Our Voices Matter: Exploring the Experience of Divorce for Young Children

Mara R. Hirschfeld

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Angela J. Huebner, Chair
Andrea Wittenborn
Mariana Falconier

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Abstract

While divorce can be challenging for children at any age, research suggests that children under the age of six are at increased risk for behavioral and developmental delays (Emery, 1999; Hetherington, 1979, Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Despite their increased risk, the majority of research on children’s adjustment post-divorce has focused on older school age children and adolescents (Jennings & Howe, 2001; Mutchler, Hunt, Koopman, & Mutchler, 1992) rather than young children. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the experience of divorce for young children (ages 5-7 old). Results produced five themes regarding children’s emotional experience of divorce, which include trying to make sense of the divorce, feelings they experience/how they describe themselves, experience and advice: “stop fighting,” what they worry about, and coping skills/ways to distract themselves. Discussion conjectures about these themes and makes suggestions for clinical implications and future studies in an effort to mitigate short-term consequences and help children cope with their parents’ divorce.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract................................................................................................................................. ii

Acknowledgements.................................................................................................................. iii

Chapter 1: Introduction ......................................................................................................... 1

  Developmental Context of Divorce....................................................................................... 2
  Significance.......................................................................................................................... 5
  Rationale............................................................................................................................... 7
  Theoretical Framework.......................................................................................................... 9
  Purpose of Study.................................................................................................................. 11
  Research Question............................................................................................................... 11

Chapter 2: Literature Review............................................................................................... 12

  Overview Paragraph........................................................................................................... 12
  Impact of Divorce on Young Children.............................................................................. 12
  Developmental Stage of Young Children.......................................................................... 17
  Meaning Making Ability.................................................................................................... 19
  Meaning Making of Divorce............................................................................................... 21
  Research Question............................................................................................................. 24
  Bracketing Statement.......................................................................................................... 24

Chapter 3: Methods............................................................................................................. 25

  Design of the Study............................................................................................................ 25
  Study Participants............................................................................................................... 25
  Procedures............................................................................................................................ 25
Future Studies & Limitations ................................................................. 57
References ................................................................................................. 59
Appendix A: Interview Activities ............................................................... 72
Data Collection Rationale .......................................................................... 72
Instructions for Play Therapy Techniques .................................................. 72
The Before and After Drawing Technique ............................................... 72
The Worry Can Technique ....................................................................... 72
Appendix B: Interview Script ................................................................. 74
Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter ............................................................ 77
Chapter 1: Introduction

Many would agree that divorce is a stressful event for those involved. Divorce often leads to unexpected changes for children such as separation from their non-custodial parent and fluctuations in their parents’ behavior and emotional state of mind (Leon, 2003). Much research has focused on the psychological and behavioral impact of divorce on children. Several negative short-term consequences for children have been identified (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991). For example, when compared to children from non-divorced families, children whose parents are divorced are twice as likely to be at risk for academic, social, and developmental challenges (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Hetherington, 1999; McLanahan, 1999; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993).

According to an overview by Kelly and Emery, research suggests that children of divorce tend to display external behavior such as protesting against authoritative figures, disobeying rules, and isolating themselves from social interaction with their peers. Internally, children of divorce may experience a high level of anxiety and a low sense of self-esteem compared to children from non-divorced families. While these short-term consequences are certainly impactful, the majority of longitudinal studies suggest that when long-term outcomes are examined, children of divorce are comparable to their peers whose parents are still married (Amato, 1994, 2001; Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Emery, 1999; Emery & Forehand, 1994; Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001; Hetherington, 1999; Simons et al., 1996; Zill et al., 1993). While such long-term findings are heartening, they do not diminish the very real negative impacts that can occur in the months and years immediately following the divorce.

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of divorce from the perspective of young children (ages 5-7). It is important to note that much of the extant research focusing on
the impact of divorce on young children has been based on parent or teacher reports of adjustment. Few studies have directly explored the divorce experience from the perspective of young children themselves. Gaining this perspective may help to inform interventions immediately following divorce, perhaps mitigating the short-term negative consequences.

**Developmental Context of Divorce**

Over the past forty years, cultural beliefs changed and new legal sanctions were created, making it more socially acceptable for couples to get divorced (Meltzer, 2011). To state the well-known statistic, approximately fifty-percent of all the marriages in America today, end in divorce (National Center for Health Statistics, 2006). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of divorced families has grown from 4.3 million in 1970 to 18.3 million in 1996, a more than four-fold increase. Seventy percent of these divorces included families with children (Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1986). With a high rate of divorce during the initial stages of marriage, most children are young when their parents get divorced (Emery, 1999). According to a national study on children (age 12 and under) from divorced families, 67% were under the age of six when their parents divorced (Furstenberg, Peterson, Nord, & Zill, 1983).

The age of the child is of great importance when exploring how they will adjust to their parents’ divorce because age can be an indication of how the child will express himself/herself to the outside world (Rogers, 2004). Research suggests that divorce often leads young children to feel frustrated and anxious because they are increasingly exposed and often intertwined in their parents’ arguments (Cohen & Ronen, 1999). Indeed, many studies suggest that children whose parents got divorced before the child was six are at an increased risk for behavioral and developmental problems compared to those whose parents got divorced after they were six years old (Emery, 1999; Heterington, 1979; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Some researchers suggest
that preschool age children may be at particular risk because their parents are often too preoccupied with their own thoughts and feelings to be available to help their children cope with the divorce and the child lacks other support resources (Cohen & Ronen, 1999).

During the divorce process, parents typically separate and begin to establish their own lives; thus the only association many parents have with one another is their children (Meltzer, 2011). This separation of mother and father has been referred to in the literature as the “divided world of the child” (Finely, 2006). Because children of divorce live two different lives, one with each parent (Marquardt, 2005), divorce quickly becomes a part of their personal identity (Meltzer). From a systemic perspective, divorce forces the family to shift its previous formation from one cohesive unit to multiple subsystems, all of which the child must learn to navigate (Emery & Dillon, 1994).

In an effort to understand the negative effects for children, it is important to mention that divorce is an experience that occurs over time. Many researchers view divorce as an ongoing process, rather than a single event, composed of potential distress that begins before the initial separation and continues after the divorce is finalized (Morrison & Cherlin, 1995). The majority of research refers to this time of transition as the “crisis period” and is defined as a period of traumatic events in the child’s life that is expected to last two to three years after the initial separation (Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990; Rogers, 2004). While this may be a difficult time for children, research states that by the end of the “crisis period,” the majority of children have adjusted successfully (Curtner-Smith, 1995). The stressors that accompany this process vary in terms of severity, length of time, and subject matter, yet all are important agents in the process and are often experienced differently from one individual to the next (Kelly & Emery, 2003).
While there are a number of factors that may impact a child’s adjustment, one facet to consider is the parents’ involvement in the process of divorce. A divorce is a significant life stage and the way in which a parent deals with it can impact his or her offspring (Altenhofen, Biringen, & Mergler, 2008). Literature suggests that many children are given little advance notice before their parents divorce (Kelly & Emery, 2003). For example, one study exploring parent-child communication during divorce states that 23% of children were given no explanation about their parents’ separation and 45% were given a short one-sentence response (Dunn, Davies, O’Connor, & Strurgess, 2001). Given such limited information, many children may be left to make sense of their parent’s divorce by themselves, which can lead them to frustration, confusion, and a fear of abandonment (Dunn, et al., 2001; Smart & Neale, 2000; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

For children, the process of divorce can lead to significant routine changes such as moving between houses, changing schools, the loss of one’s old family, and the separation from one’s noncustodial parent (Emery, 1999). In a study conducted by Booth and Amato (2001), young adults were interviewed about their experience of divorce as a young child. Forty percent reported moving houses in the initial year following divorce and 25% claimed that they had to change schools. Along with moving, daily routines and household rules may change, including new meals and bedtimes (Arendell, 1986; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). In addition, the child may have to adjust to the absence of a parent or even the parent having less time to spend with the child which can lead to feeling a deep sense of loss (Seigel & Hartzell, 2003). Recent studies have suggested that when the noncustodial parent (typically the father) leaves the home, children can experience an increased level of stress (Schwartz & Finely, 2010). Many children must adapt from getting to see their fathers on a daily basis to visiting them on average only four times a
month (Kelly & Emery, 2003). In addition, divorce often threatens a family’s financial stability leading to unfavorable results for the children involved (Emery, 1999; Rodgers, 1996). Based on the amount of child support granted, parents may restrict children from continuing extracurricular activities such as playing team sports, attending after-school programs, etc. (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Although the majority of literature focuses on the negative consequences of divorce, it is important to acknowledge the positive long-term outcomes that can emerge and the resilience of children whose parents are divorced. While many would agree that children of divorce face additional challenges, recent literature suggests that 75-80% of children whose parents are divorced do not struggle with mental health issues, tend to develop close bonds with their loved ones, and successfully accomplish their professional goals. In addition, they are able to maintain healthy romantic relationships, possess a positive outlook on love, and remain married long-term (Amato, 1999, 2000; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000, McLanahan, 1999; Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995). Divorce literature points to a number of protective factors that help buffer the negative effects of divorce (Rogers, 2004; Leon, 2003; Kelly & Emery, 2003), all of which are described in greater detail below (see Chapter II: Literature Review). While these protective factors may be influential in the long-term, it seems necessary to understand the experience of divorce for young children in order to minimize the short-term consequences they often experience immediately following divorce.

**Significance**

Preschool age children may struggle to make sense of their parents’ divorce because they lack the cognitive and emotional skills necessary to understand the situation (Cohen & Ronen, 1999). At such an early age in their development, children rely on their parents to shelter and
protect them in order to keep their world safe (Pruett & Pruett, 1999). When parental divorce occurs, it can threaten a young child’s environment making it more difficult for him or her to establish healthy emotional and behavioral skills (Pruett & Pruett). While they are capable of understanding absolute concepts, preschool age children often have trouble when trying to grasp more advanced issues such as death, life, and divorce because they have yet to accept that these events are irreversible (Ronen, 1992). Additionally, preschool age children are often egocentric in their thinking, making it difficult for them to consider other viewpoints besides their own (Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 1993). Their egocentric mindset tends to lead to self-blame, believing that they are the cause of their parents’ divorce (Rogers, 2004). As a result, young children may develop fears of abandonment, unrealistic fantasies, a need for parental attention, and aggressive behavior (Emery, 1999). With limited language skills, the difficulty many children face while undergoing their parents’ divorce is often evident through their behavior (Cohen & Ronen, 1999; Leon, 2003). Children may revert back to previous stages of development by portraying their anger through acts of violence, vomiting, stomach pain, and withdrawing from social interaction (Cohen & Ronen, 1999). For example, in a study exploring the adjustment of 90 preschool age children, teachers reported more behavior problems for children whose parents were divorced compared to children whose parents remained married (Hodges, Buchsbaum, & Tierney, 1983). Similarly, in a study of 52 preschool age children, teachers described children from divorced families as more withdrawn in structured environments when compared to their peers who came from intact families (Hodges, Wechsler, & Ballantine, 1979).

