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## Children of divorce : implication to teaching

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## Children of divorce : implication to teaching

### Abstract

Each day nearly 2,989 children experience a divorce within their families (Parker, 1994). Within the last several decades, the incidence of divorce within the United States has risen dramatically. The trend is that nearly half of all marriages will end in divorce (O'Leary & Smith, 1991). In fact, it is expected that at least 40% of all children will spend some part of their lives in a single parent household (Garvin, Leber, & Kalter, 1991). It is also estimated that over 90% of these children will reside with their mothers (Diamond, 1985; Kalter, 1990). 1 In this paper, the author will examine the effects divorce has on the children involved, various group intervention programs, and the efficacy of these programs. Techniques for working with children of divorce will also be suggested.

CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

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Each day nearly 2,989 children experience a divorce within their families (Parker, 1994). Within the last several decades, the incidence of divorce within the United States has risen dramatically. The trend is that nearly half of all marriages will end in divorce (O'Leary & Smith, 1991). In fact, it is expected that at least 40% of all children will spend some part of their lives in a single parent household (Garvin, Leber, & Kalter, 1991). It is also estimated that over 90% of these children will reside with their mothers (Diamond, 1985; Kalter, 1990).

In this paper, the author will examine the effects divorce has on the children involved, various group intervention programs, and the efficacy of these programs. Techniques for working with children of divorce will also be suggested.

#### Effects of Divorce on Children

In today's society, many children frequently come from homes in which their parents have been separated or divorced. Kalter (1990) suggested that a child's reaction and adjustment to his or her parent's divorce is influenced by the child's level of development, the stage of the divorce process, and the sex of the child.

### Level of Development

Much of the literature (Burke & Van de Streek, 1989; Yauman, 1991) has suggested that the effects of divorce vary among children depending on the developmental level of the child. Cebollero, Cruise, and Stollak (1986) found anger and sadness expressed by children regarding the parental divorce to be quite common at all levels of development. Consistent with this finding, Cantrell (1986) found that children between the ages of 6 and 8 are the most likely to experience extreme sadness. This may be a result of the change in the family structure. This change may also instill feelings of rejection or abandonment by the parent who has moved out. Between the ages of 6 and 8, children may also feel torn between both parents and experience difficulty expressing the anger which they feel. Children between the ages of 9 and 12 may also retain feelings of anger, rejection, and a sense of loss. However, anger with this age group is generally more intense than that of the younger children. The child may blame one parent for the divorce as a way of coping with the feelings he or she has during this time (Cantrell, 1986).

### Stage of Divorce Process

An additional factor which has an impact on a child's reaction to divorce is the stage of the divorce process (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). The early stage of divorce begins when parents separate and/or a parent petitions for a divorce. The conflict experienced between parents during this time is viewed as a primary stressor for children. The period usually lasts anywhere from one month to two years following the separation (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

According to Kalter (1990), the next stage lasts anywhere from one to two years. During this stage, children recognize the realities of the divorce and the conflicts involved with the process. The child may feel as though he or she is being placed in the position of having to choose between his or her parents. During this time, the children may be sources of support for the parent and may also be given additional responsibilities. In many cases, children live with one parent, which leads to another stressor: the sense of loss associated with the absence of the other parent. At this time, parents may begin to date again, which is an added stress in the lives of

children because the children begin to realize that their parents will not get back together.

The final stage or long-range phase can also be a time of stress for children. This includes the continued hostility between parents which may occur in some cases (Kalter, 1990). Children who experience this continued conflict are at great risk for experiencing emotional and social difficulties. Other stressors included in this stage are remarriage, discipline from the stepparent, step-sibling relationships, as well as economic factors. This last point is particularly important in cases in which the custodial parent does not remarry. When this income is decreased as a result of the divorce economic stress increases. Child support does not compensate for the economic deficit.

#### Sex of the Child

Research has shown that boys are more likely to experience academic problems at the time of divorce than girls (Guidubaldi, 1984; Thompson & Rudolph, 1992). Morrison and Cherlin (1995) suggested several possible reasons for this difference. First, the physiological factor (including maturity and vulnerability) may result in difficulty for boys. A



second factor may involve the socialization difference. When children reside with the mother following a divorce, boys may lose their male role model, sometimes resulting in difficulties in their adjustment. Finally, Morrison and Cherlin mentioned that boys may tend to be exposed more to stress surrounding the family difficulties than are girls. When the male remains in the custody of his mother often times she may expect him to assume some of the adult male roles which have been vacated as a result of the divorce.

