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## Effects of divorce on adolescents : interventions

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### Abstract

The family environment is a major contributor to the development and well-being of children and adolescents. The traditional definition for family is ever changing, and diversity in families is becoming more acknowledged and accepted. It is well known that currently more than half of all marriages end in divorce. It is necessary to understand the significant challenges and issues that young people of divorced families are faced with in order to facilitate positive change and resiliency in the counseling process. The author provides a historical overview of the divorce epidemic, the effects of divorce on youth, as well as implications and interventions for school counselors in working with young people struggling with issues of divorce.

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Effects of Divorce on Adolescents: Interventions for School Counselors

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

by

Abigail C. Buchan

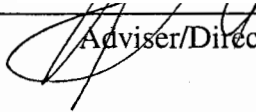
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### Abstract

The family environment is a major contributor to the development and well-being of children and adolescents. The traditional definition for family is ever changing, and diversity in families is becoming more acknowledged and accepted. It is well known that currently more than half of all marriages end in divorce. It is necessary to understand the significant challenges and issues that young people of divorced families are faced with in order to facilitate positive change and resiliency in the counseling process. The author provides a historical overview of the divorce epidemic, the effects of divorce on youth, as well as implications and interventions for school counselors in working with young people struggling with issues of divorce.

## Effects of Divorce on Adolescents: Interventions for School Counselors

In order to successfully and effectively guide young people into healthy, productive adults, it is necessary to understand implications of developmental issues and life events that may cause maladjustment such as familial conflict or divorce. Ellis explained that divorce is not simply one simple event but a transitional event. It initiates a series of multiple changes in roles and family structure that occur throughout the child's development into adulthood. Some of the transitions may be easy and beneficial, but an equal number may be stressful. For many youth the divorce is the first in the series of ongoing losses (Ellis, 2000).

This paper is divided in four sections to address needed issues concerning divorce and the many youth involved in the divorce epidemic. The first part discusses the history of divorce, which provides various current statistics of divorce and how views of divorce have changed over many years. The second part of this paper discusses the many effects of divorce on youth, including the different and similar effects on boys and girls, particularly of adolescence. The third part of this paper introduces ideas of the school and divorce. The school and divorce section leads into the fourth part, which is specific interventions for school counselors such as individual counseling interventions, group interventions, and parent and teacher participation necessary for an effective counseling process.

### *History of Divorce*

To address issues of divorce on youth, it is important to be aware of the history of divorce and the divorce revolution in the United States. In the late 1960's, the American society began to experiment with and challenge the structure and foundation

of the family that has been unique in modern times. In 1969, California passed the first “no-fault” divorce law, increasing the divorce rate into the 1970’s. Elizabeth Ellis noted the actual incidence of divorce has been steadily increasing up to that time since the mid-1800’s. Studies show that the incidence of divorce after the Civil War, roughly five percent, had increased to an estimated 36% in 1964. There was a sharp increase in the divorce rate from the mid-1960’s to the late 1970’s. A demographer presented in Ellis’s work noted that the proportion of children living with only one parent doubled between 1960 and 1978, from 9% to 18.6% (Ellis, 2000, p.11).

The roots of the divorce revolution can be found in what historian Lawrence Stone labeled as “the rise of affective individualism.” Stone was referring to the greater valuing of emotional love in relationships and the pursuit of personal happiness. Americans have always prized personal fulfillment more highly than the bonds of kinship as compared with people in European societies. Family relationships in American society likewise focus more on emotional closeness and expressions of love than on the carrying out of sharply defined social roles (Ellis, 2000). The human potential movement brought about ideas that people who have been chronically unhappy in a marriage should be allowed to end the marriage and pursue their happiness without the social stigma that had been previously attached to divorce (Ellis, 2000, 11). Changing family roles and social stigma associated with divorce have caused a rise in young people dealing with issues associated with family disruption and divorce, which manifests in many negative effects.

