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**EXPERIENCES OF THERAPEUTIC WORK OF THE FAMILY  
THERAPY TEAM OF THE SPECIALIST PSYCHOLOGICAL  
AND PEDAGOGICAL COUNSELLING CENTER „KRAKOWSKI  
OŚRODEK TERAPII” WITH FAMILIES IN PERI – DIVORCE  
CRISIS. PSYCHOEDUCATION AND PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC  
PROGRAM „BOAT ON THE WAVES”**

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*“Ex-spouses cannot be expected to continue to love each other.  
However, they can be expected to be honest with each other, which will protect  
the child from conflicts between the parents.”  
Virginia Satir [1].*

**family therapy  
family in a breakup situation  
educational program**

**Summary**

*The aim of this article is to present an original model of therapeutic work with families in the situation of a breakup crisis. The model was created in response to the needs of families that were consulted in the Specialist Psychological and Pedagogical Counseling Center “Krakowski Ośrodek Terapii”. Some of them were referred by a court and some came on their own in the situation of family crisis related to parents’ separation or breakup. Psychoeducational and Psychotherapeutic Programme “Boat on the waves” comprises both educational and therapeutical aspects. It is directed to adults – parents but topics discussed during the lectures include issues related to experiencing the breakup both by parents and children. The program is carried out cyclically and it consists of a few stages – a diagnostic stage (individual consultation with each of the parents), a psychoeducational stage (four team meetings with lectures concerning psychological situation of a divorcing family) and a therapeutic stage (therapeutic, family meetings run alternately – separately for mother and children and father with children). When partners gain the knowledge about their ways of functioning and experiencing separation and about differences in coping with the crisis on the psychoeducational stage, the conflict might be eased and it might be easier for them to benefit from the therapeutical help. The possibility to continue family therapy allows partners to broaden their perspectives and it becomes a safe method of working with relations in a new family system.*

## Introduction

Divorce in a family is a crisis event that causes a long-lasting, emotional burden [2], [3], [4]. That situation affects both, adults – a divorcing couple and their children. The process of reconstruction of the family system after the divorce forces the necessity to make changes in the way of defining oneself (I – divorcé, I – divorcée, I – a child of divorced parents). It is associated with the need to establish a way of caring for children and new principles of functioning in the changed family system. Consequently, divorce is a source of potentially stressful changes in adults' – parents' lives as well as in their children's lives [5], [4].

Adults, like children in the event of a family breakdown, are exposed to serious physical and mental consequences. Family breakdown brings suffering and entails the experience of loss [6]. What is more, it can lead to difficulties in social and emotional functioning among children [7], [8]. This transfers to complications in pursuing developmental tasks, and problems in finding oneself in the family, school, or peer space.

One of the factors making the kid's adaptation to a peri-divorce situation easier is the effective fulfilling of the parental role by parents. According to the research divorce/separation of adults – parents leads to temporary deterioration of parental role functioning which can disturb the relationship with children. Those changes include both parents, the one who takes direct care of the child and the one who meets the child according to the procedure developed under the parental agreement or by the court [9], [3].

Research shows that in a divorce situation the conflict between parents is highly destabilizing and destructing factor influencing the child. It disintegrates a family and blurs the borders, which – in its extreme form, can lead to role-changing and parentification [10]. Then, a parent wants to be comforted by a child making him or her a trustee. In such a situation a child not only does not get sufficient support but also, he or she is put in a situation of a loyalty conflict which enforces him or her to take sides. As a result, visible especially among older children, a child may feel overloaded.

The question then arises: How to support families efficiently to prevent (or mitigate) the negative effects of a breakdown crisis?

The aim of this article is to share the experience which employees of Specialist Psychological and Pedagogical Counseling Center "Krakowski Ośrodek Terapii" gained during several years of consulting and therapeutic work with families in a breakdown crisis. Activities aimed at achieving this goal were (and still are) carried out as a part of the proprietary psychotherapeutic and psychoeducational program "Boat on the waves".

