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The Effect of Divorce Groups in Reducing Childhood Aggression

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The Effect of Divorce Groups in Reducing Childhood Aggression

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to determine if children of divorced families were more aggressive than the children of non-divorced families, and also to determine if divorce groups would reduce the incidence of that aggression. Twenty-eight children from Radley School in Helena, Montana, were observed during the morning and lunch recesses from March 9, to March 13, 1998. Twenty of the subjects were randomly selected from the first and second grade classes and were then grouped together according to a divorced or non-divorced home. The remaining eight subjects were predetermined. These children had been referred to, and had completed the divorce group offered by the school counselor. The subjects' playground behavior was then observed and assessed on a four-point scale, (0=no aggression, 1=aggressive play, 2=verbal aggression, 3=physical aggression), and tested according to their group placement. A one way anova was conducted and revealed significance between groups in verbal and physical aggression. Post hoc tests suggested that the divorce group was consistently more aggressive in both physical and verbal aggression when compared to the divorce with group and non-divorced subjects. Independent T tests showed that there were significant differences found between gender in physical aggression, suggesting that the boys were more aggressive than the girls. The results of this study suggest that aggressive tendencies in children are dependent upon the child's divorce experience and whether a child of divorce completed a school divorce group. The further implications of these findings will be discussed throughout the paper in more detail.
The word divorce always evokes strong emotions in people. Until a few centuries ago, divorce was not even mentioned. Marriage was considered binding and sacred, a bond never to be broken. In the age of independence and women's rights, divorce began to slowly gain in social acceptance. Today, divorce seems to be as common as marriage. To some extent people enter a marriage knowing that it quite possibly could end in divorce. This is why prenuptial agreements have recently become so popular, and although it still evokes several negative emotions, divorce is generally accepted. As divorce statistics began to rise, so did the number of children identified by psychologists and schools for being affected with developmental problems. Psychologists started to believe that the increase of divorce and the increase of childhood problems, was somehow connected. The most common problem that seems to plague children of divorce is a heightened amount of aggression. Children of divorce are more hostile and negative about the environment around them. The exact reason for this increase in aggression is not as clear as the problem. It is important to find a common cause between aggression and divorce so that the problem can be solved for these children.

In 1986, Bronfenbrenner conducted a survey that indicated divorce statistics were beginning to level off instead of the steady increase seen within the last few decades. Even with these declining statistics, Bronfenbrenner points out that they still show a large number of children being affected by divorce every year. In a 1997 survey done by the Washington post, it was estimated that one out of two marriages are expected to end in divorce. According to Hitchcock (1997), this means that at least two out of five children will see their parents separate, forcing thousands of children into emotional trauma.

On a scale identifying causes of childhood trauma, Francke (1983) discovered that divorce was rated second only to a parental death. Studies have shown that 30%-50% of children suffer long-term effects after a divorce. Warshak (1992) claims that children cope with divorce in the same way that people cope with death. In essence the child feels as though they are "losing" a parent. Francke explains that, like the stages of death, children go through variations of six basic stages of coping. Those six stages are shock, depression, denial, anger, low-self esteem, shame,
and responsibility. Younger children are more easily affected by the sixth stage, (taking responsibility) than older children because of their heightened egocentric thinking. Because they believe the world is centered on them, they blame themselves more for their parent’s breakup. Older children may experience some blame but they are mentally capable of seeing that there are other problems that go beyond them.

The above information and statistics show that there are many children being affected by divorce. The number of divorced children seems to also be correlated with an increasing amount of aggressive behavior in children, leading to the assumption that the two problems are connected.

There is no doubt that the children of today are more aggressive when compared with the children of yesterday. According to Barovick (1995), today’s child is more willing to turn to acts of violence to solve their problems than ever before. Wallach (1993), has estimated that out of all the violent crimes reported in 1993, one-third of the offenders were under the age of twenty-one. He also points out that these estimates are rising every year. In fact by the year 2010, the numbers of juvenile offenders will most likely rise by 30,000. It is important to find the cause behind this rising number of offenders to help curb this increasing pattern of violence. One solution is to find programs that help the children of divorce deal with the issues that they must face because of their parent’s break up. The first step to finding a solution that could help children cope with divorce is to identify the issues that they must face every day.

According to Francke (1983), all children will suffer some repercussions from a parental divorce, and although the forms of those repercussions vary, there are some basic emotions that children must deal with. These emotions include resentment, resignation, courage, cynicism, contempt and the two predominant feelings of sadness and anger. She also states that most children hope for a reconciliation between their parents. This often false belief, causes the children to have an even greater emotional reaction to the continued separation. Hetherington and Roger (1983) have gone a step further than Franke by identifying five universal truths that they have found about children and divorce:

1) Boys take divorce harder than girls, especially between the ages of three and five and the ages of nine or ten.
2) For all children the worst time for a divorce is between the ages of three and eight. This is because of the egocentric nature of their thinking. This is also the age where children start to identify with their parents on issues of gender and values.

3) Girls whose fathers leave them early in life can become sexually precocious as adolescents and they also marry at a younger age, when compared to girls of non-divorced homes.

4) Divorced mothers have a harder time controlling their sons than they do with their daughters when compared to non-divorced mothers.

5) The worst time for remarriage is between the ages of nine and ten.

