Crisis Intervention with Children of Divorce

Hai-Juan HUANG
Shanghai Normal University Tianhua College, No. 1661, North Shengxin Road, Shanghai, China
bluehhj@163.com

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Abstract. A significant proportion of children experience parental divorce all over the world. However, inconsistent results exist in literature concerning the influences of parental divorce on children. This article reviewed the risk factors making parental divorce to be a crisis, and also the protective factors. Interventions with three age groups shown to prevent or reduce children's post-divorce adjustment problems were discussed.

Introduction

It is well known that the divorce rate is continuing high all over the world. However, it is less generally appreciated that divorce is most likely to involve young children. Over half of the children who experience divorce do so by age 6 and 75% of these children are under age 3 [1]. Parental divorce has important consequences for children, and thus the effect of parental divorce on children remains a great concern among researchers [2, 3].

Researchers agree that almost all children are at least moderately distressed when parental divorce occurs and continue to experience confusion, sadness, and anger for a period of months or even years [4]. The first 2 years following parental divorce is commonly referred to as the “crisis period.” During this period, children at every age are affected by divorce, although the nature of their reactions differs [5]. Most children function better by the end of the two-year “crisis period.” However, many children continue to experience emotional and behavioral difficulties after the “crisis period” [4].” Inconsistent results exist in literature concerning the influences of parental divorce on children. While many researchers assert that children from divorced families are at greater risk for psychological, behavioral, academic and relationship problems than most children in intact families, others failed to find significant difference [2, 6, 7, 8].

Major Risk Factors Making Parental Divorce to be a Crisis

Child’s Age at the Time of Divorce

Parental divorce can be a stressful experience for children at any age, but many researchers posit that children who experience parental divorce prior to age 6 are particularly at risk for developmental disruptions and maladaptive behaviors [4]. Children under age of 6 lack mental ability to understand what is happening and why. Separations at this age are filled with anxiety, and they are likely to be confused, angry, and sad. They are vulnerable to feeling the fear of leaving the parent they are attached to at the moment. As children at this age are in a primarily egocentric state of mind, they believe that they are responsible for their parents’ divorce and experience a sense of guilt. They are likely to sense parents’ stress and feel changes in daily routine, which increases the levels of stress they may experience and leads to crankiness, regression, irritability etc [4, 9].

Reactions of younger latency aged children (ages 7-8) include anger, grief, and a deep yearning for the departed parents, regardless of the quality of the relationship before the break-up. They are likely to show increased aggression or a return to temper tantrums. They can be very sensitive to subtle pressures and loyalty conflicts between parents, and feel they need to nurture and take care of parent that is feeling bad. As older latency aged children (ages 9-12) are at more advanced level of intellectual development, they have the basic ability to see two points of view and utilize adult
interventions. However, they may deny their feelings. Children at this age are likely to be manipulative and play games with parents. They may also develop an intense anger at one parent [9, 10].

Adolescents are more developed socially and emotionally and their primary orientation is toward peers, not family. For this reason, they may be impacted less directly by the divorce [10]. However, independence can be given too early and without limits, which may lead to bad choices by the teen. Many adolescents may have lasting concerns about their own intimate relationships. Adolescent of divorce show a greater tendency toward dropping out of school, engaging in conduct disorders, and having children out of wedlock [6, 7]. Additionally, they are more likely to be engaged in early sexual relations [5]. They also tended to exhibit a higher level of distrust of others, are less likely to foresee marriage as a certain step in their live, and show a higher level of fear toward marriage [11].

Parental Absence

Disadvantages in well-being experienced by children of divorce may due to the loss of a parent, source of emotional support, and practical help and supervision (Amato & Keith, 1991; Rogers, 2004). Research showed children of divorce tended to have lower level of well-being than children who experienced parental death and children in intact families. However, children in step-families scored significantly lower in overall measures of well-being than children of divorce. No strong evidence supporting that continued contact with the noncustodial parent would improve children’s well-being was reported [6, 10]. However, a recent study showed contradictory impacts of turbulent post-divorce family on adolescents’ well-being between paternal family and maternal family. Adolescents’ well-being was lower if their mothers were in less stable partnership situations, whereas adolescents’ well-being was lower when their fathers were in seemingly stable partnership situations.

Economic Hardship

The diminished well-being of children in divorced families may originate from economic difficulty associated with family disruption. Research showed that the differences between children from intact and divorced families were reduced when income was controlled statistically. However, even with income controlled, the differences in well-being between children from intact and divorced families were still significant [7, 12].

