

## BRIEF COMMUNICATION

# PSYCHOLOGICAL MALTREATMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

GUNTHER KLOSINSKI

Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, University of Tübingen, Germany

**Abstract**—Children of separating or divorcing parents seldom escape suffering psychological stress, particularly when the parents are in open conflict. How much should such children be allowed to suffer? The author discusses the problem of defining the terms “emotional child abuse” and “psychological maltreatment” as they are used in the literature. Reviewing the common behavioral patterns that children in this situation resort to and the roles that they tend to take upon themselves, he attempts to distinguish between those instances of stress that can be regarded as acceptable and those that must be considered harmful. With respect to children in this situation, the following behavior patterns are discussed: (a) the inclination of the child to sacrifice itself for the sake of the parents, in particular for the “weaker” one; (b) the tendency of the children to reach agreements among themselves about how they should be divided up; (c) the phenomenon of parentization in which the child assumes the role of the substitute partner for one or the other parent; and (d) the child’s discovery of both its power and its helplessness with respect to the situation and the feelings of guilt awakened by this discovery.

*Key Words*—Psychological maltreatment, Separation, Divorce.

## INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH MANY DEFINITIONS of child abuse include the aspect of psychological and/or emotional abuse, the term “psychological child abuse” has not yet become accepted usage, at least not in Germany. In the last 10 years, American researchers in particular have devoted much effort to better defining the mental injury categories proposed by the 1983 International Conference on Psychological Abuse of Children and Youth. In the first part of this paper, I shall consider briefly the problem of defining terms and identifying criteria; then, in the second part, I will go on to discuss some typical cases of psychological maltreatment occurring in the context of divorce and separation.

## THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING EMOTIONAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL CHILD ABUSE

Within the last two decades, the physical and sexual abuse of children have increasingly become the object of public interest. Thus, it is not surprising that the problem of emotional

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Professor G. Klosinski, Abteilung für Kinder- und Jugendpsychiatrie der Universität Tübingen, Osianderstr. 14, 7400 Tübingen, Germany.

or psychological mishandling of children should likewise be rediscovered. The fact is that already in the first half of this century, emotional child abuse was a topic of research in both psychoanalysis and developmental psychology (u.a., R. Spitz, 1946). More recently, the subject has been considered by attachment psychology and object relation psychology (Bowlby, 1862; Bowlby, Ainsworth, Boston, & Rosenbluth, 1956). In this earlier discussion, however, the present common name for the phenomenon, "psychological maltreatment," had not yet found acceptance; instead, individual authors discussed particular manifestations of the problem under correspondingly specific terms, for example, "analytic depression" (Spitz, 1946), "hospitalism" (Spitz, 1946); "mother-child separation" (Bowlby et al., 1956), and "childhood bereavement" (Bowlby, 1962).

The steady increase of the rate of separation and divorce over the last decades and the accompanying problems of the children caught up in such situations have called the attention of researchers to the need to better define this form of child abuse and to clarify the criteria for institutional intervention on the part of the courts, welfare departments, and child-protection organizations. For this reason, the first part of this paper concentrates on the problems of definition.

Corboz (1985) divides abuse of children and adolescents into three categories: (a) physical neglect or violence; (b) sexual abuse; and (c) emotional abuse. "Emotional abuse" he observes, "occurs as an almost inevitable accompaniment to and result of sexual abuse. Beyond this, however, there exists a pure form of emotional abuse that is more difficult to define. Usually the term is used in the sense of cruel behavior towards the child, thus producing psychological stress, not seldom to the point of making the child physically or psychologically ill. This includes, for instance, threatening the child with severe, unreasonable punishment as well as the still popular measure of locking the child in an uncomfortable place such as the cellar." Ammon (1981), on the other hand, has objected that there is no clear basis here for distinguishing between pedagogically responsible measures and measures constituting emotional abuse. Salzinger (1982) has attempted to define emotional abuse as follows: "It applies to cases where the parents behave in a way that disrupts the child's emotional well-being, and where they refuse to change their behavior and/or to allow the child to be treated." This definition, however, neglects the question as to whether the parents are acting with or without intent. Haessler (1985) faces this issue when he describes child abuse as follows: "Child abuse does not occur merely coincidentally; it is rather a form of violence, be it conscious or unconscious, which damages the child psychologically and physically. It occurs in families as well as institutions, leads to injuries, arrested development, or even death and always impairs or threatens the child's well-being and its rights."