### *Effects of Divorce on Youth*

The effects of the divorce revolution continue to greatly affect children and adolescents well into later adulthood. Large-scale studies on children of divorce began almost when the divorce rate began rising. Transition in family structure does appear to have significant long-term effects on a number of adolescent well-being variables (Spruijt & de Goede, 1997). Adolescents coming from families of significant changes, including divorce, are more likely to have relational problems and experience unemployment as compared with youngsters from stable intact families. Parental discord caused increased and prolonged periods of crying, and all adolescents of divorce experienced sadness in varied degrees (Oppawsky, 2000). Many adolescents expressed shame during the divorce, and experienced a full array of negative feelings toward their parents. Most adolescents experience a fall in academic achievements during a divorce crisis. Fear is a common feeling experienced by adolescents of divorce, as they become fearful of the unknown and losing contact with the non-custody parent (Oppawsky, 2000). The current view of divorce in the United States shows effects on children in similar but also different ways. The effects of divorce on adolescents and young adults are important to understand in order to instill necessary skills to provide positive change to occur.

### *Effects on Boys*

Ellis has proposed that boys are “developmentally vulnerable” to the lack of a father in the home because of divorce (Ellis, 2000, p.21). When boys move into the late elementary school age, approximately 7-12 years, he naturally wants to push away from



his mother and identify more with males. At this time of “male bonding” boys refuse affection from their mothers and express an aversion to girls (Warshak, 1996).

According to Ellis, developmentally boys feel a new sense of power and aggressiveness at this age, and it has traditionally been fathers who provide them with a role model for handling aggression in a socially acceptable manner. When fathers are absent, these influences are gone. Boys in these situations often look to their peer group for models and identify with older and more aggressively defiant boys. A study conducted in Ellis’s work indicates that when mothers did not remarry, boys continued to have more problems with aggressive, acting-out behavior problems even six years after the divorce (Ellis, 2000, p.22). A researcher from the University of Michigan presented in Ellis’s work found that 387 12-year-old boys from divorced homes were more angry and aggressive toward others and had poor school performance (Ellis, 2000, p.22). It is necessary to know the range of effects on both boys and girls in order to effectively instill resiliency, adjustment, coping skills, and positive change.

### *Effects on Girls*

The effects of divorce on girls is profound as well, however, there are obvious differences than the effects of divorce on boys. Researchers found higher rates of problems with dependency, anxiety, and depression and more difficulties in social relationships among young adolescents of divorce (Ellis, 2000, p.23). Girls’ levels of anger, noncompliance, and demandingness were generally lower and usually dropped off considerably after two years after the divorce as compared to boys. Three major studies were conducted in Ellis’s work indicating that in cases where the mother did not remarry, girls had no more behavior problems than the girls in intact families. In fact,

many of these girls reported becoming closer to their mothers during the years after the divorce (Ellis, 2000, p.23).

Ellis theorized that fathers must be important to girls' development in terms of offering them opportunities to interact positively and nonsexually with males and to be reinforcers of the girls' growing female identity. Adolescent girls whose parents had divorced were found to be more anxious, exceptionally shy and uncomfortable around males, and at the same time are more likely to engage in aggressive behavior toward adults, precocious sexual activity, substance abuse, and running away (Ellis, 2000, p.23). A study determined that 35% of adolescent girls have problems with being aggressive (hostile and argumentative), 41% had problems with drug and alcohol use, and 47% had acted out sexually. The corresponding figures for girls in intact homes were 4%, 7%, and 11%, respectively (Ellis, 2000, p.25). In working with adolescents, it is necessary to understand the background and family life when establishing counseling goals and interventions, as well as the substantial effects of divorce.

Adolescents and young adults are often found to be rather troubled, drifting, and underachieving in the following years after divorce. Young men endorse the ideas of love and marriage but are often afraid to make commitments themselves for fear of repeating their own parents' mistakes. Some avoid dating altogether (Ellis, 2000, p.27). In the same study, boys were no longer a behavior problem, but many were underachieving as young men. As a group, these young men had failed to match the socioeconomic aspirations as their parents. Several studies have shown that adolescents and young women often were embarked on multiple relationships and impulsive

marriages that ended in early divorce. They have been reported to have deep fears of abandonment, betrayal, and not being loved by the opposite sex (Amato, 1996).

