
The influence of divorce on the occupations of primary school going children in the Western Cape, South Africa: The perspective of the child and a relevant counsellor

Shaheed Soeker, PhD*

Occupational Therapy Department, University of the Western Cape, Bellville,
Republic of South Africa

Abstract

Background: There have been a number of studies over the years that propose that divorce could create turmoil in children's lives. Many theorists agree that divorce is a stressful life transition needing adjustment for both the parent and/or child. This study determined how divorce influence childrens` participation in scholastic and leisure activities. **Methods:** The study was positioned in the qualitative research paradigm, specifically using focus groups and face to face interviews to collect data. The participants consisted of one male and three females (aged 8-12 years) and one adult female (key informant). **Results:** Four themes emerged viz. 1) Listening but not hearing, 2) Adapting by doing, 3) Helping hands and 4) In the ideal world. The findings of the study indicate that children could benefit from family centred treatment programmes and should be involved in counseling post divorce. **Conclusion:** The barriers or challenges include feelings of sadness and hopelessness, inability to communicate and express feelings to parents and a change in social interaction and leisure activities. The facilitatory factors included having closer family networks, having a parental figure at home to assist with occupational needs, having positive peers support groups and counseling as a form of support.

Keywords: Occupational therapy, children`s perspective, divorce, counselling, qualitative research and focus groups

Introduction

In general, there has been a number of studies over the years that propose that divorce has the potential to create turmoil in people's lives. Many theorists also agree that divorce is a stressful life transition needing adjustment for both the parent and/or child.

The literature has indicated that divorce is a major crisis for children (1). Divorce in South Africa has shown a steady increase of 2.9% since 1999, except for the year 2008 whereby it increased by 1.9% (2). Considering the information given about divorce rates,

and the effects of divorce on children, there is a concern as to whether or not it has a negative impact on the occupational performance and development of children.

A study conducted by Allison and Furstenberg Jr. (3) in the United States of America, indicated that children who had experienced marital dissolution were significantly disadvantaged when compared to those children who did not experience divorce in their families, with respect to several measures of problem behaviour, academic performance, and psychological distress. Wallerstein (4) and Potter (5) indicated that children from divorced families showed poorer academic performance, and Potter (5) further explained that children in elementary (primary) school showed a decline in psychosocial well-being whereas secondary school children showed an incline with a further decline after two years post divorce. Therefore, it could be argued that a study that explores the challenges that children from divorced families experience regarding their ability to engage in leisure and scholastic occupations would fill a logical void in the literature.

Literature review

Divorce, according to the South African Divorce Act 70 of 1979, is said to be the dissolution or legal ending of a marriage, which is based on one of two grounds, i.e. the irretrievable breakdown of the marriage, or the mental illness or continuous unconsciousness of one partner.

According to Emery and Kelly (6) and Tartari (7), the media, mental health professionals and conservative political voices portray divorced families as having seriously flawed structures and environments. Whereas in-tact families were assumed to have a wholesome and nurturing environment for children. In a study conducted by Fincham and Grych (8), they indicated that children from divorced families may experience difficulty with social interaction and may struggle academically and these children scored lower in intellectual quotient (IQ) testing than children from non-divorced families. A study by Svedin and Wasby (9), also reflected that a decrease in academic performance and achievement was one of the most consistent outcomes associated with parental separation and divorce, and some research has proposed that children who have experienced parental divorce display a higher rate of referral to mental health services (8).

The educational consequences of divorce may have an effect on resource deprivation, it could be argued that parents' financial, human and social capitals are crucial to their children's educational success. However, along with parental divorce, children tend to become deprived of such parental resources (9). Storksen et al (10) stated that these children also lacked social support, which, as noted above, could be viewed as one of many parental resources.

According to Erikson, children in the stage of late childhood experience a crisis called industry vs. inferiority. These children work hard at being responsible, being good, doing their school tasks and engaging in social play (11). Erikson viewed these years as crucial to

building up self-confidence as it is in these years that children are able to receive recognition from teachers, parents and peers for their good efforts in school(12).

