2006

The effects of divorce in a society with ever-changing family structures

Rebecca L. Ahlstrom
University of Northern Iowa

Recommended Citation

The effects of divorce in a society with ever-changing family structures

Abstract

Divorce rates have doubled since the 1970s, this has influenced both the structure and the impact of the family. It is imperative not to overlook the large and growing population of children affected by divorce. This paper will discuss the differences of important variables involved, such as age, gender and cultural background. In addition, it will discuss in detail outreach ideas and intervention strategies including small groups, mentoring programs, and bibliotherapy that have all been effective in supporting these children and their families in this crucial change of family structure. Children in single parent and blended families are considered "at-risk" because research shows these children are at a high risk for veering off the path of becoming productive adults who contribute positively to society (Anderson, 2002). School counselors and faculty are at times the only advocates for children when parents are distracted with working on their own issues that are brought on by the divorce. A school can provide a neutral environment, allowing continued involvement by both parents in their child's life, which promotes academic success. School counselors can act as advocates because of their continued involvement, their knowledge of developmental needs, and their training in interventions that can reduce at-risk behavior.

THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE IN A SOCIETY WITH EVER-CHANGING FAMILY STRUCTURES

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

---

by

Rebecca L. Ahlstrom

December 2006

This Research Paper by: Rebecca L. Ahlstrom

Entitled: THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE IN A SOCIETY WITH EVER-CHANGING
FAMILY STRUCTURES

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of

Arts in Education.

Sept 30, 2006
Date Approved

Linda Nebbe
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

_10/18/2006_
Date Received

Michael D. Waggoner
Head, Department of Educational Leadership,
Counseling, and Postsecondary
Education

Abstract

Divorce rates have doubled since the 1970s, this has influenced both the structure and the impact of the family.   It is imperative not to overlook the large and growing population of children affected by divorce. This paper will discuss the differences of important variables involved, such as age, gender and cultural background. In addition, it will discuss in detail outreach ideas and intervention strategies including small groups, mentoring programs, and bibliotherapy that have all been effective in supporting these children and their families in this crucial change of family structure. Children in single parent and blended families are considered "at-risk" because research shows these children are at a high risk for veering off the path of becoming productive adults who contribute positively to society (Anderson, 2002). School counselors and faculty are at times the only advocates for children when parents are distracted with working on their own issues that are brought on by the divorce. A school can provide a neutral environment, allowing continued involvement by both parents in their child's life, which promotes academic success. School counselor's can act as advocates because of their continued involvement, their knowledge of developmental needs, and their training in interventions that can reduce at-risk behavior.

The Effects of Divorce in a Society

With Ever-Changing Family Structures

Around one million children endure their parents' divorce each year; many of these children will experience divorce before the age of eight (Resources for Education Professionals, 2000). Today, 40 to 50 percent of marriages are likely to end in divorce, with second and subsequent marriages having an even higher likelihood of divorce than first marriages (Family Research Council [FRC], 2004). One prediction proposed that by the year 2010, 60 percent of children will spend a large amount of their childhood growing up in single-parent homes as a result of a divorce (FRC, 2004). Divorce rates have doubled since the 1970s. These rates changed both the structure and the impact of the family. It is imperative not to overlook this large and growing population of children affected by divorce.

Depending on such factors as custody arrangements and parental attitudes, other characteristics common among children following divorce include economic stress and disorganization within the family (Anderson, 2002). Children also tend to blame themselves, worry about being abandoned, and fantasize about their parents getting back together. The effects of parental divorce on children have also been linked to emotional and behavioral problems, school dropout rates, crime rates, physical and sexual abuse, and physical health (Anderson, 2002).

In addition to the emotional and behavioral impact, researchers have also found there to be an educational impact. Children growing up in homes with divorce do not do as well in school when compared to children from stable families (FRC, 2004).

Furthermore, one national study found that on average children in single-parent families lost one year of education over the course of their lifetime.

The effects of divorce on children can be devastating. Beyond the previously mentioned characteristics of children enduring divorce and remarriage, other symptoms involve behavior problems such as aggression or acting-out (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005). A 1999 study found a higher occurrence of depression and delinquency among children whose parents divorced (FRC, 2004). Another study found that compared to children from intact families, children who experienced parental divorce are one and one-half times more likely to use illegal drugs by age 14 and more likely to use illicit drugs at any age (FRC, 2004). Ultimately, divorce and remarriage shuffle family members together in foreign and uncomfortable ways. Clear lines of authority and communication become blurred and confused in these newly revised families (FRC, 2004).