Due to limitations in both cognitive development and affect regulation, preschool age children are considered to be the “most vulnerable” compared to groups of older children (Kurdek, 1981). Despite their limitations, preschool age children are inquisitive and still ask
questions about their parents’ divorce. For example, in a study of 50 divorced mothers, 76% stated that their preschool age children asked them about their feelings for one another, the reason they got divorced, and why they have to visit their father separately (Bretherton, Walsh, Lependorf, & Georgeson, 1997). While it is apparent that young children extract meaning from their parents divorce, it is still unknown as to what the meaning they derive is and how it influences their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Considering the perspective of young children can provide useful knowledge for parents who may be distracted by the divorce and for clinicians to understand the experience of young children, both socially and developmentally. When clinicians are more aware of young children’s experience of parental divorce, they will be better equipped to help the child with adjustment in developmentally appropriate ways.

**Rationale**

In order to understand the experience of young children whose parents are divorced, the researchers conducted a qualitative phenomenological study (Creswell, 2007). A qualitative phenomenological study was appropriate because the researcher was interested in gaining a greater understanding of the meaning that children make of divorce. While researchers have explored adults’ perspective on this topic, few have spoken to the children directly to hear about their experience of parental divorce (Pruett & Pruett, 1999). Asking the children how they feel allows them the opportunity to speak on behalf of their own experience (Brostrom, 2012). Past qualitative studies have explored post parental divorce adjustment amongst older school-aged children (Jennings & Howe, 2001), as well as the adjustment of those in adolescence whose parents are divorced (Mutchler, Hunt, Koopman, & Mutchler, 1992). Given that the majority of research has focused on older youth’s adjustment (i.e. emotional and psychological development, academic performance, and behavioral issues) (Amato & Keith, 1991), a gap in the literature
remains when it comes to understanding the experience of divorce for young children. Of the few qualitative studies that exist exploring young children’s perception of divorce, one examined how children ages 4-6 comprehended their parents’ divorce by analyzing their drawings (Cohen & Ronen, 1999) and another studied how children ages 3.5-7 conceptualize divorce by asking questions through the lens of the legal system (e.g. “What is a lawyer? What is a judge?”) (Ebling, Pruett, & Pruett, 2009, pp. 669). Results suggest that young children have detailed descriptions of divorce with the most common including routine changes such as moving houses and the subsequent response involving parents’ negative feelings towards each other (Ebling, Pruett, & Pruett).

In the present study, the researcher used developmentally appropriate play therapy techniques to interview 6-8 children between the ages of 5-7 years old to learn how they make sense of their parents’ divorce. According to Piaget (1962), play is an essential part of a child’s emotional and cognitive development because it provides them with the opportunity to express themselves. Children utilize pretend play as a way to act out their experiences while trying to conceptualize the world around them (Irwin, 1983). Using play therapy techniques, children may feel safe expressing their concerns through an avenue of communication that is both comfortable and familiar (Benedict & Schofield, 2010; Elkind, 2007; Schaefer, 1993). Play not only helps a child to communicate more effectively, learn new skills, and take more responsibility, it also encourages children to make sense of the traumatic events that may have occurred in their past (Bratton, Ray, Rhine, & Jones, 2005; Gil & Drewes, 2005). In particular, children utilize pretend play and role-plays to act out earlier events through the use of metaphors (Benedict & Schofield, 2010). Research states that children have an easier time processing events through play metaphors than they do talking about the memory or event that occurred in real life (Hewitt,
For example Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1979), reported that children whose parents were divorced seemed to have more disjointed and less psychologically advanced play patterns than children whose parents remained married. In an effort to better understand the meaning young children make of their parents’ divorce, the researcher conducted the study using direct interviews in conjunction with two different play therapy techniques (described in more detail in appendix A).

**Theoretical Framework**

Much of the literature suggests that children’s adjustment post parental divorce is associated with their age at the time of their parents’ separation and their cognitive ability to comprehend the situation (Fry & Addington, 1985, Heterington, 1979, Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). A variety of research theories converge in suggesting that parental divorce can be more damaging for children age 6 and under compared to older children. According to Piaget (1924), the developmental stage of children ages 4-6 is referred to as the pre-operational-concrete stage. In this stage, children are refining and mastering language skills while their intellectual ability continues to grow (Cohen & Ronen, 1999). In terms of a child’s cognitive development, the left hemisphere of the brain, which controls language and speech, expands rapidly from age 3 to 6. A primary task of early childhood is to refine and perfect the messages being sent between the child’s brain and his or her nervous system (Steinberg, Bornstein, Vandell, & Rook, 2011), so that he or she becomes adept at responding to their environment. A process known as synaptogenesis, the passing of information from one neuron to the next begins to form in early childhood. By stimulating the creation of new synapses, children are able to react and make meaning of the world around them.
Parental divorce may require the formation of new neural networks as previous beliefs about their family living together are restructured. The part of the brain that is most active during early childhood is the frontal lobe (Gogtay, Giedd, Lusk, Hayashi, Greensyein, Vaituzis, et al., 2004). The frontal lobe helps the child focus attention, strategize and plan ahead, problem solve, and control emotion (Steinberg, et al., 2011). While young children can express basic thoughts and feelings, they have trouble experiencing more elaborate and in-depth emotions (Cohen & Ronen, 1999). This stage is also accompanied by a newfound curiosity in socializing with their peers and the ability to understand the meaning of family. Children begin to take an interest in developing relationships while trying to identify themselves within the family unit (Cohen & Ronen, 1999).

Developmental periods such as these tend to impact how children interpret divorce and their ability to comprehend events clearly (Ebling, Pruett, & Pruett, 2009). For example, when studying 5-10 year old children, Mazur (1993) found a difference between how younger children interpreted divorce compared to older children. Due to their advanced developmental stage, children over the age of 7 were able to consider others’ thoughts and feelings and respond with realistic, cohesive explanations of divorce compared to younger children (Mazur, 1993). Similarly, younger children ages 2.5-7 years old reported ambiguous and unclear descriptions of divorce (Pruett & Pruett, 1999). In sum, these studies suggest that the larger problem related to adjustment resides in the fact that young children lack the cognitive and verbal skills to accurately understand their parents’ divorce. Although the majority of literature has explored the experience of divorce for children from elementary school to adolescence (Norton, 1983; Wallerstein 1985), the experience of divorce for preschool age children is underdeveloped.
In this study, phenomenology was also used as a theoretical framework. A phenomenological study explores the meaning that several individuals make of their lived experiences for a specific phenomenon and what the individuals shared when they experienced that phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology is defined as the study of what people believe about their world and who is involved in it (Dahl & Boss, 2005). Phenomenologists believe that the phenomenon being studied should be analyzed where it commonly occurs and from the individual’s own point of view (Dahl & Boss, 2005). When studying young children and the meaning they make of parental divorce, phenomenology offers a suitable framework for understanding the experience of divorce from the child’s perspective.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experience of divorce for young children between the ages of five and seven in a Southwestern region of Arizona. In this study, the experience of young children was defined as the meaning they make of their situation as a child of divorce. While the literature suggests that young children lack the cognitive ability to understand their situation, there is evidence that they are still affected by their environment. Therefore, the research question is not to explore if they comprehend their parents’ divorce, but rather to understand and describe how they experience their parents’ divorce. Gaining their interpretation of the experience, may give parents and clinicians a better understanding of the challenges that young children face when dealing with divorce.

**Research Question**

What is the emotional experience of young children going through divorce and how do they explain it?
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview Paragraph

Although parental divorce has been studied through a variety of avenues, the following literature review explores the effects that divorce can pose for the young children involved. With a multitude of extraneous stressors, it makes sense that children of divorce have an increased risk for developing psychological problems (Kelly & Emery, 2003). While risk factors such as interparental conflict may lead to negative short-term consequences, there are also protective factors such as parental attunement that help positively influence adaptation (Cicchetti, 1993).

Along with a child’s adjustment to divorce, it is important to consider the child’s age and capacity to understand the situation (Fry & Addington, 1985; Hetherington, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Given that preschool age children lack the cognitive and verbal skills necessary to comprehend their parents’ separation, it makes sense as to why young children face additional challenges when coping with parental divorce (Emery, 1999). In an effort to compliment their unique developmental stage, play therapy techniques are often used to help children communicate their behavioral and emotional needs. While adults use words to explain their thoughts and feelings, young children commonly utilize play as a familiar way to express themselves (Bratton, et al., 2005). In addition, play allows children to explore traumatic events that may have occurred in their past and invites them to interpret and make sense of their personal life experiences (Gil & Drewes, 2005).

Impact of Divorce on Young Children

Empirical evidence suggests parental divorce as a primary risk factor in effecting children’s future psychological and emotional well being (Amato, 2000; Emery, 1999; Hetherington, 1999; Kelly, 2000; McLanahan, 1999; Simons et al., 1996). The literature on
divorce ranges in age group from school-aged children to adolescence, yet research is scant when measuring the impact of divorce for preschool age children. Although divorce can be difficult for a child at any age, as mentioned earlier children whose parents get divorced before they are six-years old tend to be at an increased risk for behavioral and developmental delays (Emery, 1999; Hetherington, 1979, Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Parental divorce is related to a number of deleterious effects for preschool age children such as poor cognitive performance (Carter & Murdock, 2001), the development of insecure attachment bonds (Bowlby, 1969), and behavioral misconduct. Because young children lack the verbal skills necessary to explain their feelings, emotional distress is usually expressed externally through their behavior (Leon, 2003). In a study conducted with children 4-6 years old, Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1978) discovered that young children whose parents were divorced were violent, demanding, rebellious, and uncontrollable.

While children whose parents are divorced tend to experience negative short-term impacts, longitudinal studies using nation-wide samples suggest that the majority of children whose parents are divorced would be considered average in terms of adjustment compared to their peers (Amato, 2001; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Zill et al., 1993). The Virginia Longitudinal Study (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Hetherington, 1989, 1993, 1999 (b)) interviewed 144 families with 4-year-old children at different time points throughout their lives (i.e. age 4, 6, 10, 15 and 24) and discovered that despite struggling two years after the divorce, they primarily seemed unscathed by any permanent effects. Furthermore, an overview by Leon (2003) addressed young children’s adjustment following divorce by exploring the developmental changes that occur, the risks that accompany divorce, and the protective factors necessary to ensure successful adaptation. While there are a number of risk factors that effect old and young children alike, the
three main risk factors that effect young children are interparental conflict, contact with the nonresident parent, and parenting quality/maternal emotional well being (Leon, 2003).

