The epigenesis of psychopathology in children of divorce

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In this examination of the impact of divorce on child development, the parents’ marriage as a container of the child’s emerging affects and drive expressions is identified as crucial to healthy psychological growth of the child. Parental separation and divorce threaten to destabilize child development by removing the needed container and thereby overwhelming the child’s immature ego structures with excessive drive energies from within and without. The four cases that are presented examine the psychopathology that may emerge in response to marital dissolution and the interventions that help restore psychic structure. Prevention, the author maintains, requires treatment of the marriage and the child at the earliest sign of marital difficulty.

When the screenwriter Noah Baumbach (2005) dramatized his experience as a child of divorce in the film “The Squid and the Whale,” he depicted the parents, Bernard and Joan, as relentlessly pursuing the satisfaction of their own narcissistic needs while remaining blind to the impact of their difficulties on their children. The film narrative follows adolescent Walt and pre-teen Frank through the end of their parents’ marriage and into their new life. They must learn to live in two separate households while their mother and father despise one another and fight openly over their children as if they were furniture. Walt and Frank survive, but their efforts to adjust are fueled by sorrow, rage, and fear. Each boy develops defenses to cope with the eruption of intense emotions and drive energies in their parents and in themselves. Walt holds himself together
by forging a powerful identification with his father and an alliance with him against the mother, while Frank, the younger boy, drifts between the warring factions. He turns to sexual soothing and discharge of his anger, masturbating and smearing his semen on library books and school lockers, acts that are desperate efforts to manage his libidinal strivings that have lost their objects.

Baumbach’s story is not unique. Maladaptive responses to divorce are common, if not the rule. Divorce may ease the suffering of adults in unsatisfying or painful marriages, but there is abundant evidence that divorce is harmful to children when the difficulties between the parents are not resolved. The impact of a hostile divorce can reverberate throughout the life of the child (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). The danger is that the child’s developing ego will be overstimulated, leading to defensive maneuvers to contain the drives. Overstimulation can come from within; the immature ego is too fragile to manage id energies without the stabilizing influence of parents who contain their drives through cathexis to one another. Overstimulation can also come from without; since the parents’ drive energies are intensified by the narcissistic injury of divorce and no longer catheceted to one another, the child becomes a vulnerable target for their excesses of drive discharge. Overstimulation in the context of insufficient insulation of an immature ego is recognized as a significant source of psychopathology in children and adults (Spotnitz, 1987).

When children develop symptoms of maladjustment following divorce, their parents may bring them to therapy to address the difficulties. Invariably, the parents need therapy themselves to repair the wounds of marital failure and to learn to create a healthy environment for their child. This paper presents an understanding of the role of the marital union and its dissolution in child development and then explores several cases of “divorced child” therapy in a private practice setting. It examines how an antipathetic divorce can generate specific forms of damage to a child’s developing ego and suggests that child and family therapy at the earliest onset of marital difficulties may prevent the more serious forms of maladaptive responses in the child.
Functions of the marital union

In any relationship in which libidinal and aggressive strivings give rise to love and the wish to connect, hate and the wish to destroy will also arise. Marriage is a dynamic container for the instinctual energies of family life. In marriage, potentially destructive drives may be cathected, contained, and neutralized. The work of marital life must include efforts of the partners to manage their destructive impulses and their hatred for one another and their children in constructive ways. There must be willingness in both partners to resolve conflict and to curtail the acting-out of their aggressive impulses. For instance, partners in a healthy marriage consciously choose to refrain from engaging in hostile conflicts in front of the children. Neither do they displace their frustrations with one another onto their children nor seek libidinal satisfactions from the children rather than from the marriage. If this is accomplished, parents can continue to provide an environment that resembles Bion’s (1970) concept of the container and the contained. The marriage is supportive of the child’s development toward adulthood as a result of the parents’ containment of the child’s emerging drives and affects. It is a holding environment in which adult difficulties do not intrude on a child’s psychic well-being. The marital container protects the child by maintaining an emotional refuge from the outside world along with at least some protection from the internal storms of normal development as healthy defenses and personality structures emerge.

