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Children and their divorced fighting parents

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Introduction

Working with parents who continue in bitter dispute after divorce is, for many experienced couple and family therapists, one of the most complicated areas of their practice. What works in therapy with couples and parents often seems not to be effective in these cases. Distrust, paranoia and the taking of a defensive stance, by one or both parties, frustrates the formation of a safe therapeutic relationship in which therapy could be of help. Ongoing legal fights complicate the dynamic. The threat of new legal proceedings, with the stress and financial consequences this imposes, is always problematic.

These fighting, divorcee parents were often referred to the *Lorentzhuis* in Haarlem, the Netherlands, centre for systemic therapies, training and consultation, because of our expertise on complicated couple and family problems. The referrals came from diverse professional contexts; child protection, mediation, psychiatry, health care, youth care, social work, psychotherapy and family therapy. The destructive patterns present in the relationships of these divorcees can be so strong and powerful that professionals are caught in the middle. Many of the professionals who referred to us had arrived at an impasse with these clients. As experienced family and couple therapists, and trainers in family therapy we tried hard to create space for more safety, connection and parental teamwork. Sometimes we succeeded, but there seemed to be a group of parents so caught up in their destructive fighting that we were unable to find space where change could occur.

The children of these parents caused us increasing concern and we wanted to refer them to the *KJTC*, a centre for child and juvenile trauma. However, we discovered that the centre had stopped working with the children of these fighting parents, because they found that the help they were able to offer was of no benefit and, in some cases, the children developed more serious symptoms. Through therapy the children became more aware of their pain. Whilst they learned to express this in the therapeutic context they also became more aware of the powerlessness of their position. They could not express their pain at home because all utterances could be used in the war between the parents. The child therapists therefore concluded that they should stop attempting to intervene with therapy as long as the context of the child's problems remained unchanged. In fact, the child therapists wanted to refer these cases to us, rather than vice versa! In effect, both services needed each other and it was from this realisation that the project for 'Children and their divorced fighting parents' was born. The progress of the first group taking part in this project, how the sessions were structured, what went well and what went less well, is the focus of this chapter.

Size and Context

Statistics

In the Netherlands, around 70,000 children are confronted with the separation of their married, or unmarried parents each year. About 70 % of these divorces proceed well. They create pain and imbalance, but the parents act responsibly and lovingly for the sake of their children and the family is able to find a new balance within two years. Around 30% of divorces, however, are more complicated and problematic and 15% of this group represent the most complicated, 'fighting' divorces that are the focus of this chapter.

Much research has been conducted around the consequences for children of divorce (Amato & Cheaddle, 2005; Spruijt & Kormos, 2010; Hughes, 2005). In the beginning the main focus of research was on the negative consequences. The image that emerged from this early research was that children of divorced parents had more psychological problems, performed less successfully at school, and had more problems finding stable friendships and partners.

More recent research shows that, whilst children can indeed have problems with all the changes that their parents' divorce brings to their lives, most develop well after some time. The differences between children of divorced parents and those whose parents stay together disappears after two years (Hughes, 2005; Buysse et al, 2011).

Children are not solely victims in the divorce of their parents. They are also active in giving meaning to the divorce; they take a position and develop a personal narrative that helps them to go on. The IPOS research (Buysse et al, 2011) shows that children have a lot of resilience - as long as they experience that they **do** matter. In the process of divorce, when parents separate as partners but stay active and connected as parents and give children the feeling that they matter, their children are able to develop well. Children are harmed when parents fight against each other both as partners and as parents. The parents we work with in the 'Children and their divorced fighting parents' project are involved in a relational war that can last many years, full of destruction, revenge, paranoia and demonization. Children caught in the middle of such wars often develop several symptoms (Spruijt & Kormos, 2010). Each year around 3,000 children are harmed in this way.

Financial problems often complicate the dynamic. Both parents can suffer financially after divorce. One parent can refuse to pay alimony or the whole family can go bankrupt because of the escalating legal costs of a continuing, bitter, relational war.

Social and legal context

In the Netherlands, due to several developments, the number of children caught up in the acrimonious divorce of their parents has grown. Prior to 1998 legal authority for children after divorce was assigned to one parent. In most cases authority was given to the mother, who usually already had the central caring role. The legal position for the other parent became less powerful. The most common situation after divorce was for the children to stay with the mother, with a contact arrangement with the father. This created some continuity for the children.

The emancipation of women has produced changes in patterns of child care within families. Since the middle of the last century mothers have started to work outside the home and fathers have begun to be more often at home, sharing the care of their children - although the latter process has been much slower than the participation of women in the workforce. As they became more involved in the care of their children, fathers began to protest against their lack of parental power after divorce... and they were successful. Fathers gained the legal right to see their children and, for the mothers, there was a legal obligation to cooperate with access arrangements.

A successful political lobby by the '*dwaze vaders*' (Fathers 4 Justice) resulted, in 1998, in equal legal power for both parents after divorce. Although Fathers 4 Justice campaigned under the banner of well-being for their children, the consequence of this change in the law is not always beneficial. Where there is one ship with two captains who have decided that they no longer want to live and work together, there is, almost inevitably, a lot of conflict. When the ship is a family there can be arguments about everything concerning the children: structure, family life, schools, sports, division of days for care, finances, anniversaries, holidays, celebrations, and so on. There is plenty of scope for vicious dispute around every

change, as well as for distrust about the behaviour of the other parent when the children are with them.