These five truths stated by Hetherington and Roger, have shown to be more true than false when looking at how divorce affects children. The exact reasons behind why these certain symptoms show themselves are not yet completely understood. Kasen (1996) looked at whether a divorced mother really does have more problems with boys than the mothers from non-divorced families. She discovered that there is an increased risk for a male living with a single mother to develop psychiatric disorders than the boys in an intact family situation. She also discovered that boys are indeed more depressed than girls living in a single family home. The reason for the significant difference is that children from divorce relationships are more likely to hold in their emotion, which will lead to psychiatric disorders and depression. When a child is affected with a psychiatric or depressive disorder, they are usually harder to control. This reason could be why divorce mothers have a harder time with their sons. The reasoning behind why these children hold in their feelings will be discussed in further detail later in this paper.

In 1995, Tucker looked at the long-term effects of divorce that the emotions identified by Franke and the five truths described by Hetherington and Roger can have on children. He discovered that a child's experience of divorce also is an indicator of negative patterns in adulthood, such as alcohol consumption. His research involving 972 subjects seemed to indicate childhood characteristics such as cheerfulness, unconscientiousness, and sociabilities were predictors for smoking and drinking in later years. Since a child of divorce is affected in the above characteristics, it is more likely that they would fall into these negative patterns.

Specific differences in gender have also been a predictor of how children deal with the
effects of divorce. In general, boys show more negative effects than girls. In fact, until just a few years ago it was thought by psychologists, that girls weren't really affected by divorce. It was assumed that boys have difficulties because, given the typical ruling of custody to the mother, boys are separated from the person with whom they are supposed to identify with. In contrast, girls of divorce still had most of their contact with their mothers, with whom they mostly identify. Although parts of this theory have some validity, it is not necessarily true. It was not until recently that researchers started doing more specific gender research and they discovered that girls do have reactions to divorce, but unlike boys, girls have "sleeper" effects. Sleeper effects are reactions to a traumatic situation that manifests inside a person years after the specific event. The sleeper effects for girls of divorce families usually appear during adolescence.

There are many specific differences in the effects that divorce has on girls and boys. Generally boys, unlike girls, have overt problems from the start. Hitchcock (1997), found that male children of divorce throughout grade school and high school are more hostile and aggressive toward teachers, classmates, and parents. They are harder to control and have a variety of behavior problems. Such behavior problems include impulse control, higher amount of activity and restlessness and a smaller amount of patience. On the other hand, Hitchcock found that the sleeper effects in females ranged from problems with depression, intimacy, and relationships with males. Females also tended to be more sexually active earlier than females of intact families.

Another area that is severely affected by divorce is academic achievement. The research of Hitchcock (1997), shows that most of the children affected by divorce do not stay in school and/or will not achieve as much as children from non-divorced homes. Research has shown that problems in school can be the first sign that a child is traumatized by a divorce. Because of the emotional issues that these children must confront, they tend to be withdrawn, hostile, disrespectful, unruly, and rude. Children of divorce also tend to have a higher incidence of stealing in school than the children of non-divorced homes. Another common indicator that Franke (1983) often found was teachers reporting the tendency for children of divorce to act more "adult-like". A child who behaves in this manner is often worried about money issues, taking care of their parents needs and helping the single parent with "adult like" responsibilities.
Children who are plagued with these complicated concerns will spend all of their time concentrating on how to solve them. When a child is constantly preoccupied, it leaves them no time to concentrate on school work and this is why they often get behind in their studies.

Hitchcock states that another result of divorce that affects academic success is a child's self-esteem. According to Bynum (1996), a child of a divorced family has a much lower amount of self-esteem than a child from a non-divorced home. Therefore, these children will often lack the self-esteem needed to even try in school. Children of divorce tend to feel as though their chances in life are severely compromised. In fact, according to Stephan West (1996), pre-adolescent children whose parents are divorced appraise themselves and situations more negatively than children from non-divorced homes.

Another reason for the decline in academic achievement could stem from the fact that girls from a divorced home are more likely to become pregnant and quit school. Children of divorce are also more likely to cohabitate at a younger age. When this occurs, they leave school to focus on work and making money. Supporting themselves becomes more important than receiving an education.

The emotional problems that plague these children are reason enough to cause the high incidence of behavioral and aggressive problems. But interestingly enough research has shown that it's not the emotion themselves but how they are dealt with that decides how well a child will survive the trauma of divorce. All too often these feelings of resentment, sadness and anger are missed or mistaken for something else. For example, when a child is acting out in class or becomes overly aggressive on the playground, he or she is often labeled as a "problem child" and handled in such a matter. When a child is given this label, their behavior becomes expected and, like Cooley's looking glass self theory suggests, the child's behavior becomes what the other person expects of them. Unfortunately, the fact that such behavior may be caused by the trauma of a divorce gets lost in that this child is simply considered a "problem". The problems that occur are addressed from their behavior alone and not the cause, leaving the true problem to be unaddressed and unresolved. A child is then left feeling isolated with those feelings and with no way to express them. He or she begins to internalize the problem as his or her fault, which
causes even further emotional damage.

Recently some researchers have focused on the specific reasons why problems faced by children of divorce go unnoticed. Monahon (1993), an expert in the field of childhood trauma, offers an explanation by looking at the coping mechanisms that children use when dealing with traumas. When a child is traumatized, the parents' ability to support their child is key to helping them overcome it. The reason that divorce is different from other personalized trauma is that it affects the whole family system, leaving the entire family in upheaval. People who are caught in a divorce often become immersed in how it is affecting their individual lives, not to mention dealing with their own emotional issues. All too often a parent will eventually get so caught up in his or her own needs that he or she easily overlooks the needs of their children. A child's distress often goes unnoticed until behaviors get out of hand. This is when a child overtly vents their emotions through the uses of hostility or aggression. This is also when they are often mislabeled as a "problem child".

