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| **The effects of family conflict resolution on children's classroom behavior**  *Bruce F Dykeman*.  **Journal of Instructional Psychology**.  Mobile:Mar 2003.  Vol. 30,  Iss. 1,  p. 41 (6 pp.) | |
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| **[Headnote]** |
| Fifteen children of recently separated or divorced parents completed a family systems intervention with their custodial parent for purposes of reducing family conflict and improving classroom behavior. A paired-samples t-test indicated significantly improved use of verbal reasoning (p < .01) and significantly reduced use of verbal aggression (p <.01) from pretest to 6-months follow-up when resolving family conflicts as reported by participating students. No significant reduction in physical aggression was noted. Teacher observations indicated significant improvement in classroom behavior from the time of initial referral to completion of intervention (p < .05). |

More than a third of American children experience their parents' divorce before reaching 18, and under many circumstances, the effects of divorce can have immediate and long-lasting consequences. With more than one million divorces occurring every year (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996), divorce has become a frequent occurrence in American society.

The negative effects of parental divorce upon children depend upon many factors, including the age and sex of the child at the time of the marital dissolution, the amount of conflict within the family unit, and the degree of cooperation between the divorced or separated parents (Dacey & Travers, 2002). Each of these factors, alone and in interaction with each other, influences the psychological health of the child and the ability of the child to do well at school.

The manner by which parents interact with each other, both before and after the divorce, may have a far greater impact on children than the actual divorce itself (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan & Anderson, 1989; Hines, 1997). Indeed, it is often difficult to separate the effects of divorce from the effects of a conflictual family relationship. In this manner, the negative effects of divorce may stem from pre-existing differences in the family unit prior to the divorce itself, and these negative effects may be more related to the emotional separation that precedes the legal divorce.

In general, children who have recently experienced a family dissolution have a more difficult time with academic and social expectations at school than children from intact families or established single-parent or blended families (Carlson, 1995). However, there is much variability in children's adjustment to parental divorce. Under some circumstances, children of divorce show only small negative effects that are limited in time; and in a few circumstances, children show resilience in adjusting to the effects of parental divorce. Indeed, children who thrive well in family dissolution are more likely to report living in homes characterized by family support and parental control (Dacey & Travers, 2002).

What are the circumstances of children's successful adjustment to parental divorce? Children do better when parents provide consistent and coordinated co-parenting in which they monitor their children and provide them with nurturance and discipline (Carlson, 1995; Hines, 1997). Such coparenting requires a problem-solving approach in which the separated parents hide their own conflicts from children and avoid putting children in the middle of parental disagreements. After the divorce, effective co-parenting requires a business-like relationship in which parents avoid criticizing each other in front of their children.

Despite such resilience, many children of divorce experience intense, short-term effects that negatively impact upon their school performance; and a few children carry long-lasting effects into their own adulthood that seriously impair their ability to develop and maintain a long-lasting relationship (Wallerstein, 1988; Wallerstein & Corbin, 1999). For these children, witnessing the conflict of parental divorce represents a critical life passage of emotional stressors that predispose them to much vulnerability (Thompson, 1998).

The emotional aspects of adjusting to parental divorce often affect the child's ability to meet the academic and social expectations at school (Dacey & Travers, 2002). In this regard, the emotional aspects of divorce often include feelings of anxiety, depression, guilt, and sometimes, aggression (Simons, Gordon, Conger & Lorenx, 1999). Additionally, parental divorce often affects the child's sense of emotional well being and self-esteem.

The treatment of the cognitive, affective and behavioral consequences of divorce at the community agency can extend across the continuum of primary, secondary and tertiary intervention (James & Gilliland, 2001). Primary intervention programs typically help children understand and cope with divorce as a common life crisis. Secondary intervention programs provide services to children at risk of experiencing the negative effects of parental divorce. Tertiary intervention programs provide services to children who currently experience harmful cognitive, affective and behavioral consequences of parental divorce.

Although counseling services offered in the school recognize the impact of divorce upon children's academic functioning, formal tertiary intervention of family dysfunction seldom occurs within the school itself. Rather, school counselors typically engage in primary and secondary interventions as a family specialist by using a family-systems perspective to facilitate the academic and developmental needs of students (Capuzzi & Gross, 2001). Students with acute actingout behaviors attributed to a recent family crisis are often referred to a community agency for family therapy, and students with chronic acting-out behaviors are often referred for special education evaluation. In this regard, school counselors play an important part of the school's intervention program, including (a) primary and secondary intervention to prevent negative effects of family dissolution upon academic performance, (b) referral to community agencies for tertiary intervention not usually addressed at the school, and (c) participation in the school's multi-disciplinary team for children in need of special education evaluation when problem behavior is chronic.