Brassard, Germain, and Hart (1987) and other authors (Garbarino, Guttman, & Seely, 1986) suggest using the term "Psychological Maltreatment," which they define as: ". . . the term to stand for all affective and cognitive aspects of child maltreatment, including both acts of omission and commission. Psychological maltreatment has historically been labeled "mental cruelty" (Laury & Meerloo, 1967), "emotional abuse" (Lourie & Stefano, 1978), "emotional neglect" (Whiting, 1978), and "emotional maltreatment" (Lauer, Lourie, Slaus, & Bradhurst 1979). In 1981, the National Center of Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States identified the following as categories of "emotional maltreatment": (a) verbal and emotional assault (b), close confinement (c), inadequate nurturance/affection, and (d) knowingly permitting maladaptive behavior. The American Human Association in 1980 distinguished between emotional abuse, defined as "active, intentional berating, disparaging or other abusive behavior toward the child which impacts upon the emotional well-being of the child;" and emotional neglect, which is defined as "passive or passive/aggressive inattention to the child's emotional needs, nurturing or emotional well-being." Brassford et al. (1987) called attention to the list published by the Office for the Study of the Psychological Rights of

the Child (OSPRC, Indiana University), which identified seven major forms of psychological maltreatment:

1. rejecting,
2. degrading,
3. terrorizing,
4. isolating,
5. corrupting,
6. exploiting, and
7. denying emotional responsiveness.

Although every effort has been made to define as clearly as possible the different categories of psychological maltreatment—most recently, for instance, in the 1991, No. 1 issue of *Development and Psychopathology* devoted wholly to the problem of defining psychological maltreatment—I believe we must admit that Ammon's (1981) objection that there is no clear criterion for distinguishing between pedagogically acceptable measures and those constituting emotional abuse still holds. Thus, I agree with McGee and Wolfe (1991) that we have to regard psychological maltreatment as lying along a continuum, ranging from mild forms of inappropriate parent communication to the more serious forms clearly dangerous for the child's reactions. Furthermore, I agree with their view "that psychological maltreatment is any communication pattern that could undermine a child's resolution of important developmental tasks."

Important, in this connection, is the question: When are the rights and the well-being of a child impaired or threatened in such a way that protective measures become necessary? In my view, this is always the case in situations where the child's well-being is continuously endangered and, following a formula of section 307 of the ZGB (the Swiss Civil Code), where the parents are unable or unwilling to undertake remedial measures. Identifying such a case can be a very difficult question, especially when an acute outburst in a crisis is followed by a long, drawn-out battle, such as frequently occurs in the case of divorce or separation.

#### SEPARATION AND DIVORCE AS A POTENTIAL SOURCE OF DANGER FOR CHILD ABUSE

Children of separating or divorcing parents seldom escape suffering serious psychological stress, as they are drawn into the dynamics of the ongoing conflict between their parents. Bert Brecht aptly symbolized this situation in his *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. The child is virtually torn apart being plunged into a conflict of loyalties, thus, suffering direct injuries or at least retardation in his or her psychological and social development. Separating or divorcing parents often blame each other for overtaxing the child's capacity for suffering and thus hold each other responsible for the consequences; meanwhile the authorities are forced to decide whether protective measures present a greater or lesser evil for the child. As the child generally perceives the separation or divorce of the parents as a threat, he/she tends to pursue their own well-being by attempting to do what he/she can for the well-being of the family. In short, children find it very difficult to cope with the acute phase of the parents separation, especially when they have a good relation to both parents. In this situation, they tend to resort to a number of typical behavior patterns, designed to relieve feelings of guilt by assuming new roles in the disintegrating family.