Monahon further states that, while some children act out their distress in a hostile manner, other children do the exact opposite. Some children will do whatever they can to try to make things better, which often entails trying to be the "best" child possible. This is especially true with children who desperately want their parents to reconcile. They believe that if they are perfect it will make their parents happy which in turn, will bring them back together. This false belief turns their trauma into the "perfect" child’s syndrome, where on the outside they seem to be fine, but in reality the trauma of their parent's divorce is tearing them up inside. More specifically, the "perfect" child’s syndrome arises when a child who tries to be perfect becomes distressed when they feel as though they have fallen short of that status. This becomes a syndrome because the child begins to internalize everything around them. They believe that it is up to them to make everything all right, and when something goes wrong it is their fault, despite their lack of control over the situation. The longer that this belief is held, the worse the symptoms will get. They will start to believe that no matter what they do it is not good enough. For example a straight A student could hate him or herself because the grades on a recent report card were not all A+s. These children often become suicidal because they feel as though they will never be good enough.
and everybody would be better off without them. The danger of the "perfect" child's syndrome, is that these children seem so confident and healthy on the outside. In the mess of a divorce, it is easy to take an apparently "perfect child" for granted and overlook the underlining problems.

Although experiments and statistics have shown that most children are severally affected by a divorce, there is that small percentage that seem to recover better than the statistics would indicate. These children do not show the long-term effects that research suggests most children of divorce do. Researchers who have focused in this area have discovered many different circumstances that could help predict how the child will be affected by a divorce. Some of these predictors include the amount of post-divorce time that the child spends with his or her father, and whether the family was involved in any type of divorce program or counseling sessions. One of the most important predictors of how a child will be affected by a divorce, specifically the amount of post-divorce aggression, depends upon the parent's relationship both before and after the divorce.

The parent's post-divorce relationship is important in predicting the outcome of a child's long term development and problems. Francke (1983) found that children that come from a hostile pre-divorce environment and a bitter post-divorce environment fare the worst when compared to the children of more amicable before and after divorce relationships. Francke believes that this occurs because the children of a bitter divorce are often trapped in their parents' emotional tug of war. Because of the egocentric nature of childhood, a child feels responsible for the state of their parent's relationship. These children often become mediators and pawns in their parent's losing game. Parents will often use the child to gain information about their ex-spouse's new life or to see if the ex-spouse talks about them. Parents also often become guilty of using custody battles and arrangements to hurt the other parent instead of considering what is best for the child. The worst thing that can occur during a bitter divorce is the bad mouthing of one parent about another. This is absolutely devastating to a child. Children begin to feel guilty about wanting to see the non-custodial parent or for even loving them. They believe that this desire and/or love is betraying the love of the custodial parent and the last thing that children of divorce want to do is to hurt their parents. Unfortunately, long term guilt will eventually turn into
resentment toward the parent that has kept them away from the non-custodial parent. There is also resentment at both parents for breaking up the family and putting all of the family members into this difficult position. As mentioned before, this emotional upheaval will often show itself as aggression and hostility.

The children of divorce whose parents have a fairly good post-divorce relationships, seem to deal better with the immediate effects as well as suffer fewer long-term effects. Esposito (1995), studied the effects of cohesion in a family, and discovered that the higher levels of cohesion a family has, the better a child will cope with divorce. His study also showed that the higher the level of cohesion was between the parents, the better the relationship would be between the children and the non-custodial parent. When the parents have a better relationship, it not only lowers the stress for the child, but also for the parents. The lower stress and tension level makes it easier for the non-custodial parent to contact their children. Therefore, they will most likely keep in touch more often. This also makes it easier for the child to have a separate relationship with each parent and not feel guilty about doing so.

When parents allow their children to feel love for the other parent without feeling guilty, it relieves many of the fears that accompany divorce. When they know that they can see their non-custodial parent whenever they want, it does not feel like they are being abandoned. Once these fears are settled, he or she can successfully begin to deal with the effects of the divorce. These children have shown that they are less likely to turn to aggressive behavior because they are allowed to deal with and express their feelings.

According to Abdalla (1992), besides the post-divorce relationship between parents, the amount of time that the child spends with his or her father seems to help predict aggressiveness within a child. It has been a social custom for the courts to give custody of the children to the mother. Warshack (1992) states that as a culture, we assume that women make better parents. Our culture also assumes that women are more important in the child's development because they are the nurturers and the comforters. Though there is some truth to this theory, it is harmful to exclude the importance of a father's role. This belief and judgement often mean that divorced fathers fade out of the lives of their children. Warshak (1992) found that one-third of all children...
of divorce that lives with their mothers never see their fathers. As fathers develop new post-
divorce relationships, their level of involvement with their children drops off. Hoffman (1995)
found that the decline of the father's involvement is dependant upon the pre and post-divorce
relationship. When the relationship between the ex-spouses is bad and the non-custodial father
has no support from the mother, it becomes easier to let go than to fight for more time with the
children. Studies have also shown that a father's involvement is also dependent upon the age of
the child. A father that has younger (preschool age) children, spends more time with them then a
father of school age children. Stephen (1996) learned that ironically it is during the school age
when a father's relationship is so crucial to the long term development of a child. It is during this
age that a child learns to identify with gender roles and parental values. Boys want to learn what
it is like to be a man, while girls learn about what kind of man to look for in a mate.