## Divorce as a crisis situation

Divorce is a long process that begins with the dissatisfaction of one or two partners in a marriage, and the intensification of negative and ambivalent feelings towards each other through a mutual conflict. People who were close to each other gradually grow apart emotionally, often physically, and sometimes decide to separate (sleeping in separate beds, temporarily moving out of the house). At this stage, a relationship crisis accumulates,

often causing personal suffering, loss, sadness, guilt, or harm. The solution to the crisis is a decision to split up / divorce, which goes into the phase of litigation (short or long-term, focused on agreement or mutual struggle). The last stage is the time of acceptance and adjustment of the former spouses to the separation.

The experience of divorce or separation, both in parents and their children, often leaves emotional “marks”, such as a sense of hurt, distress, or loss for many years. Every loss is accompanied by very strong and difficult emotions like grief, feeling of emptiness, hurting, failure, fear or even horror, insecurity, despair, anger and helplessness [11]. The way of experiencing loss depends on many factors such as: the reason of breakdown, the way the relationship ended, conflicts, compromises, settlement of the financial situation and maintenance obligations, and establishing contacts between parents and between parents and children. What is also important, are personal stories from the original families, early experiences, the way of experiencing and dealing with the difficulties, personal behavior patterns as well as parents’ thoughts and beliefs [12]. What also matters is the level and type of bond between parents and children, communication style and children’s level of psychological development and their relations with siblings.

Apart from parents and children’s difficult emotional experiences, divorce may lead to the disorganization of family functioning. From that moment all family members have to change their previous lifestyle, take over new responsibilities and accept a different way of existence [13].

### **The divorce from the adults’ perspective**

The difficulties associated with the couple breakdown are explained by the theories by Emily M. Brown and Joseph Hopper and are essential to understand the basis of the crisis. They make people aware of the differences that arise between people in a breakup crisis. They describe a mechanism opposing the partners which might be a barrier in resolving the conflicts. To answer the question of why the marriage broke up, partners have to cancel the meaning given to it earlier. Joseph Hopper [14] claims that the person who initiates (initiator) experiences and analyzes the fact of the breakdown of the marriage differently than the person faced with the fact of breaking up (non-initiator). The initiator sees the marriage, from the very beginning, as failed and unfortunate, as a sum of wrong decisions, which, taken into account, becomes a justification for the divorce. The non-initiator focuses on complaints and sorrows, emphasizing negative emotions and own ambivalence which precede the decision about the divorce. They develop a negative image of the partner who is responsible for destroying their, so far, good marriage relationship.

Emily M. Brown [15] draws attention to the dynamics of emotional changes in the divorce process among partners. She shows how different levels of emotional preparation for divorce influence the peri-divorce conflict. The concept explains the differences in expectations of spouses towards specialist help. When the initiator decides to break up, the non-initiator does not perceive the threat and he or she is not emotionally prepared for it. The initiator wants to fall out, the non-initiator does not and at all costs he or she wants to

maintain the marriage. The initiator may experience a sense of guilt that he or she wants to reduce by trying to communicate with the non-initiator, which may be misinterpreted as an invitation to repair the relationship. When the non-initiator discovers the consistent pursuit of separation by the initiator, the feeling of disappointment, hurt and loneliness increases. The emotions of non-initiators are more intense and prolonged over time. The author distinguishes two phases in the separation process. In the first stage of making the decision the initiator originally conducts an internal discussion and struggles with emotions such as anger, loss, regret and feelings of separation from the spouse. That stage ends with the decision to split up with the partner. At the same time, the non-initiator who is not aware of a partner's experiences and decisions begins to see the symptoms of a relationship crisis but he or she denies them. Revealing the initiator's plans is a shock to a non-initiator. In the so-called restructuring phase, the initiator starts making changes in everyday life (e.g., moving out, property separation). The non-initiator develops a whole range of negative emotions (anger, grief, helplessness, loss). At the end of the restructuring phase, it can still be observed that the initiator and non-initiator are equating in emotional processes and introducing practical solutions. Only in the final phase of the process, the ex-partners can jointly define plans, care and educational goals concerned with their children's future.

