DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 398 120 SO 026 577

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TITLE Kids, Divorce, and Teachers.
PUB DATE [88]
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Custody; Childhood Needs; *Child Psychology; *Children; Child Responsibility; *Divorce; Elementary Education; *Family (Sociological Unit); *Family Life; *Family Problems; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; Middle Schools; One Parent Family; School Community Relationship

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the influence of divorce on middle level students (grades 5 through 8) and how it relates to the students' performance (both academically and emotionally) in school. Also important to the discussion is what teachers should know about working with the children of divorce. The paper includes a review of the literature on children of divorce. A final portion of the paper is a personal reaction to these findings. Contain 15 references. (Author)

Kids, Divorce, and Teachers

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(Partial completion for course entitled, Educational Foundations)

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Purpose of Study

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the influence of divorce on middle level students (grades 5 through 8) and how that relates to the students' performance (both academically and emotionally) in school. Important to the discussion, also, is what we know that teachers should know about working with the children of divorce. A final portion of the paper will be a personal reaction to these findings.

Introduction

Studies predict that fifty percent of the children now in school will live a portion of their lives before the age of eighteen in single-parent homes (Hammond, 1979, p. 55). As the ranks of such children swell, it becomes necessary to focus more sharply on the effects of divorce on those children. A great deal of research has been done attempting to prove the thesis that divorce directly causes some harmful consequences to children, such as poor academic performance, juvenile delinquency, or confusion over sex roles. The findings are unequivocal. They support the idea that divorce does not have any single, broad-reaching affect on children. The question to ask, it seems, should not be does divorce have negative effects, but, rather, what troubles children about divorce and how is that personified in their daily lives. (Levinger & Moles, 1979, p. 17).

Because children spend almost half of their waking hours in school, teachers are in a position to actively assist children of divorce in adjusting to a new situation. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that the school served as a support network for some children experiencing divorce by providing a structure in the child's life and a stable relationship with an adult, the teacher. Furthermore, academic achievement by the above-average student may be a stablizing agent.

At the heart of the problems children encounter upon the breakup of their parents' marriage is coping with stress. That stress is most similar to that faced by those dealing with grief. After all, the children in this situation have xperienced loss, the loss of a relationship (among other things). Like adults, children pass through the stages of grief at different rates. The young people must experience the grief; for it cannot be denied or it will resurface again and again (Appel, 1985).

Research has shown that divorce precipitates a major crisis in the lives of most children and that the stress which accompanies divorce often affects school behavior and academic performance. Children at different ages react differently when dealing with divorce (Elmore, 1986). Kubler-Ross's studies of grief have proved beneficial in understanding the stages of adjustment through which children pass. The stages most often applicable are anger, depression, guilt, fear, and relief (Appel, 1985; Elmore, 1986; Fairchild, 1986; Freeman, 1985). Teachers need to understand the effects of temporary and prolonged stress on children, and to be supportive in the classroom setting. They must be more patient than ever, willing listeners, and sensitive to language used in the classroom.

Close communication between the school and the family is crucial. The extent to which children in crisis can turn to the school for support depends on the school system and the extent to which programs exist for assistance. The focus, however, in this treatise is the teacher. Counseling services, support groups, effective health programs, etc., are important, but subjects for other papers.

Review of the Literature

Information has been gathered in two areas: characteristics of children in the middle grades and suggestions for teachers assigned to work with such children. Already a stressful time for children, divorce serves to intensify this already turbulent period of time. As a renewed emphasis is placed on working with young people in the middle grades, it is highly appropriate that teachers of this age group be made aware of the needs of children of divorce. They are no longer a rare breed, but almost a commonalty. In addition, the mid-life crisis which frequently leads to divorce, most often coincides with this aged child.

What do we know about these children?

Hetherington (1979) noted that almost all children experience the transition of divorce as painful. The emotional upheaval divorce often brings leads to feelings of disruption, agony, insecurity, guilt, isolation and a feeling of being different (Elmore, 1986). In recent years we have become more aware of the enduring effect of psychic trauma experienced in youth. Most disturbing are indications that an individual's guiding conception of the world as relatively safe and reliable may be forever shattered (Fairchild, 1986; p. 25; Hetherington & Arasteh, 1988, p. 197).

