

THE IMPACT OF DIVORCE ON ANXIETY
IN ELEMENTARY-AGED CHILDREN

By

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this critical analysis of the literature was to determine the impact of divorce on levels of anxiety in elementary-aged children. The literature review also sought to determine what types of intervention strategies are available for parents to help alleviate high levels of anxiety in their children. Specifically, the review addressed these research questions: (1) What are the effects of divorce on anxiety levels in elementary-aged children? (2) What factors impact the degree of anxiety experienced in children from divorced families? (3) What types of interventions can parents use to help alleviate anxiety in children throughout the divorce process?

The history of changing family structures and current status of various family structures, specifically divorce, were explored. Anxiety produced by family conflict and divorce was discussed in great detail. A number of studies noted that anxiety problems can begin even before a divorce occurs, due to high levels of conflict within the family household. Potential factors that may affect anxiety level in elementary-aged children during a divorce were examined. The

diverse contributions include but are not limited to, the age of the child during the divorce, family closeness and support, socioeconomic status, and preceding situations.

Because over one million children will be affected by their parents' divorce each year, intervention strategies for parents were investigated. Multiple strategies were found to be effective in minimizing anxiety that elementary-aged children may otherwise experience during a parental divorce.

A summary of findings was assessed and conclusions were reached, including the fact that children of divorced families generally have higher levels of anxiety than their counterparts from intact two-parented homes. Possible recommendations for future research in this area were discussed such as the need for continued longitudinal studies on the effects of divorce on anxiety in children. In addition, more studies on effective intervention strategies to increase children's well-being were suggested.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Children today are faced with many difficult challenges including what “group” to associate with in school, how to deal with certain peer pressures that arise, and what path to take after high school. More and more children are dealing with even tougher decisions than those mentioned above, and at a much younger age. Some of these decisions stem from increased family pressures, society and socioeconomic strains, and academic stressors. Although the above contributors often play a significant role in children’s lives, research shows that many of the changes and problems currently experienced may also arise from the challenging and transforming family dynamics in today’s society (Vandewater & Lansford, 1998; Yongmin, 2001; Dykeman, 2003).

Increasing numbers of children are being raised in divorced households. Today, fifty to sixty percent of all children will live in a single-parent home some time during their childhood (Jeynes, 2002). Often, due to economical and technological changes in today’s society, parents in all family structures are not able to spend as much quality time with their children as parents did during the pre-industrial times (Walsh, 2003). Unfortunately, more children are being left alone to grow up without positive influences, moral and ethical guidance, and overall direction that adults have previously provided to their children. It must also be noted that children who reside with two parents still have no guarantee of receiving positive parental involvement (Videon, 2002).

According to Jeynes (2002), parent’s involvement, supervision, and overall support for their children often decreases within single and divorced households. This trend is a significant

change from the pre-industrial revolution era. The belief then was that “proper gender roles” were essential for healthy family functioning and child development in the “normal” American family (Walsh, 2003). This meant that women were predominantly full-time mothers and housewives in a two-parented home. Their time was strictly dedicated to caring for their families. Some contributing reasons for the change from this structure may be the economical need for a dual income in the household to make ends meet, a more embracing work environment for women, and the more recently found independence women have discovered.

Many outcomes, both positive and negative, have been associated with these new family structures, particularly divorce (Vandewater & Lansford, 1998; Demo & Cox, 2000; Jeynes, 2002; Rodgers & Rose, 2002). According to Jeynes (2002), children experiencing divorce may show increased problems with tardiness and absenteeism. Their performance in academics and obedience to parents may decrease.

Changing family roles and family structures do not necessarily mean that family life, as we have come to know it, should be condemned. Many studies (Friel, 2001; Videon, 2002; Yongmin & Yuanzhang, 2002; Dykeman, 2003) have reported strong relationships between children’s well-being and various family structures. From divorce in particular, some children may show minimal and short-term effects, while other children may experience severe long-term effects (Jeynes, 2002). Due to the prevalence of divorce, this family structure will be examined throughout this critical analysis.

For the past thirty years, with a divorce rate that has escalated to nearly fifty percent for first marriages and nearly sixty percent for second marriages (Walsh, 2003), people have been guided by the idea that it is better to get divorced than to subject children to constant bickering and unhappiness within the marriage (James, Friedman, & Matthews, 2001). Whether couples

live together in an unhappy and/or unhealthy atmosphere or choose to divorce, a no-win situation occurs for everyone involved, especially the children. Without being given a choice, over one million children each year experience their parent's divorce (Mason, Skolnick, & Sugarman, 2003). James, Friedman, and Matthews (2001) stated:

It is found that divorce causes massive disruption in children's lives. Some of this disruption may occur immediately and be very apparent, and some may lie underground, festering, only to rise and affect children later, even after they have become adults. (p. 211)

Cognitive, social and behavioral, and emotional impacts have been observed by parents and teachers. Cognitively, learning difficulties have been found to be more prevalent in children from divorced or remarried families when compared with intact families (Mason, Skolnick, & Sugarman, 2003). In terms of social and behavioral impacts, antisocial acting out, aggression toward authority figures, more sexually oriented behaviors, and difficulties with peers are a few that have been highly correlated with children from divorced families (Amato, 1993; Hoffmann, 2002; Dykeman, 2003). Emotionally, children who are experiencing a disruption in their family structure may display more depression, anger, guilt, lower self-concept, and mistrust (Hoyt, Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, & Alpert-Gillis, 1990; Nilzon & Palmerus, 1997; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998; Jeynes, 2002; Cohen, 2002;). The event of a divorce often triggers high levels of anxiety within the children involved and may have a direct impact on their well-being.

