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Becker, Jennifer R. *Children of Divorce: How School Counselors Can Help*

Abstract

Divorce affects over one million children each year in the United States. In fact, it is predicted that by the age of 18, about 40% of children will come from a divorced household. While not all children of divorce require counseling services, school counselors need to be aware of the profound impact divorce can have on children.

School counselors need to be mindful of the most commonly seen emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and academic reactions of divorce, such as guilt, aggression, and academic failure. They need to be aware of the protective factors that reduce the negative impact divorce has on children, such as low parental conflict and high self-efficacy. This knowledge will then guide school counselors in identifying students who need assistance, so they can offer them interventions, such as the Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) and bibliotherapy, to improve their academic, personal, social, and career development.

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Chapter I: Introduction

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (cited in Connolly & Green, 2009), divorce affects over one million children each year in the United States. Connolly and Green (2009) predict that by the age of 18, about 40% of children will come from a divorced household. Due to the large number of children coming from divorced households, it is important that school counselors understand the implications that divorce may have on children, as well as the different factors that make children resilient after a separation. School counselors should also be aware of different approaches and interventions they can use to help improve the outcomes of students who have experienced a divorce.

Research shows that after a divorce, children often experience psychological, behavioral, social, emotional, and academic difficulties (Burns, 2010). In some cases, children do not anticipate the separation, leaving them feeling vulnerable and confused when it happens. These children then tend to worry about what will happen to them in the future, and they may suffer from higher levels of depression, anxiety, and interpersonal difficulties more than others who come from intact families (Hoyt, Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, & Alpert-Gillis, cited in Pedro-Carroll, 2005). These emotional and behavioral reactions can present themselves not only in the home, but in the school as well, which can have a detrimental impact on their academic performance.

While many children receive help after a divorce, children who are unable to express and talk about their grief in an appropriate manner may suffer life-long consequences. As they grow older, Amato (cited in Pedro-Carroll, 2005) found that children from divorced households are at a heightened risk of “lower socioeconomic status, poorer subjective well-being, increased marital problems, and a greater likelihood of divorce in one’s own marriage” (p. 53). To improve their

well-being in the present and future, it is, therefore, very important that school counselors work with students who are having a hard time after their parent's divorce.

Trozzi (cited in Burns, 2010) would go as far to say that divorce is "the 'death' of the family that a child has known" (p. 29). In fact, Burns (2010) found many children respond to a divorce as they would a death for it is "grief that keeps 'giving,'" because it gives children the continuous hope that their parents might one day reunite (Trozzi, cited in Burns, 2010, p. 29).

In addition to suffering the primary loss of losing a two parent household, after a divorce, children suffer from secondary losses as well. Secondary losses are "additional losses experienced as a consequence of a primary loss" (Burns, 2010, p. 11). For example, after a divorce, children may have to relocate to a different school or home, and they may lose their connections with friends and family. They may also have to leave behind inanimate objects such as favorite household items.

According to Perry (n.d.), the reactions children may present after a divorce may depend on the "nature of the relationship, the history of other losses, the vulnerability of the particular child, the support system available, and other factors" (para. 4). Other factors may include the children's personality, culture, and developmental level (Burns, 2010).

Due to the severity of the emotional, behavioral, and academic reactions associated with divorce, school counselors can play a crucial role in helping children cope with their grief. It is the ethical responsibility of school counselors to respond to the academic, career, personal, and social development of all students. They are the individuals in a school building who are able to give their time and attention to students who have experienced a loss. While parents and teachers are strong support systems for children, sometimes after a divorce, parents are going through their own grieving process and are not yet ready to address their children's needs. Teachers can

lend a listening ear as well, but are usually not trained or do not have the time to deal with every one of their students' personal problems. That is why it is so important for school counselors to be able to identify students who have experienced a divorce and support their changing thoughts and feelings.