Winnicott (1965) describes the conditions for healthy development as depending in part on the parents’ capacity to identify with their children and to manage their own aggression. These narcissistic identifications make it possible for mothers and fathers to respond to their children’s needs by providing the necessary forms of devotion, stability, and cooperation needed for their emotional growth. He also describes the role of the marital union in managing potentially destructive drives that could traumatize the child. The role of the father, he states, is to “draw away from her the element that becomes…potent and spoils the mother’s motherliness” (p. 73). Fathers do this by offering support for the mother’s positive efforts and validation of the often relentless demands on her capacity for care. They provide mothers with the libidinal supplies that are needed to
sustain continuing care of the child. As a result, mothers experience their emotional nutrients as sourced in their partner and feel less depleted. They will still turn to their husbands for support and relief, rather than discharging their frustrations into the relationship with their child or employing a splitting defense in which the child receives all of their libidinal care and the partner, experienced as unavailable, becomes marginalized and cut off from care and concern.

For her part, the emotionally mature mother makes efforts to “draw away” from the father the elements of destructiveness that he may direct toward the child. She intervenes when her partner has reached a point of saturation in responding to a challenging moment with a child. In doing so, she protects both the child and the distraught father from the overstimulation that leads to impulsivity and harm.

Parents in a healthy home sometimes discharge their aggression in the form of jokes shared with one another about the children or by sharing their frustrations with other parents who struggle with the difficult but humorous aspects of child rearing. In either case, children are thereby protected from the discharge of parental drive energies because these are absorbed into the marital union and into other adult relationships.

Failure of the marital union to absorb the psychotic or too potent elements of libidinal and aggressive energies in either parent leaves children susceptible to damage to their developing egos. Anna Freud (1973) remarks that the role of the father is to represent the demands of society as well as to model impulse control. She sees the father as “the embodiment of every sexual and aggressive power, his influence at the same time acts strongly in the direction of repression and transformation of [the child’s] instinctual wishes” (p. 639). She describes the father’s role as crucial to the development of mature ego functions. When paternal functions are not in place to serve the child’s developing ego and superego needs, the child is vulnerable to being flooded by his own drive energies. A father’s presence assists both by modeling containment and by containing what is uncontained in the child.

In her studies of children whose fathers were entirely absent from the marital partnership, Freud (1973) describes two re-
sponses in the child. On the one hand are children who tend to develop forms of neurotic passivity, wherein they suppress instinctual aims to the point of extinction. On the other hand are children who develop impulse disorders in which instinctual energies are discharged chaotically without sufficient restriction.

In “Treatment of a Pre-schizophrenic Adolescent,” Spotnitz (1988) presents the case of Harry Baker, a 13-year-old whose father died when he was five. Even though Harry’s mother was unaware that she played a significant role in overstimulating him, thereby preventing his healthy development, she was insightful in identifying from the outset that Harry was in desperate need of a male figure with whom to identify. She requested a Big Brother to help him separate from her, saying, “The thought of hurting me might leave his mind then, and he might stop clinging to me so much” (p. 10). Harry’s troublesome development had been provoked by the sudden loss of the parent who had drawn away from him the mother’s toxic contents and provided an example of drive-containment.

Even when parents work diligently to discuss the divorce sensitively and supportively with their children, the children invariably react to the news with horror and grief. When a marriage dissolves, children may develop the idea that anger is dangerous and can cause a relationship to end. Consequently, the child’s own anger becomes a threat—it is held within, turned against the self, or displaced onto substitute objects. The way in which parents manage their drives and affects, the defenses they employ in order to survive the insult of divorce, is the greatest determinant of the child’s response to the trauma. Children of divorce need to know their feelings are heard. They need both parents to accept their anger without the burden of hearing, and thereby absorbing, the parents’ hostilities toward one another. Ideally, parents must be available and self-contained, but this is difficult when they themselves are wounded and frightened by the enormity of psychic and material loss consequent to divorce.

When parents are in contention over custody and visitation agreements, they may tend to deny that children need both mother and father fully present and cooperative. Some divorc-
ing parents use questions of custody and visitation to attack one another, making the children’s needs secondary to defeating the other parent. These competitive battles that evolve in the winner-takes-all legal strategies for custody and visitation exacerbate children’s fears about abandonment, leaving them feeling wounded and emotionally isolated. Only when parents achieve compromise and unity can children grow up free of the traumas imposed by their parents’ angry disagreements.

