



# Parent Education Beyond Learning: An Ethnographic Exploration of a Multi-family Program for Families in Post-divorce Conflict

Bård Bertelsen<sup>1,2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Agder, Grimstad Norway

<sup>2</sup> The Family Counseling Office, Arendal Norway

<sup>3</sup> South Norway Hospital, Arendal Norway

The paper builds on ethnographic, qualitative research that explores the 'No Kids in the Middle' program for high-conflict divorce families, as practiced in the Agder region of South Norway. Parent education programs targeting parents in divorce are generally found to be 'effective' in the sense that parents learn about the pitfalls of conflict and become socialised into less negative patterns of co-parenting. However, a narrow understanding of the potential of such programs as vehicles for the transfer of knowledge fails to attend to the relational sides of both education and therapy, and the existential sides of parenthood. Drawing on Gert Biesta's articulation of education as a process working along three dimensions of purpose, the paper approaches the 'No Kids in the Middle' program as an educational practice. It aims to explore whether the educational ambitions of the 'No Kids in the Middle' program should be understood primarily in the general terms of qualification (i.e., parents acquiring knowledge and skills) and socialisation (i.e., parents gaining a specific orientation toward a set of norms and values), or if there were practices or elements that seemed directed at subjectification or bringing the 'I' of each parent into play. Analysing field notes from participant observation in a 'No Kids in the Middle' multi-family group and interviews with parents, therapists, judges, and child welfare caseworkers, the paper concludes that programs like 'No Kids in the Middle' provide a broad spectrum of educational opportunities. While some of these might be intended to instruct along pre-defined normative paths toward understanding and behaviour, such practices can also be seen as addressing parents in a different, more existential, way. In the particular local practice studied, the dimension of subjectification was perhaps most clearly in play in the informal settings surrounding the program itself.

**Keywords:** ethnography, high-conflict divorce, No Kids in the Middle, parent education, subjectification, first-person perspective

## Key Points

1. The field of parent education programs currently lacks a vocabulary for attending to the existential dimension of its practices.
2. Gert Biesta's work on the tripartite purpose of education offers one way to bring forth essential aspects of such programs, particularly regarding the vital but lucid dimension of subjectification.
3. 'No Kids in the Middle' is an innovative program for families in high-conflict divorce that utilises the format of multi-family therapy combined with narrative, dialogical, and other perspectives from the family therapy field.
4. 'Reading' this program as an educational practice opens new vistas to understand some of its emancipatory potentials.

Address for Correspondence: [bard.bertelsen@gmail.com](mailto:bard.bertelsen@gmail.com)

A sustained, uncoercive rearrangement of desires with no guarantees, that is what I'm talking about.

(Spivak, in Sharpe & Spivak, 2003)

Conceived as something that parents *do*, post-divorce conflict is sometimes considered a form of parental neglect and, thus, a form of parental 'failure' (Barne & likestillings- og inkluderingsdepartementet, 2013; Smart & Neale, 1997). In recent years, programs for parent education or 'training' have become a favoured way for governments to implement general and more specific family policy agendas (Gillies, 2005; Hopman & Knijn, 2015; Widding, 2011). Typically, programs targeting parents in divorce involve a mix of curricular material containing information on child development, how inter-parental conflicts affect children, communication skills, and group discussion and practical exercises relevant to the topics introduced (Jerwell et al., 2017; Kramer et al., 1998). Such programs are generally considered to be effective. For instance, comparing two different versions of 'The Children First Program,' Jerwell et al. (2017) found that providing parents with information regarding the effects of divorce on children, conflict resolution, and communication led to increased scores for parents on a questionnaire measuring knowledge, attitudes, and likelihood of adaptive co-parenting. Adding explicit training in adaptive co-parenting behaviours (e.g., role play) further increased such scores.

Several authors have argued that there is an educational element in all forms of psychotherapy. Frank and Frank (1993) refer to the therapist's role as 'a teacher who provides new information in an interpersonal context that enables the patient to profit from it' (p. 45). Haley (1996) states that '[w]hen a therapist educates a client, the premise is that the person lacks knowledge about something or does not know how to behave' (p. 105). In the case of post-divorce conflicts, the idea that the successful transfer of knowledge and skills should be considered the desired outcome of any educational or therapeutic intervention, in every case, might seem attractive and evident at first glance. However, approaching the educational ambition of programs for parents in post-divorce conflict only in terms of the explicit content they cover, or their potential for producing measurable behavioural change, risks reducing the process of what goes on merely to a question of *learning*. This shrouds what we might call the *existential* side of parenthood: being a parent is not primarily a domain of knowledge – a question of 'getting it right' (although this can certainly be an essential part of it, see below). It is always (also) a question of figuring out what to do, and how to be, in response to the events and dilemmas that mark out one's own and one's children's everyday lives.

