

A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW AND CRITIQUE OF THE LITERATURE  
ON THE EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON PRIMARY LEVEL  
STUDENTS AND GUIDANCE STRATEGIES

By

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**ABSTRACT**

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A Comprehensive Review and Critique of the Literature on the Effects of Divorce  
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on Primary Level Students and Guidance Strategies

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The purpose of this study was to review, analyze, criticize, and draw sets of implications from literature on the subject of determining the cognitive, social, and emotional effects experienced by primary level students due to their parents' divorce. It also determined common strategies for schools for guiding children of divorce to reach age appropriate levels of cognitive, social, and emotional development. This study researched behaviors and development of children who have experienced their parents' divorce in home and school environments and strategies were determined that would help guide the child in these settings.

This study explored the impact of divorce on primary level students through a review of literature and results were developed through a critical analysis of the information in a qualitative format. The findings in this study have extensive generalizability to situations where primary level students are experiencing their parents' divorce

The findings indicate that some children of divorce do experience stress at various levels more than children in intact families do. Parental conflict and stress associated with the divorce effect parenting skills which have an impact on how well the child copes with the divorce. Schools can help by creating an environment that offers stability, safety, and consistency.

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## Introduction

In May, 1992, Vice President Dan Quayle suggested that a breakdown of the nuclear family was among the causes of recent riots in Los Angeles in which over fifty people had died. Mr. Quayle remarked, “I believe that lawless social anarchy which we saw is directly related to the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility, and social order in too many areas of our society” (Swisher, 1997). Although Quayle was referring to an incidence that mainly involved older children and young adults, his remarks struck a chord with many Americans, both young and old. Numerous Americans agreed with Quayle, expressing concern that the “traditional family” and “family values” were being undermined by a public morality that too readily condoned divorce and single parenting (Swisher, 1997).

In schools today, there are numerous students that come from families that have gone through separation and divorce. Some of these children come to school with emotional, social, and cognitive difficulties. Some frequent symptoms demonstrated in the classroom include anger, depression, non-socialization, and mistrust. It is important to become familiar with the frequency of this modern day phenomenon, and attitudes associated with it, in order to best meet the needs of these students in a positive and productive classroom. In the primary levels, home and school are closely associated so there is an opportunity for teachers to help students and their parents build skills for dealing with stress and anger management while increasing self-confidence and self-esteem in their students.

Divorce is wide spread in the United States and has impacted many children. This trend has increased substantially over the past forty years which has lead to debates focusing on how children of divorce react and cope with the changes in their lives. In 1994, it was estimated that

every year, over one million children in the United States face their parents' divorce 3  
(Mancini, 1995). Many social scientists contend that children raised in families that experienced divorce are more likely to experience a variety of problems than are children raised in intact family settings. Families often must deal with the diminution of family resources, changes in residence, assumptions of new roles and responsibilities, establishment of new patterns of family interactions, reorganization of routines, and possibly, the introductions of new relationships into the existing family structure (Shaffer, 1993). A child growing up in divorce circumstances is much more "at risk" than a child who enjoys two actively involved parents. Gangs, youth crime, high school dropouts, and increasing teenage pregnancy rates are amongst some of the symptoms of an increasing problem of divorce in our country (Oddenino, 1995).

Teachers are often the first to see a dramatic change in behavior when a child's parents decide to divorce. Sometimes children become very unsociable, or in some cases become the class clown, or even the class bully (Flosi, 1993). Whether aware of it or merely acting out of their own depression or anxiety, these children need to have a secure, trusting school environment in order to reach their fullest potential in all aspects of their education experience.

It is important for educators to be informed and concerned when a child's intellectual, emotional, and/or social behavior diminishes due to changes in the home resulting from divorce. Both parents are so focused on their own survival that they have not recognized what is happening to their own child. It becomes, then, the responsibility of teachers and others in the school setting who have contact with children to support and assist the family by supporting and assisting the child. They must be alert to the anguish behind such changes in behavior, which can take various forms and expressions. Children are often calling out for help because they feel helpless and incapable of living with the tension in their homes much longer (Flosi, 1993).