### **The divorce from the children's perspective**

children's reactions to the divorce of parents / partners and the breakdown of the current family are different and most often depend on the specificity and nature of the developmental period of the child. Preschool children manifest their grief by crying, sadness or by making demands. They often feel guilty about their parents' divorce and they think their parents are breaking up because of their rude behaviour. Those behaviours may vary due to the sex: boys are becoming naughtier and girls are trying to be perfect. Regressive behaviors characteristic of earlier developmental phases appear – for example disturbances in the rhythm of sleep and play, bedwetting or thumb sucking. Older children (6-8 years old) miss a parent who left home. They may feel rejected and they believe that they do not deserve someone else's love. These children very often suffer from depression, low self-esteem and they have lower school achievements than their peers [16]. In early school age children (9-12 years old) sadness associated with the breakdown of a family takes the form of anger, which is directed at parents as well as other adults. That anger is mainly directed toward the parent who has moved out. Children at this age also experience a sense of loss, regret and helplessness. Difficult feelings often find their manifestation in somatic complaints. On the other hand, adolescent children (13-16 years old) going through the breakup of their parents are often treated as "almost adults". They are emotionally burdened with e.g., parental support, and get more real duties, e.g., excessive household duties. The expectations of divorcing parents towards adolescents may contribute to their parentification and adversely affect their development, hindering the accomplishment of developmental tasks. Children of this age often bring the problem of chronic fatigue and difficulties in concentrating. They also limit their contacts with their parents more often

due to the loss of trust and / or the necessity to make choices in the family. These children may develop behavioral problems such as experimenting with drugs and breaking social norms, which is related to the mechanism of regulating emotional tensions and seeking ways of coping with the problems on their own. The consequence of such a reaction is usually premature separation and emotional cut-off [17].

As research s [18], [19], living and being brought up in a conflicted house is more harmful for a child than a healthy relationship with only one parent. Children need one good enough parent [20], with unconditional love and clear boundaries (parent with authority).

Most of the negative effects of divorce which are observed among children are the result of a conflict between parents which began before the divorce and lasts after the divorce. Therefore, parental conflicts should be minimized or restrained in such a way that children are not a part of them, they do not have to take part in exchanging information between parents or identify with negative feelings of one parent towards the other.

When it comes to the educational function of parents, including the divorce situation, it is optimal for a child, when both parents are equally engaged in their child's upbringing. This is related to the parents' non-negation of their mutual authority and active involvement in upbringing, based on cooperation.

All things considered, parents in a situation of the family breakdown during the separation or after the divorce should do everything to minimize mutual conflict and exclude children from participation in that conflict. What is more, if they cooperate in the field of taking care and upbringing, they have a chance to fulfill all children's needs. There is a high possibility that those children might be children who are loved, not children from a "broken" family [21].

### **Parental cooperation**

The decision about divorce / break up and the breakdown of the family are directly related to the need to develop rules for cooperation in the field of childcare, which is a great challenge for parents. Caring for children after the divorce requires the couple to end the spouse/partner role and start negotiating the parental role. Persistent, strong, negative feelings toward the ex-partner very often hinder or even make it impossible to communicate in the field of childcare and upbringing. Common elements of family life (living together, spending free time together) do not exist any longer, which makes it difficult to maintain pedagogic consistency, which is crucial in fulfilling parental duties. Co-parenthood after the divorce can take many forms: from cooperating parents to conflicted parents, which effects may be observed in the care and pedagogic plan [17].

