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K-12 School-Based Interventions Effective with Children and Adolescents from Divorced Families

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K-12 SCHOOL-BASED INTERVENTIONS EFFECTIVE WITH CHILDREN AND

ADOLESCENTS FROM DIVORCED FAMILIES

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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CAPSTONE PROJECT

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K-12 SCHOOL-BASED INTERVENTIONS EFFECTIVE WITH CHILDREN AND

ADOLESCENTS FROM DIVORCED FAMILIES

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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Abstract

The research on the effects of divorce on children and adolescents is growing as the divorce rates in the United States are climbing. There are many negative effects of parental divorce and separation on children and adolescents that are discussed within this paper, including decreases in self-esteem and self-worth, declines in academic performance and dysfunction emotional adjustment. The purpose of this study is to examine and outline effective research-based school counseling interventions that can be used in K-12 school settings with children and adolescents from these types of families. This study also examines the underlying therapeutic processes and functions that take place within these interventions to help students experience positive post-divorce emotional adjustment.

Contents

Introduction

As the statistics have shown continuously, the national divorce rate in the United States is rising above 50%. This statistic is difficult to ignore when the children of these divorced families are suffering the social, emotional and psychological consequences. According to Cohen and Finzi-Dottan (2005), problematic parent-child relationships can persist over the lifespan as an outcome of divorce. Every child experiences divorce differently, particularly because parents express their ability to cope with divorce in positive and negative ways toward children (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005). A parent's natural parenting style and personality also affect each child's ability to cope with divorce (Cohen & Finzi-Dottman, 2005).

Bisnaire, Firestone, and Rynard (1990) found that out of their full sample of children from divorced families, 30% were reported to have decreased academic performance following parental separation. Similarly, Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, and Mcloughlin (1983) stated that children of divorced families are at risk for problems in school. According to their research, they found that children of divorce displayed more disruptive behavior in the classroom, were absent more, and had lower IQ scores than children from intact families. Interestingly, Guidubaldi et al. also found that children of divorce were also more likely to repeat a grade in schools than their peers who were from intact families. The effects divorce can have on children are relevant to the child's future success, the family as a system and society as a whole (Guidubaldi et al., 1983).

The current study will examine the effectiveness of various school-based counseling interventions for students from divorced or separated families. This study will contribute to the understanding of the overall emotional impact of divorce on children. More importantly, this

study will identify how children from divorced families can benefit from school-based counseling therapeutic processes, techniques and coping strategies .

Review of the Literature

Kalter, Alpern, Spence, and Plunkett (1984) discuss the concept of locus of control with children and adolescents from divorced or separated families. According to this group, a very important factor that influences children's response to parental separation is their ability to cope with feelings of helplessness and powerlessness related to the divorce or separation. Kalter et al. (1984) report that the feeling of helplessness is directly correlated with the symptoms and onset of depression, decreased self-esteem and negative changes in academic performance at school.

The concept of locus of control is important in understanding how children experience and cope with feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. Locus of control is "how a person experiences the ability to be an active, effective agent in influencing his or her life versus feeling relatively powerless and more at the mercy of chance, fate and powerful others (pg. 410, Kalter et al., 1984)." This concept can explain a lot about the way a child conceptualizes, perceives and acts in the face of parental divorce. Kalter et al. (1984) go on to explain that a child's locus of control is associated with academic competence and knowledge, social maturity and potentially self-motivated behavior. Therefore, this concept is an important one to explore in children from divorced families to determine how this impacts their coping strategies post-divorce (Kalater et al., 1984).

