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## The Pirate Family – Coalitions, conflicts, codswallop

Last year, approximately 75,000 marriages were divorced. Often, underage children are among those affected. In the event of a separation or divorce, children frequently find themselves in a conflict of loyalties as a result of their parents' actions. Due to their stage of development, this applies to a greater extent to children up to the age of 11.

In behavioral therapy with children and adolescents, in systemic family therapy, schema therapy and in the context of youth welfare, such as school social work, the general social service and even in the family courts, we often experience parents who - due to individual grievances and disappointment – no longer perceive the needs of their common children as a priority and worthy of protection. The symptoms, reactions and consequences can manifest in very different ways in the children. The most common symptoms that can be observed in persistent loyalty conflicts in the short term are: Withdrawal behavior, aggression, increasing fears, insecurity, refusal to perform, lack of concentration. The symptoms are often directly related to the parents' quarrelsome behavior.

Suddenly, due to the disputes of the parents, the children are no longer allowed to love both parents unconditionally or to express their affection openly without hurting the other parent. In many cases, they are expected to recognize the misbehavior of one partner or the other and to accept that the opposing parent obviously no longer loves them. The demand to suddenly be both loyal ally and secret-keeper intensifies this conflict of conscience. In addition, children between the ages of 5 and 10 have not yet developed a sufficient capacity for ambivalence and therefore cannot see the positive and the

negative qualities of a person as a whole.

When parents separate, it is not uncommon to forget that the downside of the required loyalty often means for the child disloyalty towards the other beloved parent. The effects of this dilemma are often recognized so late that the children's ability to perform, to relate and to bond has already been damaged. Children may also react with mood disorders, rejection or withdrawal. In many cases it is not easy for psychotherapists, social education workers or teachers to put the underlying causes of the displayed behavior into the »right« context.

### Uncovering, understanding and treating loyalty conflicts

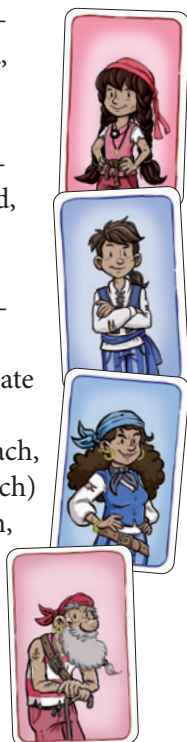
This set of cards is an effective tool for uncovering loyalty conflicts in psychotherapy with children, for making them visible and for selecting appropriate interventions. In the context of youth welfare service, it can be used as a tool in separation and divorce counseling as well as for a more nuanced assessment of the child's best interests. The number of cards was chosen in such a way that loyalty conflicts in small groups and school classes can also be vividly presented and processed (with limitation to the main actors). The prevailing aspects as well as the known mechanisms of loyalty conflicts, stressful thoughts, experiences and their consequences can be uncovered, questioned and worked on in a playful way – in order to support children in a specific way and thus take them out of the area of tension between loyalty and disloyalty.

The cards have been designed in such a way that children up to the age of 11 are able to use them to express their stressful emotions and sense of loyalty and thus counteract fears of loss and feelings of powerlessness.

## Structure of the pirate cards

**Person cards.** The deck of cards consists of the following person cards, each of which is available in a red and a blue colour:

- ▶ Girl of elementary school age (representative card for the patient herself, friend, cousin, classmate, or other; 6 red/blue cards each).
- ▶ Boy of elementary school age (representative card for the patient himself, friend, cousin, classmate, or other; 6 red/blue cards each)
- ▶ Adolescent female (friend, cousin, classmate, or other; 4 red/blue cards each)
- ▶ Adolescent male (friend, cousin, classmate or other; 4 red/blue cards each)
- ▶ Adult female (mother, aunt, teacher, coach, neighbour, or other; 5 red/blue cards each)
- ▶ Adult male (father, uncle, teacher, coach, neighbour or other; 5 red/blue cards each)
- ▶ Older female (grandmother, great aunt, neighbour or other; 4 red/blue cards each)
- ▶ Older man (grandfather, great uncle, neighbour or other; 4 red/blue cards each)
- ▶ Baby (1 red/blue card each)



You can easily tell which team a person on a card belongs to by their clothing and background. The cards can be written on and there is space to write down the name of the person the card represents.

