Healing Broken Families: How to Alleviate the Negative Effects of Divorce and Parental Bereavement on School-Aged Children

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Abstract

According to various studies, children and teens with divorced or bereaved parents are more likely to experience physical injury and develop health problems than those with married two-parent families. These problems require government intervention because the problem of broken families is widespread, but resources are not easily accessible in all places. The mental health, growth, and stability of children depends on the stability of the relationships that they have with their parents. If the relationship is broken, then the child suffers. It is important to provide support and advocacy to children who may not come from backgrounds that are able to provide services for them, whether due to animosity between parents, lack of a parent, or financial troubles. By implementing a government supported and mandated program, we can promote the health and well being of kids living in broken homes, thereby increasing their coping methods and self-esteem issues, and allowing them to lead a healthier, more normal lifestyle.

Research

Reasons for Intervention

Mental and Physical Issues Associated with Divorce and Bereavement
- Emotional and behavioral problems
- Heightened anxiety
- Depression
- Lower self-esteem and self-confidence
- Lack of coping skills

Predisposition to Divorce Sensitivity
- Lower income
- Increased parent-sensitivity and depression
- Children’s intelligence
- Home environment, pre- and post- divorce

Implications of Issues on Children’s Lives
- Diminished learning capacity
- Decreased quality of communication with parents
- More prone to get divorced themselves

Example Program Studies

Banana Splits Program
- School-based children’s group program for students who have experienced divorce or death, est. 1978
- K-8 groups, and adolescent groups
- Activities teach children of divorced or deceased parents how to help themselves and each other by creating a supportive community
- Banana Splits Resource Center

The Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CODIP) (Fig 1)
- school-based, preventative program that uses group support and training in social competence: establishment of community
- Foster group environment, acknowledgement of divorce-related feelings, understand of divorce-related feelings, teach communication and coping skills, and increase self-perception
- Originally created for fourth- to sixth-grade students, but expanded to children of different ages and socioeconomic backgrounds

Proposal

Methods of the Program: Establish a program similar to the CODEP and Banana Splits Programs
- Encourage group support
- Teaching coping methods
- Fostering creativity in activities like drawing, singing, dancing, puppetry, role playing, and play writing
- Helps to foster, identify, and brainstorm new behaviors and coping techniques
- Working with parents

Training
- 6-month training program with certified child psychologists and social workers in elementary schools
- Integrate into teaching certification
- Create trainings for parents
- Co-leadership: male and female team, importance of contact with each gender, second leader only needs to be empathetic, not necessarily a certified counselor.
- Preparation: examine personal experiences, current counseling literature, develop trust and cooperation with teammates, assessment with group leadership skills

Implementation
- School-based voluntary program
- Universality: every student that qualifies is eligible
- self-election, 2 year age proximity
- separation of siblings
- assurance of diversity
- Screening to assess ability to participate and benefit (willingness, issues, ability)
- Informed Consent: The Fragility of Divorce Situations
- Group Member Needs and Goals Assessment: What does this particular group need help with?
- Group Process Assessment: What methods will work the best with this particular group? What group format would work best?

Useful Interventions
- Music: easily and readily accepted, help to identify thoughts and feelings, begin discussion, channeling energy
- Bibliotherapy: usage of books and films, used as a stimuli to begin discussion, reflect upon
- Puppets and Drama: expressions of emotions indirectly, ask embarrassing or uncomfortable questions

Goals of the Program
1. Help children gain an accurate understanding of the process of divorce and bereavement via discussion and information
2. Normalize common experiences and feelings associated with divorce and bereavement.
3. Create a safe space to talk about these feelings and experiences that is supportive and connective
4. Help children label feelings associated with divorce and bereavement as such
5. Build new coping skills
6. Dispel some fears through group discussion and reality testing
7. Development of realistic approach to the situation

Figure 1: Data from COPE study. MANOVA Test of Teacher-Child Rating Scale. Teachers blind to condition, assessing frustration, tolerance, adaptive assertiveness, peer social skills, task orientation on a 3-point descriptive scale. High scores indicate better adjustment. Mean measurement. (Pedro-Carroll, Sutton, & Wyman, 1999, p. 473).

Figure 2: Data from COPE study: STAIC (State-Trait Anxiety Inventory) Pre-Testing. Parent measure based on Parental Survey. Mean measurement at two year follow up. (Pedro-Carroll, Sutton, & Wyman, 1999, p. 473).

Figure 3: Data from COPE study: Frequent Visits to Nurse. Measure based on school records. Percentage measurement at two year follow up. (Pedro-Carroll, Sutton, & Wyman, 1999, p. 473).

Figure 4: Data from COPE study. ANOVA Test of Parent Evaluation Form. Total scores based on 20-item survey of parents to assess perceptions of children’s general adjustment. Higher scores indicate better adjustment. 4-point scale. Mean measurement. (Pedro-Carroll, Sutton, & Wyman, 1999, p. 473).