Thus, changing family structures are rapidly increasing (Hoyt, Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, & Alpert-Gillis, 1990; Videon, 2002). Due to this fact, it is important to investigate the outcomes that may be produced. As one outcome of divorce, children often feel an increase in anxiety, among other adjustments, which can alter and influence their lives. Parental and teacher

involvement and overall adult support can have positive effects on the resiliency and impact on children's lives during and after family changes, especially divorce (Videon, 2002; Cohen, 2002; Rodgers & Rose, 2002).

Statement of the Problem

The family structure disruption caused by a divorce affects everyone involved, especially the children. Elementary-aged children who experience a disruption in their family structure due to a divorce may experience more increased levels of anxiety in comparison with their counterparts from intact two-parented homes (Wyman, Cowen, Hightower, & Pedro-Carroll, 1985; Hoyt, Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, & Alpert-Gillis, 1990; Weyer & Sandler, 1998).

The effects and impacts that divorce has on elementary-aged children vary according to different factors. Does family structure itself predict and solely influence the levels of anxiety in children from divorced families? If not, what are other contributing factors that may impact children from divorced families? Can certain interventions be provided by parents to help assist their children through the divorce transitions?

Interventions may help alleviate high levels of anxiety in children who experience divorce within their family. Parents may be the number one resource for delivering these intervention strategies. Learning about helpful interventions may mean the difference between raising a child with high levels of anxiety or a well-rounded healthy child.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study will be to review research relevant to the impact of divorce on anxiety in elementary-aged children. Factors that influence the impact and degree to which anxiety is observed will also be investigated. Considering that the occurrence of divorce is frequent in childhood, it is important for parents, teachers, and society to understand the impacts

and the factors that children may experience. In addition, possible intervention strategies and resources for parents will be developed to assist in divorce transitions.

Research Questions

The following three questions will be addressed in this critical analysis. They are as follows:

1. What are the effects of divorce on anxiety levels in elementary-aged children?
2. What factors impact the degree of anxiety experienced in children from divorced families?
3. What types of interventions can parents use to help alleviate anxiety in children throughout the divorce process?

Definition of Terms

Three terms need to be defined for this study. They are:

Anxiety - Feelings of fear, worry, or apprehension that may affect mood, thoughts, behavior, and psychological activity.

Divorce - The legal termination of a marriage between a husband and a wife.

Elementary-aged children - Children who have entered school (pre-k) through eighth grade (before high school).

Assumptions and Limitations

It is assumed that there has been sufficient research already conducted that investigated the impacts of divorce on anxiety in elementary-aged children to complete an adequate literature review. It is also assumed that the validity of this previous research is high. In addition, the researcher assumed that the following literature will clearly show that school-aged children are directly affected by divorce. Therefore, intervention strategies are important resources for

parents to be provided with.

Limitations of this study consist of one specifically. No actual data collection will be conducted by the researcher during this investigation. Results and conclusions will be based on previously done research, which may have been invalid or unsound.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will review literature related to the background of changing family structures, including history and current status of various family structures, specifically divorce. Divorce and the assorted impacts on elementary-aged children will be investigated, as well as factors that influence the impact of anxiety on these children. Finally, interventions for parents and a summary of findings will be discussed.

Background

In order to fully understand where and how families have deviated from the “traditional” sense of a family, looking into the historical perspective can be helpful. Being familiar with historical and contemporary facts regarding family structure is important for several reasons, according to Jeynes (2002). This history helps researchers and practitioners to be more objective, understand how widespread divorce is and its influences, and understand the challenges facing modern society.

According to Mason, Skolnick, and Sugarman (2003), every generation of Americans, including the first European settlers to reach our shores, thought it was witnessing the decline of the family institution. A major reason for this belief has been the constant change of society. Divorce was slowly introduced during the colonial times. It was during the post-revolutionary war period that states started discussing divorce laws. By 1900, three percent of all couples divorced (Cherlin, 1978). Before the early 1960’s, the word divorce was not easily accepted (Jeynes, 2002). The percentage of children living in single-parented homes remained in the single digits until the 1960’s, even including children who had lost a parent due to death (Jeynes,

2002). These numbers soared to almost fifty percent by 1970.

Why has the divorce rate steadily increased? According to Walsh (2003), there are various contributions that have been associated with the high divorce rate. They include but are not limited to: an increased life span, no-fault divorce laws, changes in social values, decreased stigma of divorce, increased socioeconomic empowerment of women, diffusion of contraceptive technology, more work-related stress, reduced support from extended family members and community, and an increased number of children of divorce who grew up without role models for conflict resolution and management.