In what follows, I propose to investigate four such typical behavior patterns or roles, in each case asking whether such reactions can be accepted as reasonable and healthy reactions on the

part of the child or whether, on the contrary, they represent too great a burden and thus prove harmful. The four cases of potential emotional abuse are:

1. The inclination of the child to sacrifice itself on the altar of the marriage crisis in particular by undertaking to support the weaker parent.
2. Agreements among the children themselves concerning how they should be divided up.
3. The so-called phenomenon of parentification, in particular the assumption of the role as a substitute partner for one or the other parent.
4. The children becoming aware of their positions of power of helplessness and the feelings of guilt the awareness evokes.

*The Inclination of the Child to Sacrifice Itself on the Altar of the Marriage Crisis and to Come to the Aid of the Weaker Parent*

If one of the separating parents threatens to commit suicide, the children are often afflicted with feelings of fear and guilt and respond by sacrificing themselves as a means of supporting the parent contemplating suicide. Far from being rare, such situations frequently confront child and adolescent psychiatrists.

An example of this reaction is provided by a case in which a legal opinion about child care and custody was sought. The 14-year-old daughter had entered her father's room just after he had had a decisive phone call with his wife. Telling his daughter that it was all over between him and her mother, the father reached for a pistol on his desk. She implored him not to touch the pistol, thus preventing him from doing so. Shortly afterward, he remarked to his daughter: "I would already be gone if I didn't have you children." (There was another 12-year-old son and an 8-year-old daughter.) At the separation the girl was first persuaded to join her mother and her brother and sister, however, she soon fell out with her mother and fled to her father. The immediate cause may well have been the quarrel with her mother, but the deeper motive was undoubtedly her fear that her father might kill himself. Inasmuch as the girl was already in puberty, she could not simply be forced to stay with a parent against her will, clearly she would promptly run away again.

In my view, the decision about protective measures for this girl required considering each possible solution in the light of those influences that might aggravate her feelings of guilt and those that might relieve her of them and so to opt for the solution that appeared most likely to save her from such guilt feelings. In the case, we should recognize that beneath the daughter's readiness to sacrifice herself by acting in this way, lay an intention to protect her own well-being, namely that which is meant by the term "the well-being of the child." She protects herself by stabilizing the family as a whole and thus keeping her father from committing suicide. In this way, her sacrifice contributes to the general "well-being of the family."

In my opinion, cases where such a sacrificial role clearly presents too great a burden for the child must be seen as psychological maltreatment. This was the case with a 13-year-old boy, an only child, whose father had been given care and custody after the divorce, since the mother was an alcoholic. The mother then told the boy that she would be able to free herself of her addiction if he would come to live with her. In this situation, it was vitally important to speak with the boy about the alcohol abuse of his mother and so to relieve him of the pressure weighing on him.

*Agreements Between the Children of Separating or Divorcing Parents on How to "Divide Up"*

Parents can impose their will on their children not only verbally, but also through their general behavior, through their attitudes and through their nonverbal communication. The message to the child: "I can't live without you," does not always have to be put into words. Again a case illustrated this phenomenon presented to us for an expert opinion on care and custody. The three children, aged 9 to 14, had themselves consulted together as to what to do in view of their parents' marriage is falling apart. Whereas the father wanted to go abroad and

take all the children with him, the mother wanted to stay in the same place and keep all the children herself. The oldest child, a boy, offered to go with the father. He argued that being the oldest, he would least mind going away and would manage best in a foreign country. Furthermore, he argued, this arrangement would probably enable the other children to see their father more often. The fact that the children were able to talk over the matter in a "children's council" and to agree in such a decision indicates that there was a very good relationship between them; this fact, on the other hand, spoke against tearing them apart.

For the oldest boy, the role of acting as a link with the rest of the family was more important than his wish to stay with the other children and with his mother. It is very likely that his proposal relieved him of a sense of guilt. The problem confronting us in this case was to judge which course of action would entail the least emotional abuse of all three children, acceding to the son's self-sacrificial wish or keeping the children together with the mother. Our vote was in favor of letting him go, all the more as he was evidently in a phase where he felt the need to identify his own emerging masculinity with that of his father. Nevertheless, we remained rather uneasy about the arrangement.

