



Handbook for Parents Who
Want Their Children to Have
**VIOLENCE-FREE
CHILDHOOD**

Centrum LOCIKA
2019

Centrum



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1. A Few Words to Begin...

Dear parents,

You are holding a handbook published by Centrum LOCIKA for you, parents. We hope that it will help guide you on your journey. We appreciate that you have decided to seek out the advice of Centrum LOCIKA. It is an important signal indicating that you truly care about your children and their future. We know that violence in close family relationships is always very difficult for everyone involved and it takes a great deal of courage to want to change the situation at home in your children's interest.

At Centrum LOCIKA, we help children exposed to domestic violence. To be able to provide adequate help, we closely cooperate with you as their parents. We will offer the necessary support and see you as our partners in this cooperation.

This handbook is part of the help we provide. We believe that it will make basic navigation in our services easier and allow you to better understand the potential impact of domestic violence on children and how you can help them.

Please remember that although the information in this handbook may serve as certain guidance, it definitely cannot replace professional help.

We wish you a lot of strength on your journey.

On behalf of Centrum LOCIKA Team,

Petra Wúnschová
Founder and Director

2. About Centrum LOCIKA: How and Whom We Help

Vision of Centrum LOCIKA:

WE WANT CHILDREN IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC TO GROW UP IN VIOLENCE-FREE FAMILIES.

Mission of Centrum LOCIKA:

WE HELP CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS TO LIVE A VIOLENCE-FREE LIFE AND PROMOTE HEALTHY FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS.

Objectives of our efforts:

- To stop violence in families.
- To help children cope with the effects of violence.
- To help both parents cope with the effects of violence and improve their parental competences.
- To reduce the risk of transgenerational transfer of violent behavioral patterns.

- To prevent any further damage to the child caused when dealing with the authorities.

2.1. Our fundamental philosophy – what we believe in at Centrum LOCIKA

- Children need a safe violence-free family environment for their healthy development.
- Children in families, where violence is present, are particularly vulnerable and need help.
- We see the family situation through the eyes of the child and pursue the child's best interests.
- To be able to effectively help children, we cooperate with all family members. We see parents as indispensable partners in our cooperation.
- Safety of all cooperating parties is our priority.
- Everyone, who seeks out our help, will have our full respect.
- We do not judge. However, we clearly name the problematic behavior and help change it for the child's benefit.
- We stand against violence as such. Every one of us has the right to be upset and show anger. However, no one has the right to be violent and hurt others.
- We believe in change. Violence can be stopped. Everyone deserves help: persons, who are subject to violence committed by others, as well as persons who behave violently.

2.2. What can you and your child expect at Centrum LOCIKA

Centrum LOCIKA has been providing its services by virtue of an authorization to provide social and legal protection services for children under Act No. 359/1999 Sb. The state grants this authorization to organizations that meet statutory requirements and protect the best interests of the child. Children, who experience domestic violence, are defined by this act as at-risk children. In practice, this means that we view the family situation through the eyes of the child. For this reason, we do not work as instructed by either parent. Instead, we support the parents to make desirable changes to ensure that the child does better.

The family's cooperation with Centrum LOCIKA takes place in **two phases**. A simple description of the individual steps can be found in the attached diagram. This handbook provides basic information intended to help with the initial navigation in our services. We will give you a more detailed description of the individual steps in person once you enter the service.

The first stage is called **mapping**. It may but does not have to be followed by the **follow-up care stage**. The mapping phase aims to professionally assess the child's

situation in the family. This phase usually takes 3-4 months when we work with the child and with each parent separately. We obtain comprehensive information about the family in order to be able to assess the child's mental state, current needs and any risks to his or her development. The mapping output is presented to the parents at the final meeting where we work together with the parents on defining the specific steps in the plan for providing the best possible assistance to the child and the family.

At any stage of cooperation, the social worker may convene or initiate a **case conference**, i.e. a meeting of all professionals, including the employees of the children's services authority who work with the parents (and any older children) to discuss and plan the most effective steps possible that may be taken in the interest of the child.

The follow-up care includes help for children as well as their parents. Some of the most commonly offered forms of help are: **individual therapy for children, group therapy for children, child-oriented counseling for parents**. Mothers can use a **women's group** and fathers can use a **men's group**. Where the parent-child relationship needs to improve, we can offer **parent-child therapy, art therapy**, or help improve the parent-child communication using **video interaction guidance (VIG)**.

If your child is facing examination by the Police or in court, we can help you and your child handle the situation and protect the child from any insensitive interventions.

We will enter into a **service agreement** with you in writing for both stages of cooperation. This agreement includes the rules of cooperation with the main obligation being to refrain from violent behavior during the provision of the service and from consuming alcohol and drugs before the meeting at LOCIKA.

Our services are provided **free of charge**. This does not mean, however, that they are cheap. One hour of specialized services costs CZK 600–1,000. If you know you will not be able to show up for an appointment for serious reasons, please let us know as soon as possible so that we can use the time slot for other clients. Thank you!

