
WHAT DO THE TRUE EXPERTS SAY? YOUNG ADULTS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COPING WITH PARENTAL DIVORCE

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ABSTRACT

Parental divorce affects countless families every year around the globe. Literature reveals detrimental effects of parental divorce on families, particularly on children and adolescents. Few studies, however, explored possible recommendations on how to effectively cope with this event from individuals who have experienced it themselves. The present study subsequently inquired practical recommendations from young adults who had experienced parental divorce during their childhood and/or adolescent years. Data was collected through semi-structured retrospective interviews with 15 young South African adults who were selected by means of snowball sampling. The findings revealed 2 sets of practical recommendations for both parents and children to enhance coping with parental divorce with effective communication in relationships emerging as a vital coping skill. It is hoped that these recommendations will enable psychotherapists, social workers and/or any other individual/s involved in assisting families undergoing divorce to cope more optimally with this event.

Keywords: divorce, parental divorce, coping, recommendations, young adults, children, adolescents, phenomenology, retrospective interviews, communication, interactional approach

INTRODUCTION

Divorce has long been regarded as one of the most stressful experiences that any member of a family can experience. One of the earliest and most significant research findings to have supported this notion were reported on by Holmes and Rahe (1967), whose research focused on stressful life changes as experienced by human beings. They found divorce to be rated as the second most stressful life event, with the death of a spouse the only other event rated as being more stressful.

Recent trends display a global increase in divorce rates with significant implications for those affected families. Amato (2000) indicates, for example, that near the middle of the 19th century approximately 5% of first marriages had ended in divorce. In contrast it is estimated that about 50% of first marriages initiated in recent years will eventually be ended voluntarily. Second marriages also show a higher likelihood of dissolving as opposed to first marriages (Amato, 2000). In South Africa, an article published in the *Beeld* newspaper of 19 August 2010 by Buys (2010) indicated that of the more than eighteen million children living in South Africa, 34,3% of these children live with both of their biological parents, 39,9% live only with their biological mother, 2,8% live with only with their biological father and 23% live with non-biological parents (Buys, 2010).

More recently statistics obtained from Statistics South Africa (2010) released in 2010, indicate that 30763 divorces were recorded in South Africa in 2009 and that the number of granted divorces had been fluctuating between 28924 and 34145 during the last decade. In 2011, 167264 marriages were recorded while 20980 divorces were granted and 18571 children were impacted by these divorces (Statistics South Africa, 2011). These statistics displayed a significant increase in the divorce rate in recent years which highlighted a need for more research on skills required to cope effectively with parental divorce.

DIVORCE

Two general definitions of divorce are included here for the purpose of clarity on the concept, namely that divorce refers to “the legal ending of a marriage” and “to end one’s marriage by legal means” (Hornby, 1995:340). From these two definitions it appears that divorce takes place once two individuals, who had once been legally married, voluntarily end their marital contract. However, divorce has multiple additional implications on different spheres of the lives of families affected by it. Expressed differently, the process of divorce involves much more than the mere ending of a marital contract. Sadock and Sadock (2007) describe divorce as a major life crisis that has a profound impact on multiple facets of the life of the entire family unit, including children.

Impact of parental divorce

Amato (2000), who summarised and organised research findings from the 1990s for both adults and children regarding the effects of divorce, found that divorce has the potential to create a considerable amount of turmoil for all those who are affected by it. However, Amato (2000) importantly adds that people’s reactions vary considerably in the face of divorce due to multiple factors. Some people even appear to benefit in certain respects from the divorce, while others may fall into a downward spiral from which they never recover. Others may only experience temporary decrements in their well-being as a result of divorce.

Middle childhood includes the period of life between the age of six and twelve years (Shaffer and Kipp, 2014; Louw and Louw, 2007). This is also often the period which coincides for children, in South Africa, with their time at primary school. According to Van Rensburg (2001), at a cognitive level during this phase of their lives, children are able to grasp the permanency of divorce. Furthermore, they are able to grasp, to an extent, the complexity of the disorganisation in the family while they continue their attempts to make sense of it. In accordance with the aforementioned Lansford (2009) determined that, in terms of behavioural outcomes, younger children appear to be more at risk when parental divorce occurs. With respect to academic and social relationship outcomes (including romantic relationships), adolescents were, however, found to be more at risk.

