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## **Adolescent Adjustment to the Middle School Transition: The Intersection of Divorce and Gender in Review**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigated the differences between adolescent boys and girls from divorced families' adjustment to the middle school transition. A middle school transition survey measured the academic and social middle school transitional experiences of 196 adolescent boys and girls from divorced families. T-Test for Independent Means procedures revealed statistically significant differences between the male and female participants' adjustment to the academic transition ( $F = 4.36, p < .05$ ) and social transition ( $F = 3.79, p < .05$ ) to middle school. The findings showed that girls from divorced families were more adjusted to the academic and social characteristics of the middle school transition than were boys from divorced families. One particular analysis revealed that girls from divorced families were less adjusted to making friends than were boys from divorced families. Overall, this and other findings indicate that gender can affect the transitional experiences of adolescents from divorced families. They also warrant the need to develop an awareness of the possible divorce-related transitional difficulties for middle school boys and girls.

### **Introduction**

Adolescence has been defined as a crucial period of cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional transformations (Dubois, Burk-Braxton, Swenson, Tevendale, & Hardesty, 2002; Harter, 1999; Hirsch & Dubois, 1991; Kelly, 2004; Rosenberg, 1965). One of the most influential determinants of adolescent success with these negotiations is family structure (Fallon & Bowles, 2001; Lennings & Lennings, 1995). An exhaustive review of recent research showed that family structure determines adolescents' academic and social development (Allen, Blieszner, Roberto, Farnsworth, & Wilcox, 1999; Brown, 2006; Kobak, 1999; McLanahan, 1998; Mitchell, 1994). In particular, family structure bears important implications on adolescents' abilities to lead a successful navigation through school and into adulthood. However, one barrier to this success is divorce.

Volumes of research have highlighted the negative effects of divorce on adolescent development (Boney, 2003; Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001). These researchers have claimed that divorce cannot only disrupt adolescents' academic and social development. In addition to these areas, divorce has also been studied in the context of school engagement and gender. School engagement research denoted that adolescents from divorced families struggle with becoming academically and socially engaged in school (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996). Gender-based research has indicated that boys are more negatively affected by divorce than are adolescent girls (Amato & Keith, 1991, 2001; Hetherington, 1993; Heatherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein

& Blakeslee, 2003). A review of the literature reveals that no research has focused on the interactive effects of divorce and gender on the other adolescent period of transitional development: the middle school transition.

Vars (1998) indicated that 88% of all students experience academic and social difficulties with the middle school transition. According to Anderman and Kimweli (1997), students face difficulties with transitional tasks such as (a) getting to class on time, (b) finding lockers, (c) keeping up with materials, (d) finding lunchrooms and bathrooms, (e) getting on the right bus to go home, (f) getting through the crowded halls, and (g) remembering which class to go to next. In addition to these concerns, other studies include personal safety (i.e., aggressive and violent behaviors of other students) as a prominent concern and adjustive problem for students (Arowosafe & Irvin, 1992; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Odegaard & Heath, 1992).

According to Forgan and Vaughn (2000), the transition from elementary school to middle school involves major environmental changes for students—changes that may tax students' sense of personal efficacy and competence. Typically, this transition involves moving from small elementary schools to larger middle schools, with concomitant changes in teachers' support and changes in students' academic, personal, and interpersonal functioning (Barber & Olsen, 2004). Adolescents move from a personalized school environment of familiar peers to a new and more demanding milieu. Students have to reestablish their identities, including their sense of efficacy, social connectedness, and academic status within an enlarged, heterogeneous network of new peers and multiple teachers in rotating class sessions. Thus, this period is marked some loss of personal competence, control, and self-confidence for adjusting to middle school (Pintrich, 1999, 2003).

In addition, adolescence influences students' ability to negotiate the middle school transition (Gianetti & Saganese, 1997; Hines, 2003; San Antonio, 2004). In essence, adolescence is made of self-definition, the biological and physiological development of a well-differentiated, integrated, and realistic identity; and interpersonal relatedness, the emotional and psychosocial development of mutually satisfying personal relationships. Examples of self-definition are self-critical feelings such as emptiness, hopelessness, insecurity, and failure to meet expectations and standards. Interpersonal relatedness deals with feeling rejected, hurting or offending others, and having difficulties managing anger and aggression for fear of losing someone. Given the negative impact of divorce on adolescents, research needs to focus on the effects of divorce on adolescent adjustment to middle school. Because boys and girls react differently to divorce, research should particularly examine divorce's influence on adolescent boys and girls' adjustment to middle school. Thus, the purpose of this study is to determine the effects of gender on adolescent boys and girls' from divorced families' adjustment to middle school.

