

Critical Thinking Assignment

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Human Behavior in the Social Environment

Children in the stage of middle childhood can suffer adverse effects when their parents enter into a divorce. In this stage, children are ages 6-12 and are going through a stage of Industry VS. Inferiority according to the stages created by Erik Erikson. In this stage, the children focus on the development and necessity of rules as well as ensuring fairness in how and when these rules are enforced and followed through on. Additionally, in this stage children are developing a greater sense of friendship and relations among their peer groups. Peers have a very strong influence in this stage as well.

There are multiple peer-reviewed journals that have worked to better understand the effects this phenomenon has on children of this age. One of these articles was written by Robert Hughes Jr. entitled *The Effects of Divorce on Children*. The two main questions answered in this article were “Are children of divorce worse off than children in married two-parent families?” and “What causes the difference between children in different types of families?” (Hughes, R. 1995). In this article Hughes made reference to the fact that children in divorce have more difficulty in school, they have more behavior problems, a more negative view of themselves, more problems with peers and more trouble getting along with either one of their divorced parents. A limitation of this article was that it did not go into any implications for practice for social workers.

Hughes also made reference to a study conducted by Mavis Hetherington that compared children from “intact” families to children from divorced or single parent homes. This study reports that 90% of adolescent boys and girls in intact families were well within the normal range for encountering problems and 10% have serious problems that would require intervention. When compared to the findings for divorced families, it showed that 74% of boys and 66% of girls were in the normal range of problematic behavior; meanwhile, 26% of boys and 34% of

girls were in the problematic range that would require intervention later in life. One of the strengths of this article is that Hughes made it very clear that, “ MOST children in divorced families do not need help, but MORE children in this group than in intact families are likely to need help” (Hughes, R. 1995).

In the second part of this article, Hughes was able to further explain the differences present for children experiencing a parental divorce. Parental loss was the first in which cases, after some divorces a parent is completely cut off from this child. Economic loss is similar in the way that the child will lose out on resources that they have come to rely on prior to the divorce. A parental divorce will also lead to more life stress for this child as they may need to change living situations, schools, or entire communities. Poor parental adjustment is also a possibility that this child will need to navigate as well as a lack of parental competence. (Hughes, R. 1995). Both of these issues could lead to an increase in stress for that child. Finally, during a parental divorce, this can lead to exposure to interparental conflict that the child could witness.

The second article in which I researched was *Co-parenting and Children's Psychological Distress and Adjustment after Parental Divorce* written by Jikihara, Yasumitsu. The two main points of this article were similar to the one prior. The biggest point of this article was that this would lead to the negative adjustment of the child in many facets of their lives, but most notably their education as well as peer interactions. I am in agreement with this as well because it is in line with the stage these children are in and the influence that peers will have on them. The next biggest point is the influence this article puts on cooperative co-parenting. (Jikihara, Y., & Ando, S. 2022). The article discusses that the more cooperative the parents are post divorce shows that most of the negative impact of the divorce will be mitigated through parental support.

The biggest strength of this article is the emphasis on the strengths of the parent and the child which implies they can get through this and a divorce will not lead to lifelong detriment. A limitation of this article is that they had a small sample size as well as the fact that there was little explanation of an unwilling partner to be part of their child's life. I agree with the findings of this article because it emphasizes the need for both parents to be present. The evidence has shown that being raised in a home with a high level of support will lead to a high level of success for the child.

Throughout my research, there were many other resources that provided a crucial look into what is happening in this child's mind as well as ways in which parents can support their children through this. In this blog, the effects of divorce on children were discussed. Children at this age may feel angry because their whole world is changing and while anger is natural at any age, middle aged children are at the greatest risk. Children may withdraw socially, going from a social butterfly, to a withdrawn anxious child. Their grades may suffer as a result of these life changes as well as facing a higher dropout rate. This can happen as early as age 6, which is right at the start of the middle child bracket. Children may also be forced to pick sides which can lead to cognitive dissonance as well as loyalty conflict. Children are also known to initially feel low or sad about the divorce, however, these students have a higher risk of developing clinical depression. Again, while these issues can begin at an age, they tend to be most prominent for children at the age of 11 and older, this age is at the high end of the middle childhood bracket. (Marcin, A. 2020).

In this blog, it was also discussed that the eating and sleeping patterns of children this age could change as well. This blog made reference to a 2019 study that posed the question of whether or not children really carry the weight of a divorce. This study used the Body Mass

Index (BMI) and while the parental divorce does not immediately show an impact on the BMI of the child, overtime the BMI of children who go through a parental divorce will ultimately be higher than a child who has not experienced a parental divorce. (Marcin, A. 2020). These effects are also particularly obvious for children experiencing a divorce at age 6 again, the onset of the middle childhood age range.

