



Children's experiences and meaning construction on parental divorce: A focus group study

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Abstract:	The global aim of this study was to explore children's narratives of parental divorce. A convenience sample, composed of 11 and 14 year old children, was recruited. A total of 22 children (12 male, 10 female) participated in this focus group study. The findings show that two components seem to be really important for children during the divorce process: the ability to construct meaning about their parents' decision to divorce and their feeling to count in the process of family transition. Children expressed the need for an explanation about why parents decided to divorce and wanted to matter with regard to the decisions on their post-divorce living arrangements.

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Children’s Experiences and Meaning Constructions on Parental Divorce:
A Focus Group Study

In Flanders, more than 75.000 children face parental divorce each year and about 20% of all children have parents who live separately (Lodewijckx, 2005). The majority of children deal reasonably successfully with the divorce after an initial transition period (Kelly, 2007), showing resilience to cope with this stressful change within their family. There is nevertheless considerable variation in how children cope with family disruption (Hetherington, 2003), the research findings are mixed: while some children benefit from their new life situation, others do not fare as well in later life (Ahrons, 2007). Most child research focuses on the (negative) consequences of divorce for children (Amato and Keith, 1991), it is however argued that for children’s well-being post-divorce a focus on the relationships between family members is most crucial (Moxnes, 2003). Therefore, it is not the divorce itself, but the nature of the divorce process, the changes in relationships between parents and children and the post-divorce family transitions that need to be the focus of research (Amato, 2010).

The way how children deal with this family transition is a rather unexplored area (Carobene and Cyr, 2006). So far, research is primarily based on a unidirectional, top-down ‘parenting’ formulation in which parents are seen as the active agents and children as passive recipients of their parents’ decision to divorce. The focus is then on adjustment problems in children, ineffective parenting, parental conflict and limited parental contact (e.g. father’s absence). The parent-child relationship can deteriorate for several years after a family transition because the parents are preoccupied with their personal emotions and are dealing with other strains. Diminishment of parenting is then described as a stressor for children (Kelly, 2003). In this line of outcome research the family is typically seen as a collective unit of which children are a part, rather than as individuals (Neale, 2002) who can influence their

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parents (De Mol and Buysse, 2008a). Such a top-down reasoning has been fundamentally criticized because it does not consider the child as agentic within the family (Kuczynski and Lollis, 2004).

A bidirectional perspective on parent-child relationships is more appropriate in this context. The concept of bi-directionality stresses the co-occurrence of both directions of influence, from parent to child and from child to parent, in a complex reciprocal system (Kuczynski, 2003). For both children and parents it is necessary to recognise the full person and partnership of the child in the parent-child relationship (De Mol and Buysse, 2008b). That is, the study of the parent-child relationship requires a perspective in which both parents and children are actively contributing to the development of the relationship and the personal development of one another. During a transition process, parents and children are shaping and creating themselves and each other, as well as the new family relationships. We consider children as active agents, yet in an asymmetrical power relationship with their parents (Lollis and Kuczynski, 1997). Children are able to think, interpret and make sense of family change in their own way (Kuczynski, 2003). Within the psychology of childhood, agency is a multifaceted construct with a cognitive (construction), behavioural (action) and motivational (autonomy) dimension (Kuczynski and Parkin, 2007). Understanding children's meaning constructions as part of their agency (cognitive dimension), is crucial to the study of the child in the post-divorce parent-child relationship. The concept of children's agency is independently used in psychology and sociology, however, the child as agent in sociology is entirely compatible with the child as agent in psychology (Kuczynski et al., 1999). Within the sociology of childhood, children are considered as active social agents who shape the structures and processes around them (Morrow, 2003). Sociology's agency perspective

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overlaps with psychology’s idea of construction: children do not simply internalize what happens around them, they are active producers of meaning (Corsaro, 2005).

Although they do not differ from adults in their ability to make sense of their environment, children are, at least partly, dependent on their parents to give meaning to the process of divorce, resulting from the asymmetrical power relationship children have with their parents and their different level of resources (Kuczynski et al., 1999). A change in the structure of the family can cause transformation and change in parents, children and in the parent-child relationship (Kuczynski et al., 2009). The relationship context – in which parents and children know each other intimately and have their influences intertwined in an interdependent long-term relationship with a past and a future – makes parents and children receptive as well as vulnerable to each other’s influence (Kuczynski, 2003).