The behavioural, emotional and social implications identified from the literature that divorce may have on children during middle childhood include feelings of anger; divided loyalties; a depressive mood; risk of suicide; a sense of loss; uncertainty; doubt; disillusionment; multiple disruptions such as, moving to a new home and/or school; social isolation; loneliness; fear; shame; hope of parental reconciliation; poorer academic performance; adopting of parental roles; creating distance from abusive parent; fostering a closer relationship with the custodial parent and in some cases, a sense of relief (Lansford, 2009; Jansen Van Rensburg, 2004; Van Rensburg, 2001; Amato, 2000, Ariditti, 1999; Fisher, 1999; Hanson, 1999; Steyn, 1998; Frydenberg, 1997; Amato, Loomis and Booth, 1995; Amato and Keith, 1991; Francke, 1983; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1976).

Although an in depth discussion of each of the aforementioned effects is outside the scope of this paper, it is important to note that not all children of this developmental group may experience all of these effects should their parents divorce. Each situation is unique and will differ, however, the literature identified these effects as those which most frequently impacts children of this developmental group in the event of parental divorce.

Adolescents have been found to be impacted by divorce in much the same way as children during middle adulthood. Rathus (2014) and Louw and Louw (2007) indicate that adolescence refers to the years between the ages of eleven and thirteen until the ages of seventeen to twenty one. These are also the years that usually coincide with high school. According to Van Rensburg (2001), divorce during these years could be extremely difficult as the adolescent is already confronted with a sense of confusion, particularly surrounding identity.

Given the increasing South African and global divorce rates, as well as the highly detrimental effects that parental divorce potentially has on children and adolescents, it is of the utmost importance to study effective coping methods for such an event. Despite the numerous aforementioned research studies having been conducted on the topic both in South Africa and globally it, however, appears that the majority of these studies focused exclusively on the detrimental implications for both children and adults of divorce. Few of these studies were found to have focused on possible optimal implications or recommendations on how to cope as effectively as possible with divorce. One particularly influential study that was, however, identified to have been done on the phenomena of coping with parental divorce, was conducted by Roux (2007) who focused specifically on children's coping with parental divorce.

No research could be identified on how young adults in South Africa had attempted to cope with their parents' divorce during their childhood and/or adolescent years. This determination led to an attempt to fill this apparent void in the literature and build on the research that had been conducted by Roux (2007), by completing the present study. The focus of the present study subsequently fell on how young adults had coped with the divorce of their parents during their childhood and/or adolescent years.

COPING

Some of the earliest pioneers in the study of coping include Lazarus (1991, 1985) and Lazarus and Folkman (1984) referred to by Brown, Howcroft and Jacobs (2009:450), who define coping as the "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person". Furthermore, Weiten and Loyd (2003) added that coping efforts by individuals could either be regarded as adaptive (for example, problem focused) or maladaptive (for example, through self-blame or giving up on further attempts at solving problems).

In discussing an individual's ability to solve problems from an interactional approach towards psychology which, as seen from the section above, relates closely to an individuals' ability to cope, Vorster (2011) explains that the ability to cope is vital for any individual in order to maintain a state of optimal mental health. This is vital as in the event that an individual is unable to cope effectively with everyday problems or life events such as parental divorce, such an individual may subjectively feel overwhelmed and/or present with signs and symptoms of diagnosable psychiatric disorders.

Coping with parental divorce

According to Amato (2000), divorce is not only viewed as a single event, but rather as a process which starts while a married couple is still residing together and ultimately ends only long after the legal divorce is finalised. Amato (2000) further explains that, during what is known as the uncoupling phase, a number of stressful experiences are usually set in motion for individuals involved in the divorce which increases their risk of experiencing detrimental behavioural, as well as emotional and health effects, for both adults and children. This highlights the importance of determining recommendations of effective coping with parental divorce if and where it occurs.

Some argue that time is the only true healer when it comes to coping effectively with divorce. A study conducted by Frost and Pakiz (1990) identified that children, who have developed behavioural difficulties resulting from parental divorce, display a decline in these difficulties over time. Other research studies have, however, indicated the contrary, such as the longitudinal study conducted by Cherlin, Case-Landsdale and McRae (1998). This study found that the gap between the psychological well-being of children from divorced parents, as opposed to those children whose parents had remained married, seems to grow larger over time. Amato (2000) adds that a large amount of research also indicates that parental divorce appears to be a major risk factor for psychological difficulties during adulthood, such as low socio-economic status, marital difficulties and for these children to have divorced themselves as adults. This appears to question whether time alone acts as a sufficient coping mechanism and whether more is not required for children to adjust to parental divorce.

