

## Preservice Teachers' Understanding of Children of Divorced Families and Relations to Teacher Efficacy

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*Teachers are well-positioned to play a critical role in fostering resiliency in children of divorce and to assist in reducing the risk for adjustment problems. The purpose of this study was to determine whether preservice early childhood teachers have the awareness of the stress responses and effects of parental divorce on their students. Early childhood preservice teachers responded to questionnaires that asked about awareness of the effects of a parental divorce on a child and awareness of the stress responses exhibited by a child due to a parental divorce. Results indicate that preservice teachers had moderate awareness about children's normative stress responses and those who had a high sense of efficacy had a moderate positive correlation with their overall awareness of atypical behaviors in children of divorce. Preservice teachers with personal experience of parental divorce had a lower level of awareness of the stress responses and effects of divorce than those who had not experienced a parental divorce. Participants closer to completing the teacher preparation program had significantly higher awareness of the effects on and stress responses that children can exhibit due to a parental divorce. Discussion and implications for pre-service teachers are presented.*

It has been well-established that divorce is a common occurrence in the U.S. with the unintended consequence of placing children at risk for difficulties in their academic and socio-emotional development. Early childhood teacher education programs are especially poised and equipped to assist teacher candidates develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to understand and respond to family functioning

and its impact on young children's early learning. Awareness of symptoms is not enough to prepare teachers to respond effectively in divorce situations. The starting point to helping teacher candidates develop the necessary skills and dispositions depends on expanding our knowledge of factors that might impede the teacher from effectively helping children who are experiencing parental divorce. Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand the relationship between preservice early childhood teachers' awareness of the stress responses and effects of parental divorce on their students and whether there is a relationship between their sense of efficacy and this awareness.

As the prevalence of divorce increases, so does the number of children who are experiencing the stress of such family circumstances. Research has established that these stressors have an impact on children's academic performance and overall well-being (Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Faber & Wittenborn, 2010; Heard, 2007). Parental separation and divorce has also been listed as a key adverse childhood experience (ACEs) that significantly affects overall later physical and mental health (Felitti et al., 1998). Thus, teachers may be in a position to mediate the stressors in a positive way if they are able to recognize the symptoms and behavioral manifestations of stress exhibited by a child who is experiencing a parental divorce. The purpose of this study was to determine whether preservice early childhood teachers have the awareness of the stress responses and effects of parental divorce on their students and whether there is a relationship between the preservice teachers' sense of efficacy and this awareness.

### **Divorce Prevalence and Effects**

The most common end of marriage in the current decade is divorce, unlike in centuries past when it was the death of a spouse (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Within the past two

decades, more than 20 million children have experienced a parental divorce (Frisco, Muller, & Frank, 2007), with approximately one million children experiencing their parents' divorce each year in the U.S. (Gaydos, Schwieterman, & Zimmer, 1999; Hughes & Kirby, 2000). It is estimated that approximately 40% of U.S. children born today will live in a single-parent household by the time they are 16 years old (Wolchik, et al., 2000).

Divorce is increasingly being recognized as a public health concern (Salem, Sandler, & Wolchik, 2013). For many children, divorce is a traumatic event and can affect many areas of their lives for months and even years afterwards (Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Marquardt, 2006). Although research suggests that the majority of children adjust over time, approximately 25% later develop long-term mental health and behavioral problems (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Even though many children seem to adjust well, many experience a difficult phase of considerable sadness, anger, and emotional pain that persists for years following the divorce (Fabricius & Hall, 2000). Results of this challenging period have been implicated in a number of negative child outcomes including depression, suicide, school dropout, substance use and precocious sexual activity (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Research has demonstrated that compared to children from intact families, children of divorced families are more at risk for adjustment problems during post-divorce life (Miller, Kliewer, & Partch, 2010). The degree of instability throughout the divorce has been correlated with poorer outcomes for the children due in part to a common lack of social or economic resources in post-divorce families, especially single parent households (Brown, 2006). Single parents are often depleted of their resources, such as time, energy, and emotional availability that could be spent with their children fostering a relationship after the divorce (Garg,

Melanson, & Levin, 2007). This can leave the children to feel like they are being forgotten and their emotional needs are going unmet, thus further increasing their risks of adjustment problems after the divorce. With the transition into a new home life after the divorce, parenting can become inconsistent and family routines disrupted. This can contribute to a child's emotional insecurity and instability in the attachment relationship with their parents, resulting in a weaker parent-child relationship (Brown, 2006). However, researchers have also acknowledged that effective parenting can be a protective factor against the stress children experience due to divorce and the following transitions that could negatively affect their well-being (Bastaits & Mortelmans, 2016).