In the case of conflicts, this existential side might be said to be productive in the sense that it comes with opportunities to orient and (re-)connect individual subjects to what matters most to them. It also provides opportunities to confront social problems that might otherwise appear oblique or distant. Acknowledging that interpersonal conflicts carry with them such a potential to engage us as *subjects*, Christie (1977) suggests considering conflicts as peoples' rightful 'properties.' In other words, interpersonal conflicts primarily matter from a *first-person* perspective. When they are considered solely from a third-person point of view, that is, as general phenomena treated independently of any particular people, most of what makes them *matter* disappears from view (Bertelsen, 2021).<sup>1</sup> Partly in line with such an argument, Johnson,

Roseby, and Kuehnle (2009) argue that professionals' rhetoric sometimes promotes the growth of the same conflicts that it addresses in the hope of resolution or prevention. Through objectifying conflicts and turning them into questions about what is ultimately correct or just (Hampshire, 2000), institutional procedures always carry with them a potential for turning conflict into a primary phenomenon, severing its ties to the dilemmas and problems of everyday life that provide it with relevance.

In this paper, I explore one program for parents and children struggling with issues of post-divorce conflict, the 'No Kids in the Middle' program (van Lawick & Visser, 2015) as it is practiced in the Agder region of South Norway, looking for how particular practices, settings, and arrangements position parents in relation to social norms, each other, and their children, and to themselves as subjects of their own life. Ethnographic material from participant observation and interviews with parents, therapists, judges, and child welfare caseworkers who had worked with families who took part in the program form the empirical material for the study.

In the following, I give a brief overview of the 'No Kids in the Middle' program, before introducing the theoretical perspectives used as an analytical frame for the study. Next, I discuss my engagement with the practice and the methods used in the research. I then explore the local practicing of the program in the Agder region of South Norway, using data from fieldnotes and interviews. Finally, I provide a discussion highlighting how including the first-person, or existential, dimension when exploring the merits of programs such as 'No Kids in the Middle' makes visible some essential aspects of practice that might otherwise pass unnoticed.

### **The 'No Kids in the Middle' program**

The 'No Kids in the Middle' program (van Lawick & Visser, 2015) offers an innovative approach to therapeutic work with enduring high-conflict divorce issues, utilising a multi-family group therapy format. During the past decade, the program has spread from its site of origin in Haarlem in the Netherlands to many countries in Europe. In Norway, it has been in use in a few locations (Høigilt & Bøe, 2021; Thuen, 2017). As the name indicates, the primary intention is not to steer parents toward conflict resolution. Instead, it is arranged to foster a more in-depth understanding in parents of the consequences that ongoing conflicts have for their children. Using experiential exercises and joint activities between parents and children, the program seeks to facilitate open dialogues about how to make the children's situation less hurtful.

Each multi-family group involves up to six pairs of parents and their children. These come together for eight bi-weekly group meetings lasting for about two hours. The program is not strictly 'manual-based', but a brief instructional document outlining a suggested plan for each of the eight group meetings has been developed. Parents' and children's groups are usually led by two therapists each. In parents' group sessions, therapists provide information, prompt discussions, give assignments, and initiate experiential exercises. Children's groups are more loosely structured but are focused on the general theme of being a child when parents are fighting. During the final sessions of the eight consecutive group meetings, the children present their parents with a collective formulation of their concerns, often as a creative or artistic performance. The parents respond by communicating to the children what they take with them from participating in the group.

The key normative principles underlying the model are that parents in conflict must be mindful of how conflict affects their children, that legal processes running in

parallel with the group must be avoided if parents are to be open to change in the therapy setting, and that parents and children need to be afforded a space where they are free to interact with each other. Drawing from systemic, narrative, dialogical, and trauma-informed traditions, the group format is utilised to facilitate different kinds of dialogues and dynamics than what individual or single-family therapy formats allow. Recognising that families' social networks can play a significant role in both preserving conflict and supporting change, families are encouraged to invite key members of their network to one or more Network Information Evenings held in conjunction with the program (van Lawick & Visser, 2015; No Kids in the Middle, 2020).

'No Kids in the Middle' is explicitly intended as a *therapeutic* program, seeking to provide dialogical spaces where parents and children can encounter each other and the impasses of their current situation (van Lawick & Visser, 2015; No Kids in the Middle, 2020). Relying more on active participation in open dialogue and exercises than on the transmission of knowledge and cultivation of skills, it departs from many other programs currently available for this particular population (see, e.g., Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). In the next section, I argue that approaching this program as an *educational* practice can illuminate some of its emancipatory potentials. To do this, I lean on a broad understanding of the purpose of education as found in the work of educational theorist Gert Biesta.