There are many ways school counselors can help students who have experienced a divorce. First, there are research-based interventions. The Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP), for example, is a preventative school-based intervention curriculum that helps children cope with parental divorce (Pedro-Carroll, cited in Connolly & Green, 2009). There is also the Children's Support Group (CSG), a cognitive-behavioral intervention focused on offering emotional support and teaching effective coping strategies surrounding divorce (Stolberg & Mahler, cited in Connolly & Green, 2009).

School counselors can help students of divorce by using other therapeutic interventions as well, such as bibliotherapy, art therapy, and play therapy. These interventions can be implemented individually or in groups, depending on the situation.

Children who experience a divorce are negatively impacted in many ways and need the continuous support of adults to help them through the grief process. A school counselor is a great resource students can turn to if they are suffering. Without the support of someone like a school counselor, children going through a divorce can experience severe consequences. In the end, school counselors have the power to help students cope with feelings, so they can identify the loss, process it, and grow from it.

Statement of the Problem

Unfortunately, divorce is becoming more and more common in our society than ever before. In fact, "one out of every two marriages today ends in divorce," and sadly, children are

usually involved (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2011, p. 1). Since divorce can have a huge impact on children, it is important school counselors are prepared to help those who need assistance. This includes recognizing the most commonly seen emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and academic reactions of children from divorced families, understanding the different factors which make children resilient after a divorce, and identifying the different types of approaches and interventions school counselors can use to help improve the outcomes of children after a divorce.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify ways school counselors can help children of divorce within the school setting. The information presented in this literature review was gathered during the 2012-2013 academic school year.

Research Questions

The following research questions will be addressed in this literature review.

1. What are the most commonly seen emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and academic reactions of children of divorce?
2. What factors help make children resilient after a divorce?
3. What approaches and interventions can school counselors use to help children after a divorce?

Definition of Terms

To improve the clarity of this literature review, the following terms are defined.

Divorce. “The legal dissolution of a marriage” (Divorce, 2008, p. 340).

Child(ren). “A person not yet of age” (Child, n.d.).

Protective Factors. “Network of familial and social supports that guide and protect children and adolescents” (Burns, 2010, p. 97).

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

There are several assumptions and limitations to this literature review. It is assumed the majority of the references used for this literature review are reliable, peer-reviewed, and no more than ten years old. It is also assumed that the words-children and students-will be used interchangeably throughout the paper to address individuals from a divorced household between the ages of five and eighteen.

This literature review also has some limitations. It is likely the sources used in this study will be limited to the UW-Stout library databases. It is also likely the research found in this study will not be applicable to every student, because all children from divorced situations respond differently.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter will include the most commonly seen emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and academic reactions of children from divorced families, the different factors that make children resilient after a divorce, as well as the different approaches and interventions school counselors can use to help children from divorced households.

Reactions to Divorce

After a divorce, children may experience a “series of life-altering events” triggering a wide variety of reactions influenced by factors such as personality, culture, and development (Burns, 2010, p. 29). According to Burns (2010), these reactions should not go unnoticed. The following section will describe the most commonly seen emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and academic reactions of children between the ages of 5-12 and 12-18 after a divorce.

Children Ages 5-12. According to Oltjenbruns (cited in Burns, 2010), after a divorce, children between the ages of five and eight tend to engage in magical thinking. They start to believe wishes can come true and confuse reality with their imagination. They tend to believe they have the power to reunite their parents.

At the same time, children at this age tend to blame themselves for their parents’ separation, creating “unwarranted guilt” (Burns; Trozzi, cited in Burns 2010, p. 30). They believe they could have done or said something to prevent their parents from divorcing (Burns, 2010). Then, when the noncustodial parent does not return home, they emotionally and behaviorally express their sorrows, since they do not have the same vocabulary as adults to explain how they feel (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006). This makes coping with the loss more difficult for them.