2.3. With whom will you meet

Cooperation with the mother and the father takes place separately. At the initial meeting, the parent meets a **social worker** who inquires about the parent's wishes and needs and explains in detail what we can offer to the family at the LOCIKA Center. If the parents agree to cooperate, the mapping stage begins. Each member has their own guide throughout the mapping stage: mothers are assisted by a **specialist for women**, fathers by a **specialist for men**, and children by a **child psychologist**. Cooperation between all family members and the Center's specialists is coordinated by a **social worker / case manager** who the parents know from the initial meeting.

All employees at Centrum LOCIKA are properly trained, supervised, and comply with the appropriate Code of Ethics and Work Standards.

2.4 Other organizations that cooperate with Centrum LOCIKA

Domestic violence is a comprehensive issue bordering on law, justice, social work, psychology, psychiatry and other fields. Multidisciplinary cooperation is necessary to ensure that the assistance provided to the family is effective. Centrum LOCIKA cooperates with various authorities and organizations. By law, we must be always in contact with the relevant employees of the Department for the Social and Legal Protection of Children (OSPOD) of the relevant authority. In addition, where necessary, we cooperate with the Police of the Czech Republic, the Probation and Mediation Service, courts, judicial experts, intervention centers and healthcare facilities (including but not limited to the Children Psychiatry Department). In addition, we cooperate with organizations such as Dětské krizové centrum (Children's Crisis Center), Bílý kruh bezpečí (victim support services), Liga otevřených mužů (men's support center) and other specialized organizations.

We submit expert reports to courts, OSPOD and the Police of the Czech Republic at their request. Parents are always informed about the content of the reports. We do not draw up expert reports at the request of parents or their legal representatives.

2.5. What we do not do at Centrum LOCIKA

- We do not decide who is guilty of causing and committing violence in the family. That is a task for the Police of the Czech Republic and the judicial system and we fully respect their conclusions. Our goal is to help stop domestic violence and help parents change their ways.
- We do not cooperate with the parents' lawyers and write reports on request. Our conclusions and examinations of children do not replace reports drawn up by official court experts.
- We do not cooperate with addicts or persons suffering from a mental illness of such severity that it would prevent cooperation. Such persons must start by seeking out help at other places.
- We do not offer individual therapy or diagnostics for adults. We communicate with adults only in relation to their position of parents. Where individual therapeutic or psychiatric help is needed, we provide the parents with contact information for other organizations.
- We do not try to patch up family problems and keep families together. We try to help parents be good parents even if they live separately.
- We are not hired by one of the parents. We approach both parents as partners with a view to help their child and improve their skills in their parental role.
- We do not provide assisted contact of parents and children. This care is provided by other organizations.

3. What Is Violence in Close Relationships?

VIOLENCE IS AN ACT AGAINST ANOTHER INTENDED TO HURT, INTIMIDATE OR HUMILIATE THEM IN ORDER TO FORCE THEM TO ACT AGAINST THEIR WILL (OR NOT TO ACT ACCORDING TO THEIR WILL).

Every one of us is aggressive to a certain extent, we are angry and upset at times. Every one of us has experienced violence or aggression in their lives. If we care about our family members, we learn how to work with aggression: not to use it against others and hurt them that way. Every case of violence has a major negative impact on the mental state of everyone involved, on family relationships and it mainly causes significant damage to children. If violence is repeated, intensive and has severe impact, it may be punishable under criminal law.

In that case, the Police may intervene in the family and the situation is assessed by an independent court. It is much more beneficial for everyone involved to seek out help before the family situation becomes that serious.

3.1 Forms of violence in close relationships

Violence does not need to be physical, it can take on many other forms. Per Isdal (in: Jakobsen, B., Råkil, M., 2017) lists the following forms of violence:

- **Physical violence** – this includes a wide range of behaviors involving the use of physical strength such as violent holding, shoving, shaking, hair pulling, hitting, kicking, the use of weapons or even murder.
- **Sexual violence** – this includes sexual harassment and name calling, pressure and forcing into sexual activities against the will of the person at risk, forcing into intercourse with other persons, items or animals, including brutal rape and sexual torture. Cases of sexual violence also include aspects of assertion of power, pressure, force, inducing pain and intimidation.
- **Material violence** – violence aimed against physical items in order to intimidate or embarrass another. This includes, for example, breaking a piece of furniture, punching walls, doors, throwing things.
- **Psychological violence** has 7 categories:
 - **Indirect threat** – behavior that implies potential danger or consequences in the form of physical violence. Threats may be verbal or non-verbal (gesture, look), they communicate information about the potential violent consequences and result in having control over the other person.
 - **Degrading and belittling behavior** – behavior aimed at causing psychological harm or degradation. It is mainly verbal with a view to put the other person in bad light or forcing the other person to act in a way that he or she perceives as degrading. This includes name calling and public ridicule.