**Symbol cards.** In addition to the person cards, there are 62 symbol cards. A list of these cards, with ideas of what they can stand for, can be found starting on page 14. The card with the captain's hat, the pirate ship and the raft are each available in red and in blue – they are to be assigned to the red or blue crew accordingly.

**How to work with the cards.** As soon as you and the child have put together the two crews (red/blue), it is usually possible for the child to assign his or her own representative card to one of the two crews.

Which team do you belong to, are you red or blue, or is it sometimes this way and sometimes that way?

If this is difficult for the child, the »child's card« can also be placed a little bit aside at first, with regard to the child's own wishes and the different expectations of the two pirate teams, and, if necessary, marked with the card »white flag«. Now the goal is to learn more about the team and each individual pirate, using the symbol cards, such as



cooking spoon, rum barrel or pirate code, to bring important topics into the conversation. This gives the child the opportunity to express his or her views, experiences, feelings and possibly fears.



The following exemplary questions may be helpful:

- ▶ Who is the captain on the red ship and who is the captain on the blue ship? Who wears the captain's hat and decides what everyone has to do?
- ▶ Maybe there is someone, who has already had to leave the ship and is now drifting lonely on a raft across the sea?
- ▶ Who steers the ship or who is the cook?
- ▶ Is there a treasure map or a secret island?
- ▶ Are we dealing with peaceful sailors or with quarrelsome, angry and plundering pirates, with a ship full of cannons, grappling hooks and other weapons?

This initial situation can be further developed into different applications for a variety of settings, which are briefly described below. The deck of cards is suitable for individual contact as well as for working with groups.

## Possible applications

### Application in psychotherapy/counseling in an individual setting

**Application in probatory sessions.** Already at the beginning of a therapy the set of cards can be used effectively in the context of the probatory session with the child. Only the cards of one colour, red or blue, are used. The following introduction can be helpful:

Imagine that you are a famous pirate boy or girl and your whole family is a pirate crew that lives on the ship with you. Let's see who we have in your crew. We'll add one card for each person.

*By the time the tasks on the ship and the symbol cards are assigned, it is important to get to know each pirate a little better and to ask why he or she is particularly good at this task.*

**Alternative:** If your household was a ship and every member of your family was a pirate on that ship and you were all a feared pirate crew on the high seas: How would the tasks on the ship be distributed? Who would do what and what would be your task?

**Alternative:** Imagine that both your father and mother were two feared pirate captains. Each of them has a big ship. Which one of your family do you think would sign on to which ship? Think about which members of your family, acquaintances, or friends would sail on either Mom's ship or Dad's ship and pledge allegiance to the respective captain. Briefly explain your decision.

**The Pirate Constellation.** In the further course of therapy, the cards can be used for a »pirate constellation« with the child. An instruction is given as an example:

Please choose a representative card for each of your family members. As you can see, the people on the cards are of different ages. Try to find a card for each person that fits well in terms of age.

Have you found a card for yourself?

Good, because we're going to start with your card. Put your card in front of you on the table. Now imagine that you come home from school and a letter is waiting for you. It's hard to believe: The letter says that you have been given a huge pirate ship that is waiting for you in a harbour near your home.

Together with your family you go down to the harbour in order to board your ship. Put all the other person cards next to yours on the table and make sure that the people you get along with are close to your card and the people you don't like are farther away from you. When you arrive at the harbour, the harbour master is already waiting for you and explains that you have to assign some tasks and items to your crew [*symbol cards*]. Now distribute all the items one by one among all the members of the crew, and explain to each of them why the item fits exactly to that particular person, and what task on the ship is connected to it.

**Genogram work.** The number of person cards was chosen in such a way that the deck of cards can also be used for the development of a genogram. In doing so, it is advisable for the child to select a representative card appropriate to his or her age and place it openly in front of him or her on the table. Starting from this card, siblings, parents, grandparents and other important persons can be assigned and discussed in detail in the framework of genogram work. The symbol cards are very suitable for identifying the relationship status, experiences and current behavior of the individual persons.

