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The Benefits of Counseling for Children in the Process of Parental Divorce

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Society has consistently placed an emphasis on the family and familial relationships, but the emphasis has changed over recent years. In the past few decades, the concept of divorce has gone from hidden and discouraged, to becoming normative. Three or four decades ago, the majority of children grew up in intact homes, raised in an atmosphere that families and marriages were a lifetime covenant. Children today are growing up with a different ideology about the longevity of relationships. Although divorce by definition constitutes the end of a marriage, it affects change in the entire family. While the "war" may be between the parents, often times the "victims" are the children. It is the children who tend to suffer most during this experience and after.

Within the last fifteen years, the divorce rate has increased dramatically, affecting more children every year. Approximately one out of every fifty three children experienced their parents' divorce in 1981 (Cantrell, 1985). In 1983, 43 percent of the children born that year experienced their parents' divorce by age eighteen (Crosbie & Newcomer, 1990). By the mid 1980's statistics reveal that two out of every five couples who made it to their fifth
wedding anniversary would ultimately divorce (Jacobson & Gurman, 1986). Approximately 60 percent of the divorcing couples have children, many of whom are under the age five when the divorce occurs (Scherman & Lepak, 1986).

The parents are fighting the battles, but far too many times, the battle wounds are felt by the children. Children of divorce are more likely to be divorced themselves than children of intact families (Marlar & Jacobs, 1992). This influence and present mentality continues the cycle of divorce, with children of divorce becoming parents, divorcing and exposing their own children to the same phenomenon.

Divorce continues to increase. Statistical projections from 1986 indicated that by 1990, one out of every three children under the age of eighteen would have divorced parents (Cantrell, 1986). The divorce rate fails to capture the lifetime effects of this stressful life event on children. The statistic does not reveal the amount of pain and distress this event has on a child.

Divorce can have an adverse effect on a child's immediate and long-term emotional, social and academic functioning (Farmer & Galaris, 1993). The impact of divorce may continue once the family has reached some type of equilibrium (Kaye, 1989). The transition period from the trauma of the divorce to family equilibrium on average takes eighteen months to two years (Ahrons & Miller, 1993). The
first year or two after the divorce appears to be the time where the emotional impact of the divorce is most intense (Kolevzon & Gottlieb, 1983). The effects for all family members can be tremendous. How the family handles the divorce and trauma accompanied by this event can help the parents and children improve the intimacy and communication in the parent-child relationship. Given the high prevalence of divorce and it’s potential for negative effects, assisting the children’s postdivorce adjustment is an important focus for preventative mental health programs (Wolchik, Westover, Sandler, Lustig, Tein & Fisher, 1993). Counseling children of all ages who experience divorce has been found to improve children’s adjustment and deters the intensity of some of the effects attributed to divorce. Counseling during the first two years is most beneficial for adjustment, because it is during this time that the most stress is endured. Significant differences in adjustment exist between the children of those families who requested counseling and those who have not (Isaacs, Leon & Donahue, 1986).

The importance of the year immediately following the divorce in setting the tone for coparental relationship suggests the attention be focused on intervention during this crucial time to resolve conflicts between the former spouses (Ahrons & Miller, 1993). Couples should go through some type of divorce counseling, not only for themselves,
but for their children who experience the effects from this event. Parents experience more hostility and conflict in their postdivorce interactions than non-parents do, which reflects the emotional tone of their changed relationship. Thus, it is likely to impact their interactions concerning childrearing. The friendlier the attachment is between the parents, the less will be the likelihood of conflict and childrearing (Dozier, Sollie, Stack & Smith, 1993). Parent-child relationships have changed with the new family situation, which needs to be processed by all of those involved. The relationship with the father is important and distinct from the child’s relationship with the mother (McCombs & Forehand, 1993). In general, the parent-child relationship has intensified during this traumatic experience and the children need to be able to deal with all the feelings and ideas they have about the divorce and their family situation. Divorce counseling is as, if not more important, for the child than for the parents. Children lack many of the coping skills needed in dealing with the divorce and individual and group counseling can be an aid for the child in receiving such skills. Explaining to parents that they will need to have a relationship that will affect their children’s future emotional adjustment provides a reality that divorcing parents often deny (Ahrons & Miller, 1993). A marriage may not last forever, but parenting is a lifetime commitment.
Divorce counseling has historically been considered an "adult" program, with the focus on the couple. The couple usually focuses on their unresolved issues and attempts to resolve all the problems that were never dealt with during the marriage. Divorce counseling can include parenting, but still does not directly help the children who are experiencing many of the same issues and emotions that involve divorce. It is important for parents to find the help they need, which in turn will help their children. However, the issue the children are facing are different from their parents, and many times parents are not aware of this. Children have issues of their own, which creates a need for children to have their own counseling.

Divorce mediation is another adult program that focuses on the needs of the adults experiencing divorce. Mediation looks to the couple to decide more financial and logistic proceedings than the emotional content that is involved in the divorce. Obviously these issues are not for children, and the focus is still on the adults, neglecting the needs of the children involved. Family mediation is another type of counseling. Unfortunately, the theory behind this type of counseling is to keep the family intact. The ideology is to keep the family cohesive and work out the problems within the family. Family mediation does not deal with issues of separation and divorce. A family seeking counseling who is considering separation or divorce and are attempting to
prepare the family for it, will not find the resources they need from family mediation. Though the family is counseled together, the needs pertinent to the family during divorce/separation are not addressed.

Present divorce programs often neglect the children. Children have not developed the coping skills to handle the changes in family structure, but society has focused on the parents and not on the children (Scherman & Lepak, 1986). The children of parents who are divorcing are the family members who have not had any control over what is happening to their lives. Counseling programs for the couple who is preparing themselves for the failure of their marriage are more equipped with the tools to cope with the situation, but the children involved are never prepared for the loss of their intact family and what it will mean for them. It is crucial that the counseling field begin to focus on helping the children as well, so the divorce cycle and the continuance of children experiencing parental divorce can be prevented.