Some research provides evidence in favour of a focus on children’s meaning construction concerning divorce. Smart (2006) explored the narratives that 60 children between 8 and 15 years old constructed about their post-divorce family. Some children expressed that their parents damaged their lives, not by divorcing, but by failing to divorce in the proper manner. In a study of Dunn et al. (2001), 238 children talked about their divorce experience. Many of them reported that they were confused during the process because the changes in their family were not clearly explained. They did not understand what was happening so they concluded that the parent that left did not love them. Furthermore children stated that they had more positive feelings when given an active role in decisions about how to divide their time between their parents. Maundeni (2002) examined the extent to which children in Botswana (Africa) expressed their needs for information concerning their parents’ divorce. The majority of children were dissatisfied about the informational support from their mothers. The few children who expressed satisfaction about the communication mentioned

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that their mothers sought their opinions, told them why they had decided to leave their fathers, and discussed the implications of the separation for their lives. These studies exemplify the crucial role of children's meaning construction in the bidirectional parent-child relationship in order to understand the child's perspective concerning divorce. More research is needed, however, because the evidence does not clearly indicate how children experience the process of divorce.

A part of the meaning construction within parent-child relationships is having the feeling to be important to each other, this is what Marshall (2001) terms mattering. Children want to matter to specific others, especially their parents. The perception of mattering develops through interpersonal interaction and may function to provide individuals with a sense of social meaning and relatedness. It can be considered a relational dimension of identity, emerging from validation by specific others (Josselson, 1994). Moreover, a feeling of mattering contributes to psychological well-being (Marshall and Lambert, 2006). Some divorce research indicates that children want to matter. In a qualitative study of children aged 8 to 12, Hogan et al. (2003) found that children adapted best after divorce when they received reassurances from both parents of their commitment to their relationships with them. Smith et al. (2003) interviewed 107 children between 7 and 18 years old about the divorce transition. These children wanted parents to listen to them, to ask them what they wanted, to be given information and not to be forced into arrangements that they did not want. Using in-depth interviews, Neale (2002) explored children's discourses on the issue of being listened to during their parents' divorce. Younger children wanted some degree of autonomy, older children attached importance to their autonomy when it came to making decisions about their personal lives. In the research of Dunn et al. (2001) children reported more positive feelings when being given an active role in decisions about how to spend time in the two households,

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but they also stated that dealing with decisions that affected other family members (e.g. contact and residence) was more problematic. These studies show that children’s agency including their perceived mattering concerning their post-divorce life should be acknowledged and explored more fully (Haugen, 2010).

In sum, considerable evidence suggests that the most important factor in post-divorce adjustment is not the divorce itself, but rather the nature of the divorce process. Yet, the divorce process as experienced by the child remains a fairly unexplored area and research into children’s perspectives on family change and how they matter in the post-divorce parent-child relationship is limited. Using the concepts of meaning construction and mattering, this small explorative study wants to investigate which meanings children construct concerning divorce and how children feel to matter in this transition.

Method

The global aim of this study was to explore children’s meaning constructions about their parents’ divorce. Because our research question was mainly explorative and we wanted to collect a variety of views and opinions, focus groups were conducted (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1998). In qualitative research with children, focus groups are often preferred to one-to-one interviews, which are considered more invasive or threatening (Barbour, 2008). In a focus group four to eight participants discuss a topic thoroughly, the richness of the data and the different opinions originating during the group interactions are of particular significance in this form of investigation (Krueger, 1994).

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Participants

A convenience sample composed of 11 and 14 year-old children was recruited. A total of 23 children (10 female, 13 male, $M_{age}= 12$ years) participated in the study. Age was included as a criterion as research reflects that group interactions with children are more interesting when the group members are similar in sex and age (Mauthner, 1997). Given the varied nature of the divorce process, with some parents still arguing 10 years after the actual divorce, we did not restrict the amount of time allowed since the divorce took place. In this way we captured the experiences of children who went through parental divorce recently as well as those further in the transition process. One parent of each child filled out a short questionnaire about their child's current living arrangement and whether he/she would consider the divorce currently adversarial.

Four focus groups with each between five to seven participants were conducted. Considering the sex of the children in the focus groups, we had two groups with boys and two groups with girls; considering the age of the children in the focus groups: two groups with 11-year-old children and two groups with 14-year-old children. The time between their parents' divorce and the time of the study ranged between one and 13 years ($M_{time}= 5.15$ years). Ten parents described the divorce as adversarial.