Couples do not split up for no reason. There is often a long period of unhappiness and, sometimes, intense hostility preceding the decision to divorce. The fear of parents, usually misguided, is that the other parent will hurt the children, in the same way as they themselves feel hurt. They are convinced they have to fight against the other parent for the sake of the children; because they love their children they have to rescue them from the other parent's bad behaviour and, if they stop fighting, they will be abandoning them.

Such long, fierce battles became a growing concern to many of the professionals confronted with the pain of children caught up in these situations and they asked for the introduction of legislation to better protect children from their fighting parents. This resulted, in 2009, in a new law that has obliged parents to make a good parental plan before they are allowed to legally divorce. The unintended consequence of this legislation is that the relational war is now situated even closer to the children.

Cottyn (2009) argues that this process could be improved by re-framing it as a re-organisation of parenthood, a transformation into a new phase. She suggests that the conflicts can be framed as conflicts around reorganisation, instead of who does right and who does wrong. However, parents who demonise each other are likely to keep fighting, no matter how these processes are framed.

The dynamic of fighting divorces

Many love relationships start with romantic expectations. The other will always love me, understand me, listen to me, share with me, accept me as I am, give me the feeling that I matter. Most people can handle the normal frustrations that arise when the reality of the relationship diverges from the romantic dream. Many couples can repair the rifts in their relationship and adapt to frustrations, but in some cases these adaptations do not occur,

There are a multitude of different factors that can lead to a failure of tolerance of frustration. When one partner doesn't listen, fails to understand or is angry this can be felt by the other as a personal attack that calls for a defensive response. This defence reaction can take many forms, but is interpreted by the other as reproach and attack. This pattern of attack and defence can escalate (van Lawick, 2008) and destructive patterns can become so dominant that they colour the whole relationship. Both partners feel misunderstood and unloved.

Psychological injuries dating back to childhood often resonate in these processes; the hope was that the partner would understand and heal the pain, not add to it. When the other partner is also hurt and frustrated each tries to convince the other of their 'wrong' behaviour. This can escalate into a destructive process where both partners, utilising all possible strategies, try to convince the other about their own 'rightness'. The other is now defined as a human being that fails relationally... "and that has to change!". He or she can be seen as a 'monster', a 'demon', and the perpetrator of wrongs of which the other partner is a victim.

Alon & Omer (2006) connect these demonization processes with an inability to accept 'the tragedy of life'. The dominant illusion is that we can create a happy life with a loving relationship that gives us what we need; enough money, attractive children that develop well, satisfying work, holidays and good friends. When this doesn't happen explanations for the difficulties are sought, in order that they can be eliminated or alleviated. For example, when children do not develop as expected an explanation is sought in a pathological label that leads to good treatment and a solution to the problem. Similarly, with relational difficulties a cause is sought in order to eliminate or alleviate the problem.

The opposite of demonization is acceptance of the fact that life can bring both joy and frustration. Life is never only cheerful, satisfying, prosperous and changeable. It is also sad,

unsatisfying, frustrating and unchangeable. With great perseverance one tries to create a life as it should be, to control life and to control the others. In escalating destructive processes there is no space for accepting the tragedy of life and these processes, instead, lead to solitude, desolation, sometimes to a new relationship that could diminish the feelings of abandonment, and often to divorce.

One should not be surprised that the same symmetrical destructive fights continue after divorce. When lawyers, child advocates, mediators and judges ask for a good, child friendly parental plan, the necessary negotiations for this plan will show the same intensive fighting as happened before the separation. Parents act in the conviction that they have to protect their children from harm perpetrated by the other partner. They suppose the children will feel as abandoned, controlled, maltreated or abused as they themselves felt in the couple relationship. Parents have to protect their children against that 'demon' and will sacrifice more and more during the fight; money, family relations, health, sleep, time, holidays, housing, friends. The more that is invested the more intensive the fighting. The idea that it could all be for nothing is unbearable.

Parents that demonise each other make their children sad, angry and, above all, anxious. An anxious child seeks comfort and protection, but the parents that should comfort and protect them are the source of their disquiet. The child therefore has to stand alone or find other, safe recourses. Brothers and sisters can sometimes fulfil that need.

Children can also become involved in the parents' fight by becoming an ally for one, or by trying to mediate and help both. Other family members and friends can also become embroiled in the relational war. New partners can be of great influence. Often they are an ally of their new partner and add to the demonisation of the ex-partner.

The child that doesn't want to make a choice between parents is torn apart, but cannot express this painful experience. If he or she does express their pain it can easily become ammunition in the parents' battles, adding to the child's distress and the parents' mutually destructive behaviour. As a consequence many children develop symptoms. They can be angry and oppositional, or silent and sad. Their inner balance is disrupted, resulting in sleeping, concentration or, eating problems, or other psychiatric symptoms, like conversion. These children are often referred to the child mental health field, but these professionals cannot do much when the context of the child's distress does not change.