The following clinical cases provide four examples of maladaptive response to the traumatic disruption of divorce. In these cases, obsessional defenses, attacks against the self, impulse disorders, and attention and attachment difficulties emerged when parental hostilities resulted in marital dissolution. Identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of the children and their families.

A case of obsessional neurosis in an eight-year-old boy

Sam arrived for therapy with his father, Mr. C. In a phone call prior to the session, Mr. C had described Sam’s disturbing symptoms. He and Sam’s mother had divorced when Sam was four, and Sam’s mother had recently remarried and was now on her honeymoon. After she left with her new husband, Sam was seized by the compulsion to wash his hands repeatedly throughout the day. He could not stand physical contact, and if he was touched, he immediately had to wash his hands or hair. He was fearful of others on the street, particularly dark-skinned people. He worried that his father or mother would die and that his new stepfather would murder him and his mother. Sam developed elaborate rituals to fend off his waking nightmares: he repeated phrases from songs, counted a series of numbers over and over, and required himself to repeat specific phrases, such as “Okay, let’s go,” before he left a room. At the onset of therapy he was unable to go to school because his symptoms had become so disabling.

Sam’s mother’s marriage to another man evoked a surge of sexual ideas and murderous rage. In one session, he created his own board game, modeled after Monopoly, in which he renamed all the properties, using titles with sexual themes that
appeared to remain out of his awareness even as he wrote them down and read them aloud. Worrying that someone would break into his house and attack his mother, he was afraid to go to sleep. His mother’s remarriage not only represented a clear break in the relationship with his father, it also gave him a powerful awareness of the mother’s sexual impulses. Awareness that his father no longer seemed to have the capacity to attract the mother’s drive energies heightened Sam’s drives beyond his capacity to contain them. Whenever Sam felt angry with either of his parents, his symptoms returned. His endeavor to gain mastery over this hurricane of instinctual energies led him to create a constellation of rituals and magical ideas that convinced him that he could fend off the threats projected by his fears and impulses.

Sam’s experience provides a vivid example of the impact that parental separation can have on psychic structure. Even though his parents had maintained a cooperative relationship after they separated when he was four years old, his mother’s remarriage when he was eight caused Sam’s young ego to be overwhelmed with anxieties. His reactions were exacerbated when his father remarried a year later. Sam’s parents were caught unaware that his mental health relied on their remaining together in his mind. His instinctual energies overwhelmed his ego, and the result was the formation of disabling obsessive and compulsive defenses.

In Sam’s therapy he was helped to recognize the relationship between his rage at his parents and the emergence of his symptoms. Sam was helped to join in a project of evidence gathering about his experiences, reporting about events and feelings that preceded symptom episodes. He also agreed to experiment with remedies. When he was experiencing symptoms, he tried to think of things to be angry about even if they weren’t immediately identified as problems with his parents. Sam was able to achieve symptom relief by bringing anger to the forefront of his consciousness. Throughout this process of investigation and experimentation, Sam continued to maintain areas in which his parents were protected from being directly targeted with his rage. Due to the fragility of his feelings of attachment to them, Sam continued to worry, consciously and unconsciously, that his rage might cause further abandonment. The therapy has continued over several years, providing Sam with a necessary
outlet for his anxieties and drive energies. His parents cooperated by following the suggestion that they welcome and validate Sam’s angry and blaming feelings about his experience as a child of divorce. Sam no longer needs the symptom formation to cope with his drive energies although he continues to use the therapy as a source of support and a container in which he can discharge his frustration aggression.

A series of attacks against the self in a six-year-old girl

Emma was brought for therapy following the death of her older sister. The therapy initially involved talking about loss and death. Emma used art materials to draw pictures for the lost sister and to make storybooks about her sister’s illness. Emma was concerned about her parents’ well-being. In their preoccupation with their own pain and grief, they were having a difficult time meeting Emma’s needs and the needs of her two brothers. The children acted out to get attention, only to receive anger and impatience in return. Emma’s mother also reported that she and Emma’s father were verbally and physically violent with one another.

