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# Family drawing and psychological vulnerability in Children's representations of parental divorce

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**Abstract:** Parental divorce is a traumatic experience for children, a stressful life event which may contribute to a future psychological vulnerability. The aim of this study is to explore psychological distress in children after parents' separation. This research was based on a convenience sample of one-hundred children, divided in two subgroups: (1) 50 coming from a separated family (observational sample) with an age range spanning from 7 to 12 years [Mean age =  $9.2 \pm 1.5$ ] and (2) 50 belonging to a nuclear family (control sample) with the same range of age [Mean age =  $9.5 \pm 1.6$ ]. The sample resulted homogeneous for the gender: in particular, the observational group, is composed of 30 females (60%) and 20 males (40%). Showed several differences, highlighting the presence of negative affectivity, a well-known risk factor for the development of a depressive disorder, by reflecting the possible link between home environment and self-perception. In conclusion, this instrument, like any other projective proof, constitutes a privileged access to the psychological world in which the drawing remains the best communication channel and provides us precious informations about the emotional state of the children.



Mento Carmela

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Presently, Mento Carmela is an Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology at University of Messina, Clinical Psychologist, PhD in Psychiatric Sciences, specialized in Psychological diagnosis and consulting in Health settings and, is also a Jungian psychoanalyst at CIPA and International Association for Analytical Psychology, IAAP Member.

This author is supervisor of clinical psychodiagnostic practice in Psychiatric Unit at University Hospital of Messina and, Member of the Réseau Universitaire de Recherche Européen et International Méthodes Projectives et Psychanalyse.

Carmela Mento is author of scientific articles in clinical psychology field, focused on psychological assessment in health settings, mental health, psychosomatic illness, affective dynamics in psychopathology and personality disorders.

The focus of research include psychopathological and psychological vulnerability in life events, health settings, personality in lifespan, clinical psychodiagnosis of the emotional-affective and personal attitude in mental disorders, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis and analytical psychology, psychosomatosis and dermatological diseases, mental health of women, psychopathology of the postpartum.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The topic of this research is to describe the vulnerability in children, after parents' separation. Parental divorce can be a traumatic experience for children, based on age, family background and their mental development, often, the children may self-attribute the cause of parent's separation, sometimes close in on themselves and do not express their suffering and could be manifest symptoms such as depressed mood and anxiety-related abandoned feeling.

In the research, was prefer the drawing methodology, because it is a privileged form of access to the inner mental world, with immediate access to the emotional and representational dimension. If the child closes in on himself and does not express his own suffering, he may have difficulties such as closure in himself, introversion, reduction of the expressive vocabulary.

This topic is important in psychological programs of prevention in situation of family divorce for the psychological health of children and his parents.

**Subjects: Health Psychology; Counseling Psychology; Mental Health; Child & Adolescent Psychiatry & Clinical Psychology; MentalHealth; Mental Health/Clinical Social Work**

**Keywords: Family drawings; divorce; psychological vulnerability; depressive and anxiety signs**

### 1. Introduction

Parental divorce is a traumatic experience for children, a stressful life event which may contribute to a future psychological vulnerability. In this sense, children can show symptoms such as depressed mood and anxiety tied to the feeling of loss (Hovens et al., 2010). In the last decade, the topic of psychological vulnerability and distress has been object of research for several authors, who have used different methods to investigate psychological aspects in caregivers (Mento, Rizzo, & Settineri, 2019; Settineri, Rizzo, Liotta, & Mento, 2014).

In a recent study, it has been highlighted that in cases of separation and divorce 70–90% of affected children have a higher risk rate to develop psychiatric syndromes in adulthood, such as borderline personality disorder (Von Boch-Galhau, 2018). Baker, Asayan, and LaCheen-Baker (2016) demonstrated the presence of lifelong negative consequences such as poor self-image, depression, difficulties in trusting others, and low self-esteem.

Furthermore, previous research has consistently demonstrated that adverse childhood events compromise children's ability to regulate stress and negative emotions and hence can increase subsequent anxiety and other mood disorders. This could lead to the development of specific personality disorders as classified in the ICD-10, such as: eating disorders, addictions, post-traumatic stress disorders, and other mental and psychosomatic illnesses (Bernet & Baker, 2013).

