

## The School Counsellor and Divorce: A Child's Perspective

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### Abstract

*In Manitoba, more than half of marriages end with divorce. Many of these families include children. This article addresses the need for school counsellors to understand the impact that divorce has on children's lives. Children require a method to deal with unresolved feelings related to divorce. A school counsellor can support children through the separation process by examining how divorcing parents' decisions disrupt the family system, understanding how children progress through the post-divorce developmental tasks, and exploring possible therapeutic approaches.*

Separation and divorce affect many children. The children experiencing their parents' separation or divorce may feel depressed, confused, guilty, and stressed (Pehrsson et al., 2007). Parents also feel stressed during separation and divorce, and are often unable to recognize how their behaviour is affecting their children. It is important for guidance counsellors to have knowledge regarding divorce, in order to help the children of divorce create coping strategies. This article examines how divorcing parents' decisions disrupt the family system and how school guidance counsellors can support children through the separation process.

### The Parents

When parents divorce, they typically have been through a series of events that have led them to the decision to separate. An actual divorce or separation indicates that marital conflict, unhappiness, or dissatisfaction has reached a critical level for a given couple (Acs, 2007). There may be many reasons for divorce; however, the job of being a parent continues (Strohschein, 2007). Family interactions, such as family dysfunction and parental conflict, not only predict and precede marital dissolution, but also take a toll on children's mental health. Therefore, it is important for parents to rear their children in a positive, supportive manner rather than in a negative, hostile manner.

Parents become divorced for many reasons. At the beginning of a relationship, individuals are aware of their partner's deficiencies (Kluwer & Johnson, 2007). Relationship distress starts with problems that existed in the beginning of the relationship, such as incompatibility in personality and high levels of conflict. However, the frequency of conflict may not be the only cause of lower relationship quality. Relationships end through divorce for several other reasons. One reason is financial (Osborne et al., 2007). Schilling (2000) also discussed three additional reasons: people change, infidelity, and illness. Regardless of the situation, anything that diminishes the real or perceived gains to marriage constitutes a risk factor for marital disruption (Teachman, 2002). Divorce may be a sobering alternative to personal unhappiness, financial instability, and emotional liability (Pehrsson et al., 2007). Inevitably, it will end the relationship between the parents; however, the relationship between parent and child will continue.

The behaviour of parents greatly influences how children adjust emotionally after the separation (Manitoba Family Services and Housing, n.d.). It is sobering for parents to hear that it is not necessarily the divorce, but their behaviour and quality of their co-parenting that continues to echo throughout the family system (Ahrns, 2006b). If parents have a good relationship with their children and the children feel the parents' love and acceptance, the children can tolerate parenting imperfections (Manitoba Family Services and Housing).

However, some imperfections are not easily tolerated by children: unpredictability, parental conflict, and parentification.

An important challenge for parents is avoiding unpredictability. Inconsistent parenting is likely an important aspect of unhealthy family functioning in general (Thomson Ross & McDuff, 2007). Although flexibility is necessary, so is dependability (Manitoba Family Services and Housing, n.d.). Children of divorced parents need to know that they can count on their parents.

Parents can be more predictable by following a parenting plan. A parenting plan includes decisions that are based on the children's developmental stages (Sanders, 2007). The plan includes various strategies for topics such as parent time schedules, transitions, communication, decision-making responsibilities, and tools and resources for post-divorce parenting. To help children cope with changes, parents can prepare them for transitions, provide explanations that make sense but do not place blame, and dispel myths about their new family arrangements in order to increase the probability of understanding their new life (Bernstein, 2006). Providing stability will give children a routine and the security that is needed to succeed.

A second parenting challenge is avoiding parental conflict in front of the children. High parental conflict is a powerful predictor of the negative effects of divorce for both children (Portnoy, 2008) and adults (Lebow & Newcomb, 2006). Discordant parenting is linked to elevated levels of psychological distress when the children become young adults (Amato, 2000). Children need to know that they will continue to see both parents and that the separation is not their fault (Family Conciliation, 2007). Although hiding animosity between parents can be difficult, it is necessary for children's welfare.

In order to reduce conflict, the central goal of the parent plan is to reduce the most damaging aspects of custody disputes (Lebow & Newcomb, 2006). Since the transition from one parent to another is a convenient time for arguments between parents, a plan must be in place to avoid tension. For example, transfers may occur in the absence of one parent or take place in a public area. Controlling the amount of hostility that the children witness can improve transitions and overall adjustment.