- **Control** – an attempt to gain control over the life of another person by force or threat. This may concern time, activity, information, social contact, clothing, behavior or habits. Such behavior creates a relationship based on dominance and submission where one of the partners must completely submit to the other person’s demands and expectations. A frequent form is economic control where one of the partners controls the funds and allowance is given to the other person at the dominant partner’s discretion.
- **Pathological jealousy** – conduct where a person intimidates or hurts another person due to jealousy or where such conduct becomes a tool of control. It may be a pretence for hurting others by accusing them and claiming that the partner wants to find someone else or bringing up past sexual experiences.
- **Isolation** – direct or indirect duress with a view to restrict the freedom of movement and living space of another. Contact with the surroundings, family and friends is limited, sometimes the person is prevented from going to work. The reason may be exercising control as well as an attempt to hide the consequences of violence. In extreme cases, it may result in dependence on the dominant partner and ultimately in the person’s inability to see violence as something that is unacceptable or unnatural.
- **Emotional violence** – behavior aimed at making another person feel degraded, inferior or unimportant. This includes neglect, systematic overlooking, ignoring deals and promises, ignoring the person and being silent with a view to achieve one’s goals, and arrogant and degrading behavior.

4. How can domestic violence affect a child?

Domestic violence always has a negative impact on the child. Generally, the younger the child, the closer the violence physically, the more frequent the violence and the longer the child’s exposure, the more serious the negative consequences. We can summarize the negative impact of violence on the child in the following points:

- The child learns that violent behavior in relationships is a normal way of getting what one wants.
- The child’s perception of the world changes. The world becomes a dangerous place to live, a place where one must be always alert and ready to protect themselves.
- The child receives confusing signals about relationships. One of the messages that get to the child could be something like this: Those, who love you, will always hurt you a lot.
- Repeated experience with violence reduces sensitivity to violence. This then easily becomes standard behavior: Children may then have the tendency to later become those who hurt others or those who tolerate getting hurt.

- Children experiencing domestic violence are often left alone to deal with their confusing feelings. Depending on their age, they interpret the situation they experience in their own way and then live feeling guilty, afraid, helpless etc.
- The child may feel very lonely, be afraid to speak about violence to keep a secret which may put an excessive mental strain on the child and complicate his or her relationships with other people.
- The child loses his or her support in both parents and is often forced to become a “little adult” due to inadequate demands.
- The child is usually ashamed of the situation at home and feels guilty.
- The child does not have any models for healthy ways of handling stressful situations and controlling emotions.
- The child learns that dysfunctional close relationships are normal.
- The child often gets used to imbalance in male-female relationships where one of the sexes is seen as inferior.
- Many children experiencing domestic violence show symptoms of trauma (more on childhood trauma in Chapter 6.1.).
- These children often suffer from anxiety, depression, and may behave aggressively at school.
- Research has shown (Jacobsen, Rákil, 2017) that children, who grew up in violent families, often behave aggressively as adults, abuse alcohol and narcotics, are more prone to mental illness (including but not limited to depression and anxiety disorders), more often manifest signs of suicidal behavior, are more susceptible to health issues (i.e. autoimmunity, cardiovascular, oncological diseases), attain lower levels of education, which affects their success in the labor market, and have difficulties with establishing and maintaining functional relationships.

5. Myths about Children and Domestic Violence

Many myths about the impact of domestic violence on children are spread among adults. Some of them are debunked and explained below.

Myth 1: Violence is only physical. Psychological violence has no effect on children.

This is false. Psychological violence between parents may be more devastating to a child than witnessing physical violence (Jacobsen, 2017, Groves, 2002).

Myth 2: If violence is not taking place right in front of the children, it cannot affect them.

Parents often use this phrase to downplay the impact of their behavior. However, children have their “radars”. They have a very strong perception of changes in emotions and atmosphere at home. They can sense their parents’ conflicts even if they take place, for example, at night behind the closed bedroom door. They can sense an imminent conflict which increases their alertness and readiness for action (to intervene, hide etc.).

Myth 3: Small children are immune to violence because they are too young to understand it and they will not remember it.

It is true that children under 3 years of age do not have fully developed centers for explicit memory (i.e. verbal memory for events) and they will most likely not remember violent situations in the form of a story. Recent research has shown, however, that even infants respond to the conflicts by distress and a change in behavior. Repeated exposure to violence at an early age changes the development of a child’s brain, specifically both in terms of the structure of the brain tissue as well as chemical responses in the brain (Perry, 2001 and 1997; Siegel, 2014). Children repeatedly exposed to traumatizing violent situations tend to be irritable, impulsive and aggressive. They often suffer from permanent changes in the way they experience life and in their behavior. Although they do not retain the memory of violence in the form of an event that they could tell about in the form of a story, their brain and body have a very good memory of the feelings that the child experienced during his or her parents’ violence.

Myth 4: Domestic violence only concerns children from socially underprivileged families.

Statistics show that in the Czech Republic domestic violence is a threat to up to 14% of children. Violence affects all social classes with one difference: the more educated the family is, the more sophisticated and unapparent the forms of violence tend to be.

Myth 5: A violent parent does not love his or her children and does not deserve to be their parent.

Many parents, who behave violently to the other parent, have a close relationship with their children and can be good parents. The child’s relationship with the parent tends to be, however, disturbed by the violence and it may require therapeutic treatment. However, there are parents who are failing in their parental role to such extent that their contact with children is dangerous and permanently damaging.