Parental Conflict

Researchers have pointed out that parental conflict is a more important predictor of child adjustment than divorce itself [9]. It is suggested that divorce affects children primarily due to parental conflict prior to, during and subsequent to a divorce [6, 13]. Research showed that children in high-conflict intact families displayed considerably lower levels of well-being than children in low-conflict intact families and children in divorced families In addition, less conflict and greater cooperation between parents post-divorce were found to associate with better divorce adjustment of children [6, 13].

Parental conflict creates an adverse home environment for children's development [14]. The frequent, intense and poorly resolved parental conflicts have negative influence on children of all ages [15]. These adverse impacts associate with various indicators of children’s well being [15]. Parental conflict may trigger children’s feeling of insecurity about their own relationships with their parents. They may fear that their parents will stop loving them or abandon them [9]. In addition, parental conflicts in which children are caught in the middle are even more destructive. The feeling of caught in the middle of divorced parents’ conflicts increases the risks of children for being depressed or anxious and for engaging in problematic behaviors, such as drinking and using drugs [16]. When children are not directly involved in their parents’ conflicts, increased parental irritability and diminished parental monitoring, support and involvement may produce adverse effect on children’s well-being [7].

Diminished Parenting

Quality of parenting often deteriorates following divorce. For example, emotional distress
following divorce often leads mothers to be less responsive, less patient, less sensitive, and more controlling of their children. All of these negative parenting practices can impair parent-child interactions and lead to insecure attachments and various problems in children’s adjustment following divorce [4].

**Major Protective Factors**

**Secure Attachment with Parents**

Previous studies revealed that secure attachment already established prior to parental divorce can first and foremost serve as a protective factor in this period of hardship. Children with secure attachment bonds are able to regulate affects and maintain close connections with their parents, in spite of the fact that parents may be less available to them [9]. For securely attached children, their caregivers’ emotional responsiveness and comfort provides them the support they need to regulate their distress resulted from parental divorce [17].

**Positive Parenting**

If the parent can be responsive and sensitive to the child’s thoughts and feelings following the divorce, the child will likely work through the divorce more effectively [13]. Research showed that when the quality of parenting improved, the child’s behavior also improved. Therefore, positive child adjustment is most likely to occur when each parent provides a stable home environment, including a sense of routine, and each parent utilizes authoritative, consistent, and warm parenting practices [4].

**Active Coping Style**

Children using active coping that involves problem solving and positive restructuring demonstrated an increase in their feelings of confidence in their ability to cope and adjusted to divorce more quickly [18, 19]. Conversely, children who have an external locus of control, low self-efficacy, self-blame for the divorce, and rely upon distraction or avoidance are at an increased risk of difficulties [18].

**Intervention**

**Interventions with Preschoolers**

Interventions with young children who do not have a history of emotional difficulties should focus primarily on the parents. The central goals are to help parents communicate more effectively with their children and better understand the causes of the child’s distress. Frequently, interventions involve stabilizing aspects of both the care-taking situation and visits with the noncustodial parent [9]. One evidence-based program for parents is Kid’s turn, which may be sponsored by the school. This program aims at help parents mediate relationships with a spouse, and also help them find a ways to lessen the effect of divorce on children. In the program, parents are given strategies for working through the divorce and information about how children typically adjust to divorce, given their age. There are five concrete skill areas targeted in the program: 1) know self; 2) manage self; 3) motivation for healthy emotions; 4) understanding others; and 5) managing relationships [20].

**Interventions with Young Elementary School Children**

Interventions for this age group should take children’s realistic understanding of the basis for the divorce into account. It is important to develop an indirect technique for discussing the multiple and complex feelings that arose from the marital disruption. Storytelling approaches using fantasy, displacement, and projection are appropriate for this age group [9].

**Interventions with Adolescents**

As adolescence move into formal operational thought, they are better able to use traditional talk therapy. Cognitive behavioral therapy or nondirective counseling can help them identify emotions
and conceptualizations that are not adaptive in their current situations [9, 21]. However, group therapy might be a more useful method of intervention in the school [9].

One example of school-based group intervention program is Pedro-Carroll’s Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP), which is based on factors linked with risk and resilience in children’s post-divorce adjustment [22]. The program is designed to help children to develop effective and active coping styles including problem solving and positive thinking. It also focuses on clarifying misconceptions, framing realistic appraisal of control, and providing accurate attributions for parental problems. These skills have been shown to support better adjustment in school-aged children [23].

**Summary**

Parental divorce has become increasingly common for large numbers of families, which can be a stressful experience for children at any age. There are multiple factors determine whether children can adjust well after parental divorce. When design the appropriate interventions with children of divorce, it is better take those risk and protective factors into account.

**References**