The stage that follows is adolescence, which is explained by Erikson as identity vs. role confusion (12). Adolescent leisure activity has been shown to be associated with better life outcomes, academic performance, psychological well-being and a clear sense of self-identity, and in South Africa, teens are exposed to many risk behaviors, which could be associated with peer pressure. There is a high level of teenage drop outs in Cape Town high schools (13), drug and alcohol use as well as sexual behavior are moderately common, and in some cases problematic, among adolescents in South African high schools (14).

Venter (15) a qualified social worker expressed the need for a program for children from divorced families in South Africa. This was particularly needed with children between the ages of 6-12 years, the latency stage of personality development and useful for the researchers as they would be working with children between the ages 8-12 years. The above author`s research was performed using a participant in the latency stage, to partake in play therapy, over a short period of time to work through the difficult emotions after a divorce. Play therapy was used and the program consisted of several stages that looked at dealing with the reality of the divorce, dealing with different emotions that were experienced in the process of the divorce, and dealing with feelings of helplessness and aggression experienced by the participant.

In the USA, intervention programs have been established for children who have undergone parental divorce. In a study that concentrated on the effectiveness of these intervention programs the following was found; they made use of a child-centered approach and the aim was to alleviate negative feelings, misconceptions and practical challenges associated with divorce amongst children (8). The child-centered approach entailed, allowing the child to participate freely, without direct guidance and allowing the child to take initiative, e.g. free play. This intervention program were not as effective as it could have been, due to an increased emphasis being placed on moderating factors such as gender, age and temperament of the child.

Focusing on how children were participating and performing in scholastic as well as social occupations and comparing it to the age and stage of development of the child would give occupational therapists a clearer indication of what the needs of that child would be. Therefore, the current study addressed the following research question: What are the experiences and perceptions of children about the influence of parental divorce on their scholastic and leisure performance?

Aim

To explore the perceptions and experiences of children regarding the influence of parental divorce on their scholastic and leisure performance and to:

- explore the barriers that children experience in engaging in scholastic and leisure activities.
- explore the facilitators that enables children to engage in scholastic and leisure activities.
- explore how children adapt to their occupational roles after a divorce.

Methods

Qualitative studies aims for depth rather than ‘quantity of understanding’ (16). The proposed research project was positioned within the qualitative paradigm using an interpretive approach, as the question relates to the perceptions that children have about divorce and its influence on their occupations.

Purposive sampling is a series of strategic choices regarding where and how research will be conducted (17). The current study used purposive sampling in order to select participants for the study. A set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was used to select participants (see table 1). However due to time and cost constraints, the number of participants depended on who was available to the researchers at the time, only four children (participants) who participated in the study (the aim however being 8 to 10 participants). Two of the participants were siblings.

The participants in the study were from a low to middle socio economic back ground. They were mainly from homes where there were one income (i.e. either the mother or father was the sole bread winner). All the children were of a coloured racial background (see table 2). One key informant being the lay-councilor of the Family and Marriage Association of South Africa (FAMSA) also participated in the study. The key informant (adult) was chosen to participate in this study as she could provide valuable information pertaining to the influence of divorce on the daily occupations and activities of children.

Data collection

The data was collected in this study by means of individual interviews that was semi-structured and focus groups. Focus groups are a popular qualitative approach used to gather data in research (18). Focus groups can be used to capture children’s` perspectives, original ideas and insights that are often neglected in more traditional paediatric research. Focus groups could also serve as an innovative approach to understanding children’s` experiences from a developmental perspective (18). In the current study the participants participated in 2 focus groups.

The structure of the focus groups were as follows: The focus groups was initiated with an ice breaker to set the scene for the discussion as well as to reduce the anxiety amongst the participants, thereafter the facilitators used exploratory activities such as colouring in of a picture that depicted an emotion- this activity assisted the facilitators in identifying the general mood of the participants and it allowed the children to discuss their feelings

pertaining to the challenges they face in their lives after the divorce of their parents, the focus groups were concluded by summarising the main aspects of the discussion (the participants were provided with the opportunity to clarify any misconceptions).

