

Title: The lived experiences of children in parental divorce: A call for trauma-informed approach to divorce support in Singapore.

Authors: Tan, Meilinda; Mack, Wilson; Dawood, Katijah

Introduction

There is a general increase in the total number of divorces in Singapore, where approximately half of the divorces involved children. Past local research informed that children of divorce tended to experience socioeconomic difficulties in adulthood. The current study, therefore, aimed to complement existing research, by exploring the long-term psychological adjustment of parental divorce.

Qualitative Methodology

The study relied on the use of qualitative interviews, to address two research questions of the study:

1. How did children respond to parental divorce from adolescence to adulthood?
2. What are the proposed recommendations that can better support children’s psychological adjustment following parental divorce?

14 young adults were recruited for participation in the semi-structured interviews, to address the research questions. The profile of the 14 participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: *Profile of Interviewees*

Code	Age	Gender	Highest Education Level	Employment Status	Marital Status	Age of Parental Divorce	Care Parent
VOC 1	21	Male	Pursuing Degree	Part-time	Single	11	Mother
VOC 2	29	Male	Degree	Employed	Single	9	Mother
VOC 3	24	Female	Pursuing ITE Certification	Unemployed	Single	11	Father
VOC 4	33	Female	Primary School	Part-time	Married	8	Father
VOC 5	22	Male	ITE	Unemployed	Single	9	Mother
VOC 6	22	Female	ITE	Unemployed	Single (parent)	16	Mother
VOC 7	33	Female	ITE	Unemployed	Married	5	Mother
VOC 8	21	Male	Pursuing ITE Certification	Part-time	Single	17	Mother
VOC 9	26	Female	Primary School	Home-based business	Married	8	Mother
VOC 10	23	Female	Degree	Unemployed	Single	8	Father

VOC 11	23	Female	Degree	Employed	Single	5	Mother
VOC 12	26	Female	Degree	Employed	Single	3	Mother
VOC 13	26	Female	Degree	Unemployed	Single	9	Father
VOC 14	26	Female	Degree	Employed	Single	10	Father

Interview questions focused on the participants' experiences growing up with parental divorce. Many of the questions asked for information before, during and after the divorce. The interview was then transcribed for data analyses.

Data Analyses

The transcribed data was first analysed using Braun and Clark's (2006) procedure for thematic analysis. Thereafter, a second level analysis using the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) framework was conducted to organise the codes and themes.

The ACEs framework is a biopsychosocial perspective that outlines how adverse childhood experiences can evolve into future health consequences. These categories are grouped into three domains: child abuse, neglect, and household challenges. Experiences of child abuse are categorised into three types (a) emotional abuse, (b) physical abuse and (c) sexual abuse. Neglect is grouped into emotional and physical neglect. Household challenges are defined as growing up in households with (a) mental illness, (b) substance misuse or dependence, (c) incarceration, (d) intimate partner violence and (e) parental separation or divorce (ACEs Aware, 2023).

All participants in the qualitative study experienced parental divorce as an ACE event. Yet, participants were also exposed to abuse, neglect, and other household challenges. The interviews, thus, highlighted the prevalence of ACEs in participants' journey through parental divorce. The conceptual framework of ACEs (see Figure 1 below) was therefore used to guide thematic analysis, to provide insight into participants' impairments, health behaviours, and subsequent outcomes in early adulthood, following parental divorce.

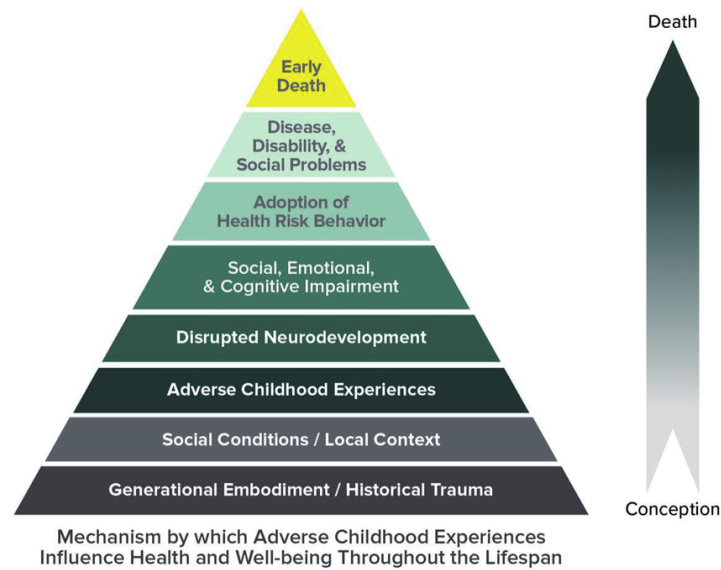


Figure 1. The ACE Pyramid¹

Conceptual framework that illustrates the mechanism by which exposure to adverse childhood experiences influences health and well-being over the life course.

Results

Qualitative analyses (see Figure 2) revealed the following themes.