The ultimate purpose of this paper is to bring attention and awareness to this overlooked at-risk group of children who has endured divorce, is enduring divorce, or will endure its parent's divorce in the future. Another purpose is to suggest outreach ideas and intervention strategies to support these children and their families in this crucial change of family structure. Research has shown that when compared to children coming from married parents, children with divorced parents are less successful academically, are less proficient in social skills, have lower levels of psychological functioning, have lower self-concept, and have an increase in health problems (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005). In addition, children with divorced parents are more prone to depression, drug abuse, and criminal delinquency (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005). These research findings alone give reason as to why this at-risk group of children, who are experiencing divorce, need help and support from

community resources such as schools. The first step is awareness. The second step is the

exploration and understanding of present research on this topic. This paper represents a

compilation of research that describes differences in response to divorce among age

levels, gender, and three different ethnicities in adults and children. Finally, detailed

descriptions of specific and effective interventions are included.

<div align="center">Research</div>

Age Differences

Children respond and adjust to divorce differently depending on their age and

developmental stage when that divorce occurred (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). Most

divorces take place when a child is between five and ten years of age (Franklin, Janoff-

Bulman & Roberts, 1990). However, disadvantages and effects appear at any age where

divorce occurs. This paper covers four distinct stages, and the impact that divorce can

have when it occurs at each of those developmental levels.

Infancy. The first stage is infancy through toddlerhood, covering the ages

newborn to three years. Once a child is two years of age, he or she is more likely to be

directly affected emotionally by divorce (Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990). If

parents divorce when their children are younger than three years, those children may not

be able to internalize memories of a removed parent as a result of that divorce (Kot &

Shoemaker, 1999). The time between parent contacts or visitations creates feelings of

abandonment and a break in attachment with that parent (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999).

Children younger than three years were found to be more negatively affected if parental

visitation is limited rather than being consistent or on a more regular basis (Kot &

Shoemaker, 1999). This results because children under the age of three years lack

developmental maturity, and therefore, quickly lose feelings of attachment to parents that they do not see consistently.

Childhood. The next stage, entitled childhood, is where most research and focus on divorce effects take place. During the divorce process, common emotions and behaviors seen in children at this stage include anxiety, aggression, withdrawal, sadness, grief, restlessness, separation problems, and tantrums (Taylor, 2001). These emotions and behaviors result not only from divorce, but also from simple conflict observed between parents (Taylor, 2001). In the childhood stage, children treat divorce similar to the loss or death of a loved one. According to Sanders and Riester (1996), children at this age who experienced parental divorce often believed they were the cause of the break up. Most researchers agree that there are specific short-term and long-term effects when parents divorce in this stage of a child's life. In childhood, three consistent short-term effects of divorce include becoming emotionally disturbed, feeling depressed and anxious, and continuing decline in school achievement. School achievement and behavior suffer more in this stage than anywhere else (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999).

Two consistent long-term effects are reported, however both are controversial. First, children growing up in single-parent families were more at risk for delinquent behavior (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). This can be explained by less involvement from parents and less parental supervision in children's day-to-day activities. Second, the younger children are when divorce occurs, the more they were considered to be disadvantaged when compared to older children (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). Parents were found to interact with their children less the younger they are at the time of divorce, therefore, explaining why younger children are possibly disadvantaged when being

compared to older children (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999).   Another disadvantage was concluded by one longitudinal study which found that 60 percent of children who experienced divorce in the transition of later childhood to early adolescence were doing poorly ten years later when entering the last stage of young adulthood (McCabe, 1997). When divorce occurs in childhood or early adolescence there was an increased incidence of early relationships and premature sexual activity for women and early fatherhood for men. This explains why 60 percent of children or adolescents are worse off ten years later. They are more likely to get into early relationships and sexual activity that could cause major consequences later in life.

Adolescence. After childhood, the next stage is called adolescence. Family conflict is most strongly linked with higher levels of depression in adolescents who experienced divorce at this stage (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). Besides depression, adolescents were reported to respond to divorce with anger, suicidal thoughts, or, most commonly, delinquency (Taylor, 2001). One frightening statistic revealed that seventy-two percent of adolescents who committed suicide had one or both biological parents absent from the home (Taylor, 2001). In addition, girls who experienced divorce during this stage were more likely to become heavy drinkers and smokers as adults, and boys were more likely to become smokers (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001).

On a more positive note, adolescents coming from divorced families took relationships in general more seriously and also viewed them as more meaningful (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). Although this idea may be true, adolescent boys who experience divorce in adolescence still had increased levels of relationship difficulties as opposed to boys who experienced parental divorce during childhood. This evidence implies that

boys only experience relationship difficulties in the young adulthood stage if the divorce occurred during adolescence (McCabe, 1997). Overall, adolescence is a time of life changes and major decisions involving autonomy, role identity, and intimacy with others (McCabe, 1997). Therefore, parental divorce at this stage can be quite distressing simply because adolescents are forming personal identities and developing relationships. Furthermore, experiencing parental divorce in the midst of these developmental tasks makes for a harder transition into young adulthood and into meaningful relationships.