Externalizing behaviors for five to nine year olds may include aggression and withdrawal, as well as reoccurring nightmares (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006). They may also “express frustration and anger and experience a sense of powerlessness” (Burns; Trozzi, cited in Burns 2010, p. 30). As children reach the ages between nine and eleven, however, they start to develop a more concrete view of divorce (Morgan & Roberts, 2010). They are more likely to ask “What if?” questions, such as, “What if I do not make any friends at the new school?” or “What would life be like if mom and dad didn’t divorce?” (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006, p. 42). Sense of powerlessness also tends to cause children from divorced families to remove themselves from friends while they grieve (Black, 2005). According to Hetherington and Kelly (cited in Connolly & Green, 2009), children from divorced families between the ages of five and eleven are two times more likely to display externalizing behaviors than children from non-divorced families.

In addition to externalizing behaviors, five to nine year olds from divorced families demonstrate internalizing behaviors; however, they are not as prevalent as externalizing behaviors and academic difficulties (Amato; Hetherington; Hetherington et al., cited in Connolly & Green, 2009). Internalizing behaviors may include “feelings of sadness, anxiety, confusion, fear, and worries of being ignored or ostracized” (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006, p. 42). They may display higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem compared to children from non-divorced families (Connolly & Green, 2009). Children in this age group may also experience “loyalty conflicts between parents, and yearn for the parent who no longer resides in the family home” (Amato & Keith, cited in Connolly & Green, 2009, p. 5).

In the classroom, children between the ages of five and nine may demonstrate noncompliant behaviors, such as disobedience, inappropriate classroom conduct, and decreased self-regulation (Hetherington & Elmore, cited in Connolly & Green, 2009). They may also have

a hard time concentrating in class and show a decline in grades (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006).

Children from divorced families are “at risk for lower academic performance” than children from non-divorced families (Hetherington & Elmore; McLanahan; Mulholland, Watt, Philpott, & Sarlin, cited in Connolly & Green, 2009, p. 6). Teachers reported that students who came from divorced families also had “heightened anxiety surrounding academic failure, the inability to reflect, irrelevant talk, and inattention” (Emery, cited in Connolly & Green, 2009, p. 6). It was also reported that students from divorced families “attended school less, watched more television, did less homework, and had less parental supervision of their schoolwork,” which might impact their school performance (McLanahan, cited in Connolly & Green, 2009, p. 7).

Children Ages 12- 18. When children between the ages of twelve and eighteen experience a divorce, they suffer from many emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and academic problems as well. At the emotional and cognitive level, twelve to seventeen year olds may develop depression (Burns; Trozzi, cited in Burns 2010). Like five to eleven year olds, they may also feel regret after a loss, thinking of what they should have done, as well as feel “confused, powerless, helpless, [and] frightened” (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006, p. 40).

At the behavioral level, Black (2005) found that compared to twelve to fourteen year olds, fifteen to seventeen year olds tend to grieve in more adult-like ways; however, both express their grief through acting out or impulsive behaviors. They may start to abuse substances, engage in promiscuous and delinquent behaviors, and withdraw from friends and group activities (Black, 2005). According to Amato (cited in Portnoy, 2008), children between the ages of twelve to eighteen are “two to three times more likely to engage in adolescent delinquent behavior” than children from two-parent households (p. 128). They are also more likely to use drugs and alcohol than their peers (Jeynes, cited in Portnoy, 2008). Adolescent females from divorced parent

homes, in particular, are more likely to be sexually active and have more sex partners than adolescent females from intact families (Hetherington & Kelly; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, cited in Portnoy, 2008).

Academically, after a divorce, children between the ages of twelve and eighteen tend to display low school attendance and demonstrate poor school performance (Black, 2005, p. 30). For example, Frisco, Muller, and Frank (2007) found that children of divorce had lower grades and failed more classes than children from intact families. They have also been found to “score lower on academic tests, have lower educational aspirations, are two to three times more likely to drop out of school, and eventually achieve lower levels of education and lower adult occupational status” (Amato & Keith; Sun & Li; Ross & Mirowsky; Kelly & Emery, cited in Portnoy, 2008, p. 128).