### *Effects on Parents*

When working with adolescents, it is necessary to consider the lives of adolescents' parents when dealing with a divorce situation. Divorce leads to multiple life changes that affect parental well-being. Divorce leads custodial parents to experience major changes in their lives including a change in residential arrangements, economic disadvantage, loneliness associated with social network changes, and role strain associated with the task overload that results from having to care for children and work outside the home (Carr, 2000, p.280). Mood swings, depression, identity problems, vulnerability to common infections, and exacerbation of previous health problems are all common realities for adults who have separated or divorced. These issues affect the ability for parents to meet their children's needs for safety, care, control, education and relationships with each parent (Carr, 2000, p.281). Divorce is overwhelmingly stressful and entails sustained adjustment problems for parents and their children.

To finalize the overall effects of divorce, the research shows a revolution of change on society and the lives of children and adolescents. Divorce has come to be viewed, after this 30-year divorce revolution, as a transition in children's lives; a period of stress and instability that requires the child to use coping mechanisms and to make lifestyle adjustments in order to reorganize his or her relationships with significant adults and reassess his or her trust in others. The experiences of separation and divorce may lead to short and longer term adjustment reactions (Wallerstein, 1991)

*Study Results of Children of Intact Families versus Disrupted Families*

Large-scale studies of the effects of divorce on adolescents are largely in agreement in indicating that boys are at greatest risk, especially for disruptive behavior in single-mother households. Many boys show improved adjustment; however, when the mother remarries. Girls show far fewer adjustment problems, especially in mother-custody homes, but do not adjust well to mother's remarriage. They appear to show delayed effects of the divorce in adolescence, with more acting-out and antisocial behavior. The most consistent outcome across age and gender groups was that the children of divorce are angrier and have a poorer bond with both their parents. Divorce appears to double the rates of a wide variety of adjustment problems in adolescence.

Large-scale studies that followed adolescents of divorce into young adulthood found that they have lower educational and occupational attainment than their parents. They rate themselves as more unhappy and as having more problems in life than their counterparts from intact families. The most striking finding has been that these children have far greater rates of divorce in their own marriages, leading researchers to hypothesize about the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Ellis, 2000, p.35). Divorce initiates a series of multiple changes in roles and family structure that occur throughout development into adulthood (Furstenberg and Cherlin, 1991).

There are many theories that go along with the broad group differences between the children of divorce and the children of intact families such as parental absence, economic hardship, and family conflict. The parental-absence perspective starts from the assumption that the family is the foundation for nurturing, teaching, and guiding children. Two parents seem to have more to offer than just one parent. Economic

hardship may affect children following divorce and may lower their quality of life; however, it is likely to be an additive factor. Children's functioning at the time of their parents' separation was best predicted by parental discord, followed by mother's level of depression, and then by family income (Ellis, 2000, p.41).

### *Levels of Conflict in Divorce and the Effects*

Divorce has negative effects on children primarily through exposing them to conflict before, during, and after the divorce. Conflict between parents is detrimental to children and not necessarily whether the children live in an intact family or a divorced home. Also, children whose parents have low conflict following divorce should have fewer adjustment problems than children whose parents have high levels of conflict (Ellis, 2000, p.41).

Effects of exposure to chronic parental conflict are profound and will affect any counseling relationship with adolescents. Some major themes of the effects of parental conflict before, during, or after a divorce include insecurity and agitation, shame and guilt, helplessness, fear of abuse, rejection, and less parental involvement. Chronic conflict causes chronic distress and agitation in adolescents as well as a loss of emotional control (Ellis, 2000, p.49). They feel more out of control and sense that their home and family life are unpredictable. In a highly conflictual home, young people form insecure attachments to their parents (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

### *The School and Divorce*

In working with adolescents who come from high-conflict or divorced homes, the school environment can offer nurturance and continuity as well as addressing age-appropriate developmental tasks (Richardson, 1999, p.22). The single most important

formal institution providing support and guidance outside the home is the school. The school environment must be supportive for development where adolescents are less hindered by preoccupations at home. The school is a relief from family turmoil, because school is an environment that provides quietness, consistency, and compared to the home, a non-threatening atmosphere (Oppawsky, 2000). Because the school as a system is confronted with large numbers of families attempting to cope with the transitions brought about by divorce, strategies for intervention must be designed to address the needs not only of the individual student so affected, but also those of the classroom teacher and the school as a whole (Sandoval, 2002, p.84). Interventions are a primary way that schools can assist young people with effectively coping, and can promote adjustment to the new situation (Richardson, 1999, p.23).