When it comes to co-parenthood after the divorce and fulfilling of parental duties towards the child, the term "parental alienation" seems to be important. We talk about parental alienation when one parent makes it difficult for the other parent to contact a child. It can take various forms: from creating obstacles to meet the other parent to creating a negative image of the parent in a child's perception. Parental alienation is an improper behavior of one of the parents towards the child. The behaviours range from constant forcing of

declaration of affection, offering material benefits to a child in exchange for reluctance and negative attitude towards the other parent, to false accusations against the other parent. As a result of this, a child may encounter numerous difficulties, described in the literature as an alienated child syndrome. They include symptoms of physical nature (somatic complaints) and of emotional nature [22], [23].

Divorce/breakup is never easy, especially when it concerns children, but it is the child's best interests that should be the most important goal for adults / parents. Although the divorce is very often associated with strong negative emotions experienced by the parties, it is the child's disturbed sense of security that should be the main concern.. Even the most "peaceful" divorce may, despite the parents' will, lead to various adverse consequences among children.

### **The Psychological and Psychotherapeutic Program "Boat on the Waves"**

The Psychological and Psychotherapeutic Program "Boat on the Waves" was established in 2017. The authors and therapists working in the program are the members of the Family Therapy Team of the Specialist Psychological and Pedagogical Counseling Center "Krakowski Ośrodek Terapii": Anna Bodzek, Ireneusz Czachura, Paweł Fuksiewicz, Joanna Krupa, Katarzyna Morajda, Bogusława Piasecka and Piotr Podgórski.

The program was created with families in a crisis of separation in mind. The initial experience of the team in therapeutic work with families in such a crisis showed that parents' expectations as to the goals of the meetings were inconsistent and prevented them from starting therapy. Some of the families were sent to the KOT Centre by a court order with recommendations to: "undergo a family therapy", "... create stable rules of living together, including the principles of communication, mutual respect and, understanding of entrusted duties...". Families that came to the Centre were often under a strong partnership conflict, which made cooperation at the parental level difficult. Conflicts most often took the form of claims and distrust toward the therapists. Parents very often treated the therapists as judges who had to settle a dispute. As a reason of their attitude, they cited the children's welfare. Classic forms of therapeutic work with the family did not work.

In relation to described difficulties, the therapists of the Family Therapy Team began to work on developing a model of working with families in a break-up crisis, which would enable these families to benefit from specialist support. What the Team recognized to be of high importance, was sensitizing parents to the children's need in the face of the divorce/separation and drawing attention to separation of the partner and parent role.

The team undertook supervision, training, and literature analysis, as a result of which a preliminary plan of the Psychoeducational and Psychotherapeutic Program "Boat on the waves" was developed.

The program is aimed at parents who experience the breakdown of a relationship and at the same time want to take care of the well-being of their children. The main goal is to help understand the emotional processes that arise in the crisis of separation in adults and children. The result is an increased awareness of different experiences of separation as well

as differences in dealing with the crisis. A better understanding of one's own emotions and the emotional background of the conflict may help to mitigate the effects of split-up in the couple and help to clarify expectations, needs and mutual parental aims. This creates the conditions to make a decision on the possible use of the proper form of therapeutic work after the lectures. An important goal is also to familiarize parents with the psychological situation of their children during the parents' breakup and what might be helpful for the children to cope with this experience. The discussion about the method of parental care and challenges that both parents and children will have to face after the divorce may enable/facilitate the development of common educational and communication rules for the child's benefit. A significant change that results from the sensitization of parents to the needs and experiences of children is the strengthening of parental roles. It is really important due to the fact that parents should build a positive self-image, especially in a situation where they fail in partnership roles. Finding self-esteem in line with the idea "I can be a good parent despite failure in partnership" is the basis for taking responsibility for working on oneself and their family.

