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# How do School Social Workers Provide Support to Children of Divorce?

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How do School Social Workers Provide Support to Children of Divorce?

by

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation

**Abstract**

The ongoing impact of divorce on elementary school-aged children has been associated with lower academic achievement, behavioral problems, relational issues, depression, and risk of developing short-and long-term mental health symptoms. School-based divorce support groups are one way children may receive support to cope with ongoing stressors associated with growing up in divorced or separated families. The purpose of this project was to explore elementary school social workers perspectives regarding what services they are able to provide to children who come from divorced, separated, or never married households and at what frequency. If divorce groups were offered in an elementary school setting questions were asked regarding what makes an effective group, and if groups were not run questions were asked regarding what services school social workers can provide. Using a qualitative design, interviews were conducted with nine elementary school social workers, located in the Twin-Cities area and greater Minnesota. This study found that elementary school social workers indicate the use of engagement activities such as group activities and play helpful components of engaging students in family change groups. Participants also shared benefits elementary school-aged children derive from group such as learning coping skills and normalizing divorce experiences. Another area participants identified is a change in how elementary school social workers provide support with a shift in elementary social work roles and funding. These findings indicate that further study into how elementary school social workers roles and funding may have changed the landscape of social services available to children from divorced, separated or never married families is needed. A larger sample size and nationwide sampling for participants is recommended.

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**How do School Social Workers Provide Support to Children of Divorce?**

**Introduction**

Elementary school-aged children of separated or divorced parents experience a range of problems and stress. Children of divorce are affected socially, cognitively, and emotionally from the stressful change and may experience feelings of loss, stress, confusion, anger, denial, and sadness (Garvin, Leber, & Kalter, 1991). As a result, children of divorce may be at higher risk for anxiety, depression, acting out (including sexually acting out), lower self-concept, poor academic performance, and problems relating to peers as well as to their parents (Amato, DeLucia-Waack, Gerrity, & Keith, 2001; Keith, 1993).

These stressors associated with children of divorced affect a significant number of children. Statistics support the scope and prevalence of divorce in the lives of elementary school-aged children. The prevalence of divorce among the families of elementary school-aged children is common, as 50% of marriages in the United Sates end in divorce (Bureau of Census as cited by Johnson, Throngen, & Smith, 2001). Forty percent of children will face their parents' divorce by age 18 (DeLucia-Waack & Gerrity, 2001). Every year the parents of one million children will divorce (Johnson, Thorngren, and Smith, 2001). On a local level, Minnesota's divorce rates are on par with national statistics: every 35 minutes a couple's marriage ends in divorce (Minnesota Department of Health, 2011).

Overall, statistics show that children from divorced households are more likely than children from non-divorced households to experience the effects of psychosocial

stressors in their lives.  Children from divorced families more often reside in female-headed households and more often live in poverty (Berhman & Quinn, 1994). This population more often encounters school-related problems such as higher rates of truancy and decreased overall academic performance, skill development, capacity for adjustment, and quality of peer relationships (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985).  Similarly, children of divorce tend to be more prone to experience problems at school by having more disruptive classroom behavior, more frequent absences, and lower intelligent quotient scores in comparison to children of intact families (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, & Mcloughlin, 1983). Children from divorced and separated families need and deserve support.

Sources of support for children may include immediate family, extended relatives, communities, programs, counseling, and schools, but it is often lacking during a divorce for elementary school-aged children.  However, the literature primarily focuses on the lack of support for divorcing families and does not mention the impacts for communities and extended relatives.  Family structure changes significantly during a divorce.  Unlike other family crises, familial and social support tends to wane. Throughout the divorce process family, friends, and neighbors may feel they have to choose sides, or may think it is best not to get involved (Richardson & Rosen, 1999). Children count on their parents as their primary support system.  During or after a divorce or separation, parents may no longer live in the same household, and children may experience different rules and expectations, and parental support can wane.  Children may become confused about the roles and boundaries of family members.  Divorce has been conceptualized as the

"renegotiation of intimacy and power between members of the divorced families" (Emery &Dillon, 1994, p. 374). The ambiguity of boundaries in a family system and in relationships themselves is a challenge for families, and mental health providers (Emery & Dillion, 1994).

The demand for mental health services among children of divorced parents increased since the 1970's. During their elementary school years, children from divorced families are roughly three more times likely to receive a referral from teachers for mental health problems than children from intact families (Wallerstein, 2005). The first wave of children from divorced families—now in their 20's, 30's, and 40's—comprises roughly one quarter of the American population (Wallerstein, 2005, p.403). As adults, they are more than twice as likely as those who grew up in intact families to have mental health issues (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). If these same adults had sufficient support as children their lives may have been healthier.

Although children of divorced parents do get some support from family, friends, counselors and community, support groups in a school-based setting is the most common way children receive support to mitigate the impacts of divorce (Farmer & Galaris, 1993). In terms of support for children in elementary schools, the literature does not mention how schools provide individual support for children of divorce; the literature primarily focuses on in-school divorce support groups. Elementary schools have built-in support for children impacted by divorce or separation. Most schools in the United States offer some type of intervention for children of divorce (Richardson & Rosen, 1999). According to the literature, elementary divorce support groups are mainly facilitated by

school social workers and on occasion by school guidance counselors or trained personnel. Schools offer a much-needed consistent structure, including, routine schedules (Benedek, 1998). School-based divorce support groups allow elementary school-aged children to have a place where there is peer support (Ims, 2001). Most commonly divorce support groups offer a psycho-educational format, which combines educational and therapeutic modalities (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2001).

Divorce support groups are helpful for a variety of reasons. First, schools and human service agencies can serve large numbers of children needing support (Rose, 2009). Second, divorce remains a hazardous transition, and group work helps normalize divorce (Rose, 2009). Finally, divorce raises various uncomfortable issues for youth, and discussing concerns in a dyadic relational way with peers and social workers is helpful (Rose, 2009).

The main divorce support group models for elementary-age children include play therapy, psychoeducation, and peer support. Play therapy is a developmental therapy that better enables children to address psychosocial issues through toys and art; children are able to use play to express difficult feelings (Brantton, Ray, & Rhine, 2005). Schreier and Kalter (1990) used displacement activities with the use of puppets and stories in their divorce group intervention, and report that children are able to better express feelings of anger and sadness afterwards.

Another therapeutic approach is psychoeducation, which is geared toward goal-setting and teaching the necessary skills for achieving such goals (Jerry, 1977). Stolberg and Mahler (1994) ran a psychoeducation group called the Children's Support Group

(CSG) and indicated improvements in self-concept, better coping skills, and improvements in adjustment with internalizing and externalizing behaviors. The Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) model improved upon the CSG model, has had several replications, and is empirically tested. The psycho-educational format based on teachers, parents, group leaders, and children indicated an improvement on several measures of behavior, competence, anxiety, academics, and had fewer visits to the nurse's office (Pedro-Caroll, Suton & Wyman, 1999). Peer support is another helpful component of divorce groups and is defined as "a system of giving and receiving help or feedback based on respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful, and is built on trust where members of a group are able to be with each other, respectfully challenge each other, may re-enact old roles, and try on new behaviors" (Mead, 2003). One of the benefits of peer support is that it engenders a group process that allows for the normalization of divorce (Goldman & King, 1985).

Determining the effectiveness of divorce support groups is important for a few reasons. School-based practitioners under "No Child Left Behind" legislation are increasingly expected to provide evidence-based treatment (Franklin & Kelly, 2009). Social work practice has become influenced by interventions in treatment that are empirically tested (Ims, 2001). Evaluations of groups within school districts can serve as a tool to indicate the need for such groups, especially during times of budget restraints, and within districts where groups are not offered (Ims, 2001). It is important, as well, for school social workers to know if groups they run provide the support and information

students find helpful, and if students are able to implement tools they have learned in group with family members, and friends.

There is a growing awareness of the importance of evaluating interventions and practices of clinical social workers and the support groups that they run. This study will attempt to evaluate elementary school social workers perspectives about what makes an effective divorce support group or family change group, and if such groups are not run an inquiry will be made to find out what services are available to children from divorced or separated households, and at what frequency.

## Literature Review

In order to address the current state of support groups for children, it is helpful to first understand divorce support groups. The literature provides specific definitions for individual elementary divorce support group models; however the literature does not provide a universal general definition of what constitutes an elementary divorce support group. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper the researcher defines an elementary school-based divorce support group as a group occurring on school property during or after school hours. Each group typically has a small group of children (usually six to 10) and is led by trained school personnel, often a social worker. Groups can be led by one person or co-led. A school-based divorce support group is often time-limited, lasting anywhere from a few weeks to a maximum of a few months. Groups are often held with peers, and may include boys and girls together, or boys and girls separately. First, the literature review will touch upon the evolution of divorce in the United States; the historical shifts that have taken place within crisis theory; the impact of divorce on children and families; the impact of divorce on elementary school-age children; the nature of elementary school-based divorce support groups; and the nature of support for elementary school aged children in the community. Second, the literature review will discuss relevant concepts and definitions in order to understand the effects of divorce on elementary school-aged children. Third, this literature review will examine eight conceptual research studies that pertain to the effects of divorce upon elementary school children. These studies from the 1980's and 1990's represent elementary school divorce support groups models by Goldman and King School Services Program (1985); Sanders

and Reister (1996), support group of 5th grade students; Stolberg and Mahler (1994), Children Support Group; and Pedro, Carroll and Cowen's Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) replicated in several settings (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985; Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Carroll, & Cowen, 1989; Pedro-Carroll & Alpert-Gillis, 1997; Pedro-Carroll, Suton, & Wyman, 1999).

**Evolution of Divorce in the United States**

**Divorce trends past to present.** Divorce has been conceptualized differently over time in the United States. Views regarding divorce have changed from the 1860's to the 2000's. As society has evolved over time, so have views and laws about divorce. Since the 1860's divorce rates have risen with fluctuations over time (Berhman & Quinn, 1994). There was a peak in the divorce rate after World War II. From 1960-80 the divorce rate doubled; the greatest rise in the divorce rate occurred in the 1970's. The literature proposes several reasons for the changing trends in divorce during this time. Initially the rise began with passage of the first no-default law, passed in 1969 by then California Governor Ronald Reagan. The law, eliminated the need to prove wrong-doing or find fault with one spouse to justify a divorce (Wilcox, 2009). During the next decade, every union throughout the United States passed no-divorce laws (Wilcox, 2009). Divorce rates nearly quadrupled between the 1950's and 1970's (Wilcox, 2009). Post-war divorce trends may have been influenced by increased numbers of women employed outside of the home, marital partners seeking relationships outside the marriage, and increasingly differing expectations regarding what a marriage entailed (Berhman &

Quinn, 1994). Similarly, a big shift came during the 1960's and 1970's as women began to feel that they could leave abusive marriages. Prior to the 1960's marriage was more likely viewed as being a family obligation with the expectations of both duty and sacrifice (Berhman & Quinn, 1994). This upward trend in the divorce rate created more demand for the support of children and lead to the formation of divorce support groups.