The variation of children's living arrangements was big. Six children were one weekend with their fathers every 14 days and lived with their mothers the rest of the time; one of these six also had dinner at his father's every Wednesday and slept there every Thursday. Two children were one weekend with their mothers every 14 days and lived with their fathers the rest of the time. Six children lived full time with their mothers, the contact with their fathers ranged between meeting once per year and once per month. Seven children alternated

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living at their mothers’ and at their fathers’: five changed every week, one changed every three days and one lived one week at father’s place and three weeks at mother’s place. Two children only saw one parent during holidays because he/she was living abroad, they lived at the other parent’s the rest of the time.

Procedure

Children were recruited through public media (e.g. a call on a children’s TV channel) and through snowball sampling. They were asked whether they wanted to take part in a discussion group with children of the same sex to discuss the topic ‘Children and their parents’ divorce’. Participation was only open to children who had been confronted with parental divorce. In each focus group it was assured that all children were strangers to one another.

Since 1995, the standard rule in Belgium allows divorced parents to exercise joint parental authority over their children. Consequently, we assumed that the permission of one parent for the child’s participation included the consent of the other and included children in our research with the written informed consent of one parent. By using this legally defined rule, we avoided any problems with parents. All the participating children signed a personal informed consent that explained the research aims in clear language. The focus groups took place in a university room and they lasted between 90 and 110 minutes. The children of each focus group only gathered for one session. Before the group discussion started the children were once again clearly informed about the aims of the research and their right to quit participation without any justification. Each focus group was audio taped to ensure that participants’ comments were recorded verbatim. Talking with children for research purposes in general (Mauthner, 1997), and especially with children who experienced parental divorce

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has to be done carefully. Attention was given to welcoming the children and making them feel at ease. To meet the criteria for validity and reliability, a standardized topic guide was used.

The interview consisted of three phases: first, the moderator (the third author) introduced herself to the group and explained the aims of the interview as well as the house rules, including confidentiality issues; second, all participants introduced themselves to the group (name, age, hobbies, time since parents divorced). In the third phase a topic guide was used, but without imposing too much structure on the participants. It was important to capture as many spontaneous descriptions as possible, therefore we asked children broad, explorative questions to capture their narratives about the divorce. In the first part of the third phase the children were introduced to three global topics: how did they experience the divorce, how did they deal with it, what could help other children going through the same situation. Open-ended questions were asked, always including, first, a general question followed by more specific probes. An example of a general question is: 'What do you remember about the period when your parents were divorcing?', an example of a specific probe: 'Do you remember the exact moment when your parents told you about the divorce?'. In the second part of the third phase a hypothetical question was asked: 'If tomorrow your best friend's parents announced they were getting a divorce and you could not stop the divorce, what would be the most ideal situation for your friend?'. This question aims to indirectly give us information on how children experience the divorce process. After this, the moderator gave a summary of what was said and the children could give feedback. Finally, the group discussion ended with the opportunity to ask questions and give remarks. Children were told what was going to happen with the data and they received a small present.

Data analysis

It is important to first mention that gathering the data proved to be a very emotional and rewarding process because of the way the children shared many rich and touching stories with the researcher. The children listened to each other carefully, took up on each others’ stories or aligned themselves with what was said by others. They were also interested in how others solved divorce-related problems (e.g. dilemma of where to celebrate newyear’s eve). Data were triangulated over three researchers, the authors of this paper, to reduce potential bias. The authors analyzed the data using essentialist thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). An essentialist or realist method focuses on the experiences and meanings of the children. Consistent with our agentic perspective on children, the aim of this study was to display children’s voices. Therefore we stayed close to the words of the children during the coding process to resist interpretation biased by adultism.

The focus group data were transcribed verbatim and the data analysis process was completed in several steps. The initial stage of the analysis was concept-driven: meaning construction and mattering were used as guiding concepts; the elaboration was, however, fully based on data-driven coding (Gibbs, 2008). In a first step all three authors individually read the most elaborated transcript thoroughly and repeatedly. After a first reading, pieces of text concerning the same topics were marked and short notes about the content were written in the margins. From these notes the first themes were identified, and subsequently written on a separate sheet of paper and given an initial code. Next, the authors discussed the process of analyzing the first group and compared lists of themes, searching for common themes and connections from which to extract super ordinate concepts. The researchers discussed the similarities and differences among their derived categories, including exemplars of the different categories. The themes of the first group were used to help orient the subsequent

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analyses of the three other focus groups: however, new themes were still discovered using the same methods as in the first group. By the end of each group discussion the moderator gave a summary using the words of the children and asked for their feedback. This was used as a first step to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, recognizing the children as full agentic beings with own experiences and meanings. At the same time special attention was paid to the limiting nature of summaries as many other themes emerge out of the data. Differences in meaning were discussed until consensus was reached. Finally, the authors took the analyses of all the groups, identified their commonalities, refined the themes and chose exemplars for the final research report. The analyses had the aim of finding the essence of the experiences, getting a view on the unique character of children's meaning construction about their parents' divorce.