Emma appeared to benefit from the attention she got in the therapy sessions and from working on her own grief. In sessions, Emma made “cookies” out of paper or clay and baked them in an oven fashioned out of construction paper. The oven was saved and reused each week as she baked elaborate confections for her mother. It seemed she was trying to feed her mother’s emotional hunger as well as to enact a fantasy of the feedings she wanted for herself. Sadly, three years after the death of her sister, Emma’s parents announced that they were divorcing. Her father, a pastor, blamed her mother, excoriating her in front of the children for going against his beliefs. In reaction Emma developed a new symptom, compulsive overeating. This set off a battle with her mother over her consumption of food.

In her sessions, Emma began to bake cookies solely for herself. Her food preparations expanded to making meals of every kind, but these gifts were no longer offered to her mother at the close of the sessions as they had been prior to the parents’ separation. Her mother reported that Emma was hoarding food un-
under her bed and in other secret locations. Her hunger for love and oral gratification exploded beyond bounds. Next, Emma began to pull her hair out. Starting with her eyebrows and expanding to her hairline, she compulsively removed her hair by the roots. She said she could not stop, that it both hurt and felt good to wound herself in this way. This led to her becoming the victim of severe teasing at school and to the loss of her ability to retain friends as a source of comfort and reassurance during this difficult time. She adopted periodic muteness, thereby symbolically mirroring the withholding she felt was directed at her by her parents’ refusal to maintain the marriage. This behavior further frustrated her mother into rages.

In Emma’s case, her parents’ divorce as preceded by her sister’s death made for a tenuous internal structure that became exhausted by her fears of loss and abandonment. Emma turned her aggressive and libidinal drives against herself. She cathed the comforts provided by biting and chewing great quantities of food, and she turned her aggressive drive onto her body. Emma’s hair pulling seemed to be an intense effort to symbolically and literally tear herself apart. Emma substituted her own immature ego for the container that her parents’ marriage had been. Sadly, her defensive structures were not prepared to manage the intensity of the drives and affects that emerged when she became terrified of abandonment. She resorted to relentless attacks on her body, a perverse solution to the need for libidinal comforts and aggressive discharge.

In Emma’s treatment, the therapist reflected and mirrored the motivations for Emma’s behaviors. Emma was helped to understand that her hunger was emotional and valid in the circumstances in which she had come to feel invisible and powerless. The therapist functioned as her narcissistic twin, also hungry, fearful, and in need of love. This mirroring enabled Emma to share the overwhelming burden her immature ego had taken on, allowing her to develop fantasy and play as outlets for her drive energies. The following excerpt illustrates a typical interaction designed to assist Emma in alleviating the pressure her drives were exerting on her fragile ego.

P: [Emma is making cookies out of construction paper and clay, describing what she wants them to be like—both pretty
and appetizing.] This one is going to have a heart on it. This one will be a face—a smiley face. This one will be just sprinkles. Lots and lots and lots of sprinkles! [She attends to the decorations.]

A: Yum!

P: Oh, yes. You can have some, but you have to wait.

A: Oh, but I’m so hungry. [Emma smiles.] I’m really, really hungry. I don’t think I can wait.

P: Well, you have to wait. I’m putting them in the oven now.

A: They look good. Are they almost ready?

P: Yes, they are. They’re ready to come out.

A: Oh, they look so good. I am really, really hungry [smiles]. Can I have one now?

P: Sure. You can have… [Now she has a hard time choosing one for the therapist.]

A: Is there enough for me?

P: [nods] I’m going to have this one and this one and this one. This one’s for my mom. So, you can have this one.

A: Do we eat them now?

P: Yes! [There is dramatic aggressive eating until all the cookies are shredded. A deflated mood emerges.]

A: They’re gone. [Emma nods.] What if I’m still hungry?

P: [smiling and invigorated] We can make some more. I have to make some for my mom.

A: Moms need cookies and lots of them!

P: [Begins a new round of cookie creating.] My mom likes hearts, so this one’s for her. Are you gonna make some, too?

A: Should I?

P: Yeah! You’re hungry, aren’t you?

A: Yeah. But sometimes I feel hungry even when I’m full.
P: I know. [Becoming quiet, she slows down her cookie mak-
ing.] I wanna go see my mom. [Gets up to go to the wait-
ing room where her mother sits. She makes physical contact. 
There are hugs, and she returns to the office.] Can we play a 
game? I wanna play War.