#### *Accommodations for Changing Families*

Adolescents experiencing the crisis of divorce frequently must deal with ongoing or repeated experiences of loss coupled with feelings of rejection. As the realization becomes clearer that the “typical” American family is no longer the “norm,” the need for organizational changes to accommodate the multiplicity of actual family structures also becomes clearer. A direct counseling service is representative of one way of helping adolescents cope with chronic family conflict and divorce.

Administration needs to be sensitive to nontraditional or changing families, including nonresidential parents. Some examples of being sensitive to many different family issues are the re-designing of registration forms to include both parents and the conduction of parent-teacher conferences with parents who do not reside together. “It is through administrative consultation aimed at effecting such changes that school

psychologists and counselors can best apply a model of primary prevention in their schools” (Sandoval, 2002, p.92). Administration and teaching staff need to take on a team approach to meet the needs of adolescents of divorced families.

Helping teachers acquire greater understanding of an adolescent’s classroom behavior as a response to this disruption, and by developing more effective strategies for aiding a student’s learning, despite the disruption, that one is able to support individual or group with adolescents (Sandoval, 2002, p.92). In-service training is important for teachers to educate them about adolescent’s reactions to marital crisis.

The conceptualization of the adolescent’s resolution of the divorce as a series of developmental tasks is a useful educational concept (Sandoval, 2000, p.93).

Elucidating common age-specific postdivorce behaviors and how these might be seen in the classroom is equally important. Another approach to in-service training is to aide teachers in dealing with troublesome classroom behavior, and how to deal with nonresidential parents.

### *Individual Counseling Interventions*

In developing a counseling relationship in the school environment and before interventions can be considered or implemented, a divorce-specific assessment must be performed. Assessment procedures for the initial session should include each adolescent’s overall developmental achievements, each adolescent’s unique responses to, and experiences with, the divorce, the support systems available to each adolescent, and how the adolescent understands the meaning of divorce (Sandoval, 2000, p.93).

In formulating school-based interventions for adolescents with familial disruptions, other considerations need to be addressed. One consideration is the

possibility of chronic and highly stressful series of events lasting in some cases for the entirety of the youngster's school years. Another consideration is that adolescents may be experiencing a set of indirectly related transitions such as loss of home, change in neighborhood or school, and others, increasing the stress of the situation. An adolescent may simultaneously lose the support of extrafamilial figures and be particularly needy of nurturance from empathic adults with whom he or she spends time. Finally, another consideration in the assessment process of the initial counseling session is the adolescent's capacity to cope with stress is dependent on his or her sex, age, developmental temperament, and problem-solving skills.

Effective individual counseling interventions includes working with divorce-related beliefs, self-esteem, home-based behavior problems, school-based behavior problems, and relationships with family members and peers. Supportive psychoeducation, problem-solving skills training, social skills training and stress management training should be part of most interventions process with adolescents of divorced families (Carr, 2000, p.311). The supportive psychoeducation component should both provide adolescents with a safe forum within which to express divorce-related feelings and beliefs and also a reliable source of information about the experience of coming to terms with parental separation. The skills training components should equip adolescents with the skills required to manage the psychological and social challenges they face as a result of their parents' separation. The effectiveness of such child-focused programs may be enhanced by including parallel parent training (Carr, 2000, p.311). This should focus specifically on training parents in listening and discipline skills to enhance the quality of the parent-child relationship and should also



enlist the aid of the parent in helping the child to transfer skills learned in treatment sessions into their day-to-day lives (Carr, 2000, p.311).

Other individual interventions presented in Dr. Vernon's work include six psychological tasks that young people of divorce must resolve. As adolescents work through these tasks, they can become more resilient. The six tasks are (a) acknowledging the reality of the marital rupture; (b) disengaging from the parental conflict and distress and resuming customary pursuits; (c) resolution of loss; (d) resolving anger and self-blame; (e) accepting the permanence of the divorce; and (f) achieving realistic hope regarding relationships (Vernon, 1999).