The following study proposes to review relevant literature on the effects divorce has on children, the help that is being provided to this population and the critique of these services, along with suggestions of what needs to be done and future research possibilities. This study will illustrate the need for counseling specifically intended to assist children of divorce.
CHAPTER II

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Apparatus

The information for this study was gathered via numerous computer databases. Specialized programs were used as research tools that are found in various libraries which helped to provide sufficient information required for my study. Using such programs also enabled me to locate periodicals published within the last fifteen years, beginning in 1980 to the present.

Procedure

The first program I used was PsychInfo. This program is used to locate periodicals that pertain to divorce counseling. This program gave me a general sense of the articles that were applicable to my research. By using general terms of: divorce, children and intervention, I was able to skim the immense amount of material of material that pertained to divorce and counseling. This computer program retrieved the title, authors and location of the articles, but did not give an abstract or summary of the information.

Psychlit was another program that helped to narrow the focus of the various articles in the direction of the specific research. This program gave the abstracts in
addition to the location, author and title. I used key words such as: divorce, effects, counseling, mediation, intervention, children, support groups and adjustment to scan the numerous articles and narrow the topics covered. Familiarity with these studies provided an aid in determining the specific topics that have not been researched adequately. Included in the articles were the discussion of the various types of interventions that were successful for children experiencing the divorce process and those populations that lack support.

Sociofile is the final computer program which assisted with more information and guidance. Using similar key words as before, the base of articles reinforced and continue to focus on intervention and divorce counseling for children.
CHAPTER III
PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS AND SERVICES PROVIDED

General Effects of Divorce

The prevalence of divorce is one justification for counseling, but when the general effects of divorce for children are explored, it becomes apparent that counseling is a necessity for this population. Children have not developed coping skills to handle the changes of a family structure. So many of the effects of divorce for children are serious and long term (Scherman & Lepak, 1986). There are emotional and behavioral problems for many children in the aftermath of parental separation (Isaacs, Lean & Donahue, 1986). Parental divorce is associated with negative outcomes in the areas of academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-esteem and social relations (Amato, 1993).

There is no association between the age at the time of divorce and child well-being, nor between the length of time since the divorce and child well-being (Amato, 1994). The National Survey of Children (1993) found that the estimated effects of divorce decreased little over time (1993). Other studies have found that the meaning of the divorce is likely to differ for infants, preschoolers, adolescents and young
adults (Kurdek, 1993). Children of different ages have different reactions and ways of coping with the stressful life event (Cantrell, 1985). In 1987, Tedder, Scherman and Wantz stated that children's reactions vary according to their age at the time of the divorce. While differences tend to be in the severity of effects and experiences, the majority of general effects tend to be similar. The intensity of emotional stress experienced in divorce is affected by time and by the phase that one is in (Kolevzon & Gottlieb, 1983).

**Academic Impairment**

One of the effects of divorce is impact on academic performance. Reactions to divorce may be observed in children through acting out behavior, decline in achievement, and strained relationships with peers and teachers (Tedder, Scherman & Wantz, 1987). Also affected is children's grades and achievement test scores. Children of divorce will begin to show poorer academic performance immediately following the divorce. The divorce is disorganizing and sets in motion a number of changes. It does not have an affect on differing school subjects, but children do show poorer quantitative skills than children from intact families. The poorer academic performance will extend for two to three years (which parallels the period of the first and second year post divorce as the most intense emotional impact and adjustment) (Tedder et al., 1987).
In age comparisons, the younger child is more likely to suffer adverse academic performance. Children who experience parental divorce at an earlier age are more likely to overcome the effects of this potentially detrimental experience (Grant, 1993). Older children are more likely to have a wider array of coping strategies and social networks involving others. Children nine and ten years old tend to show greater disruption in school performance than do children at other age levels (Tedder et al., 1987).

As children become older their understanding of interpersonal relationships increases and level of interpersonal reasoning has been shown to positively relate to children's adjustment to divorce (Kaye, 1989). Post divorce experience is considered to have better coping mechanisms in dealing with the divorce for older children because of their increased independence and ability to "get along" without steady parental supervision. During adolescence, adverse effects are experienced intensely (Grant, 1993). Despite individual differences, ages and developmental stages seem to be the most important factors governing children's initial response to divorce (Scherman & Lepak, 1986). In comparison to children from intact families, children of divorced families have lower grades. Regardless of the age during divorce, children will be impacted to some degree throughout their lifetime (Grant,
Self Concept and Relationships

Elevated aggression, anxiety, poor self concept and poor peer relationships stem from divorce (Wolchik et al, 1993). In comparison to children of intact families, children of divorce have poorer psychological adjustment and lower socioeconomic status (Amato, 1993). Adolescent children with divorced parents displayed greater behavioral/affective difficulties, greater difficulties in interpersonal relationships, sexual identity and financial stress in comparison to intact families (Grant, 1993). Separations from families and transitions into young adulthood were burdened by fear of disappointment in love relationships, lowered expectations and a sense of powerlessness by those who experienced divorce or separation in the home (Marlar & Jacobs, 1992). Concerns for children of divorce include: Shame at what has happened, anger at mom/dad/or both, fears of being forgotten or abandoned, shaken identity from being taken out of a family and loyalty conflicts (Tedder et al., 1987).

