
Counselling Children of Divorce: A Divorce Lifeline Program

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of three control group studies which examined the efficacy of a group counselling program for children of divorce. These studies were designed to test the hypothesis that the children who participated in the group counselling intervention programs would exhibit less anxiety, greater self-esteem and show improved adjustment to the experience of divorce than would the children in the control groups. In addition, in one of the studies, the experimental subjects were expected to show greater internal orientation than their control groups peers and in another of the studies the experimental subjects were expected to show fewer school-related problems. Significant differences were found between groups in some areas. Differences were not found, however, between groups on measures of anxiety and self-esteem. The reasons for the program's ineffectiveness at changing levels of anxiety and self-esteem are discussed.

Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats de trois études de groupes contrôles qui examinaient l'efficacité d'un programme de counseling pour les enfants de familles divorcées. Ces études ont été préparées dans le but de vérifier l'hypothèse que les enfants qui ont participé dans les programmes d'intervention de groupes de counseling démontreraient moins d'anxiété une plus grande estime de soi et démontreraient une amélioration dans leur habileté à s'ajuster à l'expérience de divorce que les enfants des groupes contrôles. De plus, dans l'une des études, les sujets expérimentaux devaient démontrer une plus grande orientation interne que leurs pairs dans le groupe contrôle et dans une autre étude les sujets expérimentaux devaient démontrer moins de problèmes reliés à l'école. Des différences significatives ont été trouvées entre les groupes dans certains domaines. Par contre, aucune différence n'a été trouvée entre les groupes où le niveau d'anxiété et l'estime de soi étaient évalués. Les raisons expliquant l'inefficacité du programme à amener des changements aux niveaux de l'anxiété et de l'estime de soi sont discutées.

Divorce and separation are two of the most serious and complex mental health crises faced by today's children (Solnit, 1985). It has been suggested that the trauma of family breakdown is second only to death. When parents actually separate, their children often experience a double loss: the loss of the parent who leaves and the loss of the remaining parent who may be emotionally unavailable to their children due to their own turmoil. The reaction of children is almost universal: shock followed by denial, depression, anger, fear, and sometimes the feeling that they are somehow responsible for the event. Additionally, there are feelings of loneliness and fantasies of reconciliation. Research suggests that while many adults separate seek professional help, the majority of children are left to their own resources to work through the special problems they face (Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987). Bonkowski, Bequette & Boomhower (1984), found that only 25% of the children in their study had the benefit of assistance from someone outside their homes.

The effects of divorce on children have been studied in both clinical and non-clinical settings. In general, this research details the deleterious nature of separation and divorce. Clinical studies characterize the children of divorce as displaying a broad spectrum of psychological problems. These range from higher rates of delinquency and anti-social behaviours to more neurotic symptoms, depression, conduct disorders and habit formations (such as sleep disturbances) than children from intact homes (Brady, Bray & Zeeb, 1986; Kalter, 1977; McDermott, 1970; Morrison, 1974; Schaettle & Cantwell, 1980). Shamsie (1985) has gone so far as to suggest that the increase in certain emotional disorders (e.g., runaways, suicidal and anti-social behaviour) stem from the increased number of children experiencing divorce.

Recent studies indicate that the number of children from broken families being seen for psychological/behavioural problems is growing (Felner, Stolberg, & Cowan, 1975; Kalter, 1977). There are indications that between 50 to 80% of children seen in out-patient caseloads are from separated or divorced families (Schaettle & Cantwell, 1980). Family change has also been linked to 64% of suicide attempts among young people (Golombeck et al., 1984).

Children from divorced families studied in non-clinical settings have been characterized as exhibiting greater personal, social and school-related problems than children from intact families. For example, Hammond (1979) found that boys from divorced families were lower in arithmetic achievement, exhibited more distractible and acting-out behaviour, and viewed their families as less happy than did boys from intact families. A school survey sponsored by the U.S. National Association of Elementary Principals discovered that children from single-parent families were lower in achievement, presented more school discipline problems and were absent from school more often than their two-parent peers. Similar results are reported by Brown (1980) who compared the differences in school achievement, tardiness, absenteeism, discipline problems, suspension, and drop-outs of one-parent and two-parent children.

In support of these U.S. studies, Hett (1983 & 1985) found evidence which suggests that family separation and divorce is a factor associated with children's school-related problems. Hett (1983) found differences between children from separated and intact families in such areas as academic achievement, emotional adjustment and such school-related problem behaviours as "acting out." In a second study, Hett (1985), asked teachers to rate their students from single-parent families and intact families along several dimensions. The results of this study suggest that significantly more children from single-parent families evidence problem behaviours than children from intact families. These behaviour problems include poor concentration skills, lower academic achieve-

ment, a greater need for learning assistance instruction, problem behaviours resulting in disciplinary action, and a greater number of school absences.

