

THE CO-PARENTING EXPERIENCE IN THE DISSOCIATED SPACE OF CHILDREN WITH SEPARATED PARENTS

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EXPERIENȚA DE CO-PARENTITATE ÎN SPAȚIUL ASPECTE ALE OPIILOR CU PĂRINȚI SEPARAȚI

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Abstract. Parental divorce is often a cause for mental disorders in children, by reason of the profound dislocation of the child's mental coordinates. Results: Co-parenting relationships contain a set of involvement behaviours and the combined efforts of the two parents in the education, planning and life trajectory of the child. Hetherington and Kelly (apud. Luca, 2016) identify three types of co-parenting: *conflicting co-parenting*, which involves hostile interpersonal behaviours, *cooperative co-parenting*, in which parents prioritize the child's needs and *parallel co-parenting* is the most common type and is the easiest to adopt by parents; it is characterized by the situation in which the two parents ignore each other, do not collaborate and do not coordinate their activities with the child. Both conflicting and parallel co-parenting prescribe poor models for developing the parent-child relationship and reflect low levels of parental competence. Prolonged conflictual co-parenting causes the emergence of emotional disorders in the child with dramatic long-term effects in terms of its developing personality.

Keywords: co-parenting, divorce, children mental disorders.

The Diagnosis and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - DSM V introduces a new category called "*Parent-child relational problem*", which includes the diagnosis of "*Child affected by parental relationship distress*", defined as a "category to be used when the focus of clinical attention is the negative effects of parental relationship discord (e.g., high levels of conflict, distress, or disparagement) on a child in the family, including effects on the child's mental or other medical disorders" [1, p. 716].

Parental divorce is often a cause for mental disorders in children, by reason of the profound dislocation of the child's mental coordinates and the vitiation of its own sense of security that this type of marital conflict can produce [10].

Although research in the field emphasizes the series of problems encountered by children after the divorce of their parents, ranging from psychological issues to those that affect their relational capacity and their social adaptation, one is to also take into consideration the type, the severity and the persistence of those problems, since they are influenced by an array of factors related on the one hand to the individual characteristics of the child and on the other hand, to familial characteristics such as the parental style and competence, the existence of a parental conflict, the support network, remarriage and potential changes in the surroundings. Therefore, the adaptation of the child to the new situation depends considerably on the parent's ability of handling the divorce, situations have been reported when the child was healthily and non-traumatizingly accustomed although, generally, the emotional consequences on the child following a divorce might be consistent.

Not all children whose families experience situations entailing a legal separation present symptom that can lead to the establishment of a psychiatric diagnosis, more often one can meet symptoms characteristic for a series of mental disorders from the spectrum of anxiety, affective, behavioural, somatoform and dissociative disorders [15, p 85].

In the event of a divorce involving a high level of parental conflict, if a restructuring of the relationship dynamic between the two parents does not take place, one may encounter a series of emotional consequences on the child that are difficult or even impossible to address from a psychological perspective [6].

Therefore, in the absence of an intervention aiming at the reduction of the conflict between the parents and at the development of a specific set of parenting skills by the divorced parents, the psychological support of a child, following divorces involving a high level of parental conflict, can prove to be difficult or even inefficient [7, p. 72].

In this context, a stringent endeavour consists of the development of parenting skills, the adoption of an appropriate parenting style and the formation of a co-parenting relationship based on communication and collaboration between the two parents, so as to meet the needs of the child.

Moran and Weinstock [11, p.80-101], experts in the assessment of children in trials of custody, while analysing the parental competences and abilities for the purpose of developing a psychological evaluation model for divorce cases, identify three major areas of investigation - upbringing, education and co-parenting, each one of them containing a specific set of relevant skills, namely:

- *The competence of upbringing* which includes the ability of expressing affection, the understanding of sensitivity as emotional intelligence, the ability of exercising self-restraint and of protecting the child;
- *The competence of educating a child* which includes the ability of communicating assertively and authentically in various aspects, the capacity of managing the familial environment (routines; organizing day to day activities, the physical and social environment), the ability to discipline based on limits and consequences and the ability to be a role model;
- *Co-parenting*, which refers to the ability of communicating with the other parent and encouraging the child's relationship with him/her.