A final challenge for parents is avoiding parentification, which refers to role reversal in the parent-child relationship, wherein parents rely on their children for emotional support (Peris & Emery, 2005). Children are not emotionally capable of being a parent's friend or counsellor (Family Conciliation, 2007), and if these children are faced with task demands that exceed their developmental capabilities, they are likely to experience stress and frustration (Peris & Emery, 2005). Parents must remember that children are not mature enough to handle adult problems.

To prevent using the children as emotional support, parents need to find resources to allow themselves to work through their issues without the direct involvement of their children. Separation and divorce are times when adults experience a high degree of change and a need for information and support. Some parents may benefit from talking individually with extended family members or counsellors. Other parents might prefer reading information on websites or in books. A support group may provide a sense of "normality" because there are other parents dealing with the same issues. These examples are just a few of the resources that are available to parents who are separated or divorced. Regardless of which resource a parent chooses, children should not be used as confidantes for their parents.

Divorce is often viewed as unavoidably destructive, and people with failed marriages are often assumed to lack the qualities to be good parents (Strohschein, 2007). Furthermore, divorcing couples are increasingly at risk of being labeled as deviant and morally deficient (Adams & Coltrane, 2006). In truth, these beliefs are not necessarily true. If parents can set aside their resentments and parent together, their children can have healthy relationships with their parents, grandparents, stepparents, and siblings (Ahrons, 2006b). Parenting practices clearly have an effect on child mental health and well-being (Stroschein, 2007); therefore, in many cases, parents should make their decisions together in joint custody (Kelly, 2006). However, there is no single model of post-separating parenting that is perfect for all children

(Gilmour, 2004). Regardless of the parenting strategy selected, parents can rise above society's stereotypes and parent well from two homes.

Joint custody is characterized by cooperative parenting whereby both parents plan for their children, coordinate schedules, and offer support to each other (Kelly, 2006). This type of custody promotes resiliency in children and increases parents' ability to resolve differences on their own, or with mediators and therapists as required. Divorce issues can harm relationships (Pehrsson et al., 2007). However, consistent and appropriate parental monitoring and positive discipline influence the children's post-divorce adjustment (Strohschein, 2007). In addition, adolescents can adjust reasonably well to divorce when parents set clear boundaries, explain their conflict briefly, and avoid hostility in front of their children (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Regardless of the reasons to separate and the obstacles that can hinder positive parenting, separated or divorced parents can raise children who are well adjusted and successful.

### **The Children**

Studies of children who are experiencing family breakup show that different reactions occur, depending on the age of the child at the time of separation (Sanders, 2007; Schilling, 2000). Children's understanding of parental divorce depends on their developmental stages. It is important to know what thoughts and feelings children of different ages may be having, so that parents can modify their own behaviours to help children adjust to divorce.

When parents are explaining the separation, children need a "no blame explanation" (Family Conciliation, 2007). The children need to know that both parents love them, that they will continue to see both parents, and that the separation is not their fault. Children require the parents' permission to love both parents and their families. Children may become insecure if marital conflicts disrupt the parent-child relationship (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2007). A no-blame explanation will help children to understand the circumstances that are affecting their family.

Children's lives are changed radically in a short time when their parents divorce (Portnoy, 2008). To cope with the changes in their family, children must undertake developmental tasks in order to carry on with their lives (Symons, n.d.). It is important for children to have a post-divorce environment to accomplish these developmental tasks (Sanders, 2007). Accepting the reality of divorce is one of the tasks children must resolve (Symons, n.d.). Twenty-five years after the divorce, children still recall the shock and bewilderment of the beginning of their family restructure. Children may feel that they have little control over what happens (Schilling, 2000). However, the reality is that divorce is an adult decision and their family will change as a result.

Another necessary task is to separate themselves from their parents' conflict (Symons, n.d.). Children with parents in high-conflict marriages are more likely than other children to feel caught between parents (Amato & Afifi, 2006). These feelings are associated with lower subjective well-being and poorer quality parent-child relationships. The act of separating themselves from the conflict may help children to avoid interpersonal problems (Jacquet & Surra, 2001). If conflict does occur, children must realize that the hostility is between their parents and is not directed at them. Older children may ask parents to have arguments or heated discussions in private, in order to avoid involving them. The level and type of interactions that children have with their parents also influence their well-being (Acs, 2007); therefore, if children can separate themselves from their parents' conflict, they can have a better relationship with both of their parents.