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

| Inclusion Criteria | Exclusion Criteria |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children in late childhood, between the ages of 8- 12 years • Children who have experienced divorce in the last three years • Children of any race, or gender • Children should be able to understand and communicate in English and Afrikaans | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children living with another guardian besides their parents • Children with secondary mental disabilities • Children from orphanages • Children from shelters |

Table 2. Demographics of participants

| Participants | Initials | Age | Gender | Religion | Culture |
|-------------------|----------|---------|--------|-----------|----------|
| Participant one | M.I | 13 | Female | Islam | Coloured |
| Participant two | A.B | 10 | Female | Islam | Coloured |
| Participant three | S.D | 9 | Male | Islam | Coloured |
| Participant four | A.I | 7 | Female | Islam | Coloured |
| Key informant | J.B | Unknown | Female | Christian | Coloured |

Face to face interview

One participant was selected to engage in two face to face interviews, she was asked questions relating to her perception of divorce and how it affected her leisure and scholastic abilities. After the interview the participant was compensated with a treats pack. Two face to face interviews were conducted with the key informant in order to explore the research question in greater depth. Furthermore a final face to face interview was conducted for the purpose of member checking.

Procedure

The procedure of the study went as follows: To gain the trust of the school, as well as participants, the first interview conducted was with the key informant, who introduced us to the school and arranged for participants, an initial meeting was arranged with the participants, to build an interpersonal relationship, as well as

gaining assent from the participants, thereafter, two focus group were held with the participants who agreed to participate, to gain their understanding, and finally an individual interview was conducted with one of the participants, for the purpose of supporting our findings.

Data analysis

All interviews and focus groups were audiotape recorded in order to capture the essence of the discussion. This method was used as it was the most accurate means of capturing data. While one researcher conducted the interview or focus group, another researcher documented the participants non verbal behaviour in response to questions asked. This data was transcribed verbatim as raw data, ensuring that the true meaning of the data was captured. The transcripts of the individual interviews with the child participants and the key informant were analyzed individually thereafter they were cross analyzed. The data was analyzed by means of thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis followed a series of steps in analyzing the data. The process being that of an inductive method (19), which involved searching for meaning in the data. Once all the codes were established, the codes were then grouped into categories. Thereafter, themes were created by grouping categories of similar meaning. To bracket means to suspend or lay aside what is known about the experience being studied (20). The researchers had regular discussions with their supervisor and a mentor (expert in qualitative research) about the project. This enabled the researchers to become aware of their own biases and perceptions about the project. Saturation of data was reached after the completion of the second focus group discussion and the second face to face interview with the key informant.

Trustworthiness was ensured by means of strategies such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (21). Within this study triangulation was ensured by the use of more than one method of collecting data, example, face to face interviews with the key informant and focus groups with the participants.

Ethics

Informants were telephonically contacted whereby the aim, purpose and process of the study were explained to them. The research project was ethically approved by the Occupational Therapy Department at the University of the Western Cape. The study was also conducted according to the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki (22). The details with regard to the study together with the consent forms were fully disclosed to the participants on their arrival at the interview session. The parents of the children were asked provide written consent to allow their children

to participate in the study and the children had to provide ascent to participate in the study. The key informant had to provide informed consent before participating in the study. The participants were informed that the findings of the study will be published in journals.

Results

The themes explored in this study will explain the perceptions and experiences of children regarding the influence of parental divorce on their scholastic and leisure performance.

Theme 1: Listening but not hearing

The above theme will be discussed in terms of the following categories: “I feel sad and alone”, “Feelings of hopelessness”, “Hostile behaviour and emotions”, “School functioning negatively affected after a divorce”, “Teachers labelling children” and “Change in social interaction and leisure activity”.

All four participants expressed feelings of sadness at the time of their parents’ divorce, as well as at present. The followings words were expressed by one of the participants when she was asked about her feelings with regards to her parents’ divorce at that time.

“I felt sad and I didn’t have anyone to talk to.”

When asked what she does to overcome this, she merely said:

“I go sit in my room and cry.”