Throughout history, American families have seen many different transitions and trends. The “traditional” family has evolved along with society. Today, the divorce rate is nearly fifty percent in the United States (Jeynes, 2002), and is predicted to increase to seventy percent in the near future. The high incidence of divorce has significantly raised levels of anxiety for parents and their children (Mason, Skolnick & Sugarman, 2003). Many other changes have been paralleled with divorce. How these changes are affecting the children of today is what many researchers are exploring.

Divorce and Anxiety in Children

Do children from divorced families display higher levels of anxiety than their counterparts from intact two-parented homes? Many studies have been conducted investigating this particular question, predominantly due to the rapid increase seen in the divorce rate over the past few decades (Wyman, Cowen, Hightower, & Pedro-Carroll, 1985; Hoyt, Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, & Alpert-Gillis, 1990; Videon, 2002).

Hoyt, Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, and Alpert-Gillis (1990) conducted a study that measured

anxiety and depression of young children from divorced families compared with children from intact families. The subjects consisted of 49 second- and third-grade children from divorced families, with an average time since parent separation being 3.3 years. These children were matched demographically with 83 children from intact families.

The measurement used to rate anxiety levels in these children was the State Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children (STAIC), which is a 20-item inventory. The children rated themselves on a scale from 1 to 3 (1 = hardly ever and 3 = often), according to particular statements. Parents and teachers were also given similar measurements. The 24-item Parent Evaluation Form was for the parents to rate their child's level of anxiety. Teachers involved in the study rated the children's behavior problems, including anxiety, on the Teacher-Child Rating Scale.

The results found that both teachers and parents rated children from divorced households to be more significantly depressed than their counterparts from intact two-parent households. The results also showed that children of divorce had significantly higher teacher-rated and self-rated anxiety scores than children from intact families.

These results are consistent with an earlier study done by Wyman, Cowen, Hightower, and Pedro-Carroll (1985), which studied perceived anxiety in latency-aged children of divorce. The motivation for this study was conflicting findings of prior studies that attempted to understand the effects of divorce on anxiety levels in children. This study included 268 fourth through sixth grade children, including 98 from divorced families and 170 from intact families. Sixty-six of the divorced subjects were currently participants in an intervention program called Children of Intervention Project (CODIP). All of the sample subjects were comparable in all areas (sex, age, etc.), however the CODIP group did show higher levels of anxiety than the latter divorce group (n=32), prior to the intervention program.

The results of the study showed that children from divorced families had higher levels of anxiety than their peers from intact families. These children also had fewer close friends and were not as involved in activities as their counterparts. Increased levels of anxiety may also affect children's ability to concentrate in school or attend school and increase children's feelings of diminished cognitive competence (Wyman, Cowen, Hightower, & Pedro-Carroll, 1985).

Support for this research was demonstrated in additional findings by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP). In 1980, the NAESP sponsored a study that examined elementary and secondary school students. The results reported that children from divorced families, as early as kindergarten, held lower grade point average's (GPA's) than children from intact two-parented homes (cited in Jeynes, 2002).

In a study by Videon (2002), a question raised is whether children's difficulties and changes in well-being are generally present before divorce occurs or whether they follow the marital dissolution. The author explains marital dissolution as a process that manifests before parents physically separate. Videon (2002) investigated the question of whether parental separation in a high conflict relationship may benefit children's emotional well-being, including decreasing high levels of anxiety. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which is a school-based study designed to assess the health of children and explore the influences of health-related behavior, provided the data for Videon's analysis. The nationally represented sample consisted of children in grades 7 through 12 in the United States. Two waves of interviews were conducted, with the first consisting of 20,745 students (September 1994 through December 1995) and the second consisting of 14,738 students (April 1996 through August 1996). After participants were screened out due to issues of race, loss of a parent due to death, or missing information, the remaining sample included 5530 boys and girls. Two hundred and

three of these children experienced their parents' separation between interviews.

In Videon's study, measurements of children's well being were assessed by a 19 item questionnaire, from the Center of Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D). The responses were rated by indicating the frequency of experiencing various symptoms on a scale ranging from 0 (rarely or never) to 3 (most of the time). Parental separation and parent-child relationships were also important independent variables in this study. Children were asked, during both interviews, to list all of the people who lived in their household. It was important for this study to exclude situations where a parent was gone for a short period of time due to factors other than parental separation, such as military leave or work-related absences. A Likert scale was used to determine the quality of parent-child relationships before marital dissolution, according to the child. The scale ranged from 1 (very unsatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied).

The results of this study showed that although great variations are seen during parental separation, the act of separation does not significantly affect the children. The relationship between the parents and the child was more highly correlated with children's overall well-being. More specifically, the relationships between boys and their mothers and girls and their fathers were crucial factors. These results indicated that parent-child relationships may have a greater influence than family status (single or two-parent households). It was also suggested that parental separation can serve as a stress release when children are not content with their parent-child relationship.

