

1988

## Administrator's role in helping school personnel handle problems of children associated with divorce

Kathy Lynn Konigsmark  
*University of Northern Iowa*

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

Copyright ©1988 Kathy Lynn Konigsmark

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Konigsmark, Kathy Lynn, "Administrator's role in helping school personnel handle problems of children associated with divorce" (1988). *Graduate Research Papers*. 2738.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/2738>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uni.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uni.edu).

---

## Administrator's role in helping school personnel handle problems of children associated with divorce

### Abstract

School administrators make effective decisions that can have important consequences. Many of these decisions involve children of divorce, who make up approximately twenty percent of the school enrollment (Drake, 1981 ). Traditionally, school administrators have responded to the growing number of personal, social, and behavioral problems in schools. According to Delaney, Richards, and Strathe ( 1984) by the year 1990, one-third of all students in our schools will be children of divorced parents. As more support services are needed. there is pressure to provide counseling to meet the needs of school children. The school is the place that can focus help. Schools can play a significant role in facilitating a child's adjustment to divorce by providing a natural environment where professionals can give support and assistance (Delaney et. al, 1984). Teachers work most closely with these children, yet most teachers have no special training to understand the special problems caused by parental divorce. Without such understanding, teachers cannot effectively intervene. The schools primary function is instruction, but a child in a crisis cannot learn until school personnel recognize the crisis and take steps to ameliorate its effects.

**Administrator's Role in Helping School Personnel  
Handle Problems of Children Associated With Divorce**

---

**A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Department of Education Administration  
and Counseling  
University of Northern Iowa**

---

**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Education**

---

**by  
Kathy Lynn Konigsmark  
May 1988**



School administrators make effective decisions that can have important consequences. Many of these decisions involve children of divorce, who make up approximately twenty percent of the school enrollment (Drake, 1981). Traditionally, school administrators have responded to the growing number of personal, social, and behavioral problems in schools. According to Delaney, Richards, and Strathe (1984) by the year 1990, one-third of all students in our schools will be children of divorced parents. As more support services are needed, there is pressure to provide counseling to meet the needs of school children. The school is the place that can focus help. Schools can play a significant role in facilitating a child's adjustment to divorce by providing a natural environment where professionals can give support and assistance (Delaney et. al, 1984). Teachers work most closely with these children, yet most teachers have no special training to understand the special problems caused by parental divorce. Without such understanding, teachers cannot effectively intervene. The schools primary function is instruction, but a child in a crisis cannot learn until school personnel recognize the crisis and take steps to ameliorate its effects.

In addition to decision-making, administrators act as supervisors also. Educators need to be aware of the impact divorce has on children and what to do in the classroom to help the child during this readjustment time. Children bring their emotions into the classroom and the schools must respond (Holzman, 1984). Offering help to these children, especially young ones, is a delicate situation. The school may be the only place where consistency and concern are regularly experienced by the child (Garanzini, 1984). Administration should identify the special needs of these students and the needs of those teachers and ancillary staff members who deal with them.

Information about divorce is needed by all persons who work with children associated with divorce. It takes planning to deal effectively with these children. School administrators can begin by compiling information on the number of children in the district involved in divorce (Drake, 1981). With this information, administrators can develop policies, guidelines, and specific programs to meet the needs of school personnel and children of divorce in the school district. Drake (1981) feels that principals and teachers need to be sensitive to the additional time that children of divorce may

require from school personnel. For example, these youngsters may visit the school nurse more frequently. Children under stress may complain of headaches or stomach pains. They may also have sleeping and eating problems or may be absent from school more often than other children. The administrator may have to devote more time to these children, helping to fulfill the need for attention.

Another way administrators can help school personnel handle problems associated with divorce is to educate them. Principals can encourage teachers to attend workshops or to enroll in training programs on this topic. Private practitioners or community mental health centers are possible resources for in-service programs too. In-service workshops are beneficial to school personnel because it can cite the implications divorce has on a child's performance. In-service can provide teachers with information about changing family patterns so they can examine their own values and possible prejudices on divorce. Hoffman (1984) believes that by providing in-service sessions for school personnel on issues of divorce can help the staff become more empathetic and tolerant toward children who suffer pain and sadness from this loss. In addition, these programs should alert school personnel to the children's personality and/or behavior

changes that may signal trouble at home and provide teachers with ways to personally assist children experiencing stress.