In the viewpoint of S. Glăveanu [7, p.84], the parental competence represents a "system of knowledge, skills, capabilities, aptitudes and abilities supported by specific personality traits, which allow the parent to successfully fulfil parental responsibilities, to prevent and overcome crisis situations in favour of the child's development and thus, to achieve the objectives of educational activities".

Glăveanu's factorial model, developed in his explanatory-interpretative research on parental competence carried out in Romania, reveals a series of constitutive factors of parental competence with a formative effect on the child:

- The *Knowledge* factor is oriented towards satisfying the needs of the child, towards the expression of adequate answers to these needs and towards the parents' ability of knowing the child's particularities, according to its own developmental stages. Based on this knowledge, the parent can explain the child's reactions, understand its needs, can have appropriate answers and can establish optimal relational and educational methods to overcome bio-psycho-social problems. Based upon this competence, a consistent support, adequate to the developmental stage that the child is going through, can be ensured.

- The *Time management* factor takes into consideration two aspects: on the one hand the parent's ability to qualitatively and quantitatively manage the necessary time spent with the child and, on the other hand, the ability to effectively organize a daily routine, by finding a balance between activities and rest. Thus, the parent guides the child in the fulfilment of a study program, creates family contexts where the child is to participate in and activities that favour social insertion, while also orienting the child towards various recreational activities for development and stimulation.
- The *Affective Support* factor results from the parent's ability to possess and use effective mechanisms to prevent and manage family stress. Based on this competence, the parent can address tense situations by providing emotional support in order to manage the child's negative emotions, by overcoming disagreements between spouses in addressing the child's various life situations and by avoiding the transposition of financial or professional problems in the familial environment.
- The *Disciplinary* factor consists of the parent's ability to manage the behaviours of the child and to lead the process in which the latter internalizes norms and rules. Depending on the stage of the child's development, the parent assertively transmits and adapts the speech and educational method to the child's understanding, with the aim of conveying a system of behavioural norms and a set of consequences resulting from the undesirable demeanour the child may have, all these having a value regulatory role.
- The *Crisis management* factor consists of the parent's ability of managing the crisis context that a child manifests, involves the capacity of being a good leader and of being able to identify solutions to the child's difficulties, alongside it [7, 91-95].

O'Donohue & Krasner [13, p.78] define parenting skills as "an amalgam containing the beliefs, attitudes and practices of parents", specifying that the act of disciplining implies convictions about the value of corporal punishment, attitudes regarding the importance of maintaining a continuity in applying rules and the parental practice of imposing consequences to the breaking of the rules through coercions. The main characteristic of being a good parent consists of the art or mastery of having more skills and sub-competences.

McClelland [apud 2, p.96] argues that the identification of parental skills can be achieved through behavioural indicators, namely through the actions undertaken by the parent and the ability of effectively performing the tasks and responsibilities. However, a competent parent is not necessarily a person with parental skills, in the sense that he/she does not need to allocate time, energy and availability to interact appropriately with the child and to meet its specific developmental needs.

Glăveanu [7, p. 41] presents the parent-child relationship from the perspective of psycho-behavioural descriptions, education and the effect it has on the child's development, calling them parental models, respectively, „information systems targeting psycho-behavioural pictures with explanatory valences- interpretive and predictive, constituting a landmark in the study of parent-child relations”.

Baumrind [apud 3, p.114] brings forward the idea that parental models contain in their composition both information regarding the *parental style*, as well as aspects that describe the *familial atmosphere*. Thus, the *parental style* represents the way in which the parents act on their children, either harmoniously or disharmoniously, the personal educational style characteristic of each of the two parents, which presents a large number of variations from one situation to the other, given the multitude of external and internal determining factors. The *familial atmosphere* is considered to be a picture of the numerous relationships that are established between family members, being a direct result of the behavioural patterns adopted by the family members. As an operationalization of the concept, the familial atmosphere can receive several

specific attributes such as: organization, family cohesion and collaboration, or disorganization, represented by dissensions and emotional division; coherence or inconsistency in the promotion of socio-moral values and in the educational means used.

