

Impact of Divorce on Adolescent Development and Mental Health

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**Abstract**

Divorce is a commonality in today's families, many children grow up in homes separated by divorce. The ramifications of divorce on the family structure can be devastating and impact many areas of the adolescent's development. The adolescent can face significant challenges as the structure of their family changes due to divorce. In addition to the commonality of divorce, research also indicates that mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression are also present in today's adolescents. With high numbers of children from divorced families and high number of adolescents suffering from mental health disorders, today's educators and mental health professionals need to be aware of the risks and protective factors to effectively help these adolescents work through strong feelings related to divorce and cope with mental health disorders. Fortunately, research indicates the school setting can provide students an outlet in which to express feelings and learn new skills to cope with strong emotions. It is imperative that today's educators be aware of such programs to assist the high number of adolescents struggling with these issues.

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## **Impact of Divorce on Adolescent Development and Mental Health**

### **Purpose of Study**

Divorce has become commonplace in today's society, however the impact divorce has on adolescents is profound. All school counselors will work with children of divorce yet we should not forget that even though all families are different the impact divorce has on the children is measurable. Although divorce is so common, it should not be overlooked or taken lightly by today's school counselors.

Divorce changes a considerable number of things in the child's life including possible changes in residences, relationships with parents, change in socio-economic standing and exposure to marital conflict (Amato & Anthony, 2014). With all these changes in the child's life it is not surprising that divorce has a substantial impact on the development and mental health of the individual.

This paper will also look at the possible link between divorce and the rise in teen mental health disorders. According to Amato, "children with divorced parents achieve lower levels of success at school, are more poorly behaved, exhibit more behavioral and emotional problems, have lower self-esteem, and experience more difficulties with interpersonal relationships. Indeed the gap in well-being between the two groups of children appears to have grown larger during the last decade" (2001, p. 366). The gap in wellbeing between the two groups of children should not be allowed to continue to grow. Fortunately, research has also shown that interventions by school counselors make a considerable impact on these students. It is imperative that school counselors first understand the impact of divorce on adolescents and implement evidence based interventions for these students in need.

### **Divorce Statistics**

Divorce in America has been rising for years. Between the years of 1960 and 1980 the divorce rate in America more than doubled (Schwartzberg, 1992). More than 45% of marriages end in divorce, with about 40% of America's children experiencing parental divorce before the age of 18 (Arkes, 2013). Today there are more than 1 million children under the age of 18 that have experienced the divorce of their parents. The average marriage lasts 6.6 years before divorce (Schwartzberg, 1992). This leaves many young toddlers and children with spilt parents as they grow and face adolescence. In recent years, Amato estimates this could mean approximately one million children have experienced divorce between the years 1990 and 2000 (2001).

Divorce effects a great many things in a young person's life. Not only will divorce impact their development, it is also likely they will experience martial conflict and many times they will also experience changes to their standard of living due to changes in parental income (Amato & Anthony, 2014). Children may also experience a change in residences or change residences frequently between parents.

Other circumstances may occur in the adolescent's life which may cause some of the same obstacles as divorce, however none of these other circumstances are as common as divorce. According to Amato and Anthony (2014), the death of a parent, military family's deployment and immigrating to a new country are all shown to have similar effects as divorce on the children in these families. None of these circumstances are as common as divorce yet they show similar effects on the children impacted. This research proves that although divorce is common, the ramifications it has on the development of adolescents is impactful and can last into adulthood.

Research suggests that parental divorce during adolescence has a larger impact than if the divorce occurred at any other stage in life.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this paper the following terms apply:

*Intact Families:* families in which both biological parents of the children are married and living together

*Disrupted Families:* families in which the biological parents are divorced and/or are living separately

*Cohabitation:* Unmarried biological parent living with or having a live-in significant other

### **Developmental Age**

The focus of this paper will be on children in early adolescence. This developmental stage was chosen because in early adolescence are experiencing a time of rapid change. The brain changes faster in this stage of development than in any other stage of life, other than infancy (Perkins-Gough, 2015). The pre-frontal cortex will go through a growth spurt around age twelve. According to Houlihan and Houlihan (2011) executive skills, such as time management, organization, short-term memory, goal setting, initiation and self-restraint are all controlled by the pre-frontal cortex. Since the pre-frontal cortex is experiencing such growth, the individual will experience many developmental changes in these three main areas: social/emotional, cognitive and physical changes.

Children in early adolescence are approximately aged 11-13. In the United States, most of these children are in a middle school or junior high school setting, in academic grades 6-8 or 7-9. According to Ham (2003), the problems that arise with divorce seem to peak around age 12

or during their middle school years. The challenge becomes even greater for adolescents if the parents' divorce during their adolescent years, than at any other time of their life.

