

THE IMPACT OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING

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Perceraian membawa impak psikologi kepada anak pasangan berkenaan yang perlu diberi perhatian sewajarnya. Artikel ini memberifokus kepada usaha memahami keadaan psikologi anak akibat dari perceraian ini, cara-cara membantu menyediakan mereka untuk berhadapan dengan perceraian ibu bapa mereka, dan usaha-usaha yang dapat dilakukan untuk membantu mereka membina kekuatan psikologi mereka agar impak perceraian ibu bapa mereka dapat dikurangkan.

Children's psychological and socio-emotional states can be affected by divorce of parents. Thompson and Rudolph (1996) believe knowledge of the child's level of cognitive development is essential for success in counseling children. Children aged 5 to 12 have their own cognitive world. According to Piaget and Inhelder (Thompson & Rudolph, 1996), there are four blocks in cognitive process faced by children. In the first block, the Egocentrism block, children are unable to see others' point of view; they believe everyone thinks the same way as they do. In the second block, the Centration block, children are unable to see other's point of views. They are unable to focus on more than one aspect of a problem as well. In the third block, the Reversibility block, children are unable to work from front to back and back to front in solving problems. In the final block, the Transformation block, children are unable to put events in the proper order or sequence. The cognitive concrete thought of children can become a source for counselors in providing effective counseling.

Social development of children is another consideration for counselors. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development explains the eight stages of human development. It is a good source for counselors to know the expectations, human needs and developmental tasks of humans across the childhood years. Children aged 3-12 go through the shame versus doubt, initiative versus guilt and industry versus inferiority stages in this period. During this period, children need to have the sense of self-control over their environment, develop a sense of initiative and learn a variety of skills from academic, social, physical and practical that will help them find a place in the adult world.

According to Berk (2005), children undergo several stages before they develop a refined me-self, or self-concept. They organize their observations of behaviors and internalize them into general dispositions, with a major change taking place between ages

8 and 11. Concurring with Freud's theory, Berk (2005) sees childhood as a quiet period emotionally, a period in which children become ready to apply themselves to given skills and tasks.

However, if the amount of freedom and creativity are restricted by surrounding issues, particularly with the break-up of parents, children's development can be impeded. According to Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee (2002), the children are suffering more mental health problems and stress because they are being kept indoors, their family is more unstable with high divorce rates, and they are facing increasing pressure to do well at school.

Marsh, Ellis, and Debus (1998) show that positive relationships exist between self-esteem, the values children attach to various activities, and their success at those activities. When it comes to child emotional development, self-concept and emotions are also governed by personal responsibility. According to Berk (2005), children realize that they can experience more than one emotion at a time, each of which may be positive or negative and may differ in intensity.

According to Berk's (2005) description of children's emotional development, children need adults' discussion of emotion in order to gain self-understanding of social experiences. This can contribute to empathy in children. Schultz, Izard, Ackerman, and Youngstrom (2001) believe that at early ages, emotional understanding and empathy are linked to favorable social relationship and pro-social behavior.

Emotional self-regulation also develops during childhood. Children have their ways of coping with stress. Lazarus and Lazarus (1994) explain that when children cannot cope with stress, they begin to engage in emotion-centered coping, which is internal, private and aimed at controlling distress when little can be done about an outcome. With age, they increasingly prefer verbal strategies to overt emotional expression such as crying, sulking and aggression. Without these coping strategies, children become overwhelmed with negative emotion resulting in the inability to engage with pro-social behavior. It is important for children to have social interaction with parents, teachers and peers as ways to express their emotion and to solve their problems. Children more often use these internal strategies to regulate their emotion, a change due to their improved ability to appraise situations and reflect on thoughts and feelings (Brenner & Salovey, 1997).

Impact of Divorce

When it comes to divorce, adults seldom consider children's feelings, thoughts and development. Thompson and Rudolph (1996) noted that the central hazard of divorce is the adverse effect on the children's development. The center of attention is mainly on resolving parents' needs than on children's needs. Children of divorced parents may be asked to assume the role of absent parents and to fulfill physical or emotional responsibilities beyond their maturity level (Thompson & Rudolph, 1996). Wallerstein (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2002), the mother of divorce research, claimed that the myth is built on the enduring fact that most adults cannot understand the children's world view and how children think. According to Wallerstein et al. (2002), in their 25 years of research, the myth has become under strong attack in recent years where they have found out children were suffering from the impact of their parents' divorce. The

Wallerstein et al. (2002) study suggests that children of divorced parents tend to become more depressed, aggressive and have more learning difficulties and problems with peers than children from intact families.

Norton (1999) reported that about eight percent of children live in stepfamilies and one in 25 see their parents divorce before they are four years old and one in four experience divorce before they leave school at 16. The breakdown in marriage is six times higher than it was 30 years ago, with one in three marriages ending in divorce.

