

Family problems, parents separation and psychosocial effects on children

Valbona Treska

Albanian University, Department of Psychology, Tirana, Albania

E-mail: valbonatreska@yahoo.com

Received 11.07.2015; Accepted 11.09. 2015

Abstract

Divorce has become a vulnerable social phenomenon in Albania. The Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) indicates the growing trend of the phenomenon since 1990. Only a few studies have been conducted in relation to this phenomenon in Albania. Such studies have been focused more on the figure about the number of divorces than on the emotional effects caused by them. Based on the work as an expert psychologist in the courts, it is concluded that the greatest number of couples seek illegal dissolution of marriage, practically since one or more year have not been living together, instead they have lived separately. This study attempts to shed light on this period of the family, transition and crisis experienced by all members, with a focus on the children.

Keywords: *parenting, separation, child, effects, psychology*

1. Introduction

Family problems, conflict, fight and resentment deeply distort family dynamics. When both partners, or one of them, decide to separate definitively, prior to starting the process of legal dissolution of marriage, another problem emerges and becomes even more tangible; the children. They experience separation of parents differently, but what remains the same is the fact that parents' separation transforms completely the life of their children and such transformation is caused by impact of significant psychological burden on them. Children lose daily contact with one of the parents, change their daily routine and lifestyle and feel completely abandoned.

Considering sex and age of children or family and social support provided to them, the psycho-emotional situation may vary, but there may be identified common elements in the experience of children going through this crisis. The data presented in this paper is the result of an extensive scientific research conducted on the topic of separation of parents. 100 families have been the target of this study for a period of three years. They have been selected randomly. Each of these families has approached the court for legal dissolution, after a period of factual separation between them for 1-5 years. Each of the families in this study consisted of 2 children aged up to 18 years in the moment of separation of their parents. They belong to the group of population considered to be psychologically normal. Separation of parents was the most critical crisis in the life of the children involved in the study, until the moment parents decided to start the procedures for the legal dissolution of marriage, after several years of their separation.

2. Effects of separation of parents on the children

Children involved in this study established a kind of connection between their experience of growing up in a family of separated parents and their current experience. Separation of parents and conflicts in the family, and divorce later on, change the identity of the individual, especially children. They have developed behaviour, acts, feelings and illusions which are common among them, thus they are considered members of a special group of people. The fact that they are children of parents who live separately since several years, gives them a specific identity which determines and affects deeply their relations in the present and in the future. They feel that their growing up process is difficult and it is such because the situation in their family which is different compared to that of their peers, increases the number of their tasks.

The study concludes that throughout the years the feeling of insecurity, loss, sadness and anxiety are dominant among these children. They feel less protected, less taken care of and caressed. Moreover it has been observed that this category of children is much more conservatory when it comes to marriage. They wish to have a sound marriage of mutual love, devotion and romanticism, but on the other hand, apart from their wish, they always fear that their marriage will likely never exist. This group of children are of the opinion that hasty marriages or matchmaking (interference of third persons known to both parties) must be avoided.

Considering the fact that marriages resulting from matchmaking continues to be a widely used phenomenon in our country, the attitude of these children is the same: *"I will find my partner on my own, without any interference. Unless I love my partner, I will not get married"*. It is also evident among these children their desire to establish permanent relations, even though they are considerably insecure of their ability to maintain relations for a long period of time. Living in families of separated parents, long-term effects emerge as a result of changes in their behaviour and actions. Moreover, experiencing the separation crisis of parents affects and defines the way of thinking and perception of children grown up in these families, as regards their relations and expectations. Even though changes in their way of thinking are more difficult to be perceived compared to behavioural changes, they are more important in time for the individuals and the society.

3. Sound separation

Separation of spouses followed by legal dissolution of marriage is a trauma for the family. Even though the psycho-emotional suffering caused to the children of these parents is unavoidable, and it bears consequences on their behaviour and way of thinking, or affects their development, there are numerous cases of children of parents separated for long period of time who develop normally and show no problems in behaviour and perception. Adjustment to the new lifestyle with a single parent and the overcoming of this period without moderate or serious psycho-social-emotional consequences, has been possible for almost one fifth of children and teenagers involved in the study. Their development and adjustment to the situation depends on the style of interpersonal relations developed within the family system, and also the social context of living of these children.

Transformation of members and especially children in the period immediately after separation of parents, is affected by the maintenance of cohesion and flexibility of the system. Parents must try to keep the family tied adequately so that the children will have a sense of belonging and at the same time they will be capable to adjust to changes. It is necessary as well that parents maintain their position and preserve the limits of the parental subsystem. Moreover, it is fundamental for children to support their hierarchy to continue fulfilling sound functions of the family itself.

