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# Divorce and Children

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## Description of Divorce and Children

### Prevalence

The National Center for Health Statistics reported data from the 2006-2010 National Survey of Family Growth indicating approximately 50% of first marriages end in divorce. Divorce rates were influenced by several factors including cohabitation before marriage, educational attainment, race, and age at first marriage (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012; [www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/divorce.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/divorce.htm)).

### Effects of Divorce on Children

Child adjustment to parental divorce often varies by age, gender, parental interactions, and socioeconomic status. According to Lambie (2008): younger children are at higher risk for internalizing (e.g., depression, anxiety) and externalizing (e.g., fighting, disobedience) problems, adjustment to divorce is often more challenging and prolonged for boys, post-divorce parental conflict is associated with behavioral and academic difficulties for children, and economic instability following divorce is related to more significant adjustment problems for children. A comprehensive collection of resources about divorce and children is provided by The University of California, Los Angeles Center for Mental Health in Schools at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/divorce.htm>

## IDENTIFICATION/ASSESSMENT

Tools are available for assessing the effects of divorce on children. Specifically, two instruments have been designed to identify and assess the effects of divorce on children. Counselors may use these scales to gather information from both custodial parents and their children following a divorce.

The **Divorce Adjustment Inventory-Revised** (DAI-R; Portes, Smith & Brown, 2000). The 42 items included in the DAI-R were designed to elicit information on demographics, pre-divorce family functioning, post-divorce co-parental relations, parent-child relationships, social support for the custodial parent/child, custodial arrangements, post-divorce parental functioning, and post-divorce coping skills of the child. Sample items include “Since the divorce, my ex-spouse and I have tried to turn the children against the other parent” and “Generally, I wish my children were able to see more of their other parent than they do.” Items are measured on a five point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

The **Child’s Divorce Adjustment Inventory** (CDAI; Portes, Lehman, & Brown, 1999). Unlike the DAI-R that is completed by the custodial parent, the CDAI collects information from children from elementary to high school grades. This 25-item inventory considers four aspects of child adjustment to divorce: (a) conflict/maladjustment; (b) depression/anxiety; (c) social support; and (d) acceptance of the divorce. Items such as “My parents often fight about me,” “Since the separation I have times when I feel sad,” “My grandparents and other family members do things with me,” and “Since the separation I get along better with my parents” are measured on a scale from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree (Gilman, Schneider, & Shulak, 2005).

## INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Providing support for children in transitioning families is an important focus for counselors who acknowledge the diversity of family structures and their responses to change (Erford, 2008). Although it is important to approach the individual needs of children, the literature also reinforces the critical role of the family system when

identifying interventions. The scope of techniques related to divorce and children are widely varying; for example, from Vicki Lansky's (2003) parent's (e.g., *Divorce Book for Parents*; [http://books.google.com/books/about/Vicki\\_Lansky\\_s\\_Divorce\\_Book\\_for\\_Parents.html?id=FQeHmd1639UC](http://books.google.com/books/about/Vicki_Lansky_s_Divorce_Book_for_Parents.html?id=FQeHmd1639UC)) and (1998) children's (e.g., *It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear*; <http://books.google.com/books?id=m9xTKekKa9QC&printsec=frontcover&dq=its+not+your+fauly+koko+bear&hl=en&sa=X&ei=2wvKUJWzJLPq0QGTjoGgCA&ved=0CDoQ6AEwAA>) books to court-mandated programs. This overview, however, focuses primarily on interventions repeatedly cited in the scholarly literature, which have been few. Specifically, addressing the needs of children has largely centered on direct interventions implemented in schools (Connolly & Green, 2009; Rose, 2009; Kim, Danylchuk, Rho, Shealy, & Thiel, 2007; Winslow, Wolchik, & Sander, 2004) and in the use of parent programs (Fackrell, Hawkins, & Kay, 2011; Rose, 2009).

### **Child-Centered Approaches**

Research focused on interventions with children is modest and primarily directed to programs used in schools. Connolly and Green (2009) provided an overview of interventions used in the school setting including a focus on group work, parent consultation, and developing protective factors in children (i.e., active coping skills and realistic appraisal of control) [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?\\_nfpb=true&\\_ERICExtSearch\\_SearchValue\\_0=EJ886140&ERICExtSearch\\_SearchType\\_0=no&accno=EJ886140](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=EJ886140&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=EJ886140). Cognitive-behavioral approaches are largely used within many school programs, however, there is also expanding literature recognizing the use of play therapy to work with children to ameliorate the effects associated with divorce (Bratton, Ray, Rhine, & Jones, 2005); those interventions will be highlighted below.

**Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP).** CODIP is a school-based program developed by Pedro-Carroll and Cowen (1985) repeatedly identified as an effective group intervention with kids <http://www.childrensstitute.net/programs/codip> (Connolly & Green, 2009; Rose, 2009; Winslow et al., 2004). CODIP is designed for children ages 5-14 and intended to be skills-based and focuses on problem-solving skills, emotion regulation (e.g., anxiety, stress), understanding of family changes, and the internalization of problems. It ranges from 12-15 sessions of varying length depending on the age of children involved and although initially created for suburban children, it has also been implemented with rural and urban populations as well as diverse racial and ethnic groups (USDHHS, SAMHSA National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practice: <http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=220>).

**Children's Support Group (CSG; Stolberg & Mahler, 1994).** CSG was identified repeatedly as an effective group intervention, although cultural considerations were unspecified in the literature (Connolly & Green, 2009; Rose, 2009; Winslow et al., 2004). CSG is a 14-week program for children ages approximately 7-13 aimed at cognitive-behavioral skill building (e.g., problem solving, impulse and anger control, relaxation; Connolly & Green, 2009; Stolberg & Mahler, 1994). An important aspect of the child's skill development is connecting feelings with events and being able to externalize their thoughts in a productive way to reduce negative internalization and externalization of behaviors (Stolberg & Mahler, 1994).

**Play therapy.** The use of play therapy was found to assist children in developing confidence and self-efficacy, allowing them to express and process emotions using a developmentally familiar approach (Kim et al., 2007; Kottman, 2004; Pehrsson & Aguilera, 2007). Again, focused in the school setting (i.e., Head Start programs), Kim et al., (2007) reiterated the use of play therapy in the individual counseling context and the positive treatment outcomes from its integration (Bratton et al., 2005). More general resources on play therapy techniques and activities can be found in Kottman's (2003; 2011) texts distributed by the American Counseling Association. Lowenstein (2009) provided examples of play therapy activities specifically targeted to implement with children of divorce: <http://www.a4pt.org/download.cfm?ID=28112>.

### **Programs for Parents**

Interventions for parents are important for supporting a child during a divorce because they help parents recognize how the transition affects all individuals in the family system. Bonach (2005) contended, "it is not the divorce per se that is strongly related to negative outcomes for children, but it is the ongoing interparental conflict that can be concomitant with divorce" (p. 80). While efforts are put into finding ways to ameliorate the legal ramifications of custody agreements and financial support (Bonach, 2005), it is imperative to also implement interventions that can reduce the exposure of interparental, destructive conflict for children of divorce (Grych, 2005; Velez, Wolchik,

Tein, & Sandler, 2011; Winslow et al., 2004). Although there has been meager empirical investigation in the rapid growth of divorcing parents education programs (DPEs), Fackrell et al., (2011) found in their meta-analysis of court-affiliated programs that they are generally effective, despite that there was little racial or ethnic diversity found within their sample of 28 studies. Skill-based programs are salient and continue to be developed. These interventions continue to reinforce the importance of relationship development between children and parents navigating the transitions surrounding divorce; however, only several programs have been consistently identified as empirically supported.

**New Beginnings Program (NBP).** According to SAMHSA, NBP is a 10-week group (including two individual sessions) designed for parents of children ages 3-17 with the aim of teaching parents skills to enhance the relationship with their child and decrease conflict with both the child and other parent and has been used as a court mandated program. Clinical trials provided evidence of effective behavioral outcomes (e.g., reduced symptoms and diagnosis of a mental disorder, drug use, and externalization of issues) with the mother only and mother-child group programs (Wolchik et al., 2002) <http://www.clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT01407120>. USDHHS, SAMHSA National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practice: <http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=27> includes related research to their findings.

**Children in Between (CIB).** Previously identified as Children in the Middle, CIB has consistently produced positive results from its participants (Grych, 2005). CIB is a shorter program (i.e., one or two sessions; 90 minutes to 3 hours in duration depending on structure) for parents that focuses on developing communication skills and reducing child exposure to conflict (Grych, 2005; SAMHSA, 2006). The program is designed to focus on familial conflict so participant focus is from early childhood through adulthood. USDHHS, SAMHSA National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices includes related research to their findings: <http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/ViewIntervention.aspx?id=5>

### **Additional Resources**

Additional literature and resources for counselors specifically related to divorce interventions for children and families can be found, but not limited to: (a) the *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*; (b) the Children's Institute: Families in Transition information website: <http://www.childrensinstitute.net/research/families-in-transition>, and (c) for members of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA), resources are available [http://www.schoolcounselor.org/resources\\_list.asp?c=31&i=15](http://www.schoolcounselor.org/resources_list.asp?c=31&i=15) including sample documents and identification of books, workbooks, and activities to use with children. There are innumerable resources available on the web, however, the research behind many of these interventions is non-existent or lacking in rigor. The breadth of means with which to address the effects of divorce emphasizes the need for intervention with children.

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