### Education beyond learning

While it is common to consider learning to be the 'point' of education, Biesta (2015) argues that what distinguishes an educational situation from other situations has little to do with learning or any other readily measurable outcomes. Instead, he suggests, it is defined by the act of *teaching*, which he describes as the attempt 'to catch and direct the attention of another human being' (Biesta, 2020a, p. 2). While it is possible to learn about parenting in many ways (e.g., through trial and error, consulting one's own experiences from growing up, the self-help literature, TV-shows, talking with friends), what is unique about parent education programs could be said to be that they are designed to direct parents' attention toward specific issues of public concern.

Biesta (2009) suggests that education always works along three dimensions of purpose: qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. Qualification concerns the presentation and acquisition of knowledge and skills (e.g., knowing that parents' conflicts can cause trauma in children, or rehearsing cooperative co-parenting behaviours). Socialisation refers to the element of education concerned with the presentation of traditions and practices typical to a particular culture or society, including the norms and values that are part of those (e.g., orienting toward child-centred parenting practices, see Hennem, 2014). In public discourse, these two domains are often treated as synonymous with education. In the field of parent education, they certainly have an important place (think only of public information campaigns on issues like the dangers of belly-sleeping for babies, or the importance of breast-feeding). The subject position at stake here is that of comprehension, of 'getting it right.'

However, Biesta (2009, 2020b) argues that, ultimately, the most significant dimension of education is often forgotten – the domain of *subjectification*. By this term, he refers to the encounter between a subject and 'reality.' The subject position at stake here is not that of understanding the world, but of *responding* to it. Drawing on Levinas and Bauman, Biesta (2017a,b) argues that it is in the event of being called

upon by the other that my subject-ness – the fact that I am an *I* – starts to matter. This is a question ‘about what we do and about what we refrain from doing. It is, in short, not about *who* we are, but about *how* we are or, more realistically, how we are trying to be’ (Biesta, 2018, p. 15, italics in original). Understood thus, what is at stake in parent education is not (at least not only) the acquiring of new skills or knowledge (e.g., communicating more effectively or gaining a better understanding of child development), or the realising of new identity positions (e.g., becoming a ‘mentalising’ parent). It is also, always, the question ‘What do I do now?’ vis-a-vis a reality that is not first and foremost known but *encountered* (Biesta, 2015). This process of meeting not only the world, but also oneself in relation to the world as something that is radically other, Biesta has referred to as what makes *the arrival of the I* possible – the realisation that ‘[t]he “I” has to be its own “I”, so to speak, and no one can do this for the “I” (Biesta, 2020c, p. 1018). In public discourse, what is collectively considered ‘good’ – in parenting as in any other domain of life – is something that, at least to some extent, is constantly in flux. History and democratic politics teach us that following tradition does not ensure that what is done is necessarily ‘right.’ Sometimes, what is needed is precisely the opposite – someone saying, ‘wait a minute . . .,’ refusing to go along with what is expected of them. Importantly, such a judgement can only be made by an ‘I,’ by someone willing to take the consequences of their own actions.

Building from Arendt’s (1977) claim that ‘[e]ducation is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it’ (p. 285), Biesta (see particularly Biesta, 2017a) refers to what is at stake for the ‘I’ in education as the question of ‘existing in and with the world in a *grown-up* way.’ By this term, he refers to the ability (or willingness) ‘to make and ponder the distinction between one’s desires and their possible desirability’ (Biesta, 2017a, p. 18). Grown-up-ness is not something we can learn or possess (nor does it belong to a particular age or developmental trajectory). It is something that is ‘always at stake and always in question’ (Biesta, 2017a, p. 15) when we attend to something that it is up to us to say yes or no to, stay with or walk away from, succumb to or try to resist. Thus, education’s existential potential is not concerned with teaching us what to think and do, but to *summon* us as (already) thinkers and doers (Biesta, 2017b).

Drawing on Biesta’s concepts, this paper aims to explore whether the educational ambitions of the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ program, as practiced in the Agder region of South Norway, should be understood primarily in the general terms of qualification (i.e., parents acquiring knowledge and skills) and socialisation (i.e., parents gaining a specific orientation and a set of norms and values), or if there were particular elements of the practice that seemed directed at subjectification, that is, bringing the ‘I’ of each participant into play.

## Methods

### Background and access

My first encounter with the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ program happened at a conference on dialogical practices in Leuven, Belgium, in 2013. There, the program’s principal architects, Justine van Lawick and Margreet Visser, held a workshop that I did not attend, but a good friend and colleague of mine did. I vividly remember meeting

him during a break between two conference sessions as he came out from the workshop, appearing both moved from taking in the utter despair of being a child or a parent caught in a situation of high-conflict divorce, and uplifted by what he described as the workshop presenters' creative and humane ways of engaging with this problematic issue. Upon returning home to Norway, my colleague initiated a collaboration between the family counselling service and the child and youth mental health clinic at the regional hospital to implement the 'No Kids in the Middle' program in the Agder region of South Norway. Eventually, this initiative resulted in three separate teams of therapists practicing this program in this region: two city-based teams (catering to a combined population of approximately 270,000), and one team serving mainly a more rural population (of about 40,000 inhabitants).