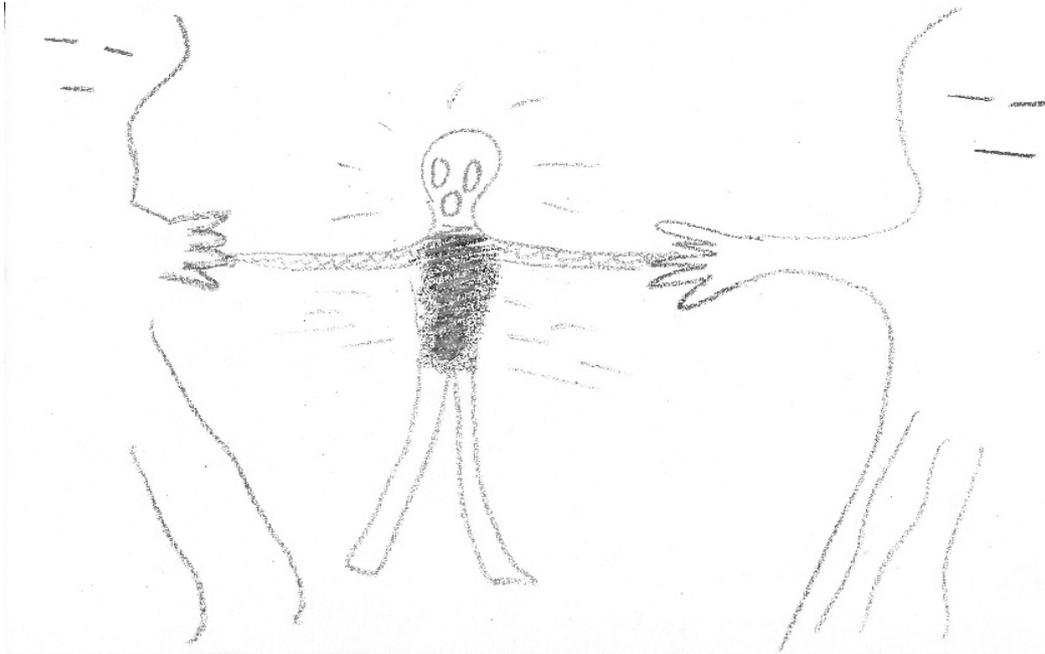
In the 'Children and their divorced fighting parents' project we try to find new roads, that create a context for movement out of deadlock for these families. We try to create a space where rigid, destructive processes can be made more flexible for both parents, children and the professionals who work with them.

The project

Starting points

To witness violence between their parents has already been recognised as child maltreatment. The long drawn-out, acrimonious divorce of fighting parents can also be seen as child maltreatment. Many of those involved, privately and professionally, are greatly concerned about children caught up in these relational wars. Often child protection or other organisations are active, but when families enter our project the destructive patterns and the connected child maltreatment are still going on. Indeed, the war has often worsened over time.

One child drew this:



The child is hanging between the parents, with no ground to stand on. All his senses are wide open and his drawing resembles 'The Scream' by Edvard Munch. The parents both pull at their child and he is being torn apart, yet they do not perceive what they are doing and seem to be blind and deaf. They are locked in on themselves and do not sense him. This is one of the most emotionally charged and shocking images I have ever received from a child.

Such images illustrate the urgent need to create a context where the child maltreatment can stop; where parents sense their children again and are able to make a safe place for them. It is not an optional context. These situations demand a therapeutic presence. We cannot accept that children are maltreated for years. We want to connect to the parents and accept them, but we reject their destructive behaviour. We try to facilitate parents' rediscovery of their qualities as parents that see, hear and feel their children. We try to create space where they can team up as parents, even though they no longer want to be partners. This starting point is not negotiable:

Co-parenting means working together in one way or another.

We want to create a space where parents can be a team in a way that fits them and their situation.

Co-parenting, however, is harmful for the child when the parents are not able to work together, or when one or both of them is caught up in personal problems, like addiction. In such circumstances, a safer place for children to live and develop may need to be created, either in the context of one of the parents becoming the central parent with legal power, or by placing the children in a home with family members that love them and are not caught up in the fight. Such arrangements, however, must be regarded as exceptions when all other possibilities fail.

Cottyn (2009) takes another stand. She advocates the possibility of parallel solo parenthood. A systemic therapist, working with one of the parents, can invite this parent to reflect on the situation for the children in order to stimulate different behaviour. We think this would be very difficult with the destructive and demonising group we work with in this project, and could create a situation where the child has to create the bridge between the parents.

Working in groups.

For this project we chose to work in groups; a parents' group and a children's group. At the *Lorentzhuis* we have the experience of many couple groups to build upon. Likewise the *KJTC*, the centre for child and juvenile trauma, has worked for many years with parent groups and groups of children. Group working with fighting parents allows more space for both the therapists and the parents. Ex- partners can observe other ex-partners fighting, whilst observing their own conflicts at the same time. This invites and encourages them to reflect, and reflection is what is missing in a demonising fight. Therapists are also able to adopt a different position. Instead of a possible ally for two fighting parents, the therapist can become the involved and observing outsider who tries to create a safe therapeutic context where change becomes possible.

In a group context parents are able to help each other. They understand the entanglements of the other parents. With common conflicts, around holidays, for example, they can see possibilities where other get stuck, and, while helping the other members of the group, they help themselves and often become more flexible. This frees the therapist from the expectation that it is solely their role to help find solutions for the 'insoluble' problems presented by members of the group.

Another advantage is that group members inspire each other to move from previously entrenched positions. For example, when two parents start to change and talk about new solutions and possibilities, and about the effect this is having on their children - how they are more relaxed and sleeping better -, others feel inspired to do the same. Faced with examples of what may be possible they may also want to move forward. This frees the therapist from having to motivate parents to move from their rigid positions.

Finally, a group approach diminishes the chance that the therapist will take a 'colonising position' (Rober & Selzer, 2010), in which the therapist attempts to change the clients according to personal or professional theories and ideas.

The main goal for the group is, however, a constant. Parents are invited to form a better team, but the road to this end, and the steps that can be taken towards it are open. As therapists we take the position of curiosity, and openness for the unexpected. We choose to "walk with our clients in the landscape of possibilities" (Wilson, 2007)

Organisation and planning

We work with four families at a time. Eight parents (four ex-couples) work with two therapists and, at the same time, all their children work with two therapists in a different room

in the same building. There are six sessions of three hours, with a break half way, for both groups. Simultaneous parent and child sessions minimise the risk of ‘drop out’ or ‘no show’ due to of baby sitting problems. Simultaneous sessions also create space where parents and children come together and meet before the sessions, during the breaks and at the end. For many families this is the first time in years that the family has met.