Young Adulthood. In the fourth stage, entitled young adulthood, Kot and Shoemaker (1999) concluded from the sample of parents who were recently divorced, that 39 percent of those men and women were at a greater risk for having mental health issues. Although the lasting effects of parental divorce on psychological and mental health in young adulthood are modest, a notable percentage of these young adults could develop serious psychological health problems and need further clinical treatment (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). Additional research has suggested that parents who divorce when their children are young adults could in fact be more harmful to their children's well-being than if children experience parental divorce at an earlier age. This concept can be further explained by the timing of parental divorce as an important prediction of a young adult's belief on general and intimate relationships (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). Young adults experiencing parental divorce while entering their 20s could likely experience adverse reactions and constant maladjustment in the aftereffects of the divorce (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). Adult children of divorce are also more likely to experience the termination of their own marriages (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). One explanation for this is that parental family structures strongly impact their adult children's own marital stability

(Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). Observing poor coping strategies and modeling negative behaviors from divorced parents are both considered ways in which adult children can let their parents' divorce impact their own marital stability (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999).

The impact of divorce on children has shown to persist into adulthood. Ross and Mirowsky (1999) assert that there are significant differences in adulthood when comparing children coming from married families and children coming from divorced families. Children coming from divorced families were shown to, as adults, have lower socio-economic status and a lower level of income in business life. Therefore, "more economic problems...they get married at an earlier age, get divorced and in many cases remarry. They are unhappy in their relationships and in general do not trust the people around them" (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005, p. 132). Other studies exploring the effect of divorce on marriage and the martial attitudes in adulthood have revealed that children who have experienced parental divorce are deeply concerned about being a good husband or wife and are fearful of experiencing failure in their own marriages (Amato, 2001).

Gender Differences

Researchers have found distinct and significant differences in the way divorce affects each gender. Boys react more with external types of problematic behavior, such as acting out at home and in school, especially during the post-divorce period. Girls are more likely to react to divorce with internal types of problematic behavior, such as depression and self-motivated behavior (Zill, 1993; Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005). Another study, with similar results, tested participants using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and also found that girls from divorced families had higher scores on

both depression and paranoia inventories. Boys were higher in scores of mania and significantly lower in social responsibility (Borkhuis & Patalano, 1997).

Observers believe that boys respond for a longer period of time and also react more strongly to divorce (Zill, 1993). A two-year follow up study researching how divorce can lead to more behavioral problems in boys concluded that social, emotional and academic improvements can be observed in girls after divorce while boys manifest further deterioration in the said areas (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005). Most studies have concluded that boys, although more noticeable in negative behaviors in response to divorce, are still more negatively and lastingly affected by divorce than are girls (McCabe, 1997). This finding is partly due to the noticeable tendency boys have of externalizing their behavior, whereas girls mostly internalize their behavior, making it more difficult to notice the effect divorce has had on them. Such repeating evidence has led many researchers to conclude that boys are more adversely affected by the experience of divorce, whereas girls recover from the divorce somewhat quickly (McCabe, 1997).

Another study comparably found boys to be more affected initially following divorce, whereas girls begin to display problems in late adolescence and young adulthood, even years after the actual divorce had taken place. These findings were results from women's reports of "low self-esteem, precocious sexual activity, delinquent behavior, and difficulty in establishing gratifying heterosexual relationships" (McCabe, 1997, p.125). This explanation describes what some researchers have defined as the "sleeper effect," in which psychological symptoms are buried for the later part of childhood and early adolescence, only to reappear in a new form in late adolescence and young adulthood (McCabe, 1997). This reappearance of difficulties in late adolescence

and young adulthood could be due to the fact that parental divorce has strong

connotations for the key developmental tasks at these stages, such as role confusion and

intimacy.

In opposition to previous findings, one study suggests that existing results do not

provide adequate evidence of contrasting responses to divorce between males and

females (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005). This implication stands in disagreement with most

research done with younger children. The study also explains that adolescent girls tend

to be more stress resistant than boys. However, some adjustment problems become

considerably greater for girls during adolescence so that they have as many or more

difficulties in some areas than boys (Forehand, McCombs-Thomas, Wierson, & Brody,

1990). This research indicates that adolescent boys and girls may not show differences in

resistance to stress. Therefore, gender differences in reactions to divorce may not even

exist. Like Forehand, Furstenberg (2001) concluded from his longitudinal study that

gender does not generate a single or distinct pattern that exists with reference to type of

divorce outcome (2001).

Other studies examining gender differences in post-divorce have focused on those

differences in respect to each gender's relationship with his or her parents. One such

study revealed that girls from divorced families were more likely than boys to develop

poor relationships with their mothers when reaching young adulthood (Zill, 1993).

