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# The Need for Research on Counseling Interventions for Children and Adolescents from Divorced Families: A Literature Review

Michael Gutzwiller

**Abstract:** The purpose of this literature review is to make a case that more research is needed on interventions for children from divorced families. Data reveals that between 40% and 60% of first marriages in the United States will end in divorce, half of which involve children. Research has consistently shown that for most children there are significant consequences resulting from the divorce of their parents. The research on specific counseling interventions for children from divorced families is relatively slim. The research on three potential interventions is discussed: group therapy, parenting training and coordination, and bibliotherapy. This review concludes that more research is needed.

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The last fifty years have seen a dramatic increase in divorce rates. This has given rise to concern for and extensive research on the effects of marriage dissolution upon children and adolescents. Reviews of journal search engines turn up thousands of articles treating the subject of divorce, its effects on adults, as well as its effects on children. This makes a literature review of the topic difficult to accomplish. Complicating the matter further is the ongoing debate among researchers over the consequences of divorce and marital instability on both adults and children (Amato, 2000). On one side of the debate, the traditional nuclear family concept is seen as the most beneficial for children to grow into healthy, well-adjusted adults. The proliferation of single-parent homes thus contributes to societal dysfunction (Amato, 2000). On the other side of the debate, other factors such as poverty and poor education services are seen as more threatening factors to child outcomes than divorce, and marital dissolution is seen as potentially healthy for all involved, despite some short term difficulties (Amato, 2000; Frisco, 2007). These perspectives underlie the majority of research.

Adding to the difficulty of completing a literature review on this subject is the inconsistent and nearly complete lack of research on interventions for both adults and children (Amato, 2000). Rich, Molloy, Hart, Ginsberg, and Mulvey (2007), note that there is diminished attention

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paid to this lack of research by healthcare professionals and society altogether. The original purpose of this review was to discuss the research on counseling interventions for children from divorced homes. Unfortunately, after combing through the literature and discovering only a small handful of useful articles, this focus had to change slightly. The reoriented purpose of this review is to make a case that more research is needed on interventions for children from divorced families. This paper will address this by first exploring the research literature on the consequences of divorce on children. Secondly, this paper will examine the little research on three methods of counseling intervention. Finally, this paper will conclude with a brief discussion of the literature review and the need for further research.

### CONSEQUENCES OF DIVORCE

Data reveals that between 40% and 60% of first marriages in the United States will end in divorce, half of which involve children (Amato, 2000; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007; Rich et al., 2007). Statistically, this means that more than one million children each year and between 30% and 40% of all children by the time they reach eighteen will experience the divorce of their parents (Amato, 2000; DeLucia-Waack & Gerrity, 2001; Frisco, Muller, & Frank, 2007; Rich et al., 2007). Research has consistently shown that for most children there are significant consequences resulting from the divorce of their parents (Amato, 2000; Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Delucia-Waack & Gerrity, 2001; Frisco, Muller, & Frank, 2007; McConnell & Sim, 1999; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007; Pehrsson, Allen, Folger, McMillen, & Lowe, 2007; Rich et al., 2007; VanderValk, Spruijt, de Goede, Maas, & Meeus, 2005). Children from divorced families generally score lower on psychological well-being tests than their peers from non-divorced families, most notably in the areas of psychological adjustment, self-concept, behavior and conduct, academic achievement, and social relations (Frisco, Muller, & Frank, 2007; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007; Pehrsson, Allen, Folger, McMillen, & Lowe, 2007; VanderValk et al., 2005). VanderValk et al. (2005) suggest that in children and adolescents, these negative effects are expressed through their internalizing behaviors, such as higher levels of depression and anxiety, and their externalizing problem behaviors, such as fighting, hostility, and defiance. Studies also show that young people from dissolved marriages show higher accounts of substance

abuse, early sexual relationships, and problematic relationships (Delucia-Waack & Gerrity, 2001; VanderValk et al., 2005).