Feelings of hopelessness. The chosen category emerged in an interview with the key informant. This category speaks about how children from divorced families, often do not see a way out of their troubled lives. The key informant implied that as children grow older, they become self-destructive an often inflict self-harm. She said:

”Alotta cases I deal with is suicide. I go home, my head is doff. ‘Cause now you have to turn that child’s mindset, and negativity to ‘Wow there is still hope in the church.’... that are the two that would stick out: suicide and self mutilation, between adolescents at high school. That’s their first way out: suicide, and cutting them.”(Key Informant)

The interview with the key informant was very informative in the sense that she mentioned a lot of the negative emotions that these children experienced. She said:

“I have children that would draw and in most cases they are suicidal. They are suicidal, are very angry, aggressive children really, and very withdrawn. They don’t really show interest in schoolwork neither in their sport activities. Is your heart strong enough if I’m going to tell you this? If I get to work with eight children out a day, actually ‘bout six, seven. If I get to work with seven children, then believe this: five turn to suicide... Alotta cases I deal with is suicide... They have their own mind set “you not gonna change me”, and dah dah dah dah dah.”(Key Informant)

From the above extract, it is evident that the key informant was able to get to the very deep hostile emotions of children from divorced families.

All four participants indicated that their mothers assisted them with their homework when they returned home from school, and when the researchers gave them a scenario of two siblings whose parents were recently divorced, all the participants indicated that these children will not work much at school. When the researcher posed the question of what they think the teachers should tell the parents, the following dialogue took place:

Participant: “They not doing their work. They must do their work.”

Researcher: “But why aren’t they doing their work? How do they feel?”

Participant: “Sad.”

Teachers labelling children. This category emerged in an interview with the key informant, in relation to the process of how the children are referred to the counsellors from the educators. In the quote below, the key informant describes the way the child is often being labelled by educators, as having a behavioural problem. They might even label them in the classroom, such as saying they are naughty. Key informant said:

“The child is easily labelled as “you are naughty! And dah dah and just aggravates the situation even more. Uhm, and that is that happens a lot. The child gets brought to us sometimes, “the child is so! Dah” and now all the ‘words get given for this child. (Key Informant)

During and after the process of divorce, the participants did experience negative feelings of sadness and anger and this category expresses how the school counselor experienced the behaviour of participants. In her opinion the effects of divorce had a vast impact on the social behaviour of the participants. She said:

“...they first become angry, withdrawn, uhm depressed and the movies they choose are with that, that aggression, that kind of exposure.” (Key informant)

The above quote also indicated that the emotion the participants had, impacted on the way they performed their leisure activities. It did not necessarily mean that it changed what they did, but it did create a sense that it affected how they performed their leisure activities.

Theme 2: Helping Hands

This theme emerged from the underlying categories which deal with the factors that facilitate engagement in occupational roles. This theme expresses that even though it is not the ideal situation; there are many aspects that aid their participation in day to day occupations, of school and leisure.

Closer family network. In this category, the participants indicated that with the experience of an absent parent in their lives, in this case being the father, the child’s life has been compensated for through extended family members such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents. The following quotes are examples thereof:

“My uncle is an accountant, so helps me with my maths”

“My aunty helps me with my homework”

The above mentioned quotes are expressions of who specifically is available in these participants’ lives, to assist them in their scholastic activities.

Counsellor- attention and affirmation. In this category the title expresses the need the child has for affirmation, attention, or acknowledgement. They also open channels of communication when they had formed a trusting relationship with someone who caters for their wellbeing and needs, such as a school councilor. The following quote expresses the need a child has for affirmation, and reassurance from the parents not to blame themselves. Key informant said:

“...Mom and the dad, and we would have the conversation. Uhm, and then we would brainstorm. Listen, what can we do to still make this child feel that that is still my mommy and my daddy, they both still love me, they are going through issues.”(Key informant)

Parental figure at home to assist with occupational needs. In this category, the title describes a role of an individual who is available to the child in the home, on a regular basis. The participants expressed that, a ‘stay-at-home guardian’, ensures that they are able to partake in their daily occupational needs as far as possible.

The quote below is from a participant who mentioned the people in her life who see to her daily needs:

Interviewer: “ok, so it’s very difficult, can I ask you guys when you leave here in the afternoon, then who’s at home to look after you or who do you go to”

Participant: “my mommy”

Interviewer: “my mommy, so your mommy works”

Participant: “she works at home, coz she doing wedding business”

Acceptance by peers. This category came to light as all participants in the group agreed that, their peers, particularly their friends are a means to escape the troubles in their life. Below is a quote whereby a participant had been asked about teasing and bullying in the school, with regard to the divorce of her parents:

Interviewer: “ And has there ever been a time, where people would like laugh at you, or, you know, make these rude comments...”