Positive Effects of Parental Confirmation

Recent research has indicated the strong impact of parental confirmation and affection on healthy childhood social development (Schrodt, Ledbetter, & Ohrt, 2007). Based on these findings, scholars are concerned with children from divorced families because parents often sacrifice parental affectionate behaviors in the process of caring for themselves. Parental communication behaviors mentioned above are associated with psychosocial outcomes in children, including self-esteem, satisfaction with the parent–child relationship, and overall life satisfaction (Schrodt et al., 2007). Parental confirmation may be described as positive praise, attention, and recognition toward children. Schrodt et al. (2007) determined through their research that parental confirmation is an parental behavior that helps alleviate the harmful effects of divorce on children's mental well-being (Schrodt et al., 2007).

Post-Divorce Adjustment Needs

McConnell and Sim (1999) have identified four main needs that children of divorce must have in order to avoid dysfunctional adjustment. These needs include "a stable, warm and intimate family relationship, good role models, consistent discipline and the freedom to love both parents (pg. 246, McConnell & Sim, 1999)." Post-divorce adjustment for children refers to the cognitive, social, academic and emotional levels of adaptation to the life-changing transitions of parental divorce or separation (McConnell & Sim, 1999). Based on the identification of these needs, many different schools and caregivers for children have implemented supportive programming to ensure that children have opportunities outside of the home to have these needs met.

According to the research discussed above, children of divorced families face challenges that can lead to dysfunctional adjustment and wellbeing if healthy parenting strategies are not

met. The problem addressed in this current study lends to the aforementioned research. Deficiencies in healthy parental behaviors during times of parental separation can lead to dysfunctional child development, adjustment and a decreased level of self-esteem (Schrodt, Ledbetter, & Ohrt, 2007). Supportive programming for children of divorced families is needed and schools are great settings for this type of support.

The success rates for group counseling interventions for children of divorced families are high in terms of helping children adjust to a challenging time in their life. Yet, there is a lack of research addressing the impact of divorce specifically on self-esteem. Self-esteem is the foundation of a child's wellbeing and recent research has indicated that social acceptance is a major determinant of an individual's self-esteem (Twenge & Campbell, 2001). How does a parental divorce impact the way in which a child views him/herself? A child's self-esteem is impacted by many different variables and the transitional issues that occur in many parental divorces may impact self-esteem negatively according to Lopez (1987) who conducted a study with college students, comparing students from intact and non-intact families. He found that college students from non-intact families rated themselves and their parents less favorably than students from intact families. Other findings indicate that students from non-intact families report negative attitudes toward child-rearing. Lastly, compared to student from intact families, students from non-intact families perceive their post-divorce home environment to be stressful and less cohesive (Lopez, 1987). These findings indicate significant differences between individuals from separated and intact families, yet there is a lack of in-depth research on self-esteem of children from divorced families. It is critical to explore individual self-esteem because as human development theory suggests, successful transition from late adolescence to early adulthood is characterized by the development of a positive self-concept (Lopez, 1987). This

process begins during childhood and is ongoing throughout adolescence.

School-Based Group Counseling Interventions

In the past, many different types of school-based interventions for children of divorced families have been put into action. Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Carroll, and Cowen (1989) studied and developed an intervention program for children of divorce in the urban areas of Rochester, New York. This intervention attempted to meet five goals. These goals included fostering a supportive group environment, facilitating identification and expressions of feelings, promoting understanding of divorce-related concepts, teaching problem-solving skills and enhancing positive perceptions of self and family (Alpert-Gillis et al., 1989). These goals were implemented into a four unit curriculum. Results showed that children from divorced families who participated in this intervention program experienced positive changes including gaining coping skills and being able to assess their individual feelings (Alpert-Gillis et al., 1989).

As many interventions for children of divorced families take place in the group setting, researchers have determined specific strategies and techniques that need to be used with children in this group format. Sonnenshein-Schneider and Baird (1980) discuss the power and benefits of group counseling, especially with elementary-aged children from divorced families. Through the group counseling process, children learn to share their feelings, connect with the stories of others and feel validated by their peers, which then influence the individual's sense of self (Sonnenshein & Baird, 1980). Children also learn effective communication and coping skills by learning from other children who may be adjusting to a different stage of divorce. Children come into these counseling groups with different backgrounds, experiences and perceptions of their family separation and through the sharing of each other's stories, children can learn to empathize

and identify with one another (Sonnenshein & Baird, 1980).