Protective Factors

While many children come from divorced families, not all of them experience long term emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and academic difficulties. There are many factors that prevent long term problems. These are known as protective factors. According to the American Psychological Association [APA] (cited in Burns, 2010), “how the parents handle the divorce process is a crucial factor in determining how children will cope and react” (p. 30). For example, if the parents continually fight and verbally attack each other on a regular basis, their children suffer “greater emotional insecurity” (APA, cited in Burns, 2010, p. 30). According to Portnoy (2008), about “twenty to twenty-five percent of divorced couples continue the conflict post-divorce” (p. 129). If the parents, however, act civilly toward each other and resolve their disagreements, by compromising and negotiating, their children’s fear, distress, and other negative symptoms start to reduce (APA, cited in Burns, 2010).

In addition to parent factors, the personality factors of children have a huge impact on how they react to the divorce. If children have positive, active coping strategies, such as good problem solving skills and “positive restructuring,” they are usually more capable of managing the divorce situation, compared to children who have a low self-esteem and self-control (Sandler et al., cited in Connolly & Green, 2009, p. 7). They also respond more positively to divorce if they have a “realistic appraisal of control” (Connolly & Green, 2009, p. 8). This means they have a good concept of what they can have control over and do not struggle for control when it is unattainable.

Finally, children cope better after a divorce depending on the parent’s parenting style and types of counseling services available to the family. The authoritative parenting style results in better outcomes for children after a divorce than other parenting styles. An authoritative parent is controlling but also listens to their children’s’ point of view. In addition to an authoritative parenting style, if the family has counseling services available and a strong support system, the children are more likely to respond better to the divorce (Amato; Amato & Keith; Hetherington; Hetherington et al.; Kelly & Emery; Simons & Associates, cited in Connolly & Green, 2009).

Approaches and Interventions

There are many approaches and interventions school counselors can use to help students after a divorce.

Approaches. According to Burns (2010), if students seek or require counseling services after a divorce, it is important that school counselors gather as much information about the divorce as possible before they work with those particular students. They should also be “familiar with the developmental, cultural, and socio-emotional characteristics” of the student (Burns, 2010, p. 53). Next, a school counselor should discover how closely the students relate

with both parents, what the students already know, and find out in detail how the students were informed about the divorce (Burns, 2010). This will help school counselors pinpoint the most effective interventions to use with their students.

When beginning the counseling relationship with students who have experienced a divorce, school counselors should ensure honesty. When clarifying divorce details, school counselors should not prettify their explanations. Burns (2010) recommended that if school counselors do not have an answer to a question, they should honestly tell their students “I don’t know,” which will build a more trusting relationship (p. 54). Depending on the students’ developmental ages, Mannino (cited in Burns, 2010) also recommended school counselors spread out the details surrounding the divorce over time to make it easier for students to comprehend.

Children of Divorce Intervention Program. The Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) is a preventative school-based curriculum that helps reduce the emotional and behavioral problems associated with divorce in children (Pedro-Carroll, 2005). The program includes four different curriculums. There is one for kindergarten and first graders, second and third graders, fourth through sixth graders, and seventh and eighth graders (Pedro-Carroll; Pedro-Carroll, Alpert-Gillis, & Sterling; Pedro-Carroll, Sutton, & Black, cited in Connolly & Green, 2009). Children are taught effective coping strategies they can use to manage their reactions toward the divorce, as well as receive continuous group support (Pedro-Carroll, 2005).

Research shows that the CODIP resulted in “reductions in shy-anxious behaviors and learning issues, and improvements in peer sociability, frustration tolerance, compliance with rules, and adaptive assertiveness” (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, cited in Connolly & Green, 2009, p. 15). After using CODIP, parents also found the program helped reduce the blame students felt

toward the divorce, increased competence levels, and reduced anxiety levels (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, cited in Connolly & Green, 2009).