### **Variations in Responses to Divorce by Age of the Child**

Children's responses to stress and the understanding of the parental divorce may also vary by age. Preschool aged children may exhibit multiple stress symptoms such as heightened irritability, aggression/disruptive behaviors, increased emotional episodes, along with amplified anxiety towards strangers and excessive clinginess with a trusted adult (Cavanagh & Houston, 2006; Pickar, 2003). Young children also may show physical manifestations of stress from the divorce such as stomachaches, headaches, and tiredness; experience depression, anxiety, or sadness (Pickar, 2003); or externalize symptoms by exhibiting anger, outbursts, or fighting with siblings or peers (Nielsen, 2011). Academically, elementary school children from divorced families earn lower reading, math, and science test scores than children from intact families (Armor, 2003; Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003). Pre-school aged children in single-parent families have been found to have lower verbal reasoning skills (Kinard & Reinherz, 1987). Further, children, especially younger, more egocentric in their thinking, often lack the

necessary coping skills to deal with changes associated with divorce and blame themselves for their parents' divorce (Foulkes -Jamison, 2001; Grych & Fincham, 1990). This may exacerbate the already increased risk for children of divorce developing major mental health issues later in life (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Older children of divorce often find refuge in peer relationships, may change their eating behaviors, or often become perfectionists or parentified confidants to their parents (Silverberg Koerner, et al, 2004). Moreover, research suggests that children who experience divorce during elementary school are at greater risk for developing ongoing internalizing and externalizing problems than older children, who tend to be at greater risk for lowered academic performance (Lansford, et al, 2006). This is due in part to their lowered capability of realistically understanding the factors related to the divorce, having increased fears of abandonment, and being unaware of both the consequences of the divorce and how to seek help from outside resources (Hetherington, 1989).

### **Socio-emotional Challenges Caused by Parental Divorce**

The stress of divorce increases the risks of social and emotional maladjustment, not just in the children's home life but also in their classroom, school, and community. The Standard Family Effects Model states that because of parental conflict and divorce, children tend to have many behavioral problems in school and at home due to the new emotional stress (Amato & Cheadle, 2008). Children from divorced families exhibit lower self-esteem and greater behavioral and emotional problems that could last long after the divorce; however, this may be exacerbated within the classroom (Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; Faber & Wittenborn, 2010; and Sun & Li, 2008). Specifically, the intersection between the child's low self-esteem, behavioral, and emotional problems

can make it difficult for children to socialize and create relationships with their peers causing a feeling of alienation and setting the stage for ongoing social and emotional development that may persist into the adolescent years.

### **Educational Challenges Caused by Parental Divorce**

In terms of educational outcomes, children of divorce are more at risk for educational disadvantages than children who have both biological parents in their home (Björklund & Sundström, 2006; Heard, 2007). They tend to have negative attitudes towards school, less parental supervision over their homework, and lower parental educational expectations (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Garg et al, 2007; Støksen, Røysamb, Holmen, & Tambs, 2006). Furthermore, research shows that a parental divorce before the age of 16 is associated with an overall lower educational attainment level in the child's life (D'Onofrio, et al., 2006). Moreover, an expected 29% of adolescents drop out of school if they live in a single-parent home after a parental divorce (Menning, 2006). The risks of trouble or failure that divorce can bring upon children in their academic careers and the roles that the classroom environment, teacher, and peers play can be critical in fostering the children's resiliency in the months after the divorce.