### **Social & Emotional Changes during Early Adolescence**

During early adolescence it is common for the individual to struggle with identity confusion (Erikson, 1998). Each individual strives to become their own self and create independence from parents. Adolescents value relationships of peers over the relationships of the family. Peer relationships heavily influence the individual (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry [AACAP], 2015). Because the individual is trying to create an identity, at times one can have feelings of inferiority and struggle with feelings that they are not normal (AACAP, 2015). Adolescents have feelings of trying to fit in with peers while at the same time trying to become their true self.

During this time, teens can resist and rebel against norms within the family. What was normal and expected during their childhood can be a source of conflict during early adolescence. Adolescence can begin to see the flaws within their own parents and will start to test limits with parents (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Adolescents can begin to test limits and rules and show less affection towards parents (AACAP, 2015).

It is common during early adolescence for individuals to experience changes in mood quickly. Due to the physical changes taking place, the emotional range of early adolescents is wide and can change quickly due to external factors (AACAP, 2015). For adolescents, this means they may experience many rapid changes in friendships. These constant changes can be a source of stress and confusion for adolescents.

**Brain Development during Early Adolescence**

In early adolescence the brain is experiencing a time of rapid growth. At this time the adolescent brain has the ability to learn new information quickly, faster than adults; however, because the pre-frontal cortex is not fully formed the adolescent brain is often unable to make important decisions quickly (Perkins-Gough, 2015). Adolescents are more likely to make poor decisions and act on impulses because the pre-frontal cortex is not fully formed until adulthood. As Konrad, Firk and Uhlhaas said, “The pre-frontal cortex controls such functions as behavioral control, planning and assessing the risk of decisions” (2016, p. 427). Because the pre-frontal cortex is not fully developed this makes adolescents especially vulnerable to risk taking behavior and poor decision making. During adolescence individuals are more likely to take part in high risk behaviors such as alcohol and drug use and early sexual behavior (Anderson, 2015).

Another factor that leads to adolescent risk taking behavior is the increase in hormones. In addition to their developing brain, adolescents also have an increase in dopamine in the brain. Dopamine is the hormone related to the reward and pleasure system within the brain (Anderson, 2015). Since adolescents have a higher level of dopamine than adults they need more dopamine to feel excitement and pleasure, thus they are more likely to engage in risk taking behaviors and follow impulses. According to Houlihan and Houlihan, in adolescent males, specifically, there is “an increase of testosterone which has been shown to increase aggression and decrease the desire to talk and connect socially” (2011, p. 9). In fact, adolescent males are producing 20 times the testosterone they had in elementary school. (Houlihan & Houlihan, 2011). The changes in the brain combined with changes in hormonal level causes adolescents to, at times, feel flooded with strong emotions more powerfully than adults.



Stress, such as parental divorce, during adolescence can have an impact on brain's functioning, ability and development. In the adolescent brain stress has a stronger and more lasting impact than in the adult brain (Perkins-Gough, 2015). Since the adolescent brain is not fully formed they do not have the same emotional regulation and self-control skills as adults. When these adolescents are exposed to stress they do not know how to appropriately cope, which can cause overwhelming distress and possibly lead to mental health problems.

### **Impact of Divorce on Adolescents**

The social and emotional impact on adolescents following the divorce of their parents is significant, compared to students from intact families. Adolescents from divorced families face more behavioral problems, increased conflict with parents, and increase in drug and alcohol use and increase in mental health problems (Amato, 2001). According to Amato, children of divorce achieve lower academically, are more poorly behaved, experience more mental health problems and experience more trouble with relationships (2001). These risk factors are present in adolescents regardless of when the parents divorced or how much time has passed since the divorce. Irrespective of when during the adolescent's development the divorce occurred, the impact on the child's emotional well-being is evident. The impact of divorce lingers with the individual long after adolescence and into adulthood (Ham, 2003). According to Ivanova, Mills and Veenstra (2011), early adolescence is the age which the dissolution of marriage has the most impact on the individual and cause heightened sensitivity to transition periods throughout their lives. Adolescents are the most vulnerable to changes in in the family structure during this time in their life than at any other developmental age. A divorce that occurs during adolescence is proven to have the most impact with the individual into adulthood.

Following a divorce, adolescents may feel an array of emotions including: abandonment, grief, guilt, shame, hurt, shock, sadness or anger. The intensity and duration of these emotions vary depending on the individual, however the impact on the child's emotional health is considerable (Schwartzberg, 1992). Divorce is shown to impact the child's current and future relationships, their academic achievement and their mental health.