A longitudinal study by Roberts and Bengston (1993), found greater psychological well-being and self-esteem to be attributed to the quality of the parent-child relationship. The results concluded that patterns of positive and negative parental appraisals should produce and reinforce similar patterns of self-evaluations in the child. The major
findings concluded that parent-child affection made a modest contribution to filial self-esteem in late adolescents/early adulthood. Children of divorce lack stable parental relations. In addition, they found that negative psychological consequences of low parent-child affection were less for young adults who possessed work and marital/parental identities. During this study, Roberts and Bengston (1993) found that young children and adolescents whose parents convey affection, acceptance and support, are likely to report higher self-esteem, lower anxiety and depression, greater happiness and scholastic achievement and fewer behavioral problems. This is one study of many that showed the need for secure and successful parent-child relationships and how they benefit children. For children who experience divorce, many times the relationship with the parents are hindered by the event.

Intimate relationships are also affected. Children from divorced families experienced interference with the establishment of enduring ties and formed impoverished, immature and ungratifying relationships (Marlar & Jacobs, 1992).

Children of divorce harbor fears of long term commitment and of marriage as a means of establishing intimacy. Attitudes about marriage are different somewhat from those of children from intact families. Divorced children had more negative attitudes towards marriage.
Females from divorced families married younger, were less educated, married men with less desirable jobs, and were more companionship oriented than females from intact families (Gabardi & Rosen, 1992). Males from divorced families reported more traditional marriage role expectations than males from intact families. Children of divorce families experienced more sexual involvement's and were more oriented towards companionship relationships. It may be that adult children from divorced families view sexual activity as a means of exploring intimate relationships more than would children of intact families. They may have learned from their divorced parents that it is to necessary to be involved in a long term relationship to be sexually involved with someone (Gabardi & Rosen, 1992). Children of divorce have higher rates of divorce and separation in their own marriages than children of intact (Marlar & Jacobs, 1992).

Self concept is another aspect of children’s lives that divorce influences. Divorce interferes with children’s normal developmental ability to work and play, resulting in lower self concept and moderate emotional disturbances (Scherman & Lepak, 1986). Self concept and familial relationships are interdependent for children of divorce. Self-esteem is highly correlated with the subjects’ perception of the interactions within their family origin, controlling for the effects of age, race and marital status.
Parental divorce influences the subjects' perception of the interactions of their family origin. Perceived closeness in the family was strongly correlated with subjects' self concept across several domains (which included lack of certainty about self attributes and global perceptions of self worth). Children of divorce feel less confident about their self worth which may interfere with their ability to establish and maintain intimate relationships (Holdneck, 1992).

Children from divorced homes viewed their families as more emotionally distant than from children from non divorced. The divorce process often leads to a decrease in the emotional closeness between parent and child. It has a long term effect on family relationships which indirectly affects self concept of the children of divorce. Children perceive their family as more disorganized. Family disorganization may affect the child's ability to participate in activities outside of school or relationships outside the family. These activities require the family to be organized enough to be able to transport the child and the child may have less time to engage in these activities due to the increased responsibility of helping the family organize daily tasks and chores (Holdneck, 1992).

Negative changes in the family relationships may result in prolonged periods of conflict and stress, which may have long term effects on the child's self-esteem. The child's
perception of family conflict and interpersonal control was related to negative psychological outcomes for the child. This population can experience poor self concepts even fifteen years after the divorce of their parents. There are higher levels of self efficacy among children with divorced families, which may be due to having to be more independent and responsible for themselves (Holdnack, 1992).

The age of the child when parental divorce occurs influences the experience. The emotions are universal for children, but the intensity and ability to cope with such cognitions and feelings differ with chronological age and maturity of the child.

Younger children do not have the capacity to understand their parents needs as separate from their own. They experience divided loyalties, but typically continue to be loyal to both parents. This causes them considerable pain. When parents try to force their children to choose sides, some children express a feeling of being torn apart. At this age, they yearn for the non-custodial parent. Some children feel abandoned and rejected by the "missing" parent and exhibit behaviors similar to those involved when the grieving the death of a parent (Cantrell, 1985). Younger children believe that the absent parent would one day walk in and the family would be together again. The hope for renunciation is a common fantasy of children whose parents divorced (Scherman & Lepak, 1986).
Young school aged children were more conscious of their sorrow than was any other age group and they had great difficulty obtaining relief from their sorrow. This population was defensive about issues associated with the divorce process. The early latency aged children reported more defensiveness than did those in the later latency. Children in the early latency period may have much less capacity to cope and quite different of the perceptions of the divorce than do the later latency children (Scherman & Lepak, 1986).

Older school aged children have acquired a new repertoire of coping skills better understanding of reality and the ability to withstand stress without regression. The single feeling that most clearly distinguished this group from younger children was a conscious feeling of anger. For later latency, the emotional state is often one of fully conscious anger, but during this age they are better able to cope with the divorce and express anger and their reactions (Scherman & Lepak, 1986).

Intense anger is both well organized and clearly directed toward the parent whom they blame for the divorce. They often view one parent as the good parent and the other is bad. This ideology helps them to cope with feelings of sadness, loneliness and depression. At this age, children are actively struggling to deal with their conflicting feelings and trying to make sense of the disorder in which
they find themselves. The feelings include powerlessness, loss, rejection, helplessness, fear, loneliness and anger. Some children in this age group also feel ashamed and embarrassed about the divorce and use denial as a way to deal with their anguish (Cantrell, 1985).

Older school aged children throw themselves into vigorous activity as a way of coping with the helplessness. This can be seen as a defense mechanism and a way to cope or an aid to denial. Many experience identity confusion, in addition to all other emotions (Cantrell, 1985).

Universally, children ages five to twelve at the time of the divorce seem to display more behavioral difficulties than younger children or adolescents (Cantrell, 1985). Young women who were five years or younger were more likely to be well adjusted ten years later than ages six to eight, or nine to 13 at the time of the divorce. School aged children do not adjust as well as preschoolers (Grant, 1993).

