

The Courtship of the Little Lion – Psychodramatic Part Work with Animal Figures in Children in Separation/Divorce Conflicts by Alfons Aichinger.

Parental separation signifies for children and adolescents the end of familiar and important family relationships and life habits. It is a crisis-laden, incisive life event with various stressors, requiring good coping resources (Walper 2007), personal and social resilience. As for personal resilience, divorce violates the four essential basic needs of the child: the need for self-esteem, self-efficacy, secure binding, and pleasure, and triggers a maelstrom of feelings from pain, fear, sorrow, anger, shame, and guilt. Coping with this overwhelms many children, especially since social resilience is also compromised. Children often do not receive the necessary support from their parents in this stressful situation, as the parents require all their strength for their own stabilization. Often, there is a role reversal: children see what the parents need, and the needs of children and parents no longer align. While children want to receive as much as possible, parents want as much separation as possible to heal their wounds. And while children are usually taken to safety first in other emergency situations, they get caught in the crossfire during high-conflict divorces. It's not surprising, then, that over 40% of registrations in parenting counseling centers are related to conflicts and problems in the separation/divorce situation (Menne 2010).

My approach:

1. Since the child is the weakest link in the divorce and pays the highest price, I work in a child-centered and not impartial manner.

2. To give children a voice, externalization to the symbolic level is required. Children can externalise and alienate difficult situations and view them from a safe distance using a specific form of enactment that is very different from adult conflict management. The healing power of children's play is based not least on this regulating quality. They transfer their stressful experiences to another time, e.g. when dinosaurs still existed, to another place, e.g. a distant galaxy, or to other characters, e.g. heroic or animal figures.

3. Part work is necessary. When children make statements, these vary depending on which ego-state they are currently in. The ego-state that is most intensively occupied with attention at the time of questioning, and thus in the foreground, will give a different answer than the other ego-states that are currently not activated. 'I don't want to go to Dad' can be a statement from the ego-state of the child that is injured in its self-worth, or the part that can't separate from the mother, or the part that is strongly attached to the mother. The other ego-state, which longs for the father, does not come to speak.

And when a child does not want to visit the father, the further question arises: Which part of the father does the child not want to go to? The child might not want to go to the violent part, the mentally or addiction-sick part, the unreliable or the enamored part, but might go to the good father part.

But parents are also torn between strong emotions in this difficult situation. In them, the injured, angry partner part, who wants to take revenge on the other or never see them again, is fighting with the good parent part who wants to burden the child as little as possible. The part that is disappointed and angry at the partner can be so dominant that it can no longer see the good parent part of the ex-partner and does not let one's own good parent part speak. And the part that has entered into a new relationship can come into conflict with the parent part when it comes to dividing scarce time resources.

In separation and divorce counseling, it is therefore very helpful to work with part work to enable dissociation and help both children and parents to differentiate their feelings and

wishes in a very delicate situation. As a psychodramatist, part work is very central to me, since Moreno described the entire personality as a role system with superior and subordinate, dominant and less dominant roles that act like a theater ensemble on an inner stage in leading and supporting roles, as opponents or in the background (cf. Zeintlinger 2004, p. 140). Depending on the situation, context, interaction patterns, stage that is sought or stumbled upon, play, staging style, theme, or need, one or another inner person takes the lead with their role and determines thinking, feeling, and acting.

To exemplify my approach through counseling: A mother comes to the family counseling center because her 4.5-year-old daughter Anna does not want to visit the father. She starts getting a stomachache the evening before the visit weekend and cries. In this state, she cannot possibly send her child to the father. Therefore, she has canceled the visit several times. Now the father is threatening to legally enforce the visit in a letter from a lawyer. Now she doesn't know how to behave. I explain to her that I first want to see with her daughter through animal figures what her daughter needs, and that I will then continue to work separately with her and her husband. Since the mother currently does not see herself able to discuss this with the father, I call him. We agree that he will suspend legal steps during the counseling.

In the first session together with Anna, the mother wants advice on whether or not she should send her daughter to the father for the upcoming visit weekend despite her resistance. Anna starts to cry and complains that she does not want to go.