Myth 6: Domestic violence is a purely private matter and it is only up to the parents to resolve the situation.

Experience with violence tends to be so devastating to the parents that it may be very difficult for them to stop the violence and deal with its consequences using their own resources. The family therefore often needs external help. It takes a lot of effort for the parents to control their own emotions and the children are left on the sidelines. Asking for help is a sign of personal courage. Professional help is often required.

Myth 7: Every child growing up in a family, where violence is present, is permanently damaged.

Fortunately, this is not true. There are many factors that may protect the children from damage. And parents play a major role in this situation (more on this on the following pages). Generally, we can say that a child experiencing violence in relationships is changed forever but he or she does not necessarily need to be damaged forever.

6. Most Common Symptoms in Children Experiencing Violence in Relationships

At Centrum LOCIKA, we see many negative impacts on the development of children growing up in families where violence is present. Many children that we meet are traumatized by domestic violence.

6.1 What is trauma

Trauma is an experience of extreme danger associated with intense fear with which the child or parent cannot cope in a short period of time (Matoušek, 2017). Trauma occurs when the child is affected by an intense situation out of the blue, overwhelms the child and the child then remains disconnected from his or her body, mind and spirit. All protective mechanisms that the child had are undermined at that moment and the child feels completely helpless and desperate (Levine, Kline, 2014). The traumatic event affects not only the child's emotion but also his or her behavior, way of experiencing life, and body, mainly the nervous system.

There are 3 types of events that have the most potential to cause trauma (Rothschild, 2015):

- 1.** Events that threaten the life or physical integrity of the child (e.g. a risk of injury) or where the child perceives the situation as such.
- 2.** Events where the child witnesses violent acts committed on another person, mainly on a close caring relative or friend.
- 3.** Events where the child hears of committed violence and the fact that a person close to the child / taking care of the child is in danger, injured or dies.

It is apparent from the above description that domestic violence has a great potential to cause trauma to (not only) children. Some persons, who have been exposed to trauma, may suffer from so-called post-traumatic stress disorder. Briefly speaking, it is a psychological disorder which is characterized by certain typical symptoms that significantly affects the way the child experiences life and behaves, therefore it affects the quality of the child's life. Some possible symptoms typical for children may include (D'Andrea et al, 2012):

- Repeated obtrusive thoughts, physical feelings associated with the trauma (children may have nightmares, re-enactment of the traumatic events when playing, certain images associated with the trauma may keep coming back...).
- Avoiding everything that brings back memories of the trauma.
- Increased irritability and sensitivity to seemingly neutral stimuli, or tendency to disconnect and be apathetic.
- Negative thoughts about self and the world, e.g. "I am the bad one", sense of guilt "This is all my fault."
- Persistent negative emotions (fear, dread, anger, guilt, shame etc.) or even inability to experience positive emotions.
- Loss of interest in favorite activities.
- Irritability or even aggressive behavior, or self-destructive behavior.
- Attention disorders, sleep disorders.
- Alertness, inadequate jumpiness and more.

Trauma originating from within the family, i.e. the closest relationships, becomes a source of symptoms of many other mental issues and disorders. Especially if the child is exposed to traumatic situations repeatedly. Some of the most common difficulties observed in such at-risk children over a longer time period, on which many other authors agree (Hughes, 2017; DAndrea et al., 2015; Matoušek et al. 2017; Barvíková, Paloncyová, 2016 and others) include:

- **Emotional problems**

The ability to recognize positive and negative feelings and express them in a healthy way is limited. The child may suppress feelings (which may lead to depression and somatic issues) or, on the other hand, express them in an uncontrolled manner (aggression, anxiety).

- **Social skills**

The ability to establish and maintain healthy relationship may be significantly limited. The child may therefore fail at relationships with his or her peers, later at work, in relationships or as parents towards their own children.

- **Somatic issues**

The child does not learn how to recognize and control various bodily conditions: difficulties recognizing hunger, fatigue, pain. The psychological issues are somatized, the child is often ill.

- **Dissociation**

During a traumatic event, the child's body is overwhelmed with emotions. One of possible protective responses for dealing with such overwhelming is disconnecting from some of their feelings, so-called freezing up. However, this emotional distress stays in the body. Some children may be "frozen up" in the long term as if they had "no reception", they seem to be "disconnected". In various situations, however, this frozen-up energy may be released in the form of uncontrolled flashbacks. That means that the child may suddenly experience in a common situation what he or she experienced in a threatening situation. It is usually difficult for other people to understand the child's response.

- **Behavioral disorders**

Due to their inability to control their physical and emotional expressions, these children have difficulties concentrating and controlling themselves. They tend to be impulsive, they seem to be difficult to control in terms of educational development. Adults often see him or her as a "naughty" child who intentionally breaks rules and disrespects norms. These children then often fail in systems that require certain rules, e.g. at school.