Children's Support Group. The Children's Support Group (CSG) is a fourteen week, cognitive-behavioral intervention program. It is designed for children between seven and thirteen years old, who come from a divorced household. The program is divided into two sections. The first part of the intervention is emotional support. The students are provided opportunities to talk about underlying issues following the divorce. Besides openly initiating discussion about it, they are given the opportunity to express emotions and feelings through "cartoon and pictorial stimuli, writing newspaper articles, and [playing] games" (Stolberg & Mahler, cited in Connolly & Green, 2009, p. 17).

The second part of the program is the educational piece. It focuses on teaching and modeling coping and skill-building strategies surrounding problem solving, anger control, impulse control, communication, and relaxation (Stolberg & Mahler; Emery, Kitzmann, & Waldron, cited in Connolly & Green, 2009). Research shows the CSG helps reduce internalizing and externalizing problems of children and improves their relationships at home (Pedro-Carroll, 2005). It specifically improves the self-concept and adaptive social skills of children (Stolberg & Mahler, cited in Connolly & Green, 2009).

Bibliotherapy. School counselors can also use bibliotherapy to help students through a divorce. Bibliotherapy uses different types of literature, such as fiction books, to help students through a loss. According to Gladding and Gladding (cited in Malchiodi, 2008), bibliotherapy can be either reactive or interactive. In reactive bibliotherapy, children are given a book to read on their own that has a storyline or character they relate to, which can help them work through their own thoughts and feelings surrounding the loss. There is also interactive bibliotherapy. In

interactive bibliotherapy, school counselors and students read and discuss the book together and then relate it to the students' particular circumstances (Gladding & Gladding, cited in Malchiodi, 2008).

According to Morgan and Roberts (2010), when using bibliotherapy, school counselors should consider the students' "cognitive ability, age, needs, and situation" (p. 212). If a school counselor does not take these considerations into account, Morgan and Roberts (2010) believe bibliotherapy will not be therapeutic. Malchiodi (2008) also suggested school counselors read the books recommended to students in advance, as well as take in any cultural considerations pertaining to the student, to match the students' needs. The books chosen for students should provide them "comfort and reassurance, along with explanation and insight, and be realistic" (Morgan & Roberts, 2010, p. 213). In the end, bibliotherapy can help clarify topics for students that may be confusing to them and hard to discuss, as well as help students feel like they are not alone during this trying time in their life (Morgan & Roberts, 2010; Malchiodi, 2008).

According to bibliotherapy researcher and practitioner William Pardeck (cited in McMillen & Pehrsson, 2010), "the benefits of appropriately implementing bibliotherapy are particularly salient for children experiencing divorce" (p. 30). While bibliotherapy can be highly effective with adolescent students, it is widely used with students between the ages of five and twelve years old. It is particularly useful for this age group because unlike adolescents, younger children have a harder time comprehending concepts like divorce or are just starting to understand it. They also have a harder time expressing their emotions, since they typically do not have the vocabulary to properly express their thoughts and feelings (Weimin, 2007). Weimin (2007) recommends the books *I Don't Want to Talk about It* by Jeanie Franz Ransom and *Miss Rabbit* by Roni Schotter for children five to eight.

McMillen and Pehrsson (2010) looked at the divorce literature used by school and mental health counselors in the past thirty years with students between the ages of eight and twelve years old. They generated a list and found the top three fiction and nonfiction books most highly recommended. The fiction books McMillen and Pehrsson (2010) recommended were *Dinosaur Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families* written and illustrated by Laurene Krasny Brown and Marc Brown, *What Can I Do? A Book for Children of Divorce* by Danielle Lowry, and finally, *How it Feels When Parents Divorce* by Jill Krementz. The nonfiction books McMillen and Pehrsson (2010) recommended were *How Tia Lola Came to Visit Stay* by Julia Alvarez, *Amber Brown is Green with Envy* by Paula Danziger, and *Sahara Special* by Esme Raji Codell. These are books school counselors can effectively use with other interventions to help students of divorce.