Results

The analysis revealed how the three main topics (meaning construction, feeling of mattering and ideal divorce scenario) can be interpreted. These themes with subthemes will be discussed with reference to verbatim quotes from the different focus groups.

Constructing meaning of parental divorce

Our analysis divulged how important it is for children to understand what is happening within their families. Clearly, the divorce of their parents was a significant event in all the children's lives. In each focus group children remembered the specific moment their parents told them about the divorce. For example:

"On a Saturday my mum woke me up and told me we were going to move out, that we were going to leave daddy." (Boy, 11)

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“I still remember the day that my dad was taking his stuff and left. It was around Christmas.” (Girl, 14)

The children had an understanding of the situation, but to different extents depending on the child. In several cases parental conflicts had served as a signal to children that something was going wrong, in other cases parents explained directly to the child that they were getting a divorce. Besides conflict and explicit conversation as a clear signal, several children talked about less clear signals. They explained they were ‘sensing’ it, or they were told implicitly (e.g. parent wanted to watch a particular movie with them). One 14-year-old girl said:

“For a long time I had been sensing it and I had already been thinking about what would happen if they divorced.”

However, sensing that a divorce might be possible is not the same as understanding why it happens. Children talked extensively about their ideas concerning the reasons for their parents’ divorce. The analysis revealed that this is definitely an important issue for children. The children highlighted the importance for them of understanding the divorce and having an understandable story. For example:

“I have been seeing a psychologist for 5 years now. She is trying to arrange a talk with everyone because I don’t understand anything about it and I really want to know.” (Girl, 14)

“The first thing I asked is why they wanted to divorce and what arrangement they would make. I wanted to know all the facts. If I know what exactly happened and I can picture it, then it feels good.” (Boy, 14)

From the accounts of the children it became clear that an understandable story is created in dialogue with parents in the first place. However, speaking about the divorce with a teacher, a

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stepparent, a grandparent, a psychologist or a friend also helped children to better understand the situation. Moreover, creating an understandable story seems to be an iterative and dialoguing process: some children expressed the need to speak about it several times.

Seeing and understanding that the divorce is the best solution for their parents helps children cope with the situation, as this quote exemplifies:

"I understand it's better for them to be divorced because I know that otherwise they would argue again all the time" (girl, 14)

Some children named a very clear and for them understandable reason of their parents' divorce: violence or continuous conflict between parents, adultery or parents not being in love anymore. In several groups it was mentioned that an understanding of the situation became deeper after some years.

Some children were not understanding the situation at all, making it more difficult for them to accept it. One 14-year-old girl expressed that she still didn't understand why her parents divorced because they both told her completely different reasons for the divorce. Having an understandable story seems to help children to cope with the different emotions they are faced with, sometimes even years after divorce.

The feeling of mattering

There were a number of subthemes related to the concept of mattering. First, the children postulated firmly that the decision to divorce is fundamentally unfair to them. In general they preferred to see their parents together than separated:

"The fact that they divorce means that they only take us into account for the half of it." (Boy, 14)

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“I think they are still unhappy both...so for them it wouldn’t help to be together, but for the kids it would.” (Girl, 14)

Second, the unfairness is related to a massive feeling of ‘I did not count’. Many children stated clearly that they did not have the feeling that they counted when it came to their parents’ decision to divorce. However, some children noticed their parents’ efforts to try to stay together ‘for the kids’ and interpreted them as a sign of being taken into account. For example:

“My father had a girlfriend, but he didn’t want to divorce my mum because he was afraid that she would get the kids and not see us anymore. He didn’t want to take the decision to divorce because of that.” (Girl, 14)

The more positive side is that to the extent that they do not matter in the decision, children know they are not to blame for the divorce:

“For me it was very important that mum told me that it was not my fault that they were separating.” (Girl, 11)

Third, the feeling to count - to matter - in response to the decisions about living arrangements is fundamentally different from the feeling in response to the decision to divorce. Unlike the decision to divorce, youngsters do feel that they are taken into account when their living arrangements are discussed, but to differing extents. Many different living arrangements were sketched in the groups: from children who had no contact at all with their biological father, to all kinds of weekend arrangements, to fully shared custody. There was a clear contrast between children who felt that their parents took them into account in working out a living arrangement and children who did not have this feeling.