### *The Problem of Parentification and of the Role as a Substitute Partner*

Children entering or going through the age of puberty are not infrequently abused during divorce and separation by becoming directly involved in the parents' relationship and by having to share problems with them as though they were adults. Apart from denying them their youth, such demands often overtax the children. Frequently, children in the phase of latency take on the role of a substitute partner while giving support to the weaker parent, in other words, the one who appears to be in greater distress. However, there may well be two aspects to consider in such cases. On the one hand, the child is being emotionally abused by having to act as a substitute partner. On the other hand, there is often an Oedipal conflict working in the background, the child unconsciously wanting to outdo the parent of the same sex and competing with him or her for the favor of the other parent. There are many cases where such psychological maltreatment by a parent fits perfectly the needs of the child, and where those involved do not immediately realize the inhibiting effect of such a constellation on the child's development. Such cases should be regarded as instances of unconscious child abuse on the part of the parent concerned.

### *Becoming Aware of Positions of Power and Helplessness and of the Problems Created by Guilt*

Upon realizing either its power or its helplessness in the situation, a child can figuratively become paralyzed when caught in a conflict of loyalties toward his or her parents and can no longer bear the ambivalence of power and helplessness and the accompanying feelings of guilt, a frequently observed defensive reaction of the child is a sudden and exaggerated taking of sides with one parent and a turning against the other: resorting to unrealistic black and white, good and bad dichotomous thinking. In such cases the children have usually already been taxed beyond their limits and then unconsciously resort to this defense mechanism to take the edge off the otherwise unbearable ambivalence of their position. For me, such a situation always indicates previous psychological maltreatment; this, however, can often no longer be dealt with, since the child has already found relief in resorting to such extreme behavior.

## WHAT CONCLUSIONS CAN WE DRAW FROM THESE EXAMPLES AND CONSIDERATIONS?

1. On the one hand, situations of separation or divorce in families impose a great burden on the children's emotional and social life and thus pose a potential threat to their well-being.

On the other hand, the act of separating or divorce can ease or put an end to the everlasting quarrels and conflicts that have in the past affected the children. Be that as it may, in the great majority of cases, the result is an emotional and psychological shock to the children, who are thus confronted with their emerging fears and who find themselves caught up in a conflict of loyalties. In cases where the conditions of divorce are fought out openly, there is a danger of the parents either consciously or unconsciously abusing the child in their struggle to win it over to their side. This danger is all the greater if one of the parents is trying to rescue the marriage and is not yet willing to give in to separation or divorce. Once the children are drawn into the battle that is being fought over them, psychological maltreatment is almost inevitable. This is especially true of school-children between the ages of 6–14.

2. When a state of constant tension and quarreling develops in families facing divorce or separation, there is an increased danger of impairing the children's psychological and emotional development. Thus it can happen that, in a reaction of psychohygienic self-defense, children who have hitherto loved and respected both their parents, begin now to see them in a distorted light and to judge them solely in terms of good and evil.
3. In families facing separation or divorce, children's rights to emotional physical health, care, and support (as declared by UNICEF) are always at stake. The aim of intervention can only be to prevent extreme cases of child over-taxation, regardless of whether the parents are conscious of their actions or not. At the same time, however, we should recognize that family crises can also lead to processes of growth. The parents, or, if they are not up to it, the authorities, and especially the consulting child and adolescent psychiatrists should carefully and continuously assess the situation, taking into account all the individual problems and needs in order to prevent harmful developments that could ultimately lead to psychological maltreatment.

Thus, in my opinion, the following situations within the context of separation or divorce may be identified as psychological maltreatment:

1. When chronic separation-anxiety and guilt-feelings are deliberately induced in a child, in order to draw the child to one parent's side.
2. When a child is consciously or unconsciously used to fulfill a function ("functionalization"), serving one or the other parents' needs and purposes (e.g. as a messenger, spy, etc.). In such cases, reactive behavior disturbances and psychosomatic disorders often ensue.
3. When a child is abducted or illegally retained by a parent.
4. When parents abuse each other physically in front of their children.