In the Ten Year Study, conducted by Wallerstein, Corbin & Lewis (Hetherington & Arasteh, 1988, p. 208), it was found that preadolescents feel especially powerless, as well as frightened, at the marital rupture. Most disturbing was their intense anger at one or both parents for precipitating the divorce. At this age, there is a tendency to align themselves with one parent against the other. About half of the boys and girls in this group suffered a severe drop in their school work that lasted throughout the year following the separation. Initial responses were of concern because so many displayed acute depression, acting out, and regression that included emotional and social withdrawal from involvement with friends and investment in school. The anxiety about the future was intense. A significant subgroup in this study showed an impressive development spurt. They were mature, compassionate, and genuinely helpful to one or both parents during the crisis time. These findngs are supported in Fairchild's work (1986).

Other reports (Levinger and Moles, 1979, p. 302) focus on the tremendous feeling of loneliness experienced by older children. They were afraid of not being

loved. Early teenagers' reactions exhibited many of the feelings associated with loss -- anger, sadness, betrayal, as well as shame, and embarrassment.

It is not uncommon for children to assume guilt for being the cause of the divorce (Hetherington, 1979). They may think they are being punished for wrongdoing and that if they are very, very good, their parents might reconcile. Some children may fear being abandoned. Therefore they may become clingy, even have separation anxiety. They may feel that they are not worthy of affection, that they are not loved by their parents (Freeman, 1985).

Anger may lead to aggression leading a youngster to destroy things and perhaps even become self-destructive. Depression is faced by the majority of youngsters in this situation. Sadness and depression may be evidenced in loss of appetite, hopelessness, moodiness, and self-criticism. The child may experience insecurity and a lowered self-esteem with the feeling that they cannot do anything right. This may lead to inattentiveness and frequent daydreaming (Fairchild, 1986).

Appel (1985) summed up what teachers might seek to observe in students to alert themselves to a need to take special and/or appropriate action. They include:

1. During the period of grief, students may lose sleep, appear lonely, need a greater need of reinforcement, be more dependent, have a poor memory, and exhibit guilt, anger or bitterness.

2. They may complain of stomachaches, headaches, and request to go to see the nurse. Be aware that the underlying cause may be stress.

3. Changes in manner of dress, grooming habits, work habits, and frequent tardiness are all indicators of problems at home.

4. The emotional confusion due to the family change may prompt crying for no apparent reason, unprovoked spurts of anger, anxiety for no apparent cause, and sometimes unexplained euphoria.

5. Students may assume a new role. Three common ones are the placater, the adjuster, and the troublemaker.

What can teachers do?

The research has confirmed that divorce precipitates a major crisis in the lives of most children and teens. The stress engendered by the crisis often, if not always, spills over into the academic setting (Elmore, 1986; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1974, 1976). Children in the middle grades, while upset by the events of divorce, continue to function both at home and at school with a minimum of disruptive behavior in most cases. The child should be given time to work through a myriad of feelings and changes. The teacher should aim for a balance that will allow the child latitude and a feeling of support, while not allowing destructive or disruptive behavior to become a pattern. Patience is essential (Elmore, 1986).

Hammond's (1981) research showed that the most helpful thing a teacher could do for students in this predicament was to let the students talk about their feelings. The teacher can be a willing and accepting listener, without making judgments or prying into personal matters. Stress is an inevitable part of live. Adults can help children structure and order their world in order to gain control over stressful situations. Aiding in the development of coping skills is beneficial (Chandler, 1981,1987). Teachers can help students acknowledge that they are hurting by allowing tears and reassuring students by saying things like, "I know these are hard times for you." Teachers who know something of students' lives

outside the classroom are best equipped to supply this kind of extra support (Chandler, 1981).

Close communications with parents is essential in dealing with all children, but it is especially so in the case of children of divorce. Teachers can encourage parents to inform the school of any major changes at home (Chandler, 1987; Diamond, 1985). Face-to-face communications provide much more helpful information than a phone call. It increases the confidence level and lets the parents know that the teacher really cares (Appel, 1985; Freeman, 1985). It is also important that the teacher understands the relationship with the absent parent. They might be included in conferences, receive report cards, and/or attend school programs (Freeman, 1985).