Distress caused by divorce for children can be seen in several facets of their lives. The effects fluctuate according to age, maturity and the latency stage the children are in. The affect and effects endured are still pertinent and long term for any child.

**Mediation**

Divorce mediation is a particular type of intervention for couples experiencing divorce. The goal of divorce
mediation is to achieve outcomes deemed equitable by all participants (Schwebel et al., 1993). The goal of mediation is not to restructure relationships, nor lessen anxiety or stress. Mediation is not treatment. It attempts to resolve relational conflicts to affect a satisfactory postdivorce adjustment. The introduction of divorce mediation was a means of allowing divorcing individuals to develop their own parental agreements, property, finances and the philosophy of returning the decision making back to the family. It focuses on the dissolution of marital corporation and the allocation of the marital resources including children and economic issues (Jacobs & Gurman, 1986). Spouses needed to be willing to share relevant thoughts, feelings and concerns, to listen attentively, negotiate cooperatively, and reach settlements using compromise and logic. Participants must be able to think abstractly, be willing to engage in self-examination, listen in an active, open fashion to the feelings and concerns of the other party. If the couple have children, they need to consider and productively discuss their youngsters needs (Schwebel et al., 1993). Divorce counseling helps participants identify and confront issues, develop favorable circumstances and conditions, remove the blocks and distortions in the communication process so mutual understanding may develop, establish norms for rational interaction and determine what type of solutions are possible (Schwebel et al., 1993).
Child's adjustment affects the parents adjustment and vise versa (Strangeland, Pellegreno & Lundholm, 1989). Divorce mediation impacts children indirectly by helping parents. During family transitions, spouses may function in egocentric ways and this can lead to misunderstandings, an intensification of interpersonal differences and decreased effectiveness as parents. When parents function on egocentric ways to underestimate the impact of divorce on their children and sometimes relate to them as adult friends (Schwebel, Gately, Milburn & Renner, 1993).

Divorce mediation for parents has many implications for the children involved. If parents function in cohesive and positive ways towards each other and their children during the divorce and afterwards, their children have more favorable outcomes, such as becoming more mature, empathic, androgynous and with a higher self-esteem (Schwebel et al., 1993).

Divorce mediation does have an impact on child adjustment. Adjustment five years after the divorce was found to be better if parents resolved their conflict and anger and remained involved in satisfying relationships with the children. Even two years after the divorce, children fared better if their parents had a low level of conflict and were in general agreement in terms of childrearing techniques. A low level of interparental stress and a quality relationship between the children and the non-
custodial parent were additional key factors in children's adjustment (Schwebel et al., 1993).

Parent-child mediation is another type of counseling. This type of mediation puts more of an emphasis on children, unlike divorce mediation which exclusively focuses on the couple. Parent-child counseling can be necessary and pertinent to children because of the differing perceptions that lie between a parent and child.

Parents perceive their children differently than the children perceive themselves and therefore, parents cannot speak for their children. The myth that children are unaware of the tensions in the marriage is still believed by many couples (Jacobs & Gurman, 1986). In 1989, Strangeland, Pellegreno and Lundholm explored various issues between parents and children, and it becomes evident in the differences in perception. For example, in parent relationships, the parents reported their children knew why they divorced and that they would live together again (parents). However, children said they didn't feel this way. Related to sleeping patterns, the children stated they woke up in the middle of the night and had trouble sleeping. The parents stated they did not. With the issue of security and trust, the parents reported that their children would always have someone to take care of them, that adults could always be trusted, but parents worried there wouldn't be enough money for things needed. The children had other
expectations of all these concepts. Parents believed their children planned to get married. The children disagreed.

Parents do not perceive that divorce affect school achievement. Concerning school adjustment, the children with divorced parents stated that they had a more difficult time keeping their mind on school work (Srangeland et al., 1989).

The goal of mediation is to effect a basic positive change in the dynamics of the interactions of family members. Mediation can resolve conflicts and improve family relationships (Van Slyck, Stern & Newland, 1992). Another goal is to help the family members define the underlying problems and encourage them to move toward some common agreement - via written contracts focusing on future behaviors. Unfortunately for a family experiencing a divorce, this type of counseling is not pertinent to their needs. The ideation behind parent-child mediation is to use it with families who wish to remain intact. Parent-child mediation focuses on the child's behavior, not on the problem within the family that may have caused the problem. The child's behavioral and/or attitudinal problems are symptomatic of a larger problem and if that family problem is separation or divorce, parent-child counseling does not deal; with the appropriate issues during counseling that is needed for this population. Mediation can be effective in resolving specific disputes as well as produce a positive
impact on the general quality of family relationships (Van Slyck et al., 1992). For families with the intentions of staying together, mediation can be successful in improving family interactions because it’s approach is consistent with the general needs of the adolescents involved and with the dynamics of the family system. It promotes problem-solving behavior on the part of the disputants, and discourages a reliance on such emotion-based coping strategies as denial, avoidance and self blame (Van Slyck et al., 1992).

Mediation as a service for children who are experiencing parental divorce is insufficient. Though divorce mediation may aid spouses in decisions that need to be made, it is not a treatment and the emotional issues that are involved in the divorce experience are not adhered to. Children of divorce, (i.e., the psychological effects and issues that are experienced) are not dealt with in divorce or parent-child mediation. In parent-child mediation, the philosophy of counseling is to keep the family intact and work within the family unit. As necessary as these two types of counseling are, the issues and the perceptions of such issues between the parent and child differ, with the need for resolution. For children of divorce, mediation is not a service that could resolve or enhance the coping process for their exclusive needs. Divorce counseling for children could satisfy such needs.
Support Groups For Children of Divorce

Support groups are an effective treatment for children of divorce. This intervention offers children the experience of discussing divorce issues within a peer group. A support group offers children the opportunity to express their feelings and ideas about what the divorce means to them. In return, children are given feedback from the facilitators and other children who share similar experiences feelings and ideas.