This study consisted of the following research questions:

1. What are the effects of gender on adolescent boys and girls from divorced families' academic adjustment to middle school?
2. What are the effects of gender on adolescent boys and girls from divorced families' social adjustment to middle school?

The answers to these questions could be used to better facilitate the middle school transition of adolescent boys and girls from divorced families.

### **Significance of Study**

The significance of this study is twofold. Prior to conducting this study, the author investigated the middle school transitional differences between a sample of students from divorced families and students from non-divorced families. The findings revealed that the students from non-divorced families were better adjusted to both the academic and social aspects of the transition than were students from divorced families. Because of these findings, the author wanted to conduct an in-depth analysis of the transitional issues within the groups of students from divorced families. That is, the author wanted to identify the factors that could possibly contribute to the difficult transitional experiences of students from divorced families. Volumes of research have consistently focused on the differences between boys and girls' reactions to divorce (Amato & Keith,

1991, 2001; Hetherington, 1993, Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). As a result, the author focused on the extent to which gender affects the transitional experiences of students from divorced families.

The other impetus for this study is that at least 60% of all children will experience divorce with many students experiencing this marital disruption during adolescence (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Research has not only documented divorce's negative impact on adolescents, but has also showed that this disruption elicits different responses from adolescent boys and girls.

Ginther and Pollak (2004) highlighted a steady increase in the number of adolescent boys and girls from divorced families. This increase prompted the researcher to consider how this change in family structure affects other significant transitions in adolescents' lives. Due to children's simultaneous entry into adolescence and middle school, researchers need to examine divorce's relationship to the middle school transition.

In addition to the increase in divorced families, the importance of this research is supported by the transitional difficulties of 80% of all first year middle school students (Hines, 2003; Vars, 1998). Moreover, this study may help determine whether these transitional difficulties are prevalent among students from divorced families. Equally significant, the researchers can explore whether these difficulties are more prevalent among adolescent boys or girls from divorced families. Overall, this research can increase middle school stakeholders' awareness of the possible gender-based, divorce-related transitional difficulties of these students.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study is Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory. This theory defines attachment as the relationship between children and their parents. In particular, children's attachment to their parents and their parents' attachments to each other provide them with an understanding of how to form relationships. These attachments also influence children's ability to adjust to various life experiences.

Bowlby (1969) stated that when family attachment is severed by divorce, children's attachment style is replaced by feelings of anger, resentment, and confusion. As children mature in age, their altered attachment style can prevent them from forming meaningful relationships. In addition, children begin to show maladaptive behaviors toward new, but pivotal, life experiences.

The current study is an outgrowth of the Attachment Theory. In effect, the middle school transition is a compilation of academic and social adjustment periods. The success of this transition is contingent upon students' abilities to form meaningful relationships with their friends, principals, professional school counselors, and teachers. If students have experienced divorce, their attachment style could be vulnerable to poor adjustment to middle school. In addition to exploring this notion, the current study examined the extent to which this vulnerability is related to the gender of students.

## **Literature Review**

### **Divorce of a Parent**

Divorce is one of the most traumatic and life changing events for children (Amato, 2000; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). Decades of research (Amato & Keith, 1991; Buchanan et al., 1996; Ginther & Pollak, 2004; South, Crowder, & Trent, 1998; Wolfinger, 2003) documented child-related problems associated with the permanent separation of married parents. The research further indicated that children's responses to divorce are contingent upon factors that range from the parenting skills of and approval from both parents to the level of comfort with discussing the issue with them. Divorce can also cause adolescents to experience severe problems with adjusting to school (Teachman, 2002). For example, middle school teachers noted that students of divorced parents show a decline in attendance, academic achievement, and social behavior. Seccombe and Warner (2003) reported that adolescents often use drugs and alcohol, sexual behavior, and violence as divorce-related coping mechanisms.