The first stage of the program is parents' individual participation in consultations with the team therapists who qualify them for the program. Then, parents take part in 4 lectures aimed at introducing them to the psychological perspective of their own and their children's experiences in this difficult situation. What is emphasized is that the child's good relations with both parents are important for its development. It is highly valuable when both parents take part in lectures. Both of them, have the opportunity to gain the same theoretical knowledge, they also both know that "the second parent has heard exactly the same". That gives the space to talk about the reasonability of continuing further therapy and stating mutual expectations of that therapy.

The purpose of qualifying for the program is to examine the structure and current situation of the family, the stage of separation of the couple, the legal status, the psychological condition of parents and children, and adults' expectations regarding therapeutic help. Consultations take place with each parent separately or, if possible and necessary, in the parental pair. Participation in the program is volitional and a parent who is willing/ready can take part in it. If one of the parents comes to the clinic, attempts are taken to establish cooperation with the other parent. During consultations, the forms of support the family can get from KOT are discussed.

Topics related to communication and parental cooperation are discussed during lectures. Parents get to know the current psychological knowledge about what they, their former partners, but most of all their children experience in this crisis moment of life. This knowledge allows them to look at difficult experiences from a distance and from different perspectives. It also makes planning further actions and making important decisions much easier. Participation in the program is primarily aimed at enabling parents to reflect on their children's emotions related to the breakdown of the family and to provide their children with appropriate emotional support. Therapists also pay attention to those aspects of the psychological functioning of children, which often escape the attention of even the most loving and caring parents during stormy divorce disputes. Meetings are conducted

in the form of a lecture or a presentation. During some meetings, interactive exercises are proposed. Participants have the possibility to ask questions and take part in a discussion. Lectures are set twice during the school year.

There are the following subjects of lectures:

**Lecture 1.** Introduction to subjects. Determination of goals, expectations, and rules. Feelings and experiences connected with the breakup. Psychological reactions to the divorce and separation. Phases of the divorce process. Ways of dealing with this tough experience.

**Lecture 2.** Defining child's problems, children's reactions to the divorce. How do children understand divorce? How do children react to their parents' separation? The phases of dealing with parents' separation. Child's needs in that difficult moment.

**Lecture 3.** Providing information about parents' behaviours that might be helpful in children's dealing with experiencing the situation of separation. What can a parent do to help a child undergo a parents' breakup? How to talk about a divorce with a child? What should parents avoid while talking with a child?

**Lecture 4.** Perspectives of parental cooperation after the divorce and setting directions for the future. Parental alienation – the definition and possible effects for the child's psychological development. How should divorcing parents talk to each other and what should they establish? Reconstructed families – truths and myths.

After the lecture's completion, in order to deepen the topics presented, parents may take part in individual consultations. They are aimed at exploring the knowledge obtained during the lectures and, if they are willing to, they can undertake therapeutic work and define the needs, expectations, and goals of the therapy. The goals and nature of therapeutic meetings are determined individually for each family. The therapeutic work with each family is held alternately, in separate subsystems – mother with children and father with children. Adopting such a model of work by the Team is aimed to work through the breakup instead of maintaining the illusory hope of family reunification and supporting a non-existent family system, as well as releasing and protecting children from the effects of the conflict of loyalty and not exposing them to quarrels and a tense atmosphere in the relationship between parents. If necessary, joint meetings of the parent pair are proposed to discuss parenting issues, without the participation of the children.

### Program evaluation

Three editions of the program took place in 2021. Two of them were held on-line and one was stationary. Initial questionnaires were prepared in which information on the expectations and needs of participants were gathered as well as final questionnaires – summarizing the lectures. The research was conducted via the Internet, and participants filled in the questionnaires anonymously. There were 38 initial and 31 final questionnaires. The answers and conclusions obtained in the questionnaires are presented below.

The first question in the initial questionnaire was about participant's expectations of the training course. The participants focused mainly on the aspect of supporting a child in a breakup situation, how to improve relationship with children, how to deal with the

separation of the child from the parent, and what may be the rules of parental cooperation after the breakup.