I turn to her, direct her attention to the animal figures set up, and say that I have heard from her mom what is making her insecure. Now I would like to hear what she needs. I would like to do that with the animals that are standing on the floor. And I ask, 'If you were an animal, which one of these animals here would you be?' Anna looks at all the animals closely and then chooses a little St. Bernard dog. When I ask what she likes about him and what he's good at, she answers that he is kind and likes to play. Together we look at him to see if he has nice fur. She nods and strokes him. Then I let her show the dog to her mother, who also strokes him. Then I ask her to choose an animal for her mother with whom she gets along well. For the mother's side, she picks a hen, which she says is very soft. We then both look at the hen, imagining how a chick can nestle under its wings and feel safe and secure. I also let her give the hen to the mother so she can befriend it. Then, for the father's side, which she doesn't want to visit, I let her choose an animal. She picks a hippopotamus for this, stating it can scream very loudly and gets angry quickly. Then I ask her to choose an animal for the father's side, with whom she had spent good times in the past. For this side of her father, she finds a lion, who she says is funny and strong. With a dog, she hops onto its back and slides down. After choosing the animals, I continue, 'When you were still in your mom's womb, you received something from both your mom and dad. Therefore, the dog has two friends, a chick from the hen and a little lion from the lion,' and place the miniature versions of the parent animals behind the dog.

To involve the mother more and allow her to be touched by the figures, I turn to her and ask how the hen and lion relate to the little dog and its two friends, back when the hen and lion got along well. The mother brings the hen closer to the three animals, explaining that the father didn't know how to deal with Anna as a baby. He usually returned from work when Anna was already asleep. Then Anna places the little lion away, making it look lost. I 'mentalize' (double) the chick, 'I'm good, I'm well-nourished by the mother hen.' Then the little lion, 'I wonder if the lion father is still sleeping (Anna lays him on the floor), hopefully he wakes up soon and takes care of me. The chick has it good.' Anna picks up the little lion and hits the chick. I 'mentalize' the little lion, 'I get very jealous when I see the chick getting

fat while I have to starve.' Touched, the mother corrects that when Anna grew up and became a pretty girl, the father was completely enamored by her. She then became his one and only, which makes Anna place the lion father very close to the little lion. To strengthen her self-esteem and self-efficacy, I 'mentalize' the dog, 'I managed to wake up the lion. How happy he was to discover us, three great animals.' And the little lion, 'Finally, I can get what I've long missed.' Anna lets the little lion jump onto the big one and they frolic together. To remind Anna and her mother of the good times, I continue, 'And so the three could go back and forth between mother hen and lion father, you, the little lion could get what you need from lion father, and the little chick from mother hen, without having to leave lion or hen.' This warming up to the good times doesn't last long for the mother and she throws in, 'That didn't stop him from cheating, and that since her birth, as I found out a few months ago when I read texts on his phone. I completely freaked out. And then it all went down between us.' Immediately, Anna places the hen and the lion far apart. I comment, 'And now they can no longer go back and forth so easily,' and differentiate, 'It's not the lion and the hen that are fighting. Can you pick an animal for the man and woman who are fighting?' For the angry man, Anna chooses a hippopotamus, and for the angry woman, a black panther, and lets the animals fight fiercely. I 'mentalize' the fear of the little ones, 'Where have the good mother hen and lion father gone who could protect us? The hissing, dangerous animals are scaring us.' Anna takes all three and hides them under a cloth. To clarify that Anna, in this situation that massively triggers the need for attachment, had to regulate her feelings herself, Next, I 'mentalize' the dog, 'The best thing is to hide the little ones in a cave where they can't see or hear anything terrible.' I acknowledge what the dog does in this frightening situation. The mother is moved by the imagery and says that she no longer wanted Anna to be subjected to the constant bickering, so she kicked her husband out. Anna then places the lion far away in the corner of the room. Again, I 'mentalize' the chick, 'I hope the mother hen doesn't disappear as well,' to which Anna places the chick close to the hen. The mother confirms that Anna had become very clingy. Then I 'mentalize' the little lion, 'Now the lion father is far away, what will become of me, I hope I see him again?' Anna had initially asked every day when her dad would come back, the mother confirms. But as the first visiting weekend drew near, she became more anxious and whined the night before that she didn't want to go to her father. I ask Anna to show this with the animals. She lets the little lion move towards the lion father while the dog and chick snuggle up to the hen. When the big lion comes closer, the little one jumps on him and kisses him on the snout. I 'mentalize' the joy of the reunion. Anna then hides the chick behind the hen. I 'mentalize' the separation anxiety, 'I won't come out from under the secure wing. There were such frightening animals.' She lets the dog run between the little lion and the chick. Again, I 'mentalize,' 'I am so torn about what to do; the little lion wants to go, the chick wants to stay.' Anna then has the little lion plead and coos, 'Please, please, come with me, just for a short time.' As she lets the chick take a step towards the lion, she continues to coax, 'Maybe also for two or three hours. You're not so small anymore.' As the chick takes another step towards the lion, she says, 'Or a whole day. But when it gets dark, we'll definitely go back to the nest with the hen. Please, just a few hours!' At this touching plea, tears come to the mother's eyes. She then complains that when Anna hid herself during the first visiting weekend, her ex became angry and accused her of sabotaging the visit. In an instant, they got into a heated argument. And then he just grabbed Anna and dragged the screaming child into the car. To differentiate that it was not Anna, not the father, but a part of them that acted this way, I illustrate this with the figures and let them speak, 'Could it be that the lion only sees the chick that's hiding and the hesitant dog and not the little lion who's running towards him and then becomes very sad

