

**DIVORCE AND CHILDREN IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD:  
PARENTS' CONTRIBUTION TO MINIMISE THE IMPACT**

by

**ANNA WILHELMINA VAN JAARVELD**

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**SUPERVISOR: DR CE PRINSLOO**

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## ABSTRACT

# DIVORCE AND CHILDREN IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD: PARENTS' CONTRIBUTION TO MINIMIZE THE IMPACT

**Student:** Wilma van Jaarsveld

**Supervisor:** Dr CE Prinsloo

Department of Social Work and Criminology  
University of Pretoria

The rationale for the choice of the topic is embedded in the researcher's practical experience. It is a fact that divorce has a definite influence on all children; however it has become clear to the researcher that the degree to which parents are able to handle their divorce minimises these effects on the children. In this research the researcher explored whether children tend to adjust to divorce with less difficulty when they are able to maintain the family relations.

The procedure of obtaining the information required for the research was done through utilising both the qualitative and quantitative approaches. The researcher has done an in-depth study of a family who succeeded in minimising the impact of changing from an intact family to a divorced family. The dominant approach was done in the form of a case study and the data was collected through unstructured interviews and observations. The interviews were recorded and the responses analysed in terms of themes and sub-themes.

For the quantitative data standardised measuring instruments, namely the Hudson Scales for children's attitude towards their parents, were used to explore the parent-child relationship after divorce. These responses were analysed according to the prescribed format by Perspective College.

At the end of the study the researcher was able to draw conclusions and make recommendations to professionals involved in working with families that go through a divorce, on the aspects that can make the transition during parental divorce less traumatic.

## KEY WORDS

- Divorce
- Intact family
- Middle childhood
- Co-parenting
- Transition

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL ORIENTATION

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

According to Cohen (2002:1019) over one million children are living in separated or divorced families each year. Many professionals are asking the question: “How will these children survive their parents’ divorce and will they have the ability to become loving, competent adults”? Coping with their parents’ divorce can be regarded as a crisis that children have to deal with.

The *Talk Magazine* (May 1990) stated the following: “There were 32 524 South African children who were caught up in the pain of divorce in 1989.” With statistics being quoted worldwide that one out of every three marriages ends in divorce and an article in the *Daily News* (September, 1990) claiming that, “73% of children in South Africa come from broken homes; and that 150 000 children have been affected by divorce in the last four years, we must be burdened for the children involved”, this is an aspect of modern life that raises concern.

In South Africa it is a reality that one out of every two marriages ends in divorce (Collins, 2003:32). These are frightening statistics, not only because it points to the breakdown of the family nucleus, but also because it means that 50% of young people come from broken homes. According to Statistics South Africa (2005:3) 32 484 divorces were recorded in 2005.

“Whatever the cause, divorce will remain a part of society – all we can do is learn to cope with the effects of it, and try not to let it ruin our outlook on relationships and marriage” (Collins, 2003:32). The researcher feels that behind each of these statistics is a life – a child, tomorrow an adult, still coping with the emotions brought on by the divorce.

In South Africa we tend to move like a pendulum from one extreme to the other. When divorce laws were first liberalised, it was thought that children would be

upset for a short while, but would soon resume life as usual. Recently, the pendulum has swung over to the other side and parents are told that all children from divorces will be profoundly damaged. Does the truth lie somewhere in between?

According to the South African Law Commission (2002:1) "...divorce or separation is invariably traumatic for all concerned, but especially for the children of such a marriage or relationship. The high divorce rate and break-up of other relationships mean that more and more children – and younger children - are experiencing rearrangements in their households."

Cloete (2005:2) mentions the following: "South Africa has an exceptionally high divorce rate. The stressful nature of parental separation and divorce result in a higher susceptibility of children to psychological, social, academic and health problems."

The question remains: Why do some parents have the ability to handle their divorce transition in such a manner that the long term effects are less traumatic for their children and the long term adjustments are made much easier?

*Time* quotes Robert Emery, director of the University of Virginia's Centre for Children, Families and the Law: "For the most part, kids from divorced families are resilient. They bounce back from all the stresses. Some kids are at risk, but the majority are functioning well" (*Time*, September 25, 2000:77). The researcher would like to inform parents on how divorce affects children in middle childhood and also equip the parents with advice on how to handle the divorce with positive parenting skills.

Bradshaw (1995:128) states the following:

"Divorce is a fact of modern life and yet many couples don't divorce and many who do, continue the dysfunction they had when married. Arguably, the main reason children may require psychological care, before, during and after their parents' divorce, may be due to the ugliness, fighting, yelling, deception and

litigation. We usually hear about the type of divorce and not about the children who are doing better, as a result of divorce.”

Benokraitis (2005:437) states that: “In real life, marital dissolution is usually an agonising process both for women and for men, across socio-economic levels and regardless of race or ethnicity.” Divorce has a significant effect in at least three areas of a family’s life:

- physical, emotional and psychological well-being;
- economic and financial changes;
- and child-custody and support arrangements.

In *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: a 25 Year Landmark Study* (in Whiteman, 2001:8) Judith Wallerstein states: “Divorce is a deeply painful experience for children. They endure more depression, greater learning difficulties, more aggression towards parents and teachers and are two to three times more likely to be referred for psychological help at school than their peers from intact families.”

The researcher agrees with Benokraitis (2005: 444-445) namely, that divorce is beneficial for some children but harmful for most. The harmful effects often decrease within two to six years if children have “protective” factors that assist their adjustment. One of the most important adjustment factors is the way parents interact and handle the divorce. Benokraitis (2005:445) feels that the more civilised and mature the divorce is handled, the easier it is on children.

The rationale for the choice of this topic was embedded in the researcher