Amato (2000) notes further that, when referring to specific coping resources, a study by Sandler, Tein and West (1994) found that children during their middle childhood years who attempt to make use of active coping skills, which included the gathering of social support and specifically problem solving, cope more effectively than children who make use of avoidance or distraction in an attempt to cope with their parental divorce. Roux's (2007) research results further found that, similar to the findings of Louw and Louw (2007), children need to develop a personal understanding of their parents' divorce and be given the opportunity to voice their opinions in developing a sense of consistency in their lives, in order to be able to cope effectively with their parental divorce. Furthermore, Roux (2007) found that children expressed the desire to have a voice on matters pertaining to themselves; the need for co-parenting and "equal time" with both parents; and the value of involvement of significant other individuals in their lives, were all found to be of significant assistance to children in coping with divorce (Roux, 2007).

In another study conducted in South Africa by Spalding and Pretorius (2001), it was found that the divorce process includes negative, detrimental aspects as well as options in which the individual could alter and adjust these effects in a way that is meaningful and optimal. From this it appears that by adopting a more optimistic/positive attitude and to seek positive meanings resulting from the divorce of his or her parents, a child or adolescent could also cope more effectively with parental divorce, despite the negative implications that it may hold.

What differentiated the present study from the aforementioned was the decision to include young adults who had personally experienced parental divorce earlier in their lives. This was done as they were regarded by the researchers as the true experts on their personal experiences. The present study, therefore, aimed to grant participants an opportunity to provide recommendations (from their own experiences and perspectives) to adults and children on how to cope effectively with parental divorce.

METHOD

Research design

In order to obtain the participants' (the true experts') recommendations on coping with divorce, a qualitative design was utilised. Qualitative research can be described as being concerned with meaning and depth in a general sense. Qualitative researchers view the environment as socially constructed and, therefore, as consisting of numerous perceptions and interpretations of reality. It, therefore, focuses on how individuals view situations from their unique perspectives while excluding "common sense" notions, scientific explanations or any other interpretation to come to that understanding as it is commonly found in quantitative research, and more specifically within the positivist approach (Donalek, 2004). Furthermore, qualitative research proposes that views are relative to each individual and can change over time (Merriam, 2002). Snape and Spencer (2003:21) state: "The diversity of perspectives thus adds richness to our understanding of the various ways in which that reality has been experienced..." In qualitative methods, researchers do not seek to obtain an "objective truth", but rather the unique experiences and understanding of an individual in the social world. The social world and its phenomenon is, therefore, accessible via the individual experiences, interpretations and opinions (Snape and Spencer, 2003). The research aim, of providing young adults with the opportunity of making

recommendations from their own perspectives and experiences regarding how to cope with parental divorce, thus falls within the framework of a qualitative research method.

Participants

The focus of this study fell on what young adults between the ages of 20 and 39 years would recommend – from their own subjective experiences and opinions – on how to promote effective coping after parental divorce. Nolte (2002) describes young adults as individuals between the ages of approximately 18 and 25 years who have completed schooling or are in the process of completing it. Louw and Louw (2007) however, describe young adulthood from a broader developmental perspective as the period of life that lasts from the age of 20 to 39 years. For the purpose of this study, the developmental perspective was accepted. Inclusion criteria were that individuals, therefore, had to be between the ages of 20 to 39, and who had experienced the divorce of their parents during their middle childhood or adolescent years. Participants had to be able to converse in either English or Afrikaans to be included in the sample.

Purposive, non-probability sampling was used, where participants were included due to specific knowledge of a phenomenon. One form of non-probability sampling entails snowball sampling, which was also used. In this specific study, young adults were allowed to nominate acquaintances whom they believed may also be willing to participate in the research. This was done until data saturation had taken place (Whitley, 2002). The first participant was a young adult referred by a colleague of one of the researchers. This participant subsequently referred other friends, who, on their part referred friends and acquaintances who met the inclusion criteria. After interviewing 15 participants, data saturation had taken place as specified by Strauss and Corbin (1998). A total of 9 female and 6 male participants were included in the sample with a mean age of 24 years.

Data collection

Upon meeting with candidates, the purpose of the study was first explained to each of them and their anonymity assured. The participants were then offered the opportunity to ask any questions. The voluntary nature of the study was also confirmed, after which, those who agreed to continue with participation, completed the informed consent document formulated for this study. After written, informed consent for interviewing and audio-recording had been obtained, the interviews commenced.