Do the results of this study indicate that parental separation bears no weight on children's well-being? What these findings show is that parents contribute enormous amounts of influence on their children's overall well-being. Individual interventions and therapy may not be as effective as family therapy that focuses on interpersonal relationships.

Factors that Impact Anxiety

Many contributions assist in dramatic family transformation during the time of family structure changes. In some divorces, the change has arrived suddenly and unexpectedly, holding no rational explanation for the children involved. This creates a scary and unknown atmosphere, where anxiety may increase, as well as sudden withdrawal from family and school involvements. Feelings of grief on the part of the child may also be observed. Many people associate the word grief only with physical death. The definition of grief, according to James and Friedman (2001, p.7) is “the conflicting feelings caused by a change or end in a familiar pattern of behavior.” Does this include what is experienced by children during a divorce?

Divorce alone has been associated with producing anxiety among elementary-aged children. The degree, duration, and effects of the impact are broad. As reported by Wyman, Cowen, Hightower, and Pedro-Carroll (1985), individual differences, characteristics of the child, situational factors, and availability of resources played a significant role in a child’s adjustments to divorce. This diverse continuum of contributions can also be attributed to multiple factors, such as the age of the child during the divorce, preceding contributions, family closeness, socioeconomic status, spiritual beliefs, and gender differences (Jeynes, 2002). Dykeman (2003) also included the degree of cooperation and amount of conflict displayed between the divorced or separated parents were important factors.

A study conducted by Nilzon and Palmerus (1997) investigated the influence of familial factors on childhood depression and anxiety in children and early adolescents. The sample group consisted of 16 males and females who were currently receiving psychiatric treatment for anxiety. All 16 of them had met the criteria for childhood depression, according to Child

Depression Inventory (CDI). This group was compared with 16 non-depressed students. Both of these groups were matched according to sex, age, and school. Eleven males and 5 females were between the ages 12-14 years old, and 12 males and 11 females were between 9 and 11 years old. All of the participants in this study were selected based on self, parent, and teacher assessments.

Parents and the 32 children who participated completed modified versions of the Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale, also known as FACES. This scale is one of the few family interaction evaluation scales available and has been widely used throughout the last decade. Along with FACES, the Marital Harmony Scale (MHS) and the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) were used for assessments.

The study by Nilzon and Palmerus (1997) found that childhood depression and anxiety are significantly related to marital disharmony. Nine out of the 16 children in the depressed-anxious group experienced the divorce of their parents, and 11 experienced high levels of marital conflict. Children who were raised in families displaying high conflict or divorce were more vulnerable to anxiety and depression-like problems.

Other studies (Jekielek, 1998; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998; Morrison & Ruane, 1999; Yongmin, 2001; Dykeman, 2003) have looked at marital conflict and marital disruption, specifically divorce. These family issues were examined in terms of their impact on the emotional well-being of the children.

A study conducted by Jekielek (1998) found that the benefits of an intact family status for child anxiety and depression increased as parental conflict decreased. The information and data that Jekielek (1998) used for her study came from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth (NLSY) in the United States. The Behavior Problems Index (BPI), which measures behavior problems of children ages four and over, was also used. The BPI was administered in 1986,

1988, 1990, and 1992 to the mothers of the children involved in the study.

Jekielek used the BPI data to look at how children were affected by different aspects of parental conflict. On a scale of 1 to 4 (1 being never and 4 being often), mothers were asked to rate the frequency of conflict with their spouses. Parental conflict was shown to have significant and consistent negative impact on child anxiety and well-being. These results are consistent with many other studies (Amato, 1993; Nilzon & Palmerus, 1997; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998; Yongmin, 2001). Parental conflict and marital disruption, according to Jekielek's study, were significantly associated. However, overall results showed "that children whose parents reported higher levels of conflict in 1988, but had separated or divorced by 1992, scored lower on scales of anxiety and depression than the children whose parents reported similar levels of marital conflict in 1992 and stayed married" (Jekielek, 1998, p. 930). These results are supported by a similar study that also used the NLSY by Morrison and Ruane (1999).

Marital dissolution can be problematic for children for two reasons, according to Amato (1993). First, it involves various amounts of stressors that challenge children's development. Secondly, the dissolution of marriage can interfere with children's ability to utilize parental resources by lowering the quality of the relationship, losing contact with the non-custodial parent, and decreasing household income.

Vandewater and Lansford (1998) conducted a study that compared relative influences of family structure and parental conflict on different areas of children's well-being. The purpose for this study was to help parents, families, and marital practitioners learn why and to what extent children's well-being is affected by family structure and parental conflict.

The participants consisted of 618 parent-child dyads who were involved in the larger National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The NSFH is a two section panel study

that took place in 1987 to 1988 and in 1992 to 1994. All of the children involved in this study were between the ages of ten and seventeen. The parent-child dyads were part of a two family groups: (a) married-never divorced; or (b) divorced-not remarried.

The married-never divorced group took a parental conflict questionnaire, which asked them to rate items on a six point scale (1=never, 6=almost everyday). Some examples of the statements include spending time together, money, sex, and the children.

