

PREVENTIVE SUPPORT for children and parents after divorce or separation: Examples of CODIP-NL and Divorce ATLAS in the Netherlands



Your partner becomes your ex, but is still your fellow parent...

"I found my divorce an enormously impactful and emotional period. It felt like being in a rollercoaster. You go into a kind of survival modus to do and arrange everything. I really thought that was a very intense period!"

(Mother, 41 years, 3 children aged 7, 13 and 16 years)

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In the Netherlands, one third of all marriages 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. Research has shown that children encounter notably negative consequences of parental divorce or separation. TNO introduced CODIP-NL group trainings to support young children after parental break-up.

Divorce impacts on parents and parenting too. 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 Divorce ATLAS): a brief training for parents in situations of divorce or separation.

Tough Turtles and Courageous Dinosaurs

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 behavioral problems and lower social-emotional scores.^[2] Children from broken families are over-represented in the youth-services sector.

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 child functioning and behavioral or emotional problems. For this reason, TNO developed the evidence-based preventive group training 'CODIP-NL' based on the U.S.-developed Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP).^[3] We started our work with CODIP-NL for 6 to 8 year-old children ('Dappere Dino's'; Dutch for 'courageous dinosaurs'). Next, we extended this to 4 to 6-year-olds ('Stoere Schildpadden', Dutch for Tough Turtles), following the same procedure.^[4] Pilot studies and a quasi-experimental trial demonstrated CODIP-NL to be a feasible, satisfactory and effective method to reduce divorce-related problems in Dutch 4 to 8 year-olds. Other evidence-based intervention programmes are available for older children.



Divorce ATLAS

Until recently, no such evidence-based, preventive 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 field partners to develop the 'ScheidingsATLAS' (Divorce ATLAS). 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.



“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 a group programme consisting of two three-hour sessions. Since the beginning of 2018, these sessions have been offered by Schoolformaat in The Hague region and by Humanitas in Almere. An online training programme consisting of six sessions is also available. To date, about 100 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 own time.”

“Everyone found it clarifying 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 ‘recognise’ 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 assures us that the information is reliable, because it has been researched.’ As one participant noted, ‘every divorced parent should take this training!’”

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 Hague 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.”

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