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The children who have the feeling of being taken into account have the idea that their parents worked out an arrangement that is good for them. Being content with the arrangements had nothing to do with the kind of arrangement (that varied substantially within this group), nor with having an active influence on the decisions. On the contrary, children explicitly stated that it is hard for them when they are asked about their preferences. As an 11-year-old boy stated:

"I love both my parents so I don't want to choose between them, they should decide themselves."

This has to do with the idea that parents make arrangements which reveal that they know what is important for their children, as this quote demonstrates:

"I don't have problems with the fact that they are divorced, they arranged everything nicely and I feel ok with that." (Boy, 14)

The decisions made by parents concerning children's living arrangements show the children that they matter to their parents. Any living arrangements that signals this, is perceived by the children as a good arrangement. Some children got the opportunity to comment on a proposal of their parents. For example:

"My parents discussed an arrangement and asked us whether we liked it. They also told us that this arrangement would not be forever, so it might change." (Girl, 11)

Sometimes children in this group even had positive thoughts about the divorce, for example: there are fewer conflicts, they have more family or a newborn sister. However, they still regretted not doing things together as one family anymore and disliked not always living in the same place and its practical consequences.

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Opposite to the latter, several youngsters in different focus groups did not feel they were being taken into account regarding the living arrangements decisions. They felt that the way their parents arranged their post-divorce life had nothing to do with who they were or what they preferred. In other words, they had the feeling that their parents do not know what is important to them:

“They didn’t really take me into account. My dad doesn’t even know how I like to spend my free time, he never asks about it. He hardly knows me.”
(Girl, 14)

These children really suffer from the feeling of not mattering to their parents. Some of them came to the focus group with drawings they made, letters they had written to the judge to ask for different arrangements, one child had written a book about the divorce and wanted to get it published. All of these gestures signaled ‘please listen to me, take me into account’. The story of these children is fundamentally sad. A few children had professional guidance (e.g. a psychologist). The feelings of the children in this group about making a difference and feeling counted differ greatly from those who are content with their living arrangements. In this group, children report that at least one parent is not listening to them. In addition, sometimes even professionals involved were perceived as ‘not listening’, adding to the feeling of ‘not mattering’. An 11-year-old girl said:

“I have been writing letters to the judge. He answered, but he didn’t really listen.”

For these children the feeling of being listened to is very important, since they often do not feel that they are being taken into account at all. In some cases children had an explicit

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preference to live with one parent (mostly the mother). In other cases children did not see the divorce as a solution to the parents' problems. For example:

"They are divorced now, but they still fight and nothing is solved." (Boy, 11)

To sum up, the data revealed that feeling counted does not necessarily mean that children take part in decision-making, but that children feel that they matter when their parents arranged things in a way that feels good for them. For some children this meant that they could continue doing things important to them, like sports or hobbies; others mentioned that they were able to have a good relationship with both of their parents. Additionally, in the focus groups with 14-year old children the idea of being able to decide yourself about your own living arrangements was brought forward: some children stated that at a certain age you should be able to decide yourself, others expressed they already decided themselves when they wanted to visit one of their parents.

The ideal divorce scenario

In the focus groups children were asked what the ideal divorce scenario would be for their best friend, given that the parents of their friend were separating. The most vital advice they gave to parents was to keep the divorce process as short as possible and not to frustrate each other. Children did not like it when parents argued all the time and thought that both parents had to make concessions. Next, children stressed that parents could do some essential things to make the divorce more bearable. First, parents should give a clear reason for their divorce, this explanation should be understandable and not a lie. A 14-year-old girl was quite firm about this:

"They should be able to do that. In the end they were married, they have loved each other and they made kids together!"

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Second, parents should make arrangements in a proper way. Children made a clear distinction between the message of divorce and the arrangements (e.g. financial decisions, arrangements about the children). An 11-year-old girl said:

“The arrangements concerning the children should be best discussed with them the day after, first we need time to recover a bit.”

The children also had some recommendations concerning their living arrangements. They agreed that a child should have a say in where he/she will stay and how many times he/she can visit the other parent. The child should be able to make some decisions, but not too many. Parents should not move too far from each other’s homes. They have to take into account practical issues and should show some flexibility about the child’s arrangement. A 14-year-old girl explained:

“If a child has an argument with one of his parents, it should be possible to contact the other parent, for example by phone.”