In recent studies Abdalla (1992) has looked at the effects of aggression and divorce in
children and the amount of time they spend with their fathers. His results indicate a negative
correlation between levels of aggression and the lack of a father figure. He has found that the less
time a child spends with his or her father, the more likely a child will show higher levels of
aggression. According to Linda Francke (1983), children need a male role model. Boys
especially fare much worse when disconnected from their fathers. The aggression that Abdalla
(1992) identified as a cause of being separated from their father has recently been more
specifically linked to play with parents and the importance it has in childhood development.

Psychologists have always known that play is the most important emotional outlet for
children. When children are not able or do not know how to express their emotions, they use play
as a catharsis to work through them. This is why play therapy is such an effective method in
helping children deal with emotions. There are strong distinctions between how mothers and
fathers play. Mothers tend to be more cautious and gentle, while fathers tend to be rougher.
They help the child strive to play harder and go further. For example, imagine a child playing on a
large jungle gym. Where a mother would be warning the child to be careful and not to go too
high, a father would be cheering the child on to climb to the top. Single mothers often impose
negative consequences on "rough" play by overly punishing the children and telling them how bad
this play is. Recent studies have suggested though, that by engaging in rough play, a child can act and work out his or her aggression and hostility. A father is generally the parent that allows children to express their emotions through the act of "rough" play. Without this outlet more openly encouraged by father figures, a child's negative feelings build, which in turn leads to more aggressive tendencies.

According to Abadalla (1992), this type of play has also been shown to be important in a child learning physical limits. This means that through "rough" play a child is indirectly taught about what is appropriate roughness and what is socially acceptable when it comes to aggression. Without learning these types of acceptable boundaries, children do not know when to quit and how far is too far with physical roughness. The children that do not learn these boundaries often become the school yard bully and "problem child". This research has shown that both a mother's caution and a father's roughness are crucial to a child's well-rounded development. A child receives feelings of security from mom while receiving a sense of confidence from dad. The issue of whether children are able to learn the appropriate boundaries, will set the stage for how children cope with problems later on. Those who have not learned these boundaries will be short tempered and quick to use his or her fists to solve a problem rather than discussing it or finding a compromise.

Warchack (1992) has identified several other characteristics that appear when boys do not have a strong relationship with their father. These boys tend to have a low self esteem which results from a lack of a strong male identity. When a young boy is trying to find his identity, he looks to his father to see how he should be. When you are angry with your father, it is hard to positively identify with a male role. Many types of emotions arise from this internal conflict. The young boy wants to be a man and yet he is ashamed of what a man is. Males of divorce also suffer from identity problems in relationships. These children grow up being doubtful of love and trust. Boys will also search for the "perfect" love so that they can be spared what their parent's have suffered.

Girls are also affected by the loss of a father figure. Although these effects are different from the identity problems that boys suffer, they are just as devastating. Warchack (1992) has
identified several problems that occur with females. Unlike males whose symptoms appear in childhood, a girl’s symptoms tend to develop in adolescence. The female issues caused by the lack of a father figure usually revolve around intimacy and relationships. These girls assume that all men are bad and that any man will eventually leave them like their fathers did. They are afraid of being betrayed and, like the boys, suffer from low self-esteem. When girls of a divorced home look for relationships, they tend to look for replacement fathers. They often believe that sex equals love and that is why the teenage pregnancy statistics for girls from a divorced home are so high.

Warshak and Abadalla’s data clearly show that both a mother and a father are needed in the development of a child. If either one of these is missing, the child is at a higher risk for long term childhood aggression and developmental problems. While Francke, Monahon, Hitchcock Hetherington, and Roger data’s clearly shows that the emotions produced as a cause of divorce also put children of divorce at risk for a higher incidence of aggression and developmental problems. These two main issues both show a correlation between divorce and aggression. The statistics and evidence clearly show that a divorce is very damaging to the development of a child. Because this fact can no longer be disputed, it is important to look at programs that can reduce such harmful effects.

One important area that reduces long-term developmental effects is a divorce program for children and families. The success of these programs has prompted many counselors to recommend that courts start to mandate that these programs are completed by families after a divorce. According to Tricia DiBias (1996), the success of these programs proves that children of divorce can be helped through their trauma to emerge with increased emotional health.

Gordan (1996), has shown that divorce classes for the parents can help them achieve a better post-divorce relationship. In a six-month outcome evaluation, Gordon evaluated how well parents mastered skills taught in a mandatory divorce group. In these classes they learn to accept their divorce, the terms of the custody agreement and how to prevent or control conflicts with his or her ex-spouse. They also learn how to allow the children to spend more time with the other parent without feeling left out or hurt. The results of the subjects that completed the program,
showed that these parents adjusted to divorce related problems much better than the parents that did not complete this program. They reported a lower amount of parental conflict, handling children related situations better and feeling able to allow the non-custodial parent more time with the children.

Barker (1995) reported that even a divorce computer program has shown to be helpful to parents and children that do not have a good understanding of divorce. This program has information to help answer questions that one might have about divorce proceedings. It also includes a program presented on a child's level that helps answer questions children might have. Subjects in Barker's study reported an increase in understanding and communication while showing a decrease in conflicts related to the divorce adjustment period. This program works because it helps to relieve some of the anxiety caused by divorce. Once some of the anxiety is relieved, the adults can deal with their emotions as well as help their children cope.