Holding a position as a psychologist and family therapist in both the family counselling service and the hospital-based mental health clinic for children and adolescents responsible for running the program, I followed the process of implementation from the sidelines. I did not participate in the training sessions for therapists (organised as several intensive workshops with experienced therapists from The Netherlands), but occasionally attended open seminars held for interested colleagues in conjunction with the training sessions.

In parallel with the implementation of the program in Norway, a large international multi-site research project on the 'No Kids in the Middle' program was planned. When the Norwegian engagement in this, at the university level, was stranded (on the grounds of practical and bureaucratic concerns), I applied for funds to conduct an ethnographic and qualitative study of the program as it was practiced in the Agder region in South Norway. Being an employee at two of the institutions responsible for running the program and being familiar with it through my previous encounters enabled me to quickly gain access to the practice. Not being a part of the teams of therapists working with the program allowed me to approach it with a relatively 'fresh' perspective.

### **Participant observation and interviews**

I employed a qualitative and ethnographic study design (Creswell, 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), following two separate multi-family groups at two different locations between February 2018 and June 2019. The primary method for collecting data was participant observation (Madden, 2017) throughout an entire run of one multi-family group (focusing mainly on the work with parents). I took part in all meetings in a parents' group run at a family counselling office in a city in South Norway (not the same office where I was employed myself) and sat in on therapists' preparation meetings and debrief sessions connected with each of the eight group meetings. I joined families in the waiting area, waiting together with them and the therapists for the group sessions to begin. At the end of the program, I sat in on post-group evaluation meetings between parents, therapists, and caseworkers from the referring child welfare services. During the observation period, I made extensive fieldnotes immediately after each session.

To supplement observational data, I conducted individual and group interviews with parents, therapists, and external referring professionals (judges and child welfare caseworkers).<sup>2</sup> Of the 20 parents taking part in two separate multi-family groups (the one I participated in and a second group conducted at one of the other sites), 16 agreed to individual interviews. To get their perspective on taking part in the program

after some time had passed, all 16 were interviewed four to six months after groups had ended. Additionally, in the second group, I interviewed eight of these same parents within the last two weeks before their first group meeting. This was to understand the attitudes and expectations they brought to the program.

I interviewed 12 therapists (representing the three different local teams practicing after the 'No Kids in the Middle' model) individually (three) or in group interviews (nine). To bring in perspectives from some of the stakeholders not directly involved in the group practice (Abma & Stake, 2014), I interviewed five child welfare caseworkers and three judges. These had experience either with referring families to the groups or working with families who had taken part in a group.

Interviews with parents were conducted either in participants' homes or at a family counselling office. Therapists, judges, and caseworkers were interviewed at their workplaces. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, similar to a natural conversation (Abma & Stake, 2014; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Interviews with parents and therapists analysed for this paper consisted of questions concerning each participant's experience with the 'No Kids in the Middle' group practice. Questions developed through 'progressive focusing' (Parlett & Hamilton, 1977), as I gradually became more knowledgeable about various aspects of the group experience from different subject positions.

Prior to recruiting and interviewing participants, approval was obtained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD, project nr. 57881) and the Ethical Committee at the Faculty for Health and Sports Sciences, University of Agder. All participants gave their informed signed consent to using the data material for this research.

To organise the data, I coded the material using headings and subheadings demarcating particular areas of interest, progressing toward the construction of interesting and meaningful categories (Charmaz, 2006). Throughout the research, I continually re-examined the coded interview transcripts and fieldnotes, in dialogue with emerging patterns and ideas for possibly productive typologies (Madden, 2017). This process eventually led me to analyse the program as an educational practice and to use Biesta's (2009) three dimensions of educational purpose (qualification, socialisation, and subjectification), as an analytical lens.

### **Findings: Core Features of the Program as an Educational Practice**

The analysis of interview transcripts and fieldnotes resulted in three key themes. First, all participants articulated a special concern for the children's situation. This concern was systematically harboured and conserved through several group practices. Second, the curriculum-based methods of dialogue, instruction, and exercises provided opportunities for parents to relate to how to be parents in a grown-up way in the situation in which they currently found themselves. Third, the time spent in the waiting room before groups, and events related to breaks and interruptions, seemed to be of at least equal importance in offering opportunities to relate to one's situation as did the specific 'curriculum-based' activities in group sessions. In the following, I unpack each of these themes in turn.

