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Divorce : supporting children and adolescents

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Divorce : supporting children and adolescents

Abstract

Divorce impacts millions of families each year. The experience of a divorce is a process rather than a single event. Children and adolescents experience the divorce process differently. Children often go through five grieving stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Divorce can be devastating to adolescents because they have a broader sense of reality and the world as it applies to their life. Older children are often seen as capable of handling the divorce process and asked to make difficult decisions regarding custody. All children and adolescents who experience their parent's divorce should try counseling. The children and adolescents who appear resilient or unaffected by the divorce are especially concerning. They may be handling their feelings secretly or in unhealthy ways. Some counseling techniques that can be beneficial for helping children and adolescents experiencing divorce are: bibliotherapy, family therapy, narrative therapy, play therapy, and art therapy.

DIVORCE:
SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

An Research Paper
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts or Masters of Education

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Divorce impacts millions of families each year. The experience of a divorce is a process rather than a single event. Children and adolescents experience the divorce process differently. Children often go through five grieving stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Divorce can be devastating to adolescents because they have a broader sense of reality and the world as it applies to their life. Older children are often seen as capable of handling the divorce process and asked to make difficult decisions regarding custody. All children and adolescents who experience their parent's divorce should try counseling. The children and adolescents who appear resilient or unaffected by the divorce are especially concerning. They may be handling their feelings secretly or in unhealthy ways. Some counseling techniques that can be beneficial for helping children and adolescents experiencing divorce are: bibliotherapy, family therapy, narrative therapy, play therapy, and art therapy.

Weddings are often described by couples as the happiest days of their lives. For better or worse and until death do we part are vowed to one another as two individuals become one family. Two people so in love, with hopes of growing old together and declaring the intent of spending the rest of their lives together. The fairytale dream of living happily ever after is usually in full swing with the births of their children. For about 45% of these families the fairy tale will come to a screeching halt when plans or people change and divorce becomes a reality (Bryner, p.201). “Love is the foundation upon which marriages are formed and families are created. Strange as it is, marriage is also the first step toward divorce” (Marta, p.103).

Divorce involves a lot more than the legal process used to end a marriage. Divorce is an emotional process experienced by all members of the family. “There are approximately a million divorces each year in the United States” (Gladding, p. 265). Millions of children are affected by divorce each year. There are numerous factors that can contribute to the decision to divorce. Marriages do not usually end abruptly. Typically, marriages dissolve after years of problems and troubles. “Only about one fourth of couples who seek divorce report seeking professional help of any kind, and those who do seek help wait an average of 6 years after a serious problem develops” (Gladding, p.122). Divorce is a national epidemic resulting from ignored and untreated issues that could benefit from family counseling professionals. Unfortunately, “the modern quest for the quick fix has extended to many aspects of society, even interpersonal relationships” (Bryner, p.201). Divorce has become the first and last stop for marital problems. The situation becomes more complex when

children are involved because divorce does not just “uncouple incompatible partners it changes the structure of the entire family system” (Gladding, p.265).

Once the decision has been made to divorce, often one of the most difficult aspects is telling the children. Parents may have questions and concerns about how to deliver the news to their kids. Family therapy may be sought or therapists may be asked to assist with this aspect of divorce. Often, parents wait until the last possible minute to tell their children about the pending divorce. Instinctively, parents want to protect their kids and as a result they wait to tell the children about the divorce with hopes that the news will hurt less (Marta, p.105). Often times, children are only spared a few days before the moving truck arrives or perhaps hours to process the information and begin living with the changes. “Children need time to hear the news, mull it over, ask questions about the decision, and begin comprehending what the event will mean” (Marta, p.105). During a divorce, parents can feel overwhelmed with their own emotional pain that it can be incredibly difficult to help their children too. Therapists can assist families by helping the parents discover clarity of their role and relationship as a parent (Taibbi, p. 235).

