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Children on the Fronts of Parental Wars

Dzieci na frontach rodzicielskich wojen

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Abstract

Aim. The issues taken up in the research focus on the functioning of children in families during the process of separation and divorce. The current state of knowledge illustrates the heterogeneous, long-term effects of the disintegration of the parents’ marriage, from temporary difficulties to phenomena that permanently disorganise the child’s life. The aim of the exploration is to analyse and describe selected factors that make it difficult for children to adapt to divorce, and to formulate guidelines for a mature separation. The presented research material is qualitative, narrative in nature, and has been prepared from the practice of working with parents using therapeutic support. Immature, confrontational patterns of ending the parents’ relationship can cause damage that is difficult to reverse. Experiencing a sense of loneliness, low mood, anxiety, regression, lack of trust, and even depression or various forms of self-destruction and permanent disorders—constitute the canon of possible consequences. Recognising the indissolubility of the parental relationship, charting a course to seek the integral participation of both parents can enable

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children to function more safely. An intentional, mature separation can cushion the negative effects of the disintegration of the child's world. The essential condition is the survival of effective communication, which allows for establishing solutions to being a family in constant dialogue. In addition, the state of mutual contact cannot block the possibility of maintaining a future parental relationship.

Methods and materials. Biographical method, notes from meetings with parents and (sometimes) children.

Results and conclusion. Description of the conditions for separation that preserves the parental relationship.

Keywords: divorce, breakup, divorce vs childhood, immature breakup, mature breakup

Abstrakt

Cel. Problematyka podjęta w badaniach dotyczy funkcjonowania dzieci w rodzinach w czasie procesu rozstawania się i rozwodu. Aktualny stan wiedzy obrazuje niejasne, niejednorodne, długofalowe efekty rozpadania się małżeństwa rodziców, od przejściowych utrudnień, aż po zjawiska trwale dezorganizujące życie dziecka. Celami eksploracji są analiza i opis wybranych czynników utrudniających dzieciom rozwodową adaptację oraz sformułowanie wskazówek dojrzałego rozstania. Prezentowany materiał badawczy ma charakter jakościowy, narracyjny, został wypracowany z praktyki pracy z rodzicami korzystającymi ze wsparcia terapeutycznego. Niedojrzałe, konfrontacyjne wzorce zamykania związku rodziców mogą spowodować szkody trudne do odwrócenia. Doświadczanie poczucia osamotnienia, obniżenia nastroju, lęku, regresji, braku zaufania, a nawet depresji czy różnych form autodestrukcji oraz trwale zaburzenia są kanonem możliwych następstw. Uznanie nierozzerwalności relacji rodzicielskiej i obranie kursu na poszukiwanie integratywnego współuczestnictwa obojga rodziców może umożliwić bezpieczniejsze funkcjonowanie dzieci. Intencjonalne, dojrzałe rozstanie może amortyzować negatywne skutki rozpadu dziecięcego świata. Warunkiem jest przetrwanie wydajnej, efektywnej komunikacji, która umożliwia rozwiązywanie pojawiających się problemów, a także trwanie rodziny w ciągłym dialogu. Ponadto stan wzajemnych kontaktów nie może zablokować przyszłej, opartej na szacunku relacji rodziców, którzy we współpracy podejmą dalszą opiekę i wychowanie wspólnych dzieci.

Metody i materiały. Metoda biograficzna, notatki ze spotkań z rodzicami (i czasem) z dziećmi.

Wyniki i wnioski. Opis warunków rozstania zachowującego trwanie relacji rodzicielskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: rozwód, rozstanie, rozwód a dziecko, niedojrzałe rozstanie, dojrzałe rozstanie

Introduction

The subject matter is related to the phenomenon of parents separating and the psychological consequences of how the child is taken through the entire process of family changes. The research problem focuses on the psychological consequences of immature ways of parental break-up. The above analyses aim to deepen the understanding of the consequences of the disintegration of the child's previous childhood world and its further effects. Defining mature ways of parental breakups is becoming an important social need, if only because of the prevalence of immature and hurtful practices that accompany divorce.

Theoretical Background

Divorces in Polish society affect (or will affect in the future) approximately every third couple, which allows us to formulate the thesis that it is a growing and relatively common phenomenon (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2019). The culture of individualism and the search for the right to individual happiness make people decide to end a relationship that they consider insufficient and unsatisfying. The problem is that while it is relatively easy to leave a partner, being effectively and permanently separated from them, it is much more difficult to transform the current form of relationship with sons and daughters into a new one that effectively meets their needs.