The central focus in the parental group is better teamwork. For the children, because psychotherapy has been found not to work well as long as the context of fighting parents stays the same, we searched for a format that could stimulate their resilience. We chose art. The children are encouraged to make a theatre production or movie around the topic of their fighting parents, or choose some other artistic expression. The aim is to invite them to enter the metaphorical world of imagination, where they can express themselves without being caught in their personal pain. By means of metaphorical expression their voice can be heard and their resilience stimulated.

The intake

In our experience getting as far as the intake of a group is a time consuming enterprise. Many parents are reluctant to attend and legal pressure from judges or child protection services is quite often necessary to ensure that parents arrive at the intake to the project. Pressure on the parents to co-operate is often exerted by youth care and child protection services, in order to avoid more serious measures having to be taken to protect the children. All parents have to be willing to come to the intake session together. At the same time the children meet the child therapists that are going to work with them.

At the intake the therapists share information about the project, explain how the group is going to work together and what the children are going to do. They also talk about privacy, protection and safety. The parents are encouraged to ask questions. They also have to agree to help us with their intention of becoming a better team for the sake of their children. This is the fundamental ground on which we can work to try to find a less destructive space.

When both parents express their willingness to become a better team we ask them what they think could be the greatest obstacles and the best possibilities on the route to this goal. We discourage long stories about history and pain and encourage parents to express their first impression, mainly of the possibilities that are still there. Children stay central at all times.

We also ask about new partners and the relationship between the new partner and the children, and the new partner’s relationship with the old partner. Although this is often a painful and difficult part of the session, it became very clear, after two groups, that the involvement of new partners – live or indirect – is an essential part of the therapeutic process and cannot be avoided. New partners are often frustrated by the on-going fights and frequently blame the ex partner. In one case a session between the former and the new wife of a father was part of the intake. In this session we created a space where communication between the two women could take place. This had never happened before and was an important element of the impasse between the two ex-partners. It was easier to stimulate understanding between the two women than we had expected and also made the new wife support the project.

Another important topic covered in the intake is our condition that the parents stop all legal processes during the project. We express our hope that, by attending the project, they will find other ways to solve their problems, rather than resorting to lawyers and judges. It became clear how many legal processes and trials these parents go through and how much these add to the destructive patterns of behaviour and demonisation. Sometimes, however, legal processes cannot be stopped. In these circumstances we ask that the parents accept the outcome and not start new trials.

We also ask about addiction or other problems that may interfere with the therapeutic process. If this is a problem we refer the client to addiction care before they enter this project.

At the end of the session we ask the parents to fill in a questionnaire aimed at measuring the extent of the demonization. This questionnaire was developed by Hans Bom, together with the project team, and is a work in progress. We aim to publish further information in a future article.

The child therapists have an intake with the children at the same time as their parents. All the children involved in the fighting relationship can participate. We have had children from 4 to 16 years of age, some of whom had psychiatric diagnoses, including ADHD, autism, conversion disorder, anxiety disorder, post traumatic stress disorder and oppositional disorder. Former treatments had often not helped in diminishing the symptoms these children were experiencing. Some children, however, presented as 'ideal' and 'perfect'; well adapted at school and at home. The children's group aims for a presentation consisting of artistic expressions, so there is space for all these different children. Social behaviour is, of course, promoted, and destructive behaviour discouraged and controlled.

We undertook six intakes for the first group in the project. Two families were unable to participate because they could not meet our conditions and four families, eight parents and eight children between four and twelve years, joined.

A tricky, but important element was our condition to stop all legal proceedings. All the couples were still involved in lawsuits about parenthood, alimony, possession issues or accusations of one against another. When they arrived at the intake they showed us big files full of documents to "prove that I am right" ("I have all the evidence with me") and it was difficult to convince them to stop these proceedings. For some of the couples the verdict was only a couple of days away and we were able to agree that, during the project, they would not appeal the verdicts. Our most compelling argument in support of our insistence on this condition of entry into the project is that we have never seen an improvement in the relationship between parent and child as the result of a court case. The stress that comes with legal procedures seem to worsen and 'freeze' relationships rather than improve them. In the group we aim for space to 'defreeze'. Going to court at the same time is a contradiction.

For one of the families insistence on this condition proved decisive. Shortly after breaking up, the father of this family moved in with his new love and her children. An argument erupted when the children went from the father to the mother. The mother pushed the father. He fell and she pulled her daughter into the car. The father then pressed charges of assault and child abuse. The police, the hotline domestic violence unit and child abuse services became involved. The fighting between the parents went from bad to worse and the daughter decided that she did not want to live with her mother anymore. Help was recruited, but none of the professionals involved could break the deadlock. During the intake interview the mother was told that the charges of assault and abuse were still being pressed. She was shocked. She thought that because she was co-operating with everything the charges would be dropped. After we had explained our conditions of entry into the project the father agreed to drop the charges. He also encouraged his daughter to visit her mother again and dialogue between these two parents started.

This couple proved to be of great value to the group. They were already on the right track and demonstrated that it was possible to break through entrenched, destructive patterns of behaviour. They were an inspiration to the other parents to do the same for the sake of their children.