A review of the literature shows that children who experience divorce are often angry, fearful, depressed, and may feel guilty because they feel responsible for their parents' breakup (Hetherington, 1981). Additional literature reveals that divorcing spouses experience psychological distress which results in diminished parenting skills. (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox 1982). Furthermore, the stresses associated with a divorce often lead to the child's problem behaviors, to a disruption of the child's peer relationships, to academic difficulties, and to conduct disorders at school (Faubert, 1990).

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### Statement of the Problem

Consistent with literature regarding the effects of divorce on children, there is controversy as to the extent children who experience social and emotional stresses due to their parents' divorce and diminished parenting skills will develop more disruption in peer relationships, difficulties in academics, and appropriate conduct in school than students who do not experience their parents' divorce.

### Purpose of the Study

This study has a two fold purpose. First, to review, analyze, criticize, and draw sets of implications from literature on the subject of determining the cognitive, social, and emotional affects experienced by primary level students due to their parents' divorce. Second, to determine common strategies identified for schools by researchers for guiding children of divorce to reach age appropriate levels of cognitive, social, and emotional development.

### Definition of Terms

Primary level students - Students who are in levels of pre-kindergarten through third grade.



## Review of Literature

## Introduction

In this chapter, perceptions, symptoms, and reasons for change in social, emotional, and cognitive characteristics in primary level students who have experienced the divorce of their parents will be explored. Also, research regarding effective strategies will be discussed in order for teachers and other school personnel to better help children deal with symptoms associated with divorce.

## Overview

Considerable attention has been devoted in the past two decades to the effects of divorce on children. The weight of the evidence, gathered from multiple resources over the past two decades, is that divorced children, when compared to children in never-divorced families, have significantly more adjustment problems ( Kelly, 1992). The most reliable findings are those concerning the greater number of so-called “externalizing problems” of children of divorce. Compared to never-divorced children, children of divorce exhibit more aggressive, impulsive, and antisocial behaviors, have more difficulties in their peer relationships, are less compliant with authority figures, and show more problem behaviors at school (Kelly, 1992).

Divorce rates have increased over the past 30 years, to the point that 40-50 percent of recently married couples will eventually divorce (Glick & Lin, 1987), and approximately forty percent of second marriages end in divorce (Hawkins, 1999). In 1994, it was estimated that every year,

over one million children in the United States face their parents' divorce (Hickey, 1994). 6

About 40-50 percent of American children born in the 1970's and 1980's will spend an average of five years in a single parent home which in most cases resulted from divorce. Ninety percent of these homes are headed by the mother (Glick & Lin, 1987). Sixty six percent of these children are under eleven years of age and 25 percent are less than five (Hawkins, 1999). In the past, families have consisted of a breadwinning father, a housewife mother, and at least two children. It is estimated that in 1960 this "ideal" family situation represented 70 percent of American households while in 1980, only 12 percent of our households compare to the stereotypical families of the past (Klineberg, 1984). As educators, it is important to broaden our concept of the family to include divorced, single parented, and reconstituted families that exist today and are influencing the development of many of our children (Shaffer, 1993).

Approximately 25 percent of children who have experience their parents' divorce show major problems or emotional difficulties. This compares to 10 percent of children in non-divorced families who experience major behavioral or academic problems. Those experiencing difficulties often exhibit anti-social behavior, trouble in school, and problems in social relationships (Hetherington, 2000). Looking at these number optimistically, Hetherington (2000) also reports that 75 percent of children do well after divorce. That is good news, but for the 25 percent of children that experience social, emotional, and/or academic difficulties, teachers need to be aware of symptoms and strategies to help these students reach their fullest potential.

In a study by Judith Wallerstein in 1987 called, Children of Divorce: Report of a ten-year follow up of early latency-age children, the findings were not as positive. She found that almost half of the preschoolers still displayed heightened anxiety and aggression a full year after their parents' divorce. Forty-four percent were found to be in significantly deteriorated psychological

condition. Older preschoolers had become whiny, irritable, and aggressive, and had problems with play (Zinsmeister, 1996).