Post-separation phenomena apply to both married and cohabiting couples, including their children as the recipients of the situation. The quality of their childhood changes, and they experience transformations that they become unwitting participants in. Ultimately, the stability of their world is often destroyed, and uncertainty and a shorter or longer reconstruction of a changed family reality awaits them. Piotrowska draws attention to the fact that a family in its separating process goes through a series of transformations: from integration to disintegration of the family system, to regain balance after a period of chaos, but in a changed structure (Piotrowska, 2021). Many studies show that the positive course of this process is not evidenced by the extensiveness of changes which are made in relation to the pre-divorce lifestyle, but by the broadly understood ability to satisfy one's needs in the reconstructed family situation (Beisert, 2008).

Separation is a multi-stage process, including a gradual deterioration of the quality of the relationship, weakening of the bonds, making decisions, choosing a way to leave, and experiencing the loss. All of these processes are accompanied by strong emotions. Separation can run in various ways. Partners sometimes make necessary changes while maintaining continuity in communication, agreeing, negotiating, searching for and set-

ting ways, trying to constantly cooperate with each other. The key areas of agreement are then located in the search for a fair distribution of joint achievements, as well as the search for an optimal educational plan. They are able to focus on a common goal, which is the well-being of the children. Different, competitive ways of separation are characterised by the fact that adult participants can use means of force, persuasion, and pressure, directed at defending their innocence for the unsuccessful life together and defeating the partner—and now the enemy. They prioritise their own well-being. They do not feel responsible for their contribution to the quality and outcome of family life. In this case, the danger is they lose sight of the children's well-being, and that they will not be able to monitor what is happening in children's experience of the parents' separation. The potential damage can be compounded and have a lasting impact on the children.

Family researchers present diverse attitudes towards the consequences of family breakdown. In the earlier, conservative pedagogical approaches, parents' divorce was usually considered as a factor pathologising the family's future and determining the negative effect of upbringing efforts (Kawula, 2007). A different opinion is presented by Wojciszke, a psychologist who tried to demonstrate that although the phenomenon is obviously harmful to children's functioning, its potential negative power is often overestimated (Wojciszke, 2002). Studies indicate that many children are able to adapt well to their parents' divorce, but a quantitative review of the children's condition after such a change showed its moderate negative impact. At the same time, it is emphasised that in many cases, parental separation can have a positive ending, freeing from highly traumatic phenomena like addictions, violence, *etc.* (Butcher *et al.*, 2017). Knowledge about the potential dangers of parental separation seems to be widespread.

The practice of working with families indicates that the complications of the separation process and the resulting problems with children are a frequent reason for using counselling, therapeutic or mediation support. This allows us to put forward the thesis that how a relationship ends is increasingly the reason for undertaking therapeutic work. This may be caused not only by one's own need, but also by the growing awareness of how strongly the separation of parents can affect the proper development of children and youth. Reaching for specialist help is practised in two ways, either as a preventive action to prevent difficulties, or taken when problems have already occurred. The growing awareness that the far-reaching effects of divorce can affect the child's future life increasingly leads to the search for specialist support. A divorcing couple, more or less consciously, faces the decision of separating, chooses between an immature and a mature pattern of separation. They choose their place on the continuum between the degree of respect for the rights of all members of their previous family, including the rights of the youngest and therefore being the most vulnerable ones.

Seeking outside support during the erosion of bonds, separation, and divorce, in my opinion, is a strengthening awareness that the way of closing a relationship with children requires reflection, setting common priorities and following them consistently. Avoiding emotional traps and impulsive decisions requires maturity, knowledge, and a sense of responsibility. It can be considered that a compendium of knowledge about mature parental separation and a set of adequate tools for their implementation are a social need.

Methodology

The aim of this study is to analyse and interpret the common reactions of children whose parents are separating. The world of the family during divorce—seen through the eyes of a child—falls apart in a way that is hard for them to imagine. Stability and security are put to the test, and the future itself becomes less predictable. Parents, who until now were the guarantors of everyday functioning, are involved in organising life from scratch. It is not certain what the child's new life will look like, how their place with both parents will be described, or how their right to the love of their mother and father will be realised. To present a picture of how the experience of separation can be assimilated, some descriptions of children's stories were selected, which, although they are individual cases, show quite frequent and recurring problems of children. They remain connected by the course of separation, the way it was carried out, and the path leading to divorce may determine specific children's reactions. The research problems focus on questions about how children react in the case of separations, in which parents are directed towards maintaining the parental status quo. In such a case, the parents, despite their separation, have a common goal, which concerns the needs of their mutual children. Despite experiencing the psychological effects of the loss of their previous life, they give priority to jointly recognising the needs of children and searching for ways that solve them.