### **Relationship with Parents**

After the divorce the child's relationship with their parents' inevitably changes. One parent tends to move out of the home, typically the father. This makes a close relationship with father difficult. Research shows the absences of the father is especially difficult for girls. According to Ham, young women derive a significant amount of self-esteem from their fathers, when this relationship is threatened or weakened (2003). Families reported that mother-daughter relationships grew stronger following the divorce (Yu, Pettit, Landsford, Dodge & Bates, 2010). Girls are also more likely to seek out a strong bond with parents as they may be more sensitive to the changed family structure.

A sense of loss can be felt by adolescents following the divorce of biological parents (Schwartzberg, 1992). For a time after the divorce the parent may be physically or emotionally unavailable to their children. In fact, adults who divorce are more prone to depression, illness, alcoholism and drug abuse, all of which make them less available, physically and emotionally, to their children (Hines, 1997). After a divorce both mothers and father tend to be inconsistent, distant, and less affectionate and hold less control immediately following the divorce. Mothers have a higher tendency to be depressed, self-involved, less supportive and authoritarian (Hines, 1997). In fact, 30% of young adults from disrupted families reported poor relationships with their mothers, while only 16% of young adults from intact families reported the same (Zill,

Morrison & Coiro, 1993). Meanwhile fathers tend to be more permissive and indulgent after the divorce (Hines, 1997); however, nearly two-thirds of young adults from disrupted families reported poor relationships with their fathers (Zill et al., 1993). In both cases, the adolescent's relationship with each parent has changed. More than likely, the resulting relationship with the parent creates a less supportive environment for adolescents to thrive and continue achieving healthy developmental tasks.

Research does show that in cases where marital conflict is high, divorce may be a relief for some adolescents. The divorce may allow a positive change for adolescents to escape the conflict between parents (Yu et al., 2010). In such instances, divorce may actually alleviate some stress and lessen the negative impacts commonly associated with divorce. Even though in these cases divorce can be positive, the changes in the parent-child relationship are still evident.

### **Future Relationships**

Children of divorce can feel torn between parents or even ashamed of their parents' behavior, especially in cases where marital conflict is high. According to Oppawsky (2000), feeling torn can leave adolescents feeling insecure, isolated, helpless, and hopeless and subjected them to severe loyalty conflicts. The inferiority felt by adolescents at this time becomes an obstacle in creating positive future relationships. Particularly in families where the conflict is high, adolescents may not have positive role models. It is likely that adolescents in these families do not see adequate conflict resolution skills modeled at home. These students will likely be lacking these skills as they move into adulthood. The lack of positive conflict resolution skills can be an enormous detriment in future relationships.

Adolescence is a time where first-time romantic relationships typically begin. According to Ivanova, Mills and Veenstra (2011) the establishment of romantic relationships is the most

important developmental task of adolescence. The initial romantic relationship can have lasting effects on the child's well-being. Research shows that in homes where parental conflict is high, children may prematurely engage in romantic relationships (Oppawsky, 2000). Furthermore, adolescents from disrupted families engage in romantic relationships earlier than adolescents from intact families (Heifetz, Connolly, Pepler & Craig, 2010). As these children likely do not receive adequate love and attention at home, many seek this fulfillment elsewhere. Sometimes engaging in relationships just to leave the house and seek a sense of belonging. Since past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior, once the initial romantic relationship is formed the adolescent is more likely to continue seeking romantic partners to escape from an unpleasant situation at home (Ivanova et al., 2011). This type of behavior can be troublesome when the development of the pre-frontal cortex. Since executive functioning skills are not fully formed in the adolescent's brain, the adolescent's impulse control and decision making processes can be hindered.

A single parent re-entering the dating world can open a child to the possibility of their own dating life and sexuality. The transition to a single parent family has been associated with lower levels of parental supervision and linked to an increased likelihood of dating and risk taking behavior (Ivanova et al., 2011). The effects of parental dating are felt strongest for the child during early adolescence. The instability pre-divorce and the less adult supervision post-divorce can lead the adolescence to seek romantic relationships sooner than peers from intact families.

### **Remarriage and Living with Step-parents**

While divorce is a common occurrence it is also important to understand the majority of people that divorce also remarry. Within 5 years of the divorce, 50% of men and 45% of women

will remarry (U.S Census Bureau, 2004). Second marriages are shown to last shorter than first marriages, meaning the adolescent may experience multiple family transitions before adulthood (Hines, 1997). Even when remarriage is not occurring, it is estimated that two-fifths of children spend time living with cohabitating parents (Manning & Lamb, 2003).

Due to their developmental stage adolescents may have a more difficult time bonding and accepting step parents than children of a younger age. The new adult may be a source of strain and cause rivalry between siblings (Zill et al., 1993). While younger children may benefit from living with step parents, adolescents however may suffer more stress living with an unfamiliar adult. Remarriage may offer a financial relief for parents, since the remarriage likely means two incomes rather than one for the family.