During this time marriage was seen as the *institutional model* which is a legitimate way to have sex, children, and for finding pleasure in intimate relationships (Wilcox, 2009). The institutional model placed less emphasis on a high-quality relationship. It was practical for couples to be married regardless of socio-economic status (Wilcox, 2009). With such a shift in societal values regarding the institution of marriage, divorce rates increased and so did programs and services needed to help families and children deal with the impact.

The institutional model was replaced by the *soul mate model* (Wilcox 2009). Marriage was no longer driven by duty to family in the soul mate model; it now was guided by the desire to have a marriage partner who satisfied the need for an intense emotional relationship (Wilcox, 2009). Higher-income couples are more likely to meet this ideal versus low-income couples. Wilcox claims that several components contribute to this model being difficult for low-income couples, as they have less access to financial resources, and less emotional and social resources needed for a high-quality soul mate marriage.

Since the 1970's working class men have had a decline in earning potential compared to college educated men, making them less desirable partners (Wilcox, 2009).

Furthermore, low-income couples are more likely to face infidelity, substance abuse, domestic violence, and other barriers associated with having a low-income status (Wilcox, 2009). The devaluation of marriage in low-income communities has further contributed to problems, as it has exacerbated poverty and inequality, and government programs have had to pick up the slack for the breakdown of families at "the federal, state, and local governments, police, prisons and welfare costs, and court costs" (Wilcox, 2009, pp.92-93). Social service programs, mainly schools, also had to implement programming for children of divorce to help provide supportive services. Divorce rates have plateaued since the 1980's (Berhman & Quinn, 1994). The plateau is believed to be caused by a shift in societal values where by divorce became more acceptable and no fault divorce laws were passed. By the 1990's at least 40% of young women were divorced. With this trend of marriages ending in the early years of marriage, more young children were impacted (Wallerstein, 2005). During the 1990's the majority of couples divorcing had children under six years old who spent most of their childhood in a divorced family (Wallerstein, 2005). Attachment is mainly formed in children's earlier years. Children under six years of age who grow up in a divorced family are more greatly affected (Wallerstein, 2005). Long-term support for children at risk can help mitigate the impacts of divorce.

The negative impacts (including impacts on family life) on children of divorce are statistically compared to the family life of children of intact families. Statistics clearly show that children of divorce face a greater risk of poor outcomes than do children of intact families (Amatto, 2001).

**Shift in Theory**

**A shift from crisis theory to stress and coping theory.** Another way to get a sense of what divorce looks like today is to examine the shift of theory from crisis theory in the 1970's, to the current theory of stress and coping. Both theories examine how divorce impacts attachment for children. The literature has shifted from crisis theory to stress and coping theory which finds that divorce is not a crisis that ends within the immediate time-frame surrounding the divorce (Kurtz, 1994). In the 1970's crisis theory was used when looking at children of recently divorced parents, but has since changed to include looking at the long-term impact divorce has on children (Kurtz, 1994). Stress and coping theory provides a context for the on-going nature of stressful transitions and demands a child faces while growing up in a divorced family. With proper support children can develop better coping skills to face the chronic stress that persists long after the initial divorce.

**Crisis theory.** Crisis theory began with the work of Erich Lindemann in the early 1940's. Building on the work of Lindemann, Caplan (1964) used preventative psychiatry in supporting the health and recovery of families (Okun & Kantrowitz, 2008). *Crisis* is defined as "an event which takes into consideration an individual or family's resources available to meet the crisis, for example, current stressors, along with the individual perception of the event" (Turner, 2011, p. 136). *Crisis theory* itself is defined as "the system that helps clients function in difficult situations in a comfortable, growth-

enhancing way by reducing stress and restoring, at a minimum, the previous functional level" (Turner, 2011, p.134).

Crisis theory encompasses two types of crisis. The first type is *situational crisis* such as divorce, death of a loved one, job loss, and life threatening illness (Turner, 2011). The second type of crisis is *developmental crisis* which are developmental in nature such as birth, adolescents, marriage, and retirement. This theory takes into account the resources an individual or family has to meet a crisis as part of their ability to be resilient. Crisis theory has three stages. First is the pre-crisis, which is the equilibrium point before the crisis (Turner, 2011). Second is the crisis phase, which is characterized by disorganization, decreased functioning, and experiencing an increase in heightened feelings of helplessness, or anxiety and fear (Turner, 2011). Then the second component of the crisis phase is the trial and error of trying out different solutions. Finally, the last phase is when the crisis is managed and equilibrium is achieved (Turner, 2011).

The nature of a crisis has several key characteristics. A crisis is short term, lasting from a day to four to six weeks (Turner, 2011). Crisis happens when the coping mechanisms of an individual or family fail. Also, during a crisis the possibility of dangerous or self-destructive behavior such as lashing out or feeling suicidal, increases (Turner, 2011). Children are impacted the most during the months immediately following a divorce. They may react with anger or aggression, and they may not listen well or follow rules. Also, they may have sleep disturbances and a lessened ability to concentrate at school (Kurtz, 1994). The immediate time following a divorce may be a time of crisis for children, as their world is turned upside down. Crisis interventions are

meant to be short term and are not meant to treat post-traumatic stress disorder or conditions that are life threatening or traumatic (Turner, 2011).

**Stress and coping theory.** Stress and coping theory has two categories of stressors: event stressors related to a sudden stressful event and chronic stressors. Stressors are either internal (e.g., anxiety or worry) or external (e.g., fighting, or acting out behaviors). These stressors can be biological (e.g., somatic complaints) or psychological (e.g., depression) or events (e.g., holiday visitation schedules). Stress and coping theory, unlike crisis theory, examines the impact of chronic, ongoing stress in relation to long-term impacts on an individual or family (Mitchell, 2004). According to crisis theory, maladaptive effects or stressors are short-term and are related to specific event or events. However, since divorce-related stressors can be ongoing for children and not a one-time event, therefore a shift from crisis theory occurred to stress and coping theory when considering the impacts of divorce on children. Stress and coping theory takes into account that children and families have to learn to develop coping skills for ongoing stress and may need to receive support with therapy or support group services.

Stress and coping theory also considers coping resources a person or family may use, and their strategies to deal with stressful events. The theory states that "stresses are based on an individual's perception and the ability to meet stressors is based on available resources" (Mitchell, 2004, p.10). In terms of divorce, coping may be influenced by beliefs about parental divorce, self- esteem and self-efficacy (Kurtz, 1994). Many support groups for children in the schools will target these areas, looking at beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions a youngster has about the divorce. When coping styles of

children are looked at, there often is a correlation with a greater ability to handle better the ongoing divorce stressors (Kurtz, 1994). For example, even resilient children may be at heightened risk for emotional distress when they witness verbal and physical fights. These acts of hostility or distrust may also be a source of heightened emotional distress for parents. Children faced with those situations are more likely to have adjustment problems and benefit from help in coping with the stressors (Kurtz, 1994).

Divorce is not necessarily a one-time event requiring adjustments only after the initial break up or dissolution of a marriage for a family. Rather, is it is a series of stressors and on-going events in stress-and coping theory. This theory asserts a relationship between stressful events and greater risk for psychological disorders in children and adults (Kurtz, 1994).

**Attachment theory.** Attachment, whether healthy or unhealthy, has long-term impacts on how well a child functions. The attachment lens regarding divorce indicates that divorce can be disruptive for children. Bowlby, the originating theorist of attachment theory, claims healthy attachment mainly develops when a secure base is formed. In Bowlby's view of attachment, separation distress occurs when there is an actual separation between the child and mother or when there is a perceived threat of separation. A *secure base* helps mitigate the stress a child experiences during separation (Sonkin, 2005). Bowlby observed infants and toddlers ages 15 −30 months old who were separated for the first time from their mother. The study revealed toddlers displayed three behaviors: protest, despair, and detachment. Bowlby concluded that these behaviors, particularly protest behavior was shown to ensure the return of the absent

parent (Sonkin, 2012). Children need a base level of security and stability. Oftentimes in divorce the security of when children will see their parents, and how often, disrupts the secure family structure.

A *secure base* develops when a child feels a parent is close by and is at a safe distance (Sonkin, 2005). When the child perceives a threat, a child needs to know that he or she can return to what is referred to as the *safe haven* for reassurance. A child moving between exploring behavior and the secure base is a way that a child achieves homeostasis (Sonkin, 2005). The secure base is developed through the first two years of life. Yet it is something needed throughout childhood, as children need to feel secure (Sonkin, 2005). The relationship between the parent and child is altered in a divorced family, which can be a stressor for a child. When a parent who is an attachment figure during divorce disappears from a child's life, it is normal for a child to experience grief and longing (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2007). In particular, a child may miss the father because often the mother is granted custody**.** In addition, the child may grieve the loss of family traditions, especially holiday traditions. The child may also long for his or her regular routine, particularly if the child moves back and forth between the father's residence and the mother's residence. All of these changes can disrupt the child's secure base. For this reason, it is helpful for adults to make up a schedule for a child that minimizes separation from an attachment figure to help a child better adjust (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2007).

**Impact of Parental Functioning and Communication**

Children often do better after a divorce if they have a consistent, secure attachment with a parent (Bagshaw, 2007). This is a challenge, as the divorced parents themselves face high levels of distress, making them less able to offer sufficient emotional support to their children (Bagshaw, 2007).

