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## The behavioral and emotional effects of parental divorce on elementary school children

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## The behavioral and emotional effects of parental divorce on elementary school children

### Abstract

Divorce has two purposes: The first purpose is to escape from the married partner and the marriage, while the second purpose is the hope of starting a new and happier life (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Many people believe that time heals the hurt that canes from divorce. However, the painful effects can last for many years.

THE BEHAVIORAL AND EMOTIONAL EFFECTS  
OF PARENTAL DIVORCE ON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Department of Educational Administration  
and Counseling  
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Master of Arts in Education

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by  
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Divorce has two purposes: The first purpose is to escape from the married partner and the marriage, while the second purpose is the hope of starting a new and happier life (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Many people believe that time heals the hurt that comes from divorce. However, the painful effects can last for many years.

The continuous increase in the divorce rate in our country is a matter of great concern. Children of divorce are increasing in number at a rapid rate. Yauman (1991) said that ". . . each year more than one million children experience the divorce of their parents" (p. 130). Flosi (1980) indicated that ". . . by the year 1990 one-third of all the students in our schools will be children of divorce" (p. 30). Gwynn and Brantley (1987) stated that "Rapid increase of divorce in the past two decades is documented" (p. 161). Divorce is on an increase and many children are affected in various ways. "According to a U.S. Bureau of the Census report (1983), 22% of all children younger than 18 live with a single parent" (Tedder, Scherman, & Wantz, 1987, p. 102). Of this number, 20.5 million children live with their mother, while about 1 million live with their father.

#### General Impact on Children

An earlier belief was that ". . . the effects of divorce would dissipate within 1 or 2 years" (Yauman, 1991, p. 130). However, Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) said that ". . . the most recent longitudinal data indicate that children of divorce may continue to experience adjustment problems for as many as 10 years after the

divorce" (Yauman, 1991, p. 130). Even after a long period of time, some children still hope their parents will reconcile. It often happens that when parents divorce, the adults are so wrapped up in their own feelings and emotions that they neglect the feelings of their children. Sometimes parents think that children are more resilient and can bounce back more quickly and with less pain than they might realistically expect.

Divorce is different from other life crises in that ". . . anger more often erupts into physical and verbal violence, violence that can cause serious psychological harm for many years" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p. 7). Divorce is a different experience for the adults than it is for the children because the children are losing something very basic in their development -- family structure (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). In other crises, such as flood, an earthquake, or a fire, families pull together for strength and support. With a divorce, the support system is being pulled apart. People that were usually there for the support and safety are in a crisis themselves, and oftentimes are unable to provide the psychological support needed. The adults are in need of the same type of support and, therefore, find it difficult to give it to their children. The parents are in crises, and they are very busy trying to find and gain control of their own emotional supports. The children's needs are put on hold, and they are left to fend for themselves.

Children of divorce experience a time of great and difficult change and adjustment in their lives. The dissolution of a family is a devastating and very traumatic time for the children in that family. This type of devastation can bring about many different feelings and behavioral changes in elementary school children. Children in two-parent households are often very worried and concerned about a possible divorce in their family whenever they hear Mom and Dad fight and argue.

Children of divorcing parents face many unique problems. Oftentimes they are caught in the middle, with each parent trying to outdo the other in winning their children's love. These problems include a variety of feelings and emotions with which they must deal. These feelings and emotions affect the way they feel about themselves and the way they behave, whether at home or in school. Their behavior can sometimes be severely disruptive if help and attention is not provided for them. Other children might withdraw and be afraid to share themselves with anyone.

The parents can have a big effect on how their children deal with the divorce. It is helpful if one or both parents talk with their children about the divorce. It can be harmful if the parents fail to be sensitive to the needs of their children. The children should not be left out and ignored.

Children who are emotionally stable feel more secure in their parents' love and acceptance. "For the most part, they are healthy, normal children who are usually confronted with an extremely

stressful situation" (Wilkinson & Bleck, 1977, p. 206). These children may find the adjustment easier than the children who have low self-esteem before the divorce.