Research also shows that remarriage negatively impacts the child's academic performance (Jeynes, 2000). The largest difference for teens living with step parents is their test scores in math were shown to be slightly lower than peers for intact families, when race socio-economic status, gender and previous test scores were controlled for (Jeynes, 2000). Stepparent-child relationships also have the tendency to be less affectionate, more conflicted and less involved than that of biological parent relationships, especially in the beginning (Hines, 1997). In general, remarriage has not shown to be a protective factor for adolescents, however with time the relationship can grow to be more positive as the two have time to bond.

### **Behavior**

Children from disrupted families are shown to exhibit more behavioral problems at school than children from intact families. A study by Schofield and Weaver found that starting at grade 6 (approximately 11-12 years old) students of disrupted families had behavioral problems at a higher rate than children from intact families (2015). These behavioral problems

were reported at school and by parents at home. This study suggested that the reason for the behavioral problems post-divorce could be attributed to the lack of routine at home and the possibly chaotic living environment (Schofield & Weaver, 2015). Another study showed that children living in mother-only households or children living in families in conflict were more likely to commit acts of crime rather than children from conflict free and intact families (Hines, 1997). Although study does not relate directly to adolescents from disrupted families, in many cases disrupted families are in conflict pre-divorce and many children live with their mothers post-divorce, making adolescents from disrupted families especially vulnerable.

### **Substance Abuse**

Research shows that teens from divorced families are more likely to abuse substances than teens from intact families, there may be several reasons for this occurrence. Adolescents from divorced families can turn to substance abuse as a means to cope with feelings related to their parents' divorce or due to the stressful divorce process. Another reason for this tendency could be that children of divorce tend to have less adult supervision and therefore more opportunity to engage in this type of behavior. Research shows that when divorce occurs during adolescence, the individual is more likely to turn to substance abuse than if the parental divorce occurs during childhood (Needle, Su & Doherty, 1990). The study also found that substance abuse occurs at a higher rate among adolescent boys from disrupted families than adolescent girls; however, when adolescent girl's parents remarried (especially the mothers) they were more likely to use drugs and alcohol (Needle et al., 1990).

Whatever the reason for the abuse, these teens are found engage in alcohol use two to four years earlier than adolescents from intact families (Arkes, 2013). Teens from divorced families are 12% also more likely to engage in marijuana use by age 18. Arkes' research has also

found that the substance abuse does not stop as time passes after the divorce, in fact the abuse is likely to continue into adulthood (2013). The ramifications of continued substance abuse can be severe, both physically and mentally.

### **Grief**

Post-divorce it is typically for one parent to move out of the family home, most likely this is the father. The presence of the parent that moves can feel like a loss to a child. Many times post-divorce adolescence will experience grief (Schwartzberg, 1992). Adolescents will grieve for the loss of the family they once knew. Adolescents may also grieve for the perceived loss of one parent. The troubling aspect is that many adolescents may not see their parents' divorce as the beginning of the grief process and therefore may not seek or receive the proper help.

### **Academic Impact**

Divorce plays a role in the academic success of adolescents from disrupted families. Grades, attendance, and dropout rates are all shown to be impacted by divorce. Research indicates that any disruption to the two parent family structure increased the odds of the student dropping out of school. Children raised by one biological parent are twice as likely to drop out of school as children from intact families. In fact, 25% of adolescents from disrupted families drop out of high school (Zill et al., 1993). Children from disrupted families are also less likely to attend college and have poorer school attendance (Ham, 2003). Although adolescent boys experience downward effect in academics following a divorce, adolescent girls are more likely to have a sharper decline in academic achievement than boys (Storksens, Roysamb, Holemn & Tambs, 2006). The drop in academic success post-divorce could be attributed to a decline in parental support and importance of school and homework.

The grades from students of divorced families were much lower than that of students from intact families. In fact, the grades from students from intact families are nearly 11% higher than grades from students of divorced families (Ham, 2003); however, the difference in scores from standardized tests was much smaller. The largest difference in standardized test scores is in math, adolescents from disrupted families scored lower than their peers. Meanwhile the scores in reading were comparable to peers (Jeynes, 2000). Jeynes estimates the difference in math scores could be attributed to the fact that once adolescents fall behind it is much harder to catch up to their peers (2000). Overall for children of divorce, standardized tests may be a more accurate indicator of academic ability than grades.

The impact divorce has on the adolescent's life can include a change in their current and future relationships, increase in behavior and substance abuse, feelings of grief and decrease in academic achievement. Divorce impacts almost every area of the adolescent's life, sometimes causing conflict, instability and even chaos.

