'Child triangulation' transcript

About this transcript

This is a transcript of the 'Child triangulation processes' video which forms part of our advice and guidance for parents and carers in conflict or separating which can be found at www.annafreud.org/conflict.

The transcript was created on 28th April 2021 and should be accessible to screen-readers. If you have difficulties with this transcript, please contact network@annafreud.org.

Impact of parental conflict on children

I'm Emma Morris and I'm a member of the Family Ties team and I'm going to be talking here about child triangulation patterns.

Now that might sound like a bit of a mouthful at the moment, but hopefully, by the end of this seminar, it will make a lot more sense to you.

Now, what we see in parental conflict, often, is that the conflict can feel very stuck. It can go round and round and it doesn't get sorted out and quite often it even escalates. And, when that happens, parents can lose their child from their minds or even sometimes the child becomes directly involved in the conflict themselves.

In the Family Ties Project what we do is to support parents to protect children from their conflict. Now parents don't want their children to be harmfully affected by their conflict, they don't usually want to involve their children in their conflict. So, we help parents to protect their children from their conflict, in lots of different ways.

So, one way is by helping parents to recognise destructive or unhelpful patterns of communication that they might have gotten into or might tend to get into and we've got another seminar which talks about that, and how parents can recognise unhelpful patterns, and step outside of them sometimes.

We also help parents to think about what we call vulnerability cycles and, again, there's another seminar on that. But what we mean when we talk about vulnerability cycles are memories and patterns from the past that become triggered in certain situations and that can lead us to respond in an automatic way which doesn't match what is needed or what might be helpful in that moment.

We also help parents think about how stress can impact on their ability to manage conflict. Stress can impact on parents' ability to keep their child in mind and understand what it's like for their children and resolve conflict in a helpful and thought out way. And there's another seminar on that where we help parents think about how they can manage their stress better.

So, these are all ways that we help parents protect their children from conflict. And, in addition. we help parents understand child triangulation processes, and that's what I'm talking about here. We focus on this because we think that understanding these processes can help parents to move away from focusing on blaming conversations that go round and round and move towards thinking about what action they can take in order to protect their child and children from conflict.

Now the term child triangulation is borrowed from family therapy, and it describes how, when parents are in conflict, a child can become involved with the adult disputes and form an alliance or take sides with one of their parents over the other.

So, what you can get where there's been child triangulation, and I've tried to show this in diagram next to me, what you can get, what can happen is that parents begin to argue about the triangulation itself. About the kind of alliance that the child is making in itself. So, for example, parent one may accuse parent two of turning the child against them, whereas parent two may say that the child has perfectly legitimate reasons for rejecting parent one. The thing is, in our experience, it is always much more complicated than that.

The first thing to think about is the children's response to being exposed to conflict. Now children are hardwired to survive and to protect the care that they receive. So, when they're exposed to conflict, sometimes they can use sort of automatic coping strategies - unconscious coping strategies – to protect the care that they receive. And one of those strategies can be choosing a side or forming an alliance.

The reason that they do this is that they are ensuring that at least one parent will continue to look after them. If you've got two parents who are arguing, if you stay too in the middle and don't choose a side there is potentially a risk that you could lose both parents. And so, by choosing a side a child's making sure that at least one parent's going to stick around and they won't have to manage the stress having two versions of the truth. Because this is another thing, it's incredibly stressful for children to be hold in mind "it's all his fault" or "it's all her fault". Those two truths about the people that they love the most don't match up. And it's too much for them to manage, and so by choosing one side they no longer have to manage that uncertainty. So, by choosing a side, they might be protecting, in an unconscious way, the care that they're receiving, and they're reducing their stress, because they don't have to manage the uncertainty and strain around trying to figure out which truth is most likely to be right.

So, by choosing a side, a child can protect the care that they receive, and they can reduce their uncertainty about who's right and wrong. But choosing a side often comes at a really big cost. By choosing a side a child is often left with really difficult feelings, guilt or fear that the other parent might be angry at them for rejecting them over time. And over time, if they come to really hate or dislike the other parent, it can have a major psychological effect on their own development. Children are made of both parents, they're more than aware of that, so if they hate one parent essentially they hate the part of themselves that comes from that parent and that can have major impact on a child's development and their mental health, and their emerging identify and sense of self.

So, it's really important that parents protect their children, and try and prevent their children from becoming triangulated in the first place. And one way that they can do that, is by understanding the processes by which child triangulation happens, how it happens in the first place.

And we're going to think about each of those dimensions, one at a time here. So, we identify three dimensions of child triangulation.

The first dimension that we're going to think about is the child's relationship with each parent, and to what extent that is supported. Now, it's not just each parent that needs to support the relationship with the other parent, it's also the child's broader network. Their social network, their family network, their community network. And the mantra that we try and promote with both parents and the child's system is that it's their job to try and protect that child's relationship with both of their parents, no matter what the conflict between the parents or between the families.

Now it's never all or nothing, is it? It's not either 'it's all supported' or 'its not supported'. There's quite often a grey area. So, if we think about a continuum, and on the left-hand side there you've got a parent who wholeheartedly supports their child's relationship with the other parent.

In the middle, you've got indirect or inadvertent undermining of the relationship. So, for example, you might have a parent who doesn't say anything negative or critical about the other parent but doesn't say anything positive either. Or they might not say anything negative or critical themselves, but they're not careful to make sure that the broader network isn't saying something critical or negative about the parent or reinforcing negative messages about the other parent.

And on the right here you've got a parent who deliberately and consistently undermines a child's relationship with the other parent including denigration, criticism, rubbishing of the other parent and of the other parents parenting,

So, the first dimension that we thought about in child triangulation is the extent to which the child's relationship with both parents is supported. The next factor, the second factor of three that we're going to think about, is the extent to which the children are exposed to their parents' conflict. So here on the left-hand side you've got a child who is completely protected from the parents conflict. The parents may be in conflict, but the child is not aware or involved with that.

In the middle you've got a child who's exposed to conflict and acrimonious interactions. They may directly witness their parents fighting and arguing a lot or they may hear their parents arguing when they're in bed or they may see one of their parents come off the phone having spoken to the other parent, very upset or very angry or they may see their parents' communications in other ways like WhatsApp messages and so on.

And at the far end on the right here you've got a child who becomes directly involved in their parents' disputes. They get kind of recruited by one parent or both parents to join their parents' fight.

So, the third and final dimension that we're going to talk about in terms of how child triangulation can happen, is the emotional and physical closeness between a child and parent. So, at one end of this spectrum you've got a very close and dependent relationship and at the other you've got complete independence from the child, a complete independence between the child and the parent.

Now children at different ages require different things from their parents. Different genders, different cultures, different stages in their development but what we tend to see in children who are triangulated is that they are often too close or too dependent on one parent and too far, too distanced, too independent, from the other parent. So when we're thinking about how child triangulation can happen, how an unhealthy alliance can form between a child and a parent, at the cost of their relationship with the other parent, we try and think along these dimensions: To what extent is the child's relationship with both parents supported? To what extent is the child exposed to parental conflict? And how appropriate is the emotional and physical closeness between that child and that parent, considering their age and stage and needs and so on? And we help think what changes need to happen to help the child move to a healthier, a better place across these dimensions, and feel free from being triangulated into their parent's conflict.