The purpose of this paper is to look at and recognize how parental divorce affects children's emotions and behaviors. In recognizing these characteristics, parents, teachers, counselors, and others in the helping professions might be more able to help these children.

### Specific Emotions and Behaviors

#### Anger

One of the emotional feelings experienced by children going through the transitional period of divorce is intense anger. This response is often more common in younger children (Cantrell, 1986). This anger is usually directed toward the parent whom they blame for the breakup. This anger can lead to hostility which may cause children to become aggressive and destructive, even self-destructive. The aggression may be more directed toward their mothers especially, ". . . with boys becoming more aggressive and oppositional than girls" (Freeman, 1985, p. 133).

The anger and hostility just described may affect the children's behavior in school. This is especially significant in elementary aged boys more so than in girls (Freeman, 1985). In the classroom, they may display acting out behavior and exhibit a lot of distractibility. They may find it difficult to concentrate and stay on task (Freeman, 1985). Actually, there may be some verbal outbursts.



This can be very disruptive for the other children in the classroom. A consistent, stable classroom where expectations are clear is very important for these children. These children need the security and stability of predictable routines which are found in the school classroom.

### Guilt

Another common feeling children of divorcing parents might have is guilt. Many times these children assume guilt for being the cause of their parents' divorce. They blame themselves, and often wonder what they did wrong to cause their parents to divorce. They sometimes believe the divorce is a punishment for something they did wrong, and they believe that if they change their behavior and act better, their parents won't divorce (Flosi, 1980). This guilt can become a heavy burden for elementary children to take upon themselves. It is important for them to be able to express this guilt in some way and get rid of it (Freeman, 1985). They need to know that their parents' divorce is not their fault.

### Sadness and Depression

Sadness and depression are other characteristics of children of divorce (Freeman, 1985). Crying and sobbing are not uncommon in lower elementary children. These feelings may be expressed in loss of appetite, moodiness, hopelessness, and low self-esteem (Cantrell, 1986). Younger elementary children may ". . . feel abandoned and rejected by the missing parent and exhibit behaviors similar to those involved when grieving the death of a parent" (Cantrell, 1986, p. 164).

These feelings, along with the feelings of guilt described earlier, may cause the child to withdraw from family and friends. They tend to daydream in school and find it hard to pay attention to what is going on around them (Freeman, 1985). This lack of interest and poor concentration may affect their academic achievement, leading to poor grades or grades below what is expected of the child. These children need many opportunities to feel successful and ways to express their true feelings.

### Fear

Another significant feeling experienced by children of parental divorce is fear (Tedder, Scherman, & Wantz, 1987). This fear is a fear of being abandoned by the custodial parent. The children may fear that the other parent will leave them as well. There is an extreme loss of a sense of security. Their security of a safe environment has been shaken, and the children are afraid about who will take care of them. Sometimes the parents are so involved and preoccupied with their own pain, struggles, and problems that the children are neglected by the custodial parent (Cantrell, 1986). The children may feel alone and really abandoned.

These feelings of fear can cause the children to become clingy, seeking out the love and affection they are lacking from their parents (Freeman, 1985). The teacher might become the only secure, stable adult in the children's lives at this time. The teacher might also become the parent figure for the children. Children at

this time need a strong person in their lives to look to for love, support, hope, and strength.

### Rejection

Also at this time of divorce in their lives, these children may feel that they are not loved by their parents (Sonnenshein-Schneider & Baird, 1980). They might even feel that they are not worthy of their parents' love. Some children may experience nightmares following their parents' divorce. These feelings of rejection can also cause problems for these children in their social relationships.