The aim of individual research interviews as a method of data collection is to ultimately obtain shared meanings. This is done by evoking a vivid picture of the experiences and perspectives from the participant while conducting the interview (Clarke and Iphofen, 2006). Furthermore, according to Wimpenny and Gass (2000), individual research interviews provide the basis from which participants' descriptions of their experiences can be explored, highlighted and probed in a gentle manner.

In semi-structured research interviews only broad questions are asked of the participants. For the purpose of this research the following question was, therefore, asked: *“From your experience and perception, which guidelines should be provided to parents and children regarding coping with parental divorce?”*

The interviews followed the guidelines of Polkinghorne (1983) and Colaizzi (1978) that suggest both an open-ended as well as semi-structured format. The purpose for this was to attempt to gather information on specific situations and action sequences related to the topic under investigation, as opposed to simply obtaining general opinions. The semi-structured interviews were further not prescribed in terms of duration, but instead to last until it appeared to the researcher that all of the topics had been covered and no further concepts were being revealed. Each participant was interviewed once which lasted an average of 40 minutes, each at a private and quiet location of their choice such as an office. Each of the interviews were recorded and sent to an independently contracted transcriber who transcribed each interview into a written format.

Data analysis

The following steps as advocated by Polkinghorne (1983) and Van Kaam (1969) were adapted and followed by the researcher: Phase 1: Reading of protocols. During this phase the researcher read through the protocols to obtain a holistic view of the content. Phase 2: Division of transcripts into natural meanings units (NMUs). This was achieved by means of “bracketing” whereby preconceived ideas of what was known about the phenomena under investigation were suspended by the researcher. Phase 3: Linguistic transformation. This was done by reducing and linguistically transforming all the selections of the previous phases into more accurate and descriptive terms. In doing so, the researcher aimed to explicitly express the implicit psychological aspects of the meaning units. Phase 4: Integration of natural meaning units (NMUs) with related themes. In this phase each meaning unit was integrated with its relevant theme in terms of the topic under investigation. Phase 5: Synthesis was achieved once the natural meaning units had been transformed into psychological terminology and the researcher attempted to synthesise them into descriptive statements of essential and non-redundant psychological meanings. Phase 6: Development of a general description. Following the descriptions that were made for each individual participant, in this final phase the researchers developed a general description by focusing on all aspects that were regarded as trans-situational or descriptive of the phenomenon in general.

Trustworthiness

According to Polkinghorne (1983), four qualities can be utilised to help the reader evaluate the power and trustworthiness of accounts, namely vividness, accuracy, richness and elegance. This research aimed to generate a sense of reality and a personal recognition of the phenomenon through precise and rich description. Furthermore, it was attempted to present the data poignantly in order to encourage engagement with the descriptions. A peer review group consisting of three other registered psychologists was also requested to critically examine the researchers’ analyses in an effort to overcome any possible intrinsic bias and to ensure that no important themes or other information may have been missed (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Throughout the data analysis phase, in addition to continuous checking for representativeness of data and fit between coding categories and data, critical awareness of the limitations of data analysis further reduced bias and increased this study’s trustworthiness (Smith, 2007).

Ethical considerations

Firstly, the voluntary and anonymous nature of the information obtained by participants was highlighted within the introductory letter that all of the participants received. Participants were also requested to complete an informed consent document compiled for this study, while being verbally reminded of the voluntary and anonymous nature of the content of their interviews, prior to commencing with them. Permission was also obtained from participants to make audio-recordings of the interviews. The participants were further assured that the research project had been approved by the Research and Ethics Committee of North-West University (Potchefstroom campus). Steps were also taken throughout the research process to protect the anonymity of the participants by ensuring that only the researchers personally conducted the interviews. All of the documentation and audio-recordings completed by the participants were securely locked in a safe place, so as to ensure confidentiality. An independent psychologist was also contracted to assist any participant during or following the research interview where indicated due to the sensitive nature of the research topic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section highlights the results of the study which is followed by a discussion in relation to other related research that was identified from the literature. The results were divided into two sections, namely recommendations for parents and recommendations for children. Figure 1 provides a depiction of the recommendations for parents.