Group programs offered by the public school systems have also been shown to be successful in helping to prevent negative effects of divorce, including increased aggression in children. Sanders (1996) conducted a study with fifth graders and found that school divorce programs help the divorced children relate to their peers in a more positive manner. Sanders also found that such programs showed a trend in improvement of the children's self-concepts, even though that improvement was not at a significant level.

Even with all of the supporting evidence, there are still questions about whether these divorce programs show enough improvement to be mandated by the court systems. It is important to experiment and find programs that will truly benefit the children of divorce. This study was designed to show that school divorce programs do have a positive influence on the amount of aggression manifested by children from divorce families. It was also designed to show that most of the children from divorced families would benefit from having these programs be more widely available or even, perhaps, mandated.
Methodology

Subjects

The sample consisted of twenty-eight grade school children ranging in ages six through nine. The grade level ranged from first through the fourth grade. The sample was taken from Radley School located in East Helena, Montana. The gender breakdown consisted of sixteen girls and twelve boys. Out of the twenty-eight subjects sampled, eighteen subjects were from divorced families and ten subjects were from non-divorced families. The first group consisted of eight subjects from divorced families, who had completed the divorced group offered by the school. The divorce group consisted of the subjects attending a therapy session once a week over a period of three months. Their sessions, held every Tuesday morning, were supervised by the school counselor, Jannice Spotorno. During these sessions, the subjects dealt with issues pertaining to different households' rules and different living styles with their parents. They also discussed their feelings about the divorce and how to better express those feelings. The subjects especially worked on dealing with their feelings and not keeping them bottled inside. Out of those eight subjects sampled, six of them were in the second grade, one was in the third grade and one was in the fourth grade. The gender breakdown for the divorce with group subjects were six girls and two boys. The second group consisted of ten subjects from non-divorce homes. Five of those subjects were in the first grade while five were in the second grade. The gender breakdown for this group was five girls and five boys. The third group consisted of ten subjects from divorced homes that had not completed any type of divorce program offered by the school. Five of those subjects were also from the first grade while the remaining five were from the second grade. The gender breakdown for this group was also five girls and five boys.

A survey of background information was conducted by Radley School in the fall of 1997, for further details of the East Helena Family Profile, refers to Appendix B, figures 7-10. This survey revealed that for both the East Helena school district and Radley school, the incidence of divorce was lower than the national average.
Procedures

The divorce with group subjects were predetermined by the specifications that they had to have completed a divorce program. These eight subjects were referred to the school counselor by their respective parents or teachers. The other two groups were randomly selected from two of the four first grade classes and two of the four second grade classes. These class lists were then divided into two groups: children from divorced homes or children from non-divorced homes. Out of this list of approximately eighty students, ten subjects were randomly selected for each of the two groups (divorced and non-divorced). The process by which they were selected consisted of a blind drop technique in which the school counselor would drop a pen onto the class list and whatever name it landed on was chosen for the study. The class lists were also divided into male and female to allow the school counselor to evenly match the subjects for gender. The first treatment group was composed of the eight subjects of divorced homes who had completed the divorce group therapy sessions. The second treatment group consisted of the ten subjects of divorced homes. The control group for this study was the ten subjects of non-divorced homes.

Each group was observed for five consecutive days during the week of March 9 through March 13, 1998. Subjects were observed during morning and lunch recesses and overt playground behavior was recorded. The subjects were identified by coat color and other distinguishable features such as hair color and then identified on paper by gender and a given number. For example girl one was identified by having a big purple coat and blond hair. The identifying markers for the subjects were obtained before the actual observations took place to ensure that the subjects could be easily observed. The playground aids also helped in identifying the children by having a list of their actual names and corresponding number. If any of the aids had trouble with a child on the list, they would mention it by for example saying, girl 16 got in trouble for swearing. If that incident had been missed, it would then be marked on the observation paper. Observations themselves involved an overall observation of the children with specific attention being paid to areas that a fight or aggressive play was occurring. If a subject from the list was spotted in that area, they were marked accordantly.

Each grade level was separated during the morning recess. The morning recess times
were as follows: first and second were at 9:45-10:00 and the third and fourth was from 10:00-10:15. The lunch recess was also separated, but the times overlapped each other. The lunch recess times were as follows: fourth was from 11:15-12:00, first was from 11:20-12:05, second was from 11:30-12:15 and third was from 11:35-12:20.

Aggression was defined on a four-point scale ranging from zero to three. Zero was defined as normal play, no aggression. One was defined as aggressive play. Aggressive play was scored when a subject engaged in pushing, shoving, or any other physical contact that was aggressive in nature. Although this was physical aggression, the intention was not to hurt anyone. The children that were scored in this area were playing together, not acting hostile toward each other. They received one mark as soon as they engaged in the play. Subjects would only receive another mark if they moved to another group and engaged in aggressive play again. Aggressive play did not include tag, where the person was simply touched instead of shoved. A two was defined as verbal aggression. Verbal aggression was defined as swearing, raised voice, and/or hostile words. A three was defined as physical aggression, which included hitting, biting, kicking, spitting or any other act that resulted in another's physical harm. Unlike aggressive play, a three designated an intention to hurt and perform hostile physical aggression upon another child, not to play with them. Scores were then tallied by the number of aggressive acts for each of the four categories. For example if boy five was marked four times with a number two, his verbal aggression score would be a four. Aggressive acts were then total together, including all four of the categories to score the amount of total aggression. In this case if girl seven had received two marks for aggressive play, one mark for verbal aggression and zero marks for physical aggression, her total aggression score would be a three.

