

A digital intervention
for children in divorced families

Background

SES NXT is a digital intervention for children aged 3-17 whose parents are divorced or separated.

SES NXT was developed as a supplement to already existing efforts for the more than 300,000 children and young people who do not live with both parents. With SES NXT, a broad range of children and young people can receive targeted support. Additionally, because the approach is digital, it is more resource-efficient compared to alternative methods.

The intervention was developed through collaboration between psychologists specializing in child and family dynamics and experienced digital developers. In addition, an advisory board composed of professionals from five municipalities and the Family Court, who are actively involved in casework with children and families experiencing divorce, provided advice and guidance during the development phase. The effectiveness of SES NXT is evaluated by researchers from the University of Copenhagen in a randomized controlled trial with a wait-list control group.

Focus and goals

What are children in divorced families concerned about? What dilemmas and problems do they face? How do we empower them to act without giving them too much responsibility? These focal points form the basis for a digital intervention that generalizes and acknowledges the issues the children may face when their parents decide to split up.

Children may often think their reaction to their parents' divorce is wrong. In SES NXT, the children are exposed to material that narrates how other children have reacted to their parents' divorce. The children learn that feelings are important and that there can be many ways of reacting when one's parents go through a divorce.

It is not the divorce itself that determines how the children are affected. What matters is how the divorce is managed during and after the separation. With SES NXT, the children are supported to speak up and express their values to their family, and they are assisted to overcome the silence that can arise in and around the family.

SES NXT has been developed with the explicit goal to enable the child to:

- + Recognize typical feelings and reactions.
- + Identify at least one way of dealing with difficult thoughts and feelings.
- + Give at least one example of how to say yes and no to adults.
- + Describe how to initiate a difficult conversation with a family member or friend.

Age differentiated

SES NXT is age-differentiated into four age groups: 3-5 years (the kindergarten child), 6-8 years (the younger school child), 9-12 years (the older school child), 13-17 years (the young adult). The content in the different age groups is adapted to the children's language and cognitive development level.

In the smallest age group (kindergarten children), the intervention is designed for the child to complete the modules together with an adult. In the module, the adult receives guidance for dialogic interaction with the child, via adult buttons.

In the age group 6-8 years, the material is rich in media, incorporating videos, animations and voice-over, so that the child can complete the modules even without the ability to read. The child is encouraged to involve an adult in several modules but has the opportunity to go through the modules independently.

In the age groups 9-12 years and 13-17 years, both media and reading material are used. The modules are adapted to the child's level of development in terms of difficulty and complexity, so that the child will be able to complete all modules independently.

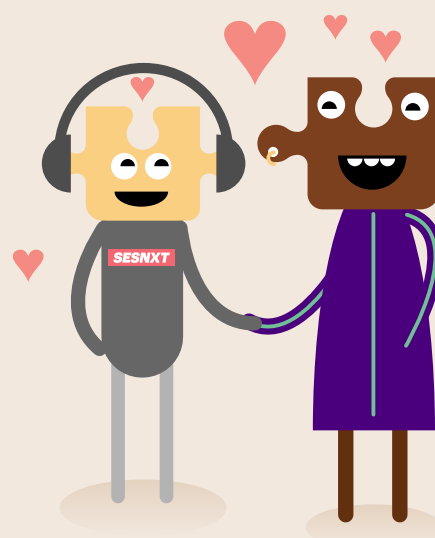
When registering a new user, the child's date of birth is indicated, and based on this, the child is directed to the modules that are available for the age group in question. The child first watches a short introductory video and is then presented with the modules of the intervention. SES NXT is based on freedom of choice – the child chooses with which module he wants to begin.

Themes and content

SES NXT consists of 14 themes divided into four age groups as follows:

| Theme/age group | 3-5 years | 6-8 years | 9-12 years | 13-17 years |
|----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|-------------|
| My Family | X | | | |
| Missing Someone Means You Care | X | | | |
| Changeover Day | X | | | |
| Feelings | X | X | | |
| Living in Two Places | | X | X | X |
| The Bonus Family | | X | X | X |
| Find an Important Adult | | X | X | X |
| Learn To Say Yes and No | | X | X | X |
| My Parents Are Not Getting Along | | X | X | X |
| When It Has Just Happened | | X | X | X |
| Packing Your Bag | | X | X | X |
| Understand Your Feelings | | | X | X |
| Tell Your Story | | | X | X |
| My Rights | | | X | X |

The learning objectives cross the various modules. For instance, the child learns to recognize typical feelings and reactions in several modules and not solely within the module "Understand your feelings". This means that the child is likely to gain insights into all the learning objectives, even without completing every module.