In a contrasting way, the question about what threats may appear in the process of immature separation was asked, the process in which the most important goals are related to the functioning of the mother/father? In this case, adults are focused on their own needs or on relational goals, which may concern the preferred way of separation from the partner. Between the clear-cut styles of separation from mature to immature on a vast continuum, many couples get divorced by mixing both attitudes. The adopted definitional goal required the selection of cases that were quite clearly located in a specific style. The task was to search for common experiences in individual family histories, and thus directed the empirical process towards individual family biographies. The biographical method was recorded in the form of notes from the meetings held. The advantage of this research path is the possibility of focusing not only

on the reporting layer of events, but also delving into the processes of giving individual meanings, relating to emotional and psychological layers. Quantitative and statistical issues were omitted. The case reports cited in the text are authentic and come from therapeutic practice. They are the history of an individual family, but they are representative of many similar ones. In a certain sense, the fate trajectories are repetitive in nature; the patterns of experiences of parents and children are replicated in the stories of other separations and divorces. For the study there were selected some descriptions illustrating typical reactions of children, indicating the threats that should be considered in working with the family and what to focus on in eliminating the negative effects of changes occurring in the family.

In order to maintain anonymity, all names have been changed, but the data relevant to the research are true. In most cases, the main subject of therapeutic work is the parents (one or both). Occasionally, specific needs may arise that require support for children in the peri-divorce period. Protecting children from direct participation in activities is intended to prevent attempts to involve them in separation processes, entangle them in conflicts and disputes, and continue the processes of parentification and reversal of family roles. In the further part of the text, three characteristic cases of immature patterns of parental separation are presented; their interpretation and analysis, and then conclusions are drawn about what peri-divorce factors increase the threats, how they affect the functioning of children and what their long-term impact may be. This will allow for the formulation of a description of the conditions that may have an influence on children, protecting them and leading to a mature separation. Such actions are illustrated by the example of the last couple who consistently went through a difficult breakup, with the needs of their mutual children as their priority.

Children on the Front Line of Their Parents' Battle

The children's stories presented in this part of the text contain descriptions of entanglements in adult affairs. The separation process absorbed the described parents to such an extent that their sons and daughters also became unwitting participants in the events. They are not only witnesses, but also coalition partners, confidants, judges of the other parent, executors of punishments, *etc.*

Malwina, age 12

A teenager, diagnosed with depressive and anxiety disorders; refusal to go to school, recommended home education; treated pharmacologically for three months, and in cognitive-behavioural therapy for nine months.

Story: Parents got divorced after eighteen years of marriage, and the mother was preparing for her divorce with a lawyer for four years (200 pages of court documents). During that time, in coalition with her children, she prepared a plan to move out (which she informed them a year in advance, obliging them to keep the secret from their father). The main reason for the decision was supposed to be the father's violent behaviour, which the father denies. The divorce was ultimately carried out without determining fault. Interviews with both adults revealed that the separation was preceded by violent quarrels, lack of bonds, and emotional coldness. It was a big surprise for the father when his wife and children moved out. Later, he reported that contacts were being made more difficult and that he was cut off from regular meetings. From the moment Malwina broke down, they both began to work together in order to tackle the growing problems head-on, and they were particularly worried about her refusal to go to school. From the interview with the girl, it is known that she was involved in a conflict for the last six years with both parents; she was in a coalition with her mother, and during the therapy, she was diagnosed with parentification. Until the separation, Malwina achieved high academic results at school and was liked by her peers and teachers. Later, she was homeschooled; sometimes she simply slept late, was at home and waited for her mother and brother to return.

Interpretation: Malwina had been (along with her brother) in a close coalition with her mother for many years. About a year before moving out of her father's house, she had been secretly conspiring with her mother, knowing about her plans and actively participated in their implementation. Being only 7, she was able to keep the secret and not reveal her mother's intentions to anyone. Before the disappearance from home, everyone had maintained such normal relations with her father that the sudden moving out of his wife and children within a few hours was a shock for him. The prepared legal battle was planned as a major offensive ending with the mother taking over full custody of the children and awarding solid alimony. Eventually, a settlement was reached, and the court cases were quickly closed. While the father had accepted the financial costs of the divorce, he could not idly accept his daughter's current suffering. He tried to prevent her from capitulating to active participation in school activities and her progressive withdrawal from social life, sports, and other activities that had previously given Malwina lots of fun. The girl's depression, refusal to go to school, made her parents join in a common action, if only for a moment. Paradoxically, illness, leaving school and withdrawal from activities typical for her age helped the girl join her parents in common action.