- **Learning disorders**

Children, who are exposed to violence in close relationships in the long-term, are permanently alert, they are in a so-called "survival" mode. In the way they experience the world, there is danger everywhere and one must always protect himself or herself. That is why they have difficulties focusing on learning (and using the higher-level, intellectual part of the brain). *It is similar as if you were walking through a park at night, heard steps behind you, felt threatened, and at the same time someone would want you to learn a poem by heart and recite it.*

- **Self-concept disorders**

Children exposed to violence tend to perceive themselves negatively. They often experience feelings of shame that is multiplied by a feeling of being different. Difficulties in relationships with their peers result in further rejections and by extension in repeated confirmation of the "I am flawed".

Mapping of the child's situation, which always includes a **psychodiagnostic assessment**, can give an answer to the question whether a child was or was not traumatized, or what impact the exposure to violence had on the child. This assessment is usually carried out in 2 sessions. The psychologist uses a set of standard psychological tests to map out the current psychological state of the child, the level of his or her psychosocial development and any deviations from a healthy norm.

If you see any of the aforementioned symptoms in your child, it does not necessarily indicate traumatization. However, you should seek out professional help.

6.2. How to prevent traumatization in children?

The basic prerequisite for protecting children from traumatization is ensuring safety in the family which requires **stopping all violence**. The child is not responsible for ensuring a safe family environment, it is the adults' responsibility. In the event that the

child is exposed to a traumatic situation, the parents' behavior can have a major effect on the impact of the situation on the child (Levine, Kline, 2014; Perry, 2014).

Younger children in particular do not understand the situation they are experiencing and the parents' response has a major effect on their experiences. If the parent can take the child's feelings into consideration, protect and then calm down the child in an extreme situation, the effects of a traumatic situation can be minimized. On the contrary, a strong emotional response of a parent overtaken by his or her emotions, where the child is left on his or her own with his or her feelings, only amplifies the child's feeling of terror, helplessness, loneliness, and it may contribute to the onset of mental issues. **The parents' response is absolutely crucial in this regard.**

The parent should:

- Ensure their own safety and their child's safety;
- Listen to their child, show them love and interest, be available;
- Tone down, navigate the child's emotions, calm the child down;
- Explain the events that occurred at home in a way adequate to the child's age;
- Be a resource and support to their child.

7. How to Talk to a Child about Domestic Violence?

Many parents hesitate when it comes to whether and how they should talk about ongoing violence with their child. They struggle to find the right words and, in addition, explaining domestic violence to a child means confronting oneself with what is happening which tends to be uncomfortable for adults. It is understandable that they do not want to go back to relive the violent situation. At Centrum LOCIKA, however, we strongly recommend that parents talk to their child about violence and help the child understand the situation. Keeping quiet about violence promotes the tabooization of the topic and it lays grounds for the child to make up his or her own version of events which may have a negative impact on the child's further experiencing of events and their self-image. Example: The child may live with the feeling that his dad beat up his mom because the child did not behave; or if the child hits his younger sibling, he will go to prison just like his violent parent did. Below are some options how to talk to a child about domestic violence (according to Crager, Anderson, 1997).

7.1. What children need to hear about domestic violence from the person not expressing violent behavior

- That violence is not okay.
- That it is not the child's fault.
- That I am sorry that the child had to witness the situation.

- That I, as a parent, am looking for ways to help prevent the situation from happening again.
- That I am here for the child and will listen to everything that bothers him or her.
- That I will make sure the child stays safe.

7.2. What children need to hear about domestic violence from the person expressing violent behavior

- That violence is not okay and I should have acted differently.
- That I would like to apologize that the child had to witness it.
- That I am responsible for my behavior.
- That it is not the child's fault.
- That I will do everything I can to prevent it from happening again.
- That the child can talk to me without having to worry and I will listen.

8. How Children Experience Violence in Close Relationships and What They Need

The way children experience events may vary greatly. It is common that siblings in one family may have different experiences despite having witnessed the same situations. Below, we listed the most common feelings encountered in children exposed to domestic violence (according to Crager, Anderson, 1997). This is then supplemented with information about what children need and what they may be missing. However, the list is definitely not exhaustive.

Fear

- For their parents, siblings
- Of the parent behaving violently
- For their future, of what is coming next

What the children need:

- To experience the feeling of safety
- To have an opportunity to talk about the feelings to someone they trust
- To know what they can do if another situation threatening their safety arises again

Anger

- At the person who behaves violently

- At the person who is being hurt: that they stay in the situation, that they fail to protect themselves and the child as necessary
- At the fact that the child lives in a family exposed to violence

What the children need:

- To know that it is normal to be angry
- To learn ways how to vent anger in a healthy manner
- To have an opportunity to talk about their anger to someone they trust

Ambivalence – the state of having mixed feelings

- Children may experience contradictory feelings, such as when they love someone who is hurting them but at the same time they are afraid or ashamed of the person which may result in the feelings of guilt in them

What the children need:

- To hear that it is normal to feel confused and have contradictory feelings towards the same person
- To know that they are not bad if they love their parent who behaves violently
- Confirmation that they can love someone and, at the same time, disagree with their reactions in certain situations

Loss

- Loss of ideals about their parents, family that sticks together and family members who support each other
- Loss of one parent / both parents if the family falls apart
- Loss of feeling, background, attention and care that they need at their age

What the children need:

- To share their sadness caused by the loss with someone they trust and have the opportunity to mourn the loss
- To improve the resources/areas where they succeed: relationships with their friends, with their extended family, hobbies etc.