Seccombe and Warner (2003) proposed that divorce causes four major sources of stress for children: (a) fear of change, (b) loss of attachment, (c) feelings of abandonment, and (d) tension from exposure to hostile parents. They further noted that most children experience extreme difficulties with adjusting to the first year of the divorce. In addition, many children needed from two to ten years to adjust to the divorce. Some children even carried the effects of divorce into adulthood. Both Corak (2001) and Lang and Zagorsky (2001) extended this notion to indicate that adolescents are affected by divorce from their early childhood years.

Emery, Waldron, Kitzman and Aaron (1999) posited that some of the most prevalent adolescent responses to divorce are grief, loss, and anger. Many adolescents show feelings of abandonment and blame toward the nonresidential parent. These feelings can become more intense on birthdays, holidays, and other special occasions. In effect, their temperament is often sustained by the realization of the change in family structure, economic stability, and the poor relationship between both parents. The latter factor can cause adolescent children to doubt their own abilities to achieve successful intimate relationships.

Freeman, Temples, and Hill (1999) related that the difficulties of divorce are sometimes evident before parents file for permanent separation. During the pre-divorce years, most parents experience marital discord. This discord is characterized with a high level of frustration and hostility between parents. The resulting stress and tension disrupts the household and children's academic and social development.

Scanlon and Devine (2001) reported that divorced parents often use their adolescent children to express negative verbal and nonverbal communication and feelings to each other. Consequently, these children become burdened with the stress of feeling that they must mediate the divorce between their parents. In addition, they lose the time needed to experience a healthy recovery from their parents' permanent separation.

Teachman's (2002) perspective revealed that families could use many strategies to offset the negative consequences of divorce. These strategies include but are not limited to:

- Providing children with a supportive and warm relationship
- Creating feasible and fair parental custody and visitation arrangements
- Allowing children to discuss their feelings in a supportive environment
- Maintaining active involvement in the academic lives of their children

Buchanan and associates (1996) indicated that both parents should provide children with a structured home environment. Parents need to create a normal routine for their children, and then they must develop expectations and procedures for adhering to these routines.

### **Boys and Girls' Reactions to Divorce**

Boys and girls' reactions to divorce are associated with two factors: (1) the ways of responding to the divorce, and (2) the length of time needed to adjust to the divorce. Based on their meta-analysis of the impact of divorce on child development, Amato and Keith (1991) concluded that divorce has a more negative effect on boys than on girls. They reported that more boys than girls struggle with making mental and verbal sense of divorce. They also found that in comparison to girls, boys from divorced families develop lower self-esteem and are more likely to display aggression at home and in school. In a subsequent meta-analysis, Amato and Keith (2001) revealed that such marital disruption lowers boys' academic performances in reading and mathematics. Further, more boys than girls from divorced families tend to quit school.

Hetherington (1993, Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) noted that more boys than girls become depressed about the divorce of their parents. Boys were more likely than girls to use blaming, withdrawal, and inattentiveness as responses to divorce. Hetherington's findings pointed to research on boys' tendencies to maintain few friendships and form smaller support systems (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, 2003; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1996). Another coping mechanism used was drug and alcohol experimentation.

After conducting extensive research on divorce, Wallerstein and Kelly (1996) found that girls make a better adjustment to divorce than do boys. They specified that at least three times as many girls as boys were able to minimize this marital disruption's impact on them. Whereas girls needed one year to adjust to divorce, boys usually needed three to five years to accept the marital disruption. Wallerstein and Kelly also discovered that boys usually began to show signs of adjustment during the third post-divorce year. Additionally, girls displayed a resilient attitude towards divorce, while boys appeared to experience vulnerability.

Hetherington (1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) explained that two factors could cause more boys than girls to experience difficulties with adjusting to divorce. First, before and during divorce proceedings, parents tended to argue and fight in front of more sons than daughters. Second, more unhappy parents remained married for longer periods when they have sons instead of daughters. Hetherington pointed out that during these difficult periods, boys became symbols of psychological warfare between two discordant parents. Boys also began to feel that they caused their parents' divorce. Moreover, the father's absence not only caused boys to experience feelings of sexual insecurity, but also distorted their understanding about appropriate male behavior.