#### **Negotiating the parent–child relationship: the kids in the middle**

In interviews, parents said they hoped that taking part in the group program would improve their children's situation. Many hoped that their children would meet other

children in a similar situation to their own and that this would help them feel secure, be more at ease with being themselves, and find a safe space from where to articulate their concerns to their parents. However, many parents also worried that the group experience would be disruptive for their children, counteracting or postponing a return to 'normal everyday life' (as expressed by one father). Several parents articulated a hope that their participation in a separate parents' group (as opposed to programs exclusively for children) might demonstrate that they were trying their best and that their children would recognise the effort that went into this. Some of the parents who had little everyday contact with their children, or otherwise said they felt estranged from their children, expressed a hope that doing this group *together* might improve their parent-child relationship.

In interviews with judges and child welfare caseworkers, all expressed a hope that taking part in the group would help parents realise that their actions affected their children in negative ways. They articulated this through expressions like 'lifting their gaze,' 'letting things sink in,' and 'becoming aware of how one affects one's children.' Judges and caseworkers understood the group practice as relying heavily on experiential approaches and hoped this would make parents 'feel it in their stomachs.'

In the local practice setup, the children's position as the pivot point of the group process was symbolised in several ways. As part of the preparation for taking part in the group, each parental pair had been asked to contribute a picture of each of their children. In the room where the parents' group took place, the therapists had mounted these pictures on the wall. At the beginning of the first meeting, each parent was asked to present themselves by their given name and tell a bit about their children and what they enjoyed doing together.

Some therapists said they might sometimes improvise and place a children's chair in the middle of the room (if tension was building in the parents' group) and either sit on it themselves or invite parents to do so. They used this to remind parents that their actions and the emotional atmosphere between them were an integral part of their children's everyday worlds. The fact that the children were physically present in the building, parents seeing them before the separate group sessions, in breaks, and after group, also worked as a constant reminder of their presence in the situation. The dramaturgy of the whole group process was engineered to lead up to the final two meetings, where a large portion of time would be spent with parents and children together in two staged sequences. In the first of these, the children would present a collective message to their parents in whatever format the children preferred (e.g., as a slide show, a theatre performance, a film, a sequence of poems). In the next group meeting, parents would present a message, or a response, to the children in return.

### **Group practices: dialogue, instruction, exercises**

In the parents' group, practices could be grouped under two broad headings: dialogue and instruction, and experiential exercises.

***Dialogue and instruction.*** By dialogue, I refer to relatively open group conversations. When managing these conversations, therapists said they were conscious of 'asking forth' change, that is, what parents were presently doing (or what they saw happening) that was not the same as it had been before, and that they took to be a development in the desired direction. The following excerpt from a fieldnote depicts such a sequence:



The therapists initiate a round of situation reports among the parents – where are you at this point concerning the conflict? The first three parents report no change, very little hope for the future, and few ideas about how they could act differently. The fourth parent, a mother, says that she has seen some clear changes in how she and her ex-husband communicate and cooperate since they started in the group. When asked what she makes of that, she says that it is ‘strange, but nice.’ She speaks quietly, tears running from her eyes. Next up is a father. He also speaks about experiencing some positive change. He thinks that both his ex and he have managed to show some confidence in each other. He talks mostly about himself – how he has felt the need to be in control when it comes to the children’s belongings, how his ex and he probably see and experience things differently, and how they have been unable to acknowledge these differences as something other than maliciousness. He says that he sees this pattern in other areas of his life and that this is something he needs to work on – to risk letting go and let other people take responsibility for their actions.

(Fieldnote, fifth group meeting)

Providing space for such positive narratives was a key concern that some therapists articulated in interviews. At the same time, they were mindful of acknowledging the hurt and the sense of stagnation or impasse that many parents felt. In group conversations, they would dwell on issues that seemed to catch the group’s interest and move forward if an issue raised by the therapists did not seem to resonate well with the group.

Group conversations would often be informed by more formalised sequences of therapist-controlled instruction. Here, therapists would transmit factual or theoretical knowledge, like ‘the vulnerability cycle’ (Scheinkman & Fishbane, 2004) or neurobiological theories about how inter-parental conflict might affect children’s brains. Sometimes, therapists would show a music video dealing with the issue of conflict between parents as a way to invite parents to reflect on their children’s situation:

The therapist turns off the T.V. when the music video ends. She doesn’t initiate a conversation but keeps silent for a few minutes before saying that they will now do an exercise with the aim of getting to know how children might feel when parents fight. She leads the group across the corridor to a different room, where they have already set out chairs in a circle around three small children’s chairs.