### Loneliness

Another difficult emotion children of divorcing parents may experience is the feeling of loneliness (Cantrell, 1986). The loneliness may be a result of the withdrawal mentioned earlier. As these children withdraw from family and friends, they isolate themselves. They shut out everyone around them who cares for them. They believe there is no one who cares. They really become quite alone in this type of situation. Some of these children find it difficult to make friends (Green, 1978). Social skills are a real challenge for them (Gwynn & Brantley, 1987). With a low self-esteem, they don't feel worthy of anyone's friendship. They have difficulty thinking anyone could like them or accept them. To avoid more pain and rejection, these children withdraw and find it hard to reach out to others. Self-esteem has been severely damaged, and something needs to be done to help repair it. The more they pull away from others, the harder it is for them to reach out for help. Sometimes

when help is offered, they might push it away, saying that they don't need any help. Deep down, they probably really long for the help and concern, but they don't know how to respond to it (Gwynn & Brantley, 1987).

### Powerlessness

Another significant emotion felt by children of parental divorce is that of powerlessness (Cantrell, 1986). These children feel unable to control what is happening between their parents. They want their parents to reconcile, but they can't do anything that will bring this reconciliation about. Sometimes children will intentionally harm themselves or cause some discipline problems in school in an effort to bring their parents together (Flosi, 1980). The children can become very discouraged when their efforts fail in reconciling their parents. Some children continually cling to the hope that their parents will some day get back together again.

### Loss

The feelings of loss can be very devastating. These children of divorce have lost the safety and security they felt when their parents were together. They have lost the feelings that someone will always be there for them (Cantrell, 1986). Also, they have lost the time they might have spent with the parent who is gone. They won't see that parent as often. Along with the feelings of loss is a feeling of emptiness. Someone is missing in their life, a very significant someone.

### Divided Loyalties

Younger children, as well as older children, experience divided loyalties between their mother and father (Cantrell, 1986). Sometimes parents will try to get their children to "choose sides", one parent over the other. Sometimes the non-custodial parent becomes a "Disneyland" parent for the children. This happens when the non-custodial parent showers the children with gifts and all kinds of good and fun things when they are with their children. They might never correct or discipline them. Then the custodial parent becomes the "bad guy" because he or she is the one who corrects and disciplines the children (Thompson, Cole, Kammer, & Barker, 1984). The children are caught in the middle of this struggle and often get mixed messages. These children usually remain loyal to both parents, which causes considerable pain. Even if the parents don't force the children to choose one parent over the other, children can still feel the divided loyalties.

### Fantasies

Younger children often fantasize about their parents getting back together again (Flosi, 1980). They believe that the separation is only temporary, and the non-custodial parent will come back some day to stay. These fantasies are very real for these children, and they can lead to extreme disappointment when they do not become a reality. Other fantasies these children might have may include the

fear of being deprived of food, of being left without the family, or being sent to live with strangers (Cantrell, 1986).

### Denial and Embarrassment

Some children may deny the divorce of their parents, and they may even lie about it to their friends (Freeman, 1985). Along with the denial is the feeling of shame. Some children want to keep the divorce a secret and hidden from others. The divorce might be an embarrassment for them. They might make up stories about why their mother or father is not living with them at that time. They may tell others that their non-custodial parent will be coming back to live with them some day.

Children of divorcing parents experience many different feelings and emotions. Their feelings may change as they get older. Their parents' divorce is a big adjustment for them, and can be very painful. Oftentimes, the feelings last a long time.

### Implications for the Counselor

"Schools are a significant part of a young person's life in terms of both time and preparation received for adulthood" (Wilkinson & Bleck, 1977, p. 205). A study done by the Kettering Foundation and the National Association of Elementary School Principals in 1979 ". . . indicated that a child coming from a one-parent family had a higher rate of tardiness, truancy, and suspensions than did a child from an 'intact' family (Burke & Van de Streek, 1989, p. 112). Dropout rate for these children was significantly higher also. Di Sibio (1981) concluded that ". . .

the disruption in the home life accompanying divorce is probably severe enough to impair school performance to some degree and to require educational intervention (Burke & Van de Streek, 1989, p. 113).

Within the classroom, it is important that the teacher help these children to feel secure and safe (Freeman, 1985). The teacher should let the children know that they are accepted and loved through smiles, hugs, and kind words. These children need reassurance that they are OK.