A great deal of empirical data suggests that interparental conflict amongst married couples can lead to negative effects for their offspring (see Grynch & Fincham, 2001). A meta-analysis of 12 studies with children under the age of 5 discovered that greater parental hostility was related to increased problems for the children involved (Whiteside & Becker, 2000). While interparental conflict can occur even in intact families, it is assumed that divorce stems from continuous interparental conflict and can be detrimental to children’s well being (Buchanan, Maccoby, Dornbusch, 1996; Emery, 1999). In fact, the level of interparental conflict found in divorced families is suggested to be the most significant factor contributing to children’s long-term adjustment (Amato, 1993). Literature suggests that about 25% of parents who divorce experience low interparental conflict (Booth & Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 1999; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). However, other couples experience intense feelings of anger and frustration, usually instigated by their involvement in the legal system (Johnson & Campbell, 1988; Kelly, 2002; Kelly & Johnston, 2001, Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). In families such as these where parental communication is tenuous, children may be used as a main vehicle for communication between one another, a characteristic more typical of older children than younger children (e.g. Davies, Myers, & Cummings, 1996; Johnston, Kline & Tschann, 1989). Due to their limited verbal skills, young children may be utilized as a means to provoke the other parent (e.g. one parent may threaten to prohibit visitation rights or contact with the child) rather than be directly involved in parental conflict (Leon, 2003). Regardless of the child’s level of involvement, many researchers would agree that a low level of interparental conflict is ideal for children’s positive long-term adjustment (Buchanan, et al., 1996; Emery, 1999). In an effort to cope with
interparental conflict, divorce mediation for the parents is considered to be one of the most helpful protective factors (Emery, 1999).

Children whose parents get divorced may experience a decline in contact with their nonresident parent, usually the father, while others lose contact all together (Leon, 2003; Kelly & Emery, 2003). While contact with the nonresident parent is typically considered helpful in children’s development, results are mixed regarding the outcomes for young children (Leon, 2003). One study conducted by Hodges, Wechsler, and Ballantine (1979) compared 26 preschool age children whose parents got divorced with those whose parents remained married and discovered that increased contact with the father was associated with harmful effects for the children such as increased aggression and decreased cooperation. Years later, Hodges and his colleagues (1991) conducted another study with 45 infants and toddlers whose parents were divorced and found an association between contact with the nonresident parent and developmental language delays, secure attachment bond to the mother, mixed behavior towards the father (e.g. signs of affection as well as hesitation), and decreased separation anxiety. Despite such results, a large body of attachment literature suggests that children, particularly preschool age children, experience severe separation anxiety immediately after parental divorce occurs (Emery, 1999). While separation anxiety is common after weekly visits with either parent, researchers predicted an increase when changes occur in the child’s daily routine such as alterations in the schedule, moving between houses unexpectedly, and having to adjust to an unfamiliar environment (Bowlby, 1973; Emery, 1999). In a study with high-conflict families, the parents reported that 58-71% of their preschool age children seemed to struggle with the transition between houses demonstrating acts of aggression, hesitancy, resistance to separation, and regressive behavior (Johnson & Campbell, 1988). Despite mixed results regarding contact
with the nonresident parent, the majority of divorce literature indicates that the quality of relationship between the child and nonresident parent has more significance than the frequency of contact (Barber, 1994; Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996; Simons, Whitbeck, Beaman, & Conger, 1994).

In addition to contact with the nonresident parent, children whose parents get divorced tend to experience diminished parenting, which refers to a lower quality of parenting and children receiving less attention from their parents (Buchanan et al., 1996). Immediately following divorce, parents are often engrossed in their own thoughts and feelings while trying to survive as a single parent (Kelly & Emery, 2003). According to Hetherington et al. (1979), the stress surrounding divorce may leave mothers less engaged, more domineering, more irritable, and as a result less responsive to their children. Based on a meta-analysis of 12 studies with divorced families, maternal depression was related to more behavioral issues for preschool age children than compared to maternal warmth and responsiveness (Whiteside & Becker, 2000). Similarly, Pett, Wampold, Turner, and Vaughan-Cole (1999) interviewed 198 families and discovered an association between maternal strain and diminished maternal support, leading to greater behavioral problems for the young children involved. While studies of parenting quality exist for older and younger children, the effect on children’s adjustment seems to depend on the child’s developmental stage (Leon, 2003). For example, research on older children analyze parental monitoring and participation in daily activities (e.g. Capaldi & Patterson, 1991; Kurtz, 1994; Martinez & Forgatch 2002; Simons, Lin, Gordon, Conger, & Lorenz, 1999), while studies on younger children take a closer look at parental affection and responsiveness (Heinicke, Guthrie, & Ruth, 1997; Hodges et al., 1983; Pett et al., 1999; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). As a result, research suggests that in order to help children cope with divorce successfully, parents need to be
more attuned to their child’s needs (Rogers, 2004). Another protective factor that can aid in children’s adjustment is the involvement of extended family and friends. In particular, research suggests that siblings provide extra support for children and can act as a shield protecting one another from some of the harmful effects of parental divorce (Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, & Alpert-Gillis, 1990). Leon (2003) explains how using developmental psychopathology to explore the risks and protective factors associated with parental divorce can aid in understanding why some children have an easier time adapting than others. In order to comprehend the effects of divorce on children’s long-term adjustment, it is important to consider the child’s developmental stage.

**Developmental Stage of Young Children**

The majority of literature on young children and divorce utilizes their developmental stage as an explanation for why preschool age children are particularly vulnerable to negative outcomes. The theory holds that divorce presents as a challenge for preschool age children because they lack the emotional and intellectual skills necessary to comprehend complex situations such as parental divorce (Cohen & Ronen, 1999). In families where visitation rights exist for both parents, young children may struggle in particular because they have yet to develop the cognitive ability to comprehend and reflect on the changes that are happening around them (Kelly & Lamb, 2003). While the majority of literature on young children and divorce mentions the child’s developmental stage (Rogers, 2004; Ebling, Pruett & Pruett, 2009; Pruett & Pruett, 1999), the following articles utilize it as their main theoretical framework.

Cohen and Ronen (1999) conducted an analysis of six drawings created by children ages 4 to 6 years old whose parents got divorced within the past three years. Drawing is a common activity for this age group and helps them to express their inner thoughts and feelings. Additionally, a number of studies have used drawing as a diagnostic tool, demonstrating its
consistency as both a reliable and valid method (Berger, 1994). Cohen and Ronen decided to use family drawings in an effort to collect information regarding the child’s view of himself or herself, the child’s feeling within the family, and the child’s perception of the family structure. The results of the study indicated stages of children’s adaptation (i.e. from denial to acceptance) that seemed dependent on how long the parents were divorced. For example, a 5 year-old boy drew a picture of his family with two large figures, which represented his parents, and one smaller figure, which represented his sister. When asked where he was located in the photo, the child replied, “There is no room for me.” The authors interpreted the child’s response to mean that he is struggling with his place in the family. Additionally, they categorized him as being in the denial stage, as evidence by him drawing his parents together rather than apart, a theme commonly expressed in the children’s drawings. In contrast, a six year old boy whose parents had been divorced for a year and a half, still drew his parents together but separated them from his siblings, representing his need for boundaries. Lastly, the results demonstrated that young children whose mothers have full custody and who share a close bond with their fathers tend to experience the expected amount of distress and adaptation following divorce (Cohen & Ronen). In a second study, Mazur (1993) explored the comprehension level of divorce in young children compared to older children. In this study, he interviewed 119 children in kindergarten, second grade, and fourth grade to understand their perception of marriage, divorce, and remarriage/stepfamilies. Mazur found clear developmental distinctions in children’s understanding of divorce from less to more realistic, increasing with age from 5 to 10 years old. He also reported that children whose parents were divorced stated they were more likely to get divorced in their future than children from intact families. Due to their limited cognitive ability
and lack of verbal skills, it is important to consider how children communicate when asking them to talk about complex issues such as parental divorce.

Similar to when adults use words to verbalize their thoughts and feelings, children utilize play as their primary form of communication (Landreth, 2002). A large body of research exists suggesting that play provides children an avenue to express themselves, while giving adults a glimpse into the child’s internal world (Nickerson, 1973). According to Piaget (2), play allows children to act out their experiences and is considered essential to children’s growth and development on a social, emotional, and intellectual level. Play also helps mend the gap between a child’s comprehension and his or her life experiences, providing them the opportunity to learn, problem solve, gain insight, and master certain life events (Bratton, et al., 2005). With a plethora of play therapy techniques, therapists invite the child to reenact their experience and as a result are better able to interpret the meaning they make of the event (Bratton, et al.). Although literature exists regarding the use of play therapy techniques with older children whose parents are divorced, research is scant when it comes to using play therapy techniques to explore the meaning young children make of their parents’ divorce.

**Meaning Making Ability**

A large body of research suggests that it is important for children who are undergoing traumatic experiences such as parental divorce to talk about their situation and create their own narrative (Gorell Barnes, Thompson, Daniel, & Burchardt, 1998; Mitchell, 1985; Mossige, Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Reichelt, & Tjersland, 2005). By telling stories, children are invited to reflect on their past as well as envision their future. Preschool age children develop *narrative scripts*, which include detailed descriptions of daily activities by explaining the sequence of events in chronological order (e.g. going grocery shopping, eating dinner at a restaurant, etc.)
(Fivush & Hammond, 1990; Nelson & Hudson, 1988; Paris & Paris, 2003). Narratives encourage children to make meaning from their situation (Nelson, 2000) and play a significant role in helping them define their own identity (Miller, 1994).

Additionally, narratives are interpersonal, meaning they are used to share valuable information with other people (Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997). Reporting one’s personal experience involves being able to recall past events as well as organize the experience into a coherent story. In a pivotal study conducted by Nelson and Gruendel (1981) on preschoolers’ ability to report routine events (e.g. eating at McDonald’s, going shopping, etc.), they discovered that children were able to give clear descriptions of such events as early as three years old. While preschool age children are capable of recalling past events with a relative accuracy (Eisenberg, 1985; Fivush, Gray, & Fromhoff, 1987), their narrative skills are less advanced compared to older children. Young children’s narratives are characterized as elementary including few idealistic remarks, a skewed perception of reality, and limited verbal interaction (Miller & Sperry, 1988; Peterson, 1990; Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Umiker-Seboek, 1979) whereas older children’s narratives are longer and include more reliable and detail-oriented information (Fivush, Haden, & Adam, 1995; Hudson & Shapiro, 1991; Kernan, 1977; Menig-Peterson & McCabe, 1978; Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Umiker-Seboek, 1979). Research suggests that children’s narrative skills improve with as their language skills become more advanced (Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997). Due to their limited cognitive development, young children are left struggling to verbalize and make sense of their experiences on their own.

Empirical studies suggest that children often need help conceptualizing changes that occur within their families and that in order for them to accept such changes, they need detailed descriptions of events that took place in the past (Dowling & Gorrell Barnes, 2000). Adults
scaffold their child’s experience by shaping their recall and providing them with contextual information about what happened in their past (Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997; Fivush, 1998). Along with providing information, parents frequently co-narrate with their children by asking leading questions to prompt their memory of a specific event, while teaching them how to narrate themselves (Pressley, 1996; Wiley, Rose, Burger, & Miller, 1998). This may pose as a risk in the case of parental divorce considering one parent’s opinion may cloud or directly influence the child’s perception of the other parent. Regardless of potential risks, the majority of literature supports the belief that meaning making is necessary when adjusting to stressful life events (e.g. Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Considering the effect meaning making has on children’s long-term adjustment, it seems important for researchers to understand the meaning they make of difficult situations such as parental divorce.

**Meaning Making of Divorce**

Previous studies have been conducted to try and understand children’s experience of divorce (e.g. Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). However these assessments which were intended to explore children’s adjustment to divorce, did so through the use of written exams, clinical notes, or by asking parents themselves (Whiteside, 1996). With the majority of literature focused on the parents’ perspective, the gap in the literature still remains when it comes to studying the experience of divorce from the child’s point of view.