Mateusz, age 14

A boy diagnosed with depressive disorders, supportive therapy between the ages of 11 and 13, accompanied by intensive pharmacological treatment. In the first period

of the disease, there was a six-month absence from school (11.5–12 years of age). Therapists suggested the occurrence of neuroatypical behavioural features, although the boy was high-functioning and had not been diagnosed in this direction before. As a result of the treatment, a satisfactory state of health was achieved. Recently, the father reported a deterioration in the boy's well-being, rejection of contacts, and attempts were made to determine the reasons and prevent the recurrence of the disorders.

Story: Three years ago, after a return from a joint vacation, the father announced that he was leaving the family, that he was not happy in his marriage. Within a short time, he moved out, leaving the boy in the care of his mother. The wife fell into a prolonged period of despair, sadness, experiencing the loss. Since then, she has been treated with medication for depression. The boy's mother (deeply religious) has not recognised the divorce to this day, interpreted it as a difficult marital test, wore a wedding ring, and paid for masses for her husband's return. During this time, the father lived in an informal relationship with another woman, although he regularly contacted his son, visited him, and did his homework with him. The boy reacted to the breakup with strong hostility, refused to meet with his father, hid under the blanket, and reacted with regressive behaviours (including sleeping with his mother, or playing with toys from earlier years, *etc.*). He was tearful, reacted with low mood, significant weight loss, and sleep disorders. The child psychiatrist prescribed antidepressants. Throughout this period, problems with learning at school intensified, accompanied by severe concentration disorders—during this time, from a student with high academic results—he finished the 7th grade with exams after more than half a year of absence, the 8th grade was passed poorly. Later, he started studying at a local technical school with poor results, isolated himself from his peers, and did not maintain social contact with them. Mateusz's world took place at home with his mother, and when his father appeared, he most often punished him with silence and hostility.

The boy visibly functioned better during periods when he maintained constant, stable contact with his father, when he went out with him, and when they spent time together. His condition worsened when he refused contact with his father, when he punished him; “he always lies, I won't forgive him until he comes home.”

Interpretation: After the divorce, Mateusz remained in coalition with his mother, actively representing her will in applying pressure on his father. In contrast to his silent mother, he loudly and directly blamed his father for leaving the family. The assessment of the man's behaviour was all the more unambiguous because in the axiological system of values of both origin families, marriage retains its inseparable character. It did not matter that his father had been in a relationship with another woman for a long time. The consequences of these facts were a depressive episode for the teenager, intense infantile and regressive behaviour, withdrawal from school and peer life. The boy remained in a strong, dependent relationship with his mother; he became a sort of centre

of his mother's world, and he filled her daily life in place of her father. The mother was stuck in the experience of mourning, denying the end of the relationship, and not accepting it. The son did not allow himself to disappoint his mother; he accompanied her, but he was unable to move away towards his father. Only when he was out of her sight did he allow himself short moments of satisfaction and closeness with his father. The price of entanglement was both depressive and anxiety disorders, school failures, and lower educational aspirations. Adjustment to the family situation was additionally hampered by the boy's neuroatypical features.

Ala, age 15

A teenager, a high school student, occasionally used therapeutic support. Recently, she had been reporting a lower mood, a sense of loneliness, inhibited expression of emotions, and felt concerned about her declining mood. While in conversation, Ala attributed the source of her problems to her growing reluctance to visit her father as part of her parenting plan. She felt controlled, tense, and forced to eat products that her father believed had healing power. The girl kept all of her own teenage problems a secret from him. She was aware that she was "not allowed to do anything," that she had to be absolutely obedient to her father as well as to his girlfriend. Whereas, at her mother's house, she felt normal, and her well-being was returning to normal. Both Ala and her mother were afraid of trying to negotiate a new care contract with her father.

Story: The parents' turbulent marriage had broken up six years earlier, with both of them at fault; the husband was very jealous; he stalked and controlled his wife. After the breakup, the mother entered into a new relationship. Despite the mother's attempts, the father would not agree to any changes in the parenting plan; the mother was afraid of the conflict escalating; she did not maintain contact with her ex-husband. Like her mother, Ala was convinced that she had no influence on her fate, she took a passive attitude towards her father, she was afraid of his unpredictable reactions, she did not count on her mother's help. She interpreted this state as if she had two separate lives. She felt worthless, ineffective, and helpless; she accepted the words of criticism often heard from her father as truths and axioms about herself.