Examples of responses appearing in the surveys – **What are your expectations related to the content of the lectures? (knowledge, parenting skills):**

*I want to know the children's world of emotions and thinking during the parents' conflict (marriage breakdown). I want to know how I can help so that current family experiences became possibly constructive.*

*How to talk with a child to make him or her willing to go on a meeting with the other parent.*

*I would like to improve the relationship between me and my daughter.*

*Rebuilding the emotional relationship with the child with limited contact possibilities and after a long break in contact.*

*Building proper relations with the ex-partner. Methods of communicating with ex-partner when it comes to issues connected with the child.*

*I would like to know what are the methods of communication between parents so that the child does not suffer.*

The next question was about the theoretical knowledge the parents want to acquire during the course. The participants were mainly interested in topics concerning: how to effectively support a child in a situation of family breakdown, how to communicate with the other parent for the child's own good, how to talk with a child about parents' breakup and how to rebuild broken ties with a child.

The next questions concerned the level of their parenting skills and competencies related to the situation of the breakup crisis and what skills they want to acquire on the course. Participants assessed their knowledge as on the average level when it comes to parental skills and competencies related to the situation of a breakup crisis. The main threads regarding parental competencies that they wanted to acquire concerned: parental agreement, dealing with their own and their child's difficult emotions, building the right relations with others after the breakup.

Further questions were to collect information about the level of adults' dealing with the breakup experience and the level of understanding their own and their child's emotions. The participants assessed their current level of coping with the breakup with a partner at an average or high level. They assessed their current understanding of the child's feelings/experiences when his or her parents split up on an average level. The main needs identified by the participants were: to achieve balance and peace, deal with tough emotions, maintain satisfactory relationships with children, get support from the other parent, and set the rules of parental cooperation. The current understanding of the child's needs in the event of the parents' separation was assessed on the average level by the parents.

Examples of responses appearing in the surveys – **What needs do you identify in connection with the breakup?:**

*Balance.*

*I would like to get along with the biological father of our children without troubling us with memories.*

*I need my husband's support (during the divorce case).*

*Establish clear rules related to children.*

*Contact talks and meetings with children.*

*The need to communicate constructively with your ex-partner on topics related to the child.*

Another group of questions concerned parental communication and cooperation. Participants assessed the general communication and communication in parental matters with the ex-partner at a very low level. Most of the participants assessed the level of parental cooperation and the support of the other parent in raising a child at a very low level.

Parents' interest in topics related to the breakup was examined. The most interesting lectures topics were: "children's emotional processes and reactions in a situation of parents' breakup" and "parents' and children's relations after the divorce".

Information about the parents' assessment of their own knowledge about the breakup was collected in the questionnaires. Before the course, 50% of the participants stated that they have basic knowledge about the breakup. 37% of them claimed they know a lot about the topic, 11% answered their information is limited and only 2% admitted they have huge gaps in the topic. None of the interviewees (0%) admitted that he or she has full knowledge of the topic.

After the training, an evaluation questionnaire conducted among the participants showed a clear increase in parents' knowledge about the separation. 2% of the respondents claimed they have complete knowledge about the breakup, 77% answered they know a lot about the topic. 9,7% assessed their knowledge as on thy basic level and 6,5% as on the limited level. None of the respondents indicated that they had large gaps in their knowledge about the breakup (0%).

**How do you assess your knowledge about the separation? (before the course)**

**How do you assess your knowledge about the separation after participation in the course?**

In the questionnaires, participants were asked to define what theoretical knowledge they managed to gain during the training. The most frequently revealed topics were: the consequences of separating a child from a parent, the importance of skilful parental agreement, lack of conflicts, and proper communication. Topics that turned up to be important were: emotional support of a child and ways of talking with a child about the breakup. The participants paid attention to the emotional processes and reactions in the situation of adults' separation.

