

Counseling Children of Divorce

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Abstract: This qualitative study examines the counseling process provided for three pupils who are going through parental divorce. The children are aged 9-12 and attend a primary school in Malaysia. Data was gathered from 29 individual and peer group counseling sessions. Creative interventions such as art and play therapy helped the clients to express their hidden emotions and mistaken goals and to rebuild interaction skills with peers. A collaborative approach involving teachers, parents and peers helped reduce stress on the clients and encouraged them to resume daily activities. This study suggests that professional help be provided for children coping with parental divorce.

Key words: Children of Divorce • Elementary School • Counseling • Creative Intervention • Mistaken Goals

INTRODUCTION

Most studies showed that divorce has damaging effects on children [1,2]. Children of divorced parents bear a great burden which they cannot comprehend and may take the blame. Young children need love and solid attention from parents and a place where they can feel most protected. Children of divorced parents worry about who will care for them, with whom they will live and how they have to choose between the two parents [3,4,5]. They also believe that their parents would get back together if they behaved. They felt lost, guilty, rejected and unable to express their emotions to anyone [3]. Connolly and Green [6] summarized four issues relating to children of divorce that should be indicators for intervention: externalizing problems, internalizing emotions, academic issues and protective factors.

At the same time, during their development, children experience four "mistaken goals": undue attention, power, revenge or avoidance (inadequacy) [7]. The purpose of children's misbehaviour is to attract attention from adults and mostly to secure love from both parents. Unless corrected, "mistaken goals" would continue cultivating negative views on life as they mature. This vicious cycle is partly caused by parental conflicts, divorce, unhealthy lifestyles and confusing family communication [8]. It is important to understand the goals of their behavior [9] in order to encourage and empower these emotionally and socially challenged children. Formation of mistaken goals

would be more obvious in children of divorce. Children who experience parental divorce tend to externalize their problems and mistaken goals through negative behaviours such as not cooperating in the classroom or hitting others. They internalize their emotions by keeping to and hurting themselves. The negative development of externalizing and internalizing disturbed their focus in becoming "valuable contributors" in the learning process, thus impacting their academic performance. In fact, dysfunctional family system may contribute to children's involvement in serious problems such as prostitution [10].

For many children, school is the only environment where they can receive interventions to address their emotional needs [11]. Teachers and counselors are among the first to notice the signs of disturbances in students. For this reason, school counselors should be allocated ample time to conduct individual counseling [12]. Two protective factors need to be considered by school counselors are; parenting practices and therapeutic interventions [6]. Therapeutic interventions include counselling and support from the school system. Support from counselors, teachers and friends can minimize the emotional disturbance so that they can resume daily activities such as learning and playing [13]. Teachers' involvement is necessary in understanding a child's academic and behavioral development. Collaboration reduces teachers' underestimation of the difficulties a child may be having as a result of parental divorce. This understanding makes it easier for the teachers to be more

patient, supportive and encouraging of distressed and unmotivated children. At the same time, it is important to include the family, so ongoing contact with parents is necessary. The custodial parents are especially important in providing information regarding the children's coping at home. The parents must learn more effective ways of relating to their children as they interact with the school counselors.

Loweinstein [14] suggested creative interventions such as games, art and music activities for children. Creative interventions allow children to use fully what they have within them and place primacy upon a child's personal experience [15]. Therapists can break through the resistive barrier, engage children in therapy and help them to express their emotions and build positivity in them. According to Hozman and Froiland [16] there are two parts in helping children who experience parental divorce [16]. In the early part of counseling, children are encouraged to express their anger either through noisier activities such as hitting stuffed toys, boxes or blowing and bursting balloons, or quieter ways such as crumbling play dough models, creating puppet play or expressive drawings. In the next level, they build their self concept by building wooden blocks, puzzles, or picture puzzles. Peer involvement in play therapy helps children participate in social activities. They learn to feel safe opening and expressing themselves to friends who would understand their situation.

Statistics from the Malaysian Registration Department and Department of Islamic Development [17] showed an increase in divorce rates from 15,149 cases in 2000 to 24,864 in 2007. Despite this alarming rate, not much has been written on the issues of children of divorce in this country. The current study demonstrates the counseling process conducted by a counselor with three elementary school children who face parental divorce. This study first identifies the formation of mistaken goals among children of divorce and then examines how creative and collaborative counseling processes have helped these children to cope with their situation.