Hetherington (1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) further indicated that boys usually used two mechanisms to cope with divorce. The first mechanism is compensatory masculinity. According to Hetherington, compensatory masculinity is boys' inability to feel comfortable with their masculinity. This behavior is characterized by boys' assumption of masculine roles that belies their chronological age. Another symptom is a display of macho and hypersexual behavior at home and in school. The second mechanism is the coercive cycle, which Hetherington defined as the post-divorce battle for authority between boys and their mothers. This cycle is epitomized by boys' defiant behavior toward their mothers. Boys display this behavior and initiate this struggle because of feeling they should provide the home with authoritative masculine leadership. Another reason is that boys of this family structure feel that mothers do not fit their description of family leadership. Consequently, boys are more prone to disregard bedtimes, mealtimes, and other familial policies and procedures. When mothers are unable to regulate these actions, boys began to initiate this defiant behavior in school.

Although divorce severely affects the development of boys, this marital disruption can also have a long-term effect on girls. Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) discussed a major impact in their Sleeper Effect Theory—a delayed reaction to divorce. That is, the child reacts to the divorce a number of years after the marital separation. Wallerstein and Blakeslee posited that the Sleeper Effect is more prevalent among girls from divorced families. They attributed this difference to boys' immediate and girls' delayed reactions to divorce. Wallerstein and Blakeslee continued that this effect is dangerous because of affecting girls' understanding of how attachment relates to sex, love, and commitment. Girls experience anxiety over making long-term romantic commitments. They also began to believe that potential mates could never show genuine loyalty, faith, and love to them. Notwithstanding, girls sometimes become very promiscuous during adolescence and early adulthood. Wallerstein and Blakeslee explained that these relationships are anchored by girls' need for a father figure. They further concluded that in most instances, these relationships do not erase girls' fears of experiencing loneliness and abandonment.

## **Hypotheses**

Based on the literature review, the author developed two hypotheses for this study:

1. Adolescent girls from divorced families will report a better academic adjustment to middle school than adolescent boys from divorced families.
2. Adolescent girls from divorced families will report a better social adjustment to middle school than adolescent boys from divorced families.

## Methods

Data were drawn from five middle schools in Texas and Louisiana. The middle schools were selected because of their membership in the Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB). This organization provides middle schools with staff development services for improving student achievement. The selected middle schools for this study served large numbers of students from single-parent families.

### Participants

The sample of this study consisted of 196 first year middle school students from divorced families with 84 (43%) boys and 112 (51%) girls. The students' ethnic backgrounds of this population were 67 (34%) African American, 84 (43%) Caucasian American, and 45 (23%) Hispanic American. The participants' socioeconomic status was classified in accordance with their meal plans. The investigation of this variable revealed that 121 (62%) students ate free or reduced-price lunch. The remaining 75 (38%) students paid the full price for their lunch. From a grade level perspective, this population was composed of 101 (52%) sixth grade middle school students and 95 (48%) seventh grade middle school students. The sixth grade students were 11 years old and attended grades 6–8 middle schools. The seventh grade students were 12 years old and attended grades 7–8 middle schools. This subsample was drawn from a middle school population that averaged between 500 and 600 first year middle school students.

### Instrumentation

Higgins' (1993) middle school transition survey was used to measure the middle school adjustment of boys and girls from divorced families. Higgins created and used the survey to measure transitioning middle school students' views of adjustment to middle school schedules and other transitional issues. The demographic section of this survey featured the study variable of gender. The other variables were race, socioeconomic status, age, and grade level. The other section of the survey featured a 15-item academic concerns subscale (Cronbach's alpha = .82) and 21-item social concerns subscale (Cronbach's alpha = .84). The response items ranged from 1—Not Adjusted to This Middle School Characteristic to 5—Very Adjusted to This Middle School Characteristic. Both sections of the survey were developed from Higgins' investigation of parents,' teachers,' and students' concerns about the middle school transition.

To achieve reliability and validity, I piloted the study on a group of middle school students from divorced families. I worked with their teachers to analyze the results. The teachers also provided me with suggestions for revising the survey to measure accurately students' reports of adjustment to middle school.

### Data Collection Procedures

To begin data collection procedures, the author selected 11 Texas and Louisiana middle schools from the Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB) listserv. The author then contacted and asked the principals to allow their schools to participate in this study. Six principals declined my request to participate in the study. Upon securing the other principals' support for the study, the author mailed 500 survey packets to them. In addition to the surveys, the packets contained survey administration instructions and parental permission slips. The middle school teachers submitted the permission slips and copies of the surveys to the parents. Two hundred parents returned signed permission slips to the teachers. The teachers then used the survey administration instructions to administer the survey to students with permission slips. They read and explained the survey items, while the students completed them. The teachers then returned 200 surveys to the principals. Due to administrative discretion, the principals discarded four surveys. The principals then mailed 196 surveys to the author. Thus, the author achieved a 29% return rate.