Several longitudinal studies conducted at two, six and even ten years post-divorce have suggested that some psychological effects of divorce are long-lasting. For example, in a two-year study by Guidubaldi & Perry (1984), the researchers found that children from divorced families continued to experience poorer mental health than their intact family peers. Wallerstein (1985a) reported findings that suggest that even after ten years, the effects of parents' divorce continued to be a negative influence on the lives of many children.

A number of group counselling programs have been developed to assist children of divorce (Bonkowski, Bequette & Boomhower, 1984; Bowker, 1982; Cantor, 1979; Freeman, 1985; Gerber, 1982; Green, 1978; Gwynn & Brantley, 1987; Hozman & Froiland, 1977; Kessler & Bostwick, 1977; Magid, 1977; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985; Tedder, Scherman, & Wantz, 1987; Sonneshein-Schneider & Baird, 1980; Wilkinson & Bleck, 1977). Only a small number of these researchers, however, have attempted to evaluate the efficacy of their programs and many of these evaluations are based on the group leaders' observations, parent assessments and feedback from participants (Bonkowski et al., 1984; Bowker, 1982; Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985). A few researchers have applied more rigorous research methods and evaluation procedures (Freeman, 1985; Gwynn & Brantley, 1987; Stolberg & Garrison, 1985). Freeman's (1985) study, however, remains the single control group study in this area that has been conducted in Canada.

This paper reports three control group studies which investigate the effects of counselling programs designed to assist children adjust to their post-divorce lives. One study was conducted in an elementary school. The two other studies took place at Divorce Lifeline of Victoria, a counselling centre for children and adults who have experienced family breakdown.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects of these three studies were obtained through newspaper and TV advertisements, and, in the case of the study conducted in the elementary school, from letters sent to parents, explaining that a group counselling program for children of divorce would begin at the school in the near future.

Participants in these studies varied in age. Children in the elementary school study were seven to twelve years of age. The two studies conducted at Divorce Lifeline included children six to eight years and children nine to twelve years of age.

All participants in these studies lived in Victoria, British Columbia. They were from middle-income parents who had divorced. Some children were from families who had separated within the previous year, while others were from families who had been separated for as many as six years. The intellectual levels of the children were estimated to be average to superior.

Dependent Measures

Tests used to determine the efficacy of the intervention program were administered immediately before and after the completion of each intervention. The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAIC) (Spielberger, Gorsuch & Lushene, 1968) was used to assess the subjects' predisposition to anxiety (A-Trait) and to situational anxiety (A-State). The STAIC has been used in other research with children of divorce (Gwynn & Brantley, 1987) and demonstrates acceptable levels of validity and reliability. The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) (Coopersmith, 1967) was employed to measure attitudes towards one's self. The SEI has been used in research of this nature (Freeman, 1985) and also has acceptable levels of validity and reliability. The STAIC and SEI were used in each of the three studies.

The Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale (Nowicki & Strickland, 1969) was used in the study conducted at Divorce Lifeline, with children nine to twelve years of age. Scores ranged from 0 to 40 with lower scores representing internality. This scale has been used in similar research (Omizo & Omizo, 1987) and has acceptable levels of validity and reliability. The Walker Problem Behavior Identification Checklist (Walker, 1976) was used in the study conducted in the elementary school with children seven to twelve years of age. This checklist has been used frequently to assess children's adjustment to school.

The Draw Your Family Test was used in the two studies conducted at Divorce Lifeline. Several researchers advocate this test for assessing a child's adjustment to divorce (Hammer, 1958; Hulse, 1952; Isaacs & Levin, 1984; Rezinikoff & Rezinikoff, 1956). It is suggested that drawings can reveal a child's attitude towards family members and his/her role within the family. These drawings were assessed by a psychologist who remained uninformed as to the purpose of the study and membership of the experimental and control groups.

Procedure

Prior to attending the group counselling sessions, the subjects in each study were randomly assigned to either an experimental or a control group. Children in both groups met once a week for six consecutive weeks. Each session lasted approximately one hour and fifteen minutes.

The sessions were led by male and female counsellors who specialize in working with children and divorce-related issues.

The intervention goals for the experimental groups were: (a) to clarify the children's feelings towards their parents' divorce, (b) to have children recognize that they are not alone in this situation, (c) to help children perceive their current situation realistically, (d) to equip children with coping skills, (e) to build and enhance self-esteem and lower stress and anxiety, and (f) to identify an adult from whom they can seek ongoing help. The coping skills taught to members of the experimental groups included communication skills, muscle relaxation techniques, and problem-solving strategies. Several vignettes, which displayed typical problems experienced by children of divorce (Hett, 1988), were used to stimulate and promote discussion and to teach problem-solving strategies. The groups were designed as an enjoyable experience as well as a supportive and educational one.