Guilt / responsibility

- Children often blame themselves for the situation at home
- They may feel guilty for not knowing how to stop violence between their parents
- They may assume responsibility for their parents, such as responsibility for protecting them, taking care of their younger siblings, the household etc.

What the children need:

- To clearly hear that they are not responsible for violence in their family and that it is not their fault
- To clearly hear that they are entitled to safety in their family and to be protected by both parents
- To clearly hear that domestic violence must be resolved by their parents and organizations that can help them with it, not the children themselves

Helplessness / Unpredictability

- Children often feel helpless because they cannot influence violent, often confusing and hard to predict situations in their families. The experience of repeated helplessness may result in future passive behavior, it may reinforce the permanent feeling that they cannot change things/relationships around them in accordance with their needs. Such children tend to, for example, allow other people to hurt them in the future. Other children may, on the other hand, have the permanent need to control everything that happens around them and may have the tendency to control others.
- The unpredictability of the situation and uncertainty of when the next conflict arises may lead to anxiety. The children then cannot focus on normal worries and joys of a child's life. Instead they try to control the situation in their family, prevent conflicts and protect those family members who they consider to be weaker.

What the children need:

- Clear rules and rituals in the family, to know when and what will happen and why
- To have the ability to contribute to decision-making to a certain extent and influence things that happen in their family
- To have other areas of life (school, friends, hobbies) where they can decide freely and have a healthy sense of control over their lives
- To have a safety plan in place with someone they trust

9. Child and Family Break-Up

The absolute majority of families where violence is present and there is no will or ability of the parents to change the situation and their behavior break up and the custody of children must be arranged. That is why we decided to focus on this issue in a separate chapter.

Family break-up usually places a huge stress on children. It is another potentially traumatizing situation. The degree of stress depends on the child's age and personality but most of all it depends on the child's parents: on their ability not to transfer their conflicts and pains into their relationship with the child, on their

current emotional capacity to be available to the child and help him or her handle the situation well.

The following applies to break-up/divorce situations in general (Buriánová, 2014):

- A divorce/break-up is, similarly to ongoing violence, an extreme stress for the parents. They often fail to see the children's needs and to separate the role of an ex-partner from their role of a parent. In this case, there is a risk of them neglecting the children's needs which may negatively affect the children's further development.
- A poorly handled divorce, which ends up going in circles creating a pathological situation, is eventually devastating for everyone involved, for the children as well as their parents.
- The divorce itself is not what causes the children's problems. They are caused by how their parents respond to the children's behavior and by the quality of their parenting.

Divorces in families that experienced violence tend to have their specificities. This always depends on the type of violence that occurred, its frequency and duration. In some families, divorce/break-up and separation of parents may give the children a sense of relief, especially if this ends violence between the parents. In other families, separation of parents results in further escalation of violence. The divorce phase often involves a fight for children and custody arrangements. Some parents start to use their children as a tool of power and control over the ex-partner. This often has a devastating effect on the children. Every divorce involves a major change and creates stress for the child. It brings up many contradictory feelings which cannot leave the child's behavior unaffected. Some parents falsely believe that leaving a violent household is a quick solution to negative symptoms observed in the children. This is usually not the case.

9.1. How do children usually experience the break-up of their family?

Every child is different and that is why the ways they experience things are individual. However, divorce disturbs every child's fundamental existential certainties and triggers feelings of danger. The child's future is suddenly uncertain.

Teyber (2007) describes three main fears of children during the divorce phase:

Fear of separation: Due to the parents' separation, the child loses the regular presence of one of the parents and may be afraid that the other parent might leave him or her as well. The child gains the experience that the most important people in this child's life may leave and, as a result, may feel extremely anxious.

Ideas of the parents' reunification: Most children try to bring their parents close again, and sometimes they still believe that they would be a complete family again many years after their parents' break-up. For this reason, the parents must clearly and comprehensibly tell the children that the parents' break-up is final. In some families, where the child used to witness violence, the parents' separation may bring

a sense of relief and improve the child's feeling of safety. The thought of the potential family reunification is then more of a threat and another source of anxiety.

Feeling responsible: Many children (especially the younger ones) may believe that they are responsible for their parents' separation and feel guilty. Guilt brings children down, it prevents them from living a worry-free childhood, it amplifies the feeling of not being enough and impairs their ability to build relationships.

Divorce is associated with great demands on the children's mental state. They must deal with something that they would not have to deal with under other circumstances. Wallerstein (1990) formulated six tasks faced by children in case of their parents' divorce:

- To understand the factors that caused the family break-up.
- To overcome the feeling of loss.
- To make their peace with the fact that the divorce happened.
- To overcome anger.
- To return to their common development tasks at school and among their peers.
- To regain hope and believe in the future.