Support for the efficacy of group counseling for children of divorce is evident in the research, but an interesting addition to this type of intervention has been explored by Ziffer, Crawford and Penney-Wietor (2007). These researchers discuss an intervention titled, "The Boomerang Bunch" which incorporates group counseling for not only children, but their parents also. This approach is considered a school-based multifamily solution-focused group. Ziffer et al. (2007) believe that children are understood best when they are seen in the context of their home environment, including family interactional patterns and lifestyle. Therefore, they brought the parents of the children into the school after hours for group counseling. Parents and their children had opportunities to work together on shared tasks while learning from other families around them (Ziffer et al., 2007). This approach was based on four different goals. The first goal of the group was to help each family member define and adjust to changing roles in their changing family. The second goal of the group was to provide tools and skills that each family could use and grow from. Developing a positive and healthy re-definition of each family was the third goal while instilling hope for the future was the fourth (Ziffer et al., 2007). Positive reviews were given by participants of this intervention including children, parents and teachers who were asked to assess progress.

Looking at another group counseling approach, Richardson and Rosen (1999) outline various school-based interventions that involved a thorough consideration of age, parental involvement, teacher involvement, and culture and background. The first intervention that they discuss was created and led by Goldman and King (1985) through the School Services Program of the Center for the Family in Transition. This intervention was designed to incorporate activity

groups, teaching training, and parental involvement in various ways (Richardson & Rosen, 1999). This design considers many different effects that the child/adolescent may be experiencing such as a loss of home, change in school or neighborhood, loss of extended family support or any other chronic stress that may or may not be effectively coped with. This specific intervention was designed to be used mainly with elementary aged children and young adolescents. This group intervention took place over 6-12 weeks and students met once each week for 50-75 minutes (Richardson & Rosen, 1999). Various activities used within this intervention included the following: "drawings of good and bad changes," charades activities to help identify feelings, conversations about going back and forth between homes and creating resources that remind children of various coping strategies to use when parents are fighting (Richardson and Rosen, 1999). The portion of this intervention that is unique, yet similar to the "Boomerang Bunch" approach, is the parental participation which included a number of meetings with group leaders. These meetings allowed parents to be a part of the process and learn about the adverse effects that could influence their children, while learning about helpful strategies to use at home (Richardson and Rosen, 1999).

Group Counseling Considerations

As discussed above, many research-based interventions used with children from divorced families are group-counseling based. When working with young children in a group counseling setting, it is important to reflect on a variety of considerations related to practical, multicultural, legal and theory-specific concerns. Beginning with practical considerations, group leaders should assess factors that may influence the group process such as the setting and size of the group, the nature of the population participating, the ages of the participants, and the screening process. The

setting of the counseling group should be in a space that is comfortable, open and quiet so that the group experience is not distracting or overwhelming (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2014). It is important that the space provides a confidential and private atmosphere.

As our world is becoming more and more diverse, it is critical that group leaders take time to assess their counseling practices to ensure that they are culturally sensitive to students representing a wide variety of cultures (Hinman, 2003). By getting to know each student's cultural past and experiences, the group leader will be better able meet each student's needs and form a stronger connection. Group leaders may also learn more about students' cultural backgrounds by talking with their parents or doing research on the specific culture (Hinman, 2003). Gaining culture-specific knowledge and respect for each child is crucial in creating a strong therapeutic relationship in the group counseling setting (Hinman, 2003). Lastly, as each group leader gravitates their counseling style toward specific theories, it is important that these theories are evaluated and adapted to serve all children from varying cultural backgrounds.