Art Therapy. In addition to bibliotherapy, school counselors can use art therapy to help students from divorced families. According to Davis (cited in Finn, 2003), art therapy has four main goals: “awareness, expression of energy and emotion, working through a problem, and creativity and joy” (p. 157). Overall, it is beneficial to children in many ways. Developmentally, children, especially young children, do not have the vocabulary or reasoning ability to talk about their thoughts and feelings through verbal expression. Art, on the other hand, like bibliotherapy, gives children the medium to express themselves in a developmentally appropriate way (Finn, 2003). Art can also help children “recognize the range and depth of their emotions evoked by loss” (Finn, 2003, p. 158). Loss can elicit some very strong emotions that are difficult to fully express in words. Art gives children the opportunity to express emotions in a nonthreatening way and in many different avenues (Dalley; Zambelli & DeRosa, cited in Finn, 2003). Finally, art

also has the ability to help initiate conversations in a therapeutic relationship by discussing the images depicted in the artwork (Finn, 2003).

Different types of art can be used in therapy. For example, students could paint, color, draw, sculpt, or photograph to describe their thoughts and feelings. When introducing art therapy into a session, school counselors could take two approaches. First, a directive approach can be taken. This occurs when school counselors focus a session on a particular topic and direct students to artistically express particular thoughts and emotions. School counselors could also take a nondirective approach, in which school counselors allow students to direct the session and choose what they would like to portray in their artwork. Both approaches are used; however, the directive approach is most commonly used because of the limited time school counselors can have with students (Goodman, cited in Morgan & Roberts, 2010).

Finn (2003) ran an art therapy group for students between the ages of eleven and thirteen years old. In the group, students were asked to use different mediums of art, like drawings, paintings, drama, music, and collages to achieve the objectives of the different sessions. For example, they drew self-portraits and portraits of loved ones and illustrated different emotions experienced after the divorce. The goals of the group included the following:

1. To better understand the different emotions I feel.
2. To realize we can learn from difficulties I face in life.
3. To understand the stages of grief and loss.
4. To understand the emotions I feel when I go through a loss.
5. To learn the difference between negative and positive ways of coping with loss

(Finn, 2003, p. 163).

Finn (2003) found all participants believed they had accomplished each goal. They ranked each goal on 4-point scale, with four indicating that the goal was completely met. Every participant put either a three or four for each goal (Finn, 2003).

Saunders and Saunders (cited in Finn, 2003) also did an art therapy study using ninety-four children and adolescents between the ages of two and sixteen. The participants exhibited a variety of problems, including “aggression, family violence, divorce, low self-esteem, and poor school performance” (Saunders & Saunders, cited in Finn, 2003, p. 158). After utilizing art therapy, Saunders and Saunders (cited in Finn, 2003) found “significant positive changes in the therapeutic relationship and significant decreases in the severity and frequency of the reported problem behaviors” (p. 158-159). In fact, they found 93% of the students partially or completely met their group goals (Saunders & Saunders, cited in Finn, 2003, p. 159). Art therapy, therefore, can be an effective strategy to use with students who need support after a divorce.

Play Therapy. In addition to art therapy, school counselors can use play therapy to assist children of divorce. Like art therapy, play therapy allows children the chance to safely express their feelings and emotions, surrounding a divorce, in an interactive and creative way.

Lowenstein (2009) believes in order for children to cope with a divorce, several topics need to be addressed, such as: “developing effective coping skills, facilitating the appropriate expression of feelings, clarifying divorce-related misconceptions, expressing anger through appropriate outlets, disengaging from parental conflict, eliminating self-blame for the divorce, and enhancing positive perceptions of self” (p. 10).