### **Impact on Mental Health**

Along with the disruptions to development discussed above, research shows that adolescents from disrupted families are also more likely to suffer from mental health disorders. The impact divorce has on adolescent's mental health is profound, in fact "Researchers have found a 39% increase in the incidences of mental health problems in children of divorce as compared to their peers from two-parent families at age 23" (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin & Kiernan, 1995, p. 1629). According to Hines (1997), adolescents from divorced families are more than twice as likely to seek help from mental health professionals as adolescents from intact families. Likewise, the National Survey of Children found that 40% of children from



disrupted families sought mental health help between the ages of 18-22 (Zill et al., 1993), testimony that problems experienced during adolescence carry on into adulthood.

Children who develop and grow in high stress homes, such as a home with high levels of marital conflict, are more prone to be diagnosed with mental health conditions later in life (Oppawsky, 2000). When children are exposed to high levels of marital conflict, evidence shows this has a negative impact on the child's well-being and future mental health. According to Jolene Oppawsky, "Parental discord intensified normal reactions and perpetuated negative reactions of various intensities from the children, as well as hindered their adjustment to crisis" (2000, p. 143). Likewise, parenting is a central role in facilitating the development and successful adaptation to challenges in the adolescent's life (Velez, Wolchik, Tein & Sandler, 2011). It can be argued that when parents are in a pattern of fighting, their role in facilitating the child's development is not being executed well and are not being that protective factor for their children. For many reasons parents are not as involved post-divorce, leaving the adolescent more vulnerable to mental health disorders than adolescents from intact families. The most common mental health conditions seen in adolescence are depression and anxiety, both are discussed below.

### **Anxiety**

Anxiety occurs in about 10% of youth, making it the most common mental health disorder among this age group (Ginsburg & Kinsman, 2014). Anxiety is a mental health disorder in which an individual's brain is stuck in a flight, fright or freeze reaction to everyday stimuli. According to Schwartzberg, "anxiety is related to a heightened sense of vulnerability" (1992, p. 634). Anxiety is a heightened physical and mental state in which the individual is always anticipating a potential threat (Ginsburg & Kinsman, 2014). A child who has experienced

trauma such as parental divorce may feel especially vulnerable to stressful stimuli and be unable to cope as well as peers from intact families. Intact families, with two biological parents, have been shown to provide a more protective family structure than that of divorced families. A two parent family with supportive and involved parents can serve as a buffer to stress the adolescent faces during this important developmental time. Without this buffer to stress, adolescents must face this stress without the comfort and support from parents (Hines, 1997).

Children of divorce may feel a heightened anxiety regarding dating and romantic relationships compared to children of intact families (Schwartzberg, 1992). Forming romantic relationships during adolescence is a developmentally important stage for children, one which may prove especially difficult for children of divorce.

Research shows that adolescent girls from disrupted families are more likely to self-report feelings of anxiety than adolescent boys from disrupted families (Storksen et al., 2006). Adolescence also seems to be the age in which feelings of anxiety seem to surface, or perhaps the age in which individuals become aware of such feelings.

### **Depression**

One child of divorce explained, "They were always fighting and I couldn't stand it. I always cried. It hurt me so deep in my heart. I went to my room, held my ears shut, and cried my heart out" (Oppawsky, 2000, p. 143). Depression affects 3-8% of adolescents but occurs at a higher rate among adolescents in disrupted families (Mancillas, 2009). In a study by Wallerstein and Kelly, five-years after the divorce approximately one-third of children were suffering from moderate to severe depression. A decade after the divorce, nearly half the individuals studied were worried, under-achieving and self-critical (1996). This important research proves how divorce during adolescence can have a lasting impact on the individual well into adulthood.

The research does indicate that depression occurs more often in adolescent girls than boys (Oldehinkel, Ormel, Veenstra, De Winter & Verhols, 2008). In families with divorced parents depression in girls ages 10-15 has been self-reported and parent reported at higher rates than girls of the same age from intact families. In girls, the impact of divorce is shown to be associated with a decrease in self-esteem, which can carry on into adulthood (Schwartzberg, 1992). In fact, a study by Oldehinkel et al. (2008) found that parental divorce was more strongly associated with depressive symptoms in girls in adolescents than boys. Researchers suggest this could be because adolescent girls are more sensitive to conflict and family changes during this time than adolescent boys.

It should also be noted that depression and other mood disorders are present in one or more parent in approximately 30% of divorces in the United States (Taylor & Andrews, 2009). Research also shows that children with a clinically depressed parent are more likely to also be diagnosed with depression than children where parents are not diagnosed as depressed (Taylor & Andrews, 2009). The implications of this research could indicate that the increase of adolescence from disrupted families of divorce could also be attributed to a biological cause passed down from parents. Whatever the cause of the depression, research findings support that adolescents from disrupted families are more likely to be diagnosed with depression than their peers.