### **Teachers' Role in Buffering Developmental and Academic Risks Caused by Parental Divorce**

Pianta and Stuhlman (2004) established that teacher-child relationships play a role in children's ability to acquire the skills necessary for success in school. The same conclusions were reached by Ladd, Birch, and Buhs (1999) who asserted teacher-child relationships impact classroom participation and achievement. Teachers can be a buffer or provide protective factors to at-risk children; this idea is captured in the statement made by Hamre and Pianta (2006), that the

development of “strong and supportive relationships with teachers allows students to feel safer and more secure in the school setting, feel more competent, make more positive connections with peers, and make greater academic gains” (p. 57). The buffering role of teachers was most favorable for young children with mothers who reported rejecting parenting accounts (Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson, 1999).

When children have a place to find support and comfort, they are better able to regulate their emotions and feel like they are not alone (Lowe, 2009). In any given academic year, the classroom environment remains relatively consistent and could provide daily support and comfort within their peer and teacher relationships and routines. The classroom environment is especially capable of promoting peer support and mutual empathy between other students who are also experiencing parental divorce (Somody & Hobbs, 2007). If teachers create an environment in the classroom that promotes creativity, children of divorce are given an outlet to process, express, and describe their experiences and struggles, even with something as emotionally delicate as their parents’ divorce, in a safe environment (Somody & Hobbs, 2007).

### **Efficacy as a Mediating Factor in Teacher’s Ability to Buffer Risks**

Previous research has indicated that teachers with higher efficacy—strong beliefs in their abilities to act in the necessary manner to bring about desired results (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy, & Hoy, 2001)—exhibit more passionate dispositions about helping their students with their school work, helping them gain inner confidence, and creating a safe environment for their students within the classroom (Guskey & Passaro, 1994). The higher the teachers’ sense of efficacy, the better outcomes for their students, such as better student achievement (Cousins & Walker, 1995;

Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004). Thus, it is critical for teachers to have a high sense of efficacy—specifically in the area of nurturing children's esteem and socio-emotional well-being—so that they are better able to meet and recognize the needs of the students who may be experiencing a parental divorce. In the school, students are able to gain new relationships and find resources and activities that can help them find a structure and a sense of normality in their lives after the traumatic event in the home (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012).

## Method

### Participants

All Early Childhood preservice teachers at a Midwestern university were invited to participate in this research. The teacher preparation program in which participants were enrolled is housed in a child development and family relations department, not in a college of education, though upon program completion, candidates are eligible for pre-K to third grade teacher certification from the state's Department of Education. The program consists of a four-semester sequence. Prior to admittance into the program, students are required to take a course in lifespan human development in which they study human development within diverse family systems, and where risk and resilience are emphasized. During the second semester of the program, students take a course about guidance and classroom management for pre-K to third grade where the teacher's role in facilitating prosocial behavior is emphasized. Finally, in the third semester, they take a course where they examine the relationships between families and schools and are further exposed to family variables that have implications for early childhood practices.

Participants were all females. A total of 74 preservice teachers participated, though two questionnaires were deleted

due to being incomplete. Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and following the approved procedures, data were collected from early childhood education students identified as those consisting of the total population of students in the program.

The participants' ages ranged from 20-29. Although research has established that 40% of children in the U.S will have experienced a parental divorce by the time they are age 16 (Wolchik et al., 2000), only 17 out of the 72 or 23% of the participants personally experienced a parental divorce. This is consistent with previous research that the demographics of the university student body tend to have lower percentages of students who have experienced a parental divorce before college (Lillard & Gerner, 1999; Sandefur, McLanahan, & Wojtkiewicz, 1992). It is very probable that a university student may be less likely to have experienced a parental divorce since previous research states that many children of divorced families have lower academic achievements in post-divorce home life (D'Onofrio et al., 2006; Ginther, 2004; Sun & Li, 2002) and are less likely to enter into college (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Parental income and parental educational achievement are also highly correlated with children's educational achievement and negatively correlated with divorce (Tyson, 2012) which could explain why the college population experiences a lower rate of parental divorce than the total population.