because it's not like before when all three came running? And could it be that then the hippopotamus thinks, it must be the evil panther that's preventing contact? And then the hippo gets in front and attacks the panther angrily?' Anna nods. The little ones are frightened because they no longer see the good lion father, but only the angry hippopotamus, and they hide behind the hen, I continue. 'Can you show me what the hippopotamus does next?' Anna takes it and places the chick between its teeth and puts the dog and little lion on its back. I 'mentalize,' 'They get really scared and complain, where is this wild hippopotamus taking us, why don't the lion and hen help?' Anna nods vigorously, and the mother interjects that she wanted to snatch Anna away, but that led to more physical altercations. I 'mentalize' the little animals, 'Oh no, now there are only fighting, wild animals to see.' Since then, Anna doesn't want to go to her father anymore, the mother continues. Again, I differentiate: The dog, the little lion, and the chick naturally don't want to go to an angry hippopotamus, but the little lion shows longing for the good lion father. 'That's a good point,' says the mother, Anna becomes irritable whenever she cancels the visit."

After this work, one could have ended the session and continued in another session. However, since Anna is still fully engaged, I ask her to show what the dog and the chick would need to fulfill their friend, the little lion's wish, to visit the lion father and accompany him. Anna represents this by playing with the figures, which I then mentalize: She locks the hippo and the panther in a cage, which she builds with blocks. Then she lets the lion father approach. The little lion immediately jumps up at him, while the chick snuggles closely to the hen. The Saint Bernard dog sniffs the lion. 'Does he smell like hippo or is he pure?' I mentalise. Then the mother hen invites the lion father in with the words: 'Please come in, dear lion father.' He plays hide and seek with the little lion, while the hen, the chick, and the dog watch. After a short time, the dog and the chick join in, and everyone hides and is sought by the lion father. Only then do the little ones climb onto the back of the lion. With intuitive attachment knowledge, Anna shows that she can only explore the lion from a secure base. She lets the lion slowly move backward, while the chick keeps jumping down, kissing the hen, and assuring that they will return in the evening. This play, which Anna plays for herself while letting the figures speak, is so touching that the mother cries. She had no idea of the little lion's longing. She also only sees the hippo that has destroyed and continues to destroy everything, and no longer the good lion father that still exists. As a good mother hen, she wants to do her utmost to satisfy the little lion's hunger. However, letting the lion father into her house is beyond her means.

I appreciate what Anna has shown us and arrange another appointment with the mother to look for solutions and work on the integration of the parts. Through the increase in her mentalization ability, she finds a solution in the search for alternatives: At her in-laws, with whom everyone has a good relationship, she could imagine a handover that allows Anna more time for acclimation. I verify this solution idea with Anna by questioning each part. The dog, the little lion, and the chick agree that the mother hen will bring them to the kangaroo grandmother and elephant grandfather, spend some time together, and then leave. Then the lion father comes, plays with the three little ones, and takes them with him, if they agree.

Since the mother does not know how she can maintain the good lion father part next to the hippo part, and how she can bring her hen and panther parts together, we agree on individual counseling.

I also get Anna's consent to show her setup to the father. In doing so, I don't exactly repeat the setup but first take time to touch the lion father. Only then do I show the father the little

lion's longing, the chick's separation anxiety, and the small Saint Bernard's uncertainty about the unfamiliar new world of the lion. The father is touched by this replay. He hadn't seen the little lion at all; he had only perceived the crying, clinging chick. The fact that his daughter hid from him made him feel so powerless and caused such strong feelings of guilt that he just wanted to get away. I let him show this with the figures. The lion father, hoping that the three animals will jump towards him joyfully as they used to, is frozen when he sees the dog and chick hiding behind the hen. 'And then does the lion call the hippo for help to not feel his powerlessness anymore?' I ask. 'No, it appears uninvited,' he replies. 'And since it believes that the panther is taking revenge and holding the little ones tight, it freaks out and grabs the little ones. "Just get in the car," he says. "And the lion father, who doesn't want to frighten the little ones, what does he do?" I ask. He feels bad when he sees his daughter crying and trembling in the car. "So, the lion father doesn't approve of the hippo's intervention?" I question. The father denies it; he simply becomes furious. "The hippo is not an animal that sneaks up; it stomps in. How come the lion doesn't hear it and stop it in time?" I confront him. Once the hippo crosses the line, it's tough even for a strong lion to pull it back by the tail. The father agrees, grinning. He argues that the lion must accept things aren't as they were before when Anna used to run towards him when he came home from work. "Is the lion strong enough to accept what he has put the little ones through and earns their trust despite the chick being frightened and the dog being uncertain?" I ask. The father is willing to muster this strength and agrees to arrange a handover at his parents' home.