#### Types of Interventions

Since a majority of time is spent in the school setting, it is imperative that students experiencing a divorce receive some form of intervention. This can assist the child in adjusting to the change in the family structure. As a result of the limited family finances previously mentioned, the school becomes an ideal setting for students to receive some type of intervention.

Stangeland, Pellegrino, and Lundholm (1989) recommended that the school counselor can best help children by first assessing the divorce. This involves determining the degree of such feelings as guilt, hurt, and anger which are present. Following this

assessment, school counselors can then determine the intervention which would most likely be beneficial for that child. In any case, if children are to adapt to the changes inherent in divorce, they need to receive some type of support from the school counselor.

School counselors can provide this support to children by facilitating a group especially for those students experiencing a divorce. Not only is the counselor providing support, he or she can also provide children with a setting in which to see that others his or her age have common feelings and problems associated with parental divorce. These groups can provide support and information for children as well as encouragement for children to express feelings and develop strategies for coping (Cebollero, Cruise, & Stollak, 1986).

A variety of group interventions for helping children of divorce have been reviewed. The efficacy of the interventions have also been discussed.

Burke and Van de Streek (1989) examined the efficacy of Hammond's method of assisting children of divorce. Hammond developed a program which would aid children of divorce. Some of the goals included developing an understanding of why people get divorced

and recognizing the fact that one can only make changes in oneself, not others. The focus of Burke and Van de Streek's study was on the children's psychological adjustment to the divorce. This study involved 39 fourth through sixth grade children from a small city in the midwest. Children were placed into a randomly selected control or experimental group. Those children in the experimental group attended an hourly session once a week for eight consecutive weeks. As part of the intervention, children viewed and discussed filmstrips on divorce, identified various family interactions, and were encouraged to share and express feelings regarding the divorce. The group members also brainstormed ideas for dealing with some of the present and future problems which they encounter at home. The control group, on the other hand, did not receive any type of intervention.

Prior to the intervention, members of both groups were given a pretest with the Piers-Harris Self Concept Scale. At the end of the eight week session, the members of each group were again given the Piers-Harris Self Concept Scale as a posttest. Researchers then conducted a *t* test for each of the groups. This was designed to identify any differences from pretesting to

posttesting. The control group did not show any significant changes, while the experimental group did show a statistically significant increase in self concept. This comparison between the two groups suggested an improvement in self-concept among the members of the experimental group, which the authors suggested is evidence of the success of Hammond's method.

Future research in this area may want to include larger numbers of participants, as well as a follow-up study. However, it is clear that Hammond's program did encourage improved self-concept among the children of divorce who participated in this research. As self-concept increases, children should feel more comfortable not only in school, but in social situations as well.

Omizo and Omizo (1987b) also researched the efficacy of a group counseling intervention on children's self-esteem and self-concept. This study involved 34 boys and 26 girls in grades four to six. These were primarily lower-middle to middle class socioeconomic backgrounds. The parents of these children had not remarried following the divorce over a

year before. The children were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups.

One week prior to the onset of the 12 week session, all students were administered the Dimension of Self-Concept, Form E(DOSC) and the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale. The experimental group met for 1 hour once a week for 10 consecutive weeks. This group was led by a trained counselor.

The goals of the group included expressing feelings, developing appropriate coping skills, and enhancing self-concept. The activities for these sessions included drawing, bibliotherapy, role plays, and discussions regarding divorce. Children also practiced ways of coping with divorce through relaxation and assertion training. During this same period, the control group viewed various films, none of which discussed the issue of divorce.

One week following the last session, a posttest was given to all students. The posttest instruments were the same as those used for the pretest. After analyzing and comparing the posttest results, a significant difference was found between the experimental and the control group. The experimental group had scored higher on three DOSC scales than did

those in the control group. These results indicated that group counseling did enhance the self-concept of those children who had participated. They also provided evidence that group participants exhibited an increased sense of control over their lives. This was indicated by the experimental group members' lower scores as compared to the control group on the Anxiety measures of the DOSC. The conclusion of the researchers was that the members of the experimental group demonstrated greater emotional stability than those of the control group and were not as preoccupied with their school performance.