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What causes the differences between children in intact families versus families who have experienced divorce? Amato (1993) suggested several major hypotheses regarding the causes of children overall difficulties. They include:

1. PARENTAL LOSS - divorce often results in the loss of a parent for the children and with this loss children also lose the knowledge, skills, and resources (emotional, financial, etc.) of that parent.
2. ECONOMIC LOSS - another result of divorce is that children living in single parent families are less likely to have as many economic resources as children living in intact families.
3. MORE LIFE STRESS - divorce often results in many changes in children's living situations such as changing schools, child care, homes, etc. Children often have to make adjustments to changes in relationships with friends and extended family members. These changes create a more stressful environment for children.
4. POOR PARENTAL ADJUSTMENT - generally how children fare in families is due in part to the mental health of the parents, this is likely to be true for children in divorced families as well.
5. LACK OF PARENTAL COMPETENCE - much of what happens to children in general is related to the skill of parents in helping them develop. The competence of parents following divorce is likely to have considerable influence on how the children are doing.
6. EXPOSURE TO INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT - conflict is frequently part of

families and may be especially common in families that have undergone divorce. The degree to which children are exposed to conflict may have substantial effects on children's well-being (Hughes, 1996). 8

### Social and Emotional Causes and Effects

Social and emotional issues are closely related in that each affects the other significantly in children of divorce. Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development describes an overview of human social and emotional development resulting from specific crisis in one's life. Erikson believed that human beings face eight major crises during the course of their lives. Each conflict has its own time for emerging as dictated by both biological maturation and social demands. Throughout a child's life, effective parenting largely impacts the outcome of some of these crises either in a positive or negative manner. Unfortunately, when parents are going through divorce, each spouse is psychologically distressed which results in diminished parenting skills (Hetherington, 1982). Custodial mothers, overwhelmed by responsibilities and by their own emotional reactions to divorce, often become edgy, impatient, and insensitive to their children's needs, and they typically adopt more punitive and coercive methods of child rearing. Meanwhile, noncustodial fathers are likely to change in a different way, becoming somewhat over permissive and indulgent during visits with their children (Shaffer, 1993). Consequently, many divorcing parents do not have their children's healthy psychological development as a priority which can result in negative outcomes in the stages that Erikson has identified.

For example, from birth to one year of age, Erikson's stage of basic trust versus mistrust will be resolved one way or the other. If the parents meet the child's basic needs and is accepting and consistent, trust will evolve within the child. Conversely, if the parents do not meet the basic

needs and is rejecting or inconsistent, the infant may view the world as a dangerous place 9  
filled with untrustworthy or unreliable people. The mother has the greatest impact during  
this stage.

Between the ages of one and three, the stage of autonomy versus shame and doubt is  
determined. Children must learn to be “autonomous” - to feed and dress themselves, to look  
after their own hygiene, and so on. Failure to achieve this independence may force the child to  
doubt his or her own abilities and feel shameful. Both parents have a great impact in this second  
stage in encouraging and supporting their child’s autonomy.

The third stage is also greatly influenced by parents and family. The crisis of initiative versus  
guilt typically appears sometime between the ages of three and six. In this stage a child attempts  
to act grown up and will do things that are beyond his ability to handle. Conflict arises between  
the child and the parents, and a balanced resolution should result in the child’s retention of his  
sense of initiative and yet understand some limitations. Again, effective parenting skills are  
essential in order to achieve these positive outcomes (Shaffer, 1993).

Erikson believes that a successful resolution of each stage prepares the child for success in the  
next stage. By contrast, the child who fails to resolve one or more of these stages in a positive  
manner, is almost certain to have social problems in the future. (Shaffer, 1993). Erikson’s theory  
may account for some of the social and emotional difficulties demonstrated by primary level  
children of divorce when parenting skills are affected. According to Erikson’s theory, this may  
result in the child being unable to resolve these early conflicts in a positive manner.

According to Gary Neuman (1998), creator of the Sandcastles Divorce Therapy Program,  
children in the primary level, from ages three to eight, experience their parents divorce differ-  
ently than adolescents do. Older children are more likely to understand their feelings associated

with their parents' divorce, but younger children are so egocentric that they 10

do not have the capacity to empathize or understand divorce from anyone's point of view but their own. One result of this self-centeredness is that preschool children actually believe that they are the force behind much of what happens in their world including their parents' divorce. This misplaced guilt may be detrimental to a child's emerging self-image. Furthermore, preschool children may feel angry but afraid to express it directly. Instead aggressive behaviors focused at siblings or classmates may result. Regression is another common symptom displayed by preschoolers in response to the stress experienced from parental divorce. Some preschoolers may regress to behaviors such as having toileting accidents, wetting the bed, whining, using babyish voice tones, or thumb sucking (Neuman, 1998).