**Relationship with the father.** The literature does not address the emotional and behavioral impact on the mother child relationship after a divorce; the literature only addresses the post-divorce socio-economic realities of single mothers. The literature does, however, discuss the father and child relationship. The quality of contact with the non-custodial parent, often the father, has a significant impact on how well children of divorce function. Divorce is associated with less contact with the father (Amato & Keith, 1991). When children have high-quality contact with the non-custodial parent, they experience lower levels of anxiety and acting out at school (Miller, Ryan, & William, 1999). A lack of a father's involvement has been associated with poor outcomes for children (Wallerstein, 2005). Adolescents who viewed their relationship with their father as positive received higher grades than children who view their relationship with their father as negative (Wallerstein, 2005). On the other hand, some fathers are not consistent with visitation and may not see a child for several weeks or months. This usually occurs when fathers have physical, emotional, or financial restraints, as fathers may feel they have do not have much to offer during such times. Not knowing when they will see their fathers can be a source of on-going stress and uncertainty for children (Wallerstein, 2005). Children need that secure base, and when it is disrupted or a parent such as a

father is not consistently in a child's life, the child may struggle with adjustment by acting out or withdrawing, feel it is his or her fault, or blame the other parent (Wallerstein, 2005).

   **How divorced parents function.** Children are greatly affected by how their parents adjust during and after their divorce or separation**.** If parents are in crisis, sometimes role reversals happen within the parent–child relationship (Wallerstein, 2005). The process of children taking on adult roles is known as parentification, a role reversal between parent and child. When this occurs, the child's needs are sacrificed to meet the needs of the parent (Chase, 1999). In her practice, Wallerstein (2005) found parents sometimes rely on their children as a confidant as they know the families divorce concerns. Furthermore, a child's developmental needs for stability can conflict with the parent's needs to rebuild themselves "socially, sexually, and economically" (Wallerstein, 2005, p.405). When parents rely on their children in this way, the reliance may be temporary or long-term. Some parents during this phase may even have problems distinguishing their own needs from the needs of the children (Wallerstein, 2005). Parents can feel lost and lonely when their children are with the other parent for visitation. A parent in crisis may have a tendency to treat his or her child as a "surrogate spouse, confidant, advisor, sibling, parent, caretaker, and ally within marital wars and to help comfort during a time of emotional distress" (Wallerstein, 2005, p.405). All of this shows the significant impact that parental functioning has on their children, and that children from divorced or separated families are at greater risk, and have a need for supportive services to better adapt to the family environment. Children need a place of

support, and when that is lacking or disrupted within the family, schools can provide that much-needed support through divorce support groups. Such groups can offer support, help normalize divorce, and strengthen coping skills of children who have to navigate the complexities of living in a post-divorce family.

**How divorced parents communicate.** How well parents communicate before and after a divorce or separation also correlates with the well-being of their children. In general when parents show conflict, children have adjustment issues, whether they are from divorced families or intact families (Shifflet & Cummings, 1999). One kind of conflict, *Interparental conflict*, involves conflict between the parents, and may continue to impact children negatively after a divorce (Shifflet &Cummings, 1999). There is a consensus in the literature that conflict between parents before and after a divorce is a primary factor related to children's poor adjustment (Amato & Keith, 1991). Children often experience stress, anxiety, depression, and loyalty conflicts when they witness verbal or physical fights between their parents. Some children are even asked to pass messages between their parents (Bagshaw, 2007). Children who are placed in the middle like this may feel they have to choose sides, may not know which parent to trust, and may even feel angry or act out from having to take on adult roles. In this way, security in their parental relationships is compromised.

**Impact of Divorce on Elementary-Age Children**

**Erickson's stages of development**. Children are affected by divorce differently at various ages. The stage that relates to elementary-age is the latency stage (six to 12 year olds). *Latency* is the primary age group that elementary school social workers work

with. In latency the children's main tasks are to learn new skills academically and socially, or risk inferiority and failure (Cramer, Flynn, & Lafave, 1997). In this stage children need a parent's support in order become competent in these tasks. Erickson states that children will not feel supported and learn inferiority or helplessness if parental support is missing. It is critical for children to achieve mastery and skill; on the other hand, when given too much responsibility, children assume more adult roles for competency and can develop narcissistic or histrionic tendencies (Niolin, 2011). Latency can include children ages 11-12 years old who have not yet quite reached adolescence. During this time they may take on some adult roles before they are ready; these children may become confused by their rushed transition into adulthood. During this confusing time this age group may begin to start pushing away their parents and start testing boundaries (Niolin, 2011).

Erickson further refers to *identity versus role confusion* as adolescence (12 to 19 year olds) (Niolin, 2011). This stage can impact older elementary school aged children who are approaching adolescents. The hallmark of adolescence is a process of now shifting from something that was done to the child to something the child takes on; it's an ambiguous time for children, as they are neither an adult nor child (Niolin, 2011). Developmental tasks center on the child finding their own identity which is separate from their family of origin or society (Niolin, 2011). Relationships with peers are also essential and when not successful role confusion may develop (Niolin, 2011).

**Impact on children six to eight years old.** The six to eight year old age group has a limited ability to understand divorce (Richardson & Rosen, 1999). These children

experience great sadness and loss (Ellington, 2003). Children this age may express common feelings of not belonging, sadness, and anger accompanied by somatic complaints, ranging from tummy complaints to headaches (Benedeck, 1998). Other characteristics include unrealistic expectations that their parents will get back together, beliefs that the divorce is their fault and fears of being without a family. Concerns center on their parents' well-being and economic strains (Ellington, 2003). Children this age especially miss their fathers, as mothers are most often awarded custody (McKay, 1999). The thought processes and judgments of six to eight year olds are often black and white (Benedek, 1998). They need permission to express sadness, consolation, and reassurance that the divorce was not their fault (Fassel, 1991). They may also experience an academic decline (Wolf, 1998). What is helpful for this age group is consistent routines and reassurance (Benedek, 1998).

**Impact on children nine to 12 years old.** Nine to 12 year old children have more cognitive ability to understand divorce and their feelings align with what they perceive. This age group shares some of the same feelings of six to eight year olds, such as loss, rejection, hopelessness, and fear (Ellington, 2003). A common feeling of this age group is intense anger (McKay, 1999). Anger is frequently directed at the custodial parent (Fassel, 1991). Anger is also directed at the parent the child perceives is at fault for the divorce (McKay, 1999). Anger expression is paramount for this group; it can be beneficial for children to be given permission to express anger in safe ways (Benedek, 1998). Physical activity and physical outlets can also be helpful with anger expression (Benedek, 1998). In addition to anger over their parents' divorce, children of this age are

more commonly put in the middle of feuding parents than are younger children (Wolf, 1998). Nine to 12 year old children are prone to building an alliance with one parent (McKay, 1999). Feelings of grief and loss and guilt are heightened. Strong role models are especially beneficial for nine to 12 year olds (Benedek, 1998).

**Impact on children 11-12 years old.** Even though the focus of this research is on elementary school aged children, 11 and 12 years olds may exhibit adolescent characteristics, and need to be understood developmentally. Adolescents often fear how a divorce will affect them (Ellington, 2003). It is common for teens to vacillate between numbness and fear (Fassel, 1991). Feelings and emotions are heightened for teens. They are often more angry than younger children (Engel, 1992). Anger is commonly expressed particularly if parents are dating. It is normal to feel a sense of profound loss and emptiness (McKay, 1999). Adolescents can sometimes feel betrayed by their parents (Teyber, 2001). Adolescents commonly feel fatigued, have nightmares, and experience a decline in concentration, have a lack of interest in school, and sometimes are depressed (Wolf, 1998). A parent's divorce often causes teens to project fears into their own relationships (McKay, 1999). Troubled teens either withdraw or act out in adult ways "through food, sexual promiscuity, running away, drug and alcohol abuse, and even suicide" (Ellington, 2003, p. 29). Coping is best achieved when teens have a good relationship with both parents and with a trusted adult such as a teacher or a mentor (Engel, 1992). Divorce support groups for older school aged children can help children improve and build on communication skills with parents, as well as provide a safe place to act out or share family dynamics and interactions between parents and children.

Support groups can also intervene and teach children healthful coping skills to address the negative feelings and experiences of numbness, fear, anger, depression, and suicidal ideation.

**Elementary School-Based Divorce Support Groups**

The literature mentions that divorce support groups are an effective intervention in an elementary school aged setting. Moreover, the main model used for divorce support groups in schools is psycho-educational (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007). The psycho-educational format is explored in terms of its features and goals. Several empirically tested groups with a psycho-educational format are explored.

**Psycho-educational model.** Out of four group types, the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) claims that psycho-educational groups are the most commonly used for pre-intervention and intervention (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007). Various divorce support group models are featured in the literature for elementary school aged children. These models appear to have a common component of offering a psycho-educational format, with key characteristics of combining educational and developmental interventions. These groups commonly utilize "roleplaying, problem solving, decision making, and communication skills training to teach specific skills and coping strategies in an effort to prevent future problems" (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007, p.98).

Because children often have a limited vocabulary, they respond better to nonverbal techniques than to verbal exercises. They are better able to show feelings through play (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2001). The use of creative activities such as roleplaying, using puppets, drawing, and singing can help children label feelings and

offer a venue to try out new behaviors and coping skills (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2001). These types of activities can be incorporated throughout the group format. Gerrity developed a specific format for an eight-week divorce group. She incorporates creative activities through the middle sessions by having the children draw their family constellation, by listing celebrities, books, cartoons, and anyone the child knows who has personally experienced a divorce. She also offers additional suggestions outside of her group format on how to use creative exercises for practitioners (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2001).

Gerrity identifies seven universal goals for children of divorce support groups. The first goal includes helping children understand divorce and gain an accurate picture of what divorce is by defining key words such as *divorce*, *separation*, and *custody*. The second goal is to help normalize divorce experiences and feelings and to create a safe place to discuss them in the group (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2001).

The third goal emphasizes creating a safe place for children to explore divorce-related concerns through activities such as drawing a picture of what their families look like and sharing their pictures, as well as sentence completion exercises. The fourth goal helps children identify, understand, and better express their feelings about the divorce. Younger children tend to dismiss feelings of anger, sadness, loss, and guilt; therefore, they benefit from exercises to help to normalize their experiences by identifying feelings, through charts or charades, or by acting things out. Because divorce can be overwhelming, the fifth goal centers on teaching new coping strategies for improved communication, problem solving, and conflict resolution. Role plays are a safe tool for

group members to demonstrate the conflicts in their blended families, such as their parent's arguing, or issues with step-siblings (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2001).

The sixth goal of the group regards children's ability to reality test. Young children often have unrealistic fears about what is happening or may happen in a divorced family, and can express this through group dialogue. They are afraid their parents may stop loving them and leave them, or feel they are the cause for the divorce. The final goal focuses on the future and on relationships, and considers relationship expectations, both positive and negative, to help children feel hopeful about their future (Gerrity & De-Lucia-Waack, 2001).