**Conflict clarification or high contentiousness.** Particularly in the case of high conflict and long-term conflicts between parents, outsiders and family members take sides and thus reinforce, sometimes unconsciously, the existing conflict. Systemic family therapy in particular offers those outside the nuclear family the opportunity to become involved, to question themselves and to search together for functional solutions. This set of cards can be used as a preparation tool for the work with representatives in the context of systemic therapy.

**Behavioral analysis.** In preparation for a later behavioral analysis of a particular situation, place the representative cards of the conflicting parties on the table according to their age. Make sure that the proxy cards are laid out in two different colours. In the family context, this could

mean that in a dispute, for example, between mother and father, the mother's card belongs to the red team and the father's card to the blue team. Since the representative cards are now on the table, the course of the current conflict can also be worked out visually. The following questions have proven to be useful in the context of obtaining information for the drafting of a behavioral analysis and the formation of hypotheses:

Describe the situation you just talked about in more detail so that I can understand you better. These cards [*symbol cards are laid out face up*] may help you to depict important objects, desires or character traits of individual persons. If one of the symbol cards suits you, you can always just take the card, match it to a person or situation, and very briefly describe why that card fits that person or position exactly. If you like, we'll first look at the items on the symbol cards together. Do you have an idea what the card means, or do you have a good idea what the card could signify for you [*explain the first card using an example, if necessary*]? How did the people involved respond to it, and how did you deal with it? Let's take a closer look at all the people for whom there are cards on the table, one by one. Let's talk first about the person for whom the answer comes to your mind the fastest and last about the person for whom you find the answers the hardest, if that's okay with you. Try to remember as clearly as possible. Imagine the situation happening very slowly, perhaps as if in slow motion, here on the table again in exactly the same way. Who are you [*pointing at cards*]? Where were you standing? Do you remember what happened next, what exactly did you do? Can you remember if you moved [*if so, move your card in the same way on the table*]? Could you please briefly describe to me precisely what the situation looked like at this point? What would the person on your card see now if they could look around? I now know what the person on your card is doing and seeing. Maybe thinking about where the person was just before that moment, will help you to figure out what that person was thinking or how that person felt their body at that moment, at the exact moment we are reenacting here. Do you also have any idea how the other people on the cards were doing or what they must have been feeling? Where did the people go after that moment, what did they do? And what did you do then? Would you react in the same way today, or is there something you would do differently? If so, show me your sequence of choice with the person cards on the table. Maybe we could reenact your wish together: You tell me what you want me to do, and later we'll think together about what and who might help you react the way you wish you had.

In the next step, the child selects a personal, age-appropriate representative card. The child decides on a situa-

tional basis whether he or she will be assigned to the blue crew, in our example the pirate crew »Dad«, or the red crew »Mom«. Therefore, it is important to differentially explore and to allow the child to place the cards independently. In case of neutrality towards the disputants, the additional card »White Flag« can be added to the proxy card.

### Application in systemic family therapy or for the work with resources.

After a representative card has been chosen for each family member, each child of the family receives a set of representative cards (one card for each member of the family). Children between the ages of 4 and 6 are accompanied and supported by a parent during the following work assignment. The children are asked to assign important tasks to all family members on the ship in accordance with the objects on the symbol cards. The strengths of each person are crucial and important. This should be emphasized during the instruction of the task. The following questions can be helpful:

- ▶ Who is in charge of the ship and decides what everyone has to do?
  - ▶ Why is this person particularly suited for this task?
  - ▶ Who is the helmsman or helmswoman, steers the ship and decides where everyone goes?
  - ▶ Who takes care of the physical wellbeing of all the pirates and decides what to eat every day?
  - ▶ Who sits up in the crow's nest, watches the vast sea and warns the crew of icebergs and other obstacles?
- The results are presented to all family members together and discussed afterwards. In addition, the resource-oriented distribution of tasks on the pirate ship can be worked out by the whole family using circular questioning.