Children facing parental divorce have to deal with the redefinition of family parameters and relationships. Sometimes this experience can be lived as highly traumatic. Often, children may self-attribute the cause of parents' separation, internalizing negative beliefs such as: "if my father is bad, I must be bad as well" or "if my mother does not love me, I must be unlovable". In addition, Children may feel at the center of the conflict between parents, since they are often used as a "tool" against the spouse and manipulated in order to obtain parental custody and win the legal battle (Salluzzo, 2006). When one parent is able to manipulate children, children ally with their favourite parent and reject any relationship with the other (the alienated parent) without a rational reason. In these cases, a situation of parental alienation is created (Verrocchio & Baker, 2015).

Parental alienation consists in a family dynamic, in which one of the two parents carries out a series of alienating behaviours with the aim of making sure that children will refuse the alienated parent. This situation is potentially dangerous for children so much that for some authors parental alienation is a specific form of psychological child abuse (Baker et al., 2016; Von Boch-Galhau, 2018). The concept of Parental Alienation is defined by these elements: a) denigrating the other parent; b) the child's rejection is hostile and irrational; c) it is not based on a real and current negative experience with the alienated parent. Examples of parental alienation strategies include denigrating the other parent, interfering with the relationship, asking the child to keep secrets from the other parent (Baker et al., 2016; Verrocchio et al., 2015; Von Boch-Galhau, 2018).

Baker et al. (2016) found that parental alienation is associated with children's psychological abuse. It is universally acknowledged that the consequences of psychological vulnerability in children are harmful, and increase the risk of crime and violence in late adolescence and into adulthood (Muscatello et al., 2014). In a sample of Italian adults, it has been noted that a greater exposure to alienating behaviours was related to a higher rate of psychological maltreatment and reduced well-being, even after checking the quality of parent-child relationship (Verrocchio & Baker, 2015).

An extensive body of research has documented that exposure to parental separation/divorce during childhood can be associated with long-term consequences into adulthood (Friesen, John Horwood, Fergusson, & Woodward, 2017). Evidence is also mounting that exposure to parental separation/divorce in childhood is associated with adverse adult outcomes particularly in the field of intimate relationships (Amato, 2001; Amato, 2004; Friesen et al., 2017).

In literature, Wallerstein (1985) has analyzed retrospectively how separation was experienced in childhood, asking young adults to report how this negative experience had influenced their lives. From their stories, vivid memories of marital breakdown, sadness, resentment towards their parents and a sense of deprivation have emerged. One of their greatest fears was the repetition of this experience in their future wedding.

In another study, Shaw and Emery (1987) has analyzed long-term effects of separation, in particular identifying the psychological and social problems associated with continued litigation in the family, and high anxiety in forming long-lasting relationships.

Nevertheless, Averdijk, Malti, Eisner, and Ribeaud (2012) have analyzed the relationship between parental separation and the onset of a behaviour of externalization or internalization. Parents' separation was associated in all cases to the outstart of a problematic behaviour in children. In particular, children with divorced parents tend to have more problems at school, in conduct and in psychological and social relationships (Nusinovici et al., 2018). The higher increase in problematic behaviour was confirmed also by another study, which revealed the association between externalization and a particular temperament characterized by difficulty in impulse control, and more internalizing problems when the child had a previous fearful temperament type (Sentse, Ormel, Veenstra, Verhulst, & Oldehinkel, 2011).

The analysis of the consequences of divorce for adults and children shows how family breakdown creates considerable consequences even on the Self. Parental conflict appears as an important predictor of some of children's characteristics, regardless separation. Separation is not a traumatic event in itself, but children's possible relationship difficulties and their emotional and behavioural problems are more likely to be linked to the entity of parental conflict (Camisasca, Miragoli, Di Blasio, & Grych, 2017).

Another parameter for the child's well-being is the type and quality of interactions structured between family members after separation (Cigoli, Gulotta, & Santi, 1997). Children's relationship with the noncustodial parent, the father, in most cases, is as significant as the ongoing relationship with the mother (Hess & Camara, 2010).