The following is a brief summary of the six-session group format. The counselling activities are outlined more fully in *Caught in the Middle: A Program and Resource Book for Counsellors Who Work with Children of Divorced and Separated Families* (Achtem & Hett, 1988).

The first session began with the group leader discussing the purpose of the group meetings, ground rules for group interaction, and issues of confidentiality. Several ice-breaking activities were introduced to have the children get to know one another. A vignette, in which a child expresses responsibility for her parents' divorce, was then shown. The discussion that followed was intended to encourage expressions of feelings about family dissolution and to dispel any thoughts that children are responsible for their parents' divorce. The session ended by each member making a positive statement of "appreciation" about another member's contribution to the group.

During the second session and for each of the remaining sessions the meetings began with group members sharing a thought about themselves and their family. These statements and discussions often led to an exchange of divorce-related experiences and offered the counsellor an opportunity to deal with the children's individual and personal concerns. These discussions were followed by warm-up activities and a discussion of the roadblocks to communication. Group members were asked to identify communication roadblocks from divorce-related vignettes shown to them. Members then engaged in role-play situations during which they practised good and poor listening skills. This session concluded with the group leader explaining the purpose of and then teaching progressive muscle relaxation skills to the group.

Session 3 began with the opening exercises and was followed by the group brainstorming some questions that children might want answered about divorce. Next, steps to problem-solving were introduced by the

group leader. These steps included: (1) writing down the problem, (2) gathering the facts, (3) brainstorming possible solutions, (4) evaluating each solution, and (5) choosing and implementing the best solution. The members then applied the model to solve a problem introduced in a vignette shown to them. Finally the members were provided an opportunity to role-play their solutions. This session concluded with the practise of muscle relaxation skills.

Sessions 4 and 5 focused on the mastery of effective communication skills, problem-solving and relaxation techniques. The practice of resolving personal problems through role-play was emphasized. The "skits" were stopped intermittently to permit discussion. Answers to the questions listed by members during Session 2 were also provided. During Session 5 several guests were invited to the group to talk about their own parents' divorce and to answer questions posed by the group members. The purpose of this event was to convince the group members that they too would survive this trauma.

The final group session was intended as a forum in which group members could discuss their rights and responsibilities and included several exercises to help group members bring closure to the group experience. Members were asked to fill out an anonymous evaluation of their experience in the group. This was followed by a discussion of what they thought were the most and least helpful aspects of the program. The session concluded with an exercise in which group members received positive written feedback about their behaviour from fellow group members.

Subjects assigned to the control groups met on the same days, in the same location, and for the same period of time as the experimental groups. It was explained that the counsellors were present to help the group members with divorce-related problems. The activities conducted during these sessions, however, were oriented towards "play" and did not, for the most part, address divorce issues. Interestingly, few divorce-related problems or questions were raised by the group members, but when they did occur, the problems or questions were dealt with in a direct and frank manner. The purpose of the control groups was to measure attention effects.

RESULTS

All measures, with the exception of the Draw Your Family Test, were analyzed using the t-test. There were no significant improvements made by any of the groups in anxiety or self-esteem during any of the studies as measured by the STAIC and SEI. The nine- to twelve-year-old children in the experimental group did, however, show a significantly greater improvement in their ability to act independently as measured by the

TABLE 1

T-test results for dependent samples on the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale

Experimental Group

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Pre	7	18.85	4.45	2.56	.021
Post		13.57	2.57		

Control Group

<i>Variable</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Pre	9	19.88	7.14	-1.32	.225
Post		20.77	6.28		

TABLE 2

T-test results for independent samples on the Walker Problem Behavior Checklist

<i>Groups</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Experimental	7	7.28	5.28	-2.32	.048
Control	8	22.75	18.02		

Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale ($M=18.85$ and 13.51) than did children in the control group, $t(7)=2.56$, $p<.05$. See Table 1.

Significantly greater improvements were also found in the school adjustment of the seven- to twelve-year-old experimental children as measured by the Walker Problem Behaviour Checklist ($M=7.28$ and 22.75) than with the control group children, $t(15)=2.32$, $p<.05$. See Table 2.

Differences between the experimental and the control groups were noted on the Draw Your Family Test. The improvements noted were greater for the six- to eight-year-old group than for the nine- to twelve-year-old group.

All of the experimental subjects six to eight years of age included their fathers in their post-test drawings. Only 43% of these children had included their fathers in their pre-test drawings. Fathers were included in only 37% of the post-test drawings by children in the control group, who had portrayed their fathers in 35% of their pre-test drawings.

