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ABSTRACT

                The typical approach to studying children's ideas
about marriage and divorce is to ask children what they think about
their parents' divorce and from their answers to calculate "divorce
adjustment." This study used a different approach and asked about
children's perceptions of marriage, divorce, and stepfamilies. It
also studied if there are developmental differences in children's
perceptions of these family issues and if children from divorced
parents evaluate marriage, divorce, and stepfamilies differently than
do children of nondivorced parents. Subjects (N=119) were in
kindergarten, second, and fourth grades who lived with nondivorced
parents or divorced mothers. In reference to a story illustrated with
paper dolls, children were asked questions concerning marriage,
divorce, and stepfamilies as social institutions and as possibilities
for themselves. Chi-square analyses indicated that older children's
perceptions of marriage, divorce, and stepfamilies were more likely
to be abstract and psychological than those of younger children.
Children with divorced parents were somewhat more likely than
children with nondivorced parents to be cognizant of certain salient
divorce-related issues and to express the belief that people have the
right to be happy. (Author/ABL)

Children's Perceptions of Marriage, Divorce, and Stepfamilies

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ABSTRACT

The usual approach to studying children's ideas about
marriage and divorce is to ask children what they think about
their parents' divorce and from their answers to calculate
"divorce adjustment." This study, instead, asks:

1) What are children's perceptions of marriage,
   divorce, and stepfamilies?

2) Are there developmental differences in children's
   perceptions of these family issues?

3) Do children with divorced parents evaluate marriage,
   divorce, and stepfamilies differently than do
   children with nondivorced parents?

Subjects were 119 children in kindergarten, second, and
fourth grade living with nondivorced parents or divorced mothers.
In reference to a story illustrated with paper dolls, children
were asked questions about marriage, divorce, and stepfamilies,
as social institutions and as possibilities for themselves. Chi-
square analyses indicated that with increasing age, children's
perceptions of marriage, divorce, and stepfamilies were more
likely to be abstract and psychological. Children with divorced
parents were somewhat more likely than children with nondivorced
parents to be cognizant of certain salient divorce-related
issues, especially fighting and stepparents, and to express the
belief that people have the right to a happy marriage.

BACKGROUND

The typical approach to studying children and divorce is to compare children from divorced and nondivorced families on a measure of adjustment. This study, however, conceives of children's perceptions of marriage, divorce, and stepfamilies as a domain of social knowledge that is important in its own right. Because the family is central to the life of the child, the study of children's cognitions of marriage and divorce can provide a significant window through which we may observe the development of children's social knowledge.

In addition, to help children cope with the stress of parental divorce and/or remarriage, it is important to have normative information regarding the way children of different ages think about marriage, divorce, and stepfamilies. Children whose parents remain married simulate a pre-divorce group whose attitudes may be similar to those children bring to parental divorce. The perceptions of children with divorced parents may reflect a pattern of coping with divorce. Thus, the assessment of developmental patterns in children's perceptions of marriage, divorce, and stepfamilies has important implications for providing children with developmentally appropriate divorce-related information.

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METHOD

SUBJECTS

Subjects were 119 children (ages 5 years 1 month to 10 years 5 months) in kindergarten (n = 33), second (n = 45), and fourth grade (n = 41). Sixty-three (56%) of the subjects were girls, and 49 were boys (44%). Eighty-seven (87) children lived with their nondivorced parents. Thirty-two children with divorced parents lived with their single or remarried mothers. The mean length of time since parents' separation and divorce was 56 months and 39 months, respectively. All subjects were white and middle-class, and were interviewed individually at one of 4 public elementary schools.

MEASURES

The Marriage and Divorce Interview

In reference to a story line illustrated with paper dolls, children were asked both open- and close-ended questions about 5 main themes. The themes were marriage, divorce of a childless couple, divorce of a couple with 2 young children, remarriage, and stepfamilies (see Table 1 in handout). Within each theme of the interview, a number of issues were explored, especially the reasons, benefits, and disadvantages of these family situations.

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<u>Coding</u>. In previous research with the Marriage and Divorce Interview, children's perceptions were assessed first by coding subjects' elicited responses to open-ended questions, and then assigning them a score reflecting the sophistication of the child's level of reasoning. In this study, we coded this material for children's unelicited perceptions that have been frequently mentioned in empirical and clinical studies. Thus, verbatim transcripts were coded for the presence or absence of 20 statements that were derived from studies of children's reasoning about parental divorce, especially those of Kurdek and his colleagues (Kurdek & Berg, 1980; Kurdek & Siesky, 1980), Neal (1983), and Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989). The percentage of perfect agreement was 95% between two undergraduate coders blind to the hypotheses of the study and to the subjects' age, grade, and parents' divorce status.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Due to the categorical nature of the data, the X^2 statistic and logit analyses were used to assess the relationship between subjects' grade and parents' divorce to their spontaneous remarks about marriage, divorce, and stepfamilies. The logit analyses indicated that there were no interactions between the independent variables.

2. Table 2 presents the percentage of children who expressed the
designated remarks about marriage, divorce, and stepfamilies. As
you can see, chi-square analyses indicate significant
developmental differences for 11 of 20 spontaneous remarks, with
an additional two nearly significant. Older children's
perceptions of marriage, divorce, and stepfamilies were more
likely to be abstract and psychological than those of younger
children. These results are consistent with evidence from prior
studies which indicate reliable age-related trends in the way
children reason about parental divorce, adoption, and the family
(Borduin et al. 1990; Brodzinsky et al., 1984; Kurdek, 1984) and
are understandable within the general context of children's
acquisition of social knowledge (i.e., Shantz, 1983).

3. The chi-square analyses indicate, too, that children with
divorced parents sometimes express more realistic views of
marriage, divorce, and stepparents. These differences seem to
appear for issues of greater salience to children of divorced
parents, such as fighting, stepparents, and the inequity of
divorce. These perceptions are similar to those of older
children and may be ones inculcated by their parents or
learned from experience. It appears, too, that divorce is more
focal in the consciousness of children of divorce. That there
were relatively few differences between children with divorced
and nondivorced parents, however, is not surprising in light of
Piagetian theory (1928) and of other studies of children's

concepts of family and of divorce, in which the effects of specific family structure experiences seem to have little relationship to children's concepts of family, adoption, and parental divorce (Borduin et al., 1990; Brodzinsky et al., 1984; Kurdek, 1986). Moreover, almost all children have experience with divorce in the families of friends, relatives, or classmates.

3. These results have implications for preventive interventions and for parents' discussions of divorce with their children. It is clear from this and other studies that a discussion of divorce cannot be a one-time affair. Since the child's knowledge of the world changes with age and experience, a continual reinterpretation of divorce by parents is necessary for appropriate understanding on the child's part. Similarly, to be able to deal with children's concerns about divorce and stepfamilies, mental health professionals need to be informed about developmental changes in children's perceptions of marriage, divorce, and stepfamilies.

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