Regarding, in particular, the projective techniques, for example, Grych, Wachsmuth-Schlaefler, and Klockow (2002) have studied the relationship between parental conflict and children's representation of their mother, themselves and the whole family. Authors have found that children witnessing conflict between their parents showed a more avoidant attachment toward the mother and less coherence in the stories about their family.

Family Drawing as methodology (Reznikoff & Reznikoff, 1956) allows the clinician to gain some understanding and awareness of children's perception of themselves, of their parents, and "some indicators of the development of their mental organization". The family drawing is considered as an optional tool for the investigation of children's mental representation of attachment to parents synchronized with developmental psychology concepts. The family drawing "projects the image of the family as perceived by children in their growth" and provides insight into children's "fantasies that combine children's subjective life experiences and their meetings with the objective outside world" (Piperno, Di Biasi, & Levi, 2007; Dunn et al., 2002).

According to Madigan, Ladd, and Goldberg (2003) the use of the Family Drawing technique as a projective psychodiagnostic technique allows to highlight: a) the image that subjects have of

themselves and their location within the family unit; b) the object relations that they have internalized during the development which determine the quality of the relationship with other family members and interpersonal relationships in general; c) conflicts, more or less acute, that they have lived or still live towards the whole family system or some of its members in particular and the defense mechanisms that they enact against them.

Thus, subjects who perform the drawing would, in fact, end up representing their family according to the unconscious relational model, more than the conscious representation, that they have progressively internalized and structured during the development. This test therefore allows to focus real-life family life, that unconsciously determines self-image, relations with others, the position and role that each member actually plays inside it, and not the one that is consciously declaimed (Di Leo, 2015). Procaccia, Veronese, and Castiglioni (2014) consider the design of the family as a personal way of conceiving family life relatively stable, even if not fixed, and in evolution with respect to the affective dynamics that change in the transition from one stage to another in the life cycle.

However, still little is known about the type of uneasiness experienced by the child who has to deal with parents' separation through the drawing projective technique. In the light of the literature review, it is therefore needed to understand the possible correlation between separation and psychological vulnerability in children.

Hence, the aim of the present study is to explore the inner representations of parental divorce in children, belonging to separated families vs. nuclear families, in order to identify indicators of psychological vulnerability and/or distress.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Sample

The research was based on a convenience sample of 100 children, divided into two subgroups: (1) 50 coming from separated families (observational sample) with an age range spanning from 7 to 12 years [Average age =  $9.2 \pm 1.5$ ] and (2) 50 belonging to nuclear families (control sample) with the same age range [Average age =  $9.5 \pm 1.6$ ]. In relation, the observational group is composed of 30 females (60%) and 20 males (40%). Similarly, the control group is composed of 31 females (62%) and 19 males (38%).

### 2.2. Instruments

For the evaluation of the possible indicators of psychological vulnerability and/or distress, three instruments were used: (1) a semi-structured interview with the parents; (2) an individual semi-structured interview with the children and (3) the Family Drawing.

The interview with the parents has been conducted in order to get more information about the familiar situation, i.e. the time of separation and/or divorce, the cohabitant parent, the perceived extended family support, the relationship with the separated spouse, impressions about the psychological impact on the child, academic achievement.

The interview with the children has been conducted separately, before administering the drawings, in order to obtain relevant information useful for the test clinical understanding in relation to individual context, developmental stage, familiar composition, presence of brothers, etc. Furthermore, the children were asked about the same information given by their parents in order to compare possible different views or incongruities.

The core-assigned task was, following the administration method proposed by Corman, to “draw a family, the one you want”, in order to leave the children free to project the perceived family situation. For Passi Tognazzo (1999) there are three levels of interpretation:

- (1) *graphic level* which takes into account, in particular, the symbology of the drawing space, size, stroke and pressure. It is necessary to control the stereotypes which constitute an inhibition of spontaneity, a constraint from rules until obsessiveness;
- (2) *formal level* that depends on age (as stated by Goodenough); if the characters have a low formal level and the boy's intelligence is normal, an inhibition or even a disturbance of the body schema, or even dyslexia, can be hypothesized. If the facial features are not drawn, difficult relationships between the family members can be assumed;
- (3) *content* that is the most important element. For this reason, it is necessary to take into account different elements such as family composition, the eliminated characters (the elimination can be interpreted as depreciation of the family or denial of its existence, or lack of acceptance, jealousy, lack of love, emotional conflict, presence that disturbs the child). If children do not draw themselves (frequent if there is a disability) they may be poorly involved in the family or may not feel accepted in the family, and this probably means that they have little self-esteem, which would be different and/or identified with another person.