The group of divorced-not remarried, also filled out a similar questionnaire. This scale consisted of five points (0= none, 4= a great deal) and included statements like where the child lives, the time the ex-spouse spends with the child, and how the child is raised.

In order to evaluate the outcomes of child well-being, parents completed a 25-item version of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL). The scores were rated 1 to 3 (1 = not true, 2 = sometimes true). These responses were categorized as internalizing behavior, externalizing behavior, and trouble with peers.

By conducting a two-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) of family structure by parental conflict, a significant effect for parental conflict was found between all three categories including internalizing behavior, externalizing behavior, and trouble with peers. However, there was no real significance on family structure alone or between structure and conflict across the three categories. This study has found support of parental conflict negatively affecting children's well-being.

Another study conducted by Yongmin (2001) investigated the impact of parents' marital disruption on children's well-being. The data for this study came from a longitudinal study done by the National Education of 1988 (NELS), where data was collected in 1990 and 1992. The researcher investigated three main aspects. They include: magnitude of pre-disruption damage to

children, including academic progress, school behavior, substance abuse, and psychological well-being; dysfunctionality of family environment in pre-disrupted families; and the impact of the actual disruption itself on child outcomes.

Ten thousand and eighty-eight students, who were in the eighth-grade when the study started in 1988, made up the sample. The sample size was broken into two participating groups by household status. Nine thousand two hundred and ninety children lived in continuously married families during the time of the study, and 798 lived in single-parent, stepparent, or other nontraditional families. The measurements of interpersonal relations between parents were based on students' responses to a six-interval questionnaire. On the scale for this measure, 0 represented false and 5 represented true. To gauge these students' psychological well-being, two batteries of psychological measures were used. They consisted of a seven-item composite of self-concept and a six-item composite of locus of control, provided by NELS.

The results of this study indicated that children in pre-disrupted families showed lower levels of well-being in multiple areas, including locus of control, self-concept, readiness for school, and relationship between parents. When parental divorce was examined, post-disruption differences in children's well-being were clearly visible. Lower educational aspirations and more exhibited psychological problems were seen.

This study and the others examined have emphasized the amount of damage parental divorce and separation has done to children. Some children may experience difficulty in attending school, lower academic achievement, increased behavioral problems, lower levels of self-concept, amplified psychological problems, or higher levels of anxiety.

Interventions

Over one million children take part in their parents' divorce each year. Many studies

have supported the negative outcomes that may interfere with these children's well-being (Nilzon & Palmerus, 1997); Jekielek, 1998; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998; Videon, 2002). Emery (1982) states that conflict between parents may produce various childhood disorders, including anxiety. He shares four possible reasons behavior problems may increase for children in high conflict homes: parents may be more inconsistent and harsh with disciplinary actions; there may be a disruption between the parent and child bond; the conflicts in the environment may increase stress levels; and children often model their parent's conflict resolution styles. Parents are viewed as the sole providers of instilling and providing conflict resolution styles within their children. For these reasons, it is important to investigate what types of intervention strategies are available to parents who are going through a divorce and have children.

A study conducted by Rodgers & Rose (2002), examined familial and extra-familial factors associated with children from divorced households. The familial factors that were identified in this study included parental conflict, reduced contact with a noncustodial parent, low parental monitoring, and low levels of parental support. Peer support, neighbor support, and school attachment are some of the nonfamilial factors that were included in this study.

Two thousand one hundred and forty-four students, of whom 45 percent were in grade seven and the remainder in high school, participated in an anonymous 145-item questionnaire. This questionnaire was collected by a community-collaborative research project. A subsample of 2,011 children who lived with two never-divorced parents (60 percent), a parent and a stepparent (20 percent), or a divorced single parent (20 percent) were selected for this study. The above listed factors were assessed by items on the questionnaire. An example of the measurement for parental support was "My mother/father is there when I need him/her." This statement and others were answered by a scale ranging from 0 (never) to 4 (very often).

The purpose of this study was to expand the findings from existing literature on family structure and nonfamilial factors on the well-being of children. The findings from this study indicated that low levels of parental monitoring showed higher externalizing behaviors (eg. physical fighting, binge drinking, or carrying a weapon). More internalizing responses (eg. depressed feelings, low self-esteem, or high anxiety) were also predicted by low levels of parental support and monitoring. These findings suggest that parents are extremely important to the well-being of children, along with peers, schools, and neighbors.

Following is a list of interventions combined from various sources (Beaulier Law Office, 2001; Kane, 2002; Rodgers & Rose, 2002; “Getting Your Child Through This,” 2003) parents can use as a guide to assist their elementary-aged children through what may be a very tough time, full of anxiety. Parents also suffer detrimental effects from divorce. Negative and uncomfortable feelings and reactions may arise while parenting skills and techniques are crucial. Beaulier Law Office (2001) recommended the following:

- Don’t lie to your children with stories like “Dad is visiting relatives”.
- Do talk to your children. Give them simple and straight-forward answers without vilifying or blaming the other parent.
- Don’t put your children in the middle. This includes not asking them where they want to live or who they want to live with.
- Do explain to your child that the divorce was not their fault.
- Don’t use children to relay messages to the other spouse, even messages related to visitation.
- Do seek professional counseling for you and/or your child to help with adjustments.
- Don’t interrogate your children when they return from visitation with the other parent.