While the process of divorce is a crisis situation for all families, some children seem to make satisfactory adjustment, while others have been seen to exhibit a multitude of behavioral symptoms. Delaney et al. (1984) say that divorce is often the most positive solution to destructive family functioning. They noted that children of divorce show more empathy for others, increased helping behaviors, and greater interdependence. Family change doesn't always spell trouble, but school personnel need to know ways to help students who need assistance and how to handle them effectively.

The issue of divorce has a direct implication on school personnel, especially teachers, since they spend at least six hours each day with these children. Teachers need to understand the child and be aware of the changes in behavior, attitude, and performance. There is no single behavior reaction to divorce; therefore, there are no easy guidelines for recognizing behaviors related to these situations and emotional changes which may accompany them. Today the word "divorce" has become a common term within the vocabulary of many



students. The impact on schools with such a large number of families changing from a two-parent to a one-parent status has been significant (Skeen, Robinson, Hobson-Flake, 1984). Because of the large number of students involved, it is important to gain insight into home, school, peer and teacher-related behaviors of students living in a single-parent family. There are several ways in which a student's behavior in school might change as a result of their parents' divorce. Each child is different; therefore, will exhibit different reactions to the situation. Hrymak and Smart (1984) cited four common behaviors found in the majority of cases...guilt, fear, anger, and depression.

One of the first characteristics of children experiencing divorce is guilt. Children view it as their punishment for wrong doing and believe if they act better their parents will reconcile. Because many children blame themselves for divorce, teachers can help children cognitively understand that they are not responsible. The teacher needs to listen openly and empathetically as children express thoughts. The teacher can suggest books to students and read them out loud in class or integrate them into lessons.

Fear is the second characteristic children experience as a result from a divorce. They fear abandonment by one parent or both. They

may become clingy and worry about who will take care of them. Because of these feelings, teachers can try to establish a close, secure relationship with the children. To communicate acceptance and affection teachers need to give hugs, smiles, and kind words.

A third characteristic of children facing divorce in the family is the feeling of intense anger. Researchers have found children may become aggressive by destroying things and become self-destructive in their behavior (Hrymak et al., 1984). The classroom environment may be an important factor in channeling their anger. A classroom with consistent, clear routines which are predictable can help a child feel secure. While teachers should be sensitive to changes in a child's family situation, they should remain consistent in terms of discipline. Role-playing, self-created stories, creative writing, and art activities enable children to freely express their own feelings of anger in a constructive way.

Depression is the fourth behavior kids face during a divorce. This may be evident in loss of appetite, hopelessness, moodiness, and self-criticism. The child may experience insecurity, lower self-esteem, and no longer enjoy activities or social interaction with other people.

This sadness may be manifested in frequent daydreaming, inattentiveness, nervousness, withdrawal, or physical complaints such as headaches and stomach aches. Many children are unable to accept the fact of their parents' divorce and often will deny it or lie to their friends. Teachers should provide children opportunities to feel successful. Creating lessons that deal with emotions can be demonstrated using activities that teach feeling words, acceptance, and different emotions. In this way children may be reassured that their feelings are normal.

Teachers should not ignore problems they believe children are having; however, treat all information in strict confidence. The teacher and the school together can be a positive force in helping children understand and accept their new family situation. Classroom teachers are in an ideal position to provide structure, continuity, and support for the child of divorce.

Another significant individual in the lives of children of divorced parents is the school secretary. She has multiple duties. The school secretary may have to cope with more telephone calls and paperwork as students transfer into and out of the school. Requests for dual parent conferences and duplicated notices or progress reports

for each parent make extra demands on a secretary's time. The secretary attends to the students nonlearning needs also. This category might be retitled as "mother" because the secretary acts like a parent, nurse, or a friend. Students come to the office daily requiring help for cuts, bruises, headaches, stomach aches, medicine, colds, or messages. The secretary transmits the empathy of the school. The position not only requires a multitude of jobs and skills but also demands organization, time management, and discretion (Rimen, 1984). Communicating effectively is virtually important.

Elementary school counselors can have a positive influence on children whose lives are disrupted by divorce. Pardeck (1985) suggests that counselors use books as a tool to help kids deal with behavioral and emotional problems. By selecting books for children with divorced parents and by using follow-up strategies, a counselor can help a young person better adjust to his or her new family situation. Counselors can also develop support systems to help children (Williams, 1984). Group counseling can help children diffuse feelings and maintain stability as children learn others are experiencing similar concerns. Counselors can be helpful by talking

with their parents. Counselors can work with parents to increase awareness of the child's needs and feelings concerning divorce.