### Data Analysis

Independent *t*-tests were used to evaluate the differences in boys and girls from divorced families' adjustment to middle school. The statistical significance for these procedures was set at an alpha level of .05.

## Results

### Academic Adjustment to Middle School

Aggregate data showed statistically significant differences between male participants' and female participants' academic adjustment to middle school ( $F = 4.36, p < .05$ ). Adolescent girls reported higher levels of academic adjustment to nine of 15 items (see Table 1). They were significantly more adjusted to four of five academic items.

Table 1  
*T-Test Mean Comparisons on Academic Characteristics*

Item	Boys Mean (SD)	Girls Mean (SD)
1. Having more classwork	2.00 (1.19)	4.17 (1.12)*
2. Having more homework	3.20 (1.10)	4.39 (1.11)*
3. Learning English	2.49 (1.21)	4.19 (1.24)*
4. Learning mathematics	3.40 (1.15)	4.62 (1.19)*
5. Having many teachers	2.49 (1.17)	3.76 (1.12)
6. Dressing out for gym	4.01 (1.24)	3.23 (1.03)
7. Carrying numerous books	4.26 (1.00)	3.49 (1.10)
8. Learning middle level science	3.21 (1.19)	3.79 (1.06)
9. Learning middle level social studies	3.76 (1.12)	3.34 (1.11)
10. Learning middle level physical education	4.75 (1.19)	2.94 (1.15)*
11. Having less freedom in class	2.49 (1.29)	3.66 (1.14)
12. Having more independence out of class	3.74 (.99)	4.11 (1.08)
13. Participating in cooperative learning	2.64 (1.05)	4.27 (1.15)
14. Participating in competitive learning	4.55 (1.17)	3.22 (1.02)
15. Participating in new classes	3.22 (1.13)	4.01 (1.26)
Subscale Average	3.36 (.97)	3.89 (1.01)

\* $p < .05$

Whereas girls reported higher levels of adjustment to having more classwork ( $M = 4.17; SD = 1.12$ ) and homework ( $M = 4.39; SD = 1.11$ ), adolescent boys were not as adjusted to classwork ( $M = 2.00; SD = 1.19$ ) and homework ( $M = 3.20; SD = 1.10$ ). Adolescent girls also reported high levels of adjustment to learning middle school English ( $M = 4.19; SD = 1.24$ ), while adolescent boys were not as adjusted to middle school English ( $M = 2.49; SD = 1.21$ ). In addition, adolescent girls were well adjusted to mathematics ( $M = 4.62; SD = 1.19$ ), but boys were somewhat adjusted to middle level mathematics ( $M = 3.40; SD = 1.15$ ). However, boys' level of adjustment to learning physical education ( $M = 4.75; SD = 1.19$ ) was higher than girls' adjustment to this course ( $M = 2.94; SD = 1.15$ ).

### Social Adjustment

Aggregate data showed statistically significant differences between male participants' and female participants' social adjustment to middle school ( $F = 3.79, p < .05$ ). Adolescent girls reported higher levels of social adjustment to 13 of 21 items (See Table 2).

Table 2  
*T-Test Mean Comparisons on Social Characteristics*

Item	Boys		Girls	
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)
1. Attending a larger, more crowded school	3.40	(1.12)	4.32	(.93)*
2. Dealing with peer pressure	3.20	(1.15)	4.00	(1.09)*
3. Learning a new building	3.39	(1.06)	3.39	(1.23)*
4. Following middle school rules	2.90	(1.18)	4.79	(.92)*
5. Making new friends of the same gender	4.47	(1.03)	2.13	(1.28)*
6. Making new friends of the opposite gender	4.01	(1.16)	2.07	(1.29)*
7. Staying in school longer	3.88	(1.04)	4.06	(1.38)
8. Using lunch cards	3.82	(1.03)	4.30	(1.07)
9. Wearing ID cards	4.66	(1.00)	4.72	(.95)
10. Learning middle school rules	2.01	(1.27)	4.01	(1.00)
11. Being in the youngest group	2.44	(1.21)	4.26	(1.12)
12. Opening lockers	4.26	(1.14)	3.01	(1.16)
13. Changing classes	3.22	(1.11)	4.11	(1.19)
14. Eating lunch at a later time	3.01	(1.13)	3.79	(1.17)
15. Traveling long distances	2.74	(1.16)	3.02	(1.34)
16. Having a time limit to get to class	3.61	(1.19)	4.38	(.98)
17. Meeting older students	4.21	(1.08)	3.49	(1.07)
18. Meeting teacher/principal expectations	3.05	(1.17)	4.29	(1.04)
19. Attending afterschool activities	4.01	(.98)	3.62	(1.17)
20. Attending the same class every day	3.24	(1.19)	3.76	(1.11)
21. Moving through crowded hallways	4.22	(1.01)	2.44	(1.37)
Subscale Average	3.56	(1.05)	3.74	(1.13)