The six to eight year old child experiences an age of self-discovery and transition. He is moving from a world dominated by home and parents to one of school, peers, and social interactions. Peers at school now have a great importance along with parents in shaping his self-image. When parents divorce at this child's age level, intense sadness is experienced because the child has the capacity to understand more outside himself but yet will hold on to the idea that he is somehow responsible for his parents' breakup. He will often hide his sadness where people around him will think that he is handling everything well, but instead may be exhibiting early signs of denial, depression, or withdrawal. Additionally, this child worries that his peers at school will feel differently about him so he begins to disguise and hide his true feelings. Although feelings of anger exist and are usually directed at his parents, a child at this age will rarely admit it. Instead, displaced anger will often be exhibited by striking out at siblings or peers. He will also be prone to blaming every disappointments on the divorce whether there is an association or not. Adults in this child's life need to help him make the correct associations

by discussing his feelings stemming from these disappointments (Neuman, 1998).

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The divorcing process often starts long before the children are introduced to the idea that it is happening in their family. Child development research and divorce studies demonstrate that marital conflict may have both direct and indirect effects on children's adjustment in the married family as well as in the post divorce family. High levels of marital conflict may directly influence children's emotional and behavioral adjustment through modeling processes. When children observe their parents expressing emotional distress and anger through aggressive and uncontrolled behaviors, they are more likely to incorporate this way of dealing with upset into their own behavioral repertoire (Kelly, 1992).

Marital conflict appears to have indirect effects on children's adjustment, expressed through the parent-child relationship. In married families, high marital conflict is associated with less warm, less empathetic relationships between parents and children and more rejection of the child (Belsky, Youngblade, Rovine, & Volling, 1991). There is also some evidence that fathers withdraw more from their children under conditions of high conflict. These parental behaviors, in turn, lead to more behavioral difficulties in the children in general. Continued high conflict after divorce may further interfere with parents' ability to nurture and be responsive to their children's needs and be consistent in discipline, which may exacerbate existing problems or create new problems for children which may become evident in the school setting (Kelly, 1992).

Mike McCurley (1998), president of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers agrees that parents' behavior during and after divorce is a strong factor in the degree to which children cope and adjust to the changes associated with their parents' divorce. Children who have recently experienced their parents' divorce are children in a crisis period that generally lasts from eighteen months to two years. During this time children can be expected to display behaviors

that make up the process known as the grieving cycle: denial, anger, depression, and 12 finally, acceptance or adjustment (Fuller, 1993). Symptoms for primary level children may include depression, sleep disorder, loss of self-esteem, poor academic performance, behavioral regression, and a host of other physical and emotional disorders (McCurley, 1998).

McCurley (1998) states, “The longer the parental conflict continues, the more serious is the psychological damage to the child. Many children respond to such stress by turning off their feelings and walling up their emotions. Those children are not only deprived of the joys of childhood, but they often find themselves emotionally adrift as adults.” Convinced that every child has rights, McCurley and his associates designed a list of children’s rights which reads as follows:

### **CHILDREN’S BILL OF RIGHTS**

- > You have the right to love both your parents.
- > You do not have to choose one parent over the other.
- > You are entitled to all the feelings you’re having.
- > You have the right to be in a safe environment.
- > You don’t belong in the middle of your parents’ break-up.
- > Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins are still part of your life.
- > You have the right to be a child.

Another important factor that effects the social and emotional well-being of children experiencing divorce is the family income level. An astounding 53 percent of all female headed households have annual incomes of less than \$10,000 (U.S. Census bureau, 1994). As noted earlier, 90 percent of all custodial parents are women, so this has major implications for the financial resources available in divorce situations. Even with child support payments, the typical



woman's income drops 73 percent after a divorce as reported in 1985 (Weitzman, 1985). 13