METHODS

This qualitative research uses the multiple cases approach. The participants in this study were three elementary school children (two girls aged 9 and 10 and a boy aged 12) in a suburban area of Malaysia. All three children experienced parental divorce. The girls (Clients 1 and 2) were referred to the counselor by their classroom

teachers for not completing homework, lack of involvement in learning process and for hitting friends. The boy (Client 3) has accepted his parents' divorce and demonstrated better coping skills. Data was collected from 29 counseling sessions for the three clients during a 14-week semester. Client 1 received 14 individual counseling sessions, Client 2 received 12 individual counseling sessions, while Client 3 was only involved in three group sessions. One of the sessions involved a parent and two sessions involved the teachers.

Clients 1 and 2 were both sent in by their class teachers for individual sessions. The counseling room in this elementary school has a good collection of toys, art materials, card games and children's books. The children preferred to sit on the carpeted floor and play with the toys while talking. The children were also invited to draw using papers and colored pencils. This is a creative intervention to help the young clients express themselves. Client 3 came in at the last three sessions to play with the other two clients. The group play therapy is treated as a collaborative effort. The conversations during the sessions (treated as counseling interview data) were audio recorded and later transcribed, analyzed and interpreted to identify themes. Themes from the interviews were triangulated with interpretations from drawings in the art therapy (creative interventions) and actions in the play therapy (collaborative intervention).

Case 1: Client 1 is 10 years old and an only child. Her mother is not a Malaysian citizen. After the divorce, the mother returned to her country of origin (a neighbouring country in the region). Her father works on his own and comes back late every night, leaving her alone most of the time. She was referred by her class teacher for being passive in class, not interacting with other students and not doing homework. When she first came to the session, client kept quiet. She did not want to talk much about her family; however she expressed unhappiness with her parents' divorce.

The first session was quite challenging as the client did not even look at the counselor or respond to open-ended questions. This continued in the second session where she mostly kept quiet or would answer with "I don't know" and "I will not tell you." In the second session, when asked how she is doing, the client opened up. "I miss my mother. I called her, but she didn't answer." In the third session, she talked about how she spent the day at home. "...after lunch, I play the computer, then I do my homework. When I am not happy, I play the computer again." Sessions 4 was all tears and sadness after she related to the counselor how she had

been scolded by her teacher for not doing homework. In Sessions 5 and 6, when asked about Chinese New Year Preparations, she did not show much interest, but said “Just me and my dad.”

Progress was seen in the seventh session where she seemed a little happy, when asked, she wrote on the drawing paper, “mother has come home.” In Sessions 8 and 9, the client started to engage in play therapy. She spent time looking at toys and games and took her time choosing. For the first time she talked in full sentences. “I want to put the water in the sand, how do you do this teacher?” She still looked scared of doing the wrong thing, but after a lot of encouragement and assurance that she may play any way she liked, she started to smile. She left the room smiling.

In the 10th session, she wrote on the paper, “Mummy has died.” When asked to explain, she said, “That is what my father said.” Later the counselor learned that her mother had left again and would not come back. During this session she said she wanted a friend and her class teacher to join in the next counseling session. In the next two sessions, with her friend (Client 3), she looked more confident. She said, “Mummy has a boyfriend in her country. I hate her. I would not talk to her if she comes back.” She also said she just wanted to forget her mother, focus on her study and live with her father. She also wrote a thank you note to her teacher.

During the session with Client 1, the counselor collaborated with her class teacher. The teachers sat in two sessions and listened and played with Client 1 and Client 3. After the sessions, the teacher and the counselor discussed strategies to help Client 1. They exchanged information on the client’s situation and the support that the teacher could provide. They agreed that the teacher would be more patient and encouraging with Client 1. The teacher was to pay attention to Client 1 by allowing a few minutes to consult about her homework before she went home. This information was delivered to Client 1, which she accepted with a smile. After a few sessions, the teachers reported that Client 1 was performing better in her homework. The teacher stated that she did not focus on Client 1’s mistakes, but gave more encouragement for any little improvement.

Case 2: Client 2 is nine years old and is also an only child. She lives in the house where her parents take turns living. From Mondays until Fridays she lives with her mother and on Saturdays and Sundays, her father comes back and her mother leaves to go to her grandmother’s house. Her parents argue every time they meet. Client 2 was referred to the counselor by her teacher for hitting a

classmate in the head. Client 2 likes to draw pictures but likes to “bomb” the pictures (putting in explosion signs to express her anger).