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire included demographic questions such as age, gender, and level in the four-semester progression of the teacher preparation program. This cross-sectional research surveyed preservice teachers who were at different stages of their teacher preparation program, thus participants responded to the survey only once, which allowed us to see group differences, but did not track the individual's gains in

awareness about the effects and stressors related to divorce. The participants were also asked to indicate if they had personally experienced a parental divorce, and if so to indicate how old they were at the time their parents separated.

In addition to demographic questions, participants responded to the *Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale-long form* (Tschanne-Moran & Hoy, 2001), which consists of 24 Likert items to which the subjects respond by indicating "how much can you do?" ranging from 1 (*nothing*) to 9 (*a great deal*). The authors of the scale reported a Cronbach's alpha of .94 indicating a high degree of reliability.

Participants responded to questions related to their perceptions of children of divorce, guided by Foulkes-Jamison's (2001) and Pickar's (2003) work with children of divorce. Twelve Likert-type questions ranging from 1-6 measured the participant's awareness of the stress responses that children exhibit after a parental divorce. See Appendix A for the questions asked. Reliability analysis for this set of questions yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .98. A participant's awareness of the stress responses was calculated by summing the responses to the questions. Possible responses ranged from 12 to 72 with higher scores representing a greater awareness of stress responses exhibited by children of divorce. The researcher took the total possible points and divided evenly into four subcategories. A score between 12-27 equated to little to no awareness, 27-42 equated to minimal awareness, 42-57 equated to moderate awareness, and 57-72 equated to high awareness of the different stress responses that children can exhibit due to a parental divorce.

An additional set of 11 Likert-type questions ranging from 1-6 assessed the participants' awareness of the symptoms of stress and adjustment problems of divorce on children, based on Pickar's (2003) research. See Appendix B to see the questions asked. The reliability statistic for the symptoms of stress and adjustment problems yielded a

Cronbach's alpha of .95. The overall awareness of the effects of divorce on children was calculated by summing the responses to the 11 questions, ranging from 11 to 66 with higher scores representing greater awareness of symptoms of stress and adjustment problems. The researchers took the total possible points and divided evenly into four subcategories to align with a typical scale range. A score between 11-24 equated to little to no awareness, 25-38 equated to minimal awareness, 39-52 equated to moderate awareness, and 53-66 equated to high awareness of the different stress responses that children can exhibit due to a parental divorce.

### Results

The data were collected by soliciting responses in one required course from each level of the teacher preparation program, then responses were coded and checked for accuracy before they could be statistically analyzed. Frequency distributions, means, medians, standard deviation, ranges, and correlations were calculated. In order to determine how aware preservice teachers were regarding the different stress responses children can exhibit due to parental divorce, the researchers summed the responses to the questions regarding the preservice teachers' perceptions of children of divorce. The descriptive statistics showed that, overall, the 72 respondents had a fairly moderate understanding regarding the different stress responses that children can exhibit due to a parental divorce ( $M = 52.57$ ,  $SD = 18.83$ ). Scores from the questions assessing preservice teachers' awareness of the symptoms of stress and adjustment problems of children of divorce helped determine how aware preservice teachers were regarding the effects of divorce on children. By looking at the descriptive statistics, the researcher concluded that preservice teachers scored in the moderate awareness range ( $M = 45.70$ ,  $SD = 15.18$ ).

Based on the review of the literature, it was expected that preservice teachers with a strong sense of efficacy would have an overall good judgment of how to meet the needs of the children in their classroom (Cousins & Walker, 1995; Tschanne-Moran & Barr, 2004). Consistent with what was expected from the literature, a positive, statistically significant correlation was found to be present with preservice teachers' sense of efficacy and with their awareness regarding the effects divorce can have on children,  $r (72) = .455$ ,  $p = .000$ .