\* $p < .05$

They were significantly more adjusted than adolescent boys to three of six items. Adolescent boys, however, were significantly more adjusted than adolescent girls to two of six items. Both groups significantly reported the same adjustment to one item.

The female participants were well adjusted to attending a larger, crowded school ( $M = 4.32$ ;  $SD = .93$ ). The male participants, however, were only somewhat adjusted to this social characteristic ( $M = 3.40$ ;  $SD = 1.12$ ). Adolescent girls were more adjusted to dealing with peer pressure ( $M = 4.00$ ;  $SD = 1.09$ ) than were adolescent boys ( $M = 3.20$ ;  $SD = 1.15$ ). Both groups reported that they were somewhat adjusted to learning a new building ( $M = 3.39$ ; Boys'  $SD = 1.06$ ; Girls'  $SD = 1.23$ ). Whereas adolescent girls indicated that they were well adjusted to following middle school rules ( $M = 4.79$ ;  $SD = .92$ ), adolescent boys reported that they were nearly somewhat adjusted to middle school rules ( $M = 2.90$ ;  $SD = 1.18$ ). However, more boys reported higher levels of adjustment than girls to making new friends of the same gender ( $M = 4.47$ ;  $SD = 1.03$ ;  $M = 2.13$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ , respectively) and opposite gender ( $M = 4.01$ ;  $SD = 1.16$ ;  $M = 2.07$ ;  $SD = 1.29$ , respectively).



## **Discussion**

The findings from this study present noteworthy gender-based perspectives about divorce's impact on the middle school transition. The findings reflect previous research's description of adolescent boys and girls' reaction to divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991, 2001; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This research showed that adolescent girls from divorced families were more adjusted to the middle school transition than were their male counterparts.

This difference may be explained by two reasons. First, boys need more time than girls to adjust to divorce (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, 2003). Thus, if many of the boys experienced divorce within three to five years of entering the school, they may still be struggling with the marital disruption. The findings support the hypothesis that their struggle could prevent them from being fully adjusted to middle school. Second, more boys than girls from divorced families experience a decline in academic and social development (Amato & Keith, 1991, 2001). Evidence to this effect is seen in the female participants' higher levels of adjustment to most of the statistically significant academic characteristics than the male participants. The male participants' higher level of adjustment to physical education could probably be attributed to their strong preference for physical and spatial learning (Gurian & Stevens, 2005).

The findings about the social characteristics are similar to the results of the academic characteristics. The adolescent girls were more adjusted to more of the logistical and authoritative procedures than were adolescent boys. However, the boys were more adjusted to forming relationships with their peers than were the girls. This finding runs counter to the previous identification of the few friends and support systems for boys (Amato & Keith, 1991, 2001; Hetherington; 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). In addition, this finding contradicts previous research that highlights girls' strong preferences for and skills in relationship building (Gurian & Stevens, 2005). Therefore, the author must partially reject hypothesis two.

Support for this hypothesis' relevance to the latter finding is related to the Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) and Sleeper Effect Theory (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). The female participants of this study appear to have difficulties with forming relationships with other people. Consistent with the Attachment Theory, one reason could be that their parents' divorce may have affected their understanding of attachment to other people. In the realm of the Sleeper Effect Theory, the altered attachment style can cause girls to experience apprehension about forming new relationships. Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989, 2003) continued that this theory is more applicable to females from divorced families than males from the same family structure. Thus, when entering middle school, more females than males from divorced families would presumably struggle with establishing friendships.

Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969) could also explain some of the male participants' inability to adjust fully to middle school. If divorce altered their attachment style, they may lack the intellectual strength to make sense of the divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991, 2001). Consistent with Bowlby's beliefs, this deficiency disrupts their adjustment to other life experiences. The findings from this study strongly implicate divorce's disruption of the male participants' transition to middle school.

They particularly indicated that the male students are somewhat struggling to make sense of middle level classwork and homework and English and mathematics. From a social perspective, divorce appears to affect the adolescent boys' adjustment to a larger crowded school, peer pressure, and middle school rules. Structured and nonstructured qualitative research could provide additional insight to and support for these quantitative-based conclusions.

## Implications

In spite of the findings from this study, every middle school will not consist of students whose transitional difficulties are attributed to divorce. In addition, all students from divorced families will not experience problems with adjusting to middle school. If some students from divorced families do experience problems with the middle school transition, they or their families may not want to receive assistance from school officials. Thus, the offering of assistance to every divorced student could bring unwanted and unnecessary stress for these students.

However, family researchers (Ballen & Moles, 1994; DeKanter, Ginsburg, Pederson, Peterson, & Rich, 1997; Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Berla, 1994) have indicated that schools should take a proactive role in addressing the possible family related issues that affect children. Their suggestion points to Bronfenbrenner's (1996) explanation of how some of children's problems with schools are related to the structure of their family. Thus, these explanations and this study highlight the possible need to prepare proactively for helping students from divorced families adjust to middle school.

Specifically, professional counselors should add a measurable, "needs-based" divorced-family transitional component to the comprehensive school counseling curriculum. This component should be considered when (a) school data that reveal a high number of transitional difficulties within the population of students from divorced families, and (b) students and parents of divorced families seek this assistance from the school. Listed below is an action plan for introducing the component to the school community of this study's participants.

### **School Administrators and Teachers**

Professional counselors should conduct professional development sessions on the different effects of divorce on adolescent boys and girls' development across the transition to middle school. In addition, professional school counselors should work with teachers and principals to develop gender-based action plans for helping these students with adjusting to middle school. For example, the findings from this study showed that adolescent females from divorced families struggled with forming friendships. As such, solutions to these struggles should receive consideration for facilitating the transition of middle school girls from divorced families. Moreover, professional school counselors should engage principals and teachers in developing strategies for helping these girls to make new friends.

The findings from this study showed that boys from divorced families were severely struggling with following middle school rules. Therefore, solutions to this issue should receive consideration for enhancing their adjustment to middle school. Moreover, professional school counselors could talk with faculty and staff on how to best model middle school policies for these students. In addition, the action plan should consist of strategies for involving divorced parents in the middle level careers of their children. The parental involvement could strengthen the teachers and administrators' efforts to integrate successfully the children into middle school. Notwithstanding, these strategies should only be offered to students from divorced families when they and their families seek this assistance.

### **Parents and Students**

Professional counselors should develop a "needs-based" approach toward addressing the adjustment issues of the students from divorced families. First, they should survey students from divorced families to determine if they are experiencing difficulties with the transition to middle school. The survey should also determine if the students and their families need assistance with accommodating the transition to middle school. If the parents and students express the need for assistance, then professional counselors should begin to work with these families.

When appropriate, professional school counselors should increase parents' awareness of how divorce creates different forms of stress for their sons and daughters. Based on the findings from this study, parents should be aware of their daughters' possible problems with forming new friends. They should also be informed of how their sons will probably experience a decrease in their academic performance in English and mathematics.

Professional school counselors should also help the parents to understand how these stressors affect their sons and daughters' overall academic and social development in middle school. In addition, parents should receive information about support groups for students from divorced parents. Equally significant, the parents should be allowed to share their and the children's personal experiences with adjusting to the absence of the family member. If applicable, the professional school counselors should use this information to organize divorced families support groups for the parents and their children. These strategies would inform the students that home and school support their middle school transition. In addition, the students will be able to talk to school personnel and their parents about any transitional issues that are influenced by the divorce of the parents.

Student-based intervention should begin with students' expressions of feelings about the divorce of their parents. Equally significant, professional school counselors should try to glean the emotional feelings from each of these discussions. This information should be used to develop needs-specific strategies for the students. The author suggests that the strategies be used to help students accommodate the academic or social transitional difficulties that emanated from the divorce. Professional school counselors may need to talk to girls about making friendships. Boys need to be informed of how to follow middle school rules. Professional school counselors may also need to guide discussions at individual or group counseling sessions. These sessions need to incorporate:

1. Opportunities for students to reflect on the stress, grief, and anger caused by the divorce of their parents.
2. Exposure to other middle school children who have overcome the divorce of their parents.
3. Educational films and guest speakers who reinforce the aims and goals of each session.