Several researchers have explored the meaning young children make of their parents’ separation by interviewing the children directly. For example, a qualitative study by Pruett and Pruett (1999) explored the experience of divorce for young children through the lens of the legal system via interviews with children under the age of 6 from 21 different families. In order to better understand that meaning children make of their parents’ divorce, the children were asked
to participate in a period of semi-structured play using toys, puppets, small figurines, etc. Most children mentioned their parents’ divorce prior to completing the play activity. However if they did not, the researcher would prompt the child by asking specific questions about his or her interpretation of lawyers, judges, etc. The results demonstrated that children responded with intricate and unique descriptions of divorce and the legal system as a whole. While their explanations of what divorce was were elaborate, their interpretations of their parent’s divorce were both vague and disorganized, accompanied by themes of loss, separation, and abandonment. For example a 3.4-year-old boy stated, “Divorce is when Mom and Dad hate each other and your family is dead.” Another 6 year old explained, “Divorce is when you pay lawyers a lot of money to wreck your family.” In addition, the researchers suggested that the children’s understanding of divorce was not developmentally appropriate. Not only did children have unrealistic expectations of lawyers and mental health professionals, but they also learned a great deal of troubling information from overhearing their parents talking. In an effort to reduce the risk for children’s long-term adjustment, the researchers suggest that the parents monitor the amount of information they share with their children. Lastly, the researchers found an association between parental conflict and a child’s play patterns, such that the higher the conflict between the parents, the more stress the child felt and the less complex and sophisticated the child’s play. Overall, children of this age group demonstrated their need for safety and protection and their desire to be less confused.

In an effort to expand on the pilot study conducted above, Ebling, Pruett, and Pruett (2009) designed a similar study ten years later to better understand the meaning young children make of their parents’ divorce. This study was rooted as a part of a larger study known as The Collaborative Divorce Project, which offered preventative interventions to divorced and
separated parents to test if parent education improved children’s adjustment to divorce. Their current study included 41 children ranging between 3.5 and 7.5 years old. Through verbal interviews and semi-structured play, they invited the children to draw a number of pictures ending with a picture of their family and a picture of divorce. Then, the researchers instructed the children to act out a typical day in their lives and afterwards asked them questions similar to the previous study (i.e. “What is a lawyer?” “What is a judge?” “What do you want lawyers or judges to know, to make divorce easier or better for families and children?”).

In terms of how children conceptualize divorce, results revealed that young children seemed to possess concrete, clear descriptions of divorce. While the most common definition included logistical changes such as moving between houses, other themes included parents’ negative feelings towards one another, changes in their marital status, and negative parental conflict (i.e. yelling or screaming at each other). When comparing the results, the children in their pilot study seemed more confused and disjointed than those in their present study. The authors attribute this to be a result of a younger sample size in the pilot study (i.e. sample size 2.5 to 7.5) or an indication that the intervention used in the second study may have helped children develop a more accurate understanding of divorce. Children’s perceptions of their families were evident through their drawings. With only 24.3% of children drawing their parents together, results suggest that the majority of young children understood that a change in their family had occurred. By analyzing the children’s drawings, the authors discovered a pattern suggesting that the child’s perception of family coincided with their current living arrangement, such that if the child lived with the mother, he or she would exclude the father. However, researchers found that even amongst families where the father had full-custody, mothers were rarely omitted from the portrait, suggesting her essential role in the family unit. In contrast, fifty percent of the children
living in either arrangement felt fathers were dispensable enough to dismiss them. Similar to Pruett and Pruett’s (1999) study, young children seemed confused and ill informed on the role and responsibilities of lawyers and judges. When asked direct questions about lawyers and judge, 77% responded with vague definitions of a lawyer and 54% gave unclear and inaccurate descriptions of a judge. Lastly, a number of important themes surfaced in the child’s play with the most common (nearly 42%), being wishing for parental reunion. While young children fantasize about their parents getting back together, they also hold accurate beliefs about divorce itself. Overall results suggest that regardless of their age, young children are affected just as much as older children and they understand more about their parents’ divorce than many people might believe. With these studies in mind, further research is necessary to expand our understanding of the meaning preschool age children make of their experience to help them better cope with their parents’ divorce

**Research Question**

What is the emotional experience of young children going through divorce and how do they explain it?

**Bracketing Statement**

In qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher must bracket his or her personal experience in order to separate it from that of the participants (Creswell, 2007). As a child of divorce, the researcher bracketed her feelings regarding her parents’ divorce by documenting and reflecting on how she might have been affected as a child. Although there was no way to thoroughly remove the researcher’s experience, she believes that writing down her thoughts and feelings before interviewing others helped bracket her familiarity with the topic and focus on the child’s experience of divorce rather than her own.
Design of the Study

This research question was addressed by conducting a qualitative phenomenological study to understand the meaning that young children make of their parents divorce. A qualitative study was suitable because the researcher was exploring the experience of divorce for young children. This problem was investigated by conducting participant interviews where direct questioning and play therapy techniques were used with a sample of preschool through elementary school children. The requirements for the study included children whose parents were currently in the process of divorce (i.e., those who were separated, those who were getting divorced, or those who were already divorced and/or remarried) at the time of the study. Interviewing and interacting directly with young children whose parents are divorced allowed the researcher the opportunity to better understand the phenomenon of their experience.

Study Participants

Participants included 6-8 children ranging in age from 5 to 7 years old who were currently participating in a divorce support group.

In order to recruit participants, the researcher asked the staff of the organization to send an email to the parents who were already participating in the divorce support group one month before the study took place. The email informed the parents that the study would take place on the third session of the eight-week group and directed the parents to email the researcher if they were interested in having their children participate.

Procedures

After IRB approval had been secured, the researcher gathered the email addresses of the parents who volunteered to have their children participate. Two weeks prior to the program
initiation, the researcher sent a pack of information about the study to the parents. This packet included a flyer explaining the purpose of the study, a consent form, a demographic questionnaire, a copy of the interview script with the questions listed, and a description of the play therapy techniques that were employed in the study. This gave the parents the opportunity to review the activities prior to the study’s initiation and to contact the researcher with any questions or concerns. The parents were then instructed to complete the demographic questionnaire and consent form and bring it with them on the day of the study.

**Training Facilitators**

Two days before the study took place, the researcher held a private meeting with the group leaders who facilitated the 5 to 7 year old group. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to them and educated them on the study’s procedures. The researcher then trained the group leaders on the importance of gathering quality data, even if it meant not completing every activity. While the group leaders were given a script to follow (see Appendix B), they were encouraged to try and understand the child’s experience as much as possible and were given permission to deviate from the script if it seemed the child was interested in taking the lead to talk about his or her experience of divorce. Training also included detailed instructions as to how they would audio record their interaction with the children (i.e. saying the child’s name before addressing him in order to distinguish between the children’s voices on the audio tape). Each group leader was given his or her own audio recording device to record the interaction that occurred during each activity.

**Parental Consent/Information**

On the day of the study, the researcher met with the parents before going into the classroom with the children. The researcher began by introducing herself to the parents and re-
explaining the purpose of the study. At this time, all demographic questionnaires and consent forms were collected. Upon entering the classroom, the researcher introduced herself to the children and began giving the children a brief overview of the day’s activities.

**Data Collection**

The researcher divided the children into groups of two and assigned each pair to a different group leader. The children were then instructed to go to one corner of the room with their designated group leader to conduct the day’s activities. Splitting the children into small groups provided them with the opportunity to share their feelings in a more intimate setting. Additionally with only two children per group, it allowed the group leaders to record the children’s comments with greater accuracy. During the process, the researcher walked around to each group to ensure fidelity to the research process. A more detailed description of each activity is below (see instruments section). After the activities were completed, the researcher thanked the children for participating and for sharing their stories with her and say goodbye. Additionally, two weeks after the study the researcher sent an email to the parents thanking them for allowing their child to participate.

While other studies have used a combination of semi-structured play with direct questioning (Ebling, Pruett, & Pruett, 2009; Pruett & Pruett, 1999), the researcher wanted to create a unique environment that would elicit context surrounding the children’s words. To achieve this goal, group leaders had scripts and used play techniques such as drawing as a way to prompt reflection and detailed descriptions of the children’s emotional experience. Utilizing these techniques not only offered context surrounding the children’s divorce experience but also helped provide clues into the children’s thoughts and feelings. For more information regarding data collection rationale, see Appendix A.
Demographic Questionnaire

The questionnaire included questions about the child’s age, race/ethnicity, number and ages of other siblings in the family, family income, parents’ education level, the current custody arrangement, and how long the parents have been separated/divorced. Asking the parents how long they have been divorced helped the researcher understand how recently the event occurred and helped her to be more sensitive to those who were still adjusting to the situation.

Interview Activities

The two activities utilized in the study are explained in greater detail below:

The Before and After Drawing Technique. In this part of the study, the researcher and group leaders asked the child to draw a picture of his or her family before the divorce took place and a second picture of the child’s family after the divorce. The “Before and After Drawing Technique” is a play therapy technique developed by Cangelosi (1997) for the sole purpose of working with children whose parents are separated or divorced. In this exercise, the children were told to think about their life prior to their parents’ separation and were directed to notice the changes that have occurred as a result of the divorce (Short, 1997). Not only is the act of drawing one that children naturally enjoy, but it also provides them with an unstructured way to express themselves (Cohen & Ronen, 1999). This technique helped the researcher gain a better understanding of the child’s perception of the changes that took place after the divorce and how the child perceived those changes. It is important to note that each child’s picture provided a way for the group leader to engage the child in a discussion about his or her experience of divorce.

The Worry Can Technique. The “Worry Can Technique” is the second activity and was developed by Debbie Jones (1997). To begin, the researcher and group leaders gave the children a worry jar out of a tin can. Each child was instructed to tell the group leaders three concerns
they have (regarding their parents’ divorce) and to write them down on thin strips of paper, allotting one worry per paper. The group leaders then asked the children leading questions, including what advice they would give another child in a similar situation, to help the researcher gain a better understanding of the child’s perspective of the divorce. After writing out their fears, the children were invited to share their concerns with the group. The “Worry Can Technique” is a successful technique because it helps the interviewer find out what the child’s fears and concerns are and encourages them to talk openly about their feelings regarding their parents’ divorce (Hall, Kaduson, & Schaefer, 2002). In this study, this technique helped the researcher gain a better understanding of the child’s experience and prompted future ideas for how to best help young children cope with their parents’ divorce.

