

DIVORCEATLAS: ACCESSIBLE TRAINING FOR PARENTS AFTER DIVORCE

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One third of all end in divorce, amounting to approximately 35,000 each year. In addition, around 60,000 cohabitation relationships end in separation each year. In many of these cases, children are involved. Although a partner relationship might be terminated, the parental relationship remains intact. This often leads to questions and uncertainty on the part of parents. For this reason, TNO took the initiative to develop the 'ScheidingsATLAS' (Dutch for DivorceATLAS): a brief training for parents in situations of separation.

In our country, more than 70,000 children living at home are involved in cases of divorce or broken cohabitation relationships each year.[\[1\]](#) Such break-ups are profound events that can have a major impact on parents and children. Studies have indicated that, on average, children of divorced or separated parents do not perform as well at school. Compared to children growing up in families in which the parents are together, they have more behavioural problems and lower social-emotional scores.[\[2\]](#) Children from broken families are over-represented in the youth-services sector.

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TOUGH TURTLES AND BRAVE BRONTOSAURUSES

Studies have demonstrated that preventive group training sessions can be effective in helping children to process the divorce or separation of their parents, possibly preventing or limiting the occurrence of problems. For example, TNO developed the well-grounded group programmes 'Stoere Schildpadden' (Dutch for Tough Turtles) for children between the ages of four and six, and 'Dappere Dino's' (Dutch for 'courageous dinosaurs') for children between the ages of six and eight. Other grounded intervention programmes are available for older children, including JES and KIES.

TRAINING FOR PARENTS UNDERGOING DIVORCE OR SEPARATION

Until recently, no such support was available for parents going through divorce or separation. Your partner becomes your ex, but remains your co-parent. What are good ways to cope with this? How can you communicate with each other? How can you ensure that a divorce or separation does not turn into a battle? What does your child need following a divorce or separation? Divorcing parents have a clear need for practical information. For this reason, in 2017, TNO cooperated with partners including Humanitas, Schoolformat and Iep Coaching to develop the 'ScheidingsATLAS'. This scientifically grounded and accessible training, which includes many helpful suggestions, emerged from research, contributions from experts, and the experiences of divorced and separated parents.



VIDEOS WITH EXPERTS AND DIVORCED PARENTS

“There are two variants”, explains Mariska Klein Velderman. “Although the form differs, the content is the same.” Klein Velderman is a senior scientist at TNO in the area of Child Health, in addition to being the initiator of the ‘ScheidingsATLAS’. “Parents can participate in training programmes consisting of two three-hour sessions. Since the beginning of

this year, these sessions have been offered by Schoolformaat in the region around The Hague, and by Humanitas in Almere. An online training programme consisting of six sessions is also available. To date, about 50 people have participated in this form of e-health. In short videos, experts and divorced/separated parents tell their stories, and parents receive tips and information. In addition, a few familiar situations are played out by actors. The sessions are concluded with quiz-style questions, so that parents can see whether they have understood the essential information. They also receive feedback on their answers. Each participant receives the training programme's handbook, which they can use as a reference to be reviewed at their leisure."

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PERSONAL TIPS

Wendy van Vliet is one of the counsellors from the first 'ScheidingsATLAS' group training. In her daily life, she is an account manager for 'Primary Education' at Schoolformaat, in addition to being a project leader at the Kenniscentrum 'Kind en Scheiding' (Centre for Knowledge on Children and Divorce). Schoolformaat is involved with school-based social work in the Haaglanden region. Van Vliet is enthusiastic about the parents who participated in the first training. "The group was relatively small. The parents were very open, and they even helped each other with personal tips."

LOSS CYCLE

"Everyone found it enlightening when we told them about the loss cycle, with the various stages of grief. A divorce or separation is a loss situation,

in which we must go through various steps in grief or processing. The first step is to 'acknowledge' and 'recognize' that the divorce has actually occurred. Then it becomes possible to start looking forward again, to make new plans and, ultimately, to form new ties. You, your ex-partner and your child could be at very different positions in the loss cycle. One might still be immersed in emotions and sadness, while the other already has a new partner." All of the participants found that the loss cycle made it very clear that their ex-partners or children could be in very different phases from their own situations. Van Vliet explains, "They also told us that they were glad that TNO was involved with the 'ScheidingsATLAS', 'because that lets us know that the information is reliable, because it has been researched.' As one participant noted, 'Every divorced parent should take this training!'"

6 TIPS FOR PARENTS ABOUT HELPING THEIR CHILDREN

1. Give your children more frequent signs that you love them.
2. It is important for children to know and feel that, although you are separated from the other parent, you are not separated from them.
3. Your children are not responsible for the divorce. Although this may seem obvious, when young children are lying in bed and hear their names brought up during an argument, they might come to that conclusion. *'If I had cleaned my plate this morning and if I had been nicer, Mummy and Daddy wouldn't have broken up'.*
4. If you wish to discuss something with the other parent (e.g. about parenting or the contact arrangement), make sure that your children are not present.

5. Do not use your children as messengers for communication with the other parent.

6. Safeguard the rhythm and regularity of your daily routine. When parents have separated and have the feeling that they are not seeing enough of their children, they sometimes try to compensate with gifts and fun outings, and they might have the urge to loosen the reins. However, routine is good for children (e.g. fixed bedtimes, having meals together and set rules). These boundaries provide children with a sense of security: they know what to expect.

[1] Spruijt, E., & Kormos, H. (2014). *Handboek scheiden en de kinderen: Voor de beroepskracht die met scheidingskinderen te maken heeft* [Handbook on divorce and the children: For professionals involved with children of divorce] (Second, completely revised printing). Houten: Bohn Stafleu van Loghum.

[2] Amato, P.R., & James, S. (2010). Divorce in Europe and the United States: Commonalities and differences across nations. *Family Science*, 1, 2-13. DOI: 10.1080/1942620903381583.