Although laws have been passed since then for more equitable settlements and assurance of child support payments, the mother most often provides the primary home which often results in a lower standard of living for the children. The economics of divorce may dictate fewer environmental resources such as babysitters, nursery schools, or after-school care. Often, divorce creates the necessity for the mother to work outside the home which in turn means that the children of divorced women must assume more responsibility for themselves and younger siblings (Garrity, 1994). Health concerns, which include nutritional and medical aspects, are major factors to consider because insurance coverages often change along with the family income and living situations. For children, these stresses are cumulative. The more changes in his or her environment a child experiences in a short time, the greater is the risk of long-term adjustment problems (Garrity, 1994). Divorce already involves a loss of family structure. Any additional losses, especially during the first year after the separation, decrease the possibility that children will make a satisfactory adjustment to the divorce (Hetherington, Hagan, & Anderson, 1989). It has been clearly shown that children benefit greatly from remaining in the same house, attending the same school, and retaining a supportive social network (Garrity, 1994).

Parents' obligation to meet their young child's basic physical and safety needs become an issue for some children when going through the financial aspects of divorce. When children of divorce are forced to move to different neighborhoods and schools, they are often leaving what may have been their only source of stability in their lives (Shaw, 1997). These changes, along with a lessened standard of living and lessened parental contact may contribute to a regression of parents' ability to satisfy adequately their child's physical and safety needs. According to Abraham Maslow, one of the founders of humanistic psychology, basic physical and safety

needs are essential in order to move on to fulfillment of higher level psychological needs 14  
and finally, self-actualization (WGBH, 1998). Thus, it is important for teachers to make every  
child feel safe, secure, and valuable within the classroom environment in order to reintroduce  
stability back into their lives and make that child more susceptible to achieve the higher needs in  
Maslow's hierarchy.

### Intellectual Causes and Effects

As mentioned earlier, 75 percent of children who experience their parents' divorce adjust  
favorably to the changes associated with it. In the remaining 25 percent, academic difficulties in  
school, along with the emotional and social difficulties explored earlier, can be evident as  
primary level children struggle with their parents divorce. John Guidubaldi, who conducted one  
of the largest studies documenting the effects of divorce on young children found that children of  
divorced parents performed worse than children of intact families on 9 of 30 mental health  
measures, showing, among other things, inattention and less work effort. He also found that  
children exposed to divorce are twice as likely to repeat a grade (Zinsmeister, 1996). Wallerstein,  
in her middle class sample predicted that 60 percent of divorce-children will fail to match the  
educational achievements of their fathers.

According to Neuman (1998), even for children who previously enjoyed and/or excelled at  
school, divorce can have an adverse effect on attitude, performance, and behavior. It is well  
known that a stable, supportive home environment is crucial to scholastic achievement, and  
divorce can wreak havoc on that front. A primary level student's anger, confusion, and sadness  
can result in daydreaming, difficulty in focusing, lack of motivation and work effort, acting out,  
and/or emotionally withdrawing from school.

There is an extremely close association between academic achievement and the social and emotional symptoms displayed by children of divorce. It has been difficult for researchers to ascertain specific reasons for these difficulties because most often it is the combination of many factors affecting each child individually. However, there are some general ideas in child development theory that may lend some insight into these academic declines that some children experience after their parents' divorce.

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian developmentalist stresses the importance of social contributions to cognitive growth and academic achievement. According to Vygotsky, many of the important discoveries that children make are socially mediated and take place within a zone of proximal development. Tasks within a child's zone of proximal development are those that are too difficult for the child to master on his own but that can be accomplished with the guidance and encouragement of a more skilled person such as a parent, teacher, or older sibling. Vygotsky believed that new skills are most likely to emerge in social contexts in which a child who lacks the ability to succeed alone is encouraged to make gradual headway toward a goal by a more competent associate (Shaffer, 1993). When this theory is applied to children of divorce, many of their social and emotional difficulties could impair this type of learning. There are two reasons sighted earlier that impact social learning: 1) Often the primary level child withdraws from social situations and prefers to be alone due to trust issues, feelings of being different, or simply to deal with his extreme sadness and guilt. 2) The primary caregiver is so enveloped in their own anxiety regarding the divorce that lesser quality time is available for their children. The parent may also have lesser time due to the recent change to outside employment. Finally, in some situations, the noncustodial parent has left the relationship allowing for no social learning between parent and child.