In Malaysia, according to Mustaffa (2005), the overall percentage of divorce among Malay Muslims is still under control and not alarming. The divorce rate was around 10 to 15 percent from 1990 to 2003. Although it is considered as under control, members of parliament have brought up the issue of children as the victims of divorce. The long and tedious process of divorce in the syariah court could take its toll on the divorcing parents and the children, especially when the parents disputed each other's claims and could not reach an amicable settlement.

After a divorce, parents tend to become more engaged in rebuilding their own lives economically, socially and sexually (Wallerstein et al., 2002). It is common that the children's needs tend to be neglected after the breakup. The common changes in parenting after divorce are decreased warmth and affection, poorer communication and erratic discipline.

Understanding Children of Divorced Parents

The major change in the family is the altered family organization and this often leaves children in confusion. Divorce is a life-transforming experience; whether the final outcome is good or bad, the whole trajectory of an individual's life is profoundly altered by the divorce experience (Wallerstein et al., 2002). Divorce, separation and remarriage can bring about rapid changes in the family. This can result in traumatic and painful experiences in children. Thompson and Rudolph (1996) believe the lives and relationship of children in a divorcing family are profoundly affected socially, economically, psychologically and even legally. They added that a change in the economic status, the home and school environment, different parenting styles, and custody battles may create positive or negative feelings.

According to Dunn (2004), the nature and influence of family changes as an ongoing process can be potentially stressful for children. They struggle to fit into the changes in their neighborhood and school. The dramatic decreases in family finances, their parents' mental well-being, often the formation of stepfamilies, the experience of living in two households as a result of custody arrangements and loss of contact with biological fathers and with paternal grandparents can be overwhelming and highly stressful to the children.

Cohen (2002) states that children of all ages frequently have psychosomatic symptoms as a response to anger, loss, grief, feeling unloved, and other stressors. They may try to play one parent against the other because they need to feel in control and test rules and limits. Cohen further points out that the children's sense of vulnerability and rejection by a parent are likely to cause adjustment problems. It is found that children of divorced parents showed, on the average, higher rates of adjustment problems such as behavioral and emotional problems and school failure. According to Cohen (2002), the 4 to 5-year-

old children often blame themselves for their parents' breakup and unhappiness. They become more clingy, show externalizing behavior (acting out), misperceive the events of the divorce situation, fear abandonment and have more nightmares and fantasies. The impact of divorce on children will lead to sadness, anxiety and depression. All these may be manifested in some somatic symptoms, troublesome behaviors and academic decline (Thompson & Rudolph, 1996).

Thompson and Rudolph (1996) found out that children aged 7 to 11 showed a significant decline in academic achievement following marital separation. Nappi (2000) noted children often act out at school the depression and anger caused by divorce. Their 'grades plummet, and they can turn into bullies. Cohen (2002) also found similar behaviors such as decreasing school performance, behavioral difficulties, and social withdrawal. A considerable body of literature supports these findings. Wolchik, Yun Tein, Sandler, and Doyle (2002) are among researchers who supported these perspectives through their findings of fear abandonment as a mediator of the relations between divorce stressors and mother-child relationship quality and children's adjustment problems. Their research includes children aged 8-12 and their primary residential mother. The children reported on divorce stressors and the fear of abandonment, while the mothers were concerned about the quality of relationship with their children. The high scores from children were reported on fear of abandonment, and this is consistent with the psychosocial theory on the relations between need for relatedness and attachment organization or the concepts of loss and insecurity of attachment relationships. This has provided a focus in intervening with divorced mothers, to make them aware of the importance of the children-mother quality relationship. This is supported by Thompson and Rudolph (1996) who noticed that children often experience terrifying fantasies, feel abandoned, and tend to deny the reality of the family situation.

Therefore, understanding the children's experience of divorce is essential. The importance of understanding the perspectives of children on their family situation is increasingly stressed by researchers (Dunn, 2004). Most research has emphasized understanding of the needs and perspectives of children in order to help them obtain positive adjustments.

Children's Buffer to Divorce

Discussion and explanation of divorce to children by parents are vital for the children's development. Cohen (2002) and Dunn (2004) believe that communication with children can facilitate their adjustment and well being. They need to be made to understand that they did not cause the divorce and cannot bring the parents back together (Cohen, 2002). Wallerstein et al. (2002) have also recommended that parents be open in talking about divorce with their children. By telling the children what it means, why it is happening and how sorry they are for them, the parents can promote children's understanding particularly with the meaning of divorce. This is to deal with the children's twisted belief that the divorce was their fault and their often unrealistic hopes for a family reconciliation (Thompson & Rudolph, 1996). Therefore, parents need to explain that divorce occurs only to the parents but not the children and that they are not left alone. With clear explanations, children will be able to feel that they are still important to their parents.

Wallerstein et al. (2002) have recommended the importance of parents' explanation to their children so they would grow up without having the wrong view of marriage. Furthermore, they should encourage their children to speak up so that any negative ideas or false impression of divorce can be corrected. Thompson and Rudolph (1996) consider a clear explanation of and an understanding of the divorce and its consequences as the first psychological task for children of divorcing families.

