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Coping with divorce

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Coping with divorce

Abstract

This research paper targets children who are experiencing divorce in their families. The purpose of this paper is to assist counselors in knowing how divorce affects children and how to work effectively with children and families experiencing divorce. A look at the various developmental stages, the grief process of divorce, practical interventions to be used with children experiencing divorce, and providing resources for educators and parents will assist counselors and parents in helping children to cope with their experience.

COPING WITH DIVORCE

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,
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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

by

Amanda Sue Lawless Anderson


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Coping With Divorce

Children are impacted by their environment and their experiences. The condition of parents, children and family has been precarious surrounding divorce rates with nearly 49.8 percent of children living outside traditional two parent homes (Glennon, 1995). With the number of children experiencing divorce, there is a significant need to support families sorting through the changes, feelings, and situations that arise when parents live apart.

This manuscript provides background information about divorce, current implications for parents and children, and modes of interventions. It also addresses useful information for parents and teachers to consider when interacting with children facing divorce.

Overview And History

Evolution

Divorce is defined by Scholastic Children's Dictionary as "the ending of a marriage by a court of law" or becoming "totally separated from something" (1996, p.156). The history of divorce is difficult to trace because terminology and definitions vary within cultures. The ending of a marriage, or divorce, has been documented as far back as the Babylonians in *Code of Hammurabi* ("World Book", 2000) and was considered quite rare before the 18th century ("The New Book of", 1997).

Rates and Statistics

It is very difficult to get an accurate picture of the rate of divorce. To make the divorce rate meaningful, it must be compared to another number - "like population size, number of marriages, or number of potentially divorcing people" (Root Aulette, 2002, p.256). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states that provisional data from the year 2000 indicates 4.1 divorces occur per 1000 population compared with 8.7 marriages per 1000 population. In other words, the rate of marriage to divorce in 2000 was almost 2 to 1. (February 25, 2003, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/divorce.htm>)

*Cultural Aspects**Diversity Implications*

Divorce can impact people of any race, religious affiliation, or socio-economic background. Statistics from 1999 state that white individuals had a 9.8 percent divorce rate in comparison with black individuals at a slightly higher 11.9 percent rate and hispanic individuals at a slightly lower 7.6 percent rate (Root Aulette, 2002). This did not compare their socio-economic status with race. It also did not address the ethnic similarities or differences of couples, such as the rate for White-Black couples Hispanic-White couples, or Black-Hispanic couples. In addition, the information fails to state if 29.3 percent is the total divorced percent, or if other cultures are included in that information.

In comparison, DiMona and Herndon (1994) stated that the divorce rates for Hispanic and White women were about 150 per 1,000 women. This compares with Black women at almost 400 per 1,000 women. The rate of increase over a twenty year span was about 100 per 1,000 women for White women and about 70 per 1,000 women for Hispanic women. For Black women, the increase was approximately 300 per 1,000 women.

Gender Implications

The implications that follow divorce can be both similar and different for men and women. Two-thirds to three-quarters of divorces are initiated by women for various reasons. During and after the divorce, women and men tend to experience a decrease in their economic situation, women by 30 percent and men by 15 percent (Root Aulette, 2002). This significant reduction, for women especially, results in the statistics that approximately “thirty-nine percent of single women with children live below poverty” (Root Aulette, 2002, p.265). This economic downturn often influences women to take second jobs, find sub-standard housing, live with relatives, and reduce their standard of living.

Men generally see the greatest hurdle being maintaining relationships with their children - as children most often reside with their mothers after divorce. Fathers often become separated from their children and may lack the emotional preparation or resources to restore relationships with them during or after the divorce (Glennon, 1995). In conjunction, these men express that working with the

ex-spouse to set up time with the child is one of the most exhausting aspects of divorce. Men felt left out of important events and shared hard feelings over not having "adequate" time with their child. (Root Aulette, 2002).

Situations Resulting From Divorce

Single Parent Families

A single-parent family is "a family in which one parent raises the child or children" (Chasnoff, Ben-Dov, & Yacker, 2000, p.13). When making decisions in the best interest of the care of the child, courts will frequently decide that the child should reside with one parent. The child is then allowed to "visit" the other parent. At times, a child may not see the non residing parent at all, or very infrequently. In such situations, the parent with whom the child resides is often responsible for the care, keep, and decisions surrounding the child. Situations such as these might greatly influence the impact the divorce has on the child (Chasnoff, et. al.). These may also be referred to as *sole legal custody, legal custody, primary care, or primary residence* situations. (Johnson, 1989).