(Fieldnote, second group meeting)

***Experiential exercises.*** Although not utilised in every group meeting, all participants considered experiential exercises a defining characteristic of the program. The therapists said they valued this mode of working as one of the group format’s unique features. Some of these exercises were elaborately staged, intended to induce particular sensations and provide opportunities to enact and reflect on problematic issues and behaviours. In their original paper outlining the program, van Lawick and Visser (2015) describe an exercise used in the group I took part in, devoted explicitly to letting participants experience how parents’ fighting might feel from a child’s point of view. In this exercise, three parents were assigned the role of children and placed on child-sized chairs in the centre of the room. To ‘play’ the role of parents, six others were divided into two opposing lines standing on each side of the seated ‘children’ and asked to shout accusations at each other. When the therapists subsequently interviewed the ‘children,’ they reported feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and emptiness, their sympathies leaning toward the parent that they perceived as getting the harder beating.

In interviews, several parents highlighted that exercises where they were placed in the children's position helped them understand more about what their children were going through. It also provided opportunities for experiencing oneself and others in unfamiliar roles. Reflecting on witnessing her ex-husband participating in various group exercises, a mother communicated her experience of 're-discovering' him as the father of her children:

Listening to what he had to say, I suddenly felt that "Hey, I know this man!" You see, when you have lived with a conflict for so long, it is difficult to see or even remember the things you once valued in that person.

(Mother, Group 2, post-group interview)

Others described such exercises as 'meaningless' or as 'children's games.' In the experience of one father,

It was like a theatre play. Fifteen people sitting in a circle, talking like child psychologists about everything we had to be mindful of when it came to the children, and "yes, of course," and blah blah. Like fifteen psychologists. . . . It was like a theatre.

(Father, Group 2, post-group interview)

### **Waiting, breaks, and interruptions**

*Pre-group pizza.* The groups were held after working hours, and many parents and children would arrive for the group directly from work or school during the half-hour before the group was scheduled to begin. To make them feel welcome and to make sure no-one would have to start the group activities on an empty stomach, therapists offered pizza and lemonade for the participants to supply themselves with while waiting for the group sessions to start. In addition to the aspect of nutrition and hospitality, therapists described this setting as a way for parents and children to attune to each other if there had been little or no contact between them since the last time. One consequence of this arrangement was that all parents and children would have to relate to the time spent in the waiting room as an event, itself a venue of reciprocal engagement, before proceeding to the more structured and programmed context of the group sessions. Several therapists described this situation as providing an opportunity for children to see their parents together in the same room, which some children in the groups might not have experienced in a long time. 'If the parents manage to sit beside each other and not fight, for some children, that can be a nice experience in itself,' one therapist said. However, she also acknowledged that this was probably the worst part of the whole group experience for some parents and children, remarking that 'this is not your average pizza party.' Before the third group meeting, I made the following observations in the waiting area:

The initial pizza session passes as last time, with hesitant chatter. It seems like each family has found their regular place in the meeting room by now, even their personal chairs. The children who are present start together with their parents, getting their clothes hung on the coat stand and sitting by their parents for a pizza slice. When most families have arrived, a boy and a girl hesitantly step into the corridor, glancing through it lengthwise to measure if it is still suitable for running. I see the boy walking up to another boy of about the same age, whispering. Within 30 seconds, they start running. Soon, three or four kids are scrambling up and down, turning out the lights, laughing and shouting. A mother asks to speak with one of the parent group therapists as she enters (a bit later than the father and the children), and she and the therapist

disappear for ten minutes. Another mother arrives and notices that her kids and their father haven't arrived yet. As the time nears for the session to start, she asks one of the therapists if they have heard anything. One father sits in a chair, staring gloomily into the air in front of him, arms folded across his chest.

(Fieldnote, third group meeting)

In separate interviews, many parents described the waiting room experience as a significant part of their engagement with the multi-family group. Many found this sequence to be among the most challenging elements of the group program. One mother explained that:

I always came without my children, and I never knew when they would arrive. They were always between 20 and 40 minutes late. All the other children would ask me where they were and when they would come, and I had to say, 'You know what, I don't know if they're coming or not.' Once, they didn't show up at all. . . . For me, that was an awful experience. Because . . . when you sit there, in the waiting room, not knowing if your children will come or not . . .

(Mother, Group 1, post-group interview)

A father described the period of assembling and waiting before group sessions as:

. . . exhausting. Because I . . . I don't like to draw attention in a crowd like that. I'd rather be left alone. And the kids can sense that. But with their mother, it's the opposite entirely. So, you know . . . the children flock to her, and everything is just all nice and dandy. For me, that was not a good experience. At times, it was right out painful. But after a few times, it loosened up a bit. The kids would come over to me and sit on my lap a lot of the time. Especially my daughter. So that was nice. But . . . you can feel it in the ambience in the room. I don't think anyone wanted to be there.

(Father, Group 1, post-group interview)

For others, these sequences provided the opportunity to reflect on change vis-a-vis their conflict. One mother explained:

We would sit beside each other most of the time, or near each other, and . . . the kids didn't have to dread the breaks, either. Some children seemed to find the pizza time and the breaks especially hard because their mother and father would sit at opposite ends of the room. But with us . . . it was just very natural to sit together with the children, I think. That was never a problem. And that was . . . in a way . . . kind of a good thing to notice. I mean, that this was something that we managed to do.

