

# EVALUATIE PILOT GEZINSVERTEGENWOORDIGER 'SCHEIDEN ZONDER SCHADE'

Summary

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## Summary

### Reason and purpose

The consequences of a complex divorce can be significant for children. The government program 'Divorce without Damage' of the Ministry of Justice and Security and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport aims to prevent damage to children as a result of a complex divorce. This is done, among other things, by developing a new divorce approach in the regional labs in The Hague and East-Brabant. The Family Representative/Case Holder pilot is part of the new divorce approach. In this pilot, a family representative is involved in a family as early as possible in the divorce process to guide parents and children during the divorce. The purpose of the deployment of a family representative is to de-escalate the conflict and reducing juridical conflict.

### Research accountability

The aim of the current study is to provide insight into the contribution of the family representative to the intended goals of the new divorce approach: de-escalation and reducing juridical conflict and into the desirability of a family representative as part of the new divorce approach and the way in which this can be achieved. To achieve this goal, eight research questions have been formulated (see paragraph 2.3).

Various research methods were used to answer the research questions, such as interviews with, among others, parents and family representatives, an analysis of the participating families in the pilot and questionnaires for parents, family representatives and cooperation partners. At the start of the study, a policy logic was reconstructed containing a description of the assumed effective elements and intended benefits of the deployment of a family representative, as well as an evaluation framework with the most important measurement indicators.

### Main findings

#### *Characteristics of the cases*

At the time of registration in the pilot, approximately half of the families (11 out of 23) were still in the divorce process and the divorce was the reason for registering for the pilot. In 9 families the parents were already divorced and a family representative was deployed because of the lack of a visitation arrangement, or parenting plan or because of a new conflict after the divorce. In 20 of the 23 families, other professionals were already involved when the family representative became involved with the family. In 18 of the 23 families, the family representative referred parents and/or children to another professional.

On average, a family representative was involved with a family for 5 months and spent 2 hours a week guiding a family. This guidance consisted of an average of 2 to 10 conversations with parents, jointly and separately. In 14 of the 23 families, the family representative spoke to the children, on average between 1 and 3 times.

### *Parents' experiences*

Six parents were interviewed during the study. Two parents completed a digital questionnaire about the pilot. Parents were asked about their experiences with the working method of the family representatives and about possible benefits of deploying a family representative.

With all parents, the family representatives worked in pairs. Five of the six parents interviewed found this working method pleasant: the family representatives complemented each other in expertise, working method and personality. Almost all parents mentioned the personal attention of the family representatives and were positive about this. During the interviews, the family representatives paid attention to communication between parents and confronted them with their behaviour and the way in which they reacted to each other. The family representatives also continuously put the children first by stating what effect the behaviour of parents could have on the children, both in a positive and negative sense. All parents received explanation and information about the practicalities of a divorce process and most parents were informed by the family representatives about the possible psychological consequences of a divorce, such as experiencing feelings of grief and loss. Half of the parents were referred to a mediator by the family representatives. In a few cases, care was provided for the children.

Not all parents were enthusiastic about the involvement of a family representative: in particular they felt that the family representatives should have spoken more with the children and should have involved the children more in the process with the family representative.

### *Experiences of the family representatives*

During the study, eight family representatives were interviewed at three different times. Four other family representatives completed a digital questionnaire about the pilot. The family representatives were asked about their activities and the results of their efforts.

The family representatives identify the following main activities during the pilot:

- Conversations with parents, individually and jointly;
- Conversations with children;
- Explaining the divorce process;
- Provide psycho-education about divorce and its consequences;
- Giving parents insight into each other's position;
- Act as a source of information for parents;
- Advise parents about and refer to mediation or care;
- Monitoring, among other things, of the deployed care;
- Be available during the entire process if necessary.

