

# Work with Nina whose parents are in highly conflictual divorce

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## Summary

*This case study describes psychotherapy work with a seven-year-old girl Nina whose parents are in high-conflict divorce. Within a month since beginning of our psychotherapy work behavioural changes occurred in Nina's behaviour: crying, sudden mood changes, separation and sleeping problems. The first part of psychotherapy was about creating secure and confidential relation with the girl but also with her parents through counseling and psychoeducation. The main goal was to strengthen and connect inner image of the mother and father in the girl thus integrating split parts of personality. The focus of work with the parents was to raise awareness of their responsibility and obligation as parents, that is to protect the child from suffering by creating safe, stable and predictable environment. Psychotherapy work lasted for five months, discontinuously and it is terminated due to parents' non-cooperation.*

**Key words:** *high-conflict divorce, psychoeducation*

**Sažetak**

*U ovoj studiji slučaja opisan je psihoterapijski rad sa sedmogodišnjom djevojčicom Ninom čiji su roditelji u visokokonfliktnom razvodu. Unatrag mjesec dana od početka našeg psihoterapijskog rada kod Nine su nastupile promjene u ponašanju: plačljivost, nagle promjene raspoloženja, problemi sa separacijom i sa spavanjem. Prvi dio terapije odnosio se na stvaranje odnosa sigurnosti i povjerenja s djevojčicom, ali i s njenim roditeljima kroz savjetovanje i psihoedukaciju. Glavni cilj bio je osnažiti i povezati unutarnju sliku majke i sliku oca kod djevojčice te na taj način integrirati rascijepljene dijelove ličnosti. Fokus rada s roditeljima bio je osvijestiti odgovornost i obvezu njih kao roditelja, a to je da zaštite dijete od patnje stvarajući sigurnu, stabilnu i predvidljivu okolinu. Psihoterapijski rad trajao je pet mjeseci, diskontinuirano, a prekinut je zbog nesuradnje roditelja.*

**Ključne riječi:** visokokonfliktni razvod, psihoedukacija

## Introduction

A divorce is a stressful event for a whole family system and especially for children. A divorce lasts for a long period, starting since parents are still married and then follows the divorce process and adjustment that can last for many years after the divorce. The adjustment of a child depends on how parents have coped with the divorce and to what extent they have adjusted to a new situation. About one-third of divorces are characterized by high conflicts but after the divorce process the level of conflict in majority declines, while in the smaller parts it continues even three to five years after the divorce (McIntosh, 2003; according to Bilić, Buljan Flander, Hrpka, 2012). The impact of the divorce on a child is minimal if both parents are available to a child and if they also cooperate in education after the divorce regardless their mutual feelings (Buljan Flander et al., 2018). The best interest for a child when it comes to divorce of parents is to grow up with both parents who cooperate and make mutual decision about child because it is his/her need and right (Buljan Flander et al., 2018). Constant conflicts between parents, non-cooperation, mutual accusations and child alienation make divorce traumatic for a child and cause significant consequences for his/her mental health. Alienation of a child represents the ultimate form of manipulation with a child and it is considered as emotional abuse of a child (Gardner, 1998, according to Warshak, 2008).

This case study describes psychotherapy work with a seven-year-old girl Nina. Nina is a girl whose parents are divorced since she was four-year-old, but after the divorce they fail to cooperate and raise her together.

Psychotherapy treatment lasted for five months. It was discontinuous and took place in a private practice. Meetings with the mother of the girl were performed with the same frequency as with the girl, once in a week, except in the time when the girl was with the father because then she did not attend therapy sessions. Two meetings were realized with the girl's father. At the end, psychotherapy treatment was terminated due to non-cooperation of parents.

The theoretical directions that were support to understand the case are developmental theories, psychosexual development theory (Freud, 1900, according to Corey, 2004), psychosocial development theory (Erikson, 1963, according to Corey, 2004) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982, according to Buljan Flander i sur., 2018). Since the girl is born and raised in dysfunctional family the question is whether all her body and emotional needs are satisfied to establish relationship of trust, image of world as safe place and secure attachment style.