Interpretation: The history of the relationship between the parents, based on control, evaluation, checking, and criticism, was recreated in the relationship between the father and the daughter. While the girl's mother left her husband and functioned in a new marriage, the daughter, in a sense, took over her fate. Despite the passage of six years, the parenting plan from the time of separation was still in force. In Ala's and her mother's opinion, there was no possibility of renegotiating it with the father. The parents, since they divorced, had no contact; there was no dialogue between them, and they unanimously wanted their daughter to be the information link. The mother's fear of communicating with the father, of his stuffy rules, of his angry reactions, blocked

the necessary, more flexible rules of the teenager's life. The decline in functioning during time spent with the girl's father could be a sign of future difficulties. They were in opposition to the teenage need for individuation and independence. The girl could learn that her needs were being lost out to those of her father.

An intriguing question arises in the context of family dynamics: why do parents—whose responsibility should be to focus on the psychological conditions necessary for their children's development during times of significant family change—so often lose sight of their children? Why do they fail to recognise their suffering, and in many cases, even intentionally entangle them in adult conflicts? In such situations, the primary focus of action tends to shift toward the other adult partner. The child or children, together with their emotional experiences, become secondary—almost invisible. Practice shows that it is not uncommon for children to retreat into the background during family upheaval. They suppress or “freeze” their emotional responses, often becoming silent, unnoticed participants in the turmoil surrounding them. The reasons behind why separation and divorce become such profound challenges for adults are complex and multifaceted. One key factor lies in the subjectively experienced difficulties that emerge during the successive stages of relationship breakdown. Emotional entanglements, unresolved conflicts, and deeply rooted fears can obscure the needs of children, despite their vulnerability during such critical transitions. Virtually every relationship dissolution follows a sequence of characteristic stages that closely mirror the classic phases of grieving a loss. Understanding these emotional processes is essential in recognising why adults may become consumed by their own distress, leaving children's needs overlooked.

These stages often include: 1) shock and disbelief—particularly when the decision to separate is not mutual, the partner who is left behind may hold on to the belief that, despite frequent arguments or threats, the other will not take such a definitive and radical step, 2) experiencing negative emotions—these may be projected outward in the form of jealousy, anger, or a desire for revenge against the partner. Alternatively, they may turn inward, manifesting as guilt, self-blame, or shame in front of family and friends, 3) loss of self-worth—a sense of personal inadequacy often emerges, accompanied by the internalized belief that one is less worthy, unlovable, or fundamentally flawed, 4) focus on insurmountable difficulties—challenges related to separation, co-parenting, or adjusting to new life circumstances may become magnified to the point of appearing impossible to overcome, intensifying emotional paralysis or conflict, 5) escaping reality—individuals may attempt to cope by employing defence mechanisms, such as convincing themselves with statements like “I'm better off alone.” Others may seek relief through overinvolvement in work, engaging in superficial relationships, or turning to substances such as alcohol or other forms of addiction to numb emotional pain, and 6) constructive adaptation—at this more advanced stage, individuals be-

gin to gradually accept the separation. This process involves releasing anger, grief, and feelings of injustice, which allows for the restoration of psychological balance. Attention shifts toward setting new goals and planning for the future, often resulting in more grounded, thoughtful actions that support both personal well-being and the stability of the family system.

From a pedagogical and developmental perspective, it is crucial to recognise that only at this final, constructive stage do adults typically regain the emotional capacity to fully perceive and respond to their children's needs. Before this point, the internal chaos caused by emotional loss often overshadows parental sensitivity, increasing the risk of emotional neglect or psychological burden being placed on the child. Supporting families through these transitions requires not only psychological insight but also pedagogical awareness—educators, counsellors, and caregivers must be equipped to recognise when children are becoming “invisible” within adult conflicts. Interventions aimed at strengthening parental self-awareness, emotional regulation, and prioritisation of the child's developmental needs are essential components in mitigating long-term harm. The outlined stages offer valuable insight into the complex and multifaceted nature of relationship dissolution, reflecting the emotional trajectory described in many models of grief and loss, such as the framework proposed by Kübler-Ross (2002). The ultimate aim of the changes that occur after a separation is the restoration of a new form of psychological and familial homeostasis—a stable reorganisation of life after the emotional rupture. This new balance requires a mature separation between the individuals as partners in a romantic or domestic sense, while simultaneously preserving their cooperative roles as co-parents. In other words, while the relationship as a couple ends, a new form of partnership must be maintained—one that centres on the shared responsibilities toward the children and acknowledges their need for security, continuity, and care from both parents. An immature separation can be defined as a state in which individuals become emotionally stuck in the process of parting ways, unable to bring it to a constructive and progressive conclusion. In many such cases, communication between the former partners becomes dominated by a narrative of guilt, in which both parties seek to prove their own innocence while assigning blame to the other (Rydlewski & Paluszak, 2023).