The first activity Lowenstein (2009) recommends for children of divorce is The Basketball Game (adapted from Lowenstein, 2006). The game is designed to help students process their feelings and emotions and clear up any misunderstandings about the divorce. To

play the game, school counselors need a basketball hoop, basketball, beads or LEGOS, and divorce questions or Game Cards. The students are instructed to shoot the ball in the hoop. If they make the basket, they get three LEGOS or beads. If the students miss the basket, they have to answer one of the divorce questions. A question, for example, might be: “What is some reasons parents’ divorce? They were fighting a lot and couldn’t make up; they couldn’t fix their problems; they weren’t happy together anymore; they fell in love with someone else; they stopped being in love” (Lowenstein, 2009, p. 11). If they give an appropriate response, then they receive three LEGOS or beads. If they do not answer correctly, they shoot again for the chance to win more LEGOS or beads. In the end, the students use the LEGOS or beads in a project selected by the counselor (Lowenstein, 2009).

Lowenstein (2009) also recommends playing the game Click! Emotions and Emotions Bingo (adapted from Cotnoir, 2008) with children of divorce. To start the game, the school counselor and students brainstorm a list of emotions children may experience after a divorce. Then the school counselor would take a picture of the students displaying those emotions and talk about a time the students felt that way during or after the divorce. This works on expression of feelings (Lowenstein, 2009).

The game, My Parents Argue and I Feel Stuck in the Middle Marshmallow People (Lowenstein, 2006), helps children separate themselves from the conflict they may see their parents display. To start the game, the students complete some open-ended statements, such as “(1) My parents argue about...” or “(2) When my parents argue, I feel...” (Lowenstein, 2006, p. 11). Then the students would be directed to reenact arguments they witness their parents having, using marshmallow people. The students would build three marshmallow people with marshmallows, pretzel sticks, and icing, representing their mom, dad, and self. The school

counselor would then have the students model what they can do if they see their parents arguing again. For example, with the marshmallow child, they could practice leaving the room where their parents were arguing and use self-talk to reduce self-blame. In the end, the students would be allowed to eat their marshmallow figurations (Lowenstein, 2009).

The next game, *Getting Rid of Guilt* (Lowenstein, 2006), helps children reduce self-blame after a divorce by correcting inaccurate thoughts. First, students would be given cartoon scenarios. For each scenario, “there is a child who makes a guilt-ridden statement, and another child who responds with an appropriate challenge to that guilty statement” (Lowenstein, 2009, p. 11). For example, one cartoon may say “I made my parents’ divorce because I was bad,” while the other may say “Your parents divorced because their marriage was bad, not because you were bad” (Lowenstein, 2009, p. 12). Then the school counselor and students would discuss the responses to reduce self-blame and increase child adjustment (Lowenstein, 2009).

Students can also play the *Feeling Angry Play Dough Pounding* activity, in which the student pounds on play dough, while saying statements like “I am angry about my parents’ divorce because...” (Lowenstein, 2009, p. 12). This helps students practice releasing their anger and working through their problems in an appropriate way.

Finally, Lowenstein (2009) recommends using *The Coping with Divorce Game* (adapted from Lowenstein, 2006) to help students discover effective coping strategies to dealing with divorce. Students are given a series of questions they have to choose the right response for. For example, a question may be: “Brad does not like his father’s girlfriend and he is jealous of the time his father spends with her. (1) He should be mean to the girlfriend so she will stay away. (2) He should talk to his father about how he feels. (3) He should refuse to see his father until he

dumps his girlfriend.” (Lowenstein, 2009, p. 12). These are all effective play therapy techniques school counselors can use with students experiencing a divorce.

Chapter III: Summary, Critical Analysis, and Recommendations

This chapter will include a summary and critical analysis of the present literature review's findings. It will also include recommendations for further research and recommendations for school counselors surrounding childhood divorce.