Another intervention program which has been found to be successful is the Children of Divorce Intervention Program(CODIP). Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Carroll, and Cowen (1989) revised the initial program which was originally intended for fourth through sixth grade suburban children. The goals of the program were to relieve some of the behavioral and emotional problems which occur during the early stages of divorce.

Their program has been evaluated on second and third grade urban children. Although the goals remained the same from the earlier CODIP, modifications

were made to reflect the cultural and developmental areas of the children. This included activities with a focus on extended family member roles as well as financial difficulties. The program also emphasized various family structures, relationships with noncustodial and custodial parents, and the use of problem solving techniques.

This study consisted of 185 children in second and third grade from Rochester, New York. Of these 185 students, 52 were in the experimental group, 52 were included in the divorce control group, and the remaining 81 were comparison subjects from intact families. All subjects were given pretests one to three weeks prior to the start of the program. Posttesting was done one to four weeks following the program. Tests which were used as measures included: Children's Divorce Adjustment Scale, Child Rating Scale, Parent Evaluation Form, and the Teacher-Child Rating Scale. The Group Leader Evaluation Form was also administered following sessions 4 and 16.

The experimental group met in their home schools for 45 minutes each week over a period of 16 weeks. Specific issues included teaching problem-solving skills, appropriately expressing divorce-related

feelings, and developing a positive perception of self. Role-playing, puppets, bibliotherapy, games, and discussions were utilized during the intervention to assist in meeting these goals. On the pretest, it was noted that the members of the children of divorce groups reported more problems than did the children in the comparison group. Following a comparison of pre- and posttesting between all groups, the results suggested that the children who were part of the intervention reported more positive changes on the Children's Divorce Adjustment Scale than those who were not participants of the program. Reports showed that overall these children who had participated in the intervention felt more positive about themselves, their families, and their ability to cope with problem situations. The program not only offered support for children of divorce, it also enabled children to identify and openly express feelings about divorce and deal with these feelings.

This program modification provides evidence that children from urban areas can also be helped by group interventions. However, the study did have its limitations. In this study, children were not randomly assigned to groups. Another concern involved response



bias on the part of parents and teachers. In order to strengthen and extend the program to benefit younger students, future research should include identifying child, familial, and structural factors which may aid in determining later outcomes.

In 1987, Tedder, Scherman, and Wantz designed a study which addressed the feelings, cognitions, and problem-solving areas for those children affected by divorce. This group consisted of 17 fourth and fifth grade students whose parents had undergone a divorce anywhere from two months to two years prior to the study. Again, as in other studies previously mentioned, pretesting and posttesting was used. The instruments were given to both parents and teachers of the children involved. These measurements included the Walker Problem Behavior Identification Checklist (WPBIC) and the Child Behavior Rating Scale(CBRS). This intervention program consisted of 11 weekly sessions of 45 minutes each. Each session was designed to assess one of the three previously mentioned areas of concern. Children participated in activities, viewed filmstrips, played games, and participated in discussions concerning divorce. The interventions also included role plays as well as a trip to the courthouse

to familiarize students with the courtroom where the divorce proceedings occur.

A comparison of the results on the pretest and posttest instruments was conducted following the final session of the intervention. The results indicated that parents identified changes in children more often than teachers. This may be attributed to the fact that parents have a greater opportunity to observe and interact with their children on a more individualized basis. Another factor may have been that parents had participated in an orientation and therefore were more involved in the intervention. In future studies, researchers may want to offer an orientation for teachers designed to familiarize them with the purpose and goals of the group. Overall, the study showed that schools are an excellent place for children to receive support when signs of stress are evident due to a divorce. It is in schools that children spend a majority of their time and generally have easy access to the school counselor.

Gwynn and Brantley (1987) researched the areas of anxiety, depression, and feelings about divorce among school children. The pretest/posttest control group design was utilized for the 30 boys and 30 girls

between the ages of 9 and 11. Children in this study had parents who had been separated for at least one year. The goals of this group were to educate children about divorce, enhance problem-solving skills and encourage children to express feelings. Students viewed films, made drawings, and participated in role plays as part of the intervention. During this time, the members of the control group attended regular classes. Instruments in this study included the Children's Depression Inventory(CDI), Children's Divorce Information Scale(CDIS), and the Children's Divorce Affective Scale(CDAS).

