational programmes designed for parents during and after divorce. The summary of their findings shows that programmes which are based on the development of skills, not only on giving information, have proved more efficient²³. Parents participating in skills-based programmes tend to be more successful in cooperative parenting and exhibit greater reductions in inter-parental conflict²⁴. Participants in various programmes report that they help them make stronger effort to work with ex-spouses for the sake of their children, and to understand how divorce affects children and the importance of cooperative parenting post-divorce²⁵.

In skills-based programmes they also learn how to strengthen their relationship with their children. Developing parenting practice includes committing to one-on-one time with each child, affirming their strengths, reinforcing positive behaviours, listening without judgment, accepting ambivalent feelings, reflecting understanding, connecting words to feelings, allowing silence and giving children space to not talk. All of these skills help children and parents alike to understand each other and deepen their connection²⁶.

Some researchers suggests that parenting programmes with the most beneficial effect for children are those that take a two-front approach:

²³ S. A. Wolchik, I. Sandler, E. B. Winslow, V. Smith-Daniels, *Programs for promoting parenting of residential parents: Moving from efficacy to effectiveness*, "Family Court Review" (2005), p. 65-80.

²⁴ B. L. Bacon, B. McKenzie, *Parent education after separation/divorce: Impact of the level of parental conflict on outcomes*, "Family Court Review" 42 (2004) 1, p. 85-97.

²⁵ D. J. Brandon, *Can four hours make a difference? Evaluation of a parent education program for divorcing parents*, "Journal of Divorce and Remarriage" 45 (2006) 1-2, p. 171-185.

²⁶ J. Pedro-Carroll, *Putting children first: Proven parenting strategies for helping children thrive through divorce*, New York 2010, Avery/Penguin.

supporting parenting functions as a protective factors, and teaching effective conflict-management to minimize harmful disagreements. This approach emphasizes the focus on helping parents distinguish their own needs from children's²⁷.

Generally, parent education programmes show positive outcomes for participants. Improvements often include an improved self-perception of their parenting ability, increased parenting skills, improved family cohesion, better parent-child relationships and reduction in family stress.

5. Helping children cope with divorce

Children's needs are important

Children develop different ways of managing stressful situations, different needs of support, and different opportunities to get support. It has been established that children who got a lot of support from their parents, grandparents, relatives, teachers, consultants and other professionals reported less adaptation issues than children who did not benefit from such support²⁸. Having friends to whom children can turn to for support is also associated with positive outcomes.

Although authors²⁹ consider that constructive communication and an appropriate relationship between parents and children are supportive of a child, to prevent problems it is necessary - in addition to work with parents - to offer children help which is designed for them personally. Findings show that some children lack basic information related to the process of divorce and are not usually given an explanation of what is happening at the time of separation. Therefore, the importance of informing children about what is going on, and including them in decisions related with the family situation is emphasized, provided it is appropriate for their age and ability to understand.

Children want to retain relationships with both parents and often report that the quality of the significant relationships with adults is of major importance to them. They want to be included in the decision-making process that takes place about living arrangements. The basic concept of prevention programs comprises empathizing with a child, taking into consideration his or her experience of divorce and his or her perception of change. With preventive activities it is also necessary to take into consideration that not only parents but also grandparents,

²⁷ J. H. Grych, *Interparental conflict as a risk factor for child maladjustment: Implications for the development of prevention programs*, "Family Court Review" 43 (2005) 1, p. 97-108.

²⁸ J. Hawthorne, J. Jessop, J. Pryor, M. Richards, *Supporting children through family change: A review of services*, London 2003, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

²⁹ J. Pryor, B. Rodgers, *Children in changing families: life after parental separation*, Oxford 2001, Blackwell Publishers.

friends and other persons who significantly contribute to the adaptation after divorce are important for a child³⁰. Grandparents, especially, are an additional resource when the other parent is absent or experiences emotional hardships, and when they maintain appropriate communication with the grandchild while supporting their own child. Changes in relationships within wider network, and the loss of friends, relatives and grandparents is another painful experience for the child experiences the divorce of his/her parents.

Interventions for children

Interventions for children often aim at creating an environment where children can share their experiences³¹. Support groups for children in a safe environment, such as school, proved effective, at least in cases when a child does not change school due to divorce. In programmes of varying lengths of duration, children get emotional support and develop skills for easier coping with change brought up by divorce. Their content focuses on learning relaxation techniques, problem solving, affect regulation, especially self-control in expressing anger, and communication. The work consists of conversations about specific topics, complemented by children-friendly techniques such as games, specific cartoon topics and observation of images. Preventive programmes in schools are often the only source of realistic information helping clarify misconceptions. For many children, school is the only place where their emotional needs are addressed and met. It has been proven that these programmes contribute to easier adaptation of elementary school children and positively affect social and academic change. The advantage of advisory-educative help at school is that it includes a lot of children, also those from economically and socially weak environments, and it is offered in a place and from persons whom children know.

It is necessary to emphasize that programmes should be designed in such a way that they do not cause additional stigma for children.

During, as well as after, divorce, specific psychopathology manifests in some children demanding in-depth treatment by appropriately trained professionals³².

The help for children facing the change of family structure and the loss of security is therefore multi-layered, including support for parents and direct support for children, formal as well as informal types of inter-

³⁰ J. Dunn, K. Deater-Deckard, *Children's views of their changing families*, York 2001, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

³¹ E., Dowling, G. Gorell Barnes, *To work with children and adolescents during separation and divorce of parents*, Milano 2004, Franco Angeli.

³² J. Lebow, K. N. Newcomb Rekart, *Integrative family therapy for high conflict divorce with dispute over child custody and visitation*, "Family Process" 46 (2007) 1, p. 79-91.

vention, creating a supportive society in which the network of help for children and parents in distress during divorce will be natural and readily accessible.

6. Conclusion

In spite of the fact that divorce is becoming a common event causing families to face urgent restructuring, it is clear, on the basis of comparison between various studies of the harmful impact of divorce, that among protective factors there are many more options that could be reinforced so that they could contribute to easier adaptation of children to a new family life and provide ex-spouses with necessary knowledge and skills for constructive functioning during and after the process of divorce.

It is necessary to recognize the need of preventive educational, consulting and other programmes as early as in the time of preparation for cohabitation and marriage, in order to develop interpersonal skills; also the development of programmes related with life-long family cycle would contribute to circumstances preventing divorce and family dissolution.

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