Qualitative

Young children experienced marked insecurity and grief after parental divorce and perceived legal professionals as exacerbating difficulties

Pruett KD, Pruett MK. "Only God decides": young children's perceptions of divorce and the legal system. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 1999 Dec;38:1544-50.

QUESTION: How do young children perceive their parents' divorce, the effect on their families, and legal officials?

Design

Semistructured play interviews were conducted at home as part of a larger study and a grounded theory approach was used to identify recurrent themes.

Setting

10 towns in Connecticut, USA.

Participants

22 children 3-7 years old from 18 families who had finalised divorce in the previous 6 months.

Methods

An experienced child psychiatrist conducted individual semistructured interviews lasting 1 hour. The children drew their family then engaged in semistructured play with drawings to expand emergent themes while parents were interviewed separately. Notes were analysed for recurrent content in 6 predetermined categories.

Main findings

The young children had complex personal views about divorce and legal processes. Children from higher conflict families showed more stress, anxiety, a constricted sense of the world and their future, and greater fears.

3 themes emerged from the play sessions: (1) back and forth between houses and preoccupation with accidents, (2) lawyer play and courtroom drama, and (3) concerns about security at home with fears of loss, harm, and loneliness. In the courtroom scenarios the children explained that judges are paid to decide things when nobody else can and wanted them to make adults behave. Lawyers were depicted as pirates, vampires, or wolves who scared children and stole money from parents. Every child described a change in their father, some for the worse, particularly in high conflict families. Most children felt deep sadness and loss about the permanent damage to their parents' relationship. Most children expressed confusion about what divorce actually was. Some saw it as killing the family. Blame, loss of trust, and fear of separation and abandonment were frequent themes.

There was confusion about lawyers and different court personnel and whether they could be trusted. Definitions of judges were often negative because they were unable to prevent the divorce and conflict despite their authority. All children described ways to improve the process such as the judge listening to the children, and lawyers being truthful and not frightening children about separation.

Conclusions

Young children from divorced families had many negative feelings and confusion surrounding their parents' divorce and could express their views through play. The results suggest that clinicians should help parents to be sensitive to young children's feelings and needs, using age appropriate information about the divorce process.

COMMENTARY

This study by Pruett and Pruett focuses on the experience of very young children at the time of divorce rather than the long term effects of divorce as in other important studies.^{1 2} This small qualitative study shows how white American children were able to express their feelings and views eloquently using semistructured play with an experienced clinician.

Although the findings require replication, they confirm common clinical experience with older children. These children express poignantly their grief and insecurity, exacerbated by conflict between parents that the legal system often intensifies. It is unclear how the effects of parental conflict before parental separation have influenced their responses, but, as the authors conclude, "only reunification mattered more to these children than their parents' ability to remain friendly." Very young children may be less aware of parental conflict than older children, but are more susceptible to diminished parenting capacity during divorce.

Considerable child mental health resources are now consumed dealing with the aftermath of divorce and separation to ameliorate the harm to children. This study describes a tool which can be used to bring the views of young children through mental health professionals to parents and the legal system and which may provide an opportunity to place the wellbeing of young children rightly at the forefront.

Pruett and Pruett suggest that parents continue to need support and guidance about the effect of divorce on children and that young children need developmentally appropriate explanations of the legal process. They plan to evaluate such interventions in subsequent research. Increased understanding of children's suffering as a result of the divorce epidemic may ensure they are heard, disputes are resolved sooner, calmly, and with the need for co-operative parenting at the forefront.

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- 1 Hetherington EM, Cox M, Cox R. Long-term effects of divorce and remarriage on the adjustment of children. *J Am Acad Child Psychiatry* 1985;24:518-30.
- 2 Wallerstein JS, Kelly JB. *Surviving the breakup: how children and parents cope with divorce*. New York: Basic Books, 1980.