Joint Custody

Joint custody, also referred to as *shared custody or shared physical custody*, holds the connotation that "parents are dividing or sharing some of the authority and responsibility around raising a child" (Ricci, 1997, p.166). Isolina Ricci (1997) states that joint custody no longer means an equal division of time.

Instead, Ricci (1997) explains that more parents are opting to share time more with each parent clearly specifying when and where time will be spent. Joint custody has become a popular recommendation for the courts, sometimes evenly splitting the time with the child in *Home A* this week and *Home B* the next week (Ricci, 1997).

Impact On Children

Early Childhood

As children grow, they incur several milestones of development. Vernon (1999) states that “knowledge about developmental characteristics is essential in assessment and intervention with children, adolescents, and their parents (p.3)”. Divorce can affect children in every capacity of development: cognitive, social, physical, emotional, and self.

In “Healing Hearts”, Hickey and Dalton (1994) recognized the stages and hurdles that some children might encounter. They state that from ages 3 to 5, children often observe and test. Children ask many “Why” questions to learn about the world around them. When experiencing parental divorce, a child may become quite anxious and overzealous to receive parental affection because of a fear of abandonment and rejection (Hickey & Dalton, 1994).

Middle Childhood

Middle childhood, ages 6 to 11, also brings significant changes. Children constantly “compare themselves to others” becoming self-critical and possibly

more inhibited about trying new experiences (Vernon, 1999, p.10). In addition, children at these ages may experience more complex emotions and a shift from preoperational to concrete operational thinking. Although their thinking is starting to move to a new level, their reasoning may not yet be abstract (Vernon, 1999).

This often results in children seeing things as simply right or wrong. The emotions may surface at elevated levels, especially concerning the well-being of the parents. Great difficulty may arise when the child tries to express the situation to others because it is still confusing to the child. (Hickey & Dalton, 1994).

General

Children are individual beings with different characteristics and personalities. Parents, teachers and counselors must understand that children will respond differently depending on the situation. Adults need to be aware of the changes in children's behavior for an extended period of time, not just the first few weeks or months (Berger, 1983). Issues may be triggered by seemingly unrelated events that still need resolution to move forward.

Counselor's Role

When families experience divorce, counselors potentially become major factors in children's resiliency. Especially noting Lansky's (1996) findings that "half of a group of preschoolers were more troubled a year after their parents' divorces than they had been immediately after"(p.55).

Counselors may become involved at different stages with children experiencing divorce. Some may begin working with children while parents are still together before a divorce occurs. During this time, children may be exposed to family stress and arguments. Counselors can also become involved later in the process when parents have separated and are working with divorce proceedings or even after the divorce has occurred (Miller, 2002).

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) (as cited in Vernon, 1999, p.219-220) share how children experience many issues: fear, sadness, loss, loneliness, rejection, conflicting loyalties, and anger. Often, counselors utilize various means to process these experiences with children. In addition to individual or small group meetings with children, the counselor may also meet with teachers and parents to facilitate change and healing for the children.

The counselor's role with a child contains many important aspects. The child should be told that the counselor is aware of the divorce situation and is there for the child to talk with. The counselor should provide opportunity for expression for the child through activities, discussion, or games. Another important aspect for the counselor to address is to work towards accepting change. This can be done with discussion and "activities to reinforce the idea that change is part of life" (Miller, 2002, p.109).

The counselor should discourage self-blame. Children often take responsibility for the parental divorce. Children need a great deal of support to

back the message that they are not responsible for their parents' situation. In addition, the counselor should also reinforce that parents still love their children and will still be a mommy or a daddy. The "change-over" day, a day when children may change residence from one home to another, may be a difficult time. Children may test limits during this time in trying to determine new rules and boundaries (Miller, 2002).

The role of the counselor is extremely important concerning the aggression and anger which may surface for children. At times, divorce situations may bring out great conflict sometimes resulting in domestic violence. Children are often quite aware of these situations and may witness this violence. Counselors should be extremely sensitive to the anger or aggression that children may demonstrate. Counselors should work with children to share their feelings and experiences in a safe and therapeutic format.

Each divorce situation is different, as is each child and family. A challenge for the counselor is to meet the developmental needs of the child while working to understand the situation and framework of the child's everyday life. The counselor has another significant role in working with parents. As Miller (2002) stated, "Get the message across to parents that the director and teacher should be informed of any major changes at home that might affect the child's behavior at school"(p.110). At times, this may be difficult because parents might be apprehensive about informing others. The parents are going through major

transition, too. It is helpful for the counselor to reassure parents and to be nonjudgmental. The counselor should never take sides between parents. Instead, concentrate on the child's point of view. This allows for an opportunity to share resource materials while keeping the lines of communication open (Miller, 2002).