Pre-referral intervention is often recognized as a viable treatment alternative (Ross, 1995), particularly if students are experiencing adjustment issues antecedent to the problem behavior. Consequently, a pre-referral treatment alternative was offered to children whose parents were recently separated or divorced and whose behaviors their classroom teachers looked upon as problematic.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects a pre-referral tertiary-intervention program in reducing acting-out behaviors of students referred for special education assessment due to behavioral difficulties and whose parents were recently divorced or separated. Counselors at five junior high schools identified 21 students from recently dissolved families who were referred by teachers for special education assessment because of recent episodes of disruptive classroom behavior. Prior to the special education evaluation, counselors provided the referred child and his or her custodial parent with a pre-referral intervention that involved parent-child counseling at a community agency.

Treatment

Community agency counselors offered a conflict-resolution model of family-systems intervention to each dyad presenting for treatment. Dyads consisting of the referred child and his or her custodial parent received a family-systems treatment that focused upon the reduction of conflict associated with recent episodes of misbehavior at school. The resolution of conflict and associated misbehaviors focused on many problem-solving issues: (a) How to appraise and interpret antecedents of conflict? (b) How to reinterpret a provocation? (c) How to solve problems? and (d) How to include others in the resolution of a disagreement? In this regard, treatment was grounded in the cognitions and behaviors operant within the family environment that both preceded and followed classroom misbehavior and the strategies used by the custodial parent to discipline and socialize the child.

Counselors at a community agency administered the treatment, which included the referred child and his or her custodial parent, although other family members were occasionally included to address treatment goals. The typical dyad met with the counselor weekly for approximately one and onehalf hours. The average length-of-treatment was 3 months (SD = 3.2 weeks), with services provided during one of three school years, i.e., 6 parent-child dyads were seen during 1998-99, 8 dyads during 1999-2000, and 7 dyads were seen during 2000-2001.

Sample

Fifteen of 21 children and their custodial parents completed the treatment and follow-up. The sample consisted of 13 male and 2 female students, including 8 Caucasians, 4 Hispanics, and 3 Afro-Americans. The average age of child participating in treatment was 13.1 years (SD = 5.8 months) and all children were enrolled in either the seventh or eighth grade at one of five junior high schools in a mid-sized, industrial midwestern city. Parents participating in the study were custodial parents who were typically middle-aged, with 13 mothers and 2 fathers participating in treatment as the custodial parent. Two of the custodial parents graduated from college, four attended college or technical school after high school graduation, six graduated from high school with no further adult education, and 3 did not graduate from high school. Parental consent and child assent was received from all dyads.

Measurements

Each student completed an adaptation of one version of the Conflict Tactics Scale at the beginning of treatment and again approximately six months post-treatment. The Conflicts Tactics Scale selected for this study was published in Fischer and Corcoran (1994), and consisted of a 15-item Likerttype rating scale that measured three different tactics used to resolve conflict between family members, viz., reasoning, verbal aggression, and violence. The Conflict Tactics Scale measures the actions one might take in conflict with another family member; and in this study, the scores represented the number of times the action was reported to have occurred over the past six months. For instance, the Reasoning subscale was measured by such items as (a) trying to discuss an issue calmly; (b) demonstrating discussions of issues in a calm manner; (c) getting information to back up one's position; (d) requesting assistance from another person to help settle things; and (e) arguing heatedly, yet without yelling. The Reasoning subscale measured the frequency by which one used reasoning to resolve family disputes, with a score of 0 indicating no occurrences of reasoning to resolve conflict during the past six months and a score of 6 indicating six or more occurrences of reasoning to resolve conflict during the past 6 months. In a like manner, the Verbal Aggression subscale was used to measured the frequency by which verbal aggression was reported to have been used to resolve family conflict, and consisted of items measuring (a) yelling or insulting another person, (b) sulking or refusing to talk about a disputed issue, (c) stomping out of the room, (d) throwing something or smashing something, and (e) threatening to hit or throw something at another person. The Physical Aggression scale consisted of items measuring (a) throwing objects at another person, (b) pushing or shoving another person, (c) hitting another person without use of an instrument, (d) hitting another person with use of an instrument, and (e) other acts of physical aggression.