Client 2 was worried that she was being punished for hitting her classmate. She kept apologizing and claimed that it had been unintentional. She looked relieved when the counselor explained that the session was to help her cope with her parents’ divorce. In the following sessions, counselor kept her company while she drew quietly. She drew colorful flowers, houses, the sun, cars and buildings and had no people in her drawing. She refused to talk about her parents except to mention their arguments. “I am angry when my parents argued,” “they even argue at PTA meetings.”

Clients’ “extreme” feelings started to emerge in fifth and sixth sessions through her drawings. She drew bombs and explosion signs and said “bomb, bomb, everyone run away.” She still kept quiet when asked about her mother or herself. In Session 7, she drew hot-air balloons, rockets and a UFO on top of the drawing paper and at the bottom, drew lakes and mountains. In Session 8 she drew a beautiful rainbow, but again filled the whole paper with bombs. She drew just lines on four papers in Session 9 but still did not want to talk.

In the 10th and 11th sessions, the client chose to play Lego and demonstrated anger expressions such as hitting, slapping and scratching herself. She also looked at a facial expressions poster and pointed at angry faces and then kept quiet. The counselor met with each of her parents separately. The parents agreed not to fight on the phone or in front of their child. In the twelfth session, she came in and looking a bit happy and shared with the counselor “hmm.I heard them talk on the phone, but they did not fight...” Up until the twelfth session, Client 2 was not ready to accept her parents’ divorce. She did not have problems doing her homework but still needed improvement relating to classmates.

Case 3: Client 3, a 12 year old boy, was invited to join Clients 1 and 2 in the last three sessions. Client 3 has a younger sibling and lived with his father and grandmother after his parents divorced. His father has a new girlfriend who paid attention to Client 3 and his sister, so Client 3 felt quite comfortable even though his parents were separated. His main concern was for his safety when his father went out with the new girlfriend. “I am scared staying at home with my sister and grandmother only.”

Client 3 who was a little older than the other two, is a positive influence in encouraging the other clients to speak up. In the last session Client 1 shared with the

group that his father went to the court to obtain guardian rights. “My dad went to court today, now I live with my dad only.” Client 2 added that her parents did not do that because they have agreed to share their parenting rights. Client 2 stated that she actually wished that she could live with her mother. Client 3 added that he is happy that he can still see both of his parents even though not at the same time. “I love them both for bringing me to this world.” He assured the other two that children should not worry about parental issues because they cannot make any decision regarding their parents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Children of divorce suffered in silence because they do not have the means and skills to cope with the unexpected and unwanted situation. Most of the time, children of divorce do not even understand why their parents have to separate and why they (the children) have to live in different living arrangements. This confusing occurrence affects their emotional, cognitive and social development. Without help, there is tendency that this traumatizing experience will form a vicious cycle of unhealthy personalities as they grow [8]. This study focused on how counseling process may bring out the hidden emotions and thoughts in order to encourage the children to cope.

Children in this study are burdened by hidden feelings of fear, rejection, guilt, loss and anger [3,4,5]. They externalize behaviors while internalizing emotions. This study maps these behaviors with “mistaken goals” [9]. Mistaken goals among participants of this study are manifested through negative behaviors in the classroom such as not paying attention, not doing homework, hitting friends, not responding to counselor and ‘bombing’ beautiful drawings. All four mistaken goals postulated by Dreikurs [7] -- undue attention, power, revenge and avoidance (inadequacy) -- were found among these children. Protective factors among these clients were found in the support from family members such as siblings and grandmothers.

A number of symptoms were observed on both clients during the counseling session (Table 1). These symptoms represent the emotions, cognition and actions of the clients, as well as the mistaken goals [7]. Clients 1 and 2 appeared sad, angry and confused over their parents’ separation. Clients 1 and 3 expressed fear, insecurity and discomfort with the living arrangements. They wished to have their mothers around and most of all they wanted a happy family. The children showed that their struggle for happiness depended so much on the “family intact” (“Chinese New Year with Dad alone is not exciting”), smiled at certain things only (“my mother has come home,” “my parents do not fight anymore”).