### **Impact of Divorce and Mental Health on Adolescence**

Divorce during adolescence, in the least, causes instability during a developmentally important time. The research shows that adverse mental health disorders are felt more often in adolescents from divorced families. Some attribute the higher rates of mental health problems to the environment in which the child develops, while other attribute it to the possible genetic

disposition to mental health disorders. Typically, adolescents from divorced families are exposed to higher levels of instability and stress than children from intact families which supports the theory that a chaotic environment plays a part in the higher rates of mental health disorders.

### **Protective Factors**

Although divorce and the mental health disorders mentioned above are not uncommon, there are successful protective factors that can be utilized to mitigate some of the effects of divorce. Research suggests that a caring, engaged adult can make a positive difference for an adolescent struggling with strong feelings after parental divorce. For some adolescents from divorced families school is a place of refuge. School provides the quietness, consistency, and non-threatening atmosphere (Oppowsky, 2000). Some children will search for adequate role models, if parents have failed the child. School is a typical place for students to find such a role model. The school counselor can provide a positive role model by establishing a relationship with the student and creating a strong therapeutic alliance (Kim, Roth, & Wollburg, 2015). School can also be successful as a refuge for these children, especially through consultation with teachers. Consultation is identified by ASCA as a role required in both responsive and support system services (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012). Consultation can also serve as a preventative measure for the counselor to be aware of potential changes in family structure. Teachers may be aware of this information much sooner than the counselor. Likewise, teachers may gain knowledge and skills to better respond and prevent situations in the future through collaboration with the school counselor.

Parental relationships with their children can impact the child's ability to cope with the divorce. Research has shown that high levels of parental involvement in divorced families is

correlated with an increase in academic achievement (Jeynes, 2002). Likewise, families can provide a positive place for children to learn to cope with divorce and their changed family structure. Three ways in which families can influence the child's coping process is through modeling, coaching and striving for positive relationships with the child (Velez et al., 2011). A study also finds the providing stable and consistent discipline in the home is another manner in which to teach coping skills. The child learns predictability and consequences for their actions. Positive parenting also strengthens the child's bond with the parent and can even increase their coping skills and abilities when faced with challenges (Schofield & Weaver, 2015).). Since the majority of the child's social skills are learned in the home, it is also a positive place to learn coping strategies as well.

Research has also indicated that when parents or even step-parents are involved post-divorce, children may not experience downward effects commonly felt by most children of divorce. Having caring, encouraging and involved parents can shield adolescents from the adverse emotional, academic and mental health repercussions of divorce. According to Schofield and Weaver, "positive parenting, including being sensitive and responsive to the child's needs, is likely to protect children from the negative fallout associated with parental divorce" (2015, p. 40). Involved parenting can provide adolescents with the support, love and stability they need to be successful. Parents and step-parents should be encouraged to be as involved as possible in the child's life and education

### **Effective Interventions**

There are many options for effective interventions to use with adolescents from disrupted families. It is important to consider the individual first before determining which interventions may be best. If the adolescent is struggling with issues surrounding the divorce, research shows

that a family change group may be best. If the individual is struggling with anxiety or depression a different set of interventions are listed for each. Below intervention strategies for anxiety, depression and evidence-based family change groups are discussed.

### **Interventions for Anxiety**

Adolescents with a severe and debilitating anxiety should be referred to an outside resource for additional help. An outside referral may use cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or prescribe medical to alleviate anxious feelings. School counselors should work with students with mild anxiety who need help to stay in class or focus in class during the school day. The school counselor may also use CBT to connect the student's thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

For students struggling with feelings of anxiety, the school counselor should allow the student to talk openly about their worries (Ginsburg & Kinsman, 2014). The school counselor should also educate the adolescent on ways to alleviate anxiety by being healthy, such as eating right, getting enough sleep and exercise (Ginsburg & Kinsman, 2014). Also, providing education to the child about brain function can serve as baseline for understanding what is happening physically within their bodies. Teach the adolescent to recognize feelings of anxiety within their body, have the adolescent look for sweaty palms, racing heart, tense muscles and a flushed face.

After students are able to recognize anxious feelings, the next step to use with students experiencing anxiety is teaching students effective strategies to calm down. Since all students are different provide the student with many calm down strategies and have the student try them all to find what works best. Some common strategies include breathing exercises which may help to mitigate feelings of anxiety and stress while promoting personal empowerment and a sense of calm (Wilkinson, Buboltz & Young, 2002). Breathing exercises work well in the school

setting because students can do them at any time without drawing unwanted attention from their peers. Wilkinson et al. (2002) describes a breathing technique known as single sided breathing, a type of breathing in which helps to create energy and promotes calmness. The school counselor can teach the student this breathing technique and ask the student to try the technique the next time they experience strong feelings.