Typically, in constellations, I proceed as follows: While the parents sit in their chairs during the arrangement, only coming down to the floor to place or move figures, I sit on the floor with the child. This signals that the parents must now come down to the child's level (Even my 2-year-old granddaughter says when she wants my full attention while playing: "Come to the floor"). Initially, I let the child choose an animal that represents the good father and mother parts. To learn about the resources these animals possess, I ask what the child appreciates about them and what they contribute to the bond. Hearing positive comments about the parent animals is essential for the parents involved, as parents often have their own negative interpretations. If a child, although rarely, is not willing to choose, and a parent is present, I let the parent choose the animals instead. And if a child comes alone and refuses the arrangement, then I choose the animals. I always verify whether the right animal was selected for the child or the parents ("hot" or "cold"). At this point, children usually step in and correct the choice. Then, I ask the child if they'd like to continue since neither the mother, the father, nor I have hit the mark.

If I already know that a child shows significant anger towards a parent, I allow the child to first represent the parent's side that has aroused anger, abandonment, and revenge, or the aggressive, sick, addicted, or abusive side that has scared or harmed the child. Once this negative side is established and acknowledged, children are more willing to select an animal for the positive side of the parent, even if they haven't experienced this side for a long time. If we try to represent the positive side first, these children often say it doesn't exist. After the child has chosen animals for themselves and their parents, I introduce the central intervention: I take the miniatures that represent the good parent parts and explain that the child, while still in its mother's womb, inherited aspects from both parents. Thus, the little Saint Bernard also has a little lion and a chick within him. I then honor the qualities of this team, thereby establishing good internal objects rather than perpetrator objects in the child. When the child has had positive experiences with both parents, I show how well the animals were doing when they could go back and forth and get what they needed for growth from

both parent animals, without having to separate from one parent to go to the other. This clearly highlights the intractable conflict the child faces after the divorce—that no matter how they decide, one part is dissatisfied.

If the separation/divorce has not been too long ago, I also have the child recreate the conflict situation before the separation so that the parents better understand the feelings, problems, and questions that have been troubling their child for some time. How their child internalized the hate and conflict and what attempts they made to prevent further tension, to intervene, distract the parents, or provide care in a role reversal. And how the child had to regulate their own feelings in a highly threatening situation because the attachment figures were not available. And I acknowledge all that the child has done to strengthen their self-worth.

I then address the question of why parents have registered at the family counseling center: the refusal of contact, the confusion after the visit weekends, or the behavioral problems since the separation. In the first session, I am more active and double the feelings of the animals. If I were to ask Anna straight away in the first session how the little lion feels when the lion father leaves, it would be feared that she either just shrugs her shoulders or says she doesn't know. To avoid falling even more into loyalty conflicts or standing as a traitor in front of a parent, children initially rarely want to talk about feelings. But if I let their animals speak, double their feelings, mentalize, then the child only has to nod or shake their head or confirm or correct by positioning the figures. That's all they have to show. And it is then me who has addressed the difficult feelings for the parents. Over time, when children have experienced the protection of the symbolic level, they usually become more active and let the animals speak for themselves.

In working with parents, I keep asking them how the little St. Bernard dog is doing when it only experiences an attacking hippo or a hissing panther and not the caring animal parents. Even parents who are otherwise empathetic to their child's emotional states often find it difficult in the current couple conflict to empathize with the feelings and thoughts of their child over the loss of their parents as a couple. They are then unable to correctly mentalize the components of the child's inner world. Therefore, they must be encouraged to think about the feelings that have been triggered by the stressful family situation, and to express hypotheses about the thoughts and feelings of the child.

I also work with the animal figures in the subsequent sessions, thus allowing children to address delicate topics such as, for example, new partners of the parents, weaknesses of the parents, or stressful events, in the protection of the symbolic level and to find joint solutions for the problems. Therefore, before each new session, I place the animals as the child or the parents had positioned them at the end of the previous session. And I then ask at the beginning what has changed with the animals.

In another area of conflict in separation/divorce counseling, I would like to highlight the opportunities of parts work: Even in conflicts triggered by the appearance of new partners, parts work enables the individual subsystems and their interactions to be viewed and distinguished. The new relationship is often conflictual for the child, especially during puberty, as well as for the new partner, when both begin to rival for the same person and do not understand that it is about a different love and relationship. Here, parts work can make the difference between parent and partner level understandable for the child, the adolescent, and the adults, and thus prevent a bitter rivalry from arising.