This may create pressure resulting in depression, anger, or anxiety.

- Do listen to your children as they express concerns over the divorce.
- Don't make visitation or custody arrangements directly with the children without first consulting with the other parent.
- Do be flexible in your parenting schedule. (§ 1-10)

“Getting Your Child Through This” (2003) suggested:

- Don't argue or fight with your spouse when the children are listening.
 - Do use consistent discipline.
 - Don't criticize your spouse in front of your child.
 - Don't use your child as a spy.
 - Don't change schools, home, or activities unless absolutely necessary.
 - Do maintain relationships and routines as much as possible.
 - Don't make promises you can't keep.
 - Do take care of yourself. You owe it to yourself and to your kids.
 - Do allow your child to be a child and not get wrapped into dealing with your recovery.
- (§ 4-21)

Kane (2002) recommended the following:

- Do provide lots of personal attention to your child even small gestures like going for a walk together may give them a break from household tensions.
- Do ask questions about how your child is feeling about school to give assurance you are there to help with homework etc. and truly care.
- Don't hesitate to hire a tutor to help with academic problems.
- Do stay informed about school events and attend as many performances as possible.

- Don't neglect to inform your child's school of the change in family structure. (p. 212)

Rodgers and Rose (2002) suggested the following:

- Do encourage children to join youth clubs, youth organizations, or other peer helper groups specifically for children of divorce.
- Do allow and encourage children to build relationships with neighbors and other caring adults for extra support and role modeling. (p. 1041)

“Anxiety comes about through feelings of abandonment, changes in living conditions, embarrassment, guilt, concern about additional separations, and a haunting fear of additional unknown trouble that must be lurking somewhere in the future” (“Getting Your Child Through This,” ¶ 11, 2003). Specifically, with anxiety, it is important for parents to deal with their own personal feelings and not to use their child as a counselor or confidant. Once this occurs, parents should be willing to listen to what their children's fears are, which may be repeated over and over again. Being honest in responding to children's fears is important. For instance, if a child is most anxious over whether Mommy or Daddy is ever coming back, parents may need to say they don't know for sure. Overall, giving a child a stable and loving environment is crucial. Anything parents can do to minimize the changes that occur during a divorce will help to ease a child's anxiety (“Getting Your Child Through This,” ¶15, 2003).

Summary

Divorce itself has been shown to directly affect children's lives, both before, during, and after the separation has occurred. Children may experience a sense of loss that is ongoing and may lead to internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. High levels of anxiety are often associated with children involved in family transitions such as divorce.

The research found consistently throughout the studies reviewed that family structure and

family processes both have an effect on child well-being. Specifically, children from divorced families displayed higher levels of anxiety than their counterparts from intact two-parented homes. Studies also showed that these children often have fewer close friends and are not as involved in activities as their counterparts. Academically, behaviorally, and socially, children from divorced families often experience a change in their overall well-being. Intervention strategies may be used to help children and their families adjust and cope to their newly formed family structure.

CHAPTER THREE

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

This final chapter reviews the purpose of the study and summarizes the findings resulting from the research. A critical analysis, including a critique of the findings and final conclusions, will be reported along with additional research recommendations for further studies.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to review, analyze, and draw conclusions literature on the impact of divorce on anxiety in elementary-aged children. The study examined other factors within the family structure that may contribute to increased anxiety. Within this study, intervention strategies were proposed to help guide divorced parents in assisting their children to adjusting to family transitions.

The history of divorce and its effects on school-aged children has been studied extensively. Divorce rates have been increasing steadily in the United States, with now over one million children each year experiencing its transitions.

Divorce is commonly associated with anxiety in children. When children encounter this transition in their lives, negative results may be produced. Various studies have found that lower academic performances, less school involvement, fewer friends, and more behavioral problems were associated with children experiencing divorce. High levels of anxiety were especially prevalent and correlated highly with children's overall well-being.

Several factors contributed to increased levels of anxiety in school-aged children from divorced households. Many of the studies examined parental conflict, family closeness,

socioeconomic status, and the age of the child during the divorce. These are only a few factors that have been associated with anxiety in children.

Intervention strategies were explored for parents to help assist their children. Studies have shown that above all influences, including friends and school, parents do have the greatest impact (Vandewater and Lansford, 1998; Yongmin, 2001; Rodgers and Rose, 2002; Kane, 2002; Videon, 2002). Intervention strategies included parents keeping children out of the middle of conflict between spouses, keeping an open and honest communication line, providing support in all areas, and maintaining routine and structure as much as possible.

In summary, various studies have explored the impact of divorce on anxiety, factors contributing to increased anxiety, and intervention strategies for alleviating anxiety. Findings included an overall consensus that divorce does affect anxiety levels in children, both long and short term. High levels of anxiety produce negative effects on children, along with multiple other factors. Some of these factors specifically include lower academic achievement, decreased levels of self-esteem, lower self-concept, and increased behavioral and social problems. Intervention strategies can be effective in lessening the anxiety levels that school-aged children of divorce may experience.