The break room

A room where the families could come together without the presence of therapists turned out to be very important. A lot happened in the minutes before the group sessions started, during the break and after the session. Sometimes changed start to happen in this room, and other areas away from the therapists, rather than in the therapy sessions. An example:

Two ex-partners accidentally parked their cars next to each other, at the same time. Because of this their 7 year old son saw his parents together for the first time in ages. Excited, he jumped out of his mother's car to hug his father. After this he jumped up and down, circling his parents as they walked towards the Lorentzhuis. Moved by the happiness of their son, the parents looked at each other. For the first time in years it was a look of compassion, rather than the look of hate that they had got to know so well in court.

The group of parents

We developed a script to act as a frame-work for the group sessions, although, there was always room to deviate from the frame-work in response to what happened during the session. We started every session with an exercise to focus the parents' attention. There are many examples of meditation and mindfulness to be found in books (Kabat-Zinn, 2000). The aim is for people to learn to point their attention towards their breathing and body. In the beginning, the parents often found this way of working strange, but soon the exercises became normal, and at the end everyone appreciated that this start brought a moment of peace and concentration in an otherwise tense and restless situation.

Themes addressed in the parent group sessions were:

- children as the centre of attention
- breaking through destructive patterns
- acknowledging and validating the parenting of both mother and father
- reconciliation and acceptance of the tragedy, and
- searching for and discovering new solutions for complex problems.

Children as the centre of attention

In the first session we asked the parents to bring a picture of their child or children. Everyone put their picture on the wall and, as a first activity, we asked them to tell a story about a good experience they have had with their child(ren); something that happened recently or longer ago. This provided a positive start. Everyone was able to present themselves as a good parent and witness a positive image of the other parents. The tension reduced, and there was room for laughter and recognition. In subsequent sessions we kept referring to the children, and the pictures were a constant reminder.

In the next session we conducted an exercise aimed at getting the parents to place themselves in the position of their children. We put two little chairs, back to back, in the centre of the room. Two parents (not a couple) sat in these chairs. We asked them to imagine themselves as a child (they could choose a name and age) and to concentrate on what happened to their bodies and how they felt during the rest of the exercise. The rest of the group divided into two opposite lines. They were asked to shout accusations at each other across the room, while the two 'children' sat silently in the middle. At the beginning of the exercise the participants were a bit shy, so the therapists helped them out by starting to shout random accusations to the other side. After a while the parents found it easy to come up with a big range of their own:

“You are only thinking of yourself!”,

“You just want all the money!”,

“ After being with you, the children are impossible!”
 “You never keep your promises. Do you even know what that means for the little one!”
 “You’re lying!”
and so on.

What happened to the two people sitting on the children’s chairs in the centre of all of this was truly impressive. Some became white as a ghost, others started to cry, as if they suddenly realised what it must be like for their children. They knew, better than we expected, how to describe what they were feeling as the child:

“Stop it!”
 “I can’t choose.”
 “I want to get out of here.”
 “I don’t wanna be here!”
 “I’m scared.”
 “I’m going to cry.”
 “You don’t see me.”
 “You’re not at all concerned about me.”
 “I want it to stop.”
 “ I’m getting angry.”
 “Everything hurts...”

We made a poster of their statements.

This exercise often proves to be transforming. Afterwards the group was nearly silent. Inner reflection had started.

In every session we continually asked:

“What does this mean for the children?”

When parents started to fight, we started a dialogue about the meaning of this for the children. When they raised their voices we asked, aloud, if the children, working on the floor above us, could hear us and what they would think and feel, or we referred to one of the pictures. The children were always kept at the centre.

Destructive patterns

Just as in other partner groups, the first thing we wanted to achieve with the project’s group was to break through destructive patterns of behaviour. Only after this, is there room for reconciliation and team building.

We began by explaining the destructive patterns in which couples can be imprisoned. After this each couple prepared a poster, with examples of their own destructive patterns illustrated with concrete statements and symbols - such as a bottle of wine. These posters were then presented and discussed. This produced a lot of recognition, but also opened up possibilities of changing the pattern.

With the project’s first group we thought that it would not be a good idea to let ex-partners make a poster together and came up with an alternative approach. All the men would make a poster together about their share in the destructive patterns; all the things they said or did to start or maintain these patterns. The women would do the same about their share and the therapists would walk around between the two groups. It was a disaster!

The men immediately took on the role of ‘lobby of the foolish fathers’:

“Women think that children are theirs alone and everyone, the whole society, supports them.”

“ Mothers keep children from fathers and no one can change this, not fathers, lawyers, judges or guardians.”

“ Even you (the therapists) assume that when two people fight, two people are wrong. But really, it’s quite different. The women are the ones who are wrong and we have a lot of examples to prove this!”

The men refused to look at their own share in the destructive processes. They refused to show the pain they felt because they missed the love of their children. They blamed everything outside themselves - mainly their exes. The one who was to blame, the demon, was obviously sitting in the other room.

In the women’s group the same thing happened. One woman said to the therapist:

“I understand what you meant when you explained about destructive communication, with blaming each other with the same words as always, when it is never actually black and white. It brings you nowhere. I’ve tried to explain this to him so many times but he will not listen!, I tried to explain. I get so sad when he does this aggressive communication, but he still does it and so on!

Both groups blamed the other parent, the other sex. Reflection was further hindered by their colluding in one position: the other one is wrong and is spoiling all my efforts to make things right.

As therapists we were dismayed and felt we had failed. We were afraid we had made things worse. We therefore decided to take a different approach. Rather than getting the parents to examine and discuss the destructive processes in their own relationships, we would prepare a presentation about what happens to us in all the different groups we are involved in. This approach gave us some space to tell them how we felt, how we felt the pain and the inability of both sides to build a bridge.