VanderValk, et al. (2005) call attention to variable factors involved in quantifying the effects of divorce such as gender differences, age differences, and the long-term development of divorce effects. These variables are important because prior research on them has been inconsistent or nearly non-existent. Other research questions whether it is the divorce itself that has the most impact on children and adolescents or the conflicts and events leading up to the divorce and following it (Amato, 2000; Peris and Emery 2004). Frisco, Muller, and Frank (2007) note that there are covariates that precede the actual divorce event such as financial instability and fighting between parents that blur the causal relationship. Some further break the issue down differentiating between the eventual divorces of low-conflict marriages versus high-conflict marriages, suggesting that a child actually benefits from the break-up of a high-conflict marriage due to the alleviation of a hostile atmosphere, whereas a child experiences adverse effects from the break-up of a low-conflict marriage (Amato, 2000; Peris & Emery, 2004; Strohschein, 2007). Amato (2000) notes however that a minority of divorces are preceded by recurring high conflict between parents. Other studies question the causal effect of divorce upon child well-being. Strohschein (2007) casts doubt on the need for interventions such as parenting training and other parenting interventions. She concludes in her study that a parent's capacity to parent does not significantly diminish in the wake of divorce (Strohschein, 2007). Bernstein (2007) suggests that society holds a child of divorce script, a self fulfilling prophecy of sorts that determines a child's behavior and reaction to divorce, which has more impact on the child than the divorce itself.

There are many studies that show the negative effect of divorce and a child's academic performance (Amato, 2000; Frisco, Muller, & Frank, 2007). Throughout the 1990's research showed that children from divorced families tended to score lower on measures of academic performance than their peers from non-divorced families (Amato, 2000). The difference between the groups however has narrowed in recent years, and may be due to the growing societal acceptance of divorce (Amato, 2000). That being said, the other negative effects on children such as internal and external problem behaviors often manifest themselves in the classroom.

VanderValk et al. (2005) suggest that "all children show negative divorce effects," although some studies show slight differences in these effects upon boys and girls and different age groups (p. 534). For example,

generally speaking boys tend to show more external problem behavior while girls display more internal problem behavior (VanderValk et al., 2005). Another example would be that the effects of divorce seem to be more significant for younger children (Peris & Emery, 2004), and may continue into adolescence, adulthood, and even into future generations (Amato, 2000; Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Pehrsson, Allen, Folger, McMillen, & Lowe, 2007; VanderValk et al., 2005). Most research tends to agree that divorce always affects children negatively, however the context and degree of this effect varies.

As stated above, the issues of psychological well-being, academic performance, social interaction, and internalizing and externalizing problem behavior of the children and adolescents being addressed are directly correlated if not explicitly linked to divorce and the events and conflicts preceding and following the divorce. The issue at hand then is incorporating the research and knowledge of the effects of divorce on children into the methodology of counseling these children.

## **INTERVENTIONS**

The research on specific counseling interventions for children from divorced families is relatively slim. What little could be found can be difficult to consider empirical and tends to be either quasi-experimental or anecdotal research. This section of the paper will discuss three of these potential interventions and their specific orientation: group therapy, parenting training and coordination, and bibliotherapy.

### **Group Therapy**

Group therapy, as described by Guldner and O'Conner, is "where possible...the treatment of choice," for children from divorced families (as cited in DeLucia-Waack & Gerrity, 2001). A search through the literature however, only turned up a few articles on this intervention, only one of which reported on a study, conducted over ten years, on one clinic's group therapy program. DeLucia-Waack and Gerrity (2001), though they conducted no empirical study of their own, list seven goals for children of divorce group therapy. The first is to help children form an accurate concept of the process of divorce (DeLucia-Waack & Gerrity, 2001). The second goal is to normalize the experience or to help children learn that there are others that are going through the same thing they are (DeLucia-

Waack & Gerrity, 2001). The third goal is to provide a place where the children feel safe to talk about their feelings and concerns about the divorce (DeLucia-Waack & Gerrity, 2001). Fourth is to help children label and express their feelings and to help them understand the feelings (DeLucia-Waack & Gerrity, 2001). Fifth is to help the children develop new skills to cope with the divorce and related experiences (DeLucia-Waack & Gerrity, 2001). The sixth goal is to dispel unrealistic beliefs the children might have, such as the divorce is their fault or that both parents are going to abandon them (DeLucia-Waack & Gerrity, 2001). The seventh and final goal is to assist the children to focus on the future and on the positives of their new family structure (DeLucia-Waack & Gerrity, 2001).