Peer-Counseling Intervention Models

As evidenced throughout this review, school-based group counseling interventions have been proven to be an effective and efficient model for addressing the adverse consequences on children/adolescents from families of divorce, but are there other strategies/models that are not group-based? One interesting approach reviewed by Sprinthall, Hall, and Gerler (1992) discusses the use of peer-counseling to support children from divorced families. Within this experimental model, high school students became peer counselors for groups of middle school students experiencing a family divorce. The students involved with this study were 11th and 12th graders from a suburban high school who had been referred by teachers to be "peer counselors

(Sprinthall et al., 1992)." These students were also recommended by other students and staff within the school building based on their maturity and peer-relation abilities and skills. 24 students were chosen to be peer counselors and of this total number of students, 10 students were co-leaders of groups for students from divorced families and the other 14 were co-leaders of groups of students from a variety of backgrounds- this was considered the experimental group II (Sprinthall et al., 1992). The students that were part of the "divorce groups" were middle school students who were experiencing a parental separation or divorce and were identified by the counselors from two middle schools. The other 14 peer counselors, leading the second experimental group focused on typical elementary and middle school issues/topics such as self-esteem, achievement, and social isolation (Sprinthall et al., 1992).

In order to become a peer counselor, high school students had to take a 1-semester long course or training program on peer helping to-taught by teachers and counselors. During the training, these peer counselors were taught traditional and basic peer counseling skills and the content varied depending on the topics they would be teaching to their groups. For the divorce group leaders, the content was focused on material from The Changing Family (Ciborowski, 1984) in addition to video material from other sources focused on divorce topics (Sprinthall et al., 1992).

The results of this study suggested that there are many positive effects of peer counseling on both the peer helpers themselves, and the students receiving the support. It was found that middle school students in both groups (divorce and general) experienced increases in in interpersonal awareness and gained a greater understanding of the complexities and paradoxes of life (Sprinthall et al., 1992). These students also gained a greater awareness of how they relate to

others in relationships and experienced an increase in locus of control toward the self (Sprinthall et al., 1992). Peer counselors and middle school students were asked to reflect on their experiences. High school leaders discussed their own observations of the positive changes that middle school students experienced while in the groups. Middle school students discussed many positive feelings about the group process and could even comment on feelings of greater self-awareness. Overall, both the qualitative and quantitative results from this study suggest that this model is not only supported for the work with children and adolescents from divorced families, but all younger students within a school system (Sprinthall et al., 1992).

Consultation with Teachers and Parents

Consultation and collaboration is an essential component of a school counselor's comprehensive school counseling program. The Association of School Counselors Association (ASCA) identifies consultation as a role required in both responsive services and system support. In regard to working with children and adolescents from divorced or separated families, consultation with parents, teachers and other stakeholders within the school can serve as one of the most effective interventions for this population (Lee & Hunsley, 2001). Specifically, through counselor-teacher consultation, teachers may gain skills or knowledge that help them respond more effectively to personal and social issues in the classroom. Vice-versa, counselors may gain insight about the student's academic and emotional behavior patterns that may be relevant to their experience with the divorce (Lee & Hunsley, 2001). Through this consultation relationship, teachers and counselors can work together as a team to provide consistent and purposeful support at the classroom level and individual counseling level. Consultation with parents is important and effective for these same reasons. By working together as a team, both parties can identify the

needs and areas of growth for the individual which helps inform plans and goals to be

implemented (Lee & Hunsley, 2001).

Another effective approach to be implemented with parents includes informational

programming and outreach to educate them on the effects that divorce/parental separation may

have on their child (Lee & Hunsley, 2001). School Counselors can bridge the gap between a

children's and adolescents' experiences at home and school by providing parents with the

knowledge and resources they need to be successful in their unique parenting situations (Lee &

Hunsley, 2001). By providing education on the topic of divorce, parents can better understand

their children's developmental and psychological responses to the situation and therefore provide

support that aligns with their needs. This education can be provided through informational

sessions, parent meetings, community programming, etc.