Framework For Counseling

As counselors work with children experiencing divorce, they can be assisted by Wallerstein and Blakeslee's framework (1989 as cited in Vernon, 1999, p.221). The framework is "described as six psychological tasks that children of divorce must resolve" during their journey to become more resilient (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989 as cited in Vernon, 1999, p.221). Wallerstein and Blakeslee outlined the six psychological tasks as follows:

1. Acknowledging the reality of the marital rupture.
2. Disengaging from the parental conflict and distress and resuming customary pursuits.
3. Resolution of loss.
4. Resolving anger and self-blame.
5. Accepting the permanence of the divorce.
6. Achieving realistic hope regarding relationships.

The importance of these psychological milestones must not be underestimated as they help to pour the foundation for increased resilience, successful functioning, and healthy habits being formed (Vernon, 1999).

Lansky (1996) felt that a significant aspect of this process occurred in the resolution of loss and grief. She stated, "the way grief is expressed does not necessarily correspond to the way it's felt" (p.28). The amount of expression shown to adults may vary and does not necessarily signify a child that is more or less troubled by the divorce.

Assessment and Evaluation

When working with children, assessment and evaluation are essential components to rooted therapy. Vernon (1993) summarized it best by explaining "the purpose of assessment with children is to identify needs and priorities that lead to recommendations that will enhance their lives and assist with the decision-making process"(p.2)(as cited from Goldman, Stein, & Guerry,1983, and Hood & Johnson,1991).

In the first stage of this process, the counselor gains information from teachers and parents about the issues a child might be concerned about. Next, the counselor works with the child to determine the main concern. Then, they develop alternative solutions. The next step is to make a decision to resolve the concern. Finally, the counselor and child analyze the outcome (Vernon, 1993).

Throughout this process, the counselor compares the child's responses to the normal developmental stages. Extreme areas of concern might arise if the child exhibits regressive behaviors for a prolonged period of time, shows significant depression, or demonstrates excessively aggressive behavior. The child may also

demonstrate injury to self, or feigns illness to the point that real illness develops (Miller, 2002).

Several types of assessments may be helpful to determine the extent of concern in specific areas. The Children's Depression Inventory (CDI) can be given to individuals aged 8 to 17 to measure depression. It contains 27 items and is written at a third-grade reading level. The CDI gathers information on Negative Mood, Interpersonal Problems, Ineffectiveness, Anhedonia (inability to find enjoyment in any activities) and Negative Self-Esteem (Hood & Johnson, 2002). This is a very short, simple and effective evaluation tool.

Another means of assessment is the problem checklist. This assessment tool asks students to check which symptoms they have experienced in the past two weeks. Many of the available checklists can be revised to fit the counselor's needs. These lists can be lengthy and extremely comprehensive or very short.

In addition, the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) measures the symptoms of anxiety. It contains 21 items completed on a 4-point scale. The BAI categorizes responses by minimal, mild, moderate or severe (Hood & Johnson, 2002).

Interventions

The focus of interventions is to aid the child in gaining insight and facilitating change for the child. It is imperative that the counselor selects the mode that best fits the individual child and the child's circumstances. Several types of interventions can be utilized with children experiencing divorce.

Art Therapy. Art ideas and activities provide an effective way for children to express themselves. Miller (1996) states that “young children grow rapidly in their ability to express themselves verbally, but verbal expression is often not a child’s most effective way of communicating”(p.300). Rubin (2002), an art therapist, supported this idea by expressing how drawing and writing can help to provide children with a sense of control and relief from difficult feelings. This process can also help children to begin conversations about the topic.

Counselors and parents can encourage children to draw, paint, or mold with clay. Children might be asked to draw a picture of loved ones or their family. Rubin (2002) addressed this need by creating her drawing book. It contained simple text at the top and bottom of the pages with blanks for children to fill in information. The middle of each page was available for drawings. Children might also use play-doh, string and glue, or recycled cardboard for expression to create in other artistic means.

Bibliotherapy. Children have an extreme need to belong and fit in to a group. Bibliotherapy is a way of helping children to see that they are not alone and that there are others that are experiencing the same types of things (Miller, 1996). When counselors utilize bibliotherapy, they select books related to the topic. Children may be asked to read, to listen, or to act out parts of the book.