9.2. How can you as parents support your children in the divorce / break-up period:

As mentioned above, **parents**, i.e. their relationship with the children and their actions and behavior, are a major factor affecting the children's post-divorce adaptation. If the children's needs are taken into consideration, there is a great chance that the child will not continue to see the parents' divorce as an unprocessed traumatic experience. On the contrary, if the child learns that, despite any previous conflicts that led up to the divorce, the parents are capable of reaching an agreement and respecting each other's parental role, it may be a reinforcing experience (Buriánová, 2014). Generally, it can be concluded that a well-handled divorce of parents followed by effective parental agreements is less devastating to children than long-lasting reoccurring conflicts in a dysfunctional marriage/partnership.

The following fact turns out to be another protective factor: The child definitely needs to have a strong emotional bond to a family member (Perry, 2014). The more bonds there are and can be relied on in the difficult divorce situation, the better. Similarly as when talking about violence, the child needs to hear the reasons for divorce from both parents, formulated the same way by both parents. The child must be assured that it is not his or her fault and that both parents love him or her.

On the other hand, prioritizing the parents' needs at the expense of the children has a damaging effect on the children. In addition, pulling children into conflicts between parents has a negative impact on their relationship to the parents. Parents may manipulate children knowingly or unknowingly: make them the middlemen, confessors, hostages, they may punish them for expressing positive feelings

towards the other parent. These maneuvers are very dangerous. While they may bring certain advantages to the parents in the short term, they always result in losses in the long term because they can cause irreparable future damage to the children.

The parents' divorce alone does not need to cause mental issues to children. The way how the children adapt to the divorce situation is very closely related to their parents' adaptation. It can be concluded that parents can provide the best support to their children if they first seek out help for themselves to have sufficient capacity and energy to help their children.

10. Summary: What Behavior Exhibited by the Parents Is Most Damaging to Children?

- Absence of safety (i.e. presence of reoccurring violence in the family) and absence of a supportive, loving close person (persons) who can sense and meet the child's needs;
- When the parents are so overwhelmed by the conflict between the partners that they forget about the needs of their child: the child stays alone in the family;
- When the parent perceives the other parent only through their own negative experience as a partner, they fail to see them as the mother or father of their child, and admit that the child may have positive experiences with the other parent;
- Downplaying the impact of domestic violence on children;
- Long-lasting uncertainty: fear for parents, unclear agreements regarding custody arrangements after the parents' break-up/divorce, ongoing arguments without any concrete results in the form of agreements and rules;
- Lack of the parents' willingness and ability to communicate about matters concerning their children;
- When the child is used as a weapon in the fight against the other parent;
- Parents and other relatives putting pressure on the child: "Who do you love more?", "Who would you prefer to live with?", competing for the child's attention and pulling the child over to one's side;
- Slandering, embarrassing, dishonoring the other parent in front of the child;
- Corporal punishments, embarrassing the child;
- When the child repeatedly witnesses violence between relatives;
- Unreasonable demands, transfer of responsibility for care for siblings, for the household;
- Mental pressure to make the child refrain from talking about the situation or to make the child speak so as to benefit one of the parents;

- Obtaining information about the other parent through the child, sending messages through the child;
- When someone is talking bad about the child's parents;
- When the child hears one parent speak badly of the other parent.

11. Frequently Asked Questions

The mapping stage continues for 3-4 months. Does it mean you will be “only” obtaining information for this long? What if the situation in our family is urgent and we need help right away?

The mapping phase is definitely not just about obtaining information. To make sure we understand the family situation, we repeatedly meet with all family members. Such intensive cooperation often changes and stabilizes the family situation already in the mapping stage. And in emergencies, we address the situation with the individual family members immediately.

I am afraid that my partner will not want to cooperate with you and when he/she finds out what kind of organization you are, the situation at home will get even worse. Do I really have to inform him/her?

You don't have to. We will do it for you through OSPOD (Department for the Social and Legal Protection of Children) employees. Based on our practical experience, we know that assistance to a child is most effective when we cooperate with both parents. On the contrary, keeping specialized work with the child “secret” involves many risks. That is why we contact both parents to offer cooperation, usually through OSPOD employees. Some families are ordered by a court to cooperate with us. Our specialist will explain everything to you and discuss any concerns you may have in detail during the initial interview. The first consultation can be anonymous.

How much time will the cooperation take?

Quite a lot. At first, we meet with family members about once a week for the period of three months. That gives us plenty of time to repeatedly talk to the parents as well as the child. Some meetings are necessary (e.g. the parent's session with a psychologist to discuss the child), some are scheduled only for some families, and other meetings are requested by the parents themselves (e.g. discussions with the parent guide). The follow-up stage of our care is based on the needs of the respective families.

Can I refuse to cooperate with you?

You can. We want the cooperation with both parents and the child to be voluntary. If the parents wish to get help and are willing to cooperate, there is a great chance

of making a change. Before you refuse to cooperate with us, listen to what we have to offer and think about whether the cooperation with us might be beneficial to you after all.

Exceptions from this rule include situations when our care to be provided to the family is ordered (e.g. by court). In that case, we try to gain the parents' trust in us working together on making a change.