Gerrity (2001) lays out ways to begin a group in a school, and provides a thorough format from beginning to end for practitioners, including how to get school consent, how to form groups by recruiting leaders, and how to evaluate of the group's effectiveness. Gerrity suggests that practitioners can use music and songs that focus on divorce topics, biblotherapy which uses books and film, and the use of puppets and drama to act out a situation (Gerrity & De-Lucia-Waack, 2001).

**Divorce support group important considerations.** Numerous studies looked at the effectiveness of elementary school divorce support groups. Richardson and Rosen (1999) conducted a meta-analysis of the most effective school divorce support groups and recommend high support. Parental involvement is crucial; children benefited when parents meet with staff at school. Also, divorced families are strengthened when the interaction between the parents and children is improved. One helpful tool is a parent questionnaire that can be used at the end of a group. Teacher involvement is also

recommended according to Richardson and Rosen (1999), and may include rating of the progress, behavior, and academic achievement in the classroom. Teachers may provide divorce support group referrals when needed; they also may serve a role in providing support to a child during the time of a divorce. The final key to implementing a divorce group is flexibility. A good intervention will be flexible to accommodate different genders, ages, ethnicities, as well as socioeconomic statuses of various children (Richard and Rosen, 1999).

**Structured support groups for children.** Various models exist for divorce support groups in a school setting for elementary school aged children. The primary elementary divorce support group models in the literature that have been empirically tested include Goldman and King (1985), Schreier & Kalter (1993), Sanders & Reister (1993), Stolberg & Mahler (1994), and the Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP). This last study had several replications, one with fourth and sixth grade students, and another with second and third grade students, followed by another with kindergarten and first grade students. Then a follow-up two year study was then conducted.

In the first study, Goldman and King (1985) aimed to find out if direct service in group settings coupled with indirect services with families met the needs of children from divorced and troubled families. They ran a school group called the School Services Program Center for Families in Transition. A total of 90 students were served from 14 groups within five different schools. Nine of the 14 groups served latency-aged children, and five served young adolescents. The meetings were anywhere from 50-70 minutes.

Goldman and King (1985) provided a teacher component in conjunction with the group, with teachers providing a certain number of hours of availability for on-going support. Goldman and King (1985) found from student, parent, teacher, and leader reports that students who experienced recent family changes within the past two years benefited most from the group. They also noted a decrease in divorce confusion and an increase in coping and emotional support. Support groups have a unique feature of mutual aid, and include the support of peers. Students rated peer support as having helped to normalize the divorce experience**.**

One of the most comprehensive studies on elementary divorce support groups was the 1981 Family Styles Project at the University of Michigan, conducted by Schreier and Kalter (1993). The study used systematic, quantitative research and standardized instruments to measure children's social-emotional adjustment, self-esteem, and both teachers' and parents' perceptions of the group in over 1,500 school sites representing 35 states, and two schools in Canada provinces, showing improvements for those measures (Schreier & Kalter, 1993). A four to 10 week model was used for two age groups of first to third grade students and fourth to sixth grade students, with sessions of 45-60 minutes. This model was used with various socio-economic groups and ethnicities**,** composed of children new to divorce as well as those considered "divorce veterans" whose parents' divorce was not recent.

Another model by Schreier and Kalter was evaluated in two separate studies, one conducted in 1990 and another in 1993. The research study by Schreier and Kalter (1990) used displacement activities which helped children express difficult feelings

through the use of stories and puppets. The group ran for children in fourth through sixth grades, and was revised for younger elementary children in later studies. This study did not include how the results were yielded, yet did a formal, short-term evaluation at six months and a follow-up study four years later (Schreier & Kalter, 1990). The Schreier and Kalter (1993) study aimed to help elementary children manage anger and disruptive classroom behavior, resolve conflict with school authorities and peers, and improve their academic performance. The 1993 study included reports from the perspectives of parents, teachers, children, and leaders. Both parent and teacher reports found the adjustment for children improved, and children exhibited less anxiousness, sadness, and anger, and were better able to share concerns and ask questions. Children shared in their reports not feeling alone, and they had a safe place to share divorce feelings, and were better able to deal with worries and upsets (Schreier & Kalter, 1993).

Yet another study by Sanders and Riester (1996) sought to determine the impact of a school-based counseling group on the self-concept of fifth grade children of divorce. The 20 fifth-grade students from a large metro area attended a divorce support group; the control group was comprised of students waiting to get into the support group. Students were compared to nine fifth-graders whose parents were married. The goal of the students attending the support group was to improve self-concept. Sanders and Reister (1996) used the Pier-Harris Children's Self-Concepts scores for pre-post tests, which found that children made no gains in self-concept, but they improved their ability to relate with others which can lead to an improvement in self-concept later. A limitation of this study was the small sample size.

Another study used the Stolberg and Mahler (1994) Children Support Group (CSG) model, which taught both coping skills and strategies to help children adjust and better realize developmental tasks. CSG used an eight-session format which implemented modifications from previous studies about how to better effect divorce adjustment in older children. The CSG program served seven to 13 year olds in group sessions consisting of two components. To determine the effectiveness of this intervention, 103 third to fifth graders were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups. The first group of children received the support and skill-building intervention. The second group of children received the skill and transfer-building intervention. Finally, this model featured a unique third intervention that offered parent training procedures. The study found that the two skills-building groups had the most significant improvement in adjustment. The transfer-building group had similar good results. The least effective group was the parent-training group.

**Children of Divorce Intervention Support Program**

A prominent and most replicated model throughout the literature is the Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP). CODIP derived some of its format from the Children's Support Group (CSG), and made improvements by running a children-based intervention that was found to be successful (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985). When designing CODIP, Pedro and Cowen (1985) decided to keep the support and skills building components and added a portion for children to talk about divorce related feelings. Finally, CSG's components were kept for cognitive skill building, discussions, film and role plays, and the anger control sessions were shortened from five to three.

**CODIP-fourth and sixth grade students.** The Children of Divorce Program (CODIP) was first run in a suburban setting with 4-6th grade students. Pedro-Caroll and Cowen ran a 10 week group with 72 children of divorce randomly assigned to either the intervention or delayed intervention. This program was assessed from the view point of teachers, parents, group leaders and the children. According to teachers, the experimental group improved significantly in behavior and competence, and parents found the group helped with anxiety. Finally, both group leaders and the group participants reported that the children improved significantly from the intervention (Pedro-Caroll & Cowen, 1985).

Because of the success of this program with fourth and sixth grade students, it has been replicated in several settings with various age groups. The original study and the replicated studies used a similar format: the beginning sessions focused on divorce affective aspects and misconceptions through the use of skits and role plays to help normalize divorce, and the middle sessions utilized cognitive skill building through the use of a five-step problem solving model that uses self-statements. Children also used their homework to create topics for role plays, which focused on problems within their control, and learned ways to disengage from parental conflicts. The last sessions focused on control, suppression and consequences of anger, and appropriate anger expression (Pedro-Caroll & Cowen, 1985).

**CODIP- second and third grade students.** Originally this group was run in a suburban area and then replicated in the inner city. Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Caroll and Cowen, (1989) ran a divorce group as a 16 week preventive intervention with 52 students from second and third grades. The aim of the study was to find out if this group would be

successful in an urban setting with younger children. The study compared 52 divorce control children with 81 demographically matched children. Results indicated the intervention could be modified for urban settings, and would be best conducted in weekly meetings over a four-month period. Most importantly, the findings showed significant gains for the experimental group by using six scales to measure the program's success from teachers, parents, children, and group leaders perspectives.

**CODIP– kindergarten and first graders.** Pedro-Caroll and Alpert-Gillis (1997) replicated the model again with kindergarten and 1st grade children as a preventative intervention for 12 weeks by tailoring this intervention to meet this age group's needs. Gains were made on pre-tests and post-tests of 37 participants compared to 26 non-participants from the control group. Gains were also made for children in the experimental group according to the measures used by parents, teachers, and children.

After the 1997 study, Pedro-Caroll, Suton, and Wyman (1999), conducted a two-year study to determine the long-term effectiveness of the CODIP model, using a preventative intervention for first and second grade students. The study used multiple measures to assess children's adjustment at school and home under three conditions. The three conditions included children enrolled in the program, divorce controls, and a non-divorced comparison group. Overall parent interviews, teacher rankings, children's reports, and school health data have showed that the intervention group had less academic adjustment issues, demonstrated less anxiety, and fewer visits to the nurse's office.

**Limitations in the Literature**

Although there have been dominant divorce support group models discussed in the literature, and although the findings have been replicated, the studies do not mention how they are used nationally. Furthermore, the current use of a particular model for elementary schools in Minnesota is unknown. The recommended time and length for an intervention varied. On the norm, Farmer and Galaris (1993) state that most groups run from six to twelve weeks during a school year and are time limited. Richardson and Rosen (1999) also found it was typical for groups to range from six weeks to 12 weeks with a half an hour to an hour per session, and up to 75 minutes if there are fewer sessions in an intervention (Richardson & Rosen, 1999).

The literature is not specific about whether time limitations interfere with schools being able to provide support groups to students, or if groups already meet for the recommend length. The literature is also unclear about the practicality of schools offering empirically tested models for divorce support groups. Furthermore, the literature has not provided social workers' perspectives on what makes an effective group, or how they run divorce support groups. The literature leaves out the challenges social workers may face, including time available to offer a group, children missing class, funding, and if it is possible to run a divorce support group in addition to the other children they are responsible for.

**Support for Children in the Community**

Children of divorce receive support in ways other than divorce support groups, including individual therapy, which is offered by licensed professionals, psychologists, social workers, and marriage and family therapy therapists. There are educational programs for parents who are divorcing and for children, therapy groups for parents, therapy groups for children, and family therapy, as well as pre-intervention programs. Despite all of these different sources of support, Alpert and Gillis (2001) state that school support groups are still the most common way children receive support.

**Other Divorce Support Group Models**

A couple of groups offered outside of a therapeutic setting are or school setting are Divorce Care for Kids known as DC4K for kids, and Rainbows for children. These programs offer training to facilitators but are not lead by a licensed professional. DC4K is a national model, with a 13 week structured group program for children ages five-12 years and is offered in various churches with a Christian faith-based component incorporated into the curriculum. The DC4K leaders are trained under their model; however, the DC4K website does not state if this model was empirically tested for effectiveness (Divorce Care for Kids, 2011).