(Mother, Group 2, post-group interview)

A second mother said:

I see him as a stranger in so many ways. Right? He has maltreated me, and he has removed himself almost entirely from my life. And that has been his choice. . . . At the same time, it was peculiar to see him like that, because, of course, I know that he is no stranger. He is the father of my child. So . . . at that moment, when we would eat that pizza, it was somewhat pleasant, actually. Our daughter would sit between us. That was nice. . . . and I guess she must have appreciated having each parent on either side of her, for once. Her father even passed me the ketchup bottle once, I think . . . and that was, like, wow!

(Mother, Group 2, post-group interview)

***Breaks and interruptions.*** Apart from congregating in the waiting area before group sessions began, the fact that the children's group was held in a room just a few doors

down the corridor from where the parents' group was held allowed for the children's potential physical presence at any moment during group meetings. The timing of mid-session breaks during the two-hour sessions usually depended on when the children's group would take a break:

As the exercise session draws out, we can hear the children running in the corridor. When some children open the door to peek inside, one of the therapists says that this is a good thing; it is only natural that the children wonder where and how their parents are and have enough sense to check it out. He says that this often happens in these groups and that it is not to be discouraged.

(Fieldnote, second group meeting)

A few times during the eight group meetings I took part in, children would leave the children's group and knock on the door to the room of the parents' group, asking to speak with one or both of their parents. One mother remembered one such incident as the most significant moment during the whole program:

When my daughter knocked on the door and asked for her father to come out into the corridor, and he went out ... and I went out as well. I simply asked if it was ok for me to leave the room after he left, and ... it ended up being entirely ok for my daughter. Her father re-entered the group, and I stayed a bit longer with her in the corridor. That was ... in a sense, that moment made me feel like ... a mother. That is sort of ... what I remember best from it all. That I had the courage to do that.

(Mother Group 1, post-group interview)

In one of the last group sessions (the sixth meeting in the group I took part in), according to the 'No Kids in the Middle' curriculum (van Lawick & Visser, 2015), a ceremonial session where the children's group collectively make some form of performance or collective statement addressing their parents is staged. For this session, the children would come to get their parents in the room where the parents' group was held after the children had made the necessary preparations for their presentation. The children would then lead the parents down the corridor to where the presentation was to take place. The following fieldnote captures some of the tension in this situation:

When the group starts, it takes longer than expected for the children to invite the parents. There is some discussion, and some waiting in silence, the therapists having prepared for less time than what they end up having. When the children finally come to get their parents, a few of them immediately try to organise the walk so that they move together as a family. In other families, siblings split up and take care of one parent each. Together with the children's group leaders, the children have rearranged the meeting room where the children's group is usually held in an auditorium, with three rows of six chairs each. Several parents initially find seats far apart from each other but are called together by their children who invite them to sit one parent on each side.

(Fieldnote, sixth group meeting)

## Discussion

This exploration of the practice of the 'No Kids in the Middle' multi-family group therapy program shows that there was much more going on than instructing parents in how to better deal with conflict. From an educational perspective (Biesta, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2020a, 2020c), the program appeared to not only facilitate the

transmitting of specific knowledge and cultural norms or developing particular skills. It also provided a ‘scene’ on which parents were repeatedly challenged and interrupted in their habitual practices.

Rather than highlighting issues relevant to questions about whether the program ‘worked’ or not in the sense that parents ‘learned’ what they came – or were sent there – to learn, or whether the children’s situation or wellbeing improved relative to some dimension of externally determined criteria, the lens of education allows the illumination of some of the ways in which the issue of being an ‘I’ (Biesta, 2020c), or of relating in a grown-up way (Biesta, 2017a), was raised and set in play in various practices in the multi-family group setup. Most of what went on in the parents’ group sessions could be seen as ways of directing attention toward the children’s situation – the pictures of the children posted on the wall, the themes brought up in group conversations, the placing of parents on children’s chairs, and, not least, the final two communal performances where children collectively expressed their concerns and the parents responded. Interpreted as acts of *teaching*, these could all be seen as socialising gestures (promoting specific child-centred norms). But they could also be seen as ways to stage situations where parents could encounter the realities of their situation and ponder how to relate to them as facts of life. Understood in this way, these practices could be said to work as interruptions, addressing parents as the subjects of *their own* lives and denying them the ‘comfort’ of *not* relating to their own situation.