The main reason of the psychological burden experienced by children is the sudden blocking of any stage during the process of separation of parents, thus making it difficult to manage an acceptable reorganisation of the lifestyle and manner of functioning of the family. Lack of a sustainable family structure during this period makes all the members more sensitive towards stress and psycho-emotional changes.

A similar study on children with divorced parents and children from families with non-divorced parents, but in a non-functioning relationship, found that the latter felt the same fear as the former, of being abandoned, but in most of the cases they blamed their parents for this confusing situation making them anxious. Children of families of separated parents, but not divorced, generally felt themselves more unfortunate than the children whose parents had been divorced. Their difficulties were linked to guilt, hope for family reunion, anxiety, sadness, feeling of assumption of more responsibilities in the role of the missing father or mother and feeling of being different from other children of their age.

During the conduction of this study, 78% of children said that they felt themselves better as they were no longer present in the fights and conflicts of their parents. They stated that if they were to choose living with both parents in a conflict situation or living with one parent, they would still choose to living only with one parent, rather than experience the previous family conflictual situation. This observation results because they no longer experience fights and conflicts on daily basis in the family. 52% of these children report that following separation of parents, they were given more attention by both parents and were enjoying a closer relationship with the other parent who was not living with them. In 88% of cases, the other parent who does not live with the children is the father, because in most of cases of separation of parents, the mother assumes their raising and education after separation from the husband.

The crisis generated from separation of parents and the way children adjust to this situation is closely linked with the ability of parents to conclude an agreement between them as regards co-parenting. During the study it has been found that:

1. If parents manage to enter into an agreement about the children from the very beginning of their separation, children acquire greater social skills
2. Cooperation on the manner and time of visits of children by the separated parent has a positive impact on the mental health of children. Children with best social skills are those who from the very beginning of their parents' separation have regularly met and spent time during the week with the parent who does not live with them.

Moreover, it has been observed that parent-child sound meetings are more important than frequency of meetings. Both parents must be together present in the raising and education of the children, by

giving proper importance to the best interest of the child, while they must give up conflicts and fights between them after separation.

3. One of the most controversial issues in a couple is the monetary amount to be paid by each parent after their factual separation.

As already said in this paper, considering that most of the children are being taken care of by the mother, after separation of parents, children see the financial support provided by the father or mother, as an element of attention, love and devotion towards them by the parent who does not live with them. Children involved in this study who had not received continuously the financial support by the other parent, felt themselves left aside. In their psychic it is observed a close proportional link between failure of the other parent to provide financial support and love of the parent for the child. These children perceive that: *“If mom or dad does not support me financially after separation, it means that he/she does not love me anymore”*.¹ These children feel vulnerable and have problems in creating sound social relations.

Distortion of family dynamics and family structures is an experience felt differently by the adults and children. In many cases, what is good for the parents, is not good for the children. During the study, it is observed that in 13 % of the cases, children during the period of separation of parents had tried to reunite their family. In some cases they would sacrifice themselves and the relationship with each parent, simply to achieve their reunion.

Mishel, 11 years of age, whose parents lived separated as of 2 years, had decided to live with her dad rather than mom and her 4 year old sister. She thought that mom, because of her love to Mishel and also her wish not to separate the two sisters, would surrender and return to the house of the husband. Therefore, Mishel was sacrificing herself for two years by staying away from her mother and sister for the only purpose of reuniting her parents.

Even though after separation and then divorce there is a second chance for the adults to restart their life and experience new emotions, for the children, this collapse of family structure affects negatively their psycho-emotional well-being because they have to adjust to a new lifestyle in daily absence of both parents.

4. How do children react to separation of parents?

Whatever their age, the reaction following a separation of parents is fear. Children experience insecurity for the future. They have a feeling of loss and sadness for themselves and their parents.

If one of the parents abandons the family, (mostly the father), they think that he has abandoned not only their mother, but also them. If the mother is the one abandoning the family, it has been observed that the psycho-emotional negative effects on the child, are even stronger. They feel abandoned, alone and betrayed. They perceive that no one makes them part of important family decisions, because they are not loved. This makes them feel weak to change situations, regardless of their wish to have a conflict-free and united family. They feel alone and abandoned not only by their biological family, but also the society. It was concluded that only 8% of those involved in the study were supported by an adult staying on their side and making them understand better the situation in the family. This figure is considerably low considering that lack of information makes

the children confused and consequently they invent inexistent reasons for separation of their parents.