Rainbows is another national program serving children ages four to 18, with groups being offered according to various age categories such as pre-school, elementary (with groups further divided according to age), adolescents, and college/adult students (Faber, 2006). The groups provide grief support to children of divorce, for death of a parent, deployed parents, foster families, and for other kinds of losses. The Rainbows

Program did have pre-test and post-test evaluation of the program in 2003 and in 2006, the study found significant change for the participant's ability to communicate feelings, and participants found it beneficial regardless of age or type of loss (Faber, 2006).

Even though there are a couple of support groups offered in the community and therapeutic settings, it is most common for children to get support through a support group in their school. Richardson and Rosen (1999) state that most schools in the U.S. offer some type of intervention for children of divorce divorced parents. Families who experience a divorce are often faced with visitation schedules, less time with a child, financial strain, and relocation. Individual and family therapy or divorce groups in a therapeutic setting are underutilized and are often fee based and not covered by insurance. A school-based intervention is less costly for a parent, and does not require transporting children back and forth to appointments. Divorce support or family change groups are not available in all school settings, however, and are not available to all students. Some Twin-Cities school districts offer a divorce or family change group for children whose family has experienced a divorce, separation, or never married families. Most likely these groups are run by a school social worker and occasionally by a school guidance counselor. This study will only look at groups run by school social workers, as they most frequently conduct divorce support groups for children.

## Conceptual Framework

Being aware of and discerning concepts and theories in research is beneficial, as a framework can help avoid bias. Qualitative research uses both deductive and inductive approaches, and this study will use both deductive and inductive approaches (Berg, 2008). *Inductive reasoning* applies a generalization or conclusion based on a limited number of observations, and data is assimilated from specific to general (Berg, 2008). *Deductive reasoning,* on the other hand, assimilates data from the general to the specific and the researcher will assume or make deductions based on what has already occurred in a sample or what will occur in other subjects (Berg, 2008).

### Personal Lens

I had already drawn some conclusions prior reading the literature. One conclusion I had come to was that divorce has many negative impacts on children in terms of self-esteem, academics, and relationships with family. Secondly, divorce requires a grief process for children and is not just a one-time event. Therefore, children must manage their grief in an on-going way. I also had both co-lead and lead divorce support groups in a field placement in my MSW program in an elementary school age setting in the Twin Cities in Minnesota. I have seen the benefits that groups provide children and I admit to having a bias that divorce groups are beneficial to elementary school age children.

### Professional Lens

Examining my professional lens as a researcher is crucial, as it helps me eliminate my personal bias. In a previous internship with school-age children, I was eager to

better understand how to work with school-aged children who have gone through a divorce. I observed that the divorce groups I helped co-facilitate and facilitate benefited children from divorced or separated families. As a researcher, to maintain objectivity I will be examining my personal and professional lenses. I am owning my own biases, as I realized that not all elementary schools in the Twin-Cities offer elementary divorce support groups for children. I found that divorce support groups benefited the children I worked with, and I felt that perhaps schools that did not offer this type of group could better help children from divorced families if they did. It is important for me to neutralize this bias when I am conducting research and to maintain my objectivity, because in qualitative research I am the lens through which data is interpreted. I am keeping an open mind and am looking to find out what services actually do exist, as they may differ from the literature and from my own experience. Therefore, an examination of present elementary school divorce support groups for children is important to explore for this population through a needs assessment to find out what services are available for students and how support groups are run in a school setting.

This information will be beneficial in terms of providing services for this population. My personal motivation for conducting the research involved witnessing the negative impacts of a permanent separation on my own child. A school support group may have helped normalize the experience for my child, helped with coping skills, provided peer support, and guided my child through the on-going grief and re-adjustment that result in a post-divorced or separated household. I became curious about divorce support groups after co-facilitating and facilitating family change groups that worked

with children from families of divorce, separation, and never-married families. I wondered if all elementary schools were able to offer such an intervention to children who experience a divorce or separation. If not, what criteria enabled schools to offer divorce support groups? Finally, I wondered if the needs of children who would benefit from a divorce support group are really being met in a school setting.

**Methods**

Qualitative interviewing is one method used to collect information in exploratory research. Berg (2009) finds that qualitative research allows a researcher to explore in an interview the "life worlds including motivations, symbols and their meanings, empathy and other subjective aspects associated with naturally evolving lives of individuals and groups" (p.16).

Qualitative interviews lend to a richer understanding of the "quality of things through words, descriptions, and images" (Berg, 2009, p.4). Qualitative interviews provided the perspective of elementary school social workers in terms of what makes a successful divorce support group, and what methods have most benefited students served in such groups. Because not much is published on this subject, this study is exploratory. The research question for the current study is what are school social workers' perspectives on what makes an effective divorce support group?

Qualitative interviews provided the perspective of elementary school social workers in terms of what makes a successful divorce support group, and what methods have most benefited students served in such groups. Also, if divorce support groups for students are not offered, through interviews the researcher inquired about what services are available to students from never married, separated, or divorced families and with what frequency. Finally, if divorce support groups were offered in the past, this type of interview sheds some light on why such groups were discontinued, as the research clearly indicates that divorce support groups are an effective pre-intervention to mitigate negative lifelong impacts of growing up in a divorced household.

**Recruitment**

Participants were recruited from three school districts in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota and two school districts in greater Minnesota for qualitative interviews. An effort was made to interview participants from diverse school districts. Recruitment for this study occurred through both purposive and snowball sampling. Both purposive and snowball sampling methods are defined and explored in terms of how they are used in this study. According to Berg (2009) *purposive sampling* uses the judgment of the researcher, who uses his or her expertise and judgment to purposely recruit subjects who have the desired attributes for this kind of study. Next, Berg (2009) states that *snowball sampling* is convenient for the researcher because it begins with the researcher contacting several individuals to interview, and then those individuals are asked for referrals of other potential participants who possess similar attributes. Neither method is highly generalized due to their intentional nature of recruiting participants (Berg, 2009).

Purposive recruitment occurred through obtaining a letter of permission from the Minnesota Association of School Social Workers (MSSWA) (Appendix B). The researcher purchased an associate membership as well as an affiliate plus membership, which enabled the researcher to access the member e-mail database. To be considered for graduate research an approved Institutional Review Board application was sent to the Minnesota School Social Workers Association (MSSWA). When the researcher received the completed and approved IRB form, MSSWA e-mailed their most current membership list of 200 or more school social workers in the state of Minnesota.

Potential participants recruited through the MSSWA were e-mailed a letter of recruitment, and then contacted through e-mail or phone (see Appendix E).

In addition, potential participants were contacted through snowball sampling. The researcher has professional contacts who work in different school districts and who provided the researcher referrals for elementary school social workers. Participants also recommend other elementary school social workers for interviews. Furthermore, social workers through the MSSWA also provided referrals. Potential participants recruited through snowball sampling were contacted primarily through recruitment e-mails that contained a letter of recruitment. Snowball sampling did entail using professional contacts, such as the researcher's department chairs, school teachers, or those already interviewed, who forwarded a recruitment e-mail with a letter of recruitment to other elementary school social workers to participate in the study.

Dillman has used a highly successful total design method with a high return rate; although this method is geared towards survey's it was used to recruit potential interviewees (Hoddvoit & Bass, 1986). The researcher e-mailed a letter of recruitment to potential participants, and they were contacted through e-mail or phone calls. The recruitment letter in the email explained the purpose of the study, and why the researcher would like to interview. Dillman has a follow-up method of contacting non-respondents regarding a request to participate in the study at one, three, and seven weeks (Hoddvoit & Bass, 1986). The researcher recruitment strategy due to the shorter nature of the research was to send out a reminder at week one, two, and four weeks. However,

the researcher only needed to send out a reminder email at two weeks due to the high response rate.

**Protection of Human Participants**

It is important to ensure the privacy of research participants and to inform them of their rights when consenting to participate. As well as, inform them of measures taken to maintain their anonymity. Participants were provided consent forms using a template from the University of St. Thomas website. The consent form consists of the explanation of the research, procedures for an interview, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of the interview. The forms are approved by the chair of the researcher prior to conducting interviews. Forms were signed and dated by the interviewer and interviewee prior to the beginning of the interview. One copy will be kept by the researcher and one copy will be provided to the interviewee (see Appendix C).

Because of the sensitive nature of the interviewing, the researcher reminded interviewees' of the risks involved in taking part in this study, such as feeling a need for more information on this topic, or concerns and self-questioning about their current practices. Specifically concerns about how they are running groups that serve children of divorce or from separated parents or never married families. In addition, questions on the topic may arise after an interview. To address such questions, the school social workers were provided a handout of six studies on the subject, as well as a list of providing psycho-education, consultation/supervision resources and websites (Appendix F). Because the interviews are both voluntary and confidential, interviewees' were reminded before the interview they can decline to answer any question(s).

**Data Collection**

Interviews were conducted at a location of participant's choice (such as the participant's office.) The location included a quiet room where only the social worker and the researcher will be present to ensure anonymity. In one interview the participant chose to have a colleague in the room, even when the researcher asked if they wanted this person present for the interview. Interviews were conducted during school hours, or before or after school at the convenience of the interviewee.

The interviews were audiotaped in a one on one setting and then later transcribed. The questions were asked in a semi-structured format with a total of 14 questions (see Appendix D). Interview questions focused on school social workers' perspectives on what makes an effective divorce support group, as well as what goals or benchmarks they use throughout the group to measure success, and other ways they may know their group is having the desired outcome. If groups are not offered questions were asked to explore the ways elementary school social workers serve students from divorced or separated or never married households, and at what frequency.

The audiotaped interviews once they were transcribed along with all records of this study are kept confidential. Transcripts and tapes have been kept in a locked file at the residence of the researcher to insure privacy. Identifying information of participants involved in the research has been removed from the transcripts and findings to protect the interviewee. Findings from these interviews will be used for academic purposes only. Once the audio tapes have been transcribed, all recordings from interviews will be deleted and destroyed as of June 2, 2013.

**Reliability and Validity**

The interview questions are based upon the current literature and theoretical frameworks to ensure content validity. Questions were reviewed by peer students and the research committee to assess for face validity, which verifies if they contain the desired information to answer the research question (Monette et al, 2008). Questions were then reviewed by students and the research team to ensure reliability, to gauge if questions are both clear and understood in a universal way.

**Data Analysis**

Content analysis and grounded theory analysis was used to interpret the data, with the use of coding themes (Berg, 2009). This method allows for data to be interpreted based on emerging patterns and themes evident throughout the overall interviews conducted. Data that falls outside of the norm will also be interpreted for possible explanations. The themes will finally be linked and compared to the pre-existing literature on this topic.