Conclusions

The fact remains that over one million children each year will experience the effects of divorce in the United States. Research findings have shown that these effects vary from child to child. Some children may experience short-term minimal effects, while other children may experience long-term detrimental effects. Not all children experience negative outcomes from divorce; however, approximately 25 percent do. These difficulties have been seen in children emotionally, socially, and cognitively. The majority of elementary-aged children in divorcing

families experience difficulties with high levels of anxiety, due to drastic changes and stressful situations.

Along with the act of divorce creating high levels of anxiety, studies have repeatedly shown that children who live in high conflict households show many of the same negative effects. In extreme cases, studies have uncovered that children fare better when parents divorce than when they live in constant stressful turmoil.

During this study, successful intervention strategies were found for parents to utilize in helping their children adjust to the changes accompanying divorce. These interventions were found to assist in decreasing high anxiety levels, not to necessarily prevent anxiety entirely.

Recommendations

This literature review showed that an abundance of research has been conducted on divorce and the effects divorce may produce. However, there seemed to be a shortage of studies conducted with elementary-aged children. The majority of studies were based on adolescents and young adults. The social lives of children were generally less well-studied than the social lives of adults. Also, studies on anxiety alone were rare, compared to the quantity of studies on academics and overall well-being.

As a result of this review, several recommendations have emerged. One recommendation would be to carry out additional studies to more clearly understand the relationship between divorce and anxiety in children. Due to the time constraints, a study was not conducted by the researcher to investigate the effects of divorce on anxiety in school-aged children. A longitudinal study would highly benefit the study of divorce and effects over time. Not only are school-aged children affected in the short term by the act of divorce, but research shows that effects may be long-term in nature.

The second recommendation would be to explore various intervention strategies more closely to determine their effectiveness in aiding in children's well-being. Also, researching effective intervention strategies specifically for parents who are experiencing divorce and raising children would be advantageous.

Finally, there is a need for further study on the topic of what other factors are associated with increasing levels of anxiety in children of divorce. Some areas that should be studied include peer influences, extended family support, step-parent involvement, and child activity participation. By researching these factors more closely, intervention strategies may be more effective.

Overall, gaining knowledge of specific reactions of school-aged children to parental divorce is a beneficial and crucial component to planning and creating effective interventions. The overall well-being of children and families can benefit greatly from these and other future studies.

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APPENDIX

Children and Adult Book List

The following is a list of children's book available for children experiencing their parents' divorce.

- Beyer, R., & Winchester, K. (2001). *What in the world do you do when your parents divorce?* Free Spirit Publishing, Inc.
- Blume, J. (1978). *It's not the end of the world.* Scarsdale, NY: Bradbury Press.
- Boyd, C. (1983). *Chevrolet Saturdays.* Simon and Schuster.
- Brown, L.K., & Brown, M. (1990). *Dinosaurs divorce: A guide for changing families.* Little, Brown & Company.
- Coleman, W.L. (1998). *What children need to know when parents get divorced.* Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House.
- Danziger, P. (1997) *The divorce express.* Putnam Publishing Group.
- Gardner, R. (1985). *The boys and girls book about divorce.* Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group.
- Girard, L. (1987). *At daddy's on Saturdays.* Morton, IL: Albert Whitman & Company.
- Goff, B. (1985). *Where is daddy?: The story of a divorce.* New York, NY: Beacon Press.
- Grunsell, A. (1990). *Divorce. Let's talk about it.* Watts Franklin.
- Holub, J. (2001). *Cinderdog and the wicked stepcat.* Albert Whitman.
- Holyoke, N., & Nash, S. (1999). *Help! A girl's guide to divorce and stepfamilies.* Middleton, WI: Pleasant Company Publications.
- Johnson, J. (1999). *Everything you need to know about your parents' divorce.* Rosen Publishing.

- Johnson, J., & O'Neill, C. (1998). *How do I feel about my stepfamily?* Brookfield, Ct: Copper Beach Books.
- Kimball, G. (1994). *How to survive your parents' divorce: Kids' advice to kids.* Chico, CA: Equality Press.
- Lansky, V. (1998). *It's not your fault, Koko Bear: A read-together book for parents & young children during divorce.* Minnetonka, MN: Book Peddlers.
- Lindsey, J.W. (2000). *Do I have a daddy?* Buena Park, CA: Morning Glory Press.
- Mayle, P. (1980). *Divorce can happen to the nicest people.* Indianapolis, IN: MacMillian Publishing Company.
- Moser, A., & Melton, D. (2000). *Don't fall apart on Saturdays!: The children's divorce-survival book.* Landmark Editions, Inc.
- Osman, T. (1990). *Where has daddy gone?* Hambleton-Hill Publishers.
- Prokip, M. (1996). *Divorce happens to the nicest kids.* Alegra House Publishers.
- Ransom, J.F. (2000). *I don't want to talk about it: A story about divorce for young children.* American Psychological Association.
- Rogers, F., & Judkis, J. (1996). *Let's talk about it: Divorce.* Pittsburg, PA: Family Communications, Inc.
- Rubin, J. (2002). *My mom and dad don't live together anymore.* American Psychological Association.
- Spelman, C., & Parkinson, K. (2001). *Mama and daddy bears divorce.* Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company.
- Stern, E.S., Stern, Z., & Stern E. (1997). *Divorce is not the end of the world: Zoe's and Evan's coping guide for kids.* Ten Speed Press.