Added characters may be present, which generally express the creation in the field of fantasy of tendencies, tensions, aspirations and desires that children can not satisfy in reality; they can still translate the desire that that person is part of the family or can be a duplicate of the author (like age or sex) and represent desired ideals that are or make what the child cannot have come true.

The position of the child with respect to the family allows us to understand the emotional bonds existing, according to the child, among the various family members (as perceived by their relationship). In general, children draw themselves near to those who love the most or with whom they feel more comfortable.

It is necessary to take into account the magnitude of the different figures: size can mean psychic presence or absence. Characters who are close, who look at each other or perform common activities are indications of affective closeness; those far away, or engaged each in independent activities, superimposed characters; figures on floors, in corners or in different environments or separated by lines indicate difficult relationships and the existence of obstacles between the characters; the child between the parents generally indicates a need for protection.

Observing the enhancement or depreciation of the characters, it is necessary to take into account that very often the dominant figure is masculine. Since children tend to identify themselves in the drawing, in this case, they draw themselves near their favourite member or enhance it. The enhanced character is the one to which the greater emotional charge is directed (love or envy or fear or desire for identification) and is often the first to be designed, because children tend to project positive parts at the beginning; often the first from the left can also be: the biggest, the most dynamic and lively, the one in profile, the repeated one, the central one, the most refined, cared or rich in details, the most complete or evolved, the one watched by others, the most similar to reality, the most colorful, the most valued by comments.

The depreciated character, on the contrary, is the most indifferent to children or the one to whom they show greater hostility, resentment and is either the one eliminated or forgotten (maximum enhancement: the author consciously or unconsciously wishes that that character was not part of the family), or the one drawn last or on the right of the sheet or on the edge, or again: the one drawn the lightest or less coloured, or smaller, or on the side, or drawn worse, or even without the name, or with negative judgment, or without a part of the body, if it is the child itself it is also an index of self-enhancement, of low self-esteem, as it happens for the content of the drawing. Finally, if a character is drawn and erased it may mean an affective ambivalence, more conflictual than forgetfulness.

### **2.3. Procedure**

Each parent signed an informed consent, containing the general purpose of the research and the guarantee of anonymity, for themselves and their children, according to the Ethical Principles of

the Declaration of Helsinki about research on human subjects. The research took between 15 and 30 min for the interview with the parents and between 30 and 50 min for the interview with the children and the administering of drawings, which has been conducted on the same day.

Following the administration protocol, every child received a sheet of paper, a pencil, an eraser and has been left free to use the sheet in the position desired (Corman, 1976; Passi Tognazzo, 1999). In order to contextualize family characteristics and to foster their interpretation, children were asked to give a name to each member of the family and to indicate their role (mother, father, brother, sister, etc.); to describe if they were doing some activity; to describe their feelings and thoughts; to indicate the least good character and the saddest character.

### 2.3.1. Results

All information was collected, codified separately and compared by two different psychologists, expert in projective methods, who have managed to score 98% agreement level. Data were entered in an Excel spreadsheet and analyzed using descriptive statistics such as average, standard deviations, frequency and percentages (Table 1).

**Table 1. Variables coding and categories of the drawing interpretation parameters**

<b>Graphical aspects</b>	<b>Formal aspects</b>	<b>Content</b>
<b>Stroke</b>	<b>Collocation of the family</b>	<b>Idealization</b>
long	up	mother
short	down	father
straight	left	son 1
edgy	right	son 2
dashed	corner	<b>Devaluation</b>
<b>Dimension</b>	middle	mother
standard	<b>Collocation of the child</b>	father
big	middle	son 1
extra	left	son 2
small	right	<b>Omissions</b>
<b>Position</b>	corner	mother
horizontal	<b>Family</b>	father
vertical	real	son 1
<b>Pressure</b>	ideal	son 2
decisive	<b>The less good character</b>	none
excessive	mother	<b>Adding elements</b>
weak	father	father
	son 1	son
	son 2	none
	none	other
	<b>The saddest character</b>	<b>Blackening</b>
	mother	yes/no
	father	<b>Erasure</b>
	son 1	yes/no
	son 2	
	none	

The results were compared to the frequencies and the relative percentages for groups. Tables 2, 3 and 4 show the differences tangible and in percentage. Those = or >20% [ $\neq$  at least 10 cases] were considered significant differences.