Results

One way anovas were conducted to find significance of aggression between the groups of non-divorce subjects, divorce subjects and divorce with group subjects. Aggression was labeled for the anova tests in the following way: Aggress1 was aggressive play, aggress2 was verbal
aggression, aggress3 was physical aggression and aggress2 was total aggression. (See appendix c)

The one way anovas (see appendix C) showed significance between the groups in verbal aggression, F(2,25) = 4.848, p< .017 and physical aggression, F(2,25) = 3.603, p< .042. The verbal aggression mean square was 2.889 for between groups and .596 within groups. A post hoc comparison was done on verbal aggression revealing differences between the divorce subjects and the divorce with group subjects, p< .038 (see figure 2, appendix A). The mean difference between divorce subjects and divorce with groups subjects in verbal aggression was 1.00. A difference was also found between divorce subjects and non-divorce subjects, p< .05 (see figure 2, appendix A) The mean difference between divorce subjects and non divorce subjects in verbal aggression was .90. This indicates that the divorce subjects were more verbally aggressive then both the divorce with group and the non-divorce subjects.

For physical aggression, the mean square was 1.614 for between groups and .448 within groups (see figure 3, appendix A). A post hoc comparison in this category revealed a difference between the divorce subjects and the divorce with group subjects, p< .059. The mean difference for the divorce with group subjects and the divorce alone subjects in physical aggression was .80. This also indicates that the divorce subjects were more aggressive then the divorce with group subjects.

An anova was also computed for total aggression, F(2,25) = 2.723, p< .085. The mean square for total aggression was, for between groups 32.170 and within groups were 11.815. Although this was not at a significant level, it still indicates a trend that the divorce subjects are more overly aggressive then the divorce with group and the non-divorce subjects (see figures 5-7, appendix A).

No significance was found when the divorce with group subjects and the non-divorce subjects were compared in any of the aggression categories. This could indicate that these two groups are more alike in their aggressive tendencies then they are not alike. There was also no significance among the three subjects groups when compared by aggressive play, showing that divorce did not influence the amount of aggressive play found in children (see figure 1, appendix A). When the divorce subjects were compared to the non-divorce subjects in both physical
aggression and total aggression, there was once again no significance found. This indicates that the non-divorce subjects are closer to the divorce subjects in these areas. It is also interesting to note that the divorce with group subjects were significant in these areas, indicating that these subjects were less aggressive than the non-divorce subjects.

Independent T-tests were conducted to compare aggression with grade level and gender. These scores revealed hardly any significance. Grade level was found not to be a factor at all when compared by aggression. The highest level of significance found between grade level was in the area of aggressive play, \( T(24) = -1.581, p< .127 \). The mean for aggressive play between first and second graders was 1.60 for first graders and 3.38 for second graders. This indicated that the second graders were slightly more aggressive in their play than first graders.

Gender was also not a major factor to the overall aggression. The only significance found between gender was for physical aggression, \( T(26) = 2.053, p< .050 \) (see figure 4, in appendix A). The mean for physical aggression between gender was .67 for boys and .13 for girls. This indicates that boys have a higher incidence of physical aggression over the girls.

Discussion

Although significance was not found in every comparison, the general pattern of the data suggests that there is a definite correlation between children of divorced families completing a divorce group and a lower incidence of aggression. As discussed in the results section, only two of the anovas, three post hoc comparisons and one of the T-tests showed acceptable levels of significance, but there are patterns where the data was not significant that also show a divorce group can lead to a lower amount of aggression. This next section will describe and explain the patterns of all data included in appendix C, both significant and not significant.

The first anova that should be examined more closely is the comparison done between the subjects for total aggression. The comparison for total aggression between these three groups was only moderately significant, \( p< .085 \) (see figures 5-7, appendix A). The possible reason that this comparison was not at or above the .05 level, could be because the anova for aggressive play between groups was not significant, \( F(2,25) = .917, p< .413 \), which may have accounted for the low significance of the total amount of aggression. The low significance of aggressive play
The Effect of Divorce Groups

between groups, could have brought down the significance of total aggression.

Another important aspect of this study was that for all four of the categories of aggression, no significance was found between the divorce with group subjects and the non-divorce subjects. The post hoc significance levels for each of the four categories were as follows: total aggression $p < .950$ (see figure 6, appendix A), aggressive play $p < .986$ (see figure 1, appendix A), verbal aggression $p < .963$ (see figure 2, appendix A), and physical aggression $p < .821$ (see figure 3, appendix A). Because these comparisons are not significant, it shows that these two groups are more alike than they are different. This helps to show that the divorce groups can indeed help reduce aggression. The aggressive tendencies between children of divorce were shown to be higher than the non-divorce children (see figure 7, appendix A), which indicates that children of divorce homes are more aggressive than children of non-divorced homes. If the divorce groups were to have no effect on the behavior of children from divorced homes, you would expect that they would be as aggressive as the divorce alone subjects. By having the non-divorce and the divorce with group subjects be closer in their comparisons, it shows that divorce groups can help a child overcome the problems that cause more aggressive tendencies.

One surprising outcome of this study was that not only were the divorce with group subjects close to the non-divorce subjects, they were actually less aggressive. In the category of verbal and physical aggression, the non-divorce subjects had a low occurrence of each, while the divorce with group subjects had no occurrence of aggression in either category. The only category that the divorce with group subjects were marked in was aggressive play. Even in this area, the number of aggressive acts occurred at a lower incidence level than the non-divorced subjects (see figure 1, appendix A).