**Population and Sample**

For this study, this researcher interviewed nine public elementary licensed school social workers who currently run or have run family change groups and provide other support service to children from divorced, separated, or never married families. Seven participants were selected within the Twin Cities area and surrounding suburbs within a 25-mile radius of Minneapolis/St. Paul. Two participants were outside of the 25-mile radius but were located in the state of Minnesota; due to the distance the researcher conducted a phone interview rather than a face-to-face interview. Six out of the nine

elementary school social workers interviewed reported having at least 10 years' experience in this position with a high range of 22 years of experience. The elementary school social workers interviewed work primarily with students in K-5 or K-6, and two respondents worked with both elementary aged school children and high school students. Eight of respondents were female and only one was male.

**Findings**

The research attempted to identify and evaluate elementary school social workers' perspectives about what contributes to effective divorce support groups or family change groups within school settings. The research also aimed to identify what services are available to children from divorced or separated households outside of the school setting.

From the interviews three main themes emerged: 1). *use of engagement to facilitate change; 2) how children benefit from group; 3) change in how elementary school social workers provide support*. The main themes and their corresponding subthemes are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Sample Responses Among School Social Worker Respondents

_____

| Category | Thematic-category | Sample-response |
|---|---|---|

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*Theme 1:Use of engagement to facilitate change*

| E1 | Group activities | The children were brought outside to pick out a [worry] stone....and told to visualize a really big worry...everybody holds their stone and we talk about that thing [they] just can't get out of [their minds.] |
| E2 | Group play | Art therapy and discussion were used to identify who's who in the family, how the family looks now, and how it changed from the way it used to be before, when everybody was together. |

*Theme 2: How children benefit from group*

| B1 | Coping skills | Last night I used this strategy, I, you know, I went to my room and said I'll come out when you are, you're room and said I'll come out when you are, you're ready to talk. |
| B2 | Normalizing experiences | One of the biggest things is that they [the children] not blaming themselves and that it is normal to feel that way. |

*Theme 3: Change in how elementary school social workers provide support*

| S1 | Change in social work roles | So the only students that I see at this point are on individualized educational plans. There isn't any preventative work anymore. |
| S2 | Change in funding | In this district and probably nationwide, [there's a difference between what is budgeted and] what we actually get...they've got to tie it to the minutes that social workers actually get reimbursed for. |

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*Note.* This table includes the themes and subthemes that evolved from interviews in this study. Sample responses for each subtheme are provided in this chart.

**School Social Workers' Roles and Responsibilities**

It is important to first define the different roles and positions currently held by the respondents, the elementary school social workers. Some social workers worked mostly with students in special education. These students are on an individual education program plan (IEP), and depending on the nature of the funding, social workers may be bound to offer primarily special education services. Some elementary school social workers also worked in conjunction with the principal, teachers, and parents to provide support to students struggling with emotional, social, and behavioral issues as well as with family issues. One elementary school social worker summarized her static yet diverse role at her school in the following way:

> *The main responsibilities of that position [social worker] have not changed. I do direct service for special education. So I do evaluation, I attend the meetings, I plan IEP's and I do direct service as well. So I kind of help with that whole process for kids with either social skill needs or social-emotional behavioral skills. So, that is kind of the special education piece I do, which is about half of my job. Then I also do the general education population, just kind of everything else— friendship groups where we work on social skills, family change groups helping children cope with separation, divorce, other family changes, kids dealing with grief, death, dying, anger management, child protection, educational neglect, any crisis issues, community connections for parents looking for a variety of resources. I am kind of that connection person. So it really that part of my job varies widely.*

The majority (eight out of nine) of elementary school social workers interviewed provide support for children who come from divorced, separated, or never-married families. Such support is provided either from individual work (often referred to as one to one's) or through group work. Eight of nine elementary school social workers interviewed also stated that the way they were best able to provide support to students

from divorced separated or never-married families was through one-on-one meetings with a student. Most of the participants (six) stated that there are no rules or regulations as to how frequently they are allowed to meet with a student who is impacted by a divorce, a separation, or from a never-married family. In one interview a respondent stated that over the course of her work experience, the frequency of meetings with children has been dependent on multiple factors that include parents, teachers, and the children themselves:

*If the child is crying in school [about something upsetting that happened at home that morning concerning the child's parents] or is clearly upset then I just have an open door policy that [allows teachers to send a child to my office]. You know, it [the counseling session] has to fit into my regular schedule. It's up to me and what I see the needs [of the child] are. Sometimes I just meet with a student once, or you know, maybe a couple of times a week and then I don't see them again.*

If a child needs on-going support, three social workers reported that they met weekly with the child for 20 minutes (or as many minutes as seemed necessary), but that level of support is often short term for an immediate pressing need and would not necessarily continue throughout the year. Another way the elementary social workers helped students who are impacted by divorce, separation, or who come from never-married families was through divorce groups. This study found that all nine respondents had at some point run a family change or divorce group. Currently seven out of the nine elementary school social workers were permitted to run family change groups. Seven out of the nine social workers interviewed also stated that they had used a specific curriculum for their family change group or a variety of curricula to structure their groups, and noted that flexibility in terms of what help was best suited to a child's needs was an important aspect in addition to

following a curriculum.

All respondents (nine out of nine) stated that they use engagement activities (either in one-to-one's or in groups) to facilitate_change with children experiencing a divorce, separation, or the challenges that can arise from living in a never-married family. All social workers who run groups identified a common strategy: using activities as part of the group process. Such activities included role play, games, books, planned activities, worksheets, art, or play therapy methods.

**Group activities.** Group activities are a common in groups. Seven out of nine school social workers shared that they use group activities to engage children in family change groups. One social worker stated that around week five she had children write their own books as part of group activity which began with a prompting sentence like "Joey's mom and dad have been fighting a lot lately." The social worker then went around the room and had the children use markers with different colors for each prompt or question and asked each child to write a sentence or record a response for each question on a sheet of paper. At the end of the activity, each child had written enough responses to compile a short book; the social workers were convinced that the activity was therapeutic for the children.

In addition to the book activity, the social workers engaged the children in other activities that they believed to be beneficial to the children. One social worker shared using an art activity workbook. Another social worker talked about a favorite activity used in group during the middle stage of therapy: the use of a worry stone. For this activity the children were first brought outside to pick out a stone; picking out the "right"

stone was made to be a big deal. Then the children were told to close their eyes and visualize a really big worry they have going on in their family, something they just could not get out of their mind:

*Then everybody holds their stone in the group and we kind of talk about thinking about that thing that you just can't get out of your mind, and sometimes it's during school, except for me it's at night and I'm trying to fall asleep. Boy, I just can't stop thinking about what that one worry about my dad or, you know, whatever it is, and I talk about how about [you can send that worry] through to the thumb and it [the worry] goes, you know, and the stone will hold that [worry]. It will hold that for you.*

The teachers in that school were even instructed at times that a student from group would be allowed to pull his or her stone out of a pocket during class. Finally, one social worker shared the use of play therapy whereby certain animals or characters represented someone in the child's family. The child was asked what that person would say that would cause the child concern. Most social workers shared that in the one-to-one with the social worker, students used similar worksheets, games, or books as they do in group.

**Use of play in group.** Using play in group is a common way elementary school social workers engaged elementary school aged children in family change groups. One example of group play used by seven out of nine elementary school social workers involved using tools such as books (e.g. *Divorce Stinks* by Paul Kramer and *Dinosaurs Divorce* by Marc Brown) and games like My Two Homes. In the interview elementary school social workers described and explained planned playful activities. According to one social worker, art therapy and discussion were used to identify for each student "who is in who's family, how the family looks now, and how it changed from the way it used to before, when everybody was together."

Social workers also used games and physical activities to help children who were

struggling. A beginning activity used by one elementary school social worker to spur discussion was a game called Rose Bud Thorn. In this game the children were asked several questions such as "What is your favorite thing that you did on the weekend?" and "What is something you really didn't like about the weekend?" and "What is something you're looking forward to?" The social worker commented that during this game *"we just start to open up little by little, and talk about classroom stuff."* Several social workers also shared a similar opening-up activity during group such as the children sharing a high or low from their week. A few social workers mentioned another trust-building activity that included the children making a drawing of their family and then discussing the drawing in group. Another playful activity described by a social worker involved taking children to the gym where the children chose one of three places to run to: an area for yes, an area for I don't know, and an area for no. The social worker would ask the children to choose an area to run to each time she asked a question such as "Is divorce ever a kid's fault?" The social worker and the children would then discuss the children's "answers" (i.e. to which area of the gym they ran after each question.)

**How Children Benefit from Group**

Several elementary school social workers shared various ways in which children benefited from participating in family change groups and identified the goals of conducting such groups. The social workers reported that the primary aims of support groups for children are as follows: increasing coping skills, helping normalize the divorce process, teaching children to advocate for themselves and to express their concerns with

family members, helping children not feel so alone, improving academic performance, and setting boundaries with family members. One social worker mentioned that the majority of children were not getting counseling help outside of the school, which made in-school social services all the more important for struggling children:

> *Right now in my groups I'd say one out of nine or ten kids total that I'm working with is working with a counselor right now, but the rest aren't. This is the only [place] they have to process [their feelings]...so this is kind of where they come and get that connection and support.*

Interviewees also shared that group was the most common place where kids get support, and that there were some real issues that could be scary for children from divorced, separated or never-married families to face:

> *My dad swore at my mom' and then another kid will say 'Oh, that happened to me once.' And they'll kind of be able to talk about what that felt and it's like things that I don't think they can share with anyone else. And then we can kind of problem solve about what you can do if that happens, and sometimes it's even just like if mom and dad are yelling and swearing, just to go to your room. [I offer practical advice like] 'Well, can you talk to mom later to tell her about how that made you feel?*

**Coping skills children learn from group.** Seven out of nine participants stated that an important benefit of conducting family change groups is that it helps children of divorce develop coping skills that these children need in order to deal with the on-going stress and family changes associated with divorce. The literature says that group is a common place where children of divorced parents get support. One social worker gave a verbal picture of what kinds of issues come up in group:

> *I've seen kids like share things that have been scary at home like... My dad swore at my mom" or then another kid will say "Oh that happened to me once". And they'll kind of be able to talk about what that felt and it's like things that I don't think they can share with anyone else. And then we can kind of problem solve*

*about what you can do if that happened, and sometimes it's even just like if mom and dad are yelling and swearing just to go to your room. "Well can you talk to mom later to tell her about how that made you feel?*

Four social workers reported that students often talked differently with their peers and shared concerns or situations in group that the students may not otherwise share. One social worker provided an example of an important sharing by a student in group and noted that other students in group related to what the student said. *"Oh you know, my dad called my mom a bitch.' Someone else would be like 'Oh yeah, that's happened to me.' And then [we talk about] how do we cope through that."*

According to one elementary school social worker, parents could tell when their child had learned coping skills through:

> *experiences in their home when they would notice a child specifically using a coping mechanism or self-advocacy phrase or you know that kind of thing where parents would say, 'Wow I can totally tell that you guys have been working on this. She spoke to her father so much more directly than she ever has before,' or 'She was able to fall asleep much quicker because of the strategy you taught her for how to turn her head off.'*

This same social worker also said that during a one-to-one a student shared the following: "Last night I used this strategy, I, you know, I went to my room, and said I'll come out when you are, when you're ready to talk."