An overarching suggestion is for professional school counselors to talk with all students about coping with changes in family structure. The significance of these discussions is twofold. First, McLanahan (1998) has posited that before their eighteenth birthday, many students will experience a change in their family structure. Additionally, Ginther and Pollak (2004) maintained that 60% of all children will experience divorce. Second, these discussions may proactively prepare middle school students for the possibilities of dealing with divorce-related or marital-related changes in their families.

Overall, these interventions provide students with counseling and other school-related support for coping with the absence of a family member. Middle school students can use this support to build a family and school based foundation for negotiating the transition to middle level education.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study contains several limitations. The first and most significant limitation is the small sample size for this study. The basic generalization for this study is for middle schools in the sample Texas and Louisiana regions of this study. Therefore, readers should use extreme caution in generalizing these findings to their middle school populations. Nevertheless, the author believes that they should give serious consideration to these findings. The main reason is that they do show that students from divorced families can experience family influence problems with adjusting to middle school. In addition, they should use these findings as a basis for replicating this study in their and other middle schools.

Second, this study did not consider many of the role and protective factors that affect adolescents' adjustment to middle school. Research has shown that ethnicity (Timmer & Veroff, 2000) influences adolescents' responses to divorce. The differences in adolescents' responses to divorce have also been related to their age at the time of the marital separation (Amato, 2000). Finally, post-divorce factors such as economic status (Amato) and quality of neighborhood and household (South, et al., 1998) have contributed to differences in adolescent responses to divorce. These factors could have a significant impact on adolescent boys and girls from divorced families' responses to the middle school transition. Third, the findings for this study were based on self-report data. While this method is an acceptable form of research, other perspectives could

be used to enhance the credibility of the information. As such, quantitative and qualitative feedback from parents, teachers, and administrators could enhance this study's assessment of participants' adjustment to middle school.

Finally, this research did not include grade level configuration in the analysis of adolescent boys and girls from divorced families' reports on adjusting to middle school. The small amount of research on this variable has produced mixed findings on the adjustive experiences of students in grades 6–8 middle schools and students in grades 7–8 middle school. A few findings show that students in grades 6–8 middle schools make a better adjustment to middle school than do grades 7–8 middle schools (Franklin & Glascock, 1998). Other findings have not shown any differences between students who make the fifth to sixth or sixth to seventh grade middle school transition (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Notwithstanding, future studies should be measured in accordance with the interaction of grade level configuration with the gender of students from divorced families. The interaction of these variables could add significant understanding to the differences between adolescent boys and girls' from divorced families' adjustment to middle school. Thus, the overall implication is to include these protective, role, and post-divorce variables in future studies on gender-driven, divorce-related studies regarding the middle school transition.

In spite of these limitations, this research adds considerable insight on the relationship between family structure and school success. The main reason is that the research shows that the divorced family structure can create differences in adolescent boys and girls' reaction to middle school. As such, this research should be used to create appropriate sociological strategies for helping the boys and girls from this family structure with adjusting to middle school. In addition, this research could enhance divorced parents' understanding of how their pre and post divorce behavior contributed to their children's adjustive experiences with middle school.

### Summary/Conclusion

Divorce is one of the most traumatic, life changing experiences for children (Amato, 2000; South, et al., 1998; Teachman, 2002; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003). Considerable research has focused on the extent to which divorce affects adolescent development (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, 2003). Most of the findings have revealed that this marital disruption has different, but adverse, effects on adolescent boys and girls.

The findings from this study showed that these adverse affects are evidenced clearly in the middle school transition. In particular, boys and girls from divorced families appear to have different transitional experiences with their entry into middle school. The male adolescent participants of this study experienced more struggles with the middle school transition than did their female counterparts.

These finding suggest the need to increase middle school leaders and parents' awareness of these difficulties. Middle school leaders may not meet to provide divorced families and students with assistance on adjusting to middle school. However, school leaders should have a counseling curriculum available for accommodating this potential need to help students and their families. This mechanism could address the possible gender and divorce-related transitional difficulties of some first year middle school students.

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