You offer many services, how much will it cost?

Centrum LOCIKA provides its services to all clients free of charge. However, the actual cost of the services is high. Example: therapy sessions for children cost CZK 800 each, an hour of counseling costs about CZK 600 and the cost of a comprehensive psychodiagnostic assessment of a child is about CZK 2,000. For this reason, if you cannot attend a session, please excuse your absence in advance to allow us to offer the available session to other prospective clients.

Can you change my partner / my child's behavior? Someone only needs to explain to him/her that...

We cannot change a person at another person's request. The only option how to work on a change is when the person wants to make a change. And every change needs time.

I need to confirm that there has been / has not been violence in our family. Can I receive a document confirming this?

Services provided by Centrum LOCIKA do not replace services provided by the Police or the Czech judicial system. Our goal is NOT to investigate what happened in the family. Our goal is to find out how the individual family members are doing, what they need, to what extent their needs are met, and to start up corrective mechanisms within the entire family system. It happens, however, that the Police, the court or OSPOD request a report on how the family cooperates with our center as part of the supporting materials to be used to independently assess the situation, and we are required to provide them.

You cooperate with the OSPOD. Could it cause me harm if these employees find out about the situation in our family?

On the contrary. Our experience has shown that good and timely cooperation with OSPOD employees not only helps resolve the family situation but it also makes the individual steps more foreseeable for the parents.

12. Recommended Literature

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MATĚJČEK, Zdeněk and Zdeněk DYTRYCH. *Přestali jste být manželi, ale zůstáváte rodiči [You Are No Longer Spouses But You Are Still Parents]*. Jinočany: H & H, 1992. ISBN 80-85467-53-4.

13. Additional Help Options

Emergency help via phone:

Prague Helpline: 222 580 697

Line for adults, 24/7 service

Safety helpline: 116 111

Helpline for children and students under 25 years of age. Free 24/7 service

DONA helpline: 251 51 13 13

Helpline for the victims of domestic violence, 24/7 service

Family helpline: 606 021 021.

Helpline for parents addressing problems with children

Mo-Th 1-7 p.m., Fr 9 a.m.- 3 p.m.

ACORUS, z. ú.

Prague 7, Dělnická 213/12

(help for persons at risk of domestic violence – including men and children)

24/7 helpline: 283 892 772

www.acorus.cz

Bílý kruh bezpečí helpline

Prague 5, U Trojice 2

(help for adults at risk of domestic violence)

Helpline for victims of crime and domestic violence: 116 006

Dona line: 251 51 13 13

www.116006.cz

www.donalinka.cz

Cestou necestou

Prague 2, Trojická 1

(help for at-risk children and their families)

731 430 848

www.cestounecestou.org

Dětské krizové centrum, z. ú.

Prague 4, V Zápolí 1250/21

(help for at-risk children and their families)

241 480 511, 241 483 853

www.ditekrize.cz

Dům tří přání, z. ú.

Prague 6, Terronská 727/7

(help for at-risk children and their families)

233 931 310, 602 662 063

www.dumtriprani.cz

Intervenční centrum Praha

Prague 3, Chelčického 39

(help for persons at risk of DV and violent persons)

281 911 883, 734 510 292

www.intervencnicentrum.cz

RIAPS Crisis Center

Prague 3, Chelčického 842/39

(24/7 help for adults in crisis)

222 586 768 (8:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.),

222 582151 (4:00 p.m. – 8:00 a.m.)

www.csspraha.cz/24829-krizove-centrum-riaps

SOS Center

Prague 2, Varšavská 37

(help for violent persons)

Stop Violence Helpline: 608 004 444

www.nasilivevtazich.cz

Triangl – Family Center

Prague 3, Chelčického 39/ 842

(help for at-risk children and their families)

281 863 620, 731 056 720

www.centrumtriangl.cz

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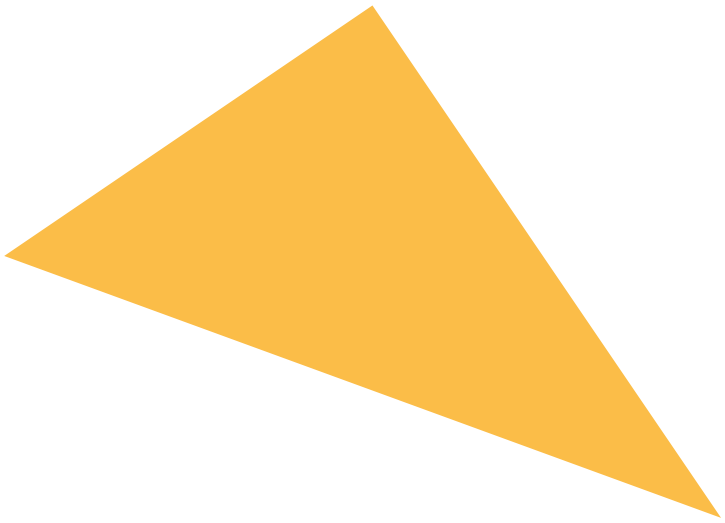
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