Differences Between Counseled and Non-Counseled Individuals

In the next intervention discussed, adolescents experiencing parental separation and

divorce were assigned to two different groups, a counseling and non-counseling group. In the

counseling group, both the children and the mothers received counseling. In order to determine

differences between the two different groups, various evaluation tools were used, including semi-

structure interviews, The Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventory, and The Children's Perception of

Parental Divorce Scale (McConnell & Sim, 1999). Within the counseling group, the services

provided to these participants was counseling that was highly individualized and based upon

each individual's needs and circumstances (McConnell & Sim, 1999). Counselors explored four

main topics with the children who received the counseling services: family relationships, school

and peer relationships, recent emotional crises and explore coping strategies (McConnell & Sim,

1999). The results from this study indicated that there were significant differences between the children in the counseled and non-counseled groups in regard to post-divorce adjustment. The differences that were found between these two groups were in self-esteem, the feelings and perceptions about the parental separation (McConnell & Sim, 1999). The mothers interviewed in this study also indicated that the counseled group of participants experienced post-divorce adjustment more positively than the group who was not counseled.

Underlying Therapeutic Processes and Functions

After reviewing the previous programs, interventions and counseling approaches to working with children/adolescents from divorced families, it is apparent that these approaches are effective. Yet, what we are left with is not knowing exactly why these approaches work. The following portion of this literature review will focus on the underlying processes and reasoning for using specific types of interventions with this population. According to Lesowitz, Kalter, Pickar, Chethik, & Schaefer (1987), school-based facilitated group counseling interventions are effective for many different reasons which have been illustrated through their counseling approach. Fifth and sixth grade children from the suburban areas of Detroit, Michigan were asked to be a part of a counseling group. Each group consisted of 5-9 boy and girls whose parents had divorced led by both male and female counselors (dyad) for each group. Each of these groups met once per week for one hour, for 8 weeks. Lesowitz et al. (1987) found that through the group process, these 5th and 6th grade individuals began to connect with each other, with the concept of cohesion being apparent. Through the use of skits and other expressive techniques, these participants within each group began to share similar concerns and share these concerns as one collective voice (Lesowitz, 1987). Some of these shared concerns related to

custody issues, stepparents, etc. Lesowitz et al. (1987) reported that these children seemed

anxious to feel less alone with their experiences with the parental divorce. The children shared

openly and began to trust each other within the first few sessions, which may have been because

of the 8-week time limit on the sessions that they were offered (Lesowitz et al., 1987).

Other techniques/activities that were used were group stories and group letters to parents.

Group leaders believed that these activities may have promoted self-disclosure because of the

use of third person expression. One of the most effective processes within this group counseling

approach was that group members were able to see many of their beliefs, experiences and

feelings shared by others within their group (Lesowitz et al., 1987). Leaders of the groups used

therapeutic processes such as universalizing, cohesion and normalizing to help their group

members open up and share with each other. Lesowitz et al., (1987) said, "the ameliorating of

aloneness and alienation fostered a sense of group membership and belonging (p. 92)."

Researchers believe that the most beneficial process within this group intervention was the

emergence of a sense of cohesion among the groups. In the beginning of the 8-week long group

process, participants spoke mostly to group leaders, but as the leaders used group counseling

skills and processes, participants began to support and talk with each other about their

experiences and feelings. Even for those individuals who were more shy or reserved, their body

language was evidence for their understanding and their ability to relate personally with the

stories that were shared by their peers (Lesowitz et al., 1987). Through this group intervention,

leaders were also able to clarify confusing circumstances or situations related to divorce that had

not previously been explained by parents or guardians. Lastly, the setting of these groups, in their

school, along with the relationships developed with group leaders and members facilitated a safe

environment for emotional disclosure, which is ultimately what makes this type of intervention

effective (Lesowitz et al., 1987).

Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Carroll, & Cowen (1989) discussed their findings in proving effectiveness with the "Children of Divorce Intervention Program," which is also a group-counseling intervention. In this program, students in urban schools met in groups for 45 minute sessions during the school day for 16 weeks. Similar to the previous group intervention explained, the study's main findings indicate that children experienced post-divorce adjustment gains that significantly exceeded those from comparison groups (Alpert-Gillis et al., 1989). Specifically, children involved with this program reported positive changes on the Child Divorce Adjustment Scale (CDAS), which assesses feelings about the self and the family along with coping abilities when faced with problem situations. Parents of the children involved reported significant gains in the ability to deal with feelings, behave appropriately and solve problems at home (Alpert-Gillis et al., 1989). Group leaders also added observed gains in peer social skills and individual perceptions of parental divorce. In all, these findings support the main goal of this intervention with children at risk following parental divorce (Alpert-Gillis et al., 1989).

Group leaders identified specific elements as being most influential in the success of this program. One very important element in this program is support. Children were able to share emotional feelings and identify with common concerns and situations. Through this process, children could empathize and begin feeling less isolated and different from their peers. Parents also shared that they observed gains in their children's emotional communication and expression. Similar to the last group intervention, group leaders found it meaningful to be able to correct misconceptions about divorce and allow children to advocate and support each other, for example one child saying to the other, "it's not our fault that our parents divorced" (Alpert-Gillis et al.,

1989). Leaders also reported that children within their groups were able to develop a sense of competence and mastery by learning to cope and respond more effectively to problems that they did have control over. Lastly, specifically for this urban population, the program's strong emphasis on acceptance of diversity within families provided them with a stronger conceptualization of their own family identity and strengths within that identity. While many of these elements can be attributed to the success of other group counseling approaches, the leaders of this program emphasized that to be effective, each program/intervention must take into account the population's developmental and sociocultural realities (Alpert-Gillis et al., 1989).

Discussion

The findings from this study are important to all professionals and adults who work or care for children, especially those who are involved with children from divorced or separated families. Specifically, the interventions discussed within this study could be implemented by other school professionals such as counselors, teachers and specialists. This study attempts to show that children and adolescents from divorced or separated families will benefit emotionally, socially and academically by participating in group and individual school-based counseling interventions. As the research has shown, parental divorce impacts children psychologically, emotionally and academically. Therefore, the growing divorce rates in the United States suggest that schools may need to develop and implement interventions to help children transition through these periods of parental separations.

There are several limitations associated with school-based counseling interventions with children/adolescents of divorce. One issue that can be foreseen with the type of interventions that have been discussed is student participation. In order for students to be involved with the group

interventions, each student needs parent consent. If parents do not want their child to participate, they will be limited from this group experience. Another potential conflict may be the amount of time designated for these group sessions. In a school setting, each teacher, specialist and staff member finds their time with students to be valuable. Therefore, finding a time to excuse students from classes that all staff members agree on can be very difficult.

Referring specifically to group counseling interventions, there are potential challenges that may occur including scapegoating, resistance, storytelling, etc. These challenges are a part of the group counseling process. Specifically, confidentiality is never guaranteed within the group setting, because the group leader cannot control what is shared by all group members. In a school setting, it may be even more difficult to maintain confidentiality. The student participants are involved with each other in different ways outside of the group; therefore it may be even more tempting to break confidentiality.

Due to a lack of in-depth research, future research could focus more on the specific effects of parental divorce on self-esteem. The development of self-esteem is critical to a maturing child's/adolescent's success as an individuals. Future research could also focus on alternative methods and strategies that could be used efficiently in today's school settings to address self-esteem in this population. Individual counseling techniques that are useful for children of divorce have been examined by the research, but with the growing rates of divorce and limited time available to counselors in schools, group approaches may be the most efficient and practical type of intervention. Also, as children from different cultures experience parental divorce in different ways, it may be important to examine specific approaches that target certain populations and cultures.

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