Parents need a counseling program particularly in assisting children to adjust themselves after divorce as they need reassurance and understanding. Counseling children is not the only solution in helping children but parental involvement in counseling is essential in shaping the lives of their children. Thompson and Rudolph (1996) recommended parents to attend support group meetings as it would enable them to better understand their children's problems and experiences. They get to learn new methods in communicating with their children, try new methods of discipline and resolve some of their own frustration. The parent support group meeting is beneficial in inculcating a more positive child-rearing attitude, which in turn will result in the children feeling more positive about themselves (Thompson & Rudolph, 1996).

Connell (2001) focuses his task through a five-hour counseling program, educating parents about meeting their children's needs in a time of crisis, as well as sharing their struggles with a group of peers. It may be helpful to interpret the children's emotional reaction to the parents based on the children's developmental level and perspective.

Norton (1999) believes that children's long-term development can be positively adjusted by good intervention and support from parents, teachers, counselors and support groups for children. School is usually a child's second most stable environment. Thus children tend to look for support and comfort from friends and teachers. Divorce devastates children, but it need not be fatal to their long-term development (Nappi, 2000). Furthermore, children of single parents can grow up happily on condition that they receive support and help from others. Cohen (2002) also believes that the children's longlasting emotional and adjustment problems associated with their parents' divorce will be adjusted over time, particularly for those who have supportive relationships and positive temperament and receive professional counseling.

Ways of Helping the Children

Children of divorced parents can be helped in other ways. Dunn (2004) believes that 8 to 10-year-old children's own accounts have made clear the importance of friends as confidants and sources of support. Berk (2005) emphasizes that in the children's lives, their peers become increasingly important and their concept of friendship become psychologically based. However, before teachers, friends and counseling professionals get involved with the children's unhappy situation, parents' support is found to be the most critical factor in helping children. Parents are recommended to cooperate with teachers in order to stabilize the children's lives and encourage achievement. Therefore, Thompson and Rudolph (1996) proposed that group counseling and individual techniques directed at improving academic achievement may help children at this level.

Communication, interaction and understanding of children's physical, emotional and social needs are vital for their positive development. Connell (2001) reminds the

counselors to be resolute once they engage in counseling children because they are "dealing with a very young individual. If you don't fix the problems now they can get very bad later on:'

Thompson and Rudolph (1996) recommended several techniques for helping children of divorce. Feelings of being unloved, powerless and disappointed are some characteristics faced by children. Therefore, it is believed that role playing, puppetry, writing, drawings, charades and other techniques can be used to encourage children to express their feelings. Children's ability in expressing their feelings can build on their self-esteem. Furthermore, it can give an understanding of their emotional needs.

Since divorce is a voluntary decision by one or both parents, the children may blame them for being selfish and unresponsive to their needs, or they may blame themselves for the breakup of their parents (Thompson & Rudolph, 1996). In this case, one useful technique is by giving the children some excellent children's books in relation to divorce. This will enable them to understand the divorce process and the reality that they are not to be blamed for the divorce. Counselors are also recommended to encourage parents to discuss with children using specific books in resolving differences and understanding of divorce.

Where necessary, it is advisable to include group counseling as a way of helping children. It consists of role-playing, play therapy, drawing, writing and problem solving sessions. By applying the appropriate techniques, children will learn to find constructive ways of handling their feelings through expression of anger and feeling of guilt. With group counseling, children will be able to resolve their anger and self-blame.

In handling the issue of children fantasizing a reunited family, Thompson and Rudolph (1996) suggest that the counselor apply reality therapy as a way to assist children to accept the permanence of divorce. Children of divorced families are encouraged to be grouped with the other children of divorced parents. Some useful techniques are drawings of the family before the divorce and at the present time, good and bad family changes since divorce, filmstrips and books about divorce and other family lifestyles. The peer group counseling can be of great benefit as it helps children to engage in excellent discussion.

Conclusion

Most of the literature has come up with the importance of communication and interactions between parents and children. Divorced parents play the most important role in helping children to have a positive development in their lives. Although one of the parents of divorced children may be absent sometimes in their lives, however, arranging custody and visitation patterns should be maintained. Kupisch (in Thompson & Rudolph, 1996) emphasized that parents should find ways in allowing the children to maintain contact with both parents. This entails logistical planning, flexibility and continuous open communication across households. With these, children can be members of two households with no division of loyalties but feel loved by both parents.

Parents need to understand the importance of fulfilling their children's needs. The children need to be given an opportunity to express their feelings and thoughts. Children's needs should become the priority, as it would help in their positive adjustment and development. Parents should seek assistance - such as counseling - in helping their

children. As mentioned above, Thompson and Rudolph have identified several techniques in counseling children. A sound knowledge of psychosocial theories would enable counselors to understand the world of cognitive and social development of children. **It** acts as a source in channeling their assistance through counseling towards the well-being of children of divorced families.

With the support from parents, teachers, peers and professional counselors, children would be able to minimize the effect of divorce and have more positive feelings about themselves. Early intervention such as social support, and parents' involvement in catering to the children's emotional, physical and social needs are essential to their positive development.

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