The divorce alone group showed consistently higher rates, showing a strong correlation that children of divorce are more aggressive than non-divorced children. When compared to either the divorce with group subjects or the non-divorced subjects, the aggression was always higher in the divorce alone group, even if not at a significant level. When the raw data for this group is compared to the other two groups, the difference is clear. For total acts of aggression scored, the divorce subjects had fifty-three acts, while divorce with group subjects had fifteen acts.
and non-divorce subjects had twenty-three acts (see figures 5-7, appendix A). Verbal aggression for the divorce alone group was ten individual acts, while having eight individual acts of physical aggression. As stated earlier, for the last two categories, the divorce with group subjects had no individual acts of aggression. The non-divorce subjects, had only one act of verbal aggression and two acts of physical aggression (see figures 2 and 3, appendix A).

Although aggressive play was not significant when compared with any group, the divorce alone subjects rated the highest, with the divorce with group subjects rating the lowest. When the raw data was again compared in this category, the divorce alone subjects had thirty-five acts of aggressive play, the non-divorce had twenty and the divorce with group subjects had fifteen (see figure 1, appendix A).

Another important aspect of this study were the divorce group subjects themselves. The gender of the subjects was skewed to the female end, with six female subjects and only two male subjects. Even though the comparison of gender was not significant, except in the physical aggression category, it is important to address this issue. As stated earlier, only through a referral is a child able to participate in this divorce group, so the majority of the children being referred are female. Radley also has a behavior management group for children who are too aggressive or disobedient during school hours. Most of the children referred to this group are male. Although the exact amount is not known, the school counselor stated that many of these children are also from divorced households. As stated in the introduction, males and females deal with divorce differently and males are the ones that tend to take divorce harder. An important question that needs to be answered then is why are so many male children not being referred to the divorce group? It seems to go back to what Monahon (1993) said about the symptoms of divorce trauma and how they are often overlooked by parents and schools because the child is simply labeled a "problem child". The number of boys in the behavior management is a perfect example of people trying to deal with the effects of a problem and not the cause. The children in the behavior management group are dealing with the aggression itself and not exploring how that aggression could be stemming from the trauma of a divorce. As seen with the results of this study, the divorce group has an effect on aggressive tendencies even though those aggressive tendencies are
not the focus of the sessions. So it would benefit the children of divorce in the behavior management group to be in the divorce group because it would most likely solve their aggressive problems.

This issue is also important to address because as stated by Hetherington and Roger (1983), boys take a divorce harder and it affects them at an earlier age. It is extremely important to deal with those problems at the age in which they develop. By denying boys easier access to divorce groups, it increases the chances that they will have permanent emotional damage. A divorce is damaging to all children despite gender and it is important to address those problems equally.

This gender situation also shows that we send a strong message to our children about how to deal with our problems in a "gender correct" manner. The girls are more likely referred to the divorce group so that they can discuss their feelings and express their emotions, which is what females are suppose to do, while the boys are referred to the group that deals with the behavior alone. This sends a message that males are not allowed to express their feelings like their female counter parts and leads to the belief that boys should hold in their emotions.

Beyond the data, the patterns seen during the observations themselves also support the hypotheses that the divorce group can help to control aggression and that non-divorced children are less aggressive than divorced children. During the observations, the divorce with group subjects were interesting to watch in their interactions with people. Most of the children in the divorce group, engaged in play differently than the other children. Even when playing aggressively, they were not as rough as the other children and, unlike the other groups, they never resorted to verbal or physical aggression. Part of the reason for this difference is that these children have been taught how to express their feelings, to work through and solve their own problems. They have taken that knowledge and expanded it into their playground behavior, even though playground behavior was never discussed in the divorce group sessions. For example, one of the boys in the divorce group was involved in a basketball game that every day resulted in a physical fight between at least two of the players. This boy, even though involved in a very rough and hostile game, was never once involved in a fight or verbal argument. In fact, he was the only
child in that group that never physically fouled someone in an attempt to take the ball away. Generally the children in the divorce group engaged in positive play (non-aggressive), and attempted to solve their own problems without interference from an aide or resorting to physical or verbal aggression.

Another interesting pattern that arose from the observations was between two groups of children that tended to play in the same area and the same game every day during that entire week. These two groups included a group of divorce alone subjects that played basketball and a group of non-divorce subjects that played football. The interesting observation about these two groups was how each group played the game with each other. The divorce kids playing basketball were very aggressive toward each other, and although basketball is not really considered a "physical" sport, these children would tackle, push, hit or kick the other players to get the ball away from them. The non-divorced children playing the football game, behaved in a distinctly different manner. Although football is typically more "physical" and aggressive than basketball, these subjects played only by touching the other person with the ball. This group spent most of their time just running back and forth instead of jumping on top of and hurting each other. Even though this group was scored a couple times for aggressive play, generally they were less aggressive than the divorce group playing basketball.

The evidence seen throughout this study, has shown that clearly school divorce groups have an effect on lowering the incidence of aggression in the children of divorced families. Studies like this are important in helping to prove that divorce groups would benefit the children of divorce. By having more divorce programs available, more children can overcome the trauma of divorce and can lead an emotionally healthy life. Finding a way to lower the amount of aggression in our children can help to lower the tendencies for those children to commit violent acts. Through divorce groups, we are giving children the chance to express their feelings and not be afraid of the consequences. We are giving them the power of voice and releasing them from the chains of guilt. Only through the promotion and further study of divorce groups can we truly give the children of divorce a chance to survive and emerge healthy.
References


Aggression in Subjects Compared by Divorce

Aggressive Play

Verbal Aggression

Figure 1

Figure 2
Physical Aggression

Figure 3

Aggression in Subjects Compared by Gender

Figure 4
Total Aggression in Subjects Compared by Divorce

Figure 5

Figure 6
Figure 7
East Helena Family Profile
1997

Prologue

The chart below shows East Helena Family Profile (Whom students are living with) from parental surveys conducted Fall 1997.