All participants responded to a question on the demographic questionnaire indicating whether they had experienced a parental divorce. A statistically significant difference was found between preservice teachers who had personally experienced a parental divorce and those who had not on their scores on the questions regarding the preservice teachers' perceptions of children of divorce,  $F (2, 71) = 10.00$ ,  $p = .00$ . The mean score of those who had experienced divorce was  $M = 53.29$  and those who had not experienced divorce was  $M = 54.25$ . The post hoc Tukey's HSD test indicated that the two groups differ significantly in their scores ( $p < .05$ ) with those who had not experienced parental divorce being more aware about the physical and behavioral symptoms that could be exhibited by a child within a year of the initial events of divorce. Out of the 17 preservice teachers who had experienced a parental divorce, eight had experienced the divorce during early childhood (birth-10 years old) with an average score of 51.63 ( $SD = 17.40$ ), and nine preservice teachers had experienced a divorce later in their lives (10- 20 years old) with an average score of 54.78 ( $SD = 12.29$ ). Results indicated that there was no significant difference regarding the timing of the divorce experience of the participants and their awareness of the effects of and children's stress responses to divorce  $F (1, 15) = .19$ ,  $p = .67$ .

It would be assumed that as preservice teachers go through each step of their teacher preparation program, they

increase their knowledge of how to meet the socioemotional needs of their students and what the students might experience when they are enduring difficulties at home. In this study, as the preservice teachers continue through their teacher preparation program, their awareness of the effects and children's stress responses to divorce significantly increased  $F(1, 69) = 6.71, p = .00$ .

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether preservice early childhood teachers have the awareness of the stress responses and effects of parental divorce on their early childhood-age students. The results indicated that preservice teachers had moderate awareness about both effects and stress responses that children can exhibit during and after a parental divorce. Preservice teachers' sense of efficacy had a positive correlation with their awareness regarding the effects on children and stress responses they could exhibit as a result of parental divorce. Though there is debate as to whether highly self-efficacious teachers are actually more emotionally supportive (Guo et al., 2010; Pakarinen et al., 2010), this finding was consistent with the literature that the more efficacious teachers are, the more responsive they are to their students' needs (Guo et al., 2012; Lachman, 2006).

As students advanced towards the completion of their teacher preparation program, there was an increase in awareness about the stress responses and effects of divorce. Student teachers in their final semester of the program scored highest regarding awareness about the stress responses and effects a child can exhibit as a result of parental divorce. This could be related to various reasons such as having more hands-on experience with children from different backgrounds throughout their field experience, or a result of a course during the semester prior to student teaching that heavily addresses family dynamics and the intersection

between school and the community. As teacher educators, we should not only include in our curriculum information about socio-emotional manifestations of the stress caused by divorce, but also clearly establish that the children of divorced families are at subsequent risk for difficulties in verbal reasoning, math, and science. Given that teacher efficacy has been linked to higher student achievement (Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004), training preservice teachers in not only how to recognize but how to mitigate these at-risk factors could positively impact the teachers' efficacy to assist with meeting the socioemotional needs of children of divorced families.

It was also found that regardless of the timing of the divorce in the participants' lives, participants' awareness of divorce was significantly lower about the effects and stress responses of divorce for those who had experienced divorce compared to those of participants who had not experienced divorce. It could be that a personal experience with divorce may cloud objective perceptions about children's needs for healing and recovery from parental divorce. Moreover, those who had experienced parental divorce at younger ages scored lower overall than those who experienced parental divorce after age 10. Older children are often more likely to experience difficulties from the divorce in terms of grief and anxiety, as they are in a life stage characterized by a quest for identity development and independence. Moreover, Pickhardt (2013) explains that divorce can intensify the grievances between parents and adolescents because of their naturally disaffected and rebellious stage.

Limitations of this study are the small sample size and that the study only reflects the perspectives of Early Childhood Education students at one Midwestern university, creating a lack of diversity among the participants. Another limitation is that the participants were enrolled in an Early Childhood Education program housed in a Human

Development and Family Science department, with course work requirements in the area of family systems and dynamics, which are not typical of teacher preparation programs housed in Colleges of Education. Regardless of where the early childhood education program is housed, accreditation standards require the inclusion of coursework and experiences that develop knowledge and understanding of "diverse family and community characteristics" (NAEYC, 2010, p. 30). If this study were to be replicated, it is suggested that the sample size include more participants with greater diversity; it is also suggested a further study incorporate more teacher preparation programs including those who do not have a family science background, as the topic of this research impacts all teachers regardless of the grade level they teach. Thus, whether the way this standard is addressed in the teacher preparation program affects teachers' awareness of stressors and effects of divorce and their efficacy requires further investigation.

