

# CHILDHOOD TRAUMA IN CONFLICTED CUSTODY DISPUTES\*

By Roxanne Rae, L.C.S.W., B.C.D.

As one who has treated trauma for over 25 years, I was slow to grasp the extent of suffering experienced by children whose parents remain highly conflicted long after their divorce. It was only as I continually witnessed the severity of the painful experiences of these children, juxtaposed to others with “identifiable” trauma such as sexual abuse or the death of a parent, that the similarities emerged. Clearly, a number of the children of high conflict and violent divorce suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Lawrence Miller defines PTSD as “PTSD is a syndrome of emotional and behavioral disturbance that follows exposure to a traumatic stressor or set of traumatically stressful experiences that is typically outside the range of normal, everyday experience for that person.”

Although many couples divorce with relative success, the numbers who do not are notable. According to Johnston and Roseby (1997), one-third to one-fourth of divorcing couples report significant hostility over the daily issues of child rearing many years beyond the separation:

For about one-tenth of all divorcing couples, the unremitting animosity will shadow the entire growing-up years of the children. This means that an accumulating sub-group of children are caught in these family situations. Since approximately one million children each year experience their parents’ divorce in the United States, over a span of two decades more than five million children will be affected by ongoing parental conflict; for two million children, this condition may well be permanent.

Since a parent’s emotional state greatly influences a child’s daily life experience, it may be useful to consider the impact of the divorce on the parents as well. Divorce tends to trigger or re-traumatize parents at the place of their own childhood wounds. They often project blame and hate onto their ex-partner. In the worst cases, the dynamics may include a cycle in which both parents also project their own self-hate onto their ex-partners, creating a continuous war zone.

Divorce is often experienced by the parents as degrading and humiliating, an attack on their self-confidence and self-image. Other common parental experiences may include disillusionment, anger, abandonment, betrayal and loss. Some of these feelings have been popularized by jazz singer, Al Jarreau, who performs a song about divorce. Part of the chorus is “High crime! - That you don’t love me!” (Jarreau, 1984) During the divorce process, parents are often emotionally vulnerable and therefore become highly defended. They tend to be preoccupied with their own needs and with “winning” the battle with the other. Because of the level of distress, there is a higher degree of cognitive distortion in the perceptions of both parties. This is also a time that underlying character logical problems and submerged issues of separation and loss are likely to surface. The parents’ self-preoccupation and vulnerability makes them less available to meet their children’s emotional needs. They often turn to their children for their own support.

Although the type of psychological trauma experienced by such children may not leave a visible scar, it may significantly impact their development in that it interferes with the ability to form trusting, authentic, emotionally satisfying relationships throughout their lives. As one eleven-year-old who had survived three years of the “divorce war” and saw no end in sight stated: “guess my parents can’t even *try* to give me a normal childhood.”

Miller (1998) states that in order to develop an effective treatment plan, it is important to recognize and assess trauma that these children have experienced. He suggests that we consider the following emotional components:

- Helplessness - they can't escape the conflict. Often the extended families are engaged as well, so they offer no respite.
- Fear (often terror) that no one will care for them.
- A loss of belief in their specialness/importance in the family, and/or a distorted, inflated sense of importance of their own position.
- Feeling alone and unprotected. (Older siblings often feel pressure to protect the younger ones.)
- Shame and guilt for the divorce.
- A loss of trust in the world.
- A sense of feeling blamed and embarrassed.
- Ongoing trauma - sometimes after an initial traumatic event. These children often are hyper vigilant.

I have found these common experiences or themes exhibited in children of high conflict divorce in creative expressive play including sand trays and conversations:

- Confusion - what is real?
- Powerlessness and the use of power.
- Defensiveness.
- Safety and protection, and the lack thereof.
- Annihilation vs. survival.
- Hopelessness vs. maintaining hope.
- Fear of taking sides.
- Surviving in a "war zone" of animosity and conflict.
- Trust - can anyone be trusted, including themselves.

The use of the sand tray allows children to create and explore these traumatic and/or confusing experiences. This helps them relive, reprocess and reorder their relationship to these experiences. While we cannot change the fact of what happened to us, we can change how we relate to that event internally. As noted by Bob Livingstone (1999):

“When memories, feelings, understandings and experiences are continually created in the sand tray, they can be faced and worked through on an intellectual, and emotional and spiritual level. The builder is able to hold these painful scenes because they are standing in front of him. This differs from regular talk therapy where the memories reside only in one’s head, and the memories are discussed and intellectualized, but not seen or experienced.”

The following examples illustrate Worlds as shared by their creators using techniques derived from Giseal De Domencio’s Sandtray - Worldplay methods. They are not based on the interpretation of archetypal symbols nor on the intuitions or projections of the therapist.

**Case 1:**

The creator of this World is a ten-year-old girl who experienced intense and extreme conflict between her divorcing parents. In the past, her mother had engaged in alienating behaviors including a threat to move her out of state. Father was awarded physical custody with alternating weekends of visitation to mother in part because of this alienation. The child had repeatedly stated she actually wanted to live with her mother. This World was created several months after custody was granted to the father.