Another essential task for children is to resolve their feelings of loss (Symons, n.d.). Because the children's family is changing, children may require a grieving process. The loss of the nuclear family will bring permanent changes in the children's lives. Children need to realize that they are not alone and that children and parents alike will need time to adjust to the changes. To cope with feelings of loss, children need to know that there is no definite formula for dealing with these feelings; however, hurrying the process or using substances such as alcohol is not a healthy way to work through the loss. Fathers who are unable to see their children on a

daily basis are able to distract themselves with activities such as work (Hallman et al., 2007). Children can also distract themselves by participating in activities, hobbies, and exercise. Children who draw on a support system, such as extended family and friends, may preoccupy their minds and avoid feeling alone and depressed.

A significant task for children is to resolve feelings of anger and feelings that they are to blame in some way for the divorce (Symons, n.d.). A divorce occurs because of something that happens between the adults who are getting the divorce; nevertheless, children may think of the times that their behaviour caused strain on the family. These instances may turn into a self-dialogue that stars the child as the problem (Bernstein, 2006). Parents need to express their reasons for the divorce to their children, so that the children will not blame themselves.

A further task for children is to accept the fact that divorce is permanent. Children sometimes believe that if they are well behaved, their parents will stop fighting and get back together. The children's behaviours will not influence their parents' decision. Although many things will change, there will be many that stay the same. For example, although parents will not love each other, they will continue to love their children. Most children whose parents divorce will be in stepfamilies at some point of their growing-up years (Stoll et al., 2005); children can still see the other parent.

A final task for children is to begin to plan for their own lives by making goals (Symons, n.d.). Children with active coping skills such as problem solving are less likely to feel passively impacted (Portnoy, 2008). When children are able to make their own informed decisions, they feel confident. If children have high self-concepts, they are less likely to suffer from psychological disorders such as depression, use drugs and alcohol, or be under-achievers at school or work (Gilmour, 2004). When children feel that they have control over their lives, they are more apt to make goals.

As time passes and children recover, the signs of stress should become less apparent (Strohschein, 2005). Children will require time to work through their developmental tasks with support from their parents. Most children with divorced parents develop into well-adjusted adults (Amato & Cheadle, 2005). However, in order to accomplish these developmental tasks and acquire appropriate coping skills, children may be assisted significantly by trained school guidance counsellors.

### **The School Guidance Counsellor**

The school counsellor is a resource that can be a part of the support system for children experiencing the separation process. Helping children after separation or divorce is a complicated therapeutic process of family reorganizing (Ahrons, 2006a); therefore, guidance counsellors need to be familiar with the many different types of therapeutic interventions that are advocated for children of divorced parents (McConnell & Sim, 2000).

Therapeutic approaches must emphasize trust between the counsellor and the child (Lowenstein, 2006). McConnell and Sim (2000) noted that two main concerns for children in counselling were the interrogative nature of the counselling and the issue of confidentiality. Both of these issues can cause a communication barrier between the guidance counsellor and the child (Young, 2005). If the counsellor maintains a nonjudgmental manner, children will communicate their concerns. If the children perceive that the counsellor genuinely cares, they will be more willing to share information about what is happening in their lives. If a trusting relationship cannot be formed, the problems that children experience when dealing with separation and divorce can be left unresolved and undetected. Once a trusting relationship is achieved, then the child can begin to explore deep-rooted feelings. Children are often referred to the guidance counsellor to help them adjust to the changes in their family (Lowenstein, 2006). The children of separation and divorce may feel anxious about participating in therapy; therefore, they may be hesitant to talk candidly about their family and the divorce. The guidance counsellor must possess skills to allow children to feel comfortable to express their thoughts and

feelings (Kottler, 2001). If the children of separation and divorce are able to expose their stories in a truthful and open manner, therapy can begin.

Although they may not have the vocabulary to describe their emotions, children continue to experience and interpret their surroundings. To resolve feelings associated with separation and divorce, guidance counsellors need to explore the children's self-narratives that attempt to explain past memories, validate current behaviours, and predict future behaviours (Bernstein, 2006). The script of the children's self-talk is not necessarily right or wrong, but can interpret the way the children think about how they fit into the family's changes. Children may not be able use words to describe how they are feeling. Therefore, guidance counsellors may use various expressive therapies to enable children to explore the emotions related to their experiences with separation and divorce.