All parents would agree that school is important, but for children of divorce, school can and often does mean much more. For some children, school may seem to be the only part of their lives that does not change with divorce. Even for those who are forced to change schools, the familiarity of routine, the structure, and the opportunities for praise and growth help ease the transition (Neuman, 1998). Teachers can play an important role in helping children adjust and manage the changes that have taken place in their life due to divorce. An open line of communication between home and school is an important factor in managing these changes effectively.

The research literature has revealed a large amount of information regarding the affects of divorce on primary level students. An analization of the research literature will be further explored in Chapter III.

## Summary, Critique, Conclusion, and Recommendations

## Introduction

This final chapter reviews the purpose of the study and summarizes the findings resulting from the research. A critique of the findings and final conclusions will be stated along with research recommendations and educational implications.

## Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to review, analyze, criticize, and draw sets of implications from literature on the subject of determining the cognitive, social, and emotional affects experienced by primary level students due to their parents' divorce. It also proposed to determine common strategies identified for schools by researchers for guiding children of divorce to reach age appropriate levels of cognitive, social, and emotional development.

A large amount of attention has been given to the subject of divorce and how it affects the welfare of the primary level children involved. Although the divorce rate has leveled off in the United States, it still leaves approximately one million children a year in varying degrees of distress relating to their cognitive, emotional, and social skills. Some suggested hypotheses regarding the causes of the overall distress are: parental loss, economic loss, added life stress, poor parental adjustment, lack of parental competence, and exposure to interparental conflict. There is significant evidence from theorists and researchers which suggests that primary level children need certain elements as they progress through stages in their lives in order to develop

normally and to be able to function fully as human beings. Divorce often interrupts or sometimes destroys some of these elements which makes it difficult for many children of divorce to reach their fullest potential. Erikson theorized that the stages of trust, autonomy, and initiative are essential elements in a young child's life that may be disrupted due to the dishevel caused by parental divorce. 18

Problems in school, including intellectual and behavioral problems, are related to the social and emotional problems associated with the distress the child of divorce is experiencing and the lessened attendance given to the child from the distressed parents. Vygotsky theorized that social contributions from significant adults in a child's live were extremely important in his/her cognitive development. He believed that new skills are most likely to emerge in social contexts such as parent-child or teacher-child relationships with the prior sometimes lacking in families who have experienced divorce (Shaffer, 1993). Teachers and other school personnel have the opportunity to give children from divorced homes a nonjudgmental classroom that represents stability and trust. The classroom should be a place where the child of divorce feels secure and safe and is encouraged to do his/her best. Children of divorce need a place where self-esteem flourishes, confidence grows, and self-discipline develops and a well managed classroom can achieve this. Communication between home and school is a key ingredient in carrying these elements between the two environments.

### Critique

As a preschool teacher in a public school setting, this researcher found this topic to be extremely relative to the early childhood classroom environment. Often, the children that have the opportunity to experience preschool are at risk children in one or more of the categories of

social, emotional, or intellectual skills. There are often children of divorce within this researcher's class and a portion of them experience many of the symptoms identified in this research project. This study has presented underlying developmental reasons why the stresses associated with divorce can have varying degrees of negative impacts on a child's well-being. As a teacher, a parent, and a former child, the ideas presented by researchers and theorists in this research study are within this researcher's realm of experience as being true; children do need supportive environments with elements of safety, security, and trust with competent care givers regardless of extenuating circumstances such as divorce. This study has broadened this researcher's understanding of children of divorce which allows a better preparedness in handling situations with students and their parents regarding issues related to divorce and the effects they have on primary level students.

### Conclusions

According to the facts discovered through this research, divorce effects over one million children each year in the United States. Research findings indicate that primary level children feel the effects of divorce emotionally, socially, and intellectually to various degrees. Not all children experience negative outcomes of divorce, but approximately 25 percent have substantial difficulties in dealing with the changes and stresses associated with the divorce of his/her parents. Parental loss, economic loss, stress, lack of parental competence, and exposure to conflicting parents contribute to the negative impact that divorce has on many primary level children.

Children have specific needs in order to be healthy, happy, and to reach their fullest potential. The effects of divorce often hampers their parents' ability to meet those needs. Beyond basic

physical needs and safety needs, a child's needs include the opportunity to trust, to become 20  
autonomous, and to develop a sense of initiative.