Fisher and Corcoran (1994) cite numerous studies supporting the reliable and valid use of this instrument, with acceptable internal consistency for the three subscales of conflict resolution and a factor structure that is also consistent with the three subscales. An adapted version of this instrument was used for this study, and students were asked to rate the frequency of conflict resolution tactics over the past six months, rather than the twelve-month self-report used with the original version. The typical student took the Conflict Tactics Scale as a pre-test at the beginning of intervention and again as a posttest approximately six months after completing intervention. For most students, intervention lasted three months. In addition, teachers of referred students used a five-part Likert scale to assess changes in classroom behavior from initial referral to the conclusion of intervention, with the following scores used to assess behavioral change: 0 = much deterioration, 1 = some deterioration, 2 = no change, 3 = some improvement, and 4 = much improvement.

Results. A two-tailed paired-samples ttest using alpha level .05 indicated a significant improvement in student-reported use of verbal reasoning, t(14) = 4.294, p < .01, and a significant decrease in student-reported use of verbal aggression, t( 14) = 3.623, p < .01, from pre-treatment to follow-up on measures of self-reported conflict resolution between child and parent. In particular, the average child presenting for treatment reported the use of reasoning 3.00 times (SD = 1.85) during the six months prior to treatment and 4.20 times (SD = 1.26) during the six month period prior to follow up. The average child presenting for treatment reported the use of verbal aggression 4.87 times (SD = 0.84) during the six months prior to treatment and 3.87 times (SD= 1.41) during the six months prior to follow up. No significant treatment effects were reported for physical aggression, t(14) = 1.702, p = .11. The average child presenting for treatment reported the use of physical aggression 1.73 times (SD = 0.88) during the six months prior to treatment and 1.33 times (SD = 0.90) during the six months prior to follow up.

Teachers of referred students were asked record their observations of student behavior at the conclusion of the school year in which the student participated in treatment. Since students were usually referred for participation during the first semester of each school year, the typical student completed intervention 2.13 months (SD = 0.74) prior to the conclusion of the school year. Thirteen out of the 15 teachers of students completing treatment and follow-up indicated some or much improvement in the classroom behavior, with a chi-square of 5.40 (df = 1) indicating significantly improved classroom behavior (p < .05). In this regard, the increased use of reasoning and reduced use of verbal aggression corresponded to improved behaviors in the classroom.

Conclusions

Results from this study suggest that prereferral intervention can reduce the number of students placed into special education for acting out behaviors when such behaviors are attributed to the effects of a recent parental separation or divorce. Results from this study suggest that the community agency counselor can play a unique role in assisting schools in helping students cope with issues that impede their education when those issues relate to responses to family dissolution.

Results from this study also suggest the unique role of conflict theory in treating the effects of family dissolution upon school behavior. In particular, the treatment of conflict-laden parent-child relationships is associated with (a) increased use of rational problem solving when attempting to resolve conflictual issues, (b) fewer incidents of verbal aggression at home, and (c) fewer incidents of acting-out behaviors at school. In this regard, the issues of unresolved conflict at home can affect of behavior of children at school, and resolution of this conflict makes it easier to children to resolve problem behaviors at school.

Conflict refers to incompatible actions in a given situation, which may exist at an individual level or among several individuals (Barsky, 2000). In this study, the custodial parent and child served as the treatment unit, and the interpersonal conflict between parent and child served as a principle treatment objective. However, parents and children were encouraged to express the internal conflict associated with the interpersonal conflict. For the parent, internal conflict was often described a need to express love and concern for the child, yet simultaneously express a need to reject the child's use of verbal aggression and behavioral non-compliance. For the child, internal conflict was often described as a difficulty in using language to express thoughts and feelings about his or her parents' marital dissolution and the behavioral expressions of interpersonal conflict when language expression was not available. The family-systems treatment looked at the manifestations of conflict within and upon the entire family unit, with cognitive strategies developed to use language when appraising and interpreting the family dissolution, along with cognitive strategies of using language to appraise and interpret the conflict that precedes classroom misbehavior.

The community agency counselor typically performs a variety of functions in the community agency setting (MacCluskie & Ingersoll, 2001), and the application of this treatment often generalizes to a number of settings, including the schools. A family-- systems perspective of treatment has been long recognized within psychotherapy research and is considered a valuable component of treatment. This particular program recognized the importance of treating the family unit when classroom misbehavior can be explained by the difficulty children experience when adjusting to parental separation and divorce. Benefits of this treatment had individual and systemic effects. Individually, students were able to apply more internal controls to situations that provoked conflict in the classroom in such a way as to increase their potential to learn. Systemically, the family system began resolving issues with more rational discussion and with less verbal aggression. Systemically, the school district was able to implement a pre-referral intervention program that provided an effective treatment and decreased the need for a special education placement.

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