**Coding Procedures**

Prior to analyzing the data, the researcher bracketed her personal experience with the phenomenon being studied in order to focus solely on the participants in the study (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher then familiarized herself with the data and created a list of “significant statements” that appeared within the participants’ interviews. Next, the researcher organized the statements into broader groups, called “meaning unites or themes” that represented the child’s experience of divorce. By extracting themes throughout the data, a detailed description of the experience emerged, and the phenomenon became easier to understand (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher then brainstormed aspects of the participants’ experience and searched for sub-themes within the data. Finally, the researcher created a report that combined the textural and structural descriptions of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Conducting a phenomenological analysis helped to convey the rich detail found in the children’s interviews and helped explain how young children experience their parents’ divorce.
Chapter 4: Manuscript

Exploring the Experience of Divorce for Young Children

Mara R. Hirschfeld

Introduction

Many would agree that divorce is a stressful event for those involved. A great deal of empirical evidence suggests parental divorce as a primary risk factor in affecting children’s future psychological and emotional well being (Amato, 2000; Emery, 1999; Hetherington, 1999; Kelly, 2000; McLanahan, 1999; Simons et al., 1996). Past qualitative studies have explored post parental divorce adjustment amongst older school-aged children (Jennings & Howe, 2001), as well as the adjustment of those in adolescence whose parents are divorced (Mutchler, Hunt, Koopman, & Mutchler, 1992). Given that the majority of research has focused on older children’s adjustment (i.e. emotional and psychological development, academic performance, and behavioral issues) (Amato & Keith, 1991), less is known about the experience of divorce for younger children. Although divorce can be difficult for a child at any age, many studies suggest that children whose parents divorce when they are less than six years old tend to be at an increased risk for behavioral and developmental delays (Emery, 1999; Hetherington, 1979; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Parental divorce is related to a number of detrimental effects for preschool age children such as poor cognitive performance (Carter & Murdock, 2001), the development of insecure attachment bonds (Bowlby, 1969), and behavioral misconduct (Hodges, Buchsbaum, & Tierney, 1983). Despite these negative short-term impacts, longitudinal studies using nationwide samples suggest that the majority of children whose parents are divorced would be considered average in terms of adjustment compared to their peers (Amato, 2001; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Zill,
Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). While such long-term findings are heartening, they do not diminish the very real negative impacts that can occur in the months and years immediately following the divorce.

A divorce is a significant life stage and the way in which parents deal with it can impact their children (Altenhofen, et al., 2008). Many researchers view divorce as an ongoing process, rather than a single event, composed of potential distress that begins before the initial separation and continues after the divorce is finalized (Morrison & Cherlin, 1995). Despite recognition of divorce as a process, research suggests that many children are given little advance notice before their parents’ divorce (Kelly & Emery, 2003). For example, one study exploring parent-child communication during divorce states that 23% of children were given no explanation about their parents’ separation, and 45% were given a short one-sentence explanation (Dunn, et al., 2001). Given such limited information, many children may be left to make sense of their parent’s divorce by themselves, which may lead to frustration, confusion, and fear of abandonment (Dunn, et al., 2001; Smart & Neale, 2000; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Research suggests that a number of factors contribute to children’s long-term adjustment. The first is interparental conflict. While interparental conflict can occur in intact families, it is assumed that divorce is related to continuous interparental conflict and can be detrimental to children’s well being (Buchanan, et al., 1996; Emery, 1999). Literature suggests that only 25% of parents who divorce experience low interparental conflict (Booth & Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 1999; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), while other couples experience intense feelings of anger and frustration (Johnson & Campbell, 1988; Kelly, 2002; Kelly & Johnston, 2001, Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).
A second predictor of adjustment is contact with the non-residential parent. A large body of attachment literature suggests that children, particularly preschool age children, experience severe separation anxiety immediately after parental divorce occurs (Emery, 1999). Children of divorce may experience a decline in contact with their non-resident parent, usually the father, while others lose contact all together (Leon, 2003; Kelly & Emery, 2003). The majority of divorce literature indicates that the quality of relationship between the child and non-resident parent has more significance on child outcomes than the frequency of contact (Barber, 1994; Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996; Simons, Whitbeck, Beaman, & Conger, 1994).

A third factor is diminished parenting which refers to a lower quality of parenting and children receiving less attention from their parents (Buchanan et al., 1996). Immediately following divorce, parents are often engrossed in their own thoughts and feelings while trying to survive as a single parent (Kelly & Emery, 2003). According to Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1979), the stress surrounding divorce may leave mothers less engaged, more domineering, more irritable, and as a result less responsive to their children.

A fourth factor is related to normative cognitive development. Due to their limitations in cognitive development and affect regulation, compared to older children, preschool age children are considered to be the “most vulnerable” (Kurdek, 1981). Preschool age children may struggle to make sense of their parents’ divorce because they lack the cognitive and emotional skills necessary to understand the situation (Cohen & Ronen, 1999). At such an early age in their development, children rely on their parents to shelter and protect them in order to keep their world safe; divorce can threaten a young child’s environment making it more difficult for him or her to establish healthy emotional and behavioral skills (Pruett & Pruett, 1999). While they are capable of understanding concrete concepts, preschool age children often have trouble when
trying to grasp more advanced issues such as death, life, and divorce because they have yet to accept that these events are irreversible (Ronen, 1992). Additionally, preschool children are often egocentric in their thinking, making it difficult for them to consider others’ viewpoints (Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 1993), which can lead to self-blame, believing that they are the cause of their parents’ divorce (Rogers, 2004). As a result, young children may develop fears of abandonment, unrealistic fantasies, an increased need for parental attention, and aggressive behavior (Emery, 1999).

Due to their limited cognitive development and lack of verbal skills, it is important to consider how children communicate when asking them to talk about complex issues such as parental divorce. Just as adults use words to verbalize their thoughts and feelings, children utilize play as their primary form of communication (Landreth, 2002). A large body of research exists suggesting that play provides children an avenue to express themselves, while giving adults a glimpse into the child’s internal world (Nickerson, 1973). According to Piaget (1962), play allows children to act out their experiences and is considered essential to children’s growth and development on a social, emotional, and intellectual level. Play also encourages children to explore traumatic events that may have occurred in their past and invites them to interpret and make sense of their personal life experiences (Gil & Drewes, 2005). With a plethora of play therapy techniques, therapists invite children to reenact their experiences and as a result are better able to make meaning of the event (Bratton, Ray, & Rhine, 2005). Although literature exists regarding the use of play techniques with older children whose parents are divorced, research is scant when it comes to using play to explore the meaning young children make of their parents’ divorce.
Empirical studies suggest that children often need help conceptualizing changes that occur within their families, and that in order for them to accept such changes, they need detailed descriptions of events that took place in the past (Dowling & Gorrell Barnes, 2000). Adults scaffold their children’s experience by shaping their recall and providing them with contextual information about what happened in their past (Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997; Fivush, 1998). Furthermore, parents frequently co-narrate with their children by asking leading questions to prompt their memory of a specific event, while teaching them how to narrate themselves (Pressley, 1996; Wiley, Rose, Burger, & Miller, 1998). This practice may pose as a risk in the case of parental divorce because one parent’s opinion may cloud or directly influence the child’s perception of the other parent. Regardless of potential risks, the majority of literature supports the belief that meaning making is necessary when adjusting to stressful life events (e.g. Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Considering the effect meaning making has on children’s long-term adjustment, it seems important for researchers to understand the meaning children make of difficult situations such as parental divorce.

Previous studies have been conducted to try and understand children’s experience of divorce (e.g. Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). However these assessments, which were intended to explore children’s adjustment to divorce, did so through the use of written exams, clinical notes, or by interviewing parents (Whiteside, 1996). With the majority of literature focused on the parents’ perspective, limited research exists when it comes to studying the experience of divorce from the child’s point of view (for exception see Ebling, Pruett, & Pruett, 2009; Pruett & Pruett, 1999). While it is clear that young children extract meaning from their parents’ divorce, it is still unknown as to what the meaning they derive is and how divorce may influence their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.
With these studies in mind, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experience of parental divorce from the perspective of young children (ages 5-7). Gaining this perspective may help to inform interventions immediately following divorce, perhaps mitigating the short-term negative consequences, while assisting parents in becoming more attuned to their children’s needs. The research question analyzed is as follows:

What is the emotional experience of divorce for young children and how do they explain it?

Methods

After IRB approval, this question was investigated by conducting participant interviews where the researcher used direct questioning and play therapy techniques with a sample of preschool through elementary school children. Participants included 7 children ranging in age from 5 to 7 years old who were participants of a divorce support group in the Southwestern region of Arizona. Inclusion criteria included children whose parents were in the process of divorce (i.e., those who were separated, those who were getting divorced, or those who were already divorced and/or remarried) and who fit the age range for the study. In order to recruit participants, the researcher contacted parents of children who were already enrolled in the divorce support group a few weeks prior to the group’s initiation and informed the parents that the study would take place on the third week of the eight-week session. Parents received a packet that included a flyer explaining the purpose of the study, a consent form, a demographic questionnaire, and a copy of the interview script. This gave the parents the opportunity to review the activities prior to the study’s initiation and to contact the researcher with questions or concerns. The parents returned the demographic questionnaire and consent form on the day of the study.
Data Collection

Interviews were conducted by the organization’s group facilitators who had been trained in the study protocol prior to implementation. Because the group facilitators had worked with the children before the study took place, the children and group facilitators had already built a strong alliance. The timing and format of the study was intentionally designed to enhance the child’s trust and comfort level during the study. On the day of the study, the researcher divided the children into groups of two and assigned each pair to a different group leader. The children were then instructed to go to one corner of the room with their designated group leader who conducted the day’s activities. Splitting the children into pairs provided them with the opportunity to share their feelings in a more intimate setting. Additionally, it allowed the group leaders to record the children’s comments with greater accuracy.

Demographic Questionnaire

The questionnaire included questions about the child’s age, race/ethnicity, number and ages of other siblings in the family, family income, parents’ education level, the current custody arrangement, and how long the parents had been separated/divorced.

Interview Activities

The “Before and After Drawing Technique” by Cangelosi (1997). The group leaders asked the child to draw a picture of his or her family before the divorce took place and a second picture of the child’s family after the divorce. The “Before and After Drawing Technique” is a play therapy technique designed for the sole purpose of working with children whose parents are separated or divorced. This technique can encourage children to consider their role in the family and how they viewed their family prior to the divorce compared to after the separation has taken place (Cangelosi, 1997). Not only is the act of drawing one that children enjoy, but it also
provides them with an unstructured way to express themselves (Cohen & Ronen, 1999). This technique helped the researcher gain a better understanding of the child’s perception of the changes that took place after the divorce and how the child perceived those changes. While drawing can be a helpful diagnostic tool, it is the child’s words and responses that were used when analyzing the results of the study.

The “Worry Can Technique” by Jones (1997). The “Worry Can Technique” is designed to solicit what the child’s fears and concerns are and encourages them to talk openly about their thoughts and feelings (Hall, Kaduson, & Schaefer, 2002). To begin, the group leaders gave the children a “worry jar” made out of a tin can. Each child was instructed to tell the group leaders three concerns they had (regarding their parents’ divorce) and to write them on thin strips of paper, allotting one “worry” per strip. After writing out their worries, the children were invited to share their concerns with the group. This technique helped the researcher gain a better understanding of the child’s experience and prompted future ideas for how to best help young children cope with their parents’ divorce.

**Coding Procedures**

Prior to analyzing the data, the researcher bracketed her personal experience with the phenomenon being studied in order to focus solely on the participants in the study (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher then familiarized herself with the data and created a list of “significant statements” that appeared within the participants’ interviews. Next, the researcher organized the statements into broader groups, called “meaning unites or themes” that represented the child’s experience of divorce. By extracting themes throughout the data, a detailed description of the experience emerged, and the phenomenon became easier to understand (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher then brainstormed aspects of the participants’ experience and searched for sub-themes
within the data. Finally, the researcher created a report that combined the textural and structural descriptions of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Conducting a phenomenological analysis helped to convey the rich detail found in the children’s interviews and helped explain how young children experience their parents’ divorce.