In our therapeutic dialogue we used language that was not blaming, we expressed our shock at experiencing how dominant the destructive patterns were and how the parents were imprisoned in them. We discussed with them how they might want to watch and observe when they get caught in these patterns at home. We hinted that if they did, they might then be able to stop the repetition of destructiveness... or maybe do something differently? This dialogue between the therapists allowed the parent to be an observer and reflect on their own situation. We invited, rather than compelled their participation, and in a group like this it is important to avoid coercion. Compulsion supports destructive patterns.

We discovered that there had been an unexpected positive response to this change of approach in the following session:

There was a dialogue between Eve and her dad:

“Dad, I love you.”

“I love you too dear.”

“Dad, please don’t be angry when I tell you that I sometimes miss mum when I stay with you.”

“Of course I am not angry at you dear.”

During this exchange the last session of the group passes through the father’s mind and he thinks...maybe I could do something different?

“Do you want to give your mum a call and talk to her?”

Eve is happy and gets her mum on the phone. Mother thinks... what’s behind this?... and then the last session passes her mind as well and she thinks... I should behave differently. She reacts positively and asks what nice things she and her dad are doing. Eve is very relieved and is especially relaxed and happy during the weekend with her father.

*When the parents reported this episode and expressed how cheerfully their daughter had reacted they received much acclaim from the group. The mother responded immediately by saying that Eve could go with her father to a family reunion the following month, so that she could see her cousins again. She had previously refused to allow this. The father reacted with non verbal astonishment and uttered:
"Oh, well, thank you."*

These are the small miracles that keep us going with this project!

Reconciliation, by validation and acknowledgement of the parental value of both

Our starting point is that parents have to reconcile as parents. Our inspiration is the South African (SA) 'Truth and Reconciliation Committee', created and led by Desmond Tutu and others (Wilson 2001).

In the majority, black community of SA, after the fall of the apartheid regime, there was huge resentment and a longing for revenge for the injustices and violence of the apartheid years. In order to build a space where the people of SA, both black and white, could begin to construct a safe and flourishing society, Desmond Tutu created the rituals of 'Truth and Reconciliation'. The people who had co-operated in murdering or injuring black rebels and their families, in Soweto for instance, went on trial. They were asked to acknowledge what they had done and the pain they had caused, When they were able to do this and could express their sorrow, shame and regret, they were confronted with their victims, or family members of the dead. They had to express their guilt and repentance to them. When this 'truth' had been acknowledged, reconciliation could begin to happen.

Antje Krog (2006) wrote about an impressive ritual where a mother was able to reconcile with the murderer of her son. This mother realised that this man was only able to kill because he had lost his humanity. 'She understood that a perpetrator could regain his humanity through her reconciliation, and that reconciliation could also give back her own possibility to be fully human' (Krog, 2006, p. 19). Realisation and understanding enabled this mother to stop the demonization of her son's killer, even in this extreme situation. We concluded that if a mother was able to reconcile with the murderer of her son, ex partners should also be able to reconcile. We therefore developed a 'ritual' which we hoped would encourage this to happen.

We divided the parents into two groups for a 30 minute exercise, ensuring the 'subjects' of the exercise, one pair of ex partners, were in different groups. In each group the 'ritual' was the same. One ex partner was invited to express, in 10 minutes, their pain about the other parent, with concrete examples and situations. One of the other parents took notes. After this the same parent was invited to think about the pain their ex partner could have mentioned in the other group for a further 10 minutes. We assumed that they would know about the pain of the other after their prolonged fighting. In the last 10 minutes they were asked which of the grievances of the other could be acknowledged and what acts of reconciliation could be possible. The other members of the group were invited to help. After 30 minutes the two groups joined together with the two ex partners who had been the subject of each group in the middle. These two ex partners were then encouraged to express their acknowledgment and possible acts of reconciliation. We supposed this could enlarge the space to stop the demonisation processes. The reality was totally different!

As we, the therapists, observed the two groups we came to understand how little realisation and understanding the subjects of each group had of the main relational injuries of their ex partner. While the mother talked about forced sex and maltreatment, the father thought she would talk about his being late for appointments and not paying enough; while he talked about her withholding his child and the pain of not seeing his son for a long time, she

thought he would talk about losing his status and about the fact that her parents hadn't contacted him after the divorce. Before, during and after divorce these parents had told many people about the terrible behaviour and pain inflicted by the other partner, the perpetrator, and had presented themselves as the victim. Their narratives were a mix of pain before the divorce and hurt afterwards. Our ritual brought these stories to life again and re-opened old wounds. We had released old genii from their bottles and, to our dismay, were unable to put them back again. Parents screamed, cursed, cried, or walked away. The opposite of what we had hoped for!

After this session we were shocked and emotionally drained, and we felt ashamed. Later we understood where we had gone wrong. In South Africa there are two different positions; a perpetrator and a victim. The victim can initiate the reconciliation and, after the ritual they do not have to work together. For the parents in our group the situation is different. They are both perpetrator and victim and they have to work together as parents after they reconcile. Both want to enlarge the bad behaviour of the other and minimise their own destructive contributions. However, they share their children and the future of their children and grandchildren. We learned that we should concentrate on their parenthood and the pain they experienced in parenthood. The hurt they felt as a partner had to be tolerated and they needed to ask help from their own network to be able to endure it. In this group we needed to concentrate on parenthood and the children. Our purpose was to invite them to reconcile as parents, not as partners.

In the next session we excused ourselves for creating space for so much pain and asked the parents for help.