In 29% of the pre-test drawings and 56% of the post-test drawings by the experimental subjects, fathers were drawn as taller than mothers. The percentage of control subjects drawing their fathers greater in stature than mothers in their pre- and post-test drawings were 10% and 11% respectively.

Additions beyond the nuclear family were included by 43% of the experimental group in their pre-test drawings and by 49% of these children in their post-test drawings. For the control subjects pre-test inclusions beyond the immediate family were found in 20% of their drawings which increased two percentage points in their post-test compositions. The drawings of 72% of the experimental subjects shifted in the direction of greater creativity. Creativity had been observed in only 29% of these children's pre-test drawings. A sizeable shift was not noted in creativity in the pre- and post-test drawings of the children in the control group. Only 20% of their pre-test compositions compared with 23% of their post-test compositions showed creativity.

In the study involving children nine to twelve years of age, 71% of the experimental subjects included their fathers in both their pre- and post-test drawings. Subjects in the control group included their fathers in all their pre- and post-test drawings. Additions beyond the nuclear family were included by 33% of these children in their pre-test drawings and in 43% of their post-test drawings. Subjects in the control group included their fathers in all their pre- and post-test drawings. Additions beyond the nuclear family were included in 12% of the control subjects' pre-test drawings and in 22% of their post-test drawings.

While none of the participants in the experimental group drew their fathers taller than mothers in their pre-test drawings, 29% of these children drew their fathers taller in their post-test drawings. Inter-

estingly, 33% of the children in the control group portrayed their fathers as taller than their mothers in their post-test drawings, but 44% drew their fathers as diminishing in size. There was a positive shift in creativity from pre- to post-test drawings of the experimental subjects from 19% to 43% respectively, and from 21% to 33% in the drawings of the control subjects.

DISCUSSION

These studies were designed to test the hypothesis that children who participate in group counselling intervention programs would exhibit less anxiety, greater self-esteem and improved adjustment to the experience of divorce than children in the control groups. In the study of nine- to twelve-year-olds the experimental subjects were expected to become more internally oriented than their peers and the seven- to twelve-year-olds were expected to show fewer school problem behaviours.

The experimental subjects in these studies showed no significant changes in anxiety or self-esteem. The reasons for the program's ineffectiveness at changing these attitudes may be several. First, each counselling program encouraged an exploration and expression of feelings. This approach to counselling may heighten children's anxiety and lower self-esteem. Wallerstein, et al., (1987) for example, report that anxiety was heightened in their study with the expression of divorce-related issues. Bowker (1982) suggests that the identification and expression of feelings is difficult for some children who invest a great deal of energy in elaborate defences against feelings. Secondly, anxiety and self-esteem may be very stable dimensions, which resist change over a short term. Pedro-Carroll and Cowen (1985) found a lack of change in self-esteem in their study and suggest that a short-term intervention program may not be sufficiently powerful to change relatively stable dimensions such as competency and self-esteem.

There were significant improvements made by the experimental children in the nine- to twelve-year-old group on the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale. This test was developed to measure "interpersonal and motivational areas such as affiliation, achievement and dependency" (Nowicki & Strickland, 1969). These results suggest that an intervention program that provides children with means to communicate their feelings effectively, to develop relaxation skills and provides a forum to discuss and resolve problems, may empower children and increase their ability to act independent of outside influences and to adjust to various events in their lives.

There were also significant differences between the two groups of children seven to twelve years of age on the Walker Problem Behaviour Checklist. Children in the experimental group exhibited fewer school problem behaviours following the completion of the counselling pro-

gram than did their control group peers. Several problem-solving sessions were devoted to solving school-related problems, although this was not a regular part of the program. These sessions were a result of several children identifying problems with their peers and teachers as primary concerns.

On the Draw a Family Test, Isaacs and Levin found that children of divorce over time tend to omit their fathers from their drawings or draw their fathers as smaller than their mothers. They suggest this phenomenon is indicative of the child's perception of their family as a single-parent one, with the father's power and influence diminishing. Their conclusions are supported by the present study. A greater number of control subjects in these studies tended either to omit their fathers from their drawings or drew their fathers as diminished in size than did the experimental subjects. It appears that the counselling program prevented this phenomenon from taking place with members of the experimental group, that is, the experimental subjects continued to view their visiting parent as an influential and prominent member of their family.

In both the studies in which children's drawings were analyzed the experimental subjects showed a greater increase in creativity than did their control group peers. This supports Isaacs and Levin's (1984) notion that a well-timed counselling program can benefit the children of divorce by increasing their sense of well-being.

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