Participant: shakes her head (indicating yes).

Theme 3: Adapting by doing

This theme was chosen to elaborate on how children who experienced parental divorce used different ways of adapting to engage in school or leisure activities. In the case of all four participants, the children lived with their mother’s and had absent fathers.

Participants were given chores in the home after the divorce, as their mothers could not take full responsibility for everything in the household, whereas before the father was there to share the responsibilities. While some participants did not have chores, there were two participants who did have daily chores that they had to do after school. One participant said:

“Get undressed then I must do the chores and then I can play outside.”

Researchers then asked why they thought they now had chores, compared to before, and a participant expressed that it was because her mother had to do everything by herself and asked her to do some stuff as she did not seem to be managing:

Participant: “I think its coz my mommy’s all alone.”

Researcher: “Does she, she... so she depends on you more now?”

(Participant nods)

Theme 4: In the ideal world

This theme emerged from the categories which dealt with what the participants wished or longed to happen if they were living in an “ideal world”. The common response from all the participants was, them wanting something to be done to make things better.

Divorce has many effects on children. For example after the divorce the child ends up living with a single parent. All four participants made it clear that if they had one wish it would be for their parents to come back together. The following quote was given by a participant when she was asked if she had one wish, what would she wish for.

“I would like my mommy and daddy to come back...”

“I would like to see my daddy more.”

“To see my daddy weekends.”

I have no say, my voice is not heard. This category arose as most of the participants concluded that they weren’t given the opportunity to voice their opinions in terms of their parents getting divorced. No one gave them the chance to talk about how they felt or even ask them how they were feeling. A participant said:

“My mommy don’t take note.”

It’s not my fault, I wish they would realise. This category arose when a participant discussed with the researcher whether blaming became an issue due to the divorce. Usually children blame themselves for things that happen or go wrong in the family. The following quote emerged from the key informant who explained the process of how she would bring the parent and the participant together in a counselling session. She said:

“Mom and the dad, and we would have the conversation. Uhm and then we would brainstorm, listen what we can do to still make this child feel that, that is still my mommy and my daddy, they still both love me, they are going through issues.”

“Just so that the child can feel that I’m not alone that my parents are not angry at me.”

Discussion

In this study the theme Listening but not hearing was seen as a barrier that negatively influenced the child after the divorce of his or her parents. I feel sad and alone and Feelings of hoplessness, described the emotions and feelings of participants towards their parents’ divorce. This can be linked to Erikson’s stages

of psychosocial development, where the participants fit into the stage of “industry vs. inferiority”. Cherry (23) described this stage as one in which children start developing a sense of pride in their accomplishments and abilities through social interactions, and that children who receive encouragement and commendation by teachers and parents develop a sense of competence and belief in their abilities.

Change in social interaction and leisure activities, described the impact that divorce had on participants’ leisure performance. In terms of leisure, majority of the participants expressed that this had changed after the divorce. Some participants have compensated for this by engaging in similar activities with friends and family as an alternate means of enjoyment which could be linked to the research findings of Hughes and Scherer (24) where they state that children may cope with their family difficulties by engaging in active play with other children. In articles by Liu et al (25) and Harland et al (26), it was documented that children from divorced families were at an amplified risk of multiple adjustment challenges in both childhood and adolescence, and sometimes even in adulthood.

Participants experienced negative feelings which, in turn, had a negative effect on their academic and social performances. The facilitatory factors in this study focused on the following: closer family networks, Parental figure at home to assist with occupational needs Acceptance by peers and Counselors. Closer family networks, focused on the unification of extended family to become part of the immediate family (extended family being: uncles, aunts, grandparents and cousins). According to the participants, closer family networks were an important factor to assist in the engagement of their occupation. The bonding experiences with these family members, enhanced the level of support given to the child and made the adjustment to having an absent parent easier. In relation to what the participants have said regarding the benefits of increased family networks, the extended family could enhance the child’s level of competence (27). This is done through stronger family bonds, increased support structure, increased accessibility to resources. According to Keitner and Miller cited in Emery and Kelly (6), they stated that by living in the custody of a competent, adequately, functioning parent, is associated with positive outcomes in children. Therefore, from the literature, as well as from the participant’s feedback it is evident that a stable parental figure is a very important factor, in allowing them to make a positive adjustment. Thus helping to prevent the child taking on an adult role and responsibility. Such a parental figure, provides warmth, emotional support, discipline authoritatively, and maintain age appropriate expectation (28).