“What would be needed for them to be able to reconcile as parents?”

“Did they agree that this was needed as a basis for co-parenting?”

“Did they have any ideas?”

This approach created a lot of movement. A father stated that it maybe wasn't so bad that the genii were out of their bottles as the bottles needed to be cleaned anyway! When group members asked about his own, particular, evil genii he talked about his pain about the lack of close contact with his ten year old daughter, Lisa.

On three occasions he had not seen Lisa for a period of months because her mother kept her away. She had left him six years previously and had immediately moved, with Lisa, into her parent's home. For him, the separation was completely unexpected and he had reacted with sadness, anger and confusion. He didn't see his daughter for four months.

When he started to see his daughter again the usual close relationship he had had with her had disappeared. It was as if they no longer felt at ease with each other and this was very painful. The mother interpreted the uneasiness as proof that contact with her father wasn't good for Lisa and she kept her from going to him for two more periods of three to four months. She also refused to let Lisa leave for holidays with her father, together with his new wife and her children. Legal trials and intervention from guardians didn't alter the situation.

In the group we focussed on his pain as father and his sadness about the loss of the natural father/daughter father contact - sharing daily activities, fetching her from school, helping with her homework, quarrelling, laughing together. With tears in his eyes he told us that he often felt more at ease with the children of his new wife than with his own daughter. He and his new wife began to think that there may even be something was wrong with Lisa; maybe a disorder in the spectrum of autism. When Lisa's mother repeatedly claimed that Lisa was totally normal, social and happy when she was with her it was as if she refused to admit that anything had gone wrong, or acknowledge the pain of the faltering father daughter relationship.

The group and the therapists could listen to the father and acknowledge his pain and sorrow. After a short silence Lisa mother said:

"Maybe I was wrong to keep Lisa from going to you. You were so confused and emotional at that time. Lisa said that she didn't want to go and that she was afraid of you emotions. I was afraid too. I didn't trust you with her. Maybe that was wrong. I understand now that that was very painful for you."

He was surprised, and said:

"That's the first time you have ever said so."

She went on:

"I do understand that you want to share daily activities with Lisa. Maybe you can collect her from school on Friday when she is with you that weekend, and if you want to be with her till Monday so that you can bring her to school and have contact with other parents, school, teachers...that's fine with me."

It was touching to see the face of the man change. Until then we, as therapists, had experienced him as a rigid, selfish, domineering man. Now he showed a soft and open face, his voice changed and he seemed a totally different person.

Moving out of deadlock

Focussing on reconciliation as parents was not successful for all, and we decided to work differently with two groups – those that were able to reconcile and those that weren't – in order to help them move forward and deal with deadlocked situations.

With the group that had been able to reconcile we collected an example of a complex, conflict situation one set of parents were experiencing and asked the other group members to help them find a solution. For example, planning summer holidays is often problematic and two families reported difficulties with this. Although demonization had diminished, the fights around holidays could easily escalate. In one case the father and mother had both taken time off work during the same three weeks and the group was able to help them find a solution they could both agree to.

After 30 minutes roles were changed and the first parents helped another set of parents with a conflict they had been unable to resolve. Through helping others these parents helped themselves and started to become more flexible in their own conflicts. By working with others they began to realise the benefits of moving towards greater flexibility and began to see how destructive rigid positioning is.

We worked with the parents that weren't able to reconcile, because their pain and hurt were too massive, in another room. These parents were invited to tell us about their hopes and dreams:

"Suppose a miracle happened and you were able to work more as a team, what would it look like?"

"How would the children react?"

"What changes would you perceive?"

One father was full of dreams and anxious to express them. He dreamt about co-parenting; that the children would live with him half of the time, that he could be a father and that his ex would stop seeing him as a monster and influencing the children to think of him in the same way. Another group member responded to this father's dream by saying that he was missing a central part; he had heard the father dream about himself, not about the well being of the children. He had 'hit the nail on the head'!

"Yes of course", the father uttered, "...that they are happy and develop well..."

The mother said she couldn't dream because she couldn't imagine her ex acting as a good father and accepting his children as they are. There were long silences in her speech....

“...if I had to think the impossible, that my ex had changed into a good father, then I would still never be willing to let the children stay with him half of the time... maybe one weekend day in two weeks...”

“Unacceptable” shouted the father.

These two parents had been fighting for eight years. Their dreams had become part of the fights. The drawing earlier in this chapter could be from one of their children.

The children’s group

In the last session the movie of the children’s theatrical production is shown to the parents. First some information about the children’s group.

The intake

In the intake we met each child to tell them about the way the group would work and about the theatrical production we were going to help them make. We made it clear that all the children in the group had divorced parents that fight and that we knew that many children suffer as a consequence. We told them that we wanted to make a production with them, a play and a movie, on this theme. We also made it clear that the production would be shown to their parents.

At this point we gave all the children the same assignment using the ‘three houses’ method (Turnell & Parker, 2009). The children were asked to draw three houses. The first house is the house of worries and in the second house they could portray what they felt was going well. The third house is the house of dreams, where they could put their wishes and longings. Nearly all the children put the fighting parents in the first house, as their biggest worry. When they drew the things that were going well they were able to depict these for both parents, separately. The children’s most common wish was that their parents would stop fighting. One child, in the centre of the eight year war of his parents, said he had no worries, that everything was going well... and that he wished his mother were dead. Then everything would be solved!

The group sessions and the movie

The children met with two therapists at the same time as the parents’ group, who worked on the floor below them. All sessions were filmed and the film was edited for use in the final session with the parents. Unlike the parents’ sessions the children’s group sessions followed the same structure for all but the final session.