**Table 2. Comparison of the graphical aspects of family drawings between groups**

<b>GRAPHICAL ASPECTS</b>		<b>Nuclear (N = 50)</b>		<b>Separated (N = 50)</b>		<b>Diff.</b>	<b>Diff. %</b>
<i>Stroke</i>	long	16	(32%)	16	(32%)	0	(0%)
	short	34	(68%)	33	(66%)	1	(2%)
	straight	28	(56%)	22	(44%)	6	(12%)
	edgy	13	(26%)	20	(40%)	-7	(14%)
	dashed	9	(18%)	7	(14%)	2	(4%)
<i>Dimension</i>	standard	21	(42%)	13	(26%)	8	(16%)
	big	1	(2%)	4	(8%)	-3	(-6%)
	extra	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
	small	28	(56%)	32	(64%)	-4	(-8%)
<i>Position</i>	horizontal	41	(82%)	45	(90%)	-4	(-8%)
	vertical	9	(18%)	4	(8%)	5	(10%)
<i>Pressure</i>	decisive	41	(82%)	43	(86%)	-2	(-4%)
	excessive	1	(2%)	6	(12%)	-5	(10%)
	weak	8	(16%)	0	(0%)	8	(16%)

\* in bold significant differences

**Table 3. Comparison of the formal aspects interpretation of family drawings**

<b>FORMAL ASPECTS</b>		<b>Nuclear (N = 50)</b>		<b>Separated (N = 50)</b>		<b>Diff.</b>	<b>Diff. %</b>
<i>Collocation of the family</i>	up	2	(4%)	1	(2%)	1	(2%)
	down	24	(48%)	26	(52%)	-2	(-4%)
	left	5	(10%)	5	(10%)	0	(0%)
	right	0	(0%)	1	(2%)	-1	(-2%)
	corner	2	(4%)	2	(4%)	0	(0%)
	middle	17	(34%)	16	(32%)	1	(2%)
<i>Collocation of the child</i>	middle	27	(56%)	24	(48%)	3	(8%)
	left	6	(13%)	10	(20%)	-4	(-8%)
	right	15	(31%)	10	(20%)	5	(11%)
	corner	0	(0%)	1	(2%)	-1	(-2%)
<i>Family</i>	ideal	18	(36%)	46	(92%)	-28	(56%)
	real	32	(64%)	3	(6%)	29	(58%)
<i>The less good character</i>	mother	6	(12%)	2	(4%)	4	(8%)
	father	13	(26%)	9	(18%)	4	(8%)
	son 1	7	(14%)	10	(20%)	-3	(-6%)
	son 2	11	(22%)	16	(32%)	-5	(10%)
	none	13	(26%)	12	(24%)	1	(2%)
<i>The saddest character</i>	mother	5	(10%)	4	(8%)	1	(2%)
	father	1	(2%)	2	(4%)	-1	(-2%)
	son 1	7	(14%)	5	(10%)	2	(4%)
	son 2	33	(66%)	36	(72%)	-3	(-6%)
	none	4	(8%)	2	(4%)	2	(4%)