Emma was reassured by this contact with her mother in the 
waiting room. Seeing that her fantasies surrounding eating and 
baking had not harmed her mother, she felt free to express her 
aggression. A competitive round of the card game War ensued, 
and Emma was able to talk about some anger she felt with her 
mother for leaving her father. The use of joining, mirroring, 
and psychological reflection provided Emma with an experi-
ence of containment that had been absent since her parents 
separated (Spotnitz, 1987).

An impulse disorder persisting 
into adulthood

Steven, now 36, grew up as the oldest son of three. His bio-
logical father, for whom he was named, left when he was nine, 
and his mother soon remarried. Steven described his mother 
as chronically unhappy and unable to give him any tender-
ness. Blaming him for his father’s departure, she told him 
repeatedly that she wished he had never been born. She pro-
duced two daughters with her second husband, who was rarely 
present and finally left when Steven was 12. Mother required 
Steven to babysit for his half-sisters during the afternoons. 
Without personal activities or interests, his concept of himself 
as unlovable solidified. He made few friends at school, and 
entering adolescence, he made no effort to seek out relation-
ships with girls the way his peers were doing. Instead, in acts 
of rage against his mother and in a vain attempt to have the 
sexual experiences he thought his peers were enjoying, Steven 
sexually molested both his sisters.

Having no father with whom to identify, no father who could 
offer him protection from his mother’s rages by drawing them 
onto himself, Steven was burdened with sexual and aggressive 
impulses that stormed inside him, and he lacked outlets or de-
fensive structures for their containment. Attacks on his sisters, 
the only persons in his environment more powerless than he,
provided outlets for the discharge of sexual and aggressive energies that were beyond his control.

Convicted of sexual assault, Steven spent six years in prison. In group therapy sessions he attended there, the only emotional state he could identify for several years was anger. But with the help of group members, he learned about the other emotions that fueled his abundant tension. He began to talk about neglect and rejection by his mother and about how imprisoned he felt himself to be by his mother’s unhappiness. In outpatient treatment, he sought approval and encouragement hungrily, as if starved for these nutrients. However, he expressed disinterest in his own life progress and satisfaction, having possibly adopted and internalized his mother’s death wish toward him.

Steven harbored a deep reservoir of anger. Whenever his power and autonomy were threatened, he lashed out verbally and physically without hesitation. At his jobs he responded to slights with inordinate rage. In social situations, terrified of the intensity of the libidinal energies that were pressing for expression, Steven suffered from extreme shyness. Steven’s dynamics demonstrate a common outcome of parental separation: distorted ego and superego development force the discharge of primitive drive energies into impulsive attacks on others and on one’s self.

Steven’s progress in treatment seemed to arise from his motivation to reach for an ego-ideal that represented specific positive values that he gleaned from his experience in group work with other men: honesty, integrity, loyalty, intelligence, and respect. His drive energies became cathected with these ideals so that when he spoke about them he became passionate. The values came to embody a kind of composite, ideal paternal object; binding his drive energies to this ideal incrementally strengthened his ego. Though a certain rigidity remained in his superego functions, he was able to release tension through humor in the form of self-deprecation. He identified the need for adequate levels of insulation to alleviate the impact of his critical superego functions, and became able to acknowledge his need for time alone to care for his animals, to exercise, and to play fantasy football. With this defense in place, Steven was able to keep his tension levels within a manageable range.
In Steven’s case, it was his own talking in the facilitating environment of the therapy hour that enabled him to develop the mature personality structures that had been underdeveloped since childhood (Winnicott, 1965). Mirroring interventions by the therapist were designed to tame his harsh superego, while joining techniques provided insulation for his drive energies (Spotnitz, 1987). In therapy sessions, Steven often said, “I’m a piece of shit.” or “I’m an asshole.” The therapist replied to these assessments with: “Okay, let me see if I’ve got this straight: you’re a soft, brown, smelly pile of excrement?” or “You’re just a shit factory?” Steven responded, “Well, when you put it that way, what I mean is…” and countered the self-attack with a more tempered analysis of his character. Recently, he has been able to point out a mistake he might have made without expressing such intense anger with himself. His ego has strengthened in the transference, and feelings have emerged that were absent in his early life such as the feeling of being worthwhile and wanted.