Acknowledging the reality of the marital rupture involves consulting with parents to encourage them to discuss the divorce with their children. Counselors must listen young client's concerns, validate their feelings, and develop lists of topics that can be explored in counseling or with parents. Disengaging from the parental conflict and distress and resuming customary pursuits involves maintaining familiar routines and continue to encourage involvement of young clients and parents in school and extracurricular activities.

Another task, resolution of loss, many times is the most difficult task. The counselor can encourage the absent parent to maintain contact with the children (Vernon, 1999). The counseling process should also assist clients to develop connections with other adults outside the family who can offer support. Counselors may need to correct the cognitive distortions young clients often have about divorce, by resolving anger and self-blame. Bibliotherapy is a technique often used for resolving anger and self-blame, because it helps young clients understand divorce and identify

with issues and feelings of characters in the story. It may be necessary for counselors to work with young clients who relentlessly have ideas that their parents will reconcile by helping to accept the permanence of the divorce.

Adolescents who have experienced divorce may struggle with creating satisfying intimate relationships (Vernon, 1999). Cognitive-behavioral techniques help adolescents realize the irrationality of their fears. Challenging young clients' irrational beliefs with open-ended questions is necessary for achieving realistic hope regarding relationships. Counselors can assist adolescents to realize that not all conflict is destructive and that constructive conflict can enhance rather than destroy relationships. Behavioral rehearsal of constructive conflict resolution skills such as active listening, brainstorming, assertion, and problem solving may help adolescents build and maintain more satisfying relationships (Vernon, 1999).

Resolving these psychological tasks will enable counselors to facilitate the development of resiliency in adolescents who have experienced divorce. Instilling resiliency is essential for adolescents to be able to function successfully and not resort to unhealthy ways of coping with the potentially devastating effects of divorce. In summary, the main goal of interventions during individual counseling is to enhance the understanding of divorce and to gain insight into the thoughts and feelings about divorce. Another goal is to help young people learn ways to cope with problems associated with their parent's divorce.

### *Group Interventions*

Research in crisis theory and its application has shown that individuals who receive cognitive guidance and emotional support for coping with a stressful situation

have a reduced risk for developing mental and physical illness (Sandoval, 2002, p.94). The use of group techniques in meeting the needs of individuals in stressful situations has proven successful (Sandoval, 2002, p.94). Group interventions can reduce some of the shame about their family situation and find out that they are "not the only one," normalizing the divorce experience.

Group content can focus on an adolescent's confusion concerning the reasons for the divorce, loyalty conflicts, visitation issues, problems with stepparents and siblings, and so on. Sharing reactions to typical divorce-related issues offers support and comfort. Group interventions teaches needed coping skills, which can be taught through role playing and discussion emphasizes defining problems, thinking of ways to solve problems or recognizing that a problem cannot be solved by the adolescent alone, and recognizing consequences of behavior. Coping skills allows adolescents to feel less out of control and the tendency to act out is decreased as the sense of mastery increases.

Another study presented in Carr's work showed that group-based child-focused intervention programs of six to sixteen sessions which involve support, problem-solving training, social skills training and stress management training were effective in the short term in facilitating adjustment at home and school and in reducing divorce-related distress (Carr, 2000, p.295). Supportive interventions without skills training were of little value. Goals of group counseling must be for adolescents to realize others have the same feelings about divorce and others have new families and feelings about these new families. Another goal is to help adolescents understand they are not to blame for the divorce and to understand and manage stress. Helping adolescents identify and express feelings about divorce is another important group counseling intervention goal.

The main goals of group counseling interventions is to provide a supportive group environment, help adolescents identify and express feelings, and to promote understanding of divorce-related concepts and clarify divorce-related misconceptions. Interventions in the group setting also develop skills in social problem solving, effective communication, support-seeking, and appropriate expression of anger. Group counseling enhances positive perceptions of themselves and their families, and fosters parent-child communication.