Even though this was only an eight week intervention, the results indicated that even a short intervention such as this could be beneficial. The experimental group showed less depression and anxiety, were more knowledgeable about divorce, and had fewer negative feelings concerning divorce than did the control group. It was also mentioned that both sexes in this study experienced similar outcomes in divorce, while literature suggested that divorce has varying effects on boys and girls.

Subjects were not randomly assigned to groups, which may have impacted the program's effectiveness.

The use of self-reports may have also affected the outcome of the program.

A final intervention program designed for children of divorce is based on the multimodal approach. In this approach, a variety of factors are considered in the life of the child. These factors include health, self-concept, academic performance, interpersonal relationships, behaviors, and emotions (Crosbie-Burnett & Newcomer, 1989). The benefits of this program are that it allows for individualization within the group and allows children to serve as role models for other children.

In 1990, Crosbie-Burnett and Newcomer studied the effectiveness of this multimodal intervention method. Their approach studied the effectiveness of a school-based program for adolescents. Emphasis was on changing the adolescents' thoughts concerning divorce, decreasing depression, and increasing self-esteem. The pre- and posttest utilized the following instruments: Children's Beliefs about Parental Divorce Scale (CBAPD), the Child Depression Scale (CDS), and the Self-Perception Scales. The eleven sixth grade participants consisted of four girls and seven boys. Their parents had been separated or divorced anywhere

from one month to four years. This group was then randomly divided into an experimental group of six children and five who were placed in the wait list control group. The groups met for six sessions which were 44 minutes in length. However, the description of the study did not specify what the intervention consisted of or what the control group did during the duration of the intervention. Although the sample size was small, the comparison of the results between the two groups following the six sessions indicated depression decreased and self-concept increased for members of the experimental group.

Not only has it been suggested that children's participation in group is effective in helping their adjustment of the divorce, there is also an indication that parental participation in groups may also enhance children's self-esteem and self-concept. Omizo and Omizo (1987a) conducted a study using 60 single parents who had been divorced for more than a year and never remarried. They also had custody of their children. These children ranged in age from seven to nine and were in grades one through three.

In this study, the parents were given the Parent Attitude Survey (PAS), while the children were

administered the Primary Self-Concept Inventory (PSCI). The groups of parents were then divided into experimental and control groups. All parents were given the PAS one week before intervention and one week following the program treatment. The experimental group met once a week for 8 weeks in sessions of 1 hour and 30 minutes each. Throughout the intervention, parents were provided information and skills regarding parenting. They were also given ideas on coping with stress, planning for the future, as well as improving relationships. Other activities included participation in role playing, lectures, and discussions. Control group parents and children of both groups did not receive any type of intervention during this time period. Posttest results of the experimental group differed significantly from those of the control group. These results indicated that parents who participated in the intervention treatment program had an increase in their Confidence and Acceptance scores on the PAS. The children of these parents also experienced higher self-concept scores. This finding suggested that parents' involvement in counseling may also affect the children involved in the divorce.

However, the study did have some limitations. It did not consist of a truly randomized sample and did not have any type of follow-up measure. The sample size was relatively small, and the study did not include a treatment control group. Future researchers may want to look at long-term efficacy, larger sample size, and use a no-treatment control group design.

As the research has indicated, a variety of interventions are beneficial in helping children adjust to the change in the family structure following a divorce. Interventions can then be utilized which best meet the needs of the child.

#### Summary

Overall, with the number of children affected by divorce it is imperative that counselors be aware of the impact divorce can have on children. By being aware of the developmental level of the child and the stage of the divorce process, school counselors can provide assistance to these children either individually or in small groups.

Group counseling for children of divorce is an effective, practical, and efficient method for treating these individuals. The benefits of a group include support from peers, lessening the shame and guilt so

many children experience at the time of divorce, as well as peer modeling of alternative behaviors in thinking and feeling.

Group counseling can be beneficial for all ages of children, particularly those between the ages of 9 and 12 (Yauman, 1991). By utilizing a variety of interventions in assisting and working with children of divorce groups, counselors can help children identify the positive aspects of the divorce.



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