Examples of responses appearing in the surveys – **What theoretical knowledge did you manage to acquire during the training?:**

*I have acquired knowledge about the child's behavior, I got to know what he feels and what he thinks about the second parent being influenced by the primary parent who is hostile, speaks badly of me, wishes badly, and does everything to make the child also have a bad opinion about me.*

*I learned how important for children in the crisis of their parents' breakup is the agreement of the divorcing parents in terms of sharing the childcare. What is important for me*

*is the knowledge of what are the emotional and psychological consequences for a child, who is involved in a divorce conflict.*

*About children's and adults' emotions, behaviours typical for children with emotional problems, how to talk with ex-partner and what to avoid, and about difficulties in building reconstructed families.*

*I acquired enough knowledge to become aware of the importance of the problem of divorce and its consequences.*

*The child's emotions and custody. Until now, I have been an advocate of alternate care, but what I have learned from this training is that it requires agreement between the parents.*

*Emotional processes and reactions in the situation of adults' separation.*

After completing the training, the participants assessed their parenting skills and competencies related to the situation of the separation crisis at a high level. They assessed the level of their coping with the experience of split-up with their partner on an average and high level. The partners stated that participation in the training helped them understand their own emotions and experiences in the situation of separation.

The parents assessed their current understanding of the child's feelings/experiences and needs in his or her parents' breakup situation at a high level.

Most of the participants stated that the content presented during the training may be helpful in improving the level and way of general communication and parental cooperation with the ex-partner/partner. The majority of parents stated that attending the lectures was helpful or very helpful in gaining the skills and competencies needed to help the child in the difficult situation of their parents' separation.

### **Experiences from therapeutic work with families**

The most common situations faced by families in a break-up crisis are the consequences that appear in the child's development, due to a strong conflict between the parents. One of such consequences is the child's loyalty conflict towards the parents. Such a state causes emotional tension and arouses various difficulties in the child's general functioning. The purpose of therapeutic meetings (separately mother with children and father with children) in such a situation is to soften the division between the good and bad parent, the child "good with the father", and "bad with the mother". Introducing ambivalence allows to reduce tension in the child (mitigating symptoms) and improves his or her relationship with each parent. It becomes important to make parents aware of the consequences of the loyalty conflict in the child and show them solutions that should be introduced in the parental relationship to free the child from that conflict.

Sometimes it happens that parents are so concerned about the emotional state of a child that they seek help in our Centre. They report difficulties with talking about emotions and a lack of knowledge how to talk about divorce. They are worried about the symptoms like bedwetting, frequent outbreaks of aggression, dropping out of school, sadness, and withdrawal from daily activities. What they care about is helping the child get through their divorce at the lowest possible cost. Then, the aim of the therapy is to recognize and lessen

children's emotional conflicts which are very often related to the feeling of guilt for their parents' divorce, grief after losing a full family, not understanding the whole situation, fear for the future, and fear for parents. Alternate children and parents' meetings and the possibility to talk about difficult topics in the presence of therapists allow family members to free themselves from difficult thoughts and work through the crisis.

Those who also come to the Centre are families in a strong parental conflict, obliged by a court to take part in the program. They very often leave the program after initial consultations and lectures. However, it sometimes happens that the meetings are continued in a form of family therapy (separately mother with children and father with children) or parental consultations are offered. The purpose of further meetings is to ease the conflict between adults and show its negative impact on the emotional development of the child. The areas where a child should not be dragged are marked and boundaries and ways to maintain them are set. It is important to support parents in building a constructive upbringing relationship after the breakup so that the child is not entangled in the adults' matters, and so that each parent can build a warm, beneficial for the child, own relationship with him or her.

A distinct situation is when one of the parents makes efforts to limit the child's / children's contact with the other parent. Lack of contact with one of the parents, who is rejected by the child without any evidence of wrongdoing, causes numerous difficulties in personality development as low self-esteem. It influences the feeling of excessive dependence on the parent and the splitting of the image of the alienated parent. The goal of therapy in cases of parental alienation is primarily to reduce the dependency between the child and the alienating parent so that the child can solve the problem of splitting. Only in the next stage, it is possible to rebuild the bond with the alienated parent.