However, in a contrasting study, boys from divorced families were found to have

significantly more behavior problems than girls, and the mothers of boys noted higher

levels of stress and pressure than the mothers of girls (Pett, 1999). One would assume

with Pett's findings that mother and daughter relationships would be better in young

adulthood if the mother had less stress raising a daughter than a son, but Zill (1993) concludes his findings differently. He states that girls end up having poorer relationships with their mothers in young adulthood than do boys. In addition, another study found that girls at any age are more likely than boys at any age to blame their fathers for the divorce (Laumann-Billings, 2000). This might oppose the first study mentioned, because if females blamed their fathers more, they would logically have a good—if not—better relationship with their mothers to compensate that belief.

In conclusion, the majority of research reports that there are certain degrees to which each gender differs in their overall reaction to divorce. Women are more likely to become depressed, whereas men are more likely to externalize their problems through acting out at home and/or at school (Zill, 1993). Men are also more adversely affected by divorce than are women (McCabe, 1997). However, girls have been found to blame their fathers for the divorce, as well as having difficulties in forming stable relationships with their mothers in young adulthood (Lauman-Billings, 2000). Coming from a mother's standpoint, it is harder raising a son after going through a divorce, than it is a daughter (Pett, 1999). Women are also generally more optimistic about the idea of marriage then are men coming from divorced families (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005).

Cultural Differences

Caucasian families have been the central focus of research in regard to the effects of divorce on children. After parental divorce, little is still known about the adjustment of children from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Bussell, 1994). However, African American parents separate at a higher rate than any other ethnic group in the United States, and when compared to Caucasian parents, are less likely to remarry

(Bussell, 1994). African American mothers and their children are more likely to adjust

successfully to life with single parent families than Caucasian mothers and their children

(Bussell, 1994). Another difference shows that African American mothers keep higher

standards for their children to be independent, stable in temperament, and do what is

asked of them. In addition, Bussell (1994) found that African American mothers reported

to cope well with the divorce and believed their families sustain a strong sense of

organization and togetherness. African Americans are less likely to consider being a

single parent as humiliating or ruining their reputation. Therefore, African American

children feel less humiliated by divorce because single parent families are more common

in numerous urban African American communities (Bussell, 1994). In Caucasian

communities, similar to Chinese society, children often feel ashamed or embarrassed

when viewing their parents divorce (Bussell, 1994). On the other hand, African

American children accept divorce more commonly than other ethnic groups, and

therefore, also receive better social support from families and peers (Bussell, 1994). This

could explain their more positive perception of parental divorce when compared with

other ethnic groups.

Other studies examining ethnic differences between Caucasian and African

American children, who have experienced parental divorce, have found significant results

when comparing the two ethnic groups in academic achievement. There was a distinct

difference in the effect of timing of divorce on grades between the two groups (Smith,

1997). Parental divorce after second grade has distinguished negative effects and lower

grades in Caucasian students, while divorce before kindergarten has distinguished

negative effects and lower grades in African American students (Smith, 1997).

Caucasian students were more negatively affected by hostility between their parents and emotional shock brought with divorce, whereas the African American students were more negatively affected by weak family structures made up from single mother families as their source of socialization (Smith, 1997).

In the end, divorce rates, out-of-wedlock births, and single parent families in American society are significantly higher among African Americans than Caucasians (Bussell, 1994). In contrast to Caucasian families, these conditions had larger negative consequences for the financial well-being of African American families. African American children, in general, had more protection from emotional shock following divorce because support from extended family is stronger in African American families than in Caucasian families (Bussell, 1994).

Although most research is primarily focused on children's response to parental divorce in Western countries, it has also been focused on white, middle class samples. Divorce in China is still uncommon, occurring in approximately 10% to 15% of the population (Dong, Wang, & Ollendick, 2002). This is extremely different from Western and other industrialized countries that approximate divorce rates for 50% of the population. However, in Chinese societies parents arrange marriages for their children, and it is also common for men to be married to more then just one woman (Dong, Wang, & Ollendick, 2002). Divorce in the Chinese culture was thought to be disgraceful to a family. If it did occur, it was usually because the husband or his family was displeased with the wife. In contrast to our society, a wife had basically no right to divorce her husband. In 1949, the People's Republic of China constituted a new law on marriage. The law regulated that "marriage was to be based on freedom of choice and to be

monogamous, both sexes were to have equal rights, and bigamy, child betrothals, and dowries were forbidden" (Dong, Wang, & Ollendick, 2002, p.102). Immediately after this law was presented divorce rates rapidly increased. It was not until 1981 that China's Marriage Law allowed divorce if it resulted from mutual consent (Dong, Wang, & Ollendick, 2002).