In approaching the family, Nichols [12, p.205] conducts an analysis that reflects on the dimensions that give the family structure the characteristic of a functional system and on the disturbances that can manifest at these levels. The author takes into consideration the communication between family members, the relationships within the family, the family functions and the disturbances in them, such as alterations of the family roles and of the emotional dimension of the family. Thus, the author points out that the first indicator of family crisis is the disruption of communication in the parental couple. In this sense, the communication between the two parents, but also between them and the children, can reach different degrees ranging from deeply conflictual, to a unidirectional or a reciprocal pattern of avoidance. In terms of the relationship between the two adults, it is emphasized that the conflicting relationship between them cannot be separated from the parent-child relationship. Thus, the severity of the conflict between the parents generates an increased level of adaptive difficulty for the children.

The ability of communicating with the other parent, of redefining and restructuring the roles and responsibilities in raising and educating the child refers to co-parenting, a concept used to describe the relationship between two separated or divorced parents who exercise their parental responsibilities together.

Co-parenting relationships contain a set of involvement behaviours and the combined efforts of the two parents in the education, planning and life trajectory of the child. Lamela et. al [9] lists a number of components of coparenting that describe cooperative behaviours between the two parents, which are based on expectations, beliefs, attitudes and supportive behaviours, so that successful coparenting does not imply the absence of conflict, but the ability to overcome the conflict by virtue of the commitment to the child's support.

Hetherington and Kelly [apud 14] identify three types of co-parenting:

- *conflicting co-parenting*, which involves hostile interpersonal behaviours, full of anger and reproach, in the presence of the child so that parents do not cooperate with each other and do not have the ability to detach themselves from their own resentments towards each other and to separate the issues and conflict that generated the divorce from the child's needs. According to the authors, this type of co-parenting tends to improve by 75% within 6 years after the divorce.
- *cooperative co-parenting*, in which parents prioritize the child's needs, cooperate in educational and disciplinary methods, communicate and apply the same rules of behaviour and conduct to the child, adapt their parenting programs to the child's needs and encourage the child's relationship with the other parent.
- *parallel co-parenting* is the most common type and is the easiest to adopt by parents; it is characterized by the situation in which the two parents ignore each other, do not collaborate and do not coordinate their activities with the child, avoiding any interference with the other parent, parental communication being non-existent. The unwillingness of one parent to involve the other in decisions related to the child can lead to tensions and conflict between them, to the emergence of power struggles, confusion, lack of roles, unclear expectations and difficulties in managing the parental relationship in regard to the child's time and loyalty.

Both conflicting and parallel co-parenting prescribe poor models for developing the parent-child relationship and reflect low levels of parental competence. The way in which the two parents cooperate after the divorce represents either the support, or the lack of it thereof, in regards with the balanced development of the child. Prolonged conflictual co-parenting causes the emergence of emotional disorders in the child with dramatic long-term effects in terms of its developing personality.

All these lead to behavioural reactions of opposition, to tantrums, to indiscipline and impudence, to hetero-aggressive acts involving the defiance of the norms of conduct, crimes, school refusal or dropout.

Other authors approach the influence of the family environment from the perspective of the correlations between the parents' lifestyle and the children's disorders. Dobrescu [5, p.65], in her work "The disobedient, agitated and inattentive child", studies the child's behavioural reactions not only from the perspective of the genes involved in child's maladaptive behaviours, but also from the perspective of parental behaviours, making associations between conducts and the lifestyle of the parents, starting with the intrauterine environment and continuing with the growth and development of their children.

Research on the psychological impact of divorce on the child has highlighted a number of disorders associated with poorly managed family separation [8]. Anxiety disorders are very common after divorce, usually associated with depressive disorders, whose symptoms have varying degrees of severity. From a clinical point of view, the symptoms vary depending on the age of the child and do not always meet the DSM criteria. Dissociative phenomena, for example, appear in some cases as a defense mechanism against trauma and help the child in detaching itself from the distress caused by the parents' divorce. Reactive attachment disorder is characterized by inadequate - and noticeably disrupted - social relationships in most contexts, which begins before the age of 5 and is associated with blatantly pathological care. Behavioural disorders are, in the case of children with divorced parents, appearing as a form of reaction to the traumatic situation they are going through.

The mediating vectors of the experience that the child encounters in the dissociated space within its parents' separation consist of a series of socio-cultural and socio-economic peculiarities. According to Brianda [4, p.204], the culture of the society that constitutes the originating environment of each parent shapes their parental skills, the set of abilities that the parent develops and the educational model that he/she adopts in raising and caring for the child. All these factors create a constellation of variables that cannot be neglected when one intends to implement a parenting skills development program for divorced families.

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