Seen under the light of education, such a group program might not primarily teach solutions but offer *resistance*. For many parents who find themselves caught in patterns of continuing conflicts after a break-up, the institutional and judicial trajectories available gradually position them in ways that let them ‘know’ each other in more or less fixed and stereotypical ways without having to confront this knowledge continually (see Johnson, Roseby, & Kuehnle, 2009; Kelly, 2003; Parkinson, 2011). Organised as an orchestrated sequence of repeated sessions, the group provided participants with opportunities to stumble upon situations where they would encounter things that did not fit the narratives they were currently living (‘Hey, I *know* this man!’). Perhaps one could say that these issues were not always set in motion *in* or *by* the particular practices or exercises, but rather emerged in their wake. As the observations from the fieldnotes suggest, the ‘noise’ or interruptions surrounding the programme itself – the waiting before sessions, the constant possibility of being interrupted by the children, a knock on the door, an impulse to get up and leave the room, the surprise at discovering that one can sit beside one’s ex and eat a slice of pizza – appear as perhaps the most critical aspects of the practice. Through interrupting identity formation, growth, or even learning, the educational element of such situations might be that they offered up a resistance to which parents and children needed to relate as *subjects*, as *I*s.

But this focus on existential affordances should not be romanticised to the extent that whatever would result from encountering resistance be considered ‘good.’ One father described his experience of the group thus:

There were no openings for personal stories or problems. That was considered as disturbance, provocation, noise. They just wanted to get through their curriculum; “Let’s talk about how you communicate; now you shall write a common divorce story, together.” That’s when I said “You know what? I can’t write that story. Not until I get

to tell my true story.”

(Father, Group 2, post-group interview)

Utterances like this indicate that far from all parents were happy with the program or judged the consequences of participation to have been altogether positive. Yet, the statement itself can be taken to express the workings of an ‘I,’ a refusal to go along with something in the face of the expectation to do the opposite.

### Conclusion

In the paper where they outline the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ program, van Lawick and Visser (2015), write that, in their experience, in every group some parents and children find the group experience itself to be of significant help, some find it useful but will still be struggling, and some do not find it very helpful. Post-divorce conflict being one of the defining potentials of present-day parenthood (see Parkinson, 2011; Smart & Neale, 1997), laying claim to vast societal resources (Neff & Cooper, 2004), this is, in a sense, an optimistic and credible estimate when seen from the perspective of what it means, and *takes*, to subject oneself to such a program as a parent or a child entrenched in a prolonged situation of conflict. In interviews with parents four to six months after taking part in the program, I asked them what they remembered best from the group experience. The most common response to this question was for parents to say that they remembered instances of interpersonal connectedness and affirmation. One said that ‘hearing others say out loud what they experienced and how they would think, was for me . . . that made it possible to speak *my* mind as well.’ Another said that ‘what helped me was . . . just sitting there, hearing that other people had the same problem as me.’ Describing what she was left with after taking part in the group, one mother said that she had come to realise that ‘I cannot change the situation, even if I want to. But I can better accept that the situation is what it is.’

Treloar (2018, 2019) places high-conflict divorce in a life course perspective and writes that the fact that meaning-making is an ongoing process across the life course is currently missing from dominant understandings of policies and practices addressing high-conflict divorce. I believe that the perspectives made available through looking at practices like the ‘No Kids in the Middle’ program through the lens of education might contribute toward furthering ideas about what engaging as professionals with parents and children caught up in high-conflict divorce situations sets in motion. It might also help reimagine the goals of policies and therapeutic initiatives, to bring them into closer contact with the question of what is at stake in a situation of high-conflict divorce as seen from the standpoint of those whose lives it affects.

In this perspective, a therapist’s most important task when working with families in situations of post-divorce conflict is not to create a space in which parents can *become* free – as in being freed from ignorance through learning how to parent ‘better,’ or as in creating a ‘safe space’ within which family members can express themselves authentically. Instead, or in addition to these, the therapeutic setting importantly allows for creating an environment in which parents can *encounter* their freedom. This has nothing to do with fostering competencies or capabilities, providing answers, or suggesting solutions. It involves directing parents’ attention toward the reality of their situation and the question of what to do with it. More than inviting consideration of the specific activities initiated, therapeutic techniques applied, or issues discussed, this

highlights how a therapeutic setting can function as a venue where parents are summoned to attend to the essential question of ‘what to do now.’ This is not a question that can be answered from the third-person perspective of a curriculum or a treatment manual. It is a thoroughly existential question that can only be answered from the first-person position, articulated in a sentence beginning with ‘I will.’

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Christie (1977) refers to such processes of professionalisation in the handling of interpersonal conflicts as ‘stealing conflicts’ (p. 4).
- <sup>2</sup> Originally, I planned to interview children as well. However, in informal conversations during participant observation, several parents were reluctant to consent to this due to the fact that their children had been interviewed by, in their opinion, too many professionals already as part of previous divorce mediations, court proceedings, or child welfare assessments. Acknowledging this, I eventually decided not to ask parents’ permission to interview children individually, apart from brief informal conversations with some of them during my presence as observer in the group setting.

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