Symptoms of divorce are evident in the home and school settings with an array of behaviors exhibited by primary level children. Every child reacts differently to his/her parents' divorce, but some common symptoms include: anti-social behavior, heightened anxiety, aggression, irritability, problems with peer relationships, feelings of guilt, displays of anger, depression, poor academic performance, behavioral regression, and lower levels of self-esteem.

Schools can contribute positively to a child experiencing these symptoms by offering a classroom that feels stable, safe, and consistent. Communication between home and school is an essential element in assisting the child to cope with his/her parents' divorce in a emotionally, socially, and intellectually healthy manner.

The information found within the review of literature has extensive generalizability in the classroom and home today. Although each child experiencing divorce is affected differently, the recommendations that follow can apply to the entire classroom population.

### Recommendations

The following list contains strategies that may benefit a primary level teacher in guiding her students to their fullest potential.

- Primary level teachers need to know about a child's home situation. Welcome discussions that the parents initiate regarding their divorce and the impact it is having on their child.
- Record changes you've noticed about the child and discuss the changes with the parents.



- Reassure your students, when the opportunity presents itself, about family relationships. (Ex. “Your mom and dad both love you very much”) 21
- Children need divorce to be explained to them in terms that they understand. Sometimes parents handle this very well, but if a child seems to be having difficulties with it, there is a large assortment children’s literature that can be a useful resource for teachers and children. (See Appendix A)
- Teachers need to maintain the best possible relationships with both parents concerning both the academic and social elements of school. Teachers need to be sensitive in order to allow children to express their feelings and be able to talk about what troubles them.
- The school should not become involved with the conflict between parents.
- Deal with acting out and other negative behaviors and attitudes promptly, consistently and fairly. Help him to see how thoughts and feelings can affect how he behaves in school. Listen to your students when they share their feelings with an open mind so he/she won’t be afraid to open up to you with other feelings of hurt or anger.
- Maintain a consistent daily routine, structure, and normal classroom environment..
- Encourage children to participate in group activities.
- Encourage both parents to participate in school activities from parent-teacher conferences to chaperoning.
- Be aware of your students’ peer group and any changes in friendships.
- If at anytime a parent is asked to come in to discuss a child’s work or behavior, both parents should be encouraged to attend. A phone call to the absent parent will suffice if necessary.

- Let the parents know that the lines of communication will always be open and you will do what you can to ease the situation for the child. 22
- Get to know the school psychologist and any programs available for students and parents through that department that deal in coping with divorce.
- Investigate various agencies within the community that may help a family through divorce. When communicating with families of divorce, help them become aware of help within the community. (Hawkins, 1999 & Neuman, 1998).

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## APPENDIX

The following is a list of children's books that are appropriate for primary level students who are experiencing their parents' divorce.

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- Divorce. Let's Talk About It. Grunsell, A. (1989) Aladdin.
- Dinosaurs Divorce. Brown, L.K. and Brown, M. (1990) Collins.
- Where Has Daddy Gone? Osman, T. and Carey, J. (1990) Heinemann.
- The Divorce Express. Danziger, P. (1987) Pan Piper.
- The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce. Gardner, R. (1985) Bantam.
- Chevrolet Saturdays. Boyd, C. (1993) Simon and Schuster
- Divorce Happens to the Nicest Kids. Prokop, M. (1996) Alegra House.
- Divorce is Not the End of the World: Zoe's and Evan's Coping Guide for Kids. Stern, J. (1997) Tricycle Press.
- Divorced, But Still My Parents. Thomas, S. (1997) Springboard.
- Don't Fall Apart on Saturdays!: the Children's Divorce-Survival Book Moser, A. and Melton, D. (2000) Landmark Editions.
- Everything You Need to Know About Your Parents' Divorce. Johnson, L. (1999) Rosen Publishing.
- It's Not Your Fault, Koko Bear: A Read-Together Book for Parents & Young Children During Divorce. Lansky, V. (1998) Book Peddlers
- Let's Talk About It: Divorce. Rogers, F. and Judkis, J. (1998) Paper Star
- My Parents Still Love Me Even Though They are Getting Divorced: An Interactive Tale for

Children. Nightingale, L. (1997) Nightingale Rose