

## *Separation as a protective factor: homogeneous groups for parents\**

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**Summary.** *When there is an inability to restore a marriage covenant and it is out of need that a particular bond is held, the gap that ensues involves the entire family and the behaviors that spouses have may not be balanced and have consequences for their children. The majority of separations are not the result of a consensual desire, but in general one of the two spouses leaves the other, while one spouse wants to exit the relationship, the other would like to continue it. Conflict is natural and it is necessary for producing change, thus separation can be an opportunity for transformation. Therapeutic groups can be a valuable support during this transition.*

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### **Theoretical references**

In recent decades, social and cultural changes have led to a change in the family, prompting researchers to deal with the issue of parenting and

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outline proposals for educational and psychological support and/or intervention (Cambi, 2006; Milani, 2004).

In a relationship between husband and wife, intimacy and power are the components that define the boundaries and rules, interpersonal and psychological spaces on which to negotiate in a cooperative way, crisis situations (Emery, 1998).

A marital crisis is always a traumatic event, sometimes sudden, involving all the members of the family and it creates tension in the intra-interpersonal. It involves many feelings: a sense of loss, defeat, guilt and betrayal. The difficulties faced are also different depending on the phase of the life cycle in which the family separates. When the psychological processing of separation is not complete, there are still feelings of anger and guilt and feelings of loss (Cigoli, Galimberti, & Mombelli, 1988), and these feelings are part of a grieving process that is difficult to label (Emery, 2004).

The clashes and negative emotions often involve the children, further fueling the conflict and confusion and creating high risk situations which can lead to revenge, complaints, police reports, family mobbing and situations where children can be manipulated or excluded from the life of the other parent, with the possible consequence of "parental alienation syndrome" (Gardner, 1998). Parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is a psychological dysfunction that can be activated in some situations of conflict in separation and divorce and if not properly mediated can escalate into a spiral of violence.

Some research (Amato, & Keith, 1991; Wallerstein, & Kelly, 1980) on the behavior of children from separated couples have found specific experiences in relation to different age groups: for pre-school children it is difficult to distinguish the relationships between the two parents, because they do not have sufficient cognitive tools to understand the situation and to process the change and the loss of one parent. Unfortunately from this can arise beliefs about being the cause of the separation and guilt associated with this experience, and the inability to prevent the break-down in the bond between the parents. The absence of a parent triggers a fear of abandonment that can also persist in subsequent experiences (Barber, & Eccles, 1992; Gately, & Schwebel, 1991). Children between seven and ten years of age have an increased awareness of parental separation and express feelings of sadness and grief, and express anger in a direct manner towards a specific object, the father or the mother. They may also present psychosomatic symptoms (Tsamparli-Kitsara, & Kounenou, 2004).

Pre-teens and teens have even greater awareness and understanding of the separation of the parents, because they start a process of psychological

distancing. The reactions are varied: alternating periods of depressive phase and aggression, including: acting out, running away from home, reckless or antisocial behavior and the presence of hypochondriacal symptoms and dropout from school (Glick, 1989).

### **Parent groups using a psychoanalytic approach**

The use of the group as a tool for working with parents promotes the possibility of finding a space of emotional acceptance, in which to experiment and understand, through comparison, discussion and exchange, experiences among peers, their resources and those of the parental in the relationship with their children (Mazzucchelli, 2011; Pezzoli, 2007).

Parent groups are often groups of homogeneous individuals that attend therapy for a limited time (Ustica, 2002), where it is easier to reach a good level of cohesion. Groups have a pre-defined duration, and designed to maximize the benefits that can be obtained through the group, so that the participants can return renewed with new parenting skills obtained through the exchange and comparisons within peer groups in the matrix.

This type of group has the purpose of assisting parents with difficult tasks, whether it is to prevent mental disorders, to support their role as parents or when there are particular problems.

The use of psychodynamic groups allows sharing of difficulties, highlighting, and unveiling troubled dynamics, thereby making it possible to glimpse the possibility of a different kind of adaptive relationship (Lo Coco, & Lo Verso, 2006).

### **Clinical Research**

We conducted a clinical qualitative analysis of four therapy groups for parental support, carried out at a clinic in the Veneto region, led by a psychotherapist-group analyst. The possibility of sharing in a homogeneous group the difficulties and individual resources associated with separation results in an increase of therapeutic factors, investigated with the FAT.A.S-G questionnaire (Marogna et al., 2011). The groups were conducted over a five-month period and met every two weeks for 90 minutes.

The comparison between the data of the two groups conducted with parents of children between 0 and 11 years of age, showed that

interpersonal learning is the factor that enables participants to compare stories similar to their own and that favored learning new ways of relating through participation.

The two groups made up by the parents of preteens and adolescents (11-18 years of age) reached a good level of cohesion and awareness and were able to reflect upon the ways of "being kids" or the relationship with their parental figures, and how that affected the relational modalities with their children.

The comparison is particularly intense, the emotional point of view led to the recapitulation of the primary family group, a therapeutic factor that showed a significant increase in scores in both groups during the three days of the survey questionnaire.

The data from this limited experience confirm that homogeneous groups for separated parents offer a place to experience emotional support and to find the relationship between new resources.

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