

## Personality of the Preschool Child in Post-Divorce Situation

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**SUMMARY:** *The article contains the results of a study of 152 six-year-old children of whom 76 experienced parental divorce and 76 from complete and non-conflictive families. The aim of presented study was to determine if the personalities of the six-year-olds disclosed any characteristics that would have a connection with the experience of parental divorce. The results indicate distinctive tendencies termed "divorce syndrome" which has decisive effects on further negative development of personality toward self-defence and misadaption. This occur only marginally in children from complete and non-conflictive families.*

### **Introduction**

The problem of "divorce versus personality" can be dealt with within the "cause and effect" paradigm. This paradigm contains a hypothesis which says that parental divorce is an incident of great importance in a child's life and may bring about changes in its personality.

Research in this area has often provided science with data on the correlation between the child's experience of parental divorce and aberrations in social adjustment. Data has also been furnished on the related disorders in establishing contact with peers and adults, emotional aberrations, neurotic reactions, lack of academic success (at school), and at a later stage - criminal inclinations (cf. Jaśnińska 1987, Jarosz 1979, Kostuj 1980, Sochaczewska 1982, Bolechowska 1983, Kaja 1987). The results of the researches, however, did not always correspond with the set hypothesis.

M. M. Thomas (1968) investigated children's personal standards and obtained very interesting results. He did not find any difference between the desires of children from complete and split families.

Some researchers (Burchinal 1964) suppose that divorce does not, as it is usually presumed, have too deep effect on a child's behaviour and development. It seems worth noticing at this point that there are exist situations where divorce may assume a positive value. The reason for this is that both marriage and divorce constitute normative standards which display cultural and subcultural variation, which in turn depends upon social changes. One cannot deny that very often the same norms that keep a marriage intact are simultaneously a source of suffering for the entire family, especially for the child. In a situation where the pre-divorce conflicts (which may even endanger lives of the family member's) have a traumatic effect on the child's psyche, the father's departure terminates the prolonged stress and brings relief. Thus divorce may acquire a positive value.

Much more often, however, divorce will lead to trauma. Landis (1960) enumerates seven trauma-causing factors connected with divorce: 1) the need to adjust to the possibility of a divorce, 2) the need to adjust to the divorce, 3) the likelihood of the child being exploited by one or both parents as a weapon against each other - both before and after divorce, 4) the need to change attitudes towards parents, 5) the need to readjust in the peer group as a child of divorced parents, 6) the realization of parents' failure in marriage and its implications, 7) the need to adjust to the new relationships that parents might eventually develop.

When the above mentioned issue is analyzed in terms of what Tomaszewski (1980) calls a difficult situation, we may say that the divorce-situation bears the features of a deprivation-situation. The child's standard of living deteriorates and his needs for recognition and security are left unfulfilled. The situation is undoubtedly a conflictive one - the child may experience cognitive dissonance facing the problem of whether to love or not to love the parent who left the family - and it also may contain elements of an endangerment-situation. This situation is the result of fear of losing one of the parents, etc.

Łukaszewski (1984) discusses the problem of the so-called barriers in the development of personality. Of course, not all barriers appear in a divorce-situation, though the barrier of indoctrination is a frequent one. Indoctrination should be understood here as the inculcation of certain beliefs upon a person by means of repetition and persuasion without making any efforts to rationally justify these beliefs. In the worst case of a divorce-situation both parents use this tactic and as a result the child experiences cognitive dissonance. It may also happen so that the parent with whom the child stays indoctrinates him against the other parent.

The divorce-situation is also favourable for the formation of a manipulation barrier. In extreme cases, manipulation means that the manipulator (parent) tries to convince the manipulated (child) that the condition for achieving his (manipulated's) goals is the realization of the goals of the manipulator. Many a time the child becomes an "instrument" in the hands of the parent who exploits him for meeting his

divorce-connected ends. Sometimes the child may also become the "extended arm of law" and may even provoke further court sentences.

It is generally believed that parental divorce is most traumatic for preadolescent children. It might, however, be interesting to find out if the experience of parental divorce has any impact on the personality of a preschool child. The theory about the importance of childhood experiences for the development of personality has been proven again and again since the time of Freud (cf. Obuchowska 1976). M. Chlopkiewicz (1980), however, proposes an alternative theory. The author believes that the instability of a child's psyche gives access to factors that neutralize the effects of negative influences. On the other hand, the problems that a child faces are a new experience to it. Therefore, the early negative experience, "does not deform the personality in any major way", and it need not necessarily have, "unequivocally negative consequences" (Chlopkiewicz 1980: 302). According to the above-quoted author the structure of personality cannot be damaged because at that time it is still in the process of being formed. The author adds that personality develops in a positive evolutionary way of overcoming all difficulties and creates a possibility of solving them. "Traces of experienced tension may find themselves entwined into the personality in a constructive way; they may be dominated or neutralized by newly developing structures and dynamism" (ibid.).