#### *Parent and Teacher Participation*

Interventions are more likely to be successful when parents and teachers are involved in the counseling process. Developing strong support systems include parents being involved by participating in surveys or questionnaires, parent meetings, and parent-child interactions to enhance child-parent communication and encourage parent involvement with their child's experience (Richardson, 1999, p.25). Parent involvement and behavior has a tremendous effect of the overall effects of divorce on children and adolescents. It is important for parents to use listening skills to enhance the quality of their relationship with their children, and to provide support for the divorce crisis (Carr, 2000, p.295). Parents must understand the overall effects of divorce on their children and learn coping skills and stress management with their children to be a support system for their grieving children. Parents are the essential part for attaining resiliency in children of divorce.

Consistent involvement of teachers is an important piece of creating successful prevention models for the school system. The teacher has the greatest cumulative effect on the largest number of students and therefore must be a central collaborator in the

counseling process. Teachers are able to help in the counseling process by being involved in the assessment process, consultation, and carrying out goals if needed.

*Other approaches to prevention and intervention*

Grych and Findaman's work reported on a universal preventive program designed to enhance resilience in adolescents and to prevent the onset of clinically significant depression. The *Resource Adolescent Program (RAP)* consisted of eleven weekly group sessions of approximately 45 minutes each. Sessions focused on seven major areas including recognition and affirmation of existing strengths, stress management, cognitive restructuring, problem solving, building/accessing support networks, considering the other's perspective, and keeping and making the peace. Adolescents reported lower levels of depressive symptoms and hopelessness, and greater coping and problem-solving resources at postintervention, compared to controls (Grych & Findaman, 2001, p.392).

Another intervention for adolescents presented in Grych and Findaman's work is the focus of the *Positive Adolescent Choices Training (PACT)* program, which is targeted for youth twelve to sixteen years. The targeted adolescents are those identified by teachers as having mild to moderate histories of aggression, to have been victims or witnesses of violence, and/or to have social skills deficits (Grych & Findaman, 2001, p.399). Many of the childhood adjustment problems that are associated with witnessing parental conflict and violence become magnified through the demands and stressors of adolescence. Exposure to such maladaptive family dynamics increases the likelihood that adolescents themselves will repeat the relationship patterns they observe. As adolescents are beginning to become more involved in their first intimate relationships

outside the family, this is typically the time that learned violent behavior and deviant conflict resolution styles become evident. For this reasons, educating adolescents about relationships and nonviolent problem resolution methods become viable prevention strategies (Jaffe, 1990). *PACT* offers adolescents social skills training, anger management training, and education about violence (Grych & Fincham, 2001, p.399). The skills training component help participants learn to express anger, frustration, or disappointment constructively; listen and react appropriately to criticism or anger from others; problem-solve and compromise in order to overcome disagreements; think through consequences of their angry responses; and control their anger (Grych & Fincham, 2001, p.399). In the educative component, myths about violence are dispelled and an awareness of the dynamics of violence is raised.

The evaluation of the impact of *PACT* as measured by diverse outcomes, including observer and self-ratings, school disciplinary records, juvenile court records, and teacher reports. Results indicate that youths who completed the program demonstrated improvement in the target social skills, a significant reduction in physical aggression at school, and less involvement that untrained youths in violence-related juvenile-court charges (Grych & Fincham, 2001, p.399). Similar interventions as the two mentioned previously are important and necessary for instilling resiliency and positive adjustment or necessary change in young people dealing with divorce.

### *Conclusion*

Given the history and prevalence of divorce, coupled with the clear evidence that many young people have resultant issues and psychological tasks that must be addressed and worked through, school personnel, particularly counselors and teachers,

must be prepared to engage in prevention strategies with young people dealing with divorce or family conflict. Evidence has shown that the school may well be the single most comprehensive continuing resource for young people dealing with the divorce crisis. This places the school counselor in a unique position to advocate for students in meeting their needs during such a crisis, including educating parents and teachers on the effects of divorce and intervention strategies, providing and organizing a support system for young people of divorce, and instilling coping skills, stress management, and other necessary life skills for such life changes. Individual and group counseling settings coupled with appropriate interventions will allow counseling goals to be instilled.

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