Learning and applying coping skills can benefit the child both at home and in school. In group one student said "My goal is to tell my mom...that I don't like hearing her say all the things she says about dad...I have a hard time telling her cuz she's so sad.*"* Once a student verbalized these goals, the social worker continued to work directly with the student on how to talk to parents and how to respect boundaries. Another social worker reported that in the classroom students applied learned coping skills as "asking

for a break in class, using calm corners" as well as learning what to do the next time there was a problem in class.

**Group helps normalize experiences.** Participants identified a benefit of conducting groups is that it helped normalize divorce related experiences. Six out of nine social workers identified groups as helping to normalize the experiences of children who came from divorced, separated, or never-married families. According to an elementary school social worker, one important benefit of group was that children did not feel so isolated. Another social worker stated that "one of the biggest things is that they [the children] are not blaming themselves and that it is normal to feel that way."

Yet another social worker stated that for children who followed a schedule based on living between two households, group helped children to normalize. An integral component and clear benefit of group was that "children connect with they hear each other's stories" and it was often in group where "children [learn] to put words to their stories." It was stated by another respondent that when children feel mutual aid, as they did in group, they *"benefit from peers, help each other out and learn from each others experiences."* Yet an additional social worker stated that group:

> *really normalizes it [the children's experiences] and then they can share anything that happens at home and there may be a lot of situations where it's fine, there is nothing going on, but they still like coming. They like to kind of have this group even just to [share their schedules and where they] stay, [and where they come to realize that] everyone has their own schedule. Students often say things like 'Oh, I do that' or 'Oh, what are you doing at the holidays this time?' or "I'm doing this....' It's normalizing [for them.]*

**Change in How Elementary School Social Workers Provide Support**

A theme emerged without any prompts about the nature of the role of elementary

school social work shifting from the 1970s and 1980s to current expected service trends for school social work. A vital role that has also influenced how elementary school social workers can provide support was directly related to the shift in funding.

**Change in social work roles.** Participants described a change in their role as a social worker. Five out of nine social workers interviewed reported a shift in how they were able to provide service to elementary school students relative to how they could in the past due to changes over time regarding the services they were expected to deliver, and due to a change in funding. One respondent made the following comment "I think overall there are probably less social workers doing family change groups than there used to be, like in the '70s and '80s, just as I think there's less groups available for students."

A second social worker spoke about the services that social workers used to be able to provide but could no longer provide to students from separated, divorced, or never-married families. She had this to say:

> *When it was full time, it was special ed. and general ed. It was any student or family that needed support resources. I would counsel for grief, divorce, anxiety, anger, social skills, all that stuff. We'd do bullying prevention, and we would do a lot of preventative stuff in the classroom. And at this point we only have enough social work support for the special ed. minutes that we have. So the only students that I see at this point are on individualized educational plans. There isn't any preventative work anymore. There aren't any groups or individual counseling for kids or families who are not affected by disability and are in special ed.*

**Change in funding.** Four out of nine social workers mentioned the role funding played in how they were able to serve children. Funding directly impacted the services that elementary school social workers were able to provide to children from divorced, separated or never-married families. There had been a shift from elementary school

social workers being funded either through general education funding, or sometimes

getting funding from both general education and special education.  One elementary

school social worker said this about budget issues:

> *In this district and probably nationwide, [there's a difference between what is*
> *budgeted and] what we actually get. Our money all comes through the special*
> *education, and so in order to justify having school social workers, they've got to tie*
> *it to the minutes that social workers actually get reimbursed for. And we're*
> *expected to provide that service. We could write into IEP a family change group,*
> *you know, that type of thing, but more often than not it's kept kind of generic, and it*
> *says, social skills group. A lot of the kids that I see for family change types of stuff*
> *actually aren't even on an IEP. The message on the street is Don't provide*
> *anything that... [you] don't have to provide. And, whatever we are providing, make*
> *sure you document it and put it in the IEP's so that we can get reimbursed for it.*

Another elementary school social worker from the same district commented about

how services to elementary school children impacted by divorce, separation, or being in a

never- married family had shifted:

> *I've been full time up until four years ago, when I took leave, and then I came back*
> *as a part-time employee the last couple of years.  The way that the job has changed*
> *around the time when I was on leave the district started, you know, because of*
> *budget cuts and stuff.  They just said that they wanted to cut one of nine of us cuz*
> *the buildings were all fully staffed and we were one point in every building, FTE*
> *(full-time).  And then at that point it was general ed and special ed.  So at this point*
> *it's been cut to .5 so I work part time. I work .5 and now our building only has*
> *social work for the .5 that I'm here.*

A social worker from a different district served students in an alternative

education environment and stated that in the past and at a different school, funding used

to be available to provide a divorce support group; however, the social worker's current

school now only ran one girls' group for girls who had an IEP and had social work

minutes.  This social worker had limited ability to work with students impacted by

divorce, separation or being in a never-married family and expressed limitations in this

way:

*[The] current sw role is to provide immediate needs, and sometimes I just meet with a student once...or maybe a couple of times a week and then I don't see them again. But there's three that I see every single week so they all basically have social work minutes [on the topic of] anger management. Every year I may see about ten students from divorced, never-married, and separated families and typically meet with them like maybe three or four times. On average I would say like three or four weeks.*

**Summary**

Most of the participants agreed on the themes with a bit of variance within the subthemes. All of the participants agreed that one main way they worked with students impacted by a divorce, separation, or never married families was through the use of engagement and those types of activities were beneficial in providing support in both individual and in family change groups. Group activities were identified as an important aspect to have within groups to help children engage and play was also a developmental tool used to help children open up and teach coping skills. In terms of how children benefited from group, most of the social worker provided examples of numerous benefits from group with sometimes similar and different feedback regarding the benefits seen, yet each one had a comment on how they felt elementary students benefited from family change groups. One main way elementary school social workers saw children benefit from group was through learning coping skills, and group being a place which normalized divorce was paramount as groups was a unique experience that provided peer support that contributed to the normalization process. Finally, a shift was noted with how elementary school social workers were able provide support. This was an unexpected theme that emerged. Social workers addressed a shift in both their roles and how funding

had also played an integral part in how services were delivered to children from divorced,

separated or never married families.

**Discussion**

The research examined what support services are available to Minnesota elementary school students impacted by being in a divorced, separated, or never married family. This section will explore and review the similarities between the literature and the themes that emerged during the research.

**School Social Workers' Roles and Responsibilities**

The research and the literature agree that children of divorced, separated, or never-married families experience acute as well as ongoing stress, and that these children benefit from both one to one's and group, where one of the roles of the school social worker is to help these children learn how to cope. The research specifically supported the conceptual framework of stress and coping theory, which in relation to children's experiences with divorce stipulates that there are event stressors and ongoing stressors that children experience (Mitchell, 2004). The research and the literature also agree that the most common source of support for children experiencing family stressors, particularly stressors related to divorce, is the social worker that conducts divorce support groups (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007). One social worker gave an example of how coping theory implemented by the school social worker in a school setting works to a child's benefit:

> *Right now in my groups I'd say one out of nine or ten kids total that I'm working with is working with a counselor right now, but the rest aren't. This is the only [place] they have to process [their feelings]...so this is kind of where they come and get that connection and support.*

The research and the literature did not agree, however, on the topic of the changing role of the school social worker. Specifically, the respondents expressed concern over what they perceive to be a decline in the number of family change groups run by school social workers. One respondent said, "I think overall there are probably less social workers doing family change groups than there used to be, like in the '70s and '80s, just as I think there's less groups available for students." There was nothing found in the literature, however, to support this view.

In view of the research conducted and the literature published, one might conclude that an important role of the elementary school social worker is to help children of divorced, separated, or never-married families cope with the stressors that family dynamics can cause in the lives of children.

**Use of Engagement to Facilitate Change**

The literature and this study agree that engagement activities are a helpful component of groups. The data obtained from participants finds engagement activities are beneficial in groups. All elementary school social workers reported the use of engagement activities in serving children from divorced, separated, or never-married families in both individual meetings and in family change groups. The elementary school social workers provided examples of engagement activities used in group, such as role play, games, art therapy, play therapy, worksheets, activities, and books. The use of engagement activities for divorce support groups is prevalent in the literature; however, engagement activities are not mentioned specifically in terms of elementary school social workers providing support on an individual basis. Most schools offer an intervention for

children of divorce (Richardson & Rosen, 1999). Also, play therapy which utilizes play, toys, and art is in line with a child's development and better helps children with emotional expression (Bratton & Ray & Rhine, 2005). In summary, in this study elementary school social workers report use of engagement activities to help children process difficult emotions. The use of engagement activities has been empirically tested and proven to be helpful to children who are impacted by divorce, and is a helpful tool to help children verbalize and process emotions.

**Group activities**. The finding of group activities being common in groups is consistent with the literature. Many participants report conducting family change groups which utilize group activities as a way to engage their students. The use of engagement activities in both individual and group support for children of divorce is highly prevalent. The literature specifically notes that engaging activities in divorce support groups helped children with feelings of anger and sadness (Schreier & Kalter, 1990). The participants in this study had a similar finding with a high correlation between using engagement activities and children being able to talk about difficult emotions or experiences. The use of engagement activities has been found to be an essential component of divorce support groups, locally known as family change groups. When children are able to engage in activity they are more easily able to talk about and process difficult emotions.