**Results**

The following table indicates the data and demographic information about the children in the study. The children ranged in age from 5 to 7 years old and differed based on how recently the divorce occurred. Representative transcript excerpts are included below to illustrate each theme. Because of the age of the children, we felt it was important to include context surrounding each quote, including the interviewer’s commentary to provide a richer depiction of each child’s experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age at Divorce</th>
<th>Custody</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child 1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Joint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Joint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Caucasian/Hispanic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Joint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>¾ Caucasian, ¼ Japanese</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>¾ Caucasian, ¼ Japanese</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child 7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Trying to Make Sense of the Divorce*

When asked questions about their parents’ divorce, all of the children in the study seemed to struggle to make sense of their situation. While some children talked about whether or not they think their parents would get back together, others seemed ambivalent regarding their feelings about the divorce and confused as to the timing and details of their family situation.
When describing what divorce means to them, their responses ranged from “I don’t know” to providing disjointed descriptions that included the time, people, and experiences in their lives. While all of the children seemed to have difficulty providing clear descriptions of their experience, three children were unable to remember what their family was like before their parents got divorced. In addition, participants talked about issues of self-blame while others acknowledged that the divorce is not their fault.

The following quote is of a 6 year-old explaining what divorce means to him. While he acknowledges that his parents are no longer married, his description seems to suggest his confusion about his parents’ divorce.

Intern 1: So [Child 1] what does divorce mean to you?
Child 1: It means, um to me… my family divorced because I didn’t have room. …Cause um….my family didn’t have room to fit in, but my family’s going to come back not divorced. That’s what it means to me. […]
Intern 1: What are some things that have changed now that your parents divorced?
Child 1: Like me and my dad….um my dad’s not living with us yet. […]
Intern 1: So [Child 1] how do you feel with all these changes that’s going on?
Child 1: Happy.
Intern 1: You feel happy?
Child 1: Yup.
Intern 1: Why do you feel happy?
Child 1: Because I like to live with my mommy and daddy.
Intern 1: But I thought you said your mom and dad don’t live together anymore?
Child 1: I know, but they’re still a part of each other. Right?
Intern 1: Yeah, that’s very true. That’s very true.
Child 1: It’s not like they’re not….they’re not like…they’re not together…they’re just still together but they just live somewhere else.
The second example is of a 7 year-old girl who acknowledges the permanence of the situation, yet longs for her parents to get married again.

Intern 2: Okay. So what’s your first worry about your parents’ divorce?
Child 2: That they might never get married again.
Intern 2: […] Do you wish your parents hadn’t gotten divorced or are you happy they got divorced?
Child 2: Wish they didn’t…because now we can’t really do anything together. Because my sister says um whenever we leave my dad, she says I want mommy to come with us, but she doesn’t come.
Intern 2: Aww, that’s sad. Do you think maybe they’ll be able to come to your stuff later like maybe when they’re not as angry?
Child 2: Mmmm, no.
Intern 2: No? You think they’ll be angry forever?
Child 2: Yes.
Intern 2: Well I hope not. If you could tell your parents one thing, what would it be?
Child 2: To get married again. (Laughing)
Intern 2: To get married again? So you really wish they were married again?
Child 2: Yes. And besides, I can’t really see my animals because they’re all at my dad’s house.
Intern 2: Mmm. So when you say like you wish your parents were still married, do you think they ever will get back together?
Child 2: No.
Intern 2: No…you’re pretty sure that this is permanent? [Child 2 nods] Does that make you sad? Have you ever told them that?
Child 2: No.
Intern 2: No….will you ever tell them that?
Child 2: No.
Intern 2: Why not?
Child 2: I’m scared.
Intern 2: What do you think they’d say? If you said, “Mom and dad I want you to get back together” what do you think they’d say?
Child 2: They’d probably say no cause they fight a lot but that they’d think about it but they’ll end up saying no.

The following quote is of a 5 year old girl who said she knows the divorce is not her fault, yet later in the transcript discusses feeling as though her parents hate or don’t like her. Her contradicting statements, shown below, may indicate ambivalence and confusion surrounding her emotional experience of the divorce. This seemed to be a common theme for the children in the study.

Intern 3: What do you remember about when your mom and dad were together? [...] Child 3: That they always fight so they picked divorce cause they always yell. And it’s not because me, it’s only because of them. [...] And they don’t like to be together anymore so they got divorced.
Intern 3: Yeah, well that was really nice of them that they told you it wasn’t your fault. You know it wasn’t your fault right?
Child 3: Yes, yup. Positively.
(Later in interview):
Intern 3: So [Child 3]….you know they don’t hate you right?
Child 3: They do hate me and sometimes they don’t. [...] Intern 3: Like don’t like you? Why do you think they don’t like you? Do they say that?
Child 3: Yeah.
Intern 3: What do they say?
Child 3: I don’t like you….I don’t want you to be with your mom anymore. I just want you to stay with me. And that’s hurtful for my mom and that’s hurtful for me. And that’s mean of my dad.
Feelings They Experience/How They Describe Themselves

When asked how they feel or how they think another child whose parents are divorced might be feeling, participants said they feel sad, mad, upset, frustrated, angry, and/or scared. Every child responded by saying they feel at least one if not two of the emotions listed above. When describing himself, one child said he “sees stars when he’s mad.” Two children described themselves as feeling scared when their parents told them they were getting divorced. One child felt the word “sad” inadequately described her experience and searched for a word that meant “really, really sad,” before settling on the word “depressed.” Some of the children attributed their sadness to their parents fighting. Four other children however, reported that they feel happy because their parents are no longer arguing with one another. Finally, one child identified herself as the only child in her class whose parents were divorced and said that she would feel embarrassed if the other kids were to find out.

The following examples illustrate the range of emotions the children in the study reported regarding their parents’ divorce when drawing pictures of their family after the divorce.

Example #1:

Intern 3: So draw your family after the divorce.
Child 4: I’m drawing little tears.
Child 3: I’m drawing tears too.
Child 4: That’s funny[....]
Child 3: These are little tears.
Intern 3: [Child 3], those are tears? Those are pretty big tears.
Child 3: I don’t know how to draw small tears…I’m gunna practice how to draw better tears[...]
Intern 3: [Child 3], does that show you how sad you are when you have tears?
Child 3: Yeah.
Example #2:

Child 5: I’m going to draw us hiding.
Intern 1: Why were you hiding?
Child 5: Because I was really scared because my mom and dad were fighting. And so that’s why they got divorced cause they were fighting too much…Mom and Dad just couldn’t get along and Mom was just like destroying everything…she destroyed our playroom.[…] She was knocking over everything and our tray table got broken and stuff like that and then all our toys got knocked over… And then behind that there was a little space behind that and we use to always hide in there. And so, there was like so nobody could see us and there was like….cause the clothes were covering us from behind and we were like hiding in there. And it was like really really scary. It was really really scary.

Example #3:

Intern 4: [Talking to Child 6] Why did you draw a broken heart?
Child 6: Cause I’m sad.
Intern 4: Why are you sad?
Child 6: Cause my parents are divorced. […]
Intern 4: So divorce is a bad thing right? […]
Child 6: Well it’s a good thing for my parents.
Intern 4: But it’s a bad thing for you?
Child 6: Mmm, hmm.

Experience and Advice: “Stop Fighting”

Children made reference to feeling caught in the middle when describing why they feel sad or mad about their parents’ divorce. Children talked about not wanting to get involved in their parents’ arguments and how they tried to avoid conflict at home (as much as possible). Increased fighting between family and siblings seemed to be common experiences for the participants in the study. When asked what they would tell their parents about the divorce, one
child responded that she would tell her parents not to fight in front of her. Others reported that they attempt to leave the situation in order to avoid fighting between their parents.

The following three quotes are examples of the children feeling caught in the middle or them describing their parents fighting in their presence. In addition, they discuss what advice they would give another child whose parents are divorced.

Example #1:

Intern 4: What do you usually do when you feel worried?
Child 7: I just stay in my room and try not to get into a thing…like a conversation. Like get in the middle. […]
Intern 4: So you worry that you might get stuck in the middle between your parents?
Child 7: Oh yeah.

Example #2:

Intern 2: Let’s say…like if they don’t get remarried but if you were to say one thing to each of your parents while they were divorcing to make it easier on you what would you say?
Child 2: Um, stop fighting when we’re near them.
Intern 2: Okay, that’s a really, really good one. Would you say that to both parents? Or just one?
Child 2: Both.

Example #3:

Intern 4: What advice would you give to another child whose parents are divorced?
Child 7: Just stay in your room and try not to get in the middle of the arguments and just stay back as close as you can…as far as you can.
Intern 4: What about you [Child 6]…what advice would you give?
Child 6: Try not to think about it and try to stay out of it.
What They Worry About

When asked what they worry about in regards to their parents’ divorce, the children gave a variety of answers. Most of their concerns seemed to relate to themes of conflict and loss. Three of the children in the sample said that they worry about their parents’ well being. One child in particular talked about feeling sad that her mother was alone. While some of the children expressed concern for their loved ones, another child said she was worried about her own emotional state of mind. In addition to being aware of others’ feelings, children expressed distress regarding the relationships in their lives as evidence by their comments during the interview, and they seemed to worry often about their family members not getting along. Another child talked about being afraid to tell other people about her parents’ divorce in fear others would find out and it would appear in the news.

Along with worrying about the relationships in their lives, the most common worry amongst the children interviewed seemed to be that they would never see their parent or loved one again. While almost all of the children expressed fear about not seeing their noncustodial parent, others talked about never seeing their grandparents and other relatives again. As evidenced by their comments, it appeared the children in the sample adopted an either-or rather than a both-and mindset, believing that their parents’ divorce meant they would never see the other parent again. Even when asked to reflect on the worries of other children whose parents are divorced, one child thought other children would be afraid they would never see their mom or dad again as well. Most of the children said they worry about this often and that they start to feel sad when they think about it. While four of the children have parents who live in another state, the rest gave similar answers despite seeing their parents on a weekly basis, suggesting this fear
may be a common concern for children whose parents are divorced regardless of their custody arrangement.

The following three examples reveal the emotions the children felt regarding their parents’ divorce and some of the things they worry about frequently.

Example #1:

Child 5: Well I’m worried that [child’s sibling] and Grandma….that [child’s sibling] and Grandma don’t get along. They never ever, never since I was a kid get along, never do they ever…don’t get along. They don’t get along anywhere. […]

Intern 3: So you don’t like it when people fight?

Child 5: Uh, huh. Yeah cause [child’s sibling] and Grandma don’t get along, when they’re in the car they don’t get along, when they’re in the kitchen they don’t get along, when we’re at dinner and stuff like that they don’t get along. Nothing was like that until, but we all…everybody started to fight and stuff….our family really changed when we moved here. Like [child’s sibling] doesn’t really, she fights with [child’s other sibling] and she doesn’t like [child’s other sibling] but she use to when we lived in [city] and everything was happy, happy, happy. And, and now she doesn’t want anybody going into her room. […] All she does is not let anyone go into her room.