Although the new marriage and divorce law, passed in 1981, generally made divorce and remarriage easier for both genders, Chinese women were reported to remarry sooner and more often than men (Dong, Wang, & Ollendick, 2002). Even today in Chinese society, traditional attitudes, which disapprove of divorce and remarriage, still remain (Dong, Wang, & Ollendick, 2002). Because of this, some divorced parents have revealed that they avoid remarriage out of concern for their children's well-being. This belief is also found in Western countries among parents. When it comes down to remarriage, custody of a child following divorce in a Chinese society is thought to be a drawback (Dong, Wang, & Ollendick, 2002). For Chinese men or women, in post-divorce, it is a constant burden for them to have children. The Chinese men and women do not often disclose information concerning their history of divorce, because they feel humiliated and they believe that divorce could ruin their reputation. Dong, Wang, and Ollendick (2002) found similar findings in adjustment with Chinese children and parents to that of Western societies. Chinese children from divorced families were less likely to be well adjusted when compared to children from intact families on measures of anxiety and depression. Divorced parents and children living in China are at a greater risk of distress than parents and children found in families from Western societies where divorce has been more commonly accepted. The history and commonality of divorce in China

and the Western countries are still extremely different in each, and thus these differences

cause various reactions among the children.

Limitations

Limitations in the research looking at divorce effects include its predominance in

studying middle class Caucasian families. The author believes researchers cannot

generalize their results to other cultures when their entire sample is confined to one ethnic

group. Another limitation concerns the age groups that are studied. Most researchers

studied one distinct age group and cannot attribute or generalize characteristics from one

age to that of another (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). Further concerns included studies that

did not include unpublished conference papers or dissertations, resulting in information

being influenced by publication bias (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005). Lastly, some studies did not

have representative samples and therefore could not find significant differences in

divorce effects among various factors (Richardson & Rosen, 1999).

Future Research

There have been several suggestions for future research regarding divorce effects

on children. Studies could emphasize the pre-divorce atmosphere in connection with the

post-divorce difficulties. The author believes that most studies overlook what the home

environment was like before divorce occurred. It could be in the pre-divorce atmosphere

where difficulties in adjustment began to take place. Future research could use multiple

informants, direct observation of children, or longitudinal designs (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005).

These three aspects of research seem to achieve more credible and valid results, and

therefore those results can be used to apply to larger populations. Longitudinal studies

that focus on families with multicultural origins are also needed in future research to

better assess the influence of divorce on various factors of children's adjustment (Amato, 2001). Longitudinal studies are also encouraged to follow not only children from early childhood to adulthood but also their families during this period as well (Amato, 2001). Lastly, the author suggests that future research could examine the possible genetic considerations of long-term life outcomes associated with divorce, including premature termination of education and the likelihood of divorce in adulthood.

<div align="center">School Counselors as Advocates</div>

School counselors need to advocate for children of divorce. Children in single parent and blended families are considered "at-risk" because research shows these children are at a high risk for veering off the path of becoming productive adults who contribute positively to society (Anderson, 2002). One study found that suicidal ideation is more prevalent among adolescent boys from single-parent families than two-parent families (Ang & Ooi, 2004). Research has also shown that students in single-parent families have consumed more marijuana and cocaine over their lifetimes than students from intact families (Jeynes, 2001). Another finding suggested that adolescents of divorce were at a considerably higher risk for property, status, and person delinquency than adolescents with two parents (Anderson, 2002). Divorce has also been shown to cause physical and emotional distress among children in this disrupted situation (Anderson, 2002). In order to reduce the risk of these behaviors, an educational team of administrators, teachers, and school counselors is imperative in order to have a positive impact as advocates for this group of at-risk youth.

The Role of the School

Social support for the family is typically lacking during the divorce process (Richardson & Rosen, 1999). It is during this time that researchers have found social support systems to fall away (Richardson & Rosen, 1999). "When the crisis is divorce, friends are afraid they will be forced to choose sides and neighbors think it is none of their business. When the family structure collapses, the child's world is often left without much needed emotional support" (Richardson & Rosen, 1999, p. 22). Richardson and Rosen (1999) proposed that the lack of emotional support that these children are experiencing can be improved by offering outreach interventions through schools. Richardson and Rosen (1999) further explained that "schools can play an important role as a source of nurturance and continuity as well as a place where age-appropriate developmental tasks can be pursued. Interventions are a primary way schools can assist children with effectively coping, and can promote the child's adjustment to the new situation" (p. 22).

In addition, school counselors and faculty are at times the only advocates for children when parents are distracted with working on their own issues, brought on by the divorce (A. Christopher, personal communication, May 15, 2006). Staff's consistent interactions with children, along with their understanding of each child's developmental needs, can be used to reduce the negative effects of divorce (Resources for Education Professionals, 2000). A school can provide a neutral environment, allowing continued involvement by both parents in their child's life promoting academic success. A majority of children will inevitably face divorce, therefore, school counselors can act as advocates

because of their continued involvement, their knowledge of developmental needs, and

their training in interventions that can reduce at-risk behavior.