This guilt/innocence script can so thoroughly take over the dialogue that the actual issues resulting from the separation—such as co-parenting logistics, the emotional needs of children, or financial planning—are pushed aside. Instead of seeking solutions, the focus turns to justification, accusation, and emotional vindication. When one or both psychologically wounded partners resort to retaliation, a destructive dynamic begins to unfold. This dynamic is often described as a conflict spiral, in which confrontation escalates through a predictable sequence: 1) rivalry leads to distorted perception and deepened biases, 2) emotional responses intensify, 3) communica-

tion deteriorates (with each partner seeing the situation only through their own lens), 4) key issues become obscured, 5) positions harden, and 6) differences are exaggerated—and the entire interaction hurtles toward open conflict (Lewicki *et al.*, 2005).

This spiral not only traps the primary participants but often expands its reach. The involvement of allies—such as parents, friends, acquaintances, or extended family—further broadens the scale of the conflict and increases the potential for coercive, force-based strategies to dominate. For children caught in the middle, the environment becomes increasingly unstable and psychologically unsafe. From an educational and developmental point of view, such a climate severely threatens a child's sense of emotional security and continuity. Educators, therapists, and support personnel must be able to recognise the early signs of such spirals and work not only with children, but also with adults, to de-escalate conflict and restore focus on the child's well-being. The actions of legal representatives, such as attorneys, sometimes raise concerns among practitioners in the field of family dynamics. At times, lawyers may encourage their clients to adopt hostile approaches, pushing them toward strategies focused on proving guilt, escalating the divorce proceedings in a confrontational direction. Of course, in legal practice, some cases clearly attribute blame to one spouse, such as situations involving addiction, domestic violence, or other severe issues. However, far more frequently, the conversation revolves around the shared and mutual responsibility of both partners for the ultimate shape and outcome of their family life.

After a separation, parents should ideally maintain strong enough relationships to collaboratively build a co-parenting partnership and continue raising their children together. If adults involve their child in their “war to the death,” the divorce can become a traumatic experience for the young person. This trauma can be so profound that, as an adult, they may experience anxiety about entering intimate relationships, struggle with expressing emotions, or develop a lowered sense of self-worth. It is important to note that there is no clinical evidence supporting the existence of a “Divorced Parents' Syndrome,” although such a definition circulates in popular self-help literature. When discussing the impact of divorce on children's development, it is useful to refer to the work of Wallerstein and Blakeslee, who conducted research involving adults who had experienced parental divorce. Excerpts from their books are frequently cited in popular publications about the effects of divorce. These American authors claim, among other things, that

[...] children of divorced parents face a more difficult task than children who have lost a parent to death. Death is irreversible, but those who divorce are still alive and can always change their minds. The fantasy of reconciliation is so deeply ingrained in a child's psyche that children cannot break free of it until they them-

selves eventually leave their parents and depart from the family home¹. (Blakeslee & Wallerstein, 2006, pp. 161–165)

However, practitioners do not fully share this view. When the cause of divorce is domestic violence, we know that in such cases, children rarely fantasise about their parents getting back together. Separation from the abuser is generally seen by children as a relief. The typical cause of divorce is marital conflict. Children inevitably observe it, becoming, to some extent, participants in it, regardless of the parents' wishes. This can constitute a serious burden for them. On the other hand, in many cases, divorce cuts off, finalises, and ends the conflict. Empirical evidence aligns with the findings presented in the introduction, which highlight the positive aspects of separation. Furthermore, practice shows that ex-spouses often become better parents post-divorce, focusing more on the developmental needs of their children than they did during the marriage. Many of the participants in studies confirm that many children prefer to see their parents separately, but calm and happy, individuals with whom they can speak without tension.