Intern 2: Do you think maybe she’s feeling sad?

Child 5: No I don’t think so. She just doesn’t like people around. Everything has changed. Everybody started to fight and stuff.

Intern 4: Does it make you sad everything’s changing?

Child 5: Yeah, yeah. I said yeah…..yeah, I said yeah.

Example #2:

Child 1: Okay I’m worried about our cousins. I think I’m never going to see my dad again…I think I am, but I just don’t know. […]
Child 1: Well I’m worried about I’m never going to see my [Grandma] again…Mama and [Grandma]. My dad’s mom and dad.

Example #3:
Child 5: I’m also worried I’m never going to see my mom again.
Intern 1: Do you worry about this often, [Child 5]?
Child 5: When I thought about it, I’m worried.

Coping Skills/Ways to Distract Themselves

When asked how they cope with their parents divorce, most of the children responded by saying that they usually play games, listen to music, or watch TV to distract themselves to avoid feeling sad. Two children said they try to think about happy things such as their parents getting back together, La-la-land, and sunshine and rainbows. In addition to distracting themselves, the children stated that they isolate themselves by either going outside or up to their room. They also said that they tend to keep their feelings to themselves, not telling anyone how they’re feeling. When asked whom they confide in when they are upset, the children responded by saying that they talk to their pets or inanimate objects such as their bed, blanket, etc. One child said that she would talk to her father or her counselor if she felt upset, however this seemed to be an exception compared to the other children in the sample. While the majority of the children keep their feelings to themselves, one child describes how she feels when she does tell someone.

The compilation of excerpts below depicts some of the ways children seem to cope with the feelings they experience surrounding their parents’ divorce.

Example #1:
Intern 2: No. Okay what do you typically do when you get worried or scared about your parents never getting married again?
Child 2: I feel like I’m gunna cry.
Intern 2: Oh really. Do you ever cry?
Child 2: No but I feel like I am really hard.
Intern 2: Oh really. What do you do when you feel like you’re gunna cry? […]
Child 2: I go in my room and try to block it…because I feel like I’m really going to cry.
Intern 2: Do you try to distract yourself?
Child 2: Mmm, hmm.
Intern 2: Do you like playing with stuff?
Child 2: Playing with my doll and dressing her up.
Intern 2: Oh that’s nice.
Child 2: Cause it’s an American Girl Doll.[…]
Intern 2: Do you ever tell anyone when you like start to feel like you’re about to cry?
Child 2: No.
Intern 2: No. You hold it all inside?
Child 2: Mmm, hmm. […]
Intern 2: Do you ever like tell people afterwards like later?
Child 2: No.
Intern 2: No, you just go in your room and play with your American Girl Doll and then the feeling passes? Okay.
Child 2: Cause I kind of forget.
Intern 2: Um, so you said you like to dress up your American Girl dolls. You said you like to dress up your American Girl dolls and do chores to distract yourself….is there anything else you do?
Child 2: Hide under the blanket…I just hide under there and think of happy things.
Intern 2: Oh what are some of the happy things you think about?
Child 2: Them getting back together. (Laughing)
Intern 2: […] What was the best thing about them being together?
Child 2: We saw more pets and had more friends.
Example #2:

Intern 1: How do you feel…. how do you feel when you’re worried or scared? Like do you want to be alone or do you want to talk to someone?
Child 5: When I’m worried or scared I keep it to myself and I tell people that…It’s kind of like when you keep things to yourself and sometimes you don’t tell anybody you feel really, really sad about it and you don’t tell anybody but when you talk to…..it kind of starts to shrink and you kind of feel better […]
Child 1: I go over to my room sometimes and I talk to my pillow. And I talk to my animals too. My animals really like it too.
Intern 1: So you want to talk to someone like get your feelings out?
Child 1: Yeah. Like…I like to talk it out with my bug.

Example #3:

Intern 4: So you usually just go in your room and hang out?
Child 7: I play my iPad.
Intern 4: Yeah.
Child 7: Sometimes I play with my sister, like put an iPad on her.
Intern 4: Do you ever tell anyone you feel that way…that you worry about being in the middle? Do you talk to your parents?
Child 7: I talk to my sister.
Intern 4: You talk to your sister? What does your sister say?
Child 7: Go in your room, like I do.
Intern 4: So she does the same thing?
Child 7: Yeah.
Intern 4: What does she tell you usually?
Child 7: Just stay, stay in your room. Be over! La, la, la.

Example #4:

Intern 4: So has there been anything that has helped you calm down when you’re upset that you think might be helpful for another child whose parents are
divorced? What’s something that you usually do that helps you calm down?
Child 7: Write.
Child 6: Just go listen to music with my ear buds and my phone. […]
Intern 4: So you just don’t talk to anyone?
Child 6: Yeah.
Intern 4: So you like to be alone?
Child 6: I don’t have service to call on my phone.

**Discussion**

Although research is scant regarding the impact of divorce on young children, this study explores the emotional experience of young children to help them better cope with their parents’ divorce. We combined a variety of play therapy techniques that were appropriate for the children’s developmental age to give them a medium through which to express their feelings and concerns about their parents’ divorce. In the section below, we discuss how our findings compare to previous studies. In addition, we discuss how parents, clinicians, and programmers can be more attuned to young children’s emotions in an effort to improve long-term adjustment and introduce implications for future studies.

While past research has focused on parents’ perception of child adjustment (Whiteside, 1996), more recent studies have interviewed children themselves about the meaning they make of their parents’ divorce (Cohen & Ronen, 1999; Ebling, Pruett, & Pruett, 2009; Pruett & Pruett, 1999). The children in our study gave disjointed descriptions of divorce and appeared to struggle when trying to make sense of their emotional experience. In particular, they seemed confused about logistical issues such as the timing and details of their parents’ divorce and had difficulty explaining what divorce means to them. Our findings are consistent with previous research. For example Pruett and Pruett (1999) asked children ages 2.5-7 questions about their parents’ divorce
and found their definitions were ambiguous and disorganized and included themes of loss, blame, and abandonment. Ebling, Pruett, and Pruett (2009) expanded their previous study and asked similar questions to children ages 3.5-7 this time with 74.5% of the children providing coherent descriptions of divorce. The authors conjectured that the difference in results might have been due to an older sample size and more directive techniques in the later study. Similarly, Mazur (1993) explored children’s comprehension level of divorce and discovered a significant difference developmentally, such that children on the younger end of their study presented less accurate descriptions of divorce than the older children. Research on how children recall past events suggests that young children create narratives that include few idealistic remarks, require minimal verbal interaction, and follow a potentially flawed view of reality (Miller & Sperry, 1988; Peterson, 1990; Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Umiker-Seboek, 1979) when compared to older children who give concise and accurate descriptions of their past (Fivush, Haden, & Adam, 1995; Hudson & Shapiro, 1991; Kernan, 1977; Menig-Peterson & McCabe, 1978; Peterson & McCabe, 1983; Umiker-Seboek, 1979).

Though the children in our study presented ambiguous descriptions of divorce itself, they reported experiencing an array of emotions around the event (e.g. sad, upset, angry, scared, mad) and displayed behavior that seemed developmentally appropriate for their age. In contrast to our study, Leon (2003) stated that due to young children’s developmental limitations they often express their emotional distress externally through their behavior rather than through their words and predicted that this might be the case for young children of divorce considering the emotionality of the situation. Similarly, Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1978) found that young children whose parents were divorced were aggressive, disrespectful, rude, and defiant. The children in our study might have been better adjusted than those in previous studies due to their
participation in a divorce support group and the fact that the study mirrored their weekly routine, making their environment both familiar and predictable.

Taking their developmental limitations into consideration, adults can help frame their child’s experience by asking them questions to activate their memory and share detailed information with them about past events (Haden, Haine, Fivush, 1997; Fivush, 1998). For example, one 5-year old in our study reported that she feels her father hates or does not like her. When asked why she feels this way, the child said her father does not want her to live with her mother and appeared to interpret his dislike for her mother as hatred towards her. Studies have shown that when parents give their children clear and concise descriptions of past events their preschool age children are better able to reproduce fluid and coherent descriptions of their lives (Fivush, 1991; Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997; McCabe & Peterson, 1991; Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993). This demonstrates the significant influence parents have in helping their children make sense of their world (Fivush, 1998). Our study coupled with others that are similar seem to indicate that parents’ perceptions and the narratives they tell their children about the divorce can impact the child’s experience and shape not only how they feel about their family, but also how they view themselves.

Another element that seems to play a role in children’s adjustment is the level of interparental conflict that occurs. In our study, 4 of 7 children reported feeling happy post-divorce because their parents fought less often. The other three children said they feel sad because their parents still fight, even though they are divorced. A number of studies suggest that interparental conflict may lead to undesirable outcomes for children (e.g. Buchanan et al., 1996; Emery, 1999; Gynch & Fincham, 2001) and that it is the most important element influencing children’s long-term adjustment post-divorce (Amato, 1993). While arguments between divorced
Parents are common, one-fourth of divorced parents experience a low level of interparental conflict (Booth & Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 1999; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). While more than one-fourth of our sample reported low interparental conflict, our results appear consistent with the literature such that if interparental conflict existed, children reported undesirable outcomes (i.e. feeling sad, mad, or stuck in the middle).

In families where interparental conflict occurs, children are often used as a means for communication between parents, a situation more frequently experienced by older rather than younger children (e.g. Davies, et al., 1996; Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989). While existing literature indicates that young children lack the verbal and cognitive skills necessary to become directly involved in their parents’ conflict, young children may still be used as a way to engage the other parent (e.g. one parent might withhold the other parent’s right to see the child) (Leon, 2003). While the children in our study did not report direct involvement in their parents’ arguments, they did state they felt sad because they often get “caught in the middle” and discussed their attempts to avoid conflict at home. Despite research suggesting that older children can get more involved in their parents’ arguments than younger children, our findings indicate that young children are aware of interparental conflict and that witnessing their parents’ fight can be distressing.

A ubiquitous theme for children of divorce is the desire for their parents to get married again (Ebling, Pruett, & Pruett, 2009; Jennings & Howe, 2001; Oppawsky, 1989). In a study by Cohen and Ronen (1999), two children were identified as being in the denial and fantasy stage because they drew pictures of their parents together. Similarly, one child in our study acknowledged that her parents were divorced but still wished that they would get married again. While research on young children of divorce is limited, our study along with others seem to
suggest that children struggle to cope with their parents divorce and long for their family to be one cohesive unit. When considering some of the protective factors that can ease children’s adjustment, studies propose that extra support from siblings and extended family can act as a shield protecting children from some of the damaging effects often associated with parental divorce (Cowen, et al., 1990). Findings from our study were less conclusive. One child reported feeling upset when she heard her siblings fighting while another said he plays and talks to his sister when he feels caught in the middle of his parents’ conflict.