Table 1: Emotional, Cognitive, Behavioral Symptoms and Mistaken Goals

Emotions	Cognitions	Mistaken goals	Behavior
Lonely and missing parent who are away (Client 1)	“Nobody is home to encourage me..”	* I want to avoid hardship	**Give up on doing homework. **Spend time playing computer games.
They fight with each other and not interested in me (Client 2)	“Nobody is paying attention to me”	*I need attention	**Hurt self in therapy
Worries over separation (Client 1)	“What if my dad leaves me too?” “I should not trust anyone..”	*I must show power (to protect myself)	**Anxious to leave class during early of counseling sessions **Does not respond to counselor
Hates mother for leaving (Client 1)	“She does not care about me”	*I must revenge	**Do not want to talk to her anymore if she comes back
Angry over parental fights (Client 2) “I can’t do anything about my parents’ fights”	“They should not fight..”	*I want to show power	**Hit friends in classroom ** ‘Bomb’ pictures, draw lines all over papers in therapy
Wishful (Client 1) (Client 2)	I want a to have a happy family		Drawings of happy family Smile when mother comes home (even for a while) Smile when parents do not fight on the phone
Fear of safety (Client 3)	There are lots of burglary but my father is out dating		Have to take care of sister, grandmother and the house
I am comfortable (Client 3)	Accept that my parents are not together anymore		I am friends with my father’s girlfriend who cares for me and my sister

Table 2: Art Therapy Interventions

Clients' Development	Art Intervention
Did not want to open up to the counselor (Client 1, Session1)	Drawing a picture of a happy family, but she did not say anything.
Seemed a little happy, (Client 1, Session 7)	Wrote on the drawing paper "mother has come home."
When asked to explain, she said "that is what my father said." (Client 1, Session 10):	Wrote on the paper "Mummy has died."
Refused to talk about her parents other than about their argument "I am angry when my parents argued" (Client 2, Session 2):	Quietly drawing colorful flowers, houses, the sun, cars and buildings and had no people in her drawing.
Kept quiet when asked about her mother or herself. Silently expressing her anger and refusal to accept parental separation (Client 2, Session 3, 7, 8). She also looked at facial expressions poster and pointed at angry faces and then kept quiet.	Drew hot-air balloons, rockets and a UFO, lakes and mountains. Drew a beautiful rainbow, but filled the whole paper with bombs until there was no more space. Drawing bombs and explosion signs and said "bomb, bomb, everyone run away. Drew just lines on drawing papers."

Client 3 showed more settled feelings. His main worry is about safety when his father is not around. Otherwise, he has accepted the separation and respected both parents for "bringing him into this world." This may be helped by the fact that Client 3 has a younger sibling and a grandmother that lives with them. At the same time, his father's new girlfriend was kind to him.

When unhappy, children form mistaken goals. Formation of mistaken goals was observable among the clients. Clients 1 and 2 appeared to form 'mistaken goals' (marked by *) which may lead to negative behaviors (marked by **). Client 1 could have developed "avoidance" (a mistaken goal) when she does not want to do her homework and spends time playing computer games (negative behaviors) to avoid the pain of thinking about her parents. Client 1 also might have developed "revenge" (a mistaken goal) when she decided not to communicate with her mother if she returned. Client 2 developed "I want to show power" (a mistaken goal) when she hit her friend, to show her anger and despair over her parents' frequent arguments. Client 2's show of power was seen in her drawings when she kept "bombing" every picture she drew. Table 1 below lists the symptoms observable in clients before and during the intervention.

Creative Interventions: The use of art therapy [14] allows the client to let go of anger, fears and wishes through the freedom of using colors and shapes. In this study one of the clients drew exploding bombs to express her anger towards her parents' fights. Art therapy was used at the start of the intervention as it helps the children to engage in conversation with the counselor and to express their emotions. Drawing was the main form of art therapy. Table 2 shows the relationship between clients' development in the counseling process and the drawings that they created to express their feelings.

Individual Play Therapy: In the earlier sessions, Client 1 just touched or held the toys, while responding minimally to teachers and drawing. Even though the teachers invited her to play in the earlier sessions, she started to engage in play therapy in Session 8. She spent time looking at toys and games. For the first time she talked in full sentences. "I want to put the water in the sand, how do you do this teacher?." She still looked scared of doing the wrong thing, but after a lot of encouragement and assurance that she may play any way she liked, she started to smile. She also asked if she could bring a friend to play with for the next session.