The situation is different in highly conflicted, combative couples. Children caught in their parents' battles suffer particularly when they are forced to take sides, becoming involved in the conflict on one parent's behalf. Dragging a son or daughter into a direct confrontation with either the father or mother is particularly harmful, carrying potential psychological risks. Regardless of the emotions the child may feel at any given time, they always have an undeniable right to love both parents. Creating a situation that forces the child to choose one parent over the other is, in essence, an act against the child itself. The mother or father forgets that they themselves chose the other parent for the child and fail to take responsibility for that choice. A child, in a sense, is a combination of two biological parts—those of the mother and the father—which they symbolically internalise. The need to negate one of these parental figures can, as a consequence, lead to the negation of that part of the child's own identity. This situation can generate potential psychological complications. These complications are particularly difficult because they often occur unconsciously and remain unseen. A child's loyalty to both parents prevents them from openly communicating their own discomfort.

A strong bond between parents is the solid foundation upon which the rest of the family is built. This bond determines everything; if something goes wrong between the parents, it strongly impacts the other family members... If the parents' relationship is shaky, the whole family system shakes... A dysfunctional family will have a highly destructive impact on children, even if other needs are fully met. Want happy children? The best thing you can do is take care of your marital

¹ Author's own translation.

happiness². (Rydlewski & Paluszak, 2023, p. 42)

In light of the above, rather unequivocal statements, is it possible to safely guide children through a divorce? If adults maturely go through the divorce process, there is a chance that the child's basic sense of security will be disrupted in the least painful way possible. Let us recall—mature means that the parents' marriage ends, but they still maintain their relationship as mother and father, as a pair of parents. They can jointly meet the child's needs, make decisions about important matters, motivate development, discipline when necessary, and offer support and care. They respect each other and show mutual appreciation as parents of their shared child. A child needs support in the relationship between their parents, even when they live apart and are no longer a couple. A parental alliance, cooperation in fulfilling the child's needs, consolidates the child's sense of stability and constancy. When the relationship between parents falls apart, in a very real sense, the child's world falls apart too. That's why the fundamental message divorcing parents should convey to their child is: We are separating—this sometimes happens—but we will never separate from you, because you are our child. It is the parents' responsibility to prove to the child—through words and consistent actions—that despite the breakup, they remain their mother and father. This means taking many practical steps, such as cooperating with the other parent in everyday life and prioritising that parent immediately after oneself. The experience of parental divorce is significant. It is undoubtedly a difficult event, but how it is lived through by the child—and how it ultimately influences their life—depends on a variety of factors, including: 1) the attitude of the parents and extended family during and after the divorce, 2) the quality of the post-divorce relationship between the child and each parent, as well as the broader social environment, 3) the individual personality of the young person.

The accuracy of these observations is confirmed by the stories of children whose parents demonstrated mature responsibility throughout the challenging process of separation or divorce.

Szymon, age 6 & Lola, age 4

Two preschool-aged children were raised for over four years under a care arrangement best described as alternating. Part of the week they spent at their mother's home—where they were born and which remained their primary home. The rest of the week was spent with their father, who had set up individual rooms for both children in his new house. There was no rigid schedule; it was subject to negotiation. The timing was adjusted based on the professional obligations of both parents and was arranged on an ongoing

² Author's own translation.

basis. This flexible approach aimed to support the mother in effectively returning to work after her parental leave. Care during periods of illness was also determined in real-time, depending on each parent's current work commitments. Their marriage lasted nine years. They met at university, fell in love, and shared common passions. Their first child was born seven years ago. The mother took on the caregiving role, while the father successfully built his own business and ensured the family's financial stability. A turning point came five years ago, when two major life events occurred almost simultaneously: the husband fell in love with someone outside the marriage, and the wife became pregnant. Their second child was born into circumstances marked by separation and newly established agreements concerning childcare and the division of shared assets. The father moved in with his new partner. During this difficult time, grandparents from both sides offered their support. The woman struggled with the early stages of single motherhood, intensified by the grief of losing the relationship and the trauma of betrayal. She blamed her husband and was deeply distressed; she began psychotherapy. The children's father persistently supported her through these processes, sharing childcare responsibilities as much as he could, according to their needs and his capabilities. He financed all expenses for both his ex-wife and the children. He did not deny responsibility for how events unfolded, endured the blame, and accepted all the consequences. Gradually, the family situation began to stabilize. The couple developed their own tools for co-parenting, problem-solving, and handling conflict. The woman has recently entered a new, fulfilling relationship. In the end, over the past few years, the former spouses have developed a fairly effective system of alternating custody. The siblings now have two homes. Both parents are in new relationships. They each declare that caring for the children remains their most important responsibility—one that requires maintaining a good relationship built on effective communication. In case of any conflicts regarding the children, they attend joint consultations with a therapist. Throughout this time, the children have been functioning well, and their development raises no concerns.