\*in bold significant differences



**Table 4. Comparison of the content of family drawings**

CONTENT	Nuclear		Separated		Diff.	Diff. %	
Idealization	mother	18	(36%)	17	(34%)	1	(2%)
	father	22	(44%)	20	(40%)	2	(4%)
	son 1	9	(18%)	8	(16%)	1	(2%)
	son 2	1	(2%)	3	(6%)	-2	(-4%)
Devaluation	mother	3	(7%)	15	(30%)	-12	(23%)
	father	9	(20%)	9	(18%)	0	(2%)
	son 1	13	(30%)	13	(26%)	0	(4%)
	son 2	18	(41%)	12	(24%)	6	(17%)
Omissions	mother	0	(0%)	2	(4%)	-2	(-4%)
	father	0	(0%)	2	(4%)	-2	(-4%)
	son 1	2	(4%)	4	(8%)	-2	(-4%)
	son 2	17	(34%)	15	(30%)	2	(4%)
Adding elements	none	33	(66%)	26	(52%)	7	(14%)
	father	0	(0%)	44	(88%)	-44	(88%)
	son	6	(12%)	3	(6%)	3	(6%)
	none	42	(84%)	0	(0%)	42	(84%)
Blackening	other	2	(4%)	5	(10%)	-3	(-6%)
	yes	35	(70%)	44	(88%)	-9	(18%)
	no	15	(30%)	5	(10%)	10	(20%)
Erasure	yes	3	(6%)	11	(22%)	-8	(16%)
	no	47	(94%)	38	(76%)	9	(18%)

\* in bold significant differences

In the comparison between graphical aspects, no significant differences have emerged, compared to the parameters mentioned above; there isn't probable difference in intelligence between the two groups. The majority of the children in both groups tend to use a short stroke with their pencil, as it can be expected by the age and the developmental stage. Furthermore, children of both groups have produced drawings smaller than the proportion of two-thirds of the sheet, traditionally considered the standard size.

The preference of the horizontal position of the sheet is very popular for family drawings: often the family is represented in line. Finally, both children from nuclear families and children from separated families used a decisive pressure, sign of a high quantity of psychic energy and/or aggressiveness.

In the comparison of formal aspects, it is highlighted a clear prevalence of drawings of ideal families for children of separated parents, while children of unified families predominantly draw their real family. In both groups most children tend: a) to draw the family in the bottom area of the sheet, possible indicator of tangible thoughts and instincts; b) to put themselves at the center of the family, as if they feel at the center of the affects but also of the conflicts; c) to indicate their brother/sister as the saddest character of the family. Furthermore, it can be observed that in the group of children of separated parents, in 32% of the cases the father is indicated as the least good character.

In the analysis of the contents, it is observed a depreciation of the maternal figure in children from separated couples. These children, in 88% of the cases, tend to integrate the paternal figure in the drawing. In children of intact families, instead, the opposite trend prevails, therefore there is no addition. Finally, in children of separated families, there is a greater presence of blackening.

In the whole sample, it can be observed a tendency for idealization towards the paternal figure in both groups and a tendency to exclude the second son (i.e. the brother or sister), a possible element interpretable as a fraternal complex. Finally, in both groups, the eraser was not used.

### 3. Discussion

This study aims to explore the inner experience of children belonging to separated families vs. nuclear families, in order to identify possible indicators of psychological vulnerability and/or distress, through family drawing as projective method. This study is in line with a clinical approach that focuses psychological attention also on the clinical case study (Langher, Caputo, & Martino, 2017; Mento et al., 2016, 2015).

Our findings showed qualitative differences among the two groups, and indicators of psychological distress in children with separated parents. This is in accordance with consistent research literature demonstrating a worse child's adaptation (Spigelman et al., 1993; Baker & Sauber, 2013; Nusinovici et al., 2018; Verrocchio & Baker, 2015). As reported, exposure to parental separation/divorce during childhood can be associated with long-term consequences into adulthood (Bruno et al., 2012; Friesen et al., 2017). Recent studies even underlined how parents' separation may have a stronger and wider effect than parents' death on children with mental illness (Takeshi et al., 2014).

It is therefore important to identify the specific indicators of a possible uncomfortable situation for the child. It has been observed that in the comparison of the graphical aspects of family drawings between groups no difference has emerged. This could exclude a possible impact on the cognitive level or on the development of intelligence. The drawings where children have taken care of the details are in fact index of normal intelligence (Cox, 2013). Furthermore, the majority of the children in both groups have used a short stroke of the pencil, as it can be expected by the age and the developmental stage. Therefore, it can be concluded that cognition is not the area in which gaps arise.