### Application in school

**Prevention of loyalty conflicts.** The whole group that is invited to do the experiment is divided into three groups of approximately equal size. Two groups represent two feared pirate crews that hijack ships on the oceans, plunder treasures and do not shrink from any danger. The members of the third group belong to the land folk, they are polite, friendly, diplomatic and have the special ability to recognize danger very quickly.

*Therapist:* »If Dad had the opportunity to distribute all the important tasks among you, to whom do you think he would give this task and why? Maybe it would help you to ask the question: »What strengths and interests does Dad see in each person?« If you can't think of a person, say aloud: »I guess ...«, and think of a suitable reason by yourself.

Now the two pirate teams each receive half of all the symbol cards and are asked to figure out, based on the cards, who

will take on which task on board and why exactly this task is particularly suited to this child. Each team does the task distribution for itself and the land population observes very closely how the pirates proceed.

The next step is that each pirate team hires some more children, because the bigger a pirate crew is, the stronger it will be in the future. The following constellation is suitable for this purpose, for which sufficient space should be available:

Red Pirates

Land Folk

Blue Pirates

*Task for the pirate teams:* Try to get as many children of the land population on your side as possible, but you are not allowed to leave the boundaries of your playing field. The pirate crew that has the most members at the end wins. Following a starting signal, you may invite, persuade, bribe, promise, or use cunning and trickery to bring them into your own field. As soon as a child from the land population is on a pirate field, it belongs to this pirate crew. The round ends after five minutes. The team with the most pirates wins. During the debriefing, all children are given the opportunity to report on their experiences during the experiment. The following questions can be helpful:

- (1) What strategies did the pirates use to recruit members?
- (2) Which strategies worked well, and which didn't?
- (3) Did the children in the middle find it easy to choose sides?
- (4) What helped the children in the middle to choose a side?
- (5) What would the pirates do differently next time?
- (6) Are there situations in the schoolyard, in physical education or at home that are similar?
- (7) How should one behave in such situations?

**Resource- and solution-oriented work.** The person cards can also be used to playfully represent opponents as well as their supporters in a group work. Invite the two groups to an experiment and ask them to organize themselves independently as a pirate team using the person cards.

Each pirate chooses a person card and tries to move like the person depicted on the card during the experiment. Afterwards, both teams appoint one pirate captain each, who is in charge. Both captains get half of the symbol cards each. Who could keep order on the pirate ship, who is the helmsman and who is the cook? If possible, the symbols should also be assigned to all the pirates and, in addition, an explanation should be found together for the decision that was made. Helpful question for this: What strengths, interests, and connections does the selected child have to this task or trait? Only if the respective child accepts the task, the card is considered assigned.

Everyone has found his or her role, if all symbol cards are distributed and everyone agrees. In case there are any symbol cards that no one wanted to accept, they are put aside and discussed in the final meeting by talking about the advantages and disadvantages of this trait or object.

We now see two pirate ships sailing across the wide sea. All »child pirates« are now playing exactly the pirate they have as a card, with the characteristics and tasks depicted on their symbol cards.

▶ What would happen, if these two heavily armed ships should meet somewhere on the ocean? The pirates play the situation.

▶ How, do you think, would two friendly pirate teams celebrate a reunion? The pirates play this situation.

After a few minutes, you dissolve each situation and free the children from their roles. The experiences from this game can then be discussed in a circle of chairs. Ask the pirate teams about their feelings and observations during the experiment. Who behaved how, what task and/or characteristic did the individual pirates have?

**Note for use outside of therapy:** Especially for children who have conflicts of loyalty it is difficult to talk openly about their current situation and their experiences. No child wants to speak badly about their own parents. Therefore, explain to the child in an age-appropriate way how you will deal with information later and what you need it for, before working with the deck of cards. Existing trust (if necessary also trust advance), sympathy and interest of the child are important conditions for the work with this set of cards. Loyalty conflicts are like icebergs, only the smaller part is visible and therefore conscious.