Along with breathing techniques the student could also use mindfulness as a method to calm down. Purposeful breathing is one way in which the student can become mindful of themselves and their surroundings. Wilkinson et al. (2002) describes the controlling emotions breathing technique. In this technique the student builds on the skills learned from the previous breathing technique and also learn how to control emotions and lessen unwanted emotions. The student is instructed to create a mental picture of their undesirable emotion and envision that emotion being carried away when breath is exhaled (Wilkinson et al., 2002). By implementing these techniques the student is empowered to gain control of their emotions and builds self-confidence.

### **Interventions for Depression**

School counselors working with adolescents experiencing feelings of depression should first strive to form a positive relationship with the student. Showing empathy towards the student and unconditional positive regard has proven to lead to therapeutic changes and improvements (Kim et al., 2015). It is possible the student does not have another adult in their life at the time who is available to listen and problem solve with them. Allow the student to talk and offer positive encouragement or solutions to their issues (Fischer, 2014). Allow the student opportunities to verbalize and identify their feelings, without any judgment. The counselor should seek opportunities for success for these students. Likely, these students are feeling

inadequate and discouraged by providing opportunities for success the student can begin to see and appreciate their strengths.

A child experiencing feelings of depression should be encouraged to journal, draw or listen to music. Ask the adolescent what they enjoy doing and encourage that activity or if possible, allow that activity to take place at school. Seek ways in which the child can be more involved at school and interact with peers. Encourage parents to allow the students to become involved in activities outside the school.

When working with students experiencing severe feelings of depression, the school counselor should assess any suicidal ideality. If the student is experiencing severe depression and expressing thoughts of suicide the school counselor should refer the student to outside resources and speak with the parents regarding the concern (Mancillas, 2009). If the counselor fears the student is an immediate danger to him or herself the individual should remain in the room while the parents are called and an immediate crisis team is called.

The school counselor can also consider making adjustments or accommodations to the students' schedule or expectations at school (Fisher, 2014). These accommodations could possibly be in the form of a 504 plan or something less formal. Possibly letting teachers know the student is struggling (with the student's consent) can be a way in which teachers can allow students flexibility. Allowing the student flexibility during the school day may alleviate stress while they work through this difficult time.

### **Family Change Groups**

Family change groups are shown to have significant improvements socially and academically for children in adolescence. Family change groups typically focus directly on the issue of divorce. While school counselors often lead family change groups, it is important to



consider group curriculum which is research based and has proven efficacy among adolescents. Since we know mental health issues such as anxiety and depression are more common among children of divorced families, the programs discussed are proven to decrease these feelings in adolescents. Two evidence based group curriculums which have shown positive effectiveness among adolescents are Pedro –Carroll's Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) and Stolberg's Children's Support Group.

First, CODIP is a school based intervention program that includes risk and resilience factors. This program focuses on creating a supportive environment to reduce the stress of parental divorce and build skills to help children cope with the difficulties that often arise from divorce. The group teaches cognitive and behavioral coping skills as well as internal control and calming strategies. CODIP also strives to normalize divorce and create feeling of belonging among group members (Cowen & Pedro-Carrol, 1985). CODIP is a 10 week program which focuses on children in grades K-8. CODIP is broken into three sections. First section builds support among members and encourages students to share emotions related their parents' divorce. Secondly, students learn cognitive skills to help them cope during times of stress. The counselor teaches conflict resolution skills as well as discussing what is inside the child's control and what is outside. Lastly, CODIP teaches students anger management skills (Children's Institute, 2016). Teachers have reported that children of divorce that participated in CODIP showed less signs of shy and anxious behavior, improved social skills, increased frustration tolerance, increased rule compliance and more adaptable to changes. Meanwhile, parents reported a significant decrease in the child's self-blame and increased ability to problem solve. Children who participated self-reported a decrease in anxiety (Connolly & Green, 2009).

Secondly, Stolberg's Children's Support Group (CSG) is designed for 7-13 year olds in a 14 week program. The program includes five sections including: (a) problem solving, (b) anger management, (c) impulse control, (d) parent-child communication and (e) relaxation techniques (Connolly & Green, 2009). Evidence from children that participated in CSG showed that at their five-month follow up children showed improvement in their self-esteem and self-concept. Likewise, parents reported an increase in social skills. Stolberg's research, as discussed in Connolly and Green (2009) shows that CSG decreased the interventions needed for children with a mental health diagnosis; 45% of students that participated had a diagnosed mental health condition, researchers found that following the one-year post-test these children were able to receive significantly less interventions for their clinical diagnosis than prior to the group sessions. The implications of this study indicate the ability to learn practical skills that allowed adolescents to successfully cope with feelings related to parental divorce.

Many interventions can be used for students working through feelings from a parental divorce. Most importantly, the school counselor should strive to create a positive relationship with the student and seek to understand what specific feelings the students is struggling with to then find the intervention that works best.