In the next two sessions, Client 1 came with her class teacher and a friend (Client 3). The teacher sat with them while they played with building blocks. Client 1 looked more confident. She said "Mummy has a boyfriend in her country. I hate her. I would not talk to her if she comes back." She also said she just wanted to forget her mother, focus on her study and live with her father. She also wrote a thank you note to her teacher in that session. Client 2 chose to play Lego, in the tenth and eleventh sessions. She expressed anger by smashing her models. She expressed guilt by hitting, slapping and scratching herself.

Collaborative Interventions

Group Play Therapy: A group counseling process was introduced for the last three sessions. This group consisted of Clients 1, 2 and 3. The group started with the children talking about their hobbies, likes and dislikes. The children played together and built houses with the wooden blocks. While playing, they talked about their families.

Client 3 who was a little older than the other two, was a positive influence in encouraging the other clients to speak up. In the last session, Client 1 opened up and shared with the group that his father went to the court to obtain guardian rights. "My dad went to court today,

now I live with my dad only.” Client 2 added that her parents did not do that because they have agreed to share their parenting rights. Client 2 shared that she actually wished that she could live with her mother. Client 3 added that he is happy that he can still see both of his parents even though not at the same time. “I love them both for bringing me to this world.” He assured the other two that children should not worry about parental issues because as children, they cannot make any decision regarding their parents.

The group play therapy with peers helped them relearn playing, sharing and caring. They also developed healthier ways of sharing their thoughts with friends when they exchange information on their parental divorce experiences. Client 3 offered insights that there is still hope for a manageable life even if one’s parents are separated. This finding seems consistent with Bistamam and Nasir [13] who highlighted similar effects among adolescents from divorced families.

Consultation with Parents: The counselor consulted with parents of Client 2. Client 2 informed the counselor that her parents fought whenever they met. Thus each parent was invited separately to the session. The parents were informed of the development of their child’s counseling sessions. The counselor pointed out that Client 2 is most distressed when she heard her parents fighting. Both parents agreed not to fight over the phone or in front of their child. The parents gained insight into their child’s needs. This proved fruitful when in the following session Client 2 was able to smile when she reported her parents did not fight on the phone anymore.

Teachers’ Involvement: The teachers played very important roles in the success of this therapy. Both clients had been referred by their class teachers because of disruptive behavior. However, before the consultation, the teachers did not show confidence and skill in handling the students. There were times the counselor had to provide immediate support when the children were reprimanded by teachers for not doing homework or for hitting another child. In this study, the teachers sat in two sessions and listened and played with Clients 1 and 2. After the sessions, each teacher and the counselor discussed strategies to help Clients 1 and 2. Teachers and counselor exchanged information on the client’s situation and the support that the teachers could provide. The teachers agreed to be more patient and encouraging. Client 1’s teacher was to pay attention to her by allowing a few minutes of consultation on her homework before

she went home. Client 2’s teacher agreed to encourage her to make friends. After a few sessions, the teachers reported that Client 1 was performing better in her homework and Client 2 had not hit anyone in the class. Both teachers agreed that they now learnt not to focus too much on the students’ mistakes, but to recognize and encourage the students’ efforts.

The inclusion of a support system such as parents and teachers has greatly enhanced the counseling process. Consultation with parents (even when done separately) resulted in parents understanding that they can reduce their children’s stress if they did not fight in front of them. Collaborative discussion with the teachers enabled them to understand their clients’ issues and needs and change their approach accordingly. The teachers also learned to encourage the clients’ academic performance.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that children of divorce suffer psychologically and socially and that they need professional help. The formation of mistaken goals was observed which included the need for attention, avoidance, showing power and revenge. Counseling intervention using creative and collaborative approaches were found to be effective. Creative interventions which included art therapy has helped engaged the children in therapy and aided them to express their fear, anger, loneliness and wishes. Collaborations with parents and teachers were found fruitful for reducing stress and putting the children back on track. This study implicates teachers in that they must be aware of each child’s development and take initiatives to obtain professional help, instead of labeling the students as classroom nuisance. School counselors play a key role in organizing their interventions, thus this paper hopes to be of benefit to increase their knowledge, steps and resources in making a change in their services. This paper suggests that all adults involved must ensure that children in their care receive professional help as parents face divorce

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