Support groups offer a unique aspect of therapy for children of divorce. They serve as an important function in lessening the negative effect of divorce processes on children. Improved adjustment to separation/divorce can be attributed to children’s support groups and intervention programs (Farmer & Galaris, 1993). Because the group gives children time to listen to their peers talk about the divorce, it is likely that at least some of the children in group counseling will overcome the delusion of uniqueness (Anderson, Kinney & Gerler, 1984). The groups facilitate with peers experiencing similar difficulties, assist the children in gaining a realistic view of divorce and provide an opportunity to understand and express feelings and develop and enhance coping strategies.

A support group provides parents and children an environment within which they could experience a cohesive feeling of support and sharing and the opportunity to learn
communication and problem solving skills (Cebollero, Cruise & Stollak, 1986). Because of the group, children are more willing to discuss separation/divorce related events and feelings with their peers and significant adults outside the home. Noncustodial parents reported increased comfort and greater candor from their children about past and present dissatisfactions and fears of abandonment. Adults can help children cope with the consequences of separation and divorce outside the home through individual/group/family counseling. Outside the home supports can facilitate the child’s adjustment by increasing understanding and acceptance of event and by increasing the quantity and quality of discussion and interaction among the child, family members and others in close contact during the divorce (Farmer & Galaris, 1993). Group discussion encouraged children to talk about their feelings, including what various family members did that prompted the children to feel happy, sad, angry, and how the children can respond.

Objectives

Core objectives with the support group involve increasing self-esteem, development of coping strategies through clarification of divorce related issues, improving communication and problem solving skills and validation of affective experiences by identification of feelings and affiliation with others (Farmer & Galaris, 1993). The group should systematically address the parts of the child’s life
that has been affected by parental divorce, as well as the interrelationships between those elements. Such elements include health, emotions, self concepts, learning and school performance, interpersonal relationships and behaviors (Crosbie-Burnett & Newcomer, 1989). Children get a chance to talk about their divorce, what they imagined about parents reuniting and how it feels to tell their friends that their parents are divorced. Children function as a support for each other, though some individuation within the group is possible. Children who are excelling in one component of life can be a role model for children who are having problems in that same area (Crosbie-Burnett & Newcomer, 1989). For the early school aged children, intervention is most easily facilitate through dialogues which enable the child to see that other children his/her age have similar problems and feelings (Cebollero et al., 1986).

Goals

The goals for the support group are to provide children with support, emotional catharsis and information. The discussion of feelings and thoughts about the divorce and their present lives are other goals (Cebollero et al., 1986). Discussion and activities aimed at enhancing each child’s comprehension and emotional acceptance of the changes typically ensued during the divorce process (Farmer & Galaris, 1993). The inherent variety of the children’s
interpersonal experiences make it possible to help children improve their interaction with family members and others, increasing self regard and sense of competence in handling situations requiring conflict management and cooperation (Farmer & Galaris, 1993). Other support groups include helping the child label and understand their feelings about the divorce. The support group deals with the developmental responses of the child. The group can help the child realize that others are having similar feelings and experiences. Children also gain by having an accurate picture of the divorce process. Most important, group goals are to assist children in learning new ways to deal with the feelings associated with the divorce. The final support group goal for children is to make them feel good about themselves and their parents through self disclosure, peer support and the leader's empathic understanding (Cantrell, 1985).

Themes

There are some general reoccurring themes that take place during support groups. Anger and sadness related to parental divorce were expressed by all children. Children fear that their custodial parent will leave them. They are extremely reluctant to take the risk of causing further trauma, especially as most continue to believe that they caused or contributed significantly to the marital break up (Farmer & Galaris, 1993). Children are quite aware of how
they try to help their parents cope with emotional upheaval caused by separation or divorce. Many children will repress their anxiety and pain to cater to their parents' needs. The children state directly that they are afraid that if they express anger at the Noncustodial parents, that the parent may decide never to see them again. Children not only tend to blame themselves for the divorce, but also put their own needs on hold in effort to care for the needy parent (Farmer & Galaris, 1993). There are three general areas that can be identified for children. One is feelings; children need to understand their feelings and how to cope with them. Second is cognition's; children need understanding as to what happened and why. Finally, there is problem solving; children need to have the power to be able to decide what to do and when to do it (Tedder et al., 1987).

School Based Groups

In order to reach as many children as possible, group intervention have increasingly taken place in the schools (Cebollero et al., 1986). Schools provide structure in children's lives at a time when their family structure is collapsing. Various behavioral manifestations found in school, exhibited by children who are affected by divorce are: poor concentration, verbal outbursts, physical aggression, withdrawal and inferior schoolwork (Cantrell, 1985). School based group counseling would seem to be an appropriate way of minimizing the effects of divorce on
children for four important reasons. First, children’s families who would not seek out counseling for financial or social reasons could receive the help in schools. Second, because of the magnitude of the social phenomena of divorce and its effects, counseling children in groups rather than individual counseling would be efficient. Third, as children mature, they increasingly look to their peers as coping models, discovering that the experience of parental divorce is survivable. Finally, because there is interaction between the child’s emotional, social and academic development, it seems appropriate for schools to address problems that hamper a child’s learning (Crosbie & Newcomer, 1990). The objectives for the school based programs are similar to the nonschool based programs. These objectives include helping children with parental divorce by reframing divorce as a form of family change, suggesting various coping skills for adjusting to change and to provide an opportunity for children to sign up for small group work on specific divorce related issues (Crosbie-Brunett & Newcomer, 1989). The small group allows for each child to focus on the elements of his/her life that has been most affected by divorce. The basic benefit of the support group is the development of individual problem solving skills that can be applied at home and at school. To best help a child of divorced parents, both parents and teachers, who have daily contact with the child, should be involved in the
Results of Studies

Support groups for children experiencing parental divorce have been shown to benefit children. Anderson, Kinney and Gerler (1984) assessed the effects of divorce groups on children's attitudes towards divorce, classroom behavior and academic performance. Children in these groups improved significantly on classroom conduct grades and moderately on classroom behavior. The effects of the support groups made significant changes in two areas: improved attitude towards divorce and improved classroom conduct grades (Anderson et al., 1984). Support group intervention has been shown to be successful in changing children's beliefs and attitudes about divorce and increasing competent behaviors. Group affiliation has proved to be a valuable means of reducing stress and social isolation for children coping with divorce. Social support has been shown to enhance adjustment to adults and children to separation and divorce (Farmer & Galaris, 1993).