Executing Advocacy

In the next section, the author has chosen and described in detail three

interventions that can be used when working with children of divorce and remarriage.

Research has shown these three interventions to be effective when used by school

counselors who are executing advocacy (A. Christopher, personal communication,

May15, 2006). These interventions will also hopefully clear up lines of communication

and authority in families as they transition into single-parent families or blended families.

Small Groups or Peer Groups. The group counseling experience could be the

single most important factor in the child's ability to cope with divorce trauma

(Morganett, 1994). Counselors can establish, coordinate, and mediate peer groups, which

are effective methods of intervention (Sissel, 1989). A small group is a great way to

promote interaction and support between five to seven students for six to eight weeks.

Groups help children better understand and accept their loss and encourage each member

of the group to realize they are not alone (Sissel, 1989).

It is advised that school counselors provide at least one role model for each child

in the group. This means having the group homogeneous for the issue of divorce, but

heterogeneous for other factors, such as length of time since divorce, coping skills, values

and attitudes about divorce, and adjustment to new family interactions and living

arrangements" (Morganett, 1994; A. Christopher, personal communication, June 28,

2005). The divorce peer group can help children to interact and support, know the facts,

clarify feelings and understandings, cope and confront problems, deal with relationships,

develop self worth and interests, develop rational thinking, and enlist change to acceptable behavior (Sissel, 1989). Peer validation is a major component of progressing through the therapeutic process after experiencing divorce.

This small group component of the advocacy project would be executed through the use of activities done within the small group each session. One activity that I would use in grades K-3 is the "I Survived the Divorce Monster" Activity booklet (Williamson, 1990). This activity is designed to help students who are dealing with the divorce of their parents. When the booklet is finished it is encouraged that the student takes it home and goes over it with his or her parent and discuss the ideas further. These booklets are to be personalized as much as possible. Each session, the counselor or a student will read the text on each page; then the students will complete the page following the directions in the parentheses. The following questions, specific to the colored page, will be discussed after each page is completed.

Using the procedure of the small or peer group would lead to systemic change because the author believes the group would help children of divorce learn coping skills from other students, promote a safe environment of support and interaction, and give each child an opportunity to learn and clarify the facts of divorce and what it involves. After the six to eight sessions, the child would leave group with an overall positive change, this may be seen in many different ways. A change in his or her emotions, for example, the child entered the group feeling angry and left with coping skills and with acceptance of the situation. A change in self-blame, the child entered the group blaming him or herself for the divorce and leaves the group understanding it was between his or her parents. There may be a noticeable change in the child's health and sleep patterns,

initially having health complaints and bad dreams to feeling physically better and sleeping through the night. There are many ways to evaluate if the small or peer group was the right intervention for children of divorce, and these listed are just a few.

The use of peer groups enhances opportunities for the child to succeed in school and in life. While working with these students each week, the school counselor will also be working in collaboration with their families and doing what he or she can to make each child's adjustment easier and his or her family stronger. With families becoming stronger, the child's success in school and in life becomes stronger. The small group experience would provide each child with successful tools and skills in coping with divorce and his or her changing family structure. Overall, the school counselor would keep encouraging each parent to stay actively involved in his or her child's life, because parent involvement at home and school is directly linked to their child's success in school (A. Christopher, personal communication, June 28, 2005).

Mentoring Program. A school based mentoring program is an effective way of reaching students who are dealing with any life transition (Delaware Mentoring Council [DMC], 2005). In the case of children who are affected by divorce, they could be paired up with a high school mentor who also experienced divorce as a child. Growing evidence supports the belief that mentoring can, in many instances, help young people change direction and do better academically and socially. Mentors can have great influences on a child's life. Mentors who have experienced divorce themselves can help their mentee, or child experiencing divorce in the present, to adjust to new life changes such as remarriage and blended families. Mentors can also help their mentee in learning to maintain family relationships, stay motivated, and deal with general problems at home or

at school (DMC, 2005). A mentoring relationship is about trust, and the children experiencing divorce can learn to trust another adult who is advocating for them and supporting them. Research statistics state that 92% of in-school mentoring relationships have helped mentees improve self-confidence, 96% showed greater cooperation in class, and 91% of mentoring students improved their level of responsibility (DMC, 2005). Lastly, positive mentoring relationships can be a great intervention when helping children who are dealing with divorce.