Summary

Many school counselors will encounter students who come from divorced households in the school setting; therefore, it is imperative that school counselors are prepared to respond to the students who need extra support throughout the divorce. First, it is essential that school counselors are able to identify the most commonly seen emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and academic reactions of children from divorced households. Research shows that both five to twelve years olds and twelve to seventeen year olds believe they could have done or said something to prevent their parents from divorcing. Typically, five to eleven year olds do not have the same vocabulary as twelve to seventeen year olds to explain how they feel about a loss, making coping with a loss more difficult (Burns, 2010; Fiorini & Mullen, 2006).

When children between the ages of twelve and seventeen experience a divorce, they suffer similar emotional and behavioral problems as five to eleven year olds, such as depression, anger, aggression, and problems in school; however, they are more likely to engage in more at-risk behaviors, such as drug abuse. They are also expected to take on more adult-like responsibilities (Black, 2005).

While divorce can evoke some powerful emotional, behavioral, and academic reactions from children, there are many factors that prevent long-term problems. They are known as preventive factors. Children from divorced families have better outcomes when the parents have resolved their conflicts, have an authoritative parenting style, and offer their children continuous

support. Children also experience better outcomes when they have active coping strategies and a good concept of what they have control over (Connolly & Green, 2009).

Even with protective factors in place, it is important that school counselors understand the different approaches and interventions that can be used to help children in divorce situations. Two interventions school counselors can use to help children after a divorce are the Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) and the Children's Support Group (CSG). Both offer students therapeutic support and teach students effective coping strategies through and after the divorce.

In addition to doing research-based interventions, school counselors can use bibliotherapy. In bibliotherapy, students read a book that pertains to their particular loss. It could be a fiction book, non-fiction book, bibliography, or autobiography. The goal is for the students to relate to the storyline or characters in a way that helps them develop insight into their own lives and situation that will help them through a particular loss.

Besides bibliotherapy, school counselors can use art and play therapy. Art gives children the medium to express themselves in a developmentally appropriate way (Finn, 2003). Different types of art can be used in therapy. For example, students can use paints, markers, clay, or photography to describe their thoughts and feelings. Play therapy uses games and toys as an outlet for students to process and describe their experiences and feelings, develop positive coping techniques, increase self-esteem, and understand the divorce process (Lowenstein, 2009).

Critical Analysis and Recommendations for Future Research

This literature review presented several different interventions school counselors could use to help students of divorce. It became evident; however, that there is a lack of evidence-based programs in schools to assist students from divorced families. The Children of Divorce

Intervention Program (CODIP) and the Children's Support Group were the only school-based curriculums found that were research-based and offered a complete curriculum for school counselors to use in the school-setting (Connolly & Green, 2009; Pedro-Carroll, 2005).

In fact, research regarding school-based interventions for children of divorce, in general, was extremely difficult to find. In many studies, participants exhibited a variety of problems besides divorce. For example, Saunders and Saunders (cited in Finn, 2003) used ninety-four children and adolescents experiencing "aggression, family violence, divorce, low self-esteem, and poor school performance" in their study on art therapy (p. 158). While aggression, low self-esteem, and poor school performance are considered reactions associated with divorce, the study did not specifically focus on children from divorced households. As a result, the interventions and strategies may not be completely applicable to children of divorce.

It seems that due to the lack of research-based programs and divorce-specific research studies, children going through a divorce may not be receiving the proper school-based interventions necessary for their recovery; therefore, it would be important to have additional research conducted on school-based intervention programs.

Recommendations for School Counselors

While it is important that school counselors are prepared to work with students of divorce and have the right interventions to address their needs, it is also important for school counselors to judge whether or not they are qualified to work with these students. According to Grollman (cited in Burns, 2010), school counselors should refer students who have demonstrated prolonged "physical, emotional, or psychological distress" to mental health professionals who are qualified in divorce counseling (p. 2). School counselors should consider not only their credentials, but also their personal history when counseling these students. School counselors

should be aware of the “relationship between [their] experiences and those of the students” (Burns, 2010, p. 3). If a school counselor becomes too involved in the student’s loss or has personal history with it that may affect their professional judgment, they should consider referring the student to another school counselor or professional agency.

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