The above view is a very optimistic one. Difficult situations undoubtedly harden a person and make him immune. The elimination of such situations would certainly not be advisable and may be even harmful, but if one considered the problem from Chlopkiewicz's experiences had no greater effect upon the development of a person, Does this imply that the divorce-situation does bear any negative impact upon the personality of a child? I hope that the following study will provide at least a partial answer to this question.

## **Method**

The study involved 152 six-year-old children from a number of kindergartens in the city of Bydgoszcz, Poland. Two comparative groups were studied: one included 76 children who had experienced parental divorce, while the control group consisted of an equal number of children coming from complete and non-conflictive families.

The aim of the study was to determine if the personalities of the six-year-olds disclosed any characteristics that would have a connection with the experience of parental divorce. If so, then these characteristics would occur only marginally in children from complete families.

In the study, parental divorce constituted the main independent variable. The secondary independent variables were: age of the child at the time of parental divorce (this variable had two operational values: 0-3 and 3-6 years old), the extent of

emotional trauma caused by parental divorce and the child's sex. The family's social status was also taken into account but no basic difference between both groups was found in this aspects.

The personality of the six-year-olds was the dependent variable. Reykowski's regulatory (interactive) theory of personality (Reykowski, Kochańska 1980) served as a basis for theoretical and methodological analyses in the study. The two main aspects of the study are the processes of attitude formation and instrumental of processes (Reykowski 1977). Regulatory processes of attitude formation were evaluated on the basis of diagnosing the levels of self-esteem (the structure of "self"), attitude towards parents, peers and adults (Value Network), demonstration of desires: material, emotional or connected with personal success (Value Network and Operational Network). The level of instrumental processes, however, was evaluated through an analysis of tasks fulfilled by the child. The tasks were of perceptual, intellectual and executive character (Operational Network) and were associated with the syllabus of the kindergarten.

The following hypotheses were to be verified:

1. There is a correlation between the experience of a divorce-situation and the development of a child's personality. The six-year-olds who experienced parental divorce will differ from their peers coming from complete families with regard to the formation of attitudes. No differences are expected in the instrumental processes.
2. The consequences of a divorce-situation are related to the child's age at the time of parental divorce and to his sex.
3. The deeper the trauma caused by parental divorce, the deeper the negative effect it will have on the child's personality.

Following methods were used for the verification of the hypotheses: L. Despert's Story Test, W. Szyryński's Two-Houses Test, Choynowski's KSI (Shortened Scale of Intelligence), Frydrychowicz's version of the Family Picture, B. Kaja's Questionnaire for Testing Self-Esteem<sup>1</sup>, Test for Developmental Achievement (for internal use at Centres for Educational and Professional Consultation), and Questionnaire for Testing the Degree of Emotional Trauma experienced by a child at the time of parental divorce<sup>2</sup>, Test for Desire Selection and Schoefer and Aronson's CBI Questionnaire.

The choice of method was based on the three criteria:

1. Agreement with the study's subject matter,
2. Possibility of supplementing and enriching current knowledge on this topic,
3. Adequacy of the choice of instruments for the accepted theory,

## Results

**1. Self-esteem:** The study proved that children in post-divorce situation often had a lower self-esteem as compared to that of their peers from complete families ( $\chi^2=17.65$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). An analysis of answers to the questionnaire given to the children from divorced families showed that they evaluated their ability to evoke positive feelings in teachers, and their appearance (clothes and looks) as low. For details cf. Kaja 1988.

**2. Attitude towards parents:** The hypothesis that there is a correlation between processes of forming attitudes and the fact that the child comes from a split family was proved in this study. However, the only difference between the two groups is in the attitude towards the father. Children from post-divorce families more often showed negative attitude towards their father as compared with their peers from non-conflictive families ( $\chi^2=27.05$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). There is, however, no correlation between the family structure of the children and their attitude towards the mother. Members of both groups showed a positive attitude towards the mother in a majority of cases, although a large number of six-year-olds did display an ambivalent attitude towards her. One could, therefore, venture to conclude that after the divorce the father loses his child's respect while the mother does not gain any of it.

Observation of secondary independent variables proved that sex and age of the child at the time of divorce does not bear any impact on the child's attitudes. There is enough evidence though, to believe that deep emotional trauma as a result of parental divorce integrates the child with his mother. It is this group that showed highest percentage index (72.2%) of child's attitude towards mother.

**3. Attitude towards peers and adults:** A relationship was established between the family structure of the children that took part in the study and their attitude towards peers and adults.