Children also agreed that during the process of divorce, parents should be attentive to their children because they are going through a difficult situation. Parents should not tell their children bad things about the other parent. Furthermore it was important for children not to be confronted immediately with a new ‘mother’ or ‘father’, and new partners should get along with the children. Although most of the children’s recommendations were directed to parents, children also thought about their own contribution to this process, however in a less extensive way. First, they stated that children should never take sides and, second, that they should always treat their parents with respect. The children were aware of the fact that their parents were having a hard time as well.

Discussion

The global aim of this study was to explore children's narratives of parental divorce using focus groups with children. Results showed that two components in this transition process are highly important to children: having an understandable story about the divorce and having a feeling of mattering when it comes to their living arrangements. Children made a clear distinction between their parents' decision to divorce and the arrangements made as a consequence of the divorce. Both meaning construction and their feeling to matter were assessed differently by each child.

Decision to divorce

Children did not have a feeling of mattering in their parents' decision to divorce. Although this decision is hard to accept for children, from a mental health perspective it is good that children feel that they do not matter in this parental decision to the extent that they feel they are not to blame. From the literature we know that self-blame is an important mediator that explains why children suffer from parental conflicts (see Fosco and Grych, 2007). However, although unfair in their eyes, the children in this study are able to live with the parental decision to divorce, especially if they understand why the decision was made. This result is congruent with Maundeni's (2002) research in which children stressed the importance of knowing why their parents divorced and what the implications were on their lives. Dunn and colleagues (2001) also stress that children need clear explanations about the changes in their family. If children do not understand why their parents divorced, they make up their own story up with things they know, increasing the danger that children will blame themselves. This can eventually result in emotional distress and even in need for psychological guidance (Healy et al., 1993).

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In sum, with respect to the decision to divorce, it is important that parents take full responsibility for their own decisions, that children do not feel any blame and that parents give their children an understandable story about why they split up and what will change in their family.

Living arrangements

In contrast to the divorce decision, the children expressed a high need to matter with regard to post-divorce living arrangements. This, however, does not mean that parents should give children the power to decide about the arrangements. On the contrary, having this power is confusing for children and potentially puts them in a conflict of loyalty (Dunn et al., 2001). Rather, it means that parents signal to the child that they are taking him/her into account, that he/she matters to them. From a child’s perspective, a good living arrangement is one from which they can deduce that parents know what is important to them, and that signals that it is about their interests, not the parents’. Here, parents have a unique opportunity to show their children that they matter to them. For children’s well-being it is important to know that they matter to their parents (Marshall, 2001). If they do not sense this, children feel as if they disappear in the whole divorce process, as if they do not count at all. In this case, children are also more likely to assert their right to decide themselves (Neale, 2002).

Limitations, future research and implications

Despite interesting results, this study has some important limitations. Only a small self-selected group of 11- and 14-year old children took part in the focus groups. This makes the results quite specific and not generalizable to children of other ages going through parental divorce. Moreover, the sample consisted merely of white, middle-class children. Children in a different cultural context might experience parental divorce in different ways;

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however, our results were quite similar to what African children experienced (Maundeni, 2002). Another limitation includes the use of retrospective data, wherein all the children were looking back to the period of the actual divorce. Unfortunately, in some of these cases the divorce process was still not completely finished. We were, however, mainly interested in their current narratives. Although to analyze the experiences of parental divorce more clearly, it could be interesting to question children who are actually going through the transition (Kuczynski et al., 2009).

Future research needs to follow children longitudinally starting from the period of divorce to examine how children cope with multiple family transitions over time (e.g. being part of a stepfamily). The process of divorce includes several transitions and the divorce itself is just the first transition. However, it should be kept in mind that not all the changes that young people face are directly related to parental divorce. Therefore, Flowerdew and Neale (2003) argued to decenter divorce and also investigate children's other life challenges.

Taking these limitations into account, we do believe that the findings of this study provide new insight into how children experience their parents' divorce. Children told us how important it is for them to feel that they matter to their parents. It was clear that children, like adults, are meaning makers. They need to understand what is happening with their family.

These findings suggest two implications to practitioners working with families in divorce. First, professionals (e.g. divorce mediators) can guide parents in their process of meaning construction and help them to create an understandable story to tell to their children. Second, professionals can make parents attentive to the fact that they should not forget their children during the divorce, children need to feel that they matter. Within the divorce process

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it is therefore important that professionals look through the eyes of both parents and children, and that they teach parents to look through the eyes of their own children.

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