Attention problems and attachment disorder in a twelve-year-old girl

When Martina reached the age of four soon after immigrating to this country from Romania, her parents got divorced. The divorce was followed by a campaign on her father’s part to win her over as a victory trophy in his battle against her mother. He seductively plied Martina with gifts and permissiveness to make himself the preferred parent. When Martina complained about minor conflicts with her mother, he supported and exaggerated them, and then added his own negative thoughts. He objected to any expression of affection Martina might make toward her mother. He cried and clung to her when they parted at the end of her visitations.

Martina’s mother responded to Martina’s negative moods and complaints about their time together with hostile retaliation, a displacement of her anger toward Martina’s father whom she perceived as turning Martina against her with his emotional neediness. In response to feeling insecure in the relationships with both of her parents, Martina developed severe anxiety attacks. At visiting time with her mother, she would crawl under
her bed and cry inconsolably until her father returned to pick her up. She chose to spend more time with her father, and her mother eventually gave up trying to make her own time with Martina successful. These difficulties were exacerbated by the isolation Martina experienced as a newcomer to this country, learning a new language while attempting to forge friendships with peers.

Martina was essentially erased as an individual in her own right. Her father used her as his confidante in place of his wife. She was his source of security and love. Simultaneously her mother ceased to see her as anything but an extension of the father’s hostile campaign to discredit her as a woman and a parent. Constrained by her parents’ ceaseless narcissistic demands, Martina’s own need for security and love was squelched.

When she was brought in for treatment at age 12, Martina was having severe difficulties in school with both learning objectives and peer relationships. Although she had acquired fluency in English, she was not motivated to complete her homework. She seemed unable to sustain effort at working for longer than a few minutes at a time. In class, she drifted off, left her seat, and detached from what was occurring in the classroom. She was completely lost in her own emotional world. Martina was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and given medication. This reduced her impulsivity, but she seemed to turn even further inward, becoming obsessively preoccupied with her body image.

In sessions, Martina alternated between three types of presence: a withdrawn state of examining objects in her purse; a seductive demeanor characterized by her asking intrusive questions about the therapist’s sexual experiences; or a hostile demeanor featuring paranoid accusations and angry threats to leave. Whereas the active roles of seducer or attacker seemed to represent imitations of her parents, the withdrawn state seemed to be her most authentic self.

In Martina’s case, internalizations of parental representations had occurred, but they were of a part-object, one-dimensional, and primitive nature. Her father’s affective seductions and manipulations and her mother’s hostile rejection and abandonment became the only models for attachment Martina could
The treatment approach in Martina’s case involved intensive work with the parental dyad. Both parents became motivated by their shared goal of having a healthy child—a goal that met their narcissistic need to be mirrored in the world. They willingly learned to avoid engaging in destructive patterns, and instead began presenting their daughter with a positive impression of their relationship as cooperative and mutually supportive. This helped reduce Martina’s anxiety about their aggression toward each other as well as her own fears about their abandoning her. Her energy was freed to forge an identity of her own, using the healthier aspects of her parents’ personalities that emerged when the destructive elements were contained. After Martina’s return from the residential program, she enrolled in a therapeutic day school. Her parents were now better prepared to cooperate in her care. She has resided with both parents in a joint custody agreement since then, and the parents continue to attend conjoint sessions on her behalf.

**Conclusion**

These case vignettes are representative of the lives of countless children whose development has been disrupted by marital disharmony and divorce. Something crucial is lost internally for a child when his parents’ relationship deteriorates and dissolves. His psychic structures are weakened by the excessive demands that the losses of divorce place on his developing ego. In addition to difficulties in developing a healthy attachment style and managing uncontained drive energies, the child is frequently overwhelmed by feelings of powerlessness and insignificance. This experience is symbolized in Baum-bach’s movie by the image of Walt’s visiting the exhibit of the giant squid fighting the giant whale at the Museum of Natural History in New York. Walt is dwarfed by the creatures’ size and the inexorable nature of their battle as they remain frozen for all time in a death grip, just as his parents seemed...
to be. For Walt’s real-life counterparts, much of the solution appears to lie in the possibility of therapeutic remediation of their relationship.