Because the school is such an appropriate and convenient setting for these children to receive the help they might need, the school counselor can play an important role in their lives. "The school can become a safe environment during the process of adjustment to divorce" (Cantrell, 1986, p. 165). Good rapport is imperative in the counseling relationship. Trust is very basic, and the level of trust builds throughout the counseling sessions.

Change might be very slow for the client. Therefore, the counselor must display a caring patience in waiting for and listening to the client, while, at the same time, challenging the client to grow and change. Being a good listener and allowing the client to talk are extremely essential roles for the counselor. "Listening to other people is most critical, as it enables them to continue to talk and explore" (Ivey, 1988, p. 21).

Sometimes clients won't talk, or don't know how to express themselves. The counselor can gently use his/her skills to start

the client thinking about what he/she is experiencing. When trust and rapport are established, the client will probably share more easily. The counselor helps his/her clients to recognize for themselves any feelings that might be hidden and not yet dealt with. Sometimes feelings are mixed, and the counselor can help the client sort through the mixed feelings. The counselor can also direct his/her clients in coming up with alternatives that the clients have generated themselves. Through counseling, the counselor can work with the clients on a plan of action which will bring about a desired change in the clients.

In counseling children of divorce, the counselor might choose individual counseling. However, ". . . because of the large numbers of children who need support and guidance in coping with parental divorce, school counselors often choose a group format in which to address these children's needs" (Crosbie-Burnett & Newcomer, 1989, p. 155). Multimodal intervention seems to be a very successful approach to group counseling. In this approach, "The elements include health, emotions, self-concept, learning and school performance, interpersonal relationships, and behaviors" (Crosbie-Burnett & Newcomer, 1989, p. 155).

Through group counseling, as opposed to individual counseling, the students have the opportunity to share with other students their own age about their similar "divorce" experience. Kids find out for themselves that they are not alone and their feelings are quite normal. "The basic benefit of group counseling is the development



of individual problem-solving skills that can be applied at home and at school" (Cantrell, 1986, p. 165). Robson (cited in Cantrell, 1986) said that children's groups on divorce led by the elementary school counselor have been very successful. Counselors use specific strategies within group sessions to meet the needs of the children. "The adjustment to divorce is a complex process, one that simultaneously involves the resolution of individual, couple, and family issues" (Hackney & Bernard, 1990, p. 142). Therefore, in working with elementary children, it is important for the counselor to be as aware as possible of the family issues and what the children might be experiencing at home. Contact with the parent/s might become necessary.

#### Summary

This study is a literature review of the feelings and emotions experienced by elementary children who are dealing with parental divorce. It is also a study of the different behaviors demonstrated by these children because of the divorce.

Each child's response to the divorce of their parents is different depending on the age, their relationship with their parents, siblings, and extended family, their emotional stability, and how the parents are handling the divorce. Even though the responses are individual, the feelings and behaviors described in this paper are very significant and common. These children are ". . . not to be considered an individual entity or a diagnostically significant category" (Wilkinson & Bleck, 1977, p. 206). They are

experiencing an extremely difficult situation at this time in their lives which is beyond their control. Many of the emotional feelings these children live with each day are devastating. If they do not get the opportunity to talk about and express these feelings in some way, it is detrimental to their behavior in the classroom, as well as to their learning.

Parental divorce is very painful to children. The school provides the proper structure and a safe environment in which help can be provided. "When parents divorce, the school can become an important source of continuity in the child's life" (Cantrell, 1986, p. 165). Daily routines, the requirements to perform certain tasks, and social contacts with other children can provide security. "Schools are a natural target for primary prevention. All children are available. Disruption is relatively easy to diagnose and intervention is relatively inexpensive to provide" (Hodges, 1986, p. 245). Therefore, the school seems to be one logical place for these children to receive the help and support they need to adjust to their parents' divorce and to live a happy life. The counselor plays a very important role in this part of children's lives.

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