In 88% of the cases considered in this study, it was observed that parents regardless of the wish to protect their children, were mostly focused on their feelings and reorganisation of their way of living. In the situation of a mental, social and emotional confusion, the parents themselves find it difficult to be attentive to the psycho-emotional changes suffered by the children because of distortion of the family balance.

Social environment and family support is very important especially during the first 6 month period of separation of parents. If respective families of each partner accept separation and help in the reorganisation of the lifestyle, then the whole process becomes simpler. Partners who decide to be separated and in particular the parent who assumes even the child guardianship, need not only psychological, but also financial support.

During the study it was observed that in 71% of cases, families of each partner failed to communicate between them. Each supported own child, while in most of the cases they were aggressive or indifferent to the other partner.

In 29% of cases in this study, family members stated that this was a decision of both partners and that they would respect the decision, without any impact on interpersonal relations they had with either of them.

Another common feeling of children in situation of factual separation of parents is even the role that they take by positioning themselves as loyal to either parent. Considering that in most of the cases separation is perceived as an open conflict or even fight between two partners and respective families, children find themselves in the mid of chaos and the circumstances oblige them to be positioned.

Except for the cases of domestic violence in the family including the children, or situation where they are directly injured by one of the parents, physically or psychologically (there have been no cases of sexual abuse), in other cases, children appear to be split. It is difficult for them to position themselves openly with one of the parents, and create the impression that they are betraying the other parent. However, with their wish or unwillingness, immediately after the factual separation of parents, they position themselves next to one of the parents. This role very often is assumed unconsciously, because children try to protect themselves from emotional damage from the split between two parents.

Even though the reaction of all family members initially is an indicator of the events later on, (this does not mean however that the beginning is decisive), it may determine the follow-up of the impact of separation of partners on the children.

In many cases, dynamics differ and there is the likelihood that conflicting situation will be gradually settled down. What remains unchanged throughout the process and even after that is cooperation of parents considering the best interest of the child.

Another effect observed in children of separated and divorced parents is the expectation of the possible reunion of parents. After the first year of separation, especially when none of the partners has been involved in a new relationship, children might think of their possible union. Family events or parties very often raise their expectations to have a united family. Re-establishment of communication between partners, even with regard to daily problems of children, awakes in them the hope for reunion.

Moreover, children of separated parents see with scepticism the possibility of creating a happy family when they grow up. It is difficult from them to move away from the patterns experienced in childhood and they have created the conception that all partners fight, cause physical damage, betray or are betrayed. They fear creating a family even though their greatest wish is to have happy family. Their fears because of experienced problems affect their common feeling of possibility of refusal, betrayal or being used. They fear a marriage failure.

5.Experience of separation of parents on gender and developmental basis

Even though both genders experience and are directly affected by the separation of parents, during the study there have been observed several changes related to the behaviour and emotion shown by girls and boys. For instance it has been observed that males are the ones to express openly and for a longer period of time the crisis and problems resulting from the factual separation of parents. They get angry and tend to be more aggressive both verbally and physically and their academic results are not as stable as those of the girls.

On the other hand, girls are more withdrawn, they become anxious and they shut themselves off. Even they get angry and tend to be aggressive verbally only. They are more sensitive, especially emotionally, and they tend to cry most of the time. Unlike them, it has been observed that male try to shrink their feelings, refrain from showing emotionally sensitive in front of other people. This change is because of the social experience in the country and also parenting style.

After separation of parents, especially when children are placed under the guardianship of the mother, sons assume the role of the adult male in the family. They try to support their mother and not only do they refrain from showing their discontent, but they also try to become emotional support for their mothers. What is mostly observed among the males, is the highest level of their aggressiveness expressed verbally and physically.

Boys whose parents are separated enter in conflictual relations quicker than girls.

Girls, on the other side, show their feelings less aggressively. It is observed that until when they reach puberty age, they are more affectionate to parents, try to flatter and in some cases they avail themselves of the situation.

Among both genders it was observed a lack of concentration in studies and poor academic results. During the first years of separation of parents, children are disordered. After that period, a decrease of tension between parties is observed and both spouses and children start to adjust psychologically to the new lifestyle. Similarly as the difference in gender is observed as regards effects of separation

of parents on the children, there is observed a difference even as regards such effects in different ages.