**Use of play in group**. The finding of play being a common component in family change groups by participants is consistent with the developmental stages of elementary school age children. Play therapy is developmentally appropriate modality which allows children to address psychosocial issues through play, using both toys and art to better

express their feelings (Brantton, Ray, & Rhine, 2005). There is a high prevalence throughout the literature to support the use of play, as it is a core component of divorce curriculums. Creative activities such as role playing, using puppets, drawing, and singing help children both label and identify feelings and offer a space to try out new behaviors and coping skills (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2001). One of the purposes of play is to help children open up and to express and label their feelings. Another purpose of play is to teach children new skills to help adjust to family change and stressors. The use of play in family change groups is more than just children having fun and getting a break from stress; it is a useful tool to help children better express themselves and teach children ways to cope with the on-going stressors associated with growing up in a divorced, separated, or never married family.

**How Children Derive Emotional Benefits from Group**

Both the literature and the reports by social workers attested to the fact that group is often the only place where children get support. The findings are consistent as the literature states that most schools in the United States offer some type of intervention for children of divorce (Richardson & Rosen, 1999). School is a common place where support is built in for children of divorce. Elementary school social workers who participated in this study identified specific goals and benefits of family change groups. Common goals include increasing coping skills, helping normalize the divorce process, teaching children to advocate for themselves, being able to express concerns with family members, helping children feel less alone, improving academic performance, and setting boundaries with family members.

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Appendix  A

26591 611th Avenue, Gibbon, MN  55335          ~ www.msswa.org ~

2012-2013 MSSWA
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December 6, 2012

Dr. Eleni Roulis, Chair
Institutional Review Board
2115 Summit Avenue
Mail AQU 319
Saint Paul, MN 55105

Dear Kimberly Johnson,

Thank you for contacting me to discuss your proposed research project that you are completing as a graduate student at the University of Saint Thomas and Saint Catherine University.  This letter is to confirm that you have the support of the Minnesota School Social Work Association (MSSWA) to conduct interviews with members affiliated with MSSWA for your research project: Social Workers Perspectives: Effective Elementary Divorce Support Groups

MSSWA understands that your study is qualitative in design, and a request will be made to MSSWA members to partake in qualitative interviews.  MSSWA members can chose to decline or participate in the survey, and their decision whether or not to participate will not harm their relationship with the University of St. Thomas or St. Catherine University in any way.  MSSWA also appreciates your effort to protect the confidentiality of its members.

MSSWA understands qualitative interviews will not be scheduled or conducted until your research project has been reviewed and accepted by your committee members, research chair, and the Institutional Review Board at the University of Saint Thomas. MSSWA also understands that the information collected will be shared in a public forum for your research project.

MSSWA does not predict any risk or benefit to our organization.

If you have any questions or concerns about the Minnesota School Social Workers Association's involvement in this research study please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Julie Ann Porath, MSW LICSW
MSSW Membership Co-Chair &
Graduate Research Contact
Julie.porath@spps.org
651-744-3531

Celebrating Over 40 Years of MSSWA:  Serving Children Through Their School, Home & Community

Appendix B

**CONSENT FORM**

**UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS**

**Qualitative Analysis: social workers perspectives in what makes an effective divorce support group.**

I am conducting a study regarding social workers perspective in what makes an effective divorce support group and am questioning school social workers. I invite you to participate in the research. You were selected as you are currently a social worker working with children in an elementary school setting. Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in this study.

This study is being conducted by: Kimberly Johnson (Kym), and is supervised by Kari Fletcher, Ph.D., LICSW in the University of St. Thomas/St. Catherine University MSW Program.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to gather information from school social workers in what they feel makes an effective divorce support group, along with finding out how they run divorce support groups. It also is helpful to be aware of considerations social workers may face in running support groups, such as funding, time, and other services they

provide for children of divorce. The potential benefit of this research includes improvements to services and delivery of divorce support programs.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in one audio taped interview with me lasting from 45-60 minutes. I will ask 10 questions, and you may choose to not answer certain questions. You may schedule this interview at any time that is convenient for you, and the interview will take place in a private reserved room or your office. If you decide now that you would like to be in the study and you change your mind later, please inform me at least three days prior to our meeting. There will be no repercussions. No data will be collected and used if you choose to withdraw. We will review and sign this form together during the day of your interview.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

If you agree to this study, I will ask you questions regarding your perspective on what makes an effective divorce/family change support group. Depending on where or when we meet other school staff may know of your participation in this study. Because of these potential risks, I will remind you during the interview that you may choose to skip any question(s) that I ask, and you also have the right to end the interview without any penalty to you. I also will be sure to take any necessary steps to ensure that you have as much confidentiality as possible in your building in regards to being in my study. Your

identifying information in my research itself will be omitted to protect your confidentiality.

You will receive no direct benefits for participating in this research. There is the possibility however, that your feedback can help inform practice in meeting the needs of children from divorce, separated, or from parents who never married households.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The types of records I will create include information an audio tape recording and transcriptions. These will be kept in a locked file on a secured computer at my home. My advisor and I are the only people who will access to them. All audio tapes shall be erased and destroyed after the 2nd of June 2012. Any identifying information will be deleted from the transcriptions and the transcriptions will be shredded to destroy the documents.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision to whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with your employer or the University of St. Thomas/ St. Catherine University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time between the date you contact me to participate and the date of our interview without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw

from the study later, data collected about you will still be used. You are also free to skip any questions I ask during the interview.

**Contacts:**

My name is Kym Johnson. You can ask me any questions you have now. If you have questions later please call me, (cell) 612-816-2450. You may also reach my advisor, Kari Fletcher, Phone: (651) 962-5807. You can also reach the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participation in the study. I am at least 18 years of age.

_____          _____

       **Signature of Study Participant**                              **Date**

_____          _____

       **Print Name of Study Participant**                              **Date**

_____          _____

**Signature of Researcher**                                                      **Date**

Appendix C

Questionnaire for Qualitative Interviews:

1) Can you tell me a bit about your role as a social worker?

2) In what ways have you worked with children who come from divorced or separated families?

3) Does how often you meet with student's from divorced or separated families evaluated based on a student's particular needs, and how often can you meet with an individual student?

4) Have you run groups that examine children's experiences with divorce?

   a. If so, is there a format you use for how your divorce groups are run?

   b. What curriculum or tools do you use if any?

   c. Typically how many weeks do you meet for a divorce/ family change group and how long is each session?

d. When conducting divorce support groups are there important markers or benchmarks that you find useful in determining the effectiveness of a divorce support group?

e. What feedback have you received from the groups you have run and from whom?

f. How do you tell when students are benefiting from the group?

g. Do you or have you provided an assessment to determine the effectiveness of your group, if so who participated in the assessment and how was it done?

5) Is there anything further you feel it would be important for me to know in terms of serving the needs of children who come from divorced or separated homes?

6) Do you know anyone else who would be interested in participating in my study who is an elementary school social worker and run divorce support groups?

7) If so, how might I get ahold of them?

Appendix D

Letter (or E-mail) of Introduction and Recruitment

Hello **fill-in-the blank,**

My name is Kym Johnson, and I am conducting a qualitative research project as part of my Masters in Social Work program at the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University. I am contacting you because this study is attempting to assess school social workers perspectives in conducting support groups that serve children from divorced, separated, and parents who never married families. I invite you to participate in this research because you are a school social worker who works with children in an elementary school aged setting with this population.

I would be very interested in interviewing you for my research. I am looking for participants who are available for an interview that will range from 45-60 minutes in length. My hope is that my research will add to the existing information regarding the wellbeing of children who come from households of parents who have divorced, separated, or never married parents.

I myself have participated in a school social work internship and worked with children from divorced households, and am particularly interested in the needs of children who have experienced a divorce, separation, or have parents who have never married. I understand there may be logistical questions you would like to ask. Please contact me at

your earliest convenience with further questions or comments, and to schedule a time when I can introduce myself and my project to you, and schedule an interview.

Also if you know of other elementary school social workers who work with divorce or family change groups please feel free to pass this letter along, or let me know who they are and how I might get ahold of them. Thank you so much for your consideration. I look forward to connecting soon.

Sincerely,

Kym Johnson

PH: 612-816-2450

E-mail: john6051@stthomas.edu

Appendix E

**Resource List for supportive interventions that help guide practice for school social workers who run divorce support groups for children.**

You are provided with this list as you are a social worker who has participated in my research study. I have listed below journal articles that you might be interested in, if you would like more information on this topic.

1) Amato P. (1993) Children's adjustment to divorce: theories, hypotheses, and empirical support. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 55 (1), pp. 23-38
   This is a meta-analysis of children and divorce from 67 studies from the 1990's. It was found when compared with children from intact families that children of divorce scored lower on measures of academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-concept, and social relations.

2) Richardson, C. and Rosen L. (1999) School-based interventions for children of divorce. *Professional Counseling,* 3.1 (22), pp. 1-10.
   Discusses several main group interventions for children of divorce, what they have in common and helpful group components. Also, provides a thorough reference list of main researcher's and practitioners in the field.

3) DeLucia-Waack J. and Gerrity D. (2001) Effective group work for elementary school-age children whose parents are divorcing. *The Family Journal,* 9 (3), pp. 273-284.

Provides a model for children of divorce support groups, including goal setting, securing agency consent, leadership planning, recruitment, securing informed consent, group members needs and assessment, group members needs and goals assessment (including scales to use as measures), group process assessment, group format, how to conduct a time limited group with seven sessions, and useful interventions for children of divorce groups.

4) Amato P. & Keith B. (1991) Parental divorce and adult well-being: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 53 (1), pp. 43-58.
This is a meta-analysis of studies that looked at the long-term consequences of parental divorce for adult wellbeing. These studies looked at the long-term implications for children who are now adults.

5) Alpert-Gillis L., Pedro-Carroll J., & Cowen E. The Children of Divorce Intervention Program: Development, Implementation, and Evaluation of a Program for Young Urban Children. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology,* 57 (5), 583-589.

CODIP was a main empirically tested model that has been replicated in several settings.

6) Wallerstein J. (2005) Growing up in the divorced family. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 33 (4), 401-418.

A mental health practitioner who looks at the findings from a 25 year study of 131 children from the 1970's who are now adults. She has extensive knowledge in working with this population and provides the perspectives of several clients, as well as a view to the long-term impact of divorce.

**Psychoeducational Group/Divorce Group Resources**:

1) Video's available for practitioners on psycho-educational videos available for groups. From AGSW (Association for Group Workers). atttp://www.asgw.org/asgw_training_videos.htm

2) For Divorce Group supervision and consultation. http://affiliatedpsychologicalservices.com/services/