All family members deal with divorce differently. It is important to remember that “divorce is a process, not simply a single event” (Cohen, p. 1020). Children experience divorce differently than adolescents and adults. According to Bryner, Children experience divorce in stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Bryner, p. 202). During the denial stage, children deny the possibility that their parents could divorce and reassure themselves that their parents will remain together (Bryner, p. 202). In the anger stage, children are furious at their parents for

not trying harder and acting out behavior is common (Bryner, p.202). Within the bargaining stage, children try to undo the problem by changing their own actions (Bryner, p.202). Children often believe that misbehavior on their part has resulted in the divorce. In the depression stage, the child experiences sadness that affects all aspects of the child's life (Bryner, p.202). "Children who reach this stage and who appear to be driven to succeed in some way must be watched closely, as they might be suffering the most and overcompensating to control the emotions they feel" (Bryner, p.202). The acceptance stage is when the child has the ability to see that the divorce may be for the best (Bryner, p.202). Family therapy can assist children as they experience the different stages of a divorce. Therapists can help families learn what normal and abnormal behaviors are within the stages. Counselors can advocate for the wellbeing of the children involved.

Divorces can be traumatic events and children can experience varying levels of grief as a result (Marta, p. 21). Grief is a common reaction to have when a loss is experienced or significant change occurs. "Grief is an expression of love and a consequence of loving" (Marta, p.25). Children who experience the divorce of their parents often have a variety of emotions relating to the situation. Divorce is not the same experience for all children. "How a child grieves depends on the loss, the amount of love invested in what has been taken away, the relationship that was shared, and how the loss occurred" (Marta, p. 7). "Children don't distinguish between the pain of loss that results from death and the pain of loss that results from divorce, separation, or abandonment" (Marta, p.8). Children are unable to think conceptually and only know that something is missing (Marta, p.8). There are a variety of things to

understand about when a child is grieving. Children grieve significantly differently than adults do. Children are only able to grieve for short periods of time because “their lack of emotional maturity simply doesn’t allow them to sustain intense pain for long periods” (Marta, p.24). Children experiencing divorce may have times where they appear to be handling the situation well and times where they appear deeply bothered by the situation. Children of divorce could benefit from having a counselor to talk to about their emotions. Counselors can validate the child’s feelings and emotions. The family counselor can help the child learn ways of expressing feelings appropriately, managing emotions, and choosing healthy coping behaviors.

Adolescents experience divorce differently than children. Adolescents have a broader sense of the world and reality as it applies to their lives. Divorce can be just as devastating to adolescents as it is to children. As older children, adolescents are often seen as able to handle the pending divorce and are often subjected to painful experiences as a result. Often times, adolescents are asked for input in the custody agreement.

Allowing for children and adolescents to tell their personal stories and express their unique emotions is essential when helping those affected by divorce. Healing emotional pain cannot be hurried and can take years to get better. “It usually takes 3 years after the loss for the intensity of the pain to diminish enough to allow the grieving child to begin reconstructing a new life” (Marta, p.33). Often adults get impatient and frustrated with the time it takes for a child to grieve. Adults may mean well by trying to “help” the child, but it may result in prolonging the grief or allowing it to linger beneath the surface for years (Marta, p. 34).

The Hillard family from the movie 'Mrs. Doubtfire' was chosen to represent the divorced population. In the movie, Miranda Hillard (wife/mother) decided to divorce Daniel Hillard (husband/father) after 14 years of an unhappy marriage. Miranda and Daniel are both devoted and loving parents. Their children, Lydia (14 years old), Christopher (12 years old), and Natalie (5 years old) witness the dissolve of their mother and father's marriage. The Hillard family experiences various feelings and emotions during the divorce proceedings. The movie focuses on the custody arrangement for the children. The mother is granted full custody of the children with the father receiving arranged visitations. The movie demonstrates the great lengths a father will go to in order to spend more time with his children. The Hillard family was chosen to represent the divorced population because the movie illustrates traditional feelings and behaviors associated with the break up of a nuclear family. It will be interesting to compare and contrast literature of factual information with a fictional family's example.