Creating a low-stress environment in the classroom is crucial. By setting clear expectations, stating academic criteria plainly, reducing ambiguity, and minimizing the opportunities for frustration a feeling of security and stability can be conveyed. During this stressful time, children need clear expectations (Appel, 1985; Chandler, 1981; Diamond, 1985; Fairchid, 1986, p. 23). Adults in general, and teachers in particular, are powerful role models, mediators, and environmental manipulators. The adult is, for the child, the person in charge, bringing order out of chaos, correcting wrongs, balancing the injustices, and controlling the forces that seem overwhelming to the child (Chandler, 1987).

Getting involved in something bigger than the problem that seems all-pervasive is a reprieve from the ever-present tension in which the child is existing. Volunteer work, (e.g., reading to senior citizens, walk-a-thons), assists in building students' self-esteem. In a similar vein, teachers can suggest ways for children to let their parents know they care. Assisting students in remembering birthdays, gifts for holidays, and recognizing other special occasions can be very beneficial (Appel, 1985).

Teachers should avoid disgracing a child. Sponsoring "father-son" events, for example, might lead to an uncomfortable situation. Picturing the two-parent family in textual material reinforces the idea that the child is in an atypical situation (Appel, 1985). When families are depicted in textual material, teachers should explain that there are many kinds of families (Diamond, 1985; Freeman, 1985).

It is very difficult for children in this situation to realize that others have felt as they do. A difficult concept to internalize at any age, it is particularly hard for the middle school child. A teacher can let students know that others care about them and that others have experienced many of the same feelings. Older children can read one of the many age-appropriate books and pre-adolescents can network with other students experiencing family change (Appel, 1985). It is from this need that various support groups are organized by counselors.

Personal Reactions

My experience, both as a single parent and as an educator, has been that teachers lack sufficient training, both in understanding the emotional, mental, and moral development of middle-level children and in dealing with children in crisis. In addition, teachers, as a rule, have been placed in rather sterile situations in which developing a climate in which the teacher can be a listener, encourager, etc., is virtually impossible.

However, there are school personnel prepared to do so. The crisis faced by children of divorce -- a sub-group of some 50% -- speaks loudly for the necessity for counselors and school nurses, and the programs they foster. These specially trained professionals must have reasonable responsibilities. Counselors cannot be occupied doing scheduling, being substitute teachers and doing recording

keeping. Elementary counselors are needed just as much as high school counselors. A reasonable ratio is crucial. One nurse for 875+ students is incomprehensible, but quite common. In addition to training educators about the dynamics of crises in our young peoples' lives, requirements for more counselors and nurses is crucial.

Clear school procedures should be developed by all schools. In too few schools, the avenues of communications are either non-existent or adversarial. Educators, especially teachers, must have a clear understanding of the family situation. If there are relevant court orders, extended family members to be involved with the schools or special situations, then every one involved should be informed. Too often, the non-custodial parent is automatically written off by the school when the separation occurs. The appropriate relationship with both biological parents should be a priority of the school. Such is in the best interest of the child and benefits all who work with the young person.

Elementary teachers, as well as secondary teachers, must be sensitized to stereotypes that are presented in the context of curricula. Books that children read, or those read to them, should show adults and children in many settings. The celebration of holidays should be carefully monitored. Christmas, for example, might be a very stressful time for children who are being tossed between warring parents or varying step-families. In addition, split families are two households being funded by the same income that once supported one household. There might not be as many presents, or other frivolities, as in the past.

Closely related to that is the tremendous awareness, missing too often, that is needed by teachers of their own attitudes. Divorce no longer has the stigma attached to it that it once did. Children caught in this quagmire should not be pitied, nor should divorce be an excuse for overlooking behavioral problems or

accepting mediocrity in academic matters. Educators must rethink their pre-judgments.

A clear understanding of the family situation is crucial. Not all fathers are "bad" or irresponsible. Living in a single-parent family is not necessarily a curse. Viewing it as dysfunctional is inappropriate. Understanding that it is what is and working within that context is crucial. Teddy Roosevelt once said that it is our charge to do the best we can with what we have where we are. And, our current President has said on numerous occasions of crisis, "Life is not about what happens to you. It's how you handle it that counts." Divorce, single-parent families, re-marriage, etc., may not be what we believe is best for children, but it is reality. What is important, is how we handle it.

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