Donner (2006) found that divorce represents a narcissistic injury and a psychic loss to each parent, leaving each no longer feel loved or wanted. Their libidinal needs then turn toward the child. Any expression of love on the child’s part toward the other parent is experienced as a threat and a loss of control. With their aggressive impulses evoked by the perception that they cannot win the child as their sole possession and feeling the threat of loss of narcissistic supplies now sourced in the child, parents concern themselves with what they are “getting” in the divorce. The number of days and hours they have with their child is entered onto a psychic scoreboard, and the child’s personal needs, such as a daughter’s need for more time with mother during puberty, are forgotten. As a result, children become overstimulated by the open expression of their parents’ libidinal and aggressive strivings. They are equally overwhelmed by the abundance of their own drive energy that has been set loose by the parents’ decision to destroy the container of the familial bond. Terrified of the aggression in the environment and in themselves, they are left to forge strategies for survival with whatever primitive defenses may be at their disposal.

The therapist’s role in treating divorced parents is to model “good-enough” mothering (Winnicott, 1965). The therapist models the healthy parent, absorbing and containing drive energies of the dyad, raising awareness of the child’s needs and of the impact of parental actions, both verbal and physical, on the child’s well-being. The narcissistic need of each parent to be loved by the child as reflected in the child’s allegiance can be transformed into the goal of being positively reflected by the child’s emotional stability and proper functioning in the world. The therapist can support this trend by building a shared vision of the child’s innate gifts and noticing the obstacles that might lie in the way of the child’s ability to express those gifts in the world. For example, parents can be helped to become flexible about visitation arrangements when traveling between homes twice a week impedes academic and extracurricular activities during the high school years.
In order to improve cooperation between parents who have themselves been injured by the experience of one another’s rejection and attacks, the therapist must routinely offer narcissistic supplies, working to reverse patterns of harm that may have been chronic through many years of a troubled marriage. McCormack (2000) discusses important moments when the therapist acts as an assistant to the couple, helping them move away from the paranoid-schizoid position of splitting and projective identification. They are encouraged instead to adopt the therapist’s capacity to think rather than act and to consider alternatives to the binary, either-or mode of thinking that dominates pre-oedipal personality organization. As the therapy offers a transitional space for contemplation rather than action, couples begin to experience one another as less threatening, and collaboration in the care of the children can more easily occur.

For example, a divorced couple sought treatment for their impulse-disordered 12-year-old son, but in the first session it became evident that their own relationship was severely contaminated by unmitigated rage, contempt, and vengeful retaliation, behaviors that were demonstrated in each of their early sessions. Taking a position of thoughtful curiosity, the therapist presented a theory that their son’s difficulties might be directly related to the models they exhibited in their interactions in her office. As a result of examining these patterns, they began to work more humanely with one another to resolve long-standing disputes about custody and to identify their own well-being as co-parents as central to their child’s mental health. Progress in the case came in part from the therapist’s demonstrations of positive regard for both parents, even in the face of their mutual contempt. A respectful disposition firmly placing limits on acting out in the session neutralized the couple’s hostile aggression and made it possible for effective dialogue to begin.

In the treatment of children who are suffering from the impact of divorce and its aftermath, the therapist offers an experience of consistency, drive containment, and affect tolerance as an alternative to what the child may be experiencing in his family life. In play and in conversation, the child’s drives and affects are expressed and explored without condemnation. The child’s overwhelming experience of loss and powerlessness, which often cannot be held by either parent, can find expression in the
therapy when the therapist encourages unique and creative avenues for empowerment and mastery of the child’s internal and external worlds.

The basic human need to feel wanted was poignantly expressed and worked through in the case of Harry Baker (Spotnitz, 1988). Harry threatened to abandon the treatment if the analyst would not agree to adopt him. He was suffering from powerlessness that stemmed from a history of insecure attachments. When it was suggested that he could adopt the analyst, Harry felt empowered to choose the relationship for himself, thereby stemming the anxiety about possible abandonment by a needed other. In therapy, the child of divorce also suffers from intense fears of abandonment and is helped when he can express his objections and anger about the loss of the marital union and about the resulting feelings of not being wanted by either parent, feelings that occur no matter how many assurances parents have offered to the contrary.

Children of divorce benefit from treatment from the very onset of their parents’ rift. At the same time, parents must be educated about the impact of their hostilities on their children and helped to work together for the children’s well-being. An explicit understanding of the effects of divorce on children can help parents manage their affects and drive energies in more mature ways and become motivated to utilize options such as mediation rather than litigation to resolve differences about custody and visitation. They can make every effort to maintain for their children the experience of being fully contained.

references