The author feels that a mentoring program is another procedure that would lead to systemic change within the child. Statistics alone show that there is a positive change in children who have an adult mentor (DMC, 2005). More findings show that young people with mentors were 53% less likely to skip school and 37% less likely to skip a class (DMC, 2005). Another way to evaluate if the mentoring program is producing systemic change is through assessing the child's behavior throughout the mentoring relationship. For instance, the child may start with more incidents of misbehavior in the beginning and slowly decline in his or her misconduct reports. Lastly, a mentoring program could also show great strides in the child's social emotional development (DMC, 2005). For example, before the mentoring relationship started the child was dependent for personal strength and happiness, and he or she expressed feelings by crying or withdrawing. However, during the mentoring relationship the child is evaluated again and he or she demonstrates more independent problem solving skills, and expresses feelings verbally.

Furthermore, a mentoring relationship would be a great intervention in order to enhance a child's opportunities to succeed in school and life (DMC, 2005). Many activities are done within a mentoring program that promote school success and

enhancement for the child. Another example is academic tutoring, class time assistance, and test preparation. Current mentoring programs suggest numerous ways the mentor and mentee could interact that enhance the child's success in life socially, physically, mentally or emotionally. Another example is providing a social partner who would come during school lunch or recess, go to movies, sporting events, zoos, parks, or libraries. The mentor could also help within the school facility, such as the computer lab, gym, music, or art. The mentoring program can enhance child success because it provides mentors with teachable moments or "sharing time" with their mentees, in such areas as personal experience, talents, hobbies, and families. Mentoring time has shown to be useful since children with mentors were 46% less likely to use drugs and 27% less likely to start drinking alcohol (DMC, 2005).

In conclusion, a mentoring program is a strong and an effective intervention when assisting children who are experiencing divorce (DMC, 2005). These children have accessibility to another trusting adult who may have experienced the same situation, and through building a trusting relationship these children find another person who advocates for them, guides and supports them, encourages them, and who can provide positive reinforcement. Peer groups and mentoring programs are two out of the many ways that can effectively advocate for children who are at risk after experiencing the divorce of their parents.

Bibliotherapy for Children. When children are experiencing difficulties in their daily lives, reading about characters with similar problems can help them cope (A. Christopher, personal communication, June 28, 2005). Experienced therapists and many school counselors use children's books to solve emotional problems in an intervention

technique know as "Bibliotherapy." Bibliotherapy can be better described as using literature as a therapeutic counseling process (Vernon & Clemente, 2005). There has been a sizable amount of research done about the use of bibliotherapy (Vernon & Clemente, 2005). Some findings concluded that bibliotherapy can produce positive attitude change related to the reduction of children's fear (Morganett, 1994). The author also believes it can produce positive changes in self-concept and provide children with knowledge of strategies they might employ in particular situations. Ultimately, books can be useful in helping children solve problems. The author has included a section on suggested readings relating to situations with divorce and blended families.

<div align="center">Conclusion</div>

There are several things to keep in mind when researching the topic of divorce, and also, when working as an advocate for children and adolescents who are going through and experiencing divorce. Sirvanli-Ozen (2005) explained quite thoroughly that divorce alone could not trigger behavioral and adjustment problems in children. Factors such as the parenting styles, psychological well-being of the parent with custody, the atmosphere of conflict which continues between the parents after divorce, and the consistency of contact with the non-custodial parent all are reasons that may affect the degree to which children, adolescents, and young adults are affected and impacted by divorce.

Sirvanli-Ozen (2005) went on to conclude that variables such as the child's age, gender, the social support he or she perceives from his or her environment, the socioeconomic status of his or her family, "the nature of the relationship between his or her parents in the pre-divorce and post-divorce periods, and the time elapsing after the

divorce all affect the probability and the severity of the problems the child will

encounter" (p. 137). However, it is imperative to keep in mind that the findings

summarized above should not be translated to mean that divorce will produce negative

results and that every child with divorced parents will experience problems.

More specifically, Sirvanli-Ozen (2005) has found several factors that could

alleviate the negative impacts of divorce on children, and also, prevent those negative

impacts from manifesting into the later periods of their lives. These factors include

examples where the child regularly sees the non-custodial parent and when there are no

significant changes in the income of the family and in the environment the child lived in

pre-divorce. Other factors include when the father or the father substitute can exemplify

a role model figure for the child, especially for boys. Finally, where the parent-child

relationship is positive and divorced parents can clearly distinguish between their roles as

partners and as parents.

References

Amato, P. R. (2001). Children of divorce in the 1990s: An update of the Amato and Keith

    (1991) meta-analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology, 15*, 355-370.

Anderson, A. L. (2002). Individual and contextual influences on delinquency: The role of

    the single-parent family. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 30, 575-587.

Ang, R. P. & Ooi, Y. P. (2004). Impact of gender and parents' marital status on

    adolescents' suicidal ideation. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 50(4),

    351-360.

Borkhuis, G.W., & Patalano, F. (1997). MMPI personality differences between

    adolescents from divorced and non-divorced families. *Journal of Human*

    Behavior, 34, 37-41.

Bussell, D. A. (1994). A pilot study of African American children's cognitive and

    emotional reactions to parental separation. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage,*

    24, 1-22.