Interpretation: The story presented may serve as an illustration of a path toward a mature separation. Although the breakup was initiated by betrayal and the abandonment of a pregnant wife—placing a heavy burden on the husband—he accepted responsibility for the future of the family. His focus on shared responsibilities and ongoing daily involvement in the life of his former wife, in caring for her, their son, and later both children, became the foundation for seeking constructive solutions. His relationship with the children was treated as a priority, shaping the direction of all actions. Ultimately, both parents built new, separate lives and formed new relationships, yet continued to raise their children together, care for them, and fulfil their parental responsibilities.

Their responsibilities toward the children remained crucial—even above their new relationships. They maintained a cordial relationship, usually limited to day-to-day

matters concerning the children, but more involved during times of illness or when the children required extra care and attention. Although no longer a couple in life, they remained partners in meeting their children's needs, in caregiving and upbringing, and in overcoming challenges together. Their relationship was marked by attentiveness and mutual respect, which served as a foundation for the children's sense of security. The mature, integrative model of post-divorce relationships focuses on finding solutions that enable cooperation in a newly defined reality. It particularly emphasizes: 1) shared needs, especially the significant interests of the children from the shared relationship, 2) shifting focus from less understood positions to more recognised needs; we seek to understand why a particular issue matters to us and pose a similar question to the other parties involved, 3) it focuses on defining and meeting the needs of all parties involved, especially the youngest, who are most dependent on other family members, 4) it is characterised by efficient communication, sometimes supported by neutral parties, 5) it finds creative, sometimes unconventional ways to achieve mutual benefits, 6) it applies objective criteria for evaluating actions, sometimes requiring consultations with others to ensure what possible actions are achievable in a given situation.

Each family is a unique constellation of conditions, so each separation will look different. However, considering the potential suffering of children, it is worth taking all available actions that may reduce the negative effects of divorce.

Conclusion

One in three couples in Poland currently experiences or will experience separation or divorce. While adults often continue their lives without major long-term consequences, the separation tends to affect their shared children more profoundly. The research material for this study consisted of family biographies involving children of various ages who had experienced the consequences of a highly conflictual separation.

The most severe post-divorce complications usually affect children whose parents separate in an immature manner, focusing solely on their own—often short-term—goals. These parents typically lack awareness of the long-term consequences of their actions. Engaging in confrontational conflict can sometimes trigger a chain reaction, escalating into hostility and placing the child in a symbolic battle against the other parent. Thus, it can be argued that it is not the divorce itself, but the “divorce war”—participation in conflicts with the other parent, entanglement in manipulations, and actions used as weapons in the struggle—that serves as a catalyst for the emergence of negative outcomes. The stories presented in this text most often revealed anxiety and depressive disorders, decreased academic performance, feelings of loneliness, withdrawal from peer relationships and other areas of life, developmental regression,

sadness, guilt, and experiences of shame, among other symptoms. The range of psychological consequences is much broader and tends to intensify the more deeply a child is entangled in adult matters. Children often take on roles that do not belong to them: they care for the suffering parent, protect them, and suppress their own emotions out of fear that the more vulnerable parent will not survive the next conflict. The long-term effects of parentification may include social isolation and feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and distrust in relationships with others; in some cases, they also lead to depression, self-destructive behaviour, or suicidal tendencies. An individual subjected to parental exploitation often carries deep emotional wounds into adulthood. Frequently, those caught in parental conflicts require long-term treatment and psychotherapy.

A mature approach to separation and divorce requires that adults accept full responsibility for managing the process constructively and respectfully. It is their duty to ensure that the dissolution of the partner or marital relationship is handled without resorting to hostility or confrontation. The relationship between co-parents occupies a unique and enduring role, as it must support the ongoing upbringing of the child(ren) through consistent cooperation and effective, respectful communication.

In many ways, this relationship must maintain a functional continuity that serves the child's developmental needs over time. Educational professionals working with families undergoing separation can play a vital role in supporting this transition. Their involvement may help reduce or eliminate instinctive, often unconscious, reliance on confrontational strategies and instead promote integrative and collaborative practices that safeguard the child's emotional and educational stability. Managing the separation process with intention and clarity—while placing the well-being of the child at the centre—should be understood as one of the most significant pedagogical and parental challenges during the period of family restructuring.

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