This is an effective way to begin conversations and a safe way for children to express what they are feeling (Miller, 1996). A counselor may choose the book,

“When Sophie gets angry - really, really angry...” by M. Bang (1999). The counselor reads or has the child read the first few pages. When Sophie starts to get angry in the book, the counselor may direct the student, “Tell me what you do when you get angry at home.” This opens the door for personalized discussion of the child’s anger. Counselors can also give books to children to take home to read with family members. In those situations, the books can help to act as catalysts for discussion and change. There are a plethora of bibliotherapy resources available about divorce (Appendix A).

Play Therapy. Play therapy is a safe and non-threatening means to encourage child expression. In play therapy, the child may choose any available materials to manipulate. The child might begin to build with blocks, play with dolls, or pick up the puppets. A significant aspect of play therapy is that the counselor allows the child to set the tone, pace, and the play. The child is allowed to be in control as long as safe practices are followed. Reflective statements are used as auditory markers of what the child is doing. These help bring self-awareness and increased self-perception to the child (Vernon, 1999).

Some counselors may use play therapy as more of an interpretive and probing tool. The counselor might direct the child to display the family by using dolls. The counselor can inquire, “Tell me who this is.” The child can talk as long or as short as desired. The counselor may note that four family members are together and interacting while one family member was left on the floor. This type

of play often feels safe for the child while providing a significant look at the family dynamic.

Music Therapy. An effective intervention to allow children self-expression is music and it can be used in various formats. The counselor might put on background music to help calm a child while meeting. A child might be asked to make a song or rap that tells the story of the divorce or how the child is feeling. The counselor can ask the child to bring in a song that symbolizes how the child is feeling or what they are thinking. Together, the child and counselor could listen to a song and then talk about the meaning. Miller (1996) shares that creating music can be a wonderful release of energy and emotion.

When given an opportunity to play an instrument, a child might pound away on the drums. The child can determine the time or the counselor can. At the end of the playing, the counselor can direct the child to share the feelings or thoughts that came to mind during the time. The counselor might point out that as the child continued to play, the pounding became slower and quieter. The counselor could inquire about what changed during the 'song'.

Small Group. When children experience divorce, they can feel loneliness or isolation (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) (as cited in Vernon, 1999, p.220). Pedro-Carroll (1997) and Stolberg & Cullen (1983) (as cited in Emery, 1999) discussed creating "supportive peer groups for children from divorced families" to help "lessen isolation, offer support, and clarify children's misconceptions about

divorce”(p.100). Preventive groups are helpful because the counselor can address issues such as family make-up and life experiences. In these instances, no child is targeted and all receive exposure to many lifestyles and families.

Counselors can provide parents with information to help support children at home (Appendix B). In addition to parent information, it is important for counselors to have resources at their fingertips (Appendix C).

Conclusion

Like adults, children sometimes need assistance in expressing themselves and in understanding the world around them. “Other than the death of a parent, divorce may be the most devastating thing that can happen to children” (Miller, 1996, p.106). When parents divorce, children often have strong feelings and need a safe place to share their experience. Counselors can help children through the confusion that frequently results from divorce. Through books, art, play, and music, counselors can help children share their feelings in hopes of moving forward.

Parents and educators also have significant influence on the perceptions and development of children after divorce. Through educating themselves and making small changes to their behavior, they can greatly help how children respond to the situation. Children deserve support and to grow from this experience. As Stern, et. al. (1997) stated, “I have learned a lot and I will keep learning and growing from this experience” (p.88).

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Appendix A

Bibliotherapy: Early childhood through middle childhood

(These books/videos can be read by or to children ages 3-12.)

Bang, M. (1999). *When Sophie gets angry - really, really angry...* New York, NY:

Scholastic, Inc.

Benjamin, A. H., & Warnes, T. (1998). *It could have been worse.* New York,

NY: Scholastic, Inc.

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Berry, J. (1996). *Let's talk about feeling sad.* New York, NY: Scholastic, Inc.

Block, J. D., & Bartell, S. S. (2001). *Stepliving for teens: Getting along with*

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Brown, L. K., & Brown, M. (1986). *Dinosaurs divorce: A guide for changing*

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Cain, J. (2000). *The way I feel.* New York, NY: Scholastic, Inc.

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- Napoli, D. J. (1998). *Changing tunes*. New York, NY: Dutton Children's Books.
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- Spelman, C. (1998). *Mama and Daddy bear's divorce*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman and Company.
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father* [Motion picture]. (Available from Concept Media, Inc., 2493
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Appendix C

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