Warming up. Each session began with a ‘warm up’ aimed at allowing the children to let go of their daily worries and focus on the topic of the day.

Staging. The children were encouraged to imagine a situation where adult care takers are quarrelling and fighting. They then created a theatrical performance around their thoughts, feelings and experiences of that imagined situation. Their narratives could also address the solutions they find to deal with these kind of situations.

The first group imagined a situation where two teachers shared the same class, but hated each other. One teacher taught the class on Monday and Thursday and the other on Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. They tried to avoid each other as much as possible, but they constantly complained about the each other to the class. On occasions they are forced to come together, either for a school or class celebration or as the result of a misunderstanding about scheduling.

The children acted out situations where the two teachers met before the class and started to fight and scream at each other. They were also encouraged to show how they responded to the fighting. Some children wanted to go away, others became locked up in themselves, some expressed how confused they were, or tried to stop the teachers from fighting. The children were energised by screaming, all together, “STOP IT, STOP IT STOP IT!”

Responses. Using the same kind of theatrical format, the children were then asked to talk about how they felt in the class with the arguing teachers. They were asked to interview each other, for example as a reporter from the television youth journal.

The children expressed their fear in the class room. They didn't feel safe and didn't know what to do when the teachers disagreed. They also started to feel angry;

”What's the point.”

”I couldn't concentrate at all.”

“I can't stand it anymore.” and

”I want to leave the room.”

This last response came from a 9 year old girl who repeatedly ran away from home.

Reflections. The children were invited to reflect and talk about the connections between the play and their own situation with their parents. They talked about feeling powerless, about trying to help the parents to stop fighting, or to like each other again. When talking about the situation at home they also said that that they sometimes thought:

“Stop this... act normally... think of me!”

They could not understand why the parents that they both loved were unable to reconcile.

Wishes. Finally, the children were encouraged to express their wishes for a satisfactory outcome to the battling teachers, and to think of situations that would make it possible for them to stop fighting. They were asked to act out these situations.

Some hoped that the teachers would be able to talk together and reach a better understanding of each other. Others asked for a 'boss' to intervene to force them to co-operate again.

Message for the parents. At the end of the sessions all the children were invited to articulate a wish, directly addressed to the parents. This was recorded at the end of the movie. The children were unanimous.

”Please stop fighting!”.

One boy also added:

”Get on with your life!”

Acting about fighting and possibilities for change appeared to be a rich ground for associations and movement. It was also striking how tired the children often were at the end of the sessions. Sometimes they just wanted to hang around and do nothing for some time. We made sure that was possible!

Finishing and closure

In the last session of the project the movie of the children's production was shown. One of the children's therapists edited the film and the result was a 15 minute movie. The children were shown the movie first, without the parents, in order to prepare and relax them a

little . We also needed to obtain their permission to show this film to the parents and they agreed to this.

Whilst the children were viewing the film and preparing we talked with the parents. We asked that they support the children as much as possible because they were in a vulnerable position. We also asked them to concentrate on themselves while watching the movie; how it made them feel, what was happening inside them.

The show took place in the space where the children had worked. They had set the room up in theatre style, with rows of chairs. It was touching to see how the children cared for both parents: “Here is a chair for you mum; dad you can sit here.” When they sat on the lap of one parent they tried to stroke and touch the other parent.

While the movie was showing there was absolute silence and the atmosphere was tense. Stress was obvious on the children’s faces and they watched the reactions their parents more than they watched movie. At the end the therapists started to applaud and the parents joined in. The children were relieved and finished their session with games and relaxation.

The parents went back to their own room...and were silent. The silence lasted minutes. When the tension in the room became too high the therapists said to each other: I didn’t expect this, what about you? How can we understand this silence? One father uttered he found it rather difficult to see all the children ask them to stop fighting. Another father said he thought it was ‘bull–shit’, that his son didn’t really show himself and that he had also said, at home, that he thought the group was not much good anyway. A dialogue within the group then started and it became clear how much shame was felt during the movie and how difficult it was for them to find words for this shame.

Finally, we asked all the parents if they felt that they could continue without help or if they wished for more support or therapy. One family thought they could continue without further help. Another father said that he had developed a ‘Ghandi attitude’, a non violent response, and that he had, very definitely, decided not to get stuck in the attack–defence pattern again. He thought that this would keep lawyers and therapists out of his family. Although his wife felt that she wanted more help she was willing to give it a chance and felt that there had been a major change for the better in their situation. The third couple could also identify a beneficial change, but both felt they needed more professional support and expressed a need for some more sessions. The father subsequently started in a parent child program to make the relationship with his daughter better, and his new partner was invited to attend so that she could add her support to any new possibilities that emerged. The fourth family was, unfortunately, still caught up in destructive patterns. A session, with them and all the involved professionals, was planned.

At the end of the project we asked all the parents to fill in the demonization questionnaire again. The main outcome was that they still didn’t like each other, but they were now able to focus focussed more on their own behaviour and what they could do to make things better. The demonization had reduced. We intend to study this in more detail.

Conclusions

Many professional helpers get caught up in the destructive communications of fighting, divorced parents. Working with groups of these parents seems to be a good way to open space for more listening and understanding, and less destruction. Therapists may also have more space in a group and feel more freedom to express themselves, or, at times, to keep back. Working with these families can be emotionally burdensome. The therapists in the project were often exhausted after the sessions.

Putting children and their future in the centre of attention is crucial in stopping demonising processes and making space for more reflection and reconciliation as parents. Attention for the new partner also appears to be important.

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