Expressive therapies, such as bibliotherapy, play therapy, and art therapy, may be perceived as less intimidating than many traditional therapeutic strategies (Kahn, 1999). These strategies can help clients reach deep into their unconscious and release emotions and conflicts that are not necessarily acknowledged by their conscious minds. Many children of separation and divorce need to work with a guidance counsellor to be able to understand, explore, and express feelings about divorce (Lowenstein, 2006). By using expressive therapies, guidance counsellors can encourage children to communicate and understand their emotions that are related to their parents' separation or divorce.

Bibliotherapy involves using books, literature, pamphlets, play scripts, narratives, journals, songs, and stories adapted from movies and television for the purpose of specific therapeutic goals (Pehrsson et al., 2007). Bibliotherapy is a useful strategy for looking at someone else's situation by taking an observer's stance and empathizing with the character that is experiencing similar problems. By means of story characters, children can avoid feeling isolated and alone by identifying with the characters and realizing that others have similar concerns. This method allows children to discuss the characters' actions as well as to examine coping strategies and various choices that the children could also pursue.

Bibliotherapy allows children of separation and divorce to experience the issues associated with family restructuring. After reading about other children experiencing similar circumstances, the counsellor could ask questions about the characters in the story. For example, if a child in counselling read a story in which the child blames himself for his parents' divorce, the counsellor could ask questions about how the character felt as well as the similarities and differences between the character and the child (Lowenstein, 2006). This technique could lead to a discussion that explores the children's feelings rather than the feelings of the fictitious family. Bibliotherapy can enhance communication by providing a strategy that allows children to take a less direct approach when exploring their emotions about separation and divorce.

Play therapy is another strategy that encourages children to explore their thoughts and feelings regarding separation and divorce. This strategy uses play as a primary means of communication because, unlike adults, children have less developed verbal ability to express their thoughts and emotions (Wittenborn et al., 2006). Play therapy allows children to express their thoughts and feelings both verbally and by manipulating objects or toys. By acting out various scenarios, children can deal with similar circumstances in their daily lives.

Play therapy is a natural way for children to develop coping strategies, practise problem solving, and release underlying emotions associated with separation and divorce. Children may find play therapy calming because the technique does not rely on verbal communication between child and counsellor (Carmichael, 1994). When a child has many characters to play with, the child is able to find objects to resemble his or her family members and home. The counsellor allows the child to build a miniature world to mimic his or her life. Afterwards, the counsellor observes how the child makes the toys interact with each other. For example, if the child pretended that the toy family members were arguing, the counsellor could ask the child how each character was feeling. A conversation could take place between counsellor and child

that would perhaps lead into how the child was feeling. Play therapy is a strategy that opens communication between the guidance counsellor and children of separation and divorce.

Art therapy is a form of expressive therapy that uses art media such as drawing, painting, sculpturing, and photography. When children participate in art therapy, they are able to explore and express feelings that they cannot verbalize (Waller, 2006). Children who have been exposed to cumulative traumatic events such as conflicted, violent, and unresolved parental separation, which has resulted in symptoms of post-traumatic stress, may have difficulties discussing stressful events or family concerns (Kozłowska & Hanney, 2001). These repressed feelings can be externalized by using art therapy.

Children may experience many emotions after their parents' separation or divorce. For instance, they may feel angry. To release this anger, children can scribble on a piece of paper. The art activity allows children to release their anger in an appropriate way. Art therapy is less direct, allows for desensitization of anxiety, and helps children to tell their stories through physical manipulation of art supplies. By using art, the counsellor can bring the children's emotions to the surface and discuss various coping strategies that will help the children deal with the changes in their family.

Children experiencing separation and divorce require a method to deal with any unresolved feelings, in order to ensure mental health. Although marital disruption does not consistently harm all children (Amato & Cheadle, 2005), most children will need some guidance to develop into well-adjusted adults.

## Conclusion

Children and parents alike are under stress due to family changes after separation and divorce. To reduce perceived negative characteristics of divorce, it is important for parents to provide an environment that supports the children's developmental stage. Due to stress, parents may not be conscious of their own behaviours and may not be able to support open communication with their children. The way that children interpret these family changes is essential for proper emotional maturity. Guidance counsellors can aid families during this time of change by helping children to work through the developmental tasks associated with separation and divorce.

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