As the literature previously stated, one of the biggest buffers of the negative effects of divorce a child can have is a strong parent-child relationship, which can translate into the classroom with a strong teacher-student relationship. It is important for teachers to give students a creative outlet that they can use to express their emotions in a healthy manner (Somody & Hobbs, 2007). It falls on the teachers to create a warm, encouraging environment where children can experience a degree of safety allowing them to discuss their experience in social situations, and through these discussions, ultimately find that they are not alone. Through a daily routine, teachers can foster in their children the feeling of stability needed after the change within their home lives. The teachers of children of divorce need to understand the hardships that a divorce can bring such as economic issues, residency change, parental conflict, change in parenting styles, decreased academic involvement, and other stress inducers.

During this difficult time, children are in great need of warmth, encouragement, support, and consistency—all approaches that are important for the teachers to provide within their classroom. Consistent with previous research demonstrating that younger children of divorce may benefit more from interventions that help to prevent internalizing and externalizing stress (Lansford et al., 2006), it is suggested that teacher preparation programs incorporate learning how to recognize the stress responses and effects of divorce that a child can exhibit during and after a parental divorce. Likewise the teacher preparation program should emphasize more of what teachers can do to help their students during and after the experience of a parental divorce.

Although all of these stress responses and effects may lessen after the divorce, teachers still need to be sensitive and sympathetic towards children's needs throughout the years following the divorce. It is extremely important that teachers do not fall victim to siding with a particular parent or speak badly of either parent in front of the child, which can become added stress for the child. The teacher needs to communicate with both parents directly about schoolwork and activities instead of leaving the responsibility of the communication to the child. This could include providing two sets of copies of schoolwork, permission slips or announcements; giving equal attention to both parents in parent-teacher conferences; and holding separate parent-teacher conferences when necessary. Furthermore, knowing details such as the parents' custody schedule and creating a system to ensure the child goes home with the correct parent or the correct bus for the evening can minimize chaos for the family system. Moreover, encouraging a non-custodial parent's involvement in their child's school life can help to ameliorate the effects of the divorce on the child. All of these strategies can alleviate the stress from the child by trying to communicate with both parents and helping children detangle themselves from parental conflicts.

Teachers need to be sympathetic to children of divorce recognizing the stress and effects they experience due to the divorce, and teacher preparation programs have an obligation to prepare preservice teachers for these experiences in their classrooms.

### **Recommendations**

By fostering positive relationships with students who have endured parental divorce, teachers can advance children's academic achievement, help them regulate their behaviors, and encourage them to demonstrate positive peer play (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Spira & Fischel, 2005). Conversely, a tense or negative teacher-student relationship can aggravate the stress of parental divorce effects that a child is already experiencing, hindering positive interactions with peers and promoting antisocial behaviors (Spira & Fischel, 2005). Therefore, the teacher's role in the life of a child who has experienced parental divorce cannot be overlooked.

As previously stated, given the NAEYC accreditation standards that require a focus on "diverse family and community characteristics" (NAEYC, 2010, p. 30), early childhood education programs are especially poised to emphasize a focus on an often overlooked area of family life that impacts a major subsection of the population. Teachers should be specifically trained on understanding the impact of divorce on the socio-emotional development of the child and how to recognize the signs and symptoms of child stress resulting from parental divorce. As a trusted adult who students typically count on to provide consistency and predictability, teachers are also positioned to serve in a protective and compensatory role that may aid in ameliorating the negative effects of divorce on children (Morris, et al., 2014). Moreover, as having both parents continue active involvement with children post-divorce significantly increases child-adjustment and well-being (Nielson, 2011), teachers

may serve a critical role in their ability to assist in facilitating parent involvement with their child's educational needs during the separation process and post-divorce. Teachers are also well positioned to assist parents in identifying appropriate referral sources to address the emotional needs of both the divorcing parents and children.

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