## List of symbol cards

- ▶ Dog, Cat, Parrot: pets, connection with animals.
- ▶ Lonely island: can stand both for a beautiful place where there is no quarreling, and for a lonely, boring place that no one can reach.
- ▶ Bed with porthole or hammock: one's own room. The place where the ship's boy or girl can retreat to when he/she is exhausted or just needs rest.
- ▶ Captain's hat: captain, the boss of the team. Who is the leader of this team? Who is in charge?
- ▶ Pirate ship: departure/arrival. This is also the place where the pirates mostly move around. This is where they party, hunt and argue.
- ▶ Raft: a temporary solution, a space or resource that ensures »survival« in the short term, but is not a solution in the long term (e.g. »My mother then moved in with her friend for the time being.«).
- ▶ Steering wheel/compass: giving direction. Who keeps an eye on the destination? Who makes sure the ship



doesn't crash into a rock or disappear into the depths of the ocean?

- ▶ Treasure chest: secret, valuable possession of a pirate crew
- ▶ Cask: alcohol
- ▶ Tobacco bag: smoking
- ▶ Sack of ducats: having money
- ▶ Mountain with cross, tombstone: death
- ▶ Treasure map: the best way. Whoever has the treasure map cannot get lost. This map also stands for plans, goals and wishes.
- ▶ The telescope: foresight
- ▶ Old books/feather: writing, school, structure, knowledge. Who knows more, who helps you in school?
- ▶ Paper roll, stapled to mast: pirate law, rules, structure.
- ▶ Cannon: aggression. Who is attacking whom?
- ▶ Pirate pistols: aggression. Who is attacking whom?
- ▶ Anchor: Whoever drops the anchor will not move from the spot, they want to stay there and wait until the storm has passed and the water is navigable again.
- ▶ Rope/Tools: resource. Who helps? Who knows how to help themselves?
- ▶ Ball and chain/Window with bars: bond, negative.
- ▶ Whip: beatings, punishments
- ▶ Spoon with chef's hat: who is responsible for food?
- ▶ Scrubber for deck/bucket/sponge: cleanliness, tidiness
- ▶ Wooden leg: illness, disability. Is someone sick? Do the other people show consideration?
- ▶ Grappling hook: pirates' readiness to fight. Once the grappling hooks are out, the crew prepares to capture another ship.
- ▶ Saber: If a pirate carries a saber openly, he/she wants to be feared. An armed pirate is not to be messed with.
- ▶ White flag: Surrender, desire for peace. Who is more likely to make peace? How will the other team react?
- ▶ Skull and crossbones flag: If the skull flag is raised, things get serious, because a fight seems inevitable.



**Note:** It has been shown that when dealing with the symbol cards, children find it easy to give the individual symbols a relevant meaning that is related to the persons or their characteristics. In order to be able to comprehensively understand the attributed meaning, it is important to discuss each symbol and its meaning in detail for further work.

## Online pirates for download

You can download the pirate cards as colouring pictures in the download area at [www.beltz.de](http://www.beltz.de) (password: PxnP9wKc). The pictures can be effectively adapted to their human models, e. g. typical characteristics and preferences, such as wearing glasses or favorite colours, can be added. Especially the self-designed cards can be used again and again in the further course of therapy. Good luck to you and the little pirates, and ship ahoy.



*»By the ship's goblin, Arr!  
You shorebirds, let's lift anchor  
after we've had a look  
at the crew and the cargo.*

*Aye!«*



## About the authors



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## Rossa – Rossa

Emotions-Monster-Mix for externalizing with children  
64 picture cards with  
20-page booklet in sturdy  
box.

With illustrations by  
Steffen Gumpert.

With online material.  
GTIN: 4019172100025



The Emotions-Monster-Mix is a set of cards that can be used to externalize stressful emotions, thoughts and behavior patterns. The procedure is suitable for children from the age of 6 and is based on the mix-and-match principle – four cards each make up a figure, e. g. an »anger monster« or »my sadness«. Together, the individually designed monster is then changed step by step. Thus, for example, it is possible, as an accompaniment to cognitive restructuring, to exchange the anger knight's armor for a colourful rainbow T-shirt or to give the anxiety a flower hat. Distancing oneself in this way can in turn be used therapeutically in the context of various interventions. Further possible applications are explained in the booklet.