Delaware Mentoring Council. (2005). About mentoring: Mentoring research and

    statistics.Retrieved January 20, 2006, from http://www.delawarementoring.org

Dong, Q., Wang, Y., Ollendick, T. H. (2002). Consequences of divorce on the adjustment

    of children in China. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 31*,

    101-110.

Family Research Council (2004). Deterring divorce. Retrieved January 25, 2006, from

    http://www.defendingholymatrimony.org/html/deterring_divorce.html

Forehand, R., McCombs-Thomas, A., Wierson, M., & Brody, G. (1990). Role of
maternal functioning and parenting skills in adolescent functioning following
parental divorce. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 99*, 278-283.

Furstenberg, F. F., & Kiernan, K. E. (2001). Delayed parental divorce: How much do
children benefit? *Journal of Marriage and Family, 63*, 446-457.

Goldman, L. (2000). *Life & loss* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Accelerated Development
Inc. Publishers.

Jeynes, W. H. (2001). The effects of recent parental divorce on their children's
consumption of marijuana and cocaine. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 35*,
43-65.

Kot, L., & Shoemaker, H. M. (1999). Children of divorce: An investigation of the
developmental effects from infancy through adulthood. *Journal of Divorce and
Remarriage, 31*, 161-178.

Laumann-Billings, L., & Emery, R. E. (2000). Distress among young adults from
divorced families. *Journal of Family Psychology, 14*, 671-687.

McCabe, K. M. (1997). Sex differences in the long term effects of divorce on children:
Depression and heterosexual relationship difficulties in the young adult years.
Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 27, 123-135.

Morganett, R. S. (1994). Skills for living: Group counseling activities for elementary
students. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Pett, M. A., Wampold, B. E., Turner, C. W., & Vaughan, C. B. (1999). Paths of influence
of divorce on preschool children's psychosocial adjustment. *Journal of Family
Psychology, 13*, 145-164.

Resources for Education Professionals. (2000). Making a difference. Retrieved January

    28, 2006, from http://childrenanddivorce.bizland.com/rfep/

Sanders, D. R., & Riester, A. E. (1996). School-based counseling groups for children of

    divorce: Effects on the self-concepts of 5th grade children. *Journal of Child and*

    Adolescent Group Therapy, 6(1), 147-156.

Sirvanli-Ozen, D. (2005). Impacts of divorce on the behavior and adjustment problems,

    parenting styles, and attachment styles of children: Literature review including

    turkish studies. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *42*, 127-151.

Sissel, C. T. (1989). Helping latency-age children of divorce: A school counselor's view.

    A Study in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Marriage and Family

    Counseling.

Smith, T. E. (1997). Differences between Black and White students in the effect of

    parental separation on school grades. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, 27*, 25-

    42.

Taylor, R. J. (2001). Listening to the children: Children of divorce speak out about their

    parents. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 35*, 147-154.

Vernon, A. & Clemente, R. (2005). *Assessment and intervention with children and*

    adolescents: Developmental and multicultural approaches (2nd ed.).

    Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Williamson, L. R. (1990). I survived the divorce monster. Doylestown, PA: Marco

    Products, Inc.

Zill, N., Morrison, D. R., & Coiro, M. J. (1993). Long-term effects of parental divorce on

parent child relationships, adjustment, and achievement in young adulthood.

Journal of Family Psychology, 7, 91-103.

Suggested Readings

Banks, A. (1990). *When your parents get a divorce: A kid's journal.* New York: Puffin.

(Grades 3-6).

Berman, C. (1982). *What am I doing in a stepfamily?* New York: Lyle Stuart. (K-6).

Berry, J. (1990). *Good answers to tough questions about divorce.* (Available from

Paperbacks for Educators, 426 W. Front St., Washington, MO 63090) (3-6).

Boulden, J., & Boulden, J. (1991). *My story: Divorce and remarriage activity book.*

Weaverville, CA: Boulden Publishing. (K-3).

Gardner, R. (1991). *The boys' and girls' book about divorce.* New York: Bantam. (4-8).

Heegaard, M. (1990). *When mom and dad separate: Children can learn to cope with*

grief from divorce. Minneapolis: Deaconess/Woodland Press. (1-6).

Krementz, J. (1984). *How it feels when parents divorce.* New York: Knopf. (3-9).

LeShan, E. (1978). *What's going to happen to me? When parents separate or divorce.*

New York: Aladdin. (3-6).

Prokop, M. (1986). *Kid's divorce workbook.* Warren, OH: Allegra House. (K-6).

Rofes, E. (Ed.). (1981). *The kids' book of divorce: By, for and about kids.* New York:

Random House. (5-8).

Stinson, K. (1984). *Mom and dad don't live together any more.* San Diego, CA: Firefly.

(K-3).