Fear of abandonment is mostly observed among the pre-school children. In their age while it is difficult, from the cognitive aspect, to make a cause-effect analysis, they think that even the parent remaining with them might one day abandon them just like the other parent. These children take backward steps in their development quite often. Some elements of the expression of the strong emotional situation experienced by them are involuntary urination, change of sleep patterns and sleeping in the parents bed, evident trend to have imaginary friends, return to the objects they are attached to, etc

Among the school age children it was observed that in 37.6% of cases, there were found elements of the parental alienation syndrome. Children of the age-group 6-10, 11 are easy to manipulate. They try to position themselves with either one or the other parent and in some cases they take for granted their attitude and sayings against one-another. At this age, children try as well to judge the parent whom they consider to be the guilty one. In this regard, it must be considered that they are not capable of sound and logical reasoning. They judge based on what they see and hear. This makes them easy to be manipulated. Puberty and adolescence is the most difficult period to adjust to the separation of parents. Parents, family environment and even more, including the society, think that children of this age find it easier to face the crisis because they are grown up and understand better. Unlike this stereotype position, the study points out that children in pre-adolescence and adolescence encounter much more psycho-socio-emotional difficulties. Identity crisis experienced by them is overlapped by the crisis of family dissolution, thus the transitory period from childhood to adulthood will be experienced with more difficulties. Maintaining their position among other peers is very important for teen-agers. They try to pretend to be intelligent, successful and unmistakable. Having a sound family, is also part of the image that the teenagers want to convey. During the study it was observed that 34% of them had never talked to anyone about the separation of parents, 42% had talked only to a close girlfriend or boyfriend and 24% had talked to their peers about the problems in the family. Moreover it was observed that this age-group was more rebellious and tended to judge openly either parent. It was observed as well the parenting problems of parents after separation in relation to their children. Being focused on themselves, it has been difficult for them to follow even the rhythm of quick changes experienced by the teenagers during the entire spectrum of their development. Based on the questionnaire about the parenting style, it was observed that in 36% of cases, a liberal parenting style is applied, especially in relation to the children aged 14-18 years.

6. Conclusion

Distortion of family dynamics has a psychological cost on all the members. But, while the adults manage to control their feelings better and appear capable of reorganising their lifestyle, children are the category most vulnerable and sensitive to rapid changes. They are not prepared and they are bound to accept *apriori* the decision of adults. The crisis experienced by them is unavoidable, but it may be alleviated if parents manage to have a smooth separation and consider the best interest of the child.

Based on the results of this study, it is advised that parents involve the children in this process by informing them of and preparing them for the upcoming decision. Children must be informed of the reasons leading to this separation. It is not advised for parents to enter into details. Mother and father must be together when their decision is communicated to the children. In such circumstances, children will understand that regardless of conflict, both parent have taken a common and rational decision. Moreover children believe that being together when the decision is made known, it implies that both mother and father will continue to be together when it comes to the child. It is important that the children are informed in advance of the difficulties to be encountered after separation of parents. It must be avoided the feeling of guilt and it must be made clear that marriage did not work because of the failure of relations in the couple, instead of the parent-child relationship. Children must be involved in decision-making about their life after separation of parents, the parent they will live with. Co-parenting will become even more difficult, but it becomes even more important after separation of parents. Co-parenting after separation implies making the child understand that regardless of the conflict, the common interest of parents is the psychological health, development and well-being of children.

References

1. Amato, P. (2001). *Children of divorce in the 1990s: An update of the Amato and Keith (1991) metaanalysis*. Journal of Family Psychology, f. 15, 355-70.
2. Finkel, Susana. (1997). *“Guía de la mujer divorciada”*. Buenos Aires, Editorial Perfil.
3. Herscovici, Pedro. (1986). *“Por el mejor interés y en defensa de los hijos de la separación”*, Revista Terapia Familiar, año IX, N° 15, *“Divorcio y nuevas organizaciones familiares”*, f. 75 - 81. Buenos Aires, Editorial Terapia Familiar.
4. Kelly, J. & Emery, R. (2003). *“Children’s adjustment following divorce: Risk and resilience perspectives”*. Family Relations, f. 52, 352-62.
5. Shazia Nazir. (2001). *“Psychological reaction to divorce of divorced women and their children”*, Phd thesis.
6. Wallerstein, Judith y ots. (1990). *“Padres e hijos después del divorcio”*. Buenos Aires, Javier Vergara Editor.

Web-site

www.gjykatatirana.gov.al [accesed 01.02.2015].

www.instat.al [accesed 01.02.2015].