Acceptance by peers is described as having a support network. This support network provides the child with a means of escaping their reality. As one participant mentioned in the focus group, their friends are aware that her parents are divorced, yet it does not affect their friendship in any regard. They are still being treated as they would be otherwise. Counselor is the person that provides

social and emotional support. These individuals are available to go to, when advice is needed and to put various structures in place to perform optimally in scholastic activity, as well as leisure and socialization in the home. According to Emmerly and Kelly (6), decreasing the conflict between parents, is a protective factor for the child, post divorce. The counsellor could be involved in mediating in this family conflict. In the current study activities as simple as enquiring about the child, or giving the child a little encouragement was viewed as being supportive. Given the factors above, it is evident that external aids such as parents, counsellor, peers and closer family networks are crucial in assisting with the child's normal development in terms of scholastic and leisure occupations.

A change in occupational roles, described the various adaptations that participants experienced. These adaptations included having them start doing chores in the house due to there being less help (i.e. absent parent) in the house. These chores had to be done after school on a daily basis, and formed part of their newly established occupational roles.

Implications for practice and research

These challenges impact on the child's ability to engage in family, school and leisure related occupations. The study also highlighted the various facilitatory factors that health professionals could utilise in developing treatment programmes. The health professional (inclusive of occupational therapist) could incorporate the extended family members into family centered therapy programmes. Advising guardian's or parents regarding child handling strategies that would help children overcome negative feelings associated with divorce. The study also highlighted the importance of having a positive peer support group in the community or school. Furthermore it is suggested that health professionals should put more emphasis on the parent to include the children in decision making, as involving the children is very important as they are part of the family. Finally focus groups could be used as a viable strategy for the generation of information. Health professionals who want to use focus groups with children, could use the following procedure in order to obtain information from participants during therapy sessions i.e. ice breaker should be used to set the scene for the discussion as well as to reduce the anxiety amongst the children, thereafter use exploratory activities such as colouring in of a picture to depict an emotion and to form the basis for discussion of a specific topic and finally the focus groups can be concluded by summarising the main aspects of the discussion. Key points of practice:

- Barriers identified in this study affected the child's ability to engage in family, school and leisure related occupations.

- Health professional (inclusive of occupational therapist) should incorporate the extended family members into family centered therapy programmes.
- Child handling strategies would help children overcome negative feelings associated with divorce.
- Health professionals should emphasise that the parent should include their children in decision making especially with regard to the affect of the divorce on the child`s daily activities.
- Focus groups could be used as a viable strategy for the generation of information particularly during counselling sessions and when conducting research.

Limitations of the study

One major limitation that was identified in this study was the inability to generalise the findings of this study to the larger population due to the inherent nature of qualitative research and the limited number of study participants. Another limitation was the fact that only one male participant participated in the study. In the process of data collection, one of the limitations was that two siblings were part of the group, which may have limited the information that the researchers were able to gather. Finally, the focus group discussion could have influenced the responses of the children as they could have simply agreed with other children in the focus group and not provide their own opinion.

Conclusion

In summary the study highlighted the barriers and facilitatory factors that influence the child`s adaptation to occupational activities at home and at school. Some of the barriers or challenges include feelings of sadness and hopelessness, inability to communicate and express feelings to parents and a change in social interaction and leisure activities. The facilitatory factors included having closer family networks, having a parental figure at home to assist with occupational needs, having positive peers support groups and counseling as a form of support. The findings suggest that health professionals such as occupational therapists should take cognisance of the barriers identified in this study and incorporate facilitatory factors such as development of positive support systems for children who may experience emotional difficulties after a divorce.

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