Rich et al. report on a study of a child-of-divorce group therapy program at Emma Pendleton Bradley Hospital (Rich, et al., 2007). While not an experiment the researchers report on the method of group therapy they employ. They conclude that their method could be replicated in other settings with successful treatment outcomes (Rich, et al., 2007). The group facilitators accepted patients only through referrals and assembled groups consisting of parents at different points in the divorce process (recently divorced to divorced within the last 3 years, and dating or remarried), and children no lower than one grade behind educationally (Rich, et al., 2007). The program consisted of eight, 75-minute sessions and separated the parents and children into respective groups (Rich, et al., 2007). The parents' group focused on helping parents better understand their children's experiences of divorce, provide parenting skill education, and emotional support (Rich, et al., 2007). The children's group focused on developing an understanding of each child's emotions and their new family structures and roles, while at the same time promoting better interpersonal skills with their peers (Rich, et al., 2007). This was accomplished through the application of Yalom's Therapeutic Factors of Group Psychotherapy, which focuses on factors such as catharsis, the instillation of hope, and the development of socializing techniques (Rich, et al., 2007). The methods of this program coincide well with goals set forth by DeLucia-Waack and Gerrity (2001). Ultimately, there is no way to adequately judge in empirical terms the efficacy or the validity of this intervention. The researchers provide no hard data on the results of the program, instead focusing solely on their methodology. They note however, that there is a need for a formal determination of the benefits of their program (Rich, et al., 2007).

## Parenting Training and Coordination

One study, in fact the only RCT found, tested a hypothetical model of how Parent Management Training would influence the behavior of children from divorced families and, in turn, the psychological well-being of their mothers. DeGarmo, Patterson, and Forgatch (2004) suggest that there is an inverse relationship between changes in effective parenting due to increased maternal depression and stress as a result of divorce, and a child's problem behavior (DeGarmo et al., 2004). They expected to show how Parent Management Training, or PMT, would produce a positive change in effective parenting. This in turn would produce a positive change in a child's problem behavior, decrease maternal depression and stress, and ultimately feed back into effective parenting. Ultimately, they were hoping to show how PMT could serve as a "protective factor," for a child's adjustment post divorce (DeGarmo et al., 2004).

The target population for this study was recently divorced single mothers with young children at risk for problem behavior. Similarly, the study population consisted of 238 recently divorced single mothers with young male children from a medium-sized, Pacific Northwest city (DeGarmo et al., 2004). DeGarmo, Patterson, and Forgatch (2004) chose to study mothers with male children because boys are more likely than girls to exhibit externalized problem behavior as children post-divorce. The sampling frame consisted of mothers who had been separated within the last 3-24 months, lived with a biological son who was in grades 1-3, and who had not lived with a new partner (DeGarmo et al., 2004). Participants for this study were gathered through media advertisement, handing our flyers, and divorce court records (DeGarmo et al., 2004).

Advantageously, this sampling method seems to have been as random as possible, using a few different methods to attract participants and, according to the authors of the study, resulted in a sample reflective of the racial/ethnic make-up of the community as well as the socio-economic status of similar familial situations. Disadvantageously, the study only concentrated on single mother led families from a medium sized city in the Pacific Northwest. This may affect the generalizability of any findings from the study to similar populations in other areas. Also, the results derived from the study, specifically in regards to maternal depression and stress, could have been caused by other factors such as the progression of time from the divorce itself. The researchers do note this possibility however.

The characteristics of the sample were adequately described in order to interpret and use the study results. Everything from the racial/ethnic make-up of the population, to the education levels of the mother, to the tests used to measure the extent of the mothers' depression were described in the article. While the article does not state how many people were ultimately invited to participate in the study, they report that of the 238 families, one-third was assigned to a control group which received no intervention (Degarmo et al., 2004). Of the two-thirds that participated in the experimental group, 19% never participated, and of the 14 PMT sessions offered, 42% of the families attended at least 10, while the average was 8.5 sessions (Degarmo et al., 2004). These factors reduce an already small study sample. As a whole, this study does indicate a relationship between PMT and an increase in a child's positive behavior, as well as a decrease in the mother's depressive feelings and stress (Degarmo et al., 2004). As a whole, this study does indicate a relationship between PMT and an increase in a child's positive behavior, as well as a decrease in the mother's depressive feelings and stress (Degarmo et al., 2004). Ultimately, results from this study, while indicative of one result or another most certainly would need to be re-tested with a larger sample and perhaps one more representative of a wider demographic less identified with a medium-sized, Pacific Northwest city.