I also agree with this information in this blog because it makes clear associations between cause and effect that make the information easy to understand. The information is also in line with the stages that these children are in as they are trying to fit in with their peers as well as developing feelings of belonging and rules. When growing up with two parents in the home, this becomes the normative behavior for a child, as well as the depiction of “happy families” on T.V. When a parent now breaks one of these “rules” the child may have a harder time understanding the consequences for these actions.

All in all, I agree with the research as well as the basis of what I have read. This information is in line with our class textbook as well. On page 268, the textbook explains that there are multiple stressors that occur during a divorce. For example, the hostilities between parents can lead to sadness, anger and loyalty conflicts. As well as, a distraught custodial parent leading to anxiety as this child may be put into roles that are inappropriate for their age. The textbook also makes reference to the possibility of poverty as the children and their parents are being faced with a downward economic mobility, emotional stressors, possible changes in residence, loss of peer relationships and school environment that may all come from the stress of poverty.

In this course we have also made reference to ACES and their ability to predict a child’s outcome later in life. While this test needs to be administered after the age of 18, the answers to

their questions are in response to things that happened prior to this age. One of the questions on this assessment is in reference to whether or not the client's parents were separated or divorced. Just the divorce of a parent can be an ACE let alone any of the subsequent behaviors also in this assessment. For example, other questions in the assessment are, "Did you ever feel that no one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special OR your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other or support each other?" By answering yes to this question, which is possible as this can be a consequence of divorce, it would lead to another ACE. Another question on this assessment is, "Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?" Although this is an extreme, it is a possibility of a divorced parent. Answering yes to this would lead to yet another ACE, all connected to the initial stressor of divorce.

I also agree with the findings of the article because of my own work with clients. I work in an afterschool program and many clients have been referred to me due to low grades, problems with friends, or a change in attitude. I have found that many of these students (who all fall within the middle aged childhood bracket) have experienced a parental separation or are children whose parents are going through this process. The research found in all of these articles, blogs and the textbook all support what I have seen first hand from my clients.

This then leads us to how this information that we have found will inform Social Work Practice. According to *World Psychology, The Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association*, a journal was written entitled "Parental Divorce or Separation and Children's Mental Health" In this Journal, they talked about the different roles a Social Worker can take in order to help these children going through this phenomenon. Mediators can oftentimes be social workers who act as third parties who help parents resolve conflict in the effort to protect the

child. Mediation can lead to a healthier parental relationship that will also help the child. A study also showed that involving the children in this mediation process can greatly improve the success of said mediation. (D'Onofrio, B., & Emery, R. 2019)

Social Workers can also take the role of mental health professionals who can play a critical role in advising parents as well as playing a role in law and policy at a macro level. This journal spoke about the physical custody time that a child is with each parent. There is a push to share 25-50% of parenting time. By sharing custody at a higher percentage it mitigates the damage that can be done from losing parental support and the subsequent adverse effects that can also occur.

The textbook also goes into detail on how this will inform Social Work practice on page 267. In order to help families with divorce, it is important that we guide families through the process of finding financial support through child support. It is also important that we support the parents through this stressful time and encourage them to stay consistent on parental warmth as well as consistent discipline. Children are most successful when there is a set routine as well as a reliable discipline that follows across all homes they will be in. It is also crucial that as social workers, we encourage emotional support from all parents.  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the divorced children will lose contact with their fathers throughout their lifetime. By encouraging this contact, we can better support this child. While there were many other ways to help families through divorce as social work, there was one final one of note. "Parents going through a divorce may also soon be experiencing a new life stage of their own, which is dating with children." As social workers, we can support the partners to think about their priorities and help them in introducing their new partner to their child.

Based on my findings in this research, there are many implications when working with clients going through this at this life stage. It is important to focus on the stage the clients are in according to Erikson, in this case inferiority vs. industry. In this stage, children are focusing on rules, consequences as well as their peers and fitting in. When working with clients, it is important to understand that rules are important and they will need explicit help in understanding the new rules of their family as well as the consequences of the divorce. Additionally, from this research, it is important to understand that involving both parents when possible is crucial in helping the child to work through these changes. Finally, from this research, it is clear that open and honest communication with the parents as well as the children is needed. The more a child can understand what it is that they are experiencing, the better off they will be when adjusting to their new lives.

## References

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