It also happens that therapeutic meetings confront the belief (resolve the illusion) that it is impossible to maintain a good relationship with each of the parents. Due to his or her deficits and dysfunctions, a parent is not able to respond to the child's needs. What is more, a relationship with a child is not a constructive one and it does not support the child's development. The healing factor that relieves the child from tensions is the statement (also by the therapists) that the parent is not able to cooperate, or support the child and that it is not advisable to maintain a relationship with him or her.

### Summary

Participation in the program gives parents the opportunity to confront the psychological knowledge about the divorce/separation of the couple and the emotions they experience. They can also understand the psychological processes occurring in the peri-divorce situation, it gives them an awareness of the different functioning and experiencing the separation by partners. Additionally, it provides space for discussing the validity of possible, further therapy as well as defining and making the expectations real. The parents can get to know their feelings, unconscious sources of conflicts, and differences in coping with a crisis as well as it allows them to set common goals in regard to therapy.

Four lectures of the program let parents prepare themselves for further therapeutic work. The basis of that work is naming and understanding emotions, working through mourning after losing a relationship and family, making people aware of the costs of a court fight, and starting understanding and empathy towards the ex-partner and child. Thanks to the therapeutic work it is possible for positive emotions to appear and it is possible to protect and support children. This helps all family members to deal with grief, say goodbye to the past, straighten their own feelings, accept the loss and rebuild their self-esteem. This prompts parents to look for such solutions to create living conditions for the child that will minimize the psychological costs resulting from the divorce/separation of parents.

During family therapy, it is important to understand what a child experiences. Explaining to the parents what is happening in the child's feelings is of huge importance. Family therapy conducted in the model described above gives a chance to support children, withdrawing parentification, freeing them from the loyalty conflict and feeling of guilt, and not getting a child involved in parents' conflicts. Parents have the opportunity to talk to each other in safe conditions and establish important parental matters, they do not address them to the child. As a result, the child rebuilds a sense of security in the newly functioning family structure. A child can talk about the loyalty conflict during the meetings. In the presence of therapists, attempts are made to solve it, and therapists become witnesses and facilitators of a change in the relationship. They also convey the idea that a child can have a good relationship with both parents. The child regains confidence in their parents and the feeling that he or she can count on them. Parents can become more cohesive when it comes to upbringing issues. Even though, they are not together anymore, they can share the same value which is the best interests of the child. They can be just as good parents as they were before the divorce.

All families have a potential that can be strengthened by focusing on the resources of a given system. Factors supporting the process of adaptation to the new situation of the family are family mental resilience, understood as the ability to return to balance and use the resources, and parents' shared values.

Parents struggle with a great deal of guilt towards the child and difficult emotions related to the loss. It is advisable not to deepen this. Parents receive support and understanding of what is happening to each of them by normalizing what they are going through.

Therapeutic meetings give time and space to rebuild the bond with parents. The possibility of starting therapy after completing a series of psychoeducational workshops broadens the participants' insight into the problem and is a safe form of work for them. Parents see that they will not be accused or held to account as it takes place in their relationship with their ex-partner.

The participants who joined the program mainly pointed out that they needed support and help in the way to support a child in a parents' breakup situation, how to improve relations with children, how to deal with the situation when the parents and the children are separated and what can be the rules of parental cooperation after the divorce.

After the lectures, the parents stated they were given the knowledge needed to understand their children's needs and feelings. They believed, they acquired the knowledge and skills

essential to support a child in a difficult situation. They also stated that they have a better understanding of their own feelings and experiences related to the separation from their partner. The parents also felt that they had received knowledge that could help them develop effective methods of communication and cooperation with each other for the good of the child.

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