Always on a graphic level, we have seen how children of both groups have produced drawings smaller than the proportion of two-thirds of the sheet, traditionally considered the standard size. Small drawings may represent feelings of inferiority, fears or phobias, low self-esteem, tendency to self-closure (Call,

2011; Madigan et al., 2003; Passi Tognazzo, 1999). It has also been noticed that all children had a preference for the horizontal position of the sheet, which is very popular for family drawings, since family is often represented in line. Finally, both children from nuclear families and children from separated families used a decisive pressure, sign of a high quantity of psychic energy and/or aggressiveness.

The most relevant result is that the differences arise mostly at the level of content analysis. In the comparison of content interpretation, in fact, a clear prevalence of drawings of ideal families for children of separated parents has been noted, while children from unified families predominantly draw their real family.

Drawing an ideal family could be the expression of a desire to regress at the time when parents weren't separated, in this way the children reject a painful reality which causes psychological suffering linked to the difficulty of accepting parents' separation (Granot, 2005; Otowa et al., 2014; Von Boch-Galhau, 2018). To this, it must be added that children of separated parents, in 88% of the cases observed, tend to integrate the paternal figure in the drawing.

This seems partially contrary to the study carried out by Roe, Bridges, Dunn, and O'Connor (2006) in which the authors found that children from step and single-parent families were more likely to exclude family members than children from non-stepfamilies and non-resident family members were more likely to be excluded than resident members.

It has also been found that in both groups the majority of children tend to collocate themselves at the center of the family, as if they feel at the center of affection but also of the conflicts. From the comparison of this analysis with the study conducted by Wallerstein (1985), the reaction of children in an age range of 7-12 to their parents' separation is similar: in both cases, it seems to be associated to sadness, guilt and anger. It is probable that children tend to feel themselves responsible for the end of the parental union, since most likely they do not completely understand the real causes of the divorce.

All this could involve the development of defense mechanisms typical of depression, such as negation, for example, which forbids the elaboration of the separation. In addition children with separated parents tend to consider themselves as the cause of parent's separation, perceiving themselves as the main reason for conflict. This occurs in particular when the separation between parents is particularly hostile and tormented. The conflict's persistence between adults seems to be the most important factor associated with long-term consequences in children into adulthood (Friesen et al., 2017). This would also explain why in children from separated families there is a greater presence of blackening, indicator of psychic anxiety.

Furthermore, in children from separating couples a depreciation against the maternal figure, a tendency for idealization towards the paternal figure in the whole sample can be observed. Children of this age make efforts to understand the real causes which lead their parents to separate, they find themselves living a depressing experience, in the form of aggressive feelings primarily directed towards the Self, through a set of negative feelings which go from sadness, guilt for parental separation, and secondarily to aggressiveness towards the mother, who is seen as the figure who has definitively broken the family ties.

Also, children found difficult to elaborate the pain caused by the "loss" of their father, and so the fear to be abandoned constantly emerges.

Finally, in both groups emerged a tendency to exclude the second son (i.e. the brother or sister), a possible element interpretable as a fraternal complex (Liotta, Mento, & Settineri, 2014). The fraternal rivalry (Corman, 1970) showed itself as: 1) an aggressive reaction with a depreciation of the rival or elimination; 2) an aggressive reaction where the child manifests the will to regress at

the time the rival was not born (identification with the infant); 3) a reaction to depression in extreme cases due to the senses of guilt from the Super-ego, which can lead to self-exclusion.

#### 4. Conclusions and implications

The parental divorce is an experience traumatic for children, it has to be considered as a factor of psychological vulnerability in the developmental phase. A specific psychological assessment tools, with multidisciplinary interventions, i.e. psycho-educational and psychotherapeutic methods, is important to prevent psychopathological aspects. This instrument, like any other projective proof, constitutes a privileged access to the emotional world in children, in which drawing remains the best communication channel and provides us valuable information about emotional state, specific relationships of his family nucleus, and identify possible risk factors for a correct psychological processing of the separation in a preventive perspective. In the scientific research, was prefer the methodology based on drawing because it is a privileged form of access to the inside world of children. The design allows immediate access to the emotional and representational dimension of the child. If the child closes in on himself and does not express his own suffering, he may have difficulties such as closure in himself, introversion, reduction of the expressive vocabulary. This topic is important in the prevention of aspects related to psychopathology, it is a social urgency to deal with the psychological health of children and consequently with the family that separates.

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#### Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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