Similar to Parent Management Training, yet different in significant ways, is court mandated Parenting Coordination. Mitcham-Smith and Henry (2007) advocate the use of Parenting Coordination as a means of reducing the psychological, social, and academic risks to a child, as well as reducing litigation and reducing time spent in divorce court. Without conducting any empirical research and citing only one study (which could not be located, but according to their citation, supports the role of Parenting Coordination in reducing litigation), Mitcham-Smith and Henry (2007) note that the Parenting Coordinator (PC) is an amalgamation of a counselor, the courts, and a family mediator. The PC helps divorced spouses communicate, resolve conflicts, and learn new parenting techniques appropriate to the new family situation, while always remaining focused on the welfare of the children rather than on the parents themselves (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Further, the PC helps the divorced spouses come up with and implement a parenting plan by resolving conflicts, making recommendations when the parties involved cannot agree, and ultimately by working within a court defined scope (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). This method of intervention seems like



it could be an effective means of reducing risk to children, but has yet to be sufficiently empirically tested.

### **Bibliotherapy**

Bibliotherapy is the use of books, literature, songs, and stories from various different mediums as a therapeutic intervention (Pehrsson, et al., 2007). Pehrsson et al. (2007) suggest that from their experiences in schools and clinical settings, this sort of intervention can have particular impact on preadolescents dealing with the divorce of their parents. Preadolescents are still in a transitioning period from the concrete to formal operational cognitive stages and often lack the linguistic and cognitive sophistication to participate in and maintain conversational therapy, yet are too mature for traditional play therapy (Pehrsson et al., 2007). Although Pehrsson et al. (2007) do not conduct an empirical study (they do note that the use of bibliotherapy has not been empirically confirmed) they make a case for why they feel bibliotherapy is an effective intervention.

As part of a larger therapeutic plan, bibliotherapy can potentially open a preadolescent child up to discussion based on the events of the book or story used (Pehrsson et al., 2007). Certain books or stories can help a child identify and moderate emotions they are coping with, frame particularly difficult issues, and create opportunities to discuss different interpretations of divorce (Pehrsson et al., 2007). Further, books and stories can provide characters and actions which a child can imitate and adapt into their own set of coping skills (Pehrsson et al., 2007). The challenge for the counselor is to select a book or story that is appropriate to each child's developmental level, situation, and interests, as each person responds differently to a book or story (Pehrsson et al., 2007). Also, the counselor must take care to not make it seem like the child is in school, focusing instead on the situations and characters and how the child can identify with them (Pehrsson et al., 2007).

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

It is clear from this review of the relevant literature on divorce and children that there are significant effects on children from divorced families. Children and adolescents are constantly facing developmental challenges in their familial, social, and academic spheres and, as Pehrsson

et al. (2007) note they are only made more difficult by the effects of divorce and the reorganization of family structures. The vast majority of research suggests that these negative effects are quantifiable and support this perspective with veritable mountains of research. While this evidence may seem overwhelming, there are still some researchers out there who oppose this view and suggest that divorce does not have the negative impact the research suggests.

Perhaps it is precisely because of studies and opinions like these that there is little empirically supported research on children-of-divorce counseling interventions. What research can be found is questionably valid and generalizable at best. This ultimately begs the question why there is so much discord between the amount of research on the effects of divorce on children (and by and large agreement that it is negative) and the amount of research into interventions. It would seem more research needs to be done. Future research could look into applying and adapting grief counseling more specifically to the loss of the family structure and the parental relationship. Further research could be conducted on forgiveness therapy. Some research, like that of Robert Enright at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, which examines the effectiveness of forgiveness in a number of areas such as counseling, physical and sexual abuse, and incest, could be readily applied to children from divorced families. Frisco, Muller, and Frank (2007) suggest there are ethical issues at play in researching divorce situations, and that it is virtually impossible to conduct a true experiment. This is no excuse however. The psychological, social, and academic/professional well-being of future generations is at stake and the immediacy of the need for research is apparent.

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