The father-daughter relationship had deteriorated. On arrival, the child said she was “down” and quietly created this World. As she lit her candles, she shared that the lit candles were protection for the castle. As we looked at the World together, she added some stars. She shared that they are for passengers. They float through the air, weaving between the candles to protect visitors from the fire. (She demonstrated this - nearly burning herself.) With the candles out, there is no protection for the castle. (She puts them out.) If intruders come, they can’t be stopped. There might even be some intruders hiding in the castle now. Experiences of devastation, helplessness to protect herself, and, hopelessness were shared. She needed to leave with the candles put out (no protection).



Photograph 1- Lit Candles of Protection

**Case 2:**

This World was created by a nine-and-a-half-year-old boy who was in a 50/50 custody arrangement. His parents were engaged in a bitter battle for full custody, could not coordinate care, and routinely undermined each other’s parenting.

This is a volcano World - Everything you see sticking up is a volcano. It is a hot, dangerous place with lava flowing all over. There is no place to go without being burned.



Photograph 2- Volcano World

**Case 3:**

This World was created by an eleven-year-old girl whose parents lived in different states. She was having a summer visit with her mother since her father had her during the school year. She described this World as having a place for Mom's house (NW), and a place for Dad's house (SE). They are very separate. The things she likes are in the middle. Even where the sand touches on the right (E) side, there is not a way through. It is significant that she chose to take home a photograph of "the stuff I like in the middle," which is held in a separate place from either parent's home.



Case 3-1: "Three Separate Worlds"





Case 3-2: "The Stuff I Like"

**Case 4:**

This World, one of many battles, was created by a thirteen-year-old boy. Each battle had different qualities as a focus, was carefully set up and played out. After this particular battle, there was only one survivor sitting on top of a small hill. The survivor's job was to tell everyone about the battle, how devastating it was and how many died. The survivor on the hill was looking at everything.



Case 4-1: Carefully Set Up Battle Scene



Case 4-2: "Sole Survivor on the Hill"

### **General Treatment Approach**

These Worlds clearly demonstrate the pain and suffering of children of high conflict divorce. In order to support the healing of these deeply wounded children whose internal realities are so clearly expressed in their sand World, one should consider the following guidelines:

1. Be sensitive and supportive, as you would with any trauma victim.
2. Recognize that the child may not be able to readily trust you. Negative experiences with Mom's, Dad's, or the child's own attorney and with any number of previous therapists, mediators, court evaluators or family court service investigators may interfere with your relationship.
3. Recognize that the child is likely to be despondent and in great despair. Often, by the time the child's symptoms are noticed and treatment has been arranged, much suffering has already occurred.
4. Help the child to manage his or her anxiety and depression. Strategies may include: play therapy to teach safe expression of anger and sadness, "and utilizing their own attachment objects, and positive self-talk.
5. Help the child to feel empowered. This is very difficult to do for young children. Strategies may include: advocating for an attorney for the child and teaching the child how to assert him/herself appropriately. Advise and assist parents to:
  - a. Allow and encourage their children to make choices in daily activities.
  - b. Allow the child to initiate phone calls to the other parent.
  - c. Encourage the child to tell the parents to "stop" when they feel placed in the middle of the conflict.
  - d. Support the child's developmental tasks.

- e. Find a balance between supporting the child's negative feelings about the divorce, and providing positive new experiences and ways of being together.
6. Help the child to build and encourage social support. Sometimes children are unwilling to engage socially due to the conflict it creates between or with their parents. They may reject birthday party invitations, overnights, and team sports. Educating parents and helping them to provide a structure for the child's normal social contact is important.
7. Be realistic but instill hope. With empathy and compassion, be clear it is not your job to "fix it" to make the parents, attorney or judge do what the child wants. The situation is complex and children need to learn that they do have some options in some areas, but that there are limits about what can be done. Focus on what can be done, including the child's own self-care and self-expression.
8. Help the child to develop selfhood and self-esteem. For infants and young children, self development may be very damaged, particularly if the separation was traumatic and the conflict high. Supporting attachment and engagement through working with the child and the parents is important.
9. As in all treatment, seek consultation for yourself and work collaboratively with the other professionals. This work is very emotionally demanding. Johnston and Roseby discuss the pull of each parent to engage professionals on "their side" against the other parent, and the counter transference issues involved in the process. Also, Miller has a chapter addressing the issues of vicarious traumatization for the therapist. It is important for therapists working in this area to take steps for self-care and support.

When we consider Miller's definition of trauma, which takes into consideration the personal everyday experience of the client, it is clear, that children of high conflict and violent divorces experience genuinely traumatic events. The sand tray offers a versatile vehicle, since it is multi-sensory and three-dimensional, and the experiences expressed can be readily changed and transformed. It also offers a way to express experiences that don't have words. This is very important to these children since they often have a high level of confusion. They do not know how to tell their story. Offering these children the use of a sand tray may assist them to relive, reprocess and reorder their relationship to traumatic experiences.

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