## History and development of the problem

The girl is born from a neat pregnancy and delivery. An early psychomotor development proceeded neatly. However, the girl is born and raised in non-stable environment, in dysfunctional family, parental relations have been disturbed since the mother's pregnancy. When the girl was three-year-old the divorce process began and ended one year after. After the divorce, parents cannot agree about mutual decisions about the girl, they do not respect Court decisions, mutual accusations are often and Centre for social work is constantly involved in the case. The girl attended kindergarten where she started to show signs of separation anxiety. She was enrolled in the primary school on time. The first class she finished successfully. Within a month she started to show changes in her behaviour, she became more crying, she often changes moods, sleeps less, separation difficulties have intensified as well as more frequent abdominal pain. Due to mentioned difficulties mother has sought psychotherapy help for the girl. After the first meeting with the mother and taking detailed history, the first meeting with the girl was arranged and it is planned to initiate meeting with the father. Nina's inhibition, lack of initiative, separation anxiety and non-secure attachment in relation with the mother could be noticed at the first meeting with Nina.

## Psychotherapy treatment

At the beginning of our psychotherapy work, psycho diagnostic is made for better insight in the girl's physical state. Thinking differentially diagnostically, based on the girl's observations, by insights in psychological test, projective techniques and interview with the parents and guided by DSM-V (2013), it can be concluded that clinical picture indicates the symptoms of child depression that resulted from growing up within a disturbed family dynamics and constant conflicts of parents before, during and after the divorce.

Integrative therapy is relationship therapy, so in the beginning I have indulged in staying with Nina while we slowly have built relationship of trust through conversations, play therapy and creative techniques that the girl usually loves. The girl needed safety, stability, predictability, peace of mind, a place where she would be able to show her feelings, thoughts and needs without worrying about hurting or losing someone. This is precisely what is set as one of the goals of therapy with the girl since it is known that high-conflict relations between parents impair the child's sense of security and trust.

What I have learned from the girl in the first part of the therapy is that she longed for family unity and that she is still in the phase when she hopes that parents will reconcile. The moment when she said that for the first time was one of the key moments in establishing our relationship. Since the parents have not yet separated parent from the partnership

role, the girl has not yet accepted the parental divorce as final and she hopes situation will change. Working on the case I often asked for supervision. Dynamics that belongs to family parents brought with them in the therapy and I could exactly experience what it was like to be between the conflicts what is exactly where the girl Nina was. In relation with the parents, I have occasionally felt insecure, afraid, angry and helpless.

Since high-conflict divorces and manipulations with the child could cause splitting as defence mechanism that can be predisposition for severe mental disorders in the future, I have set the following as the second aim of the therapy: strengthen and connect inner image of the mother and father at the girl and thus integrate split part of personalities that is preparation of base for challenging developmental phase that follows. I have worked on this aim, inter alia, through questions and conversations about what the girl likes to do with mother and what with the father, what she recognizes in herself that is similar to mother and what to father, what father does well and what mother does etc.

In the central part of the therapy we have dealt a lot with emotions, relaxation exercises, children with problems are known to switch off and block their bodies, and by proper breathing and relaxation exercises we help them to feel and listen their body and thus come in contact with their emotions that are hardly recognizable and verbalized in this age (Oaklander, 1978).

The focus of the work with parents was through psychoeducation to raise awareness of their responsibility and obligation as parents and that is to protect child against suffering by creating secure, stable and predictable environment through communication without quarrels, cooperation and mutual decision making about the child, regardless their mutual feelings. In this case it was difficult to create this due to complex dynamics of relations between the parents that is the cause of emotional difficulties in the girl. The parents repeatedly cancelled the agreed joint appointments, continued with mutual accusations and non-cooperation. Psychotherapy was terminated due to their non-cooperation, but secure and open relationship with the girl is made and the Center for social work is notified about the risk this child faces with.

## Conclusion

The relation of trust and safety is created in the work with the girl following continuous work on building inner bridge that connects inner image of the mother and father. For her I have represented factor of integration of split parts of herself, making base for the following developmental phase. Regarding work with the parents there was no significant progress. Regardless the psycho education of what their conflicts and non-cooperation do to the child and the further risks for the child's mental health, they reacted poorly and continued their behaviour. This case is a good example how important is in the therapy with a child to get involved his/her parents for cooperation because

otherwise the question is how “powerful” a therapist is? Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that psychotherapy work with children requires multidisciplinary and inter-sectional cooperation that is necessary to act in the best interest of the child.

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