The Hillard family's divorce experience is similar to what the literature presents. Miranda and Daniel communicate through arguing most of the movie. The children found out about their parents intent to divorce from overhearing the fighting. Ultimately, the mother made the final decision to divorce. Miranda decided to divorce Daniel after years of arguing. Daniel did not want to divorce. He acknowledged having marital problems, but he felt they could work them out. The Hillard family does not attend marriage or family counseling before ending their marriage. The movie does not show the children given any time to think about, talk about, and ask questions before the father moves out of the house. Daniel stays with his brother for a

few nights before he gets his own apartment. The children show signs of extreme sadness and confusion when their father moves out of the home. The oldest, Lydia, says, "I'll miss you". Christopher expresses how it is his fault that the divorce is happening. He describes how if he would never have had a birthday party then his parents would never have started fighting. The youngest, Natalie, told her dad, "You can't go". She expressed concern for who was going to read her book to her. Once separated, the children start getting used to a new lifestyle. They display sadness that they are not able to see their father more often. The movie does not portray any significant changes in the behaviors of the children as a result of the divorce. The parents verbally bash the other spouse in front of the children. The mother begins to date another man during the divorce. The movie does not reveal any feelings from the children about their mother dating another man. The movie centers on the father breaking physical boundaries in order to spend more time with his children. There are obvious family triangles within the family. The children seem to form a triangle together. It appears that they bond together and look to each other for strength while dealing with the difficult situation.

There are a lot of differences between the Hillard family and what literature presents. Unfortunately, the movie does not provide full and complete information about what is actually occurring within the family. The movie simply gives bits and pieces of what is happening as a result of the divorce. Also, the movie begins by showing the parents making the decision to divorce and does not provide much insight to compare pre and post divorce behaviors. One significant difference between the literature and the movie is that Hillard children do not show much emotion that

their nuclear family is dividing. They do not ask many questions. They appear upset, but seem more bothered by the fact that they will be spending less time with their father. Also, when the mother begins to date another man the children do not appear to react like children from the literature. The movie does not show in depth emotions from the children about the divorce.

There are various reasons that could lead to the Hillard's seeking family therapy. It is likely that the children could begin to experience emotional problems. The children could show signs of struggle academically at school. They may also display destructive behaviors that begin to cause concern. Most likely, given the current situation in the movie, one of the parents could decide to remarry. This could send the family to counseling to deal with various feelings and emotions related to the divorce and the possibility of remarriage. There are a variety of theories that could be affective when dealing with families experiencing similar situations. Solution-focused therapy could be beneficial for working with the single-parent family post-divorce. In a solution-focused therapy session the family would begin focusing its attention on solutions rather than problems (Gladding, p.242). Several techniques could be used with solution focused therapy to help the family. The miracle question could be asked to get an idea of what a "perfect" world would be like. The therapist could ask, "If a miracle happened and your family problems disappeared, what would that look like?" This would give the therapist an idea of what changes each member of the family would like to make to fulfill their wants and needs. Another technique the counselor could use is to focus on exceptions (Gladding, p.243). It may be beneficial for the therapist and the family to explore what life is like when certain problems are not

occurring. For example, Spending equal amounts of time with mom and dad result in the children doing well in school. Spending a lot of time with only mom and the man she is dating results in poor performance at school. The therapist may use the Scaling technique to help the family. By using scaling the counselor may ask for the family to scale, between 1 and 10, how they view the problem. For example, the therapist could ask each member of the family to scale “how far do you think you have come to solving your problem?” (Gladding, p.243). The therapist can then use the information from the scales to present information and questions to the family members. Another technique that could be beneficial for use with this family is a compliment. It may be beneficial for the counselor to say, “I am impressed with all of your willingness to change and become a stronger family. It really shows maturity especially in the children”. The solution focused therapy would encourage the family to “make small changes and do so rapidly”. Narrative therapy may also be beneficial for helping the Hillard family. Narrative therapy would externalize the problem from the family and allow for reauthoring to occur. The therapist would learn about the family, from the family and take a nonexpert approach. Several techniques could be used from the narrative therapy approach. Letter writing could be used after therapy sessions as a way for the family members to communicate thoughts or feelings to one another. The children could write a letters to mom and dad explaining thoughts and feelings associated with current situations.

Divorce can be a painful experience for all family members. Everyone reacts and deals with divorce differently. As a counselor it is important to keep an open mind. Counselors also need to remain aware of personal experiences that could create

potential biases. Literature shows that families do not generally seek help while experiencing divorce. When families do seek therapy it is the counselor's role to make it a positive and nurturing experience.

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