### **Adlerian Perspective**

Adlerian psychology can be applied to the modern day phenomenon of divorce in several ways. Post-divorce the adolescent will face a change in their family constellation. The adolescent will begin to create their own private logic around their new family and their role in the family. The change to the family constellation can cause the adolescent to begin to strive for superiority and possibly lead the child to experience overwhelming feelings of inferiority. To

counteract these feelings of inferiority the adolescent's feelings of belonging and contributing should be increased.

### **Family Constellation**

In every divorce, the adolescent's family constellation will change. One parent will likely move out of the family home, the adolescent will possibly move into a new home or the adolescent may split time between two homes. With the change in the family constellation, the adolescent may also experience a change in their birth order, or their place within the family. According to Ansbacher and Ansbacher (1956), "It is not, of course, the child's number in the order of successive births which influences his character, but the *situation* into which he is born" (p. 377). As Dreikurs and Soltz (1963) state "each family constellation will be unique according to the interpretations within it" (p. 22). While the degree in which the family constellation changes depends on the family, the family makes their own interpretations of their constellation based on their unique situation.

In the case of divorce the adolescent may find him or herself in an instable or changing family situation. As stated previously many times parents of divorce remarry, in these cases it is common for adolescents to have step-siblings or new siblings born. This can cause role conflict or confusion within the family constellation. Adolescents can feel in competition or conflict with their new siblings and find themselves trying even harder for their parents' attention. Especially, as in the case of adolescents, they have become accustomed to their role in the family then divorce disrupts their place in the family constellation causing even further distress.

Likewise, the adolescent will also be formed by the family atmosphere. As Dreikurs and Soltz (1964) explain "He [the child] absorbs the family values, morals, and conventions, and tries to fit in within the pattern, or the standards set by the parents" (p. 19). Thus, pre-divorce the

child may grow and develop within a home with intense marital conflict, the child will also hold the beliefs and role identities set forth by the parents. Again, the adolescent learns early from the parents the appropriate roles and norms for future romantic relationships. Additionally, post-divorce the adolescent again needs to learn and adapt to an entirely new family atmosphere. To be successful within the new family constellation the adolescent will need to learn the values, morals and roles within the family.

### **Adolescence**

Adler acknowledges that adolescence is a challenging time in the individual's life. "All the dangers of adolescence come from a lack of proper training and equipment for the three problems of life" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 440). Of course, the "problems of life" referred to are the three life tasks romantic, social and occupational. Adults in the adolescent's life should begin to allow the individual to try to fulfill these life tasks but teach the skills necessary to be successful.

### **Striving for Superiority**

More than likely adolescents from disrupted families are striving to move from a felt minus to a felt plus. The adolescent has built their own private logic which accounts for their shortcomings, or perceived feelings of inferiority. Adler would likely say that the individuals suffering from depression and anxiety are suffering from overwhelming feelings of inferiority, insecurity and inadequacy (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 303). Individuals with overwhelming feelings of inadequacy are said to be discouraged and often present symptoms similar to depression. Often, these individuals would be considered as striving on the vertical plane, meaning without social interest. Adolescents suffering from these feelings are in conflict

with those around them and compete with others rather than collaborate to cope with their feelings.

In today's world it is easy to see how adolescents from divorced families have strong feelings of inferiority. Adler says to counteract these feelings with increased social interest, "Lack of social interest, always due to an increased inferiority feeling, drives the individual into neurosis or crime" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 449). The individual needs feelings of belonging and contributing, especially within their family constellation. The adolescent's family structure has completely changed and the individual likely feels no purpose to their life. With increased feelings of belonging and contributing the individual can once again feel empowered, confident and important. By increasing belonging and contributing the adolescent increases their social interest and begins to strive for superiority on the horizontal plane. Meaning the individual is collaborating with others to feel superior, rather than competing and engaging in conflict.

Although Adler's ideas are over 100 years old, they are still relevant and can be applied to modern issues. Adler's views on adolescence, the family constellation, birth order and striving for superiority all help the modern day professionals better understand and treat adolescents experiencing strong feelings related to parental divorce.

### **Conclusion**

Divorce is a widespread family structure in today's society and has become a commonality among children in school. The impact divorce has on the development of the adolescents is profound and far reaching. Research has shown the divorce impacts almost every aspect of adolescent life including their social well-being, academic achievements, mental health, substance abuse issues, grief, future relationships and relationships with their parents.

Understanding the impact of divorce is crucial for today's school counselors. Even though divorce is common, the impact should not be underestimated or ignored. Fortunately, the evidence-based practices show the positive impact school counselors can have on the adolescent's wellbeing. School counselors can implement proven techniques in their group, classroom and individual counseling that are shown to help students through the difficult time following a parent's divorce. With the help of a caring adult the adolescent can learn coping skills and techniques that will help them cope with strong feelings even into adulthood.

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