Five out of eight interviewed family representatives see several similarities between their work as a family representative and their regular position. Three family representatives monitored families longer during the pilot and always spoke to the children during the pilot. The majority of the family representatives believe that their efforts have had a positive result in the families: most parents have started talking to each other (again), which, according to the family representatives, has also brought peace to some of the families. According to the family representatives, because the family representatives confronted parents with their behaviour, parents became aware of the effects of

their behaviour on each other and on children and were able to put the interests of the children first. According to more than half of the family representatives, their efforts have reduced or prevented escalation and conflict between parents. According to two family representatives, stepping to a lawyer has also been prevented in a number of families. At the same time, other family representatives say they do not know whether their efforts have led to de-escalation and reducing juridical conflict due to the short duration of the pilot.

The majority of family representatives found working as a family representative interesting and challenging. At the same time, working with parents in a complex divorce is experienced as difficult and heavy by several family representatives. According to them, it takes a relatively long time to achieve something with parents.

### **Conclusion: answering the main research questions**

#### *Revenue*

According to parents and family representatives, the involvement of a family representative has led to the following positive results:

- Insight: the explanation about grief and loss has given several parents insight into the different phases of a divorce. A number of parents have also gained more insight into the course of a divorce;
- Improved communication: the family representatives ensured that parents started talking to each other (again) or that parents could talk to each other without arguing;
- The best interests of children comes first: most parents have become (more) aware of and take more account of the interests of the children during the divorce, because the family representatives continuously puts the interests of children first during the conversations;
- Peace of mind: the deployment of a family representative has brought peace to most parents, because the family representatives gave them the feeling that they are not alone and as a result parents felt supported;
- Continuity: the long involvement of a family representative gave parents the confidence that the family representative was available to fall back on during the divorce.

#### *Effective elements*

The study has provided insight into a number of effective elements of the deployment of a family representative that may contribute to de-escalation and reducing juridical conflict:

- Working in pairs: both the parents and the family representatives are satisfied with working in pairs, because family representatives complemented each other in expertise, working method and personality. In a number of families, one family representative focused on the parents and the divorce process, while the other family representative focused more on the children;
- Attention to communication: most parents say that during the conversations the family representatives paid explicit attention to communication between parents. Parents were also confronted with certain behaviour of their own and with the way in which they react to each other;
- Putting children first: the family representatives continuously puts the children first by always stating what effect the parents behaviour could have on the children;

- Providing information: the family representatives explained parents which steps should to be taken during a divorce and explained the possible psychological consequences of a divorce, such as experiencing feelings of grief and loss.

### **Reflection on the pilot and the study**

During the study it became apparent that a number of important limitations had arisen in both conducting the pilot and conducting the study. As a result of these limitations, no conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of the deployment of a family representative and the underlying effective elements of the deployment of a family representative. The study did, however, yield some benefits from the efforts of the family representative, which were observed by the respondents in the families that took part in the pilot. In addition, the study has provided a number of insights into the necessary preconditions for a pilot such as this and into the best way to design a similar study in the future. The study revealed the following limitations of the pilot:

- The learning approach: most family representatives were searching for their task and role as family representatives and what was expected of them during the pilot for a long time. As a result, most family representatives took on a wait-and-see attitude when including families in the pilot and often did the same work as in their regular position;
- Time: due to the experienced work pressure and limited exemption from their regular work, the family representatives only guided a limited number of families in the pilot;
- Influx: due to the reluctance of the family representatives to include families and because many parents already had too much on their mind to participate in the pilot due to the divorce, the influx of families in the pilot was low.

Furthermore, a number of limitations were identified during the study that hindered the implementation of the initial research proposal and which contributes to the fact that no conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of the deployment of a family representative:

- Limited response: despite repeated requests, only six parents and two cooperation partners had the time and desire to participate in an interview. This is of course also related to the limited participation of families in the pilot. The response to the questionnaires was also low: only two parents and one cooperation partner completed these questionnaires;
- Interviewed parents: Four of the six interviewed parents were guided by the family representatives of one pilot location. There was also little or no escalation among the parents we spoke to. As a result, the study is not representative.