

What do children need from helping professionals after parental separation/divorce?

Jana Barvíková, Štěpánka Lehmann
Research Institute for Labour and Social Affairs, Prague, Czech Republic

Introduction

- The breakup of the family brings significant changes to the lives of children.
- Conflicts in the family cause in the child stress, fear, anxiety, often a feeling of guilt.
- The difficulties bringing children to professional services may, for many of them, have their origins in the period before the breakup of the family.
- Longitudinal studies have shown that children with the experience of family breakdown often had more problems than other children already in the period before their parents' separation/divorce - this particularly concerned children from families with a high level of conflict between parents.^{1,2}
- Since around 2015 new services and activities are emerging to help children, such as group programs for children going through divorce. The effort is also to increase the availability of classic psychological and therapeutic services, such as individual psychotherapy, family therapy and services of a school psychologist.³
- In practice, it turns out that the attitude of parents is often a barrier to the offer of programs and services for children actually reaching their clients.⁴

Methods

- *How do children live after their parents' separation?*
32 in-depth interviews with young people aged 16-29 with the experience of a family breakdown during their childhood or adolescence (2020-2021) → thematic analysis
- *How are children brought up after separation/divorce?*
42 in-depth interviews with parents of minor children with experience with one of the models of child care arrangement after separation/divorce (2021-2022) → thematic analysis

Questions

- What are the **barriers on the part of parents to use selected services to help children** after parental separation/divorce?
- What are the **barriers for children to enter or stay in professional services** from the point of view of young people with the experience of family breakdown?
- **What do children need from helping professionals** after their parents' separation/divorce - what helps and what doesn't from the point of view of young adults with the experience of family breakdown?

RESULTS

GROUP PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN GOING THROUGH DIVORCE

Welcoming attitude of parents

- positive experience with an experienced child therapist
- the opinion that it can be helpful for a child to have the opportunity to share their experience and feelings with peers with the support of an experienced therapist and to experience that they are not the only one facing such a situation (to experience normality)

Reserved to negative attitude of parents

- trying to protect the child - not to make the breakup of the family a bigger problem than it already is
- fear that someone will mess with the child's mind and convince them that they have problems they do not feel
- insecurity, fear that the child's participation in such a specifically focused program may provoke and strengthen the feeling of exclusivity and make them start to feel different from children who have not experienced separation
- distrust in the effectiveness and appropriateness of group programs, either in general or specifically in the case of their own child (shyness)
- the opinion that the program can be beneficial for children who take the separation of their parents hard, or it is accompanied by major conflicts between parents - however, this is not the case for them or they believe that their children have adapted to the breakup of the family without difficulties (how much about the problems of their children do they really know?)

Welcoming attitude of young people

- seeing that it is similar or worse in another family can help
- if the child sees that they are not the only one with a problem, they do not have to feel "weird"
- be part of a community on the same wavelength where you can share (no one from a divorced family nearby)
- the possibility to name and ventilate their feelings, not to be alone
- understand what is causing their feelings

Reserved to negative attitude of young people

- uncertainty as to whether they would have been willing to share their feelings in front of others in childhood and whether they even knew how to do so then
- zero need to meet new people and talk to them about personal life - the need to solve their own problems on their own
- preference for individual therapy over a group program (introvert)
- not to be included in the group of those who have divorced parents

FINAL HYPOTHESES

- Children who are mistrustful, withdrawn, shy, "gentle", with good school performance and children with significantly problematic behaviour do not receive professional support more often.
- The need for a wide range of services for children

BARRIERS PREVENTING CHILDREN FROM CONTACTING A SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST (SP)

- feeling ashamed in front of peers and adults
"... children are very susceptible to what their classmates think, so nobody at school would simply go to the school psychologist, because they would be afraid that their classmates would say that they are some kind of weird."
- reticence and family rules shaping expectations from oneself (need to manage everything alone; crying is a sign of failure and weakness)
- inadequate promotion of the SP's services by the school (not clear who the SP is and for whom the SP is there)
- dislike for the person of the SP
- previous negative experience with a SP
- personal negation of everything related to school

ADVICE TO HELPING PROFESSIONALS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

- Gain trust by creating a feeling of safety and establishing a relationship.
- Listen carefully to children and try to discern whether their parents are manipulating them (especially in case of young children).
- Talk to children – don't practice the technique of silence.
- Help them share feelings and sorrows.
- Do not take lightly what they say.
- Provide words of comfort and reassurance.
- Don't feel sorry for them.
- Do not devalue and judge them for their behaviour or excesses, but try to solve the problem that lies beneath them with the children.
- Help them set boundaries by requiring compliance.

Building a relationship, a sense of security and the voluntariness of contact

- First of all, it is necessary to build a relationship with the children so that they come voluntarily.
- If parents push children into the service, there is a high probability that the child will clam up and refuse to cooperate and the service will not have any effect.
- Not every child can be recruited for cooperation.
- If the child's decision not to attend is respected, it can be an important experience for them that will allow them to seek help when they are mature enough to do so.

How to help (not only) an introvert to open up?

- Be patient, sensitive and lighten the situation - make it more comfortable, more cheerful.
- Give the child time to establish a relationship, trust and gain a sense of security.
- Do not force therapy at all costs - do not push them to share, the child is not always in the mood to solve problems - let the meetings be not only about problems and difficulties.
- Advantages of a low-threshold facilities for children and youth – the child has a long-term experience, they have time to establish trust before they start sharing, no one (parent, child welfare, school) defines their image and story in advance.

References

- ¹ Cherlin, A. J. et al. 1991. Longitudinal Studies of Effects of Divorce on Children in Great Britain and the United States. *Science, New Series*, Vol. 252, No. 5011. (Jun. 7, 1991), pp. 1386-1389.
- ² Sünderhauf, H. 2013. *Wechselmodell: Psychologie-Recht-Praxis: Abwechslende Kinderbetreuung durch Eltern nach Trennung und Scheidung*. Berlin: Springer VS Wiesbaden.
- ³ *Strategie rodinné politiky [Family Policy Strategy 2023-2030]*. Document of Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.
- ⁴ Kuchařová et al. 2020. *Zpráva o rodině 2020 [Family report 2020]*. Praha: VÚPSV, v. v. i.

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Jana Barvíková, Ph.D.

jana.barvikova@rilsa.cz