- Stinson, K. (1988). *Mom and dad don't live together anymore*. Westport, CT: Firefly Books.
- Thomas, S. (1997). *Divorced, but still my parents*. Springboard Publications.

The following is a list of adult books available for parents experiencing divorce.

- Ahrons, C.R. (1995). *The good divorce*. Harper Collins Press.
- Condrell, K.N., & Small, L.L. (1998). *Be a great divorced dad*. New York, NY: St Martin's Griffin.
- Darnall, D. (1998). *Divorce casualties: Protecting your children from parental alienation*. Taylor Publishing.
- Diamond, S.A. (1986). *Helping children of divorce: A handbook for parents and teachers*. New York: Scoken Books.
- Engber, A., & Klungness, L. (2000). *The complete single mother: Reassuring answers to your most challenging concerns*. Holbrook, MA: Adams Media.
- Forward, S., & Buck, C. (2002). *Toxic parents: Overcoming their hurtful legacy and reclaiming your life*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing.
- Gardener, R.A. (1991). *The parents book about divorce*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Garrity, C.B., & Baris, M.A. (1997). *Caught in the middle: Protecting the children of high-conflict divorce*. Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Hannibal, M.E., & Gyemant, J.I. (2002). *Good parenting through your divorce: How to recognize, encourage, and respond to your child's feelings and help them get through your divorce*. Avalon Publishing Group.
- Hart, A.D. (1996). *Helping children survive divorce: What to expect, how to help*. Thomas Nelson.

- Hoerner, T. (2002). *The ultimate survival guide for single fathers*. Harbinger Press.
- Isolina, R. (1997). *Mom's house, dad's house: Making two homes for your child*. Indianapolis, IN: MacMillan Publishing Company.
- James, J.W., Matthews, L.L., & Friedman, R. (2002). *When children grieve: For adults to help children deal with death, divorce, pet loss, moving, and other losses*. Harper Collins Publishing.
- Jewett, C. (1994). *Helping children cope with separation and loss*. Boston: Harvard Common Press.
- Karst, P. (2000). *Single mother's survival guide*. Crossing Press, Inc.
- Lansky, V. (1996). *Vicki lansky's divorce book for parents: Helping your children cope with divorce and its aftermath*. Book Peddlers.
- Long, N., Forehand, R., & R.L., Forehand. (2002). *Making divorce easier on your child: 50 effective ways to help children adjust*. McGraw-Hill.
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- Neuman, G.M., & Romanowski, P. (1999). *Helping kids cope with divorce the sandcastles way*. New York: Random House.
- Ricci, I. (1997). *Mom's house, dad's house: A complete guide for parents who are separated, divorced, or living apart*. Simon & Schuster Trade.
- Rogers, F. & Judkis, J. (1996). *Let's talk about it: Divorce*. Penguin Group.
- Rosenwald, G., Smith J.D., & Abrahms, S. (1998). *What every woman should know about divorce and custody*. Berkley Publisher.
- Senn, L.C. (1999). *Your pocket divorce guide*. Pen Central Press.

- Shomberg, E.F., & Shimberb, E.F. (1999). *Blending families: A guide for parents, stepparents, and everyone building a successful new family*. New York: Berkley Publishing Group.
- Stahl, P.M. (2000). *Parenting after divorce: A guide to resolving conflicts and meeting your children's needs*. Impact Publishers.
- Talia, S. (1997). *How to avoid the divorce from hell, and dance together at your daughter's wedding*. Nexus Publishing.
- Trafford, A. (1992) *Crazy time: Surviving divorce & building a new life*. Harper Collins Publisher.
- Trozzi, M., & Massimini, K. (1999). *Talking with children about loss: Words, strategies, and wisdom to help children cope with death, divorce, and other difficult times*. Berkley Publishing Group.
- Ventura, J., & Reed, M. (1998). *Divorce for dummies*. Wiley, John, & Sons, Inc.
- Wallerstein, J.S. (1990). *2nd Chances: Men, women, and children a decade after divorce*. Houghton Mifflin Com.
- Wallerstein, J., & Blakeslee, S. (2003). *What about the kids? Raising your children before, during, and after divorce*. Hyperion.
- Wallerstein, J.S., & Kelly, J.B. (1996). *Surviving the breakup: How children and parents cope with divorce*. Basic Books.
- Wolf, A.E. (1998). *Why did you have to get a divorce? and when can I get a hamster?: A guide to parenting through a divorce*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Woodhouse, V. (2002). *Divorce and money: How to make the best financial decisions during divorce*. Nolo Press.