Children from split families display a markedly lower level of positive values that facilitate social interaction. These values were: verbal expression ( $\chi^2=13.87$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), goodwill ( $\chi^2=12.41$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), sociability ( $\chi^2=19.78$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). There was a higher proportion of negative values such as seclusion ( $\chi^2=9.13$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), timidity ( $\chi^2=16.83$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and obstinacy ( $\chi^2=16.82$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), which are hinderance in normal social interaction. Thus, the post-divorce situation has a fundamental effect on the regulation of a child's attitudes towards his surrounding.

In the majority of cases, children who underwent the trauma of parental divorce are withdrawn, distrustful and unfriendly towards other people. Of course, none of these aberrations in the regulatory processes connected with the formation of attitudes towards the surroundings is pathological in character. However, they do condition the further development of personality. The study also showed that the

above-discussed consequences of a post-divorce situation are independent of the child's sex and age at the time of parental divorce or the intensity with which it suffered the psychological trauma.

**4. Desires:** Children from divorced families more frequently expressed desires for material goods and services (e.g. wish to own a toy) as compared to their peers from complete families. At the same time fewer children from post-divorce situation voiced an emotional desire (wish to have harmony and happiness in the family) as compared to peers from non-conflictive families. The desire for personal success was rated second in both the groups. Even though these differences are statistically irrelevant, it would be interesting to find out why it is that the emotional desire in the case of a vast majority of children in post-divorce situation is the least important of the three presented possibilities. Why does the same desire of so much value for the majority of children come from complete and non-conflictive families?

The reality of the post-divorce situation might be the key to this question. The father's absence decreases the number of conflicts in the family and, therefore, the family lives in greater harmony. Thus, this desire is not so important for children from divorced families. Misunderstandings occur much more frequently in complete families. There children are a witnesses of quarrels between parents and hence the desire for happiness and harmony in the family is of such value to them. None of the three additional variables taken into account in the study bore any decisive influence on its results.

**5. Instrumental processes:** As far as the perceptual, intellectual and executive processes are concerned, the study did not show any essential differences between the two groups compared. There was, however, a tendency among children from split families to obtain worse results. But there is no basis to assume that there is any relationship between the family structure and the child's achievement connected with the mastering of the kindergarten's syllabus.

## **Conclusion**

The results of the study allow us conclude that there is a relationship between the six-year-old's experience of parental divorce and the development of his personality. Children in post-divorce situation generally have lower self-esteem than their peers from complete families. They are prone to develop undesirable attitudes towards their surroundings; they have a negative attitude towards their father and, above all, they seem not to attach much importance to values that are of emotional character. These results have nothing to do with sex of children, although their age at the time of parental divorce and the degree of emotional trauma connected with it do have an impact on their self-esteem.

By generalizing the results of the study that was conducted on the guidelines set by Reykowski's regulatory theory of personality it can be said that the impact of

experiencing parental divorce by the six-year-olds can best be seen in the formation of the Value Network. Its essence is to be found in the evaluative power of the Value Network, which means that the realization of emotional contact with another person is of secondary importance. At the same time the child perceives himself as of lesser value when compared with others. This characteristic tendency that was observed during the study can tentatively be termed "divorce syndrome". This does not, however, mean that the manifestation of the divorce syndrome (which need not appear among all children experiencing parental divorce) has a decisive effect on the further, negative development of personality, but it does direct his development towards self-defence rather than development of personality through co-operation in action with others. As a result, under some circumstances a misadapted personality may develop.

Notwithstanding with what has been said above about the development of personality of children from divorced families, one should bear in mind that there will always be a group of children who will develop in the same way as their peers from complete families. The above study does not give an answer to the very important question as to why the divorce-situation does not have a negative effect on some of the children. One could only surmise that these are the children from reconstituted families, where they found a place for themselves, or that they come from families where the parent they stay with lives with someone else, or that they are raised by their grandparents and are in close and friendly contact with them. Indeed this problem seems well suited to become the theme of another study.

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#### NOTES:

1. The questionnaire for testing the level of self-esteem consist of 10 questions such as: "Who is the best-dressed person in your group?" or "Whom does the teacher like most?". The answer can be given only through comparing oneself with others. The entire method has been presented in B. Kaja's "Problemy diagnozy i terapii zaburzeń rozwoju u dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym", Bydgoszcz 1987, WSP.
2. The degree of emotional trauma experienced by the child due to parental divorce was evaluated by the mother of the child. The basic indices that helped make the evaluation were: circumstances of divorce (how long did the divorce-situation exist and what was the atmosphere at that time), the manner in which the hurt person displayed his feelings, child's behaviour related with divorce.