Children benefit from reassurance and reality-testing with the therapist and are encouraged to raise the same issues with their parents (Cebollero et al., 1986). Children also experience the positive responses of group leaders to new behaviors being tested in the group process (Anderson et al., 1984). Group intervention for children of divorce has empirically been tested and found to have
positive effects on depression, attitudes and beliefs about parental divorce and aspects of self concept (Crosbie-Burnett & Newcomer, 1989).

Disruption of the parental marriage leaves scars, questions and fears about relations between sexes. Mixing sexes in support groups prevents unhelpful stereotyping based in fantasy that boys and girls feel differently about events based on gender (Farmer & Galaris, 1993). The effects of parental separation/divorce on children depend on the quality of life and parents eventually established in the years following the separation/divorce (Farmer & Galaris, 1993). Children who are involved in support groups can have a smoother transition into their family lifestyle and help to improve the quality of life for the child. Overall, support groups for children of divorce have positive impact in regards to conduct and classroom behavior, gender stereotyping social alienation, and beliefs, behaviors and attitudes about divorce in general.

Proposed Model of Intervention for Support Groups

Considering support groups are the most effective way of reaching children of this population, a proposed intervention model was created to give an overview of the necessities of support groups for children of divorce. The model will cover the age groups, number of sessions, facilitators, and the issues that should be addressed.
The Style of the Counseling Sessions

Support groups for children should focus on education and support. Children need to understand their feelings and cognitions, and providing education of what they are experiencing, in addition to the discussion of particular issues, could help a child deal with the healing process.

Because education is heavily stressed, counseling sessions should be given equal attention to both facets of education and social support. Counseling sessions should occur every week, for two hours a session. During these two hours, an hour could be spent on education of the particular issues covered within the model and then processing the feelings and experiences that could accompany such issues during the second part of therapy. The developmental stage of the children involved will be discussed, along with the application of education and support.

Number of Sessions

Counseling sessions should entail a two hour session weekly for at least eight to ten weeks, with a different topic weekly. The model could be applied in a cyclical manner by having children who want to continue counseling after ten weeks. The topics will remain during the cycle, but greater depth of the subject and further analysis through group discussion will occur.

Co-facilitation

A team of facilitators will lead the sessions. Both
should have experience with the various age groups, a strong background in divorce and separation, and the ability to teach. The team should consist of a male and a female. This co-ed team offers children a model that could represent their parents. If transference were to develop for a child, both parents should be represented. A child will also have the opportunity to do some reality testing with the parent(s) they are having trouble with. Having each gender represented also offers children who can only relate to their own gender, to be able to feel comfortable to build a rapport with that facilitator and build such a relationship with the facilitator of the gender they are intimated by.

**Issues Covered**

Throughout the first ten weeks several issues need to be addressed. These subjects have been determined by the most prevalent and detrimental effects found in children of divorce. Children have the opportunity to discuss and process these issues, along with adding personal experience to the topic at hand.

**The First Session.** The initial session is a "get to know each other" meeting. This session would consist of introductions of the children and facilitators. During this session, children will be told the topics that will be addressed, the ground rules and what is expected out of the group (participation, respect for one another, listening to the facilitator, etc.).
The Second Session. The change in family structure is the topic addressed. Children are taught how the family changes and becomes a new and different type of family from their old family. They are taught that they are still a family unit and they still have people who love and care about them. Children are encouraged to ask a lot of questions about what they think and how they feel about their new family structure.

The Third Session. Loyalty conflicts are the subject for this meeting. This is a direct continuation from the week before about the family structure and the need for both parents to be in the child’s life. During this session the group will go over the feelings and beliefs of their parents and the "good parent, bad parent" theory.

The Fourth Session. Child mediation is the next meeting. Again, this topic can be tied to the previous sessions regarding family and parents. This class will teach children they should not be in the middle of mom and dad’s arguments or communication in general. This class will attempt to show children they don’t need to be the "mailperson" between their parents. The group will look at how it feels to have mom and dad not talking to each other.

The Fifth Session. This session will focus on self blame. During this meeting children will have the chance to talk about their feelings about the divorce and their beliefs how they are involved in the divorce. This session
will focus on how children view themselves in relation to divorce and attempts to eliminate any beliefs or feelings that they could somehow be at fault for their parent divorce.

The Sixth Session. Counseling will put a large emphasis on the acknowledgment, labeling and understanding of the feelings of children of divorce experience. The educational aspect of this session will cover the range of feelings that have been acknowledged. This session gives children the comfort that there are other children who have similar experiences and relieves the feelings of alienation that comes with this stressful life event. Children are in a safe environment to express their fears, anger, helplessness, resentment and other feelings.

The Seventh Session. The Seventh session directly follows the sixth by covering self esteem. Children will be able to reflect on their feelings and see the strengths they have. Children have the chance to focus on positive aspects of this experience and are reinforced for their coping skills. The focus here is to make sure children understand they are still loved and cared for because of who they are.