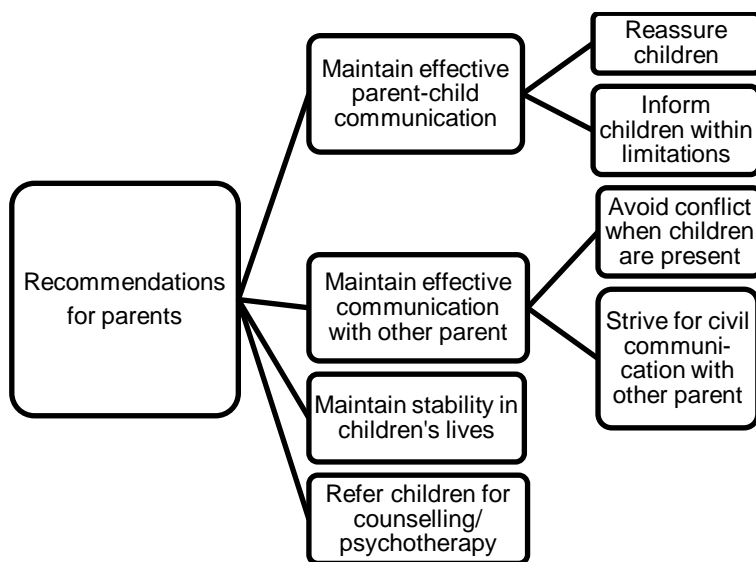


Figure 1: Recommendations for parents

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS

The first section of the recommendations highlights certain recommendations that were made by the participants for parents. Firstly, a set of recommendations that involves

communication between the parent/s and their children during divorce was made by the majority of the participants:

Reassure children

Most of the participants indicated that children would greatly benefit from reassurance by their parents on a number of matters such as their continued love towards them as well as absolving them of responsibility for the divorce. Participant 1 recommended: *“Assure the child that it [the divorce] is not his or her fault.”* Similarly participant 8 stated: *“Reassure children that it [the divorce] was not their fault.”* Participant 9 said: *“Tell them [children] it [the divorce] is not their fault.”* Participant 13 recommended that children should be told by parents: *“Your parents are divorcing because of this, but they still love you equally, and will still provide for you.”* Similarly participant 14 stated: *“Always reassure your children of your love for them and that you will still take care of them no matter what.”*

From the above it seems to be vital for children to receive verbal confirmation from their parents regarding their continued love, support and the fact that children bear no responsibility for the divorce, so as to avoid feelings of guilt and to assist them to cope more effectively. This appears to confirm the findings of Vorster (2011) that receiving confirmation from the environment plays a vital part in the promotion of optimal mental health among all human beings.

Provide information to children within limitations

In addition to providing reassurance the participants in the present study also advised that children be informed about the divorce and its possible effects on their family, especially for their future. Participant 13 stated: *“They [parents] must talk to them [children] about it, make them understand as best as possible why it’s [the divorce] happening.”* Similarly participant 8 said: *“Always inform the child what is happening [in terms of the divorce]”.* Participant 9 stated: *“Be open with a child [about the divorce]”.* The participants, however, cautioned that this should be done within limits, as sharing certain information could also be detrimental to the coping process, particularly if they are not equipped from a developmental level to handle it. In this regard participant 1 explained: *“Always inform the child and explain the divorce to the child but consider the emotional level of the child, don’t give the child too much detail.”*

Participant 2 stated: *“Don’t share things with them [children] that aren’t in their own capacity to handle.”* In her explanation of what she referred to in this respect the participant elaborated by saying: *“My Mom also had stuff that wasn’t, it wasn’t appropriate for me to hear at that age. All her boyfriend stories and all her sexual stories and all her, what my father did and what my mother did. Those type of things you don’t say [to children], you don’t gossip and you don’t share things that aren’t appropriate for the age of your child. Teaching them though, a sense of personal skills, that’s great but things that aren’t appropriate, don’t share. It rocks your [children’s] beliefs a lot more than it should.”* Participant 7 stated: *“Don’t share too much details with children, like over finances.”*

Keeping children informed about the divorce was also found by Roux (2007) to assist children in developing a clear understanding of the divorce. The aforementioned recommendation appears to echo the findings of Papalia, Olds and Feldman (2009) and

Louw and Louw (2007) who note that that the quality and nature of interactions between a parent and child are vitally important for the future functioning and coping of the child. In instances where an emotionally supportive and involved relationship is maintained between the parent and the child, regardless of whether it is the custodial or non-custodial parent, the detrimental effects of divorce for the child are decreased (Papalia et al., 2009; Louw and Louw, 2007).

Most of the participants also made recommendations pertaining to the communication between the parents to assist children in coping more effectively with divorce. These recommendations primarily involved avoiding conflict situations in the presence of children and maintaining a civil form of communication between them as far as possible.