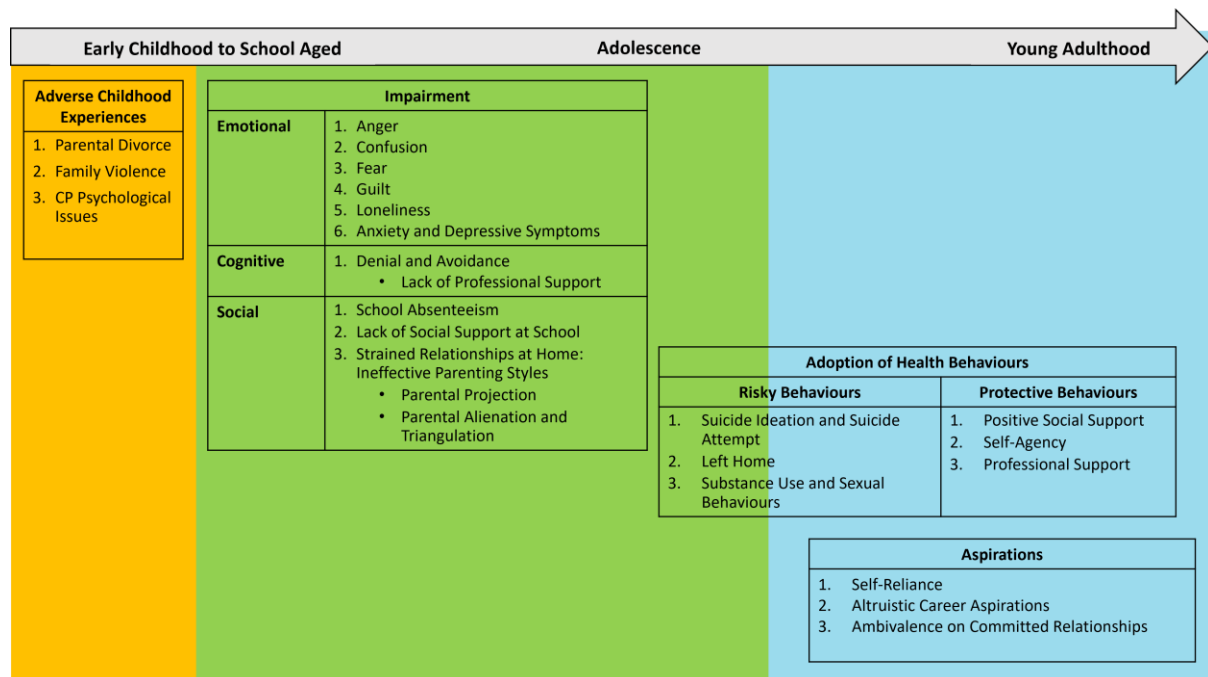


Figure 2.

With qualitative interviews, the data confirmed that children exposed to ACEs tended to experience emotional, cognitive, and social impairments. It further confirmed that impairments in these domains resulted in the adoption of risky behaviours in adolescence. Importantly, it

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *About the CDC-Kaiser ACE Study*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/about.html>

highlighted that children in Singapore may not access professional services for parental divorce, due to a lack of familial support and/or lack of knowledge about professional support. Consequently, a lack of access to support perpetuated impairments and risky behaviours in childhood and adolescence. Fortunately, the study found that participants displayed resilience as they were able to rely on internal and external protective factors to enable coping with stressors from parental divorce. It also informed that participants' journey through parental divorce had strengthened a sense of self-reliance and desire for prosocial behaviours and attitudes.

The study, therefore, proposes to commit to a child-centred divorce support in Singapore, through practice and/or policy recommendations in two areas: (1) the provision of child-centred and trauma-informed practice, and (2) enhancing access to professional support.

Recommendations

Provision of Child-Centred and Trauma-Informed Practice

ACEs are potentially traumatic, as it can activate biological stress in humans. Consequently, exposure to ACEs (i.e., parental divorce and family violence) and the associated experience of trauma can increase risk of developing physical and mental health conditions. The current study informed that participants experienced psychosocial difficulties, upon exposure to parental divorce and other trauma-related events. It, therefore, affirms the long-term negative impact of parental divorce, which aligns with the initial findings of "divorce penalty" amongst children of parental divorce, in Singapore. Hence, it is critical that we adopt a trauma-informed approach to divorce support services, to mitigate the impact of divorce and other trauma-related events, on children's adjustment following parental divorce. Importantly, trauma-informed practice must continue to be child-centred, wherein practice includes working for, as well as together with the child. These concepts are articulated within the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) that acknowledged the child's rights to provision, protection, and participation. The CRC, therefore, stressed the importance of promoting opportunities for the child's rights to be heard, through working together with the child, through child-centred practices (UN CRC, 2009).

Enhancing Access to Professional Support

The study recommends enhancing children's access and engagement with professional divorce support services. It recommends collaborations with news media platforms to raise awareness of resources. For instance, media articles that discuss parental divorce can include a short section illustrating community resources for children and youths. Relatedly, social services agencies can consider setting up a helpline specifically for families in divorce. Also, these agencies can consider the use of other media platforms such as podcasts, to enable dialogue about parental divorce. These suggested improvements may, therefore, be a low-cost way to increase awareness about notable divorce support programs to enhance access to services.

Conclusion

The study informed that children are silent victims to parental divorce, especially where there is some form of violence. Yet, children may not be equipped to cope with the adjustment process as they lack awareness of support services to navigate changes following parental

divorce. The onus, therefore, lies on policy makers and service providers to provide child-centred, trauma-informed interventions at every touch point of a child's journey through parental separation.

REFERENCES

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