The Eighth Session. "Growing up too fast" is the subject of this session. Children are taught that even though they may have new responsibilities with the change in family structure, they are still a kid. The group will discuss all the fun things kids do at their age. Making
contracts for parents and children to sign regarding play time is a project during the educational process.

The Ninth Session. The final topic is step families. During this session, the educational facet of group will include making family trees (according to the age of the group) of how their families are and the changes in the tree after the divorce. The discussion will include feelings about step parents, siblings and step families. Children are able to clarify what step families are and how they feel about them.

The Final Session. The final session is closure. The group will review all of the topics they covered and attempt to answer any left over questions. Children will get a chance to evaluate how they liked the group and if they thought it helped them. The group will discuss how it feels to have the group ending and if they want to continue.

In conclusion, this model will enable children to discuss and find the help they need and are lacking in so many services that adhere to the divorce population. The model addresses all of the many issues that children face during parental divorce.
CHAPTER IV
DISCUSSION

Counseling children of divorce should move beyond empiricism and into practice. The proposed intervention model offers the field a look into a service that could gratify the need for services for this population. The support group reaches more children than individual counseling and deals directly with many of the issues found harmful to children who are experiencing parental divorce. The model offers an intervention that gives children and their issues the attention it has been denied.

Looking at the effects and the treatment that is offered to this population, the need for research about this population and effective intervention should be obvious. Research on adjustment, parent-child relationships, effects of divorce, attitudes on marriage, on children of divorce who have experienced counseling are only a few of the studies that are needed to confirm the value of counseling for children. However, few things have been done and done effectively. This chapter will summarize the need for such services, the critique of present services and of the proposed model, suggestions for future treatment and research.
Divorce counseling for children can be a necessity for children during and after the divorce for any reasons. Divorce can be seen as a series of complex processes with factors other than divorce itself causing the disturbances in children (Scherman & Lepak, 1986).

The quality of family interactions appears to play a significant role in the development of self-esteem in children. The quality of family relationships after parental divorce has an impact on children's psychological adjustment to divorce. Children's self-esteem is positively correlated with a supportive family environment. Reduced levels of self-esteem in children from homes associated with higher levels of family and marital conflict. Marital conflict affects a child's postdivorce adjustment indirectly through changes in parent-child relationships (Holdnack, 1989).

Parental conflict influences directly children's cognitions, emotions, physiology and overt behavior. Conflict characterized by frequency, intensity, duration and diversity of content, has an adverse impact on children. More frequent conflict appears to sensitize children to conflict and is associated with a greater incidence of adjustment problems. Increased exposure to conflict may have increasing negative effects for children. Marital conflict and children's perceptions of it, appear to be related more strongly and consistently to child adjustment
than marital discord in general (Frank & Osborne, 1993). Parental marital conflict was a significant predictor of doubt regarding marital status and of general negative attitudes towards marriage (Gabardi & Rosen, 1992). The quality of the parents’ relationship and the degree of conflict between parents, whether married or divorced, are more salient features, affecting relationships of college students. The intimate relationship of a college student’s parents seem to be a significant part of the process of student’s resolving their own struggles with intimate relationships. Greater parental conflict after the divorce was a significant predictor of more negative attitudes towards marriage (Gabardi & Rosen, 1992).

Both parents are important resources for a child - each a source of emotional support, practical assistance, information, guidance and supervision. Cooperation and low conflict between parents predicts positive divorce adjustment (Amato, 1993). Children who experience minimum loss of resources and minor stress following the divorce are unlikely to experience decrease in well-being (Amato, 1993). How the divorced spouses relate to each other has clear implications for child’s well-being. Divorced families can buffer the psychological distress faced by children when both parents are available, stable and responsive to the children’s needs. The friendlier the attachment, the less likelihood of conflict around childrearing (Dozier, Sollie,
Stock & Smith, 1993). Divorced individuals who have some degree of harmony, those who interact frequently and those who do not dissolve their relationship are better able to cooperate as parents. The friendlier the attachment is, the more conducive to a supportive and shared coparenting relationship, and the less conflictual about childrearing (Dozier et al., 1993).

Explaining to parents that they will need to continue to have a relationship that will affect their children's future emotional adjustment provides a reality that divorcing parents often deny (Ahrons & Miller, 1993). Spouse perceptions are important for understanding marital conflict, but it is the behavior following such perceptions, particularly children's exposure to and appraisal of the behavior, that is likely to be central in understanding the associations between marital conflict and child adjustment (Frank & Osborne, 1993). It is important to have cooperative post-divorce parenting, which allows both parents to maintain a close and active relationship with their children. Parents need to understand that they play a vital role in the welfare of the child and that their absence from a relationship with the child has negative consequences. Children who are from families who are able to maintain cohesive parent-child relationships after the divorce have a better chance of adjusting to the new family structure with their self image intact than those children.
whose parents are uninvolved with them (Holdnack, 1992). The ability for parents to put differences aside and cooperate in childrearing and the establishment of quality relationships between each parent and their children will result in more positive outcomes for children. The best outcome for the children is when both parents are committed to the child's well-being and development (Holdnack, 1992).

Critique of Present Services

Research has only began to establish how emotionally taxing parental divorce can be for children (Scherman & Lepak, 1986). There are few longitudinal studies that focus on the effects of divorce on children and the impact the experience has made on their lives. Interventions and psychological services have placed a primary focus on adults, the couples and parents who are experiencing the stressful life event. There should be no dispute that these populations need the psychological services, but unfortunately, the needs of the children have been de-emphasized and placed on a "back burner." Divorce mediation and counseling focus on the couple and the various issues that need to be addressed because of the divorce. Divorce mediation neglects the emotional facets of divorce and attempts to resolve logistic issues of finance, property and even custody issues. Children are only indirectly addressed. This service offers virtually nothing for a child's emotional well-being. Divorce counseling attempts
to resolve unresolved and repressed emotional issues between the spouses.