Still the identification of psychological maltreatment must not necessarily entail an immediate removal of the child. This only becomes necessary when no other means of relief appears feasible, and when the parents refuse to consult a counselor or a therapist. As the danger of psychological maltreatment of a child is greater in situations of separation or divorce, such families should be offered more help and support. Since a lawsuit as a means of settling a dispute over the conditions of divorce usually only makes matters worse, we should preferably try to implement schemes of the type currently used in the United States, where mediators (i.e., experts and helpers working independently of the courts) are assigned to the family to help the parents come to an agreement favoring the well-being of the child and the family.

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**Résumé**—Rares sont les enfants de parents en instance de divorce ou de séparation qui échappent à la détresse psychologique, surtout lorsque leurs parents vivent le conflit ouvertement. Comment raisonnable est-il de voir souffrir un enfant? L'auteur explore la définition du terme "mauvais traitements psychiques," tel qu'on le retrouve dans la littérature. Il passe en revue les comportements des enfants confrontés à cette situation et les rôles qu'ils adoptent. Il tente de distinguer entre le stress considéré comme acceptable et celui qui est noscific. Voici les comportements observés chez ces enfants: (a) ils sont portés à se sacrifier pour le bien de leurs parents, surtout pour le parent perçu comme le plus faible des deux; (b) ils cherchent à convenir qui d'entre eux ira avec tel ou tel parent; (c) ils assument des responsabilités de partenaire-substitut pour l'un ou l'autre des deux parents; et (d) ils découvrent leur pouvoir et leur impuissance devant la situation et devant leurs sentiments de culpabilité. Bien que les définitions de la maltraitance doivent comprendre les aspects psychologiques, on les inclut rarement, du moins en Allemagne. Depuis les dix dernières années, les chercheurs américains se sont penchés intensément sur le répertoire des traumatismes psychiques proposé lors de la Conférence internationale de 1983 sur les abus psychologiques faits aux enfants et aux jeunes. Dans la première partie de cet article, je discuterai des problèmes de définition des termes et des critères; ensuite, je présenterai des cas typiques de mauvais traitements psychologiques associés au divorce et à la séparation.

**Resumen**—Los hijos de padres que se separan o se divorcian pocas veces escapan a sufrir stress psicológico. Cuanto se debe permitir que estos niños sufran? El autor discute el problema para definir los términos abuso emocional a los niños y "maltrato psicológico" como son utilizados en la literatura. Se revisan los patrones comunes de conducta a que recurren los niños en esta situación y los roles que asumen, se intenta distinguir entre aquellos momentos de stress que pueden ser considerados como aceptables y aquellos que deben considerarse dañinos. En relación a los niños en esta situación, se discuten los siguientes patrones de conducta: (a) la inclinación del niño a sacrificarse por los padres, en particular por el más "débil;" (b) la tendencia de los niños a llegar a acuerdos entre ellos sobre cómo deberían dividirse; (c) el fenómeno de la parentalización en que el niño asume el rol de la pareja sustituta de uno u otro de los padres; (d) y el descubrimiento del niño tanto de su poder como de su impotencia respecto a la situación y los sentimientos de culpabilidad que se despiertan por este descubrimiento. A pesar de que muchas definiciones de abuso a los niños incluyen el aspecto de abuso psicológico y/o emocional, el término "abuso psicológico a los niños" no ha sido aceptado, por lo menos en Alemania. En los últimos diez años, los investigadores americanos han dedicado mucho esfuerzo a definir mejor las categorías de daño mental propuestas por la Conferencia Internacional del 1983 sobre Abuso Psicológico en los Niños y los Jóvenes. En la primera parte de este trabajo considero brevemente los problemas para definir términos e identificar criterios; en la segunda parte, discuto algunos casos típicos de maltrato psicológico que ocurren en el contexto del divorcio y la separación.