Avoid conflict in the presence of children

Continued parental conflict, particularly in the presence of children, significantly hinders their efforts to cope effectively with parental divorce (Du Plooy and Van Rensburg, 2015; Du Plooy, 2013). As a result, the participants also advised that parents should refrain from engaging in conflict situations with each other in the presence of their children. Participant 12 said: *“Try to keep the fighting as minimal as possible in front of your children.”* Similarly participant 7 stated: *“Keep children out of the conflict.”*

Participant 3 explained that his parents’ efforts to avoid conflict in his presence had greatly assisted him to cope more effectively: *“I think to keep the child out of the conflict is very important... One of the things my parents did right is they decided when I was younger to keep their fights for themselves and so I didn’t know about it which helped me a lot.”* Participant 5 stated: *“I would say that the children should be kept out of the story [parental conflict] completely, that they shouldn’t be used for manipulation or anything else for that matter.”* Participant 4 said: *“Take your children out of that situation, especially if there is screaming and shouting and you know, because a lot of the times you put your kids on the fence and they don’t know whose side to take and your parents expect you to take a side and it is not actually fair on the child to expect them to take a side. So I would say take them out of that situation.”*

Maintain civil communication with the other parent

Closely related to avoiding conflict in the presence of children, the participants further recommended that parents strive to maintain a civil form of communication between them as far as possible, especially in the presence of their children. In this respect participant 1 suggested to parents: *“Just keep civil communication with each other... remember you have the child in common so just consider your communication with one another. You know, you are going to have to talk to each other about the child and the child’s life. There are also going to be occasions where you are going to have to meet for the child’s sake so maybe it would be a good idea to try to build a new relationship within this new context, maybe you could call it a divorced context... this has a huge impact on the child.”*

Participant 3 stated: *“Parents should at least still remain decent with each other, especially when they have to be together at the same place for the child.”* Participant 6 said on this point: *“I think parents should behave like adults. Everyone can get through this [divorce] if they behave themselves. At the very least just show respect to one another in front of*

the children, you know, try to separate in peace.” The findings of Roux (2007), Kelly and Emery (2003) and Amato and Gilbreth (1999) also stress that when parents manage pre- and post-divorce conflict effectively as this assists children to cope more effectively with the divorce.

Maintain stability in children’s lives

In addition to the aforementioned communication-based recommendations, the participants strongly advised that parents should aim to maintain as much stability in the child’s life as possible, especially following the divorce. As participant 15 stated: *“Keep children’s environments as stable as possible and avoid disruptions; that would make it much easier for them.”* Similarly participant 14 stated: *“Always give children stability, like staying in the same home and school as far as possible.”* Participant 11 remarked on this point that maintaining stability assists children to cope effectively with divorce: *“[Parents] should just attempt to keep their children’s lives as stable as possible; the divorce is already hard enough as it is to deal with. I believe that would definitely help them [the children].”*

Roux (2007) had found that maintaining a stable environment and belongingness for children will assist them to cope more effectively with parental divorce. Furthermore, Louw et al. (1999) and Papalia et al. (2009) note that, although it is generally accepted that all children are adversely affected by divorce, these children’s reactions to their parents’ divorce are also influenced by the extent to which the child’s life changes as a result of the divorce. The fewer the changes, the less these potential adverse effects will impact on children.

Refer children for counselling/psychotherapy

The participants in the present study recommended that parents refer their children to undergo counselling/psychotherapy to assist them to cope more effectively. Participant 15 stated: *“Therapy for a child is very important when his or her parents get divorced.”* Similarly participant 10 advised parents when they divorce to *“send your child to a psychologist”*. This participant also said: *“I think it will really benefit children to see a psychologist if their parents divorce, as therapy with someone who is not involved will definitely help them with the whole process.”* Graff-Reed (Undated) and Roux (2007) both emphasise the benefits of counselling for children and adults during divorce.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILDREN

The following section explores recommendations for children. Participants in the present study strongly recommended that children should attempt to distract themselves during parental divorce in the following ways as summarised in Figure 2 on the next page:

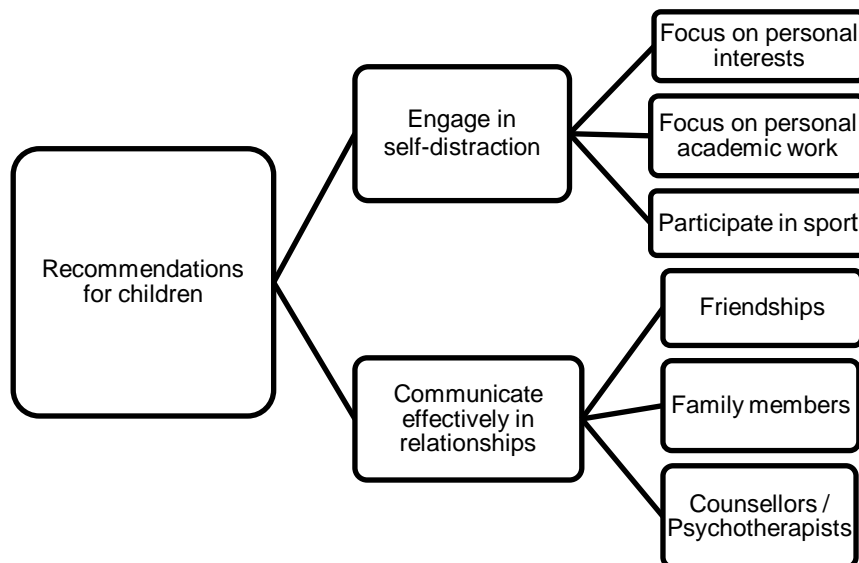


Figure 2: Recommendations for children

Focus on personal interests

One form of distraction from parental divorce recommended by the participants for children is to focus on what they regard to be personal interests. Participant 1 said: “*Children should investigate what attracts them and what interests them and to focus on that rather than focusing on what is happening there [between their parents] during divorce.*” Similarly participant 2 advised children to focus on their own interests in the form of their own emotions rather than rebelling against their parents: “*Don’t give your parents a hard time, it’s hard enough as it stands. Focus on your own emotional issues.*”

Participant 7 stated: “*I would advise them [children] to try new things and activities. If they don’t really have new things or activities, then they must just do something that they enjoy, you know something that will distract them for a while.*” Similarly participant 9 advised children: “*Just try keep it out of your head. Just think about other stuff, listen to music or do something else so that you can just get your head away from it*” [the divorce].

Focus on academic work

The participants further advised children to distract themselves by keeping their focus on their academic work. Participant 7 warned children not to disadvantage themselves during parental divorce by allowing their academic work to suffer: “*Focus on your school work, don’t let it fall behind.*” Similarly participant 9 advised children to “*keep your head with your school work and your studies*”.

Participant 10 added that he would tell children when their parents’ divorce to always “*do your homework*”. Participant 6 advised children to avoid letting their school work suffer and disadvantage themselves in the process: “*Don’t cut off your own nose to spite your face... what I mean is I know there is [sic] a lot of children who rebel against divorce*

by starting to drink and to let their school work suffer.. So I would say don't do that, don't mess up your own life that way just because they are messing up theirs."

Participate in sport

The participants further advised children to distract themselves from their parents' divorce by participating in sport. Participant 1 said to "do sports" as well participant 10 who stated that children should "take part in sport, it helps a lot". Similarly participant 8 recommended that children should "take part in any sport". Roux (2007) also indicates that participation in extra-murals including sport has been found to be of assistance for children in coping with parental divorce.

Communicate effectively

Another important recommendation made by the participants in the present study involved encouraging children to communicate with others in their environment, in particular in the following relationships:

Friendships

Spending time and communicating with friends about aspects, thoughts and feelings regarding the parental divorce were strongly advised by the participants. In this respect participant 10 said he would tell children to make sure that "*you see your friends*". Participant 1 advised that children "*should spend time with and talk to their friends about it [divorce]*".

Similarly participants 6 and 7 both said that children should strive to "*talk to friends*" during parental divorce. Numerous sources accentuate friendships as a vital source of support that assists children's effective coping with parental divorce (Papalia et al., 2009; Louw and Louw, 2007; Roux, 2007; Pretorius, 2003).

Family members

A number of the participants advised children to spend time and communicate with family members to assist them in coping effectively with parental divorce. Participant 10 suggested: "*If they have siblings I would tell them to stick very close to and talk to their siblings, and spend as much time as they can with them. I mean because obviously your parents are separated now or being separated. So you won't see all, both your parents together a lot of the time. So it is probably best to stay together with your siblings.*" Participant 7 also suggested that children should "*talk to someone, like other family members, that would help*". Participant 4 advised children to speak to family members about their experiences pertaining to the divorce: "*Talking to family made a real difference for me, like with my grandfather... So I would say take them out of that situation, maybe put them with the grandparents.*" The importance of support from extended family members has been frequently emphasised to assist effective coping among children with parental divorce, as done so by Roux (2007) as well as Sandler, Tein and West (1994).