Children need someone to respond to them when their parents are divorcing. Psychologists in schools, are in a position to act as advocates for these children (Goldman, 1986). In order to serve this function, psychologists must first become familiar with literature related to the effects of divorce on children. Psychologists can act as a consultant. By providing workshops for teachers, administrators, or guidance personnel, this can help increase sensitivity effects of divorce on children and provide personnel with ways to reduce stress on these children. It is important for teachers to know what to expect of children when there is a divorce in order for them to assess whether the child's behavior is typical or pathological, requiring referral to a child's study team. Children of divorce need someone to favor their position and offer support. Psychologists must be able to respond actively. They must create opportunities for the children to learn, grow, and to develop insight and skills in coping with the problems and stress related to divorce. The key on the part of the psychologist is to bring services where none have existed. This can be

done by reaching people in the educational and legal systems who need to have knowledge too.

Social workers are part of the school personnel that provides support for the child who deals with parental conflict and family dissolution. Divorce is usually a painful process which can lead to growth and stability for all involved. A social worker's efforts might speed up that growth or at least lessen the pain for students (Williams, 1984).

A variety of curriculum and instructional modifications may also be beneficial to the total development of children from divorced families (Delaney et al., 1984). Instructional materials should reflect a variety of nonstereotyped family configurations. Resource materials should be available to support family life, coping skills, and emergency situation skills. Books, both fact and fiction showing single-parent families in a positive light and dealing with divorce should be made available. The inclusion of community volunteers such as senior citizens in classroom learning environments can provide opportunities for students to interact with adult role models and to discuss their feelings and concerns. Sensitivity to holidays may need to be changed so the child of divorce is not embarrassed. Creating

acceptance of family structures that differ from the nuclear family will help reduce the stigma the child may feel.

Becoming aware of the facts of divorce and knowing what and what not to do about it-has become a professional duty (Garazini, 1984). To best help these children, administrators, teachers, secretary, counselor, psychologist, social worker, and both parents must be involved. The school may be the only place where a confused child of divorce continues to experience consistency and concern (Garazini, 1984). Just as school personnel try to keep abreast of new teaching methods and equipment, they must also keep abreast of new stresses that touch the emotional needs of students. Approximately eleven million school-age children in the United States today are from families whose parents are divorced, and the number is constantly growing (Garvin, 1984). It is a time for a child when they need people to care and help them understand. According to Drake (1981) it is crucial that teachers and the principal be sensitive to the ways in which stress of a family breakup can disrupt, even if temporarily, their youngsters' ability to participate in the learning process. Such awareness and the willingness to provide a supportive setting for

these children will combine to make the school more responsible to changes wrought by a decade of divorce. With this in mind, all schools will continue to meet their primary responsibility...helping all children learn at the level of their highest potential. Perhaps our priorities should be to reconfirm the importance of building a healthy climate, from which the child's self-concept can be reinforced to give the student the strength to cope with problems at home and school (Garvin, 1984).



## References

- Cartrel, R. G. (1986). Adjustment to divorce: 3 components to assist children. Elementary School Guidance Counselor, 20, 163-173.
- Drake, Ellen. (1981). Children of separation and divorce: School policies, procedures, problems. Phi Delta Kappan, 27-28.
- Delaney, E., Richards, J., Strathe, M. (1984). A Study of the single parent child in the catholic school. Momentum, 15, 41-43.
- Garanzini, Michael. (1984). Recognizing and responding to the child of divorce. Momentum, 15, 8-12.
- Garvin, James. (1984). Children of divorce-a challenge for middle school teachers. Middle School Journal, 16, 6-7.
- Goldman, R. K. (1986). Counseling children of divorce. School Psychology Review, 14, 280-290.
- Hoffman, Carol. (1984). Group sessions in a middle school. Children Today, 13, 25-26.
- Holzman, Terry. (1984). Schools can provide help for children of divorce. The American School Board Journal, 171: 5, 46-47.
- Hrymark, Marilyn, Smart, Laura. (1984). Helping elementary teachers understand children and divorce. Illinois Teacher, 27, 135-137.
- Pardeck, Jean, and John. (1985). Bibliotherapy using a Neo-Freudian approach for children of divorced parents. The School Counselor, 32: 4, 313-318.

Rimer, A. (1984). Elementary school secretary: Informal decision maker. Educational Horizon, 63, 16-18.

Skeen, P., Robinson, B., Hobson-Flake, C. (1984). Blended families. Young Children, 39, 64-74.

Strother, Joanna (1984). Adolescent stress as it relates to step family living: Implications for school counselors. The School Counselor, 32, 97-103.

Williams, Mary. (1984). Family dissolution-an issue for the schools-an elementary school program. Children Today, 13: 24, 27-29.