Where are the needs of the children represented within these services? Will children benefit from these services? Indirectly, they will benefit from a better relationship between the parents. But are the specific needs of the children being met by helping parents? Chapter Three explained how parents and children differ in perceptions of the divorce and how children have so many issues that need to be addressed just by comparing these contrasting beliefs. The different perceptions suggest a failure of parents to realize what their child is experiencing or feeling from the divorce. The child is facing a different ignorance of not understanding the divorce process and the feelings that have evolved from it. Children's needs are not being met. This population needs to be addressed as a completely separate entity from parents.

Parent-child mediation places an emphasis on the child, but neglects the issues that are pertinent for children experiencing separation and divorce. With the ideology of working through problems within the family unit and keeping the family intact, children are dismissed as a population. The intervention of parent-child mediation is essential, but it serves clients who are working within their intact family unit and not within a changing unit from intact to divorced. Again, this is a needed service for its clients,
but it is not pertinent to the children of divorce.

Support groups have been proven to be effective for children of divorce. They provide children with an environment that alleviates the alienation felt by many children. Support groups are able to offer many children the services that are needed. Unfortunately, many children are not comfortable in a group situation and need the individual attention. Support groups have been proven to reduce some of the stress of the divorce experience and helps children develop coping skills.

The proposed model offers a possible guideline for support groups, but it needs to be tested and longitudinal studies need to be researched on the effectiveness of it. Future studies should examine the effectiveness of the support group by pre-post tests, measuring adjustment, intimate relationships and the divorce rate of the children who experienced the group.

What Needs to be Done

The rate of divorce has increased substantially, affecting millions of children yearly. With each child that experiences divorce, there is an increase in the next generation, because children of divorce are far more likely to experience divorce in their lifetime (Marlar & Jacobs, 1992). With the projection in 1986, presently one third of children younger than eighteen have experienced their parents divorce (Cantrell, 1986). Although the rate is
high, understanding the intensity of the experience can not be explained by such statistics.

The acute and long-term effects of divorce, along with the need for coping skills, improved parent-child relationships and a smoother transition period are only a few of the reason why divorce counseling for children is a necessity. Divorce counseling could offer children a way to develop coping skills they are lacking. It gives children the opportunity to explore their feelings and beliefs about divorce, their parents, how their life will forever be different, their relationships and marriage. Counseling could give children a place to safely vent their anger, pain and frustrations. Children are able to explain their beliefs, fears and perceptions of what is happening to them and their family. Counseling could help deter irrational thoughts of self-blame, denial and events that have occurred during the divorce process. Counseling could give children the option to ask questions and clarify confusions.

Divorce counseling has two components. It can be seen as an intervention for children who are experiencing the event. In addition it can be seen as a preventative measure. By reaching children during their parental divorce and helping children to learn to cope and understand the divorce, counseling in the present could reduce the divorce rate for the next generation. Divorce counseling could help deter or prevent children from divorcing themselves.
Suggestions for Future Research

The general effects of divorce have been studied and should continue. Knowing the effects, their duration and intensity will aid therapists in learning what they need to address and work through with clients. In addition to research of the effects, studying the affects of counseling is another facet of research that must be adhered to. Studies should examine things like what issues are pertinent to deal with in counseling? What are some effective ways of achieving such a goal?

Comparing children who experienced counseling during the divorce and those who did not, could reinforce the need and justification for counseling. Within and between group comparisons should help answer the question: Did counseling improve a child’s well-being versus those who did not have counseling? What are the differences in intimate relationships of marriages between the children who experienced divorce counseling and those who did not? Children of all ages of this population should be included.

Longitudinal studies should be conducted. Studying children from the time of the divorce to adulthood could aid in determining how divorce effects intimate relationships and the impact of counseling over the duration. Did children who experienced counseling during parental divorce have a lower divorce rate than those who did not receive the services? Adjustment and counseling between the two groups
is another longitudinal study. Measuring self-esteem and self concept before and after counseling should be another facet of research. Does counseling during parental divorce improve children’s self-esteem and/or self concept? Research on families who are going through the divorce and following the lives of their children. A researcher could examine the quality of relationships of the children and compare the families who experienced divorce counseling for their children and those who did not. Such research could aid in determining if the quality of the relationships between parent and child aids in adjustment and well-being and if counseling improved such a relationship. Longitudinal studies and comparison studies of children who went through counseling and those who did not could establish a base for the need and positive effects of divorce counseling for children. The research needs to be done for divorce counseling for children to be instigated in the field with the other services provided for populations who experience divorce. Without these services, society and the psychological field are neglecting a growing population that need the help.
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VITA

Jessica Pellegrino was raised in Madison Wisconsin. She grew up in an active lifestyle of sports, music, theater, and academics. She was awarded several captain, most valuable player and sportsmanship awards, along with being a president in her music class and a choreographer for her swing choir during her high school years. She left high school knowing there were few things she hadn’t done that she wanted to try.

Jessica attended DePaul University for her undergraduate education. She majored in Psychology and minored in Communications. She was a member of PSI CHI, the national honors fraternity for psychology and graduated Deans list. She volunteered at a non-for-profit agency her senior year, as a support group facilitator for people who had been abusive to their children. She was heavily involved in intramural sports and continues that active lifestyle today.

Jessica was a research assistant for a professor in Nebraska who has done and continues to do research on divorce and children. She felt the opportunity to work exclusively with a professor in her specific research interest was a rewarding experience.

She is hopeful that her prior successes will continue
in her work in the field of psychology, in working with couples, families and individuals.
THESIS APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Jessica Pellegrino has been read and approved by the following committee:

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the thesis is now given the final approval by the committee with reference to content and form.

The thesis is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of master of arts.

4-5-95
Date

[Signature]
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