The most common topic of concern for the children in our study was the fear of not being able to see one of their parents, which seemed to be unique to our study. In addition, the children were afraid they would “never see their relative [i.e. cousin, aunt, grandparent] again.” Although researchers have speculated that increased contact with the noncustodial parent following divorce is healthy for children, results on the outcomes affecting young children are mixed (e.g. Hodges, Wechsler, & Ballantine, 1979; Hodges, Landis, Day, & Oderberg, 1991; Whiteside & Becker, 2000). These studies along with others that explore the effect of contact with the noncustodial parent question whether seeing the other parent or moving between houses is the factor that might impact children’s long-term adjustment (Leon, 2003). For example, a study conducted by Johnson and Campbell (1988) asked parents about their child’s transition and found that 58-71% of preschool age children struggled when moving back and forth between households, demonstrating frustration, defiance, and regressive behavior. While research regarding contact with the non-resident parent is varied, our study highlights that not seeing the other parent is a concern that appears to be distressing for young children. It is important to note that the children who reported this as a concern all had parents who lived out of state, which may have amplified their fear of never seeing their other parent again.
When describing how they cope with their concerns about their parents’ divorce, children in our study reported that they distract themselves by playing games, listening to music, or watching TV. When asked in whom they confide, they stated that they either keep their feelings to themselves or they talk to their bed, dog, bugs, etc. Based on our findings, it appears young children may cope with their parents divorce in isolation and are reaching out for comfort from resources that may not be effective in helping them make sense of their parents’ divorce. This finding seems consistent with research that exists stating that children whose parents are divorced often experience limited responsiveness and a lower quality of parenting from their parents post divorce (Buchanan et al., 1996). One reason this might be the case is because parents are often too preoccupied with their own emotional states to be able to attend fully to their children (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

**Clinical Implications**

We know that young children whose parents are divorced experience a variety of emotions and struggle to make sense of their experience on their own. Considering their limited cognitive and verbal skills, it’s important for parents, clinicians, and programmers to understand where children are developmentally in order to better help them cope with parental divorce. This information can help parents recognize when their children might be struggling and encourage them not to dismiss their children as being too young to understand the complex dynamics of divorce. Furthermore, parents can help clarify the gaps in their children’s narrative, thus shaping their experience and helping them make sense of their world.

As clinicians, it is our job to provide children with the right medium to help them articulate their emotions while allowing them the freedom to express themselves. According to Fivush (1998), young children have an easier time reporting their feelings when adults provide
them with the structure and support they need in order to do so. While there are a number of possible treatment modalities, we found employing play therapy techniques combined with direct interviewing was helpful because it allowed us to get more information than if we resorted to talking alone. For example, the “Worry Can Technique” utilized the children’s developmental strengths (e.g. their creativity and writing skills) to encourage active participation and help them better verbalize their fears about their parents’ divorce. Lastly, we believe it would be beneficial for divorce support groups to train group leaders and parents about children’s developmental life stages. This will help set realistic expectations about a child’s ability to comprehend divorce and encourage group leaders and parents to be more attuned to the child’s emotional needs.

Another factor that is important for parents and clinicians to consider is the array of emotions young children experience when their parents divorce. While some children in our study reported emotions more commonly associated with divorce (i.e. sad, angry, upset, frustrated, etc.), others said they felt happy and relieved that their parents were no longer fighting. Additionally, some children reported emotions that are harder to predict such as embarrassment and self-blame, which may affect school and social support networks. Being aware of these differences might prevent parents and clinicians from assuming all children feel the same way and can help remind them to learn about each child’s unique experience from his or her own perspective. Lastly, almost all of the children in our study reported that they keep their feelings to themselves and do not talk to anyone when they feel sad. As clinicians, we can be more aware of children’s emotions and pay careful attention to their nonverbal cues to better understand their experience. In doing so, we are modeling for parents how to build a close bond with their children and can eventually facilitate this kind of connection between parent and child in the therapy room. Knowing that their children need help coping with the divorce might help
parents be more attuned to their children’s thoughts and feelings or encourage them to find the appropriate support needed, should they be too overwhelmed themselves.

**Future Studies & Limitations**

Future studies might consider doing one on one interviews (i.e. one child per group leader) rather than small groups of two or three. Because they were in small groups, there were times when one child would speak out of turn, interrupting the other child before he or she was finished talking. This sometimes made it difficult to allow space for both children to speak and to fully capture each child’s experience. In addition, preschool age children can be easily distracted. Group leaders reported that it was sometimes difficult to stay on track and feel as though they were giving equal attention to both children. While on one hand these limitations posed challenges, on the other hand, some children may have felt more comfortable in a group setting, frequently adding their input after listening to something another child had just said. Furthermore, conducting research in a group setting might have normalized their experience and helped them recognize that they are not the only ones whose parents are divorced.

Secondly, when reading the transcripts outlined in the study, it may seem as though the child’s response was shaped or prompted by the facilitator’s question to the child. While this is a limitation when working with children of this age group, this interaction can also be considered an example of scaffolding since young children often times look to adults to help them make meaning of their surroundings. Future studies might also want to consider spending more time training the group leaders to ask more in-depth questions during the group interviews. In this study we had only one day to train the group leaders on the study’s procedure. It might have helped yield richer data had the interviewers been clinicians themselves or been trained in the field of marriage and family therapy. While this might have provided more data, it is important
to recognize that the children might not have opened up as much as they did considering they already trusted the group leaders and had established relationships with them prior to the time of the interview. Despite our study providing important information about children’s experience of divorce, future studies are needed to help advise parents and clinicians on how to best help young children cope with the intricate and complex emotions associated with parental divorce.
References


of their narratives. *Developmental Psychology, 14*, 582-592.


Appendix A: Interview Activities

Data Collection Rationale

Although there is no incentive for the parents to allow their children to participate in the study, those who attend divorce support groups tend to be invested in their children’s wellbeing. Past experience of working with these families suggest that they are generally interested in advancing the field of research especially when it pertains to divorce. The study’s protocol will be implemented in a format that is congruent with the children’s usual routine. For example, a snack will be provided during the designated activities to mimic the children’s weekly routine. In addition, integrating the researcher amongst the current group leaders may increase the likelihood of acceptance.

Instructions for Play Therapy Techniques

The Before and After Drawing Technique. This technique begins by having the researcher and group leaders ask the child to draw a picture of his or her family before the divorce took place and a second picture of the child’s family after the divorce. While the children begin drawing, the researcher and group leaders will ask the children a series of questions in reference to their specific drawing as well as related to the process of divorce as a whole. The researcher should pay attention to the inclusion and exclusion of important information as well as the distance the child places between himself and each family member (Cangelosi, 1997).

The Worry Can Technique. In order to employ this activity, the researcher will make a worry jar out of a tin can. The researcher will cut a large piece of construction paper and place it over the top to cover the can (prepared ahead of time). For this activity, each group leader will have their own worry can, which the children will be allowed to decorate. Since there will be approximately ten children there will be five cans total. The researcher will have a variety of
“scary things” (e.g. monsters, aliens, etc.) already prepared for the children to choose from. The child will glue his or her “scary thing” on the outside of the can to decorate it. Once the can is decorated, the group leader cuts a slit in the lid big enough to fit a piece of folded paper. Next, the group leader will give each child three strips of regular white paper. Each child will be instructed to tell the researcher his or her concerns (regarding their parents’ divorce) and then write them down on the strips of paper, allotting one worry per piece of paper. The researcher and group leaders will ask the children leading questions about their worries or concerns as well as any advice they would give another child in a similar situation. The researcher will ask each child to speak one at a time, to ensure that the researcher can distinguish between the children’s voices on the audio recording device. The researcher will give each child time to respond to the questions before asking the other children for their responses. After the children are done writing out their concerns, the group leader will direct them to sit in the middle of the room as a group. With the help of their group leader, the children will be encouraged to share some of their worries with the other children in the group.
Appendix B: Interview Script

The researcher will begin by introducing himself/herself and any volunteers participating in the study and then giving a brief overview of the day’s activities as follows:

- “Hi everyone how are you all doing today? I am visiting the program today and have come to spend some time with you. I have planned fun activities for us to do and I brought a snack for later. First, I am going to ask you to get into groups of two and I will assign you to a group leader. Your group leader will take you to your own area of the room to play today. The first activity is to grab a piece of paper and some crayons and we want you to draw a picture of your family before the divorce took place and another picture of your family after the divorce occurred. Your group leader will be there to talk to you about your pictures or if you need help to draw what you would like to make.”

(As the children begin drawing the group leader(s) will ask the following questions):

- What does divorce mean to you?
- Do you live with your mom or dad?
- Do you travel back and forth between mom’s house and dad’s house?
  - If yes, do you like living at both houses? Why or why not?
- What was your family like before your parents got divorced?
- What are some things that have changed now that your parents are divorced?
- What are some things that have stayed the same now that your parents are divorced?

- “Thank you all for drawing a picture of your family before the divorce and another picture of your family after the divorce. We appreciate you sharing your pictures with us. Now we are going to sit down together and have a snack.”

After approximately twenty minutes, the researcher will say:
• We want to move onto our second activity, which is called, ‘The Worry Can Technique.’

First, you are going to decorate a worry can in your small groups with the help of your group leader. Your group leader will have “scary things” (i.e. monsters, aliens, etc.) that you can choose from and glue to the outside of the can. Then with the help of your group leader, you are going to write down three worries and put them inside the worry can. After all your worries are placed in the can, we are going to share our worry cans with the group.”

(Once the children break into small groups and begin the exercise, the group leader(s) will ask the following questions):

- What is something you worry about regarding your parents’ divorce?
- Do you worry about this often? (As the child shares his or her concerns, the group leader will respond empathetically and validate the child’s experience).
- What do you typically do when you get worried or scared about something?
  - Do you tell anyone that you feel this way? Do you share your feelings with your parent(s)? Or with your sibling(s)?
- What is something you can do to make yourself feel better when you start to feel worried or scared about something?
- **What advice might you give another child whose parents are divorced?
- How do you think another child whose parents are divorced might be feeling?
- What would you say to him or her to make them feel better?
- Has there been anything that has helped you calm down when you’re upset that you think might be helpful to another child whose parents are divorced?

If the child says that he does not have any worries or fears about the divorce, the group leader might ask:
What do you think a child who is [age of the child] might worry about if his or her parents were divorced?

“If everyone has had the opportunity to put their worries in the “worry can”, then we can all sit down together in the middle of the room and share our worry cans. Which group would like to come up and share their worry cans with the group?” (If the children volunteer to share their worry can, their group leader will assist them by holding up the worry can as the child displays the object as well as help them read their worries to the group). After everyone has had the opportunity to share their worry can with the group, the researcher will thank the children for sharing and say goodbye.
Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter

Virginia Tech

Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120, Virginia Tech
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0959
email irb@vt.edu
website http://www.irb.vt.edu

MEMORANDUM

DATE: July 30, 2013

TO: Angela J Huebner, Mara Rae Katz

FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires April 25, 2018)

PROTOCOL TITLE: Exploring the Experience of Divorce for Young Children

IRB NUMBER: 13-625

Effective July 29, 2013, the Virginia Tech Institution Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the New Application request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As: Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 6,7
Protocol Approval Date: July 29, 2013
Protocol Expiration Date: July 28, 2014
Continuing Review Due Date*: July 14, 2014

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/awards with the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal/award statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to exempt and interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.