Data Display

![Chart showing family profiles]

Narrative

Totals of surveyed Family Profile were: Single Parents. = 82 District, EG = 25, RE = 44, RM = 13
Totals of surveyed Family Profile were: Both Biol. Parents. = 241 District, EG = 101, RE = 84, RM = 56
Totals of surveyed Family Profile were: Step Parents. = 19 District, EG = 1, RE = 11, RM = 7
Totals of surveyed Family Profile were: Adoptive Parents. = 12 District, EG = 5, RE = 2, RM = 5
Totals of surveyed Family Profile were: Grandparents. = 6 District, EG = 3, RE = 2, RM = 1
Totals of surveyed Family Profile were: Bio/Step Parents. = 33 District, EG = 11, RE = 18, RM = 4

Survey total responses were District 394, EG = 147, RE = 161, RM = 86
The number of students living with both biological parents was above the national average.

figure 7
East Helena Household Income
1997

Prologue
The chart below shows East Helena Schools Annual Family Income from parental survey conducted Fall 1997.

Data Display

Narrative
Totals of surveyed income were: <$10,000 = 20 District, EG = 7, RE = 12, RM = 1
Totals of surveyed income were: $10,000 - 20,000 = 47 District, EG = 14, RE = 25, RM = 8
Totals of surveyed income were: $20,000 - 30,000 = 79 District, EG = 24, RE = 42, RM = 13
Totals of surveyed income were: $30,000 - 40,000 = 75 District, EG = 28, RE = 32, RM = 15
Totals of surveyed income were: $40,000 - 60,000 = 117 District, EG = 47, RE = 42, RM = 28
Totals of surveyed income were: >$60,000 = 41 District, EG = 19, RE = 9, RM = 13
Survey total responses were District 379, EG = 139, RE = 162, RM = 78.
Only one survey was requested per household even though there are students in all three buildings from some families.
The data collected correlated well with the free and reduced lunch counts for the three buildings.

figure 8
East Helena Family Length of Residency
1997

Prologue

The chart below shows East Helena Family Length of Residency from parental surveys conducted Fall 1997.

Data Display

![Bar chart showing family length of residency by school and duration]

Narrative

Totals of surveyed Family Residency Lengths were: 0-6 mo. = 42 District, EG = 7, RE = 28, RM = 7
Totals of surveyed Family Residency Lengths were: 6-12 mo. = 27 District, EG = 12, RE = 14, RM = 1
Totals of surveyed Family Residency Lengths were: 1-2 yrs. = 38 District, EG = 14, RE = 18, RM = 6
Totals of surveyed Family Residency Lengths were: 2-4 yrs. = 9 District, EG = 42, RE = 30, RM = 8
Totals of surveyed Family Residency Lengths were: 4-6 yrs. = 54 District, EG = 19, RE = 21, RM = 14
Totals of surveyed Family Residency Lengths were: 6+ yrs. = 135 District, EG = 46, RE = 46, RM = 43
Survey total responses were District 376, EG = 140, RE = 157, RM = 79
East Helena Employment Types 1997

Prologue

The chart below shows East Helena Schools Employment Types from parental survey conducted Fall 1997.

Data Display

[Bar chart showing employment types for different schools]

Narrative

Totals of surveyed Employment were: Laborers = 131 District, EG = 38, RE = 67, RM = 26
Totals of surveyed Employment were: Management = 80 District, EG = 34, RE = 28, RM = 18
Totals of surveyed Employment were: Technical = 86 District, EG = 36, RE = 32, RM = 18
Totals of surveyed Employment were: Self - Employed = 79 District, EG = 31, RE = 34, RM = 14
Totals of surveyed Employment were: Professional = 180 District, EG = 74, RE = 70, RM = 36
Totals of surveyed Employment were: Not Employed = 11 District, EG = 0, RE = 10, RM = 1

Survey total responses were District 567, EG = 213, RE = 241, RM = 112.
Although only one survey was requested per household all parents were asked to respond.
### Oneway

#### ANOVA

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### Post Hoc Tests
## Multiple Comparisons

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* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

### Homogeneous Subsets

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Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.

a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 9.231

b. The group sizes are unequal. The harmonic mean of the group sizes is used. Type I error levels are not guaranteed.
### AGGRESS2

Scheffe\textsuperscript{a,b}

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Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.

a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 9.231
b. The group sizes are unequal. The harmonic mean of the group sizes is used. Type I error levels are not guaranteed.

### AGGRESS3

Scheffe\textsuperscript{a,b}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>divorce</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Subset for alpha = 0.05</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>divorce with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>group</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-divorced</td>
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<td>0.20</td>
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<td>Sig.</td>
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<td>0.064</td>
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</table>

Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.

a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 9.231
b. The group sizes are unequal. The harmonic mean of the group sizes is used. Type I error levels are not guaranteed.

### AGGRESSST

Scheffe\textsuperscript{a,b}

<table>
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<tr>
<th>divorce</th>
<th>N</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.

a. Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 9.231
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