Counsellors/psychotherapists

Participants recommended talking to a counsellor/psychotherapist as another important strategy to assist children in coping effectively with parental divorce. Participant 13 said:

“It is important to encourage children to talk about it [the divorce] and to see a psychologist.” Similarly participant 3 suggested that children obtain *“professional help”* to assist them to cope more effectively with their parental divorce. Participant 10 advised that when children experience parental divorce it is *“important for them [children] to talk to a psychologist”* to assist them to cope effectively with the event. It has been highlighted that seeking counselling/psychotherapy for children promotes effective coping with parental divorce (Graff-Reed, Undated). Both the present study as well as the study by Roux (2007) have highlighted that children benefit from receiving counselling/psychotherapy when experiencing parental divorce.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Research in the field of psychology has proven to be challenging for numerous researchers in the past and this investigation was no different. As a result, the findings from the present study also have limitations which expose it to criticism. The limitations of the present study and attempts to control and minimise them by the researcher, were as follows:

Snowball sampling was utilised because the aim was not to estimate population parameters but rather to develop theoretical insights specific to only a select population, namely young adults between the ages of 20 and 39 years who were either married or divorced. In addition to their ages, it was a further requirement for participation in the present study that they had experienced the divorce of their parents at least five years earlier during either their middle childhood and/or adolescent years. As qualitative research is concerned with depth of relationship, fifteen participants from a homogeneous group was considered to be a sufficient sample size (Neuman, 1997). The sample size of the present study could, nevertheless, be regarded as relatively small and also as not being representative of the current demographics of the South African population, since it includes mostly white participants who have either completed or are in the process of completing tertiary education at university level. Furthermore, as the responses from the participants reflect their subjective experiences it is not possible for it to be representative of the experience of all children and/or adolescents coping with parental divorce.

The present study also made use of retrospective interviews. The most significant limitation reported by Jupp (2006) with such interviews, is faulty memory on the part of the participants. Participants may misremember and unintentionally make use of “telescoping” or “reverse telescoping” during retrospective interviews. This refers to a problem related to time, for instance what an individual may remember as having occurred seven years earlier may in fact have occurred ten years earlier (Jupp, 2006).

UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

The unique contribution of the present study lies in the provision of a set of recommendations on how to cope with parental divorce as effectively as possible from a group of young adults who had experienced parental divorce during their own childhood and/or adolescent years. Furthermore, it was contextualised from a South African perspective and based on existing literature. In this manner it expanded on the earlier research findings such as the research by Roux (2007) who explored children’s coping with parental divorce by conducting interviews with children while their parents were in the process of divorce.

From an interactional perspective towards psychology, Vorster (2011) makes the point that the nature and quality of an individual's mental health is directly related to that individual's pattern of interaction with others in the environment. The recommendation of effective communication in relationships that emerged from the present study, which mostly entails empathic, face-to-face interactions, appears to have echoed this statement. In a study by Cohen, Schulz, Liu, Halassa, and Waldinger (2015), it was found that when marital partners are able to communicate with accurate empathy, meaning that they are able to accurately interpret and reflect on each other's emotions, they report less aggression and higher levels of happiness and well-being. When considering that Carrier, Spradlin, Bunce and Rosen (2015) had also found that the use of empathic communication is declining among contemporary young people with their increased use of technologically-based modes of communication, it highlights the importance of developing and maintaining empathic, face-to-face communication within all human relationships, not only in instances that necessitate coping with parental divorce.

Despite the limitations described in the previous section it is hoped that the findings of the present study will aid any individual who supports and/or therapeutically treats a family during a divorce process to cope more effectively. In addition, the present study contributes to the legal profession, particularly in the context of divorce-related psycho-legal cases to assist and guide members from the legal profession to manage and assist children and/or adolescents in particular as effectively as possible during divorce cases.

CONCLUSION

It is recommended that further studies be conducted on the phenomenon of effective coping with parental divorce during their childhood and/or adolescence in South Africa, the rest of Africa and around the globe by selecting larger and more diverse sample sizes than the one that was included for this study. Follow-up studies can also be conducted in an effort to examine continual patterns and/or newly developing trends so as to provide a more encompassing perspective on effective coping with parental divorce.

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