In the following, the content of the various modules is briefly described.

| Theme | Contents |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| My Family | The child follows Carla, who lives in two places. The child and the adult are supported to have a dialogue about the differences in the two homes. |
| Missing Someone Means You Care | Loss is normalized as an expression of love. The adult and the child read a digital pixie book about Carla, who is experiencing feelings of missing someone. The child and the adult get inspiration for how to manage feelings of longing. |
| Changeover Day | The child and the adult watch a video about a changeover day, with a focus on a teddy bear, and they are supported to talk about their own changeover day routines. |
| Feelings | The child learns about his feelings through a weather metaphor. The child and the adult are provided with a language that can facilitate a conversation about how the child is feeling. |
| Emotions (6-8 years) | The child is presented with typical feelings of a divorce, as well as a perspective on feelings as being important and necessary. |
| Living in Two Places | It is up to the individual to decide which sharing arrangement suits the individual family. The child is supported in adapting to the sharing arrangement and learns that one's needs may change over time. |
| The Bonus Family | The child hears what it is like for other children living in bonus families and what has contributed to their well-being in those families. |
| Find an Important Adult | The child is provided with help to find, invite and talk confidentially with an adult who is not the parents. |
| Learn To Say Yes and No | It can be difficult to ask for help when your parents are having a hard time. The child receives guidance on how to ask for help. Furthermore, the child is supported to speak up to others. |
| My Parents Are Not Getting Along | It is normalized that the relationship between parents can be difficult after a divorce. The child is presented with typical feelings when one's parents are not on friendly terms, and the child gets strategies for how to communicate these feelings to the parents. |
| When It Has Just Happened | A special focus on reactions when one's parents have just split up. A connection is established between the physical/bodily reactions and the themes in the child's life. |



| | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Packing Your Bag | Switching between two homes can be demanding. The module shows how routines and having an overview of one's belongings can make changeover day less difficult. |
| Understand Your Feelings | A divorce can be a jumble of emotions. The child is presented with typical feelings following a divorce, as well as a perspective on feelings as being important and necessary. |
| Tell Your Story | All families have memories – both positive and negative. After a divorce, some memories can be erased. The child gets inspiration about how to talk to his family about stories from the past. |
| My Rights | The child is presented with four rights linked to divorce: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Right to visitation + The right of initiative + Right to be heard and not to have an opinion + Right to privacy. |

Made even for children and young people

SES NXT is optimized for use on tablets and smartphones but can also be used on PC (Window or Mac).

The communication primarily occurs through videos, Motion Graphics (animation with speech) and interactive exercises for the user. The target group is accustomed to receiving information in this format and it has been a priority to enable engagement and interest through these digital tools. The videos often have an emotional element that the child can relate to.

SES NXT is made for children and with children. In the youngest age group, the child follows the animated character Carla and her family. In the older age groups, the user follows four children whose parents have also gone through a divorce. It is portrayed, among other things, how these children cope when their parents are no longer on friendly terms, and how they reacted emotionally, behaviorally, and physically to their parents' divorce.

The child is consistently engaged in various ways. For example, the users can send messages to their parents inspired by text suggestions on the platform or share videos with others. This is meant to help the child to start meaningful conversations with important people in their network and potentially initiate change in otherwise stuck patterns.



Theoretical basis

The content and exercises in SES NXT integrate elements from different psychological approaches including Systemic therapy, Narrative therapy and Mentalization-based therapy. The following subject terms have been pervasive in the development of SES NXT.

Mind is social (Tomm, 1985)

A person's behavior, feelings, and cognitions (the 'mental') are always embedded in a social context. When a child does not want to go to school or shouts and throws things, the behavior reflects something else going on in their social environment. The child's behavior is connected to their history and must be seen in connection with this. The behavior cannot be separated from the many relational patterns the child is currently experiencing and has experienced in the past. In SES NXT, children learn to understand their behavior and feelings in different contexts.

Re-connection (Perry, 2013)

When a child experiences their parents' separation, it represents a big change for most children. The child's everyday routine changes. Their connections to values about 'a good life', as well as hopes and dreams for the future, often change significantly. The child may become disconnected from their previous beliefs in the world. Their sense of security disappears for a period of time. In SES NXT, the children are supported in reconnecting with their hopes and dreams, values and important people in their lives.

Agency (White, 2008)

Agency is the experience of being able to influence the world around you, rather than being a passive recipient of events. The divorce decision is beyond the child's control, which can lead to an experience of loss of control. It is important that children of divorced parents get the feeling that their voices are valued and that they can influence what happens in their lives. In SES NXT, children are supported to express what is important to them. Through four rights, they learn that their opinion is important and that they can effect change in their own lives.

Adapt disturbance (Schjødtt & Egeland, 1992)

In systemic therapy, the term "disturbance" refers to the therapist's intervention aimed at creating change in a fixed pattern, for example in a family. "The adaptive disturbance" consists of intervening in a way that stimulates change, but without the system (family) losing its cohesion. In SES NXT, we consciously work to create a suitable disturbance that can promote movement in a constructive direction.

Generalization and normalization (White, 2008)

Experiences of "wrongness" and inadequacy are often central when people do not thrive. Although it is common to have divorced parents, many children find themselves navigating their thoughts and feelings on their own, which can lead to experiences of being wrong or inadequate. In SES NXT, children are shown how others may typically feel in similar situations, helping them understand that their way of feeling is common.

Mentalization (Aasen & Fonagy, 2021)

A divorce can evoke different feelings and thoughts in any child. The child's developmental stage at the time of the divorce influences how nuanced the child can understand his own and others' feelings and thoughts (mentalizing ability). The child's ability to mentalize can be strengthened if others assist the child in understanding his own and others' feelings and thoughts. In SES NXT, the children are supported in developing their mentalization skills by listening to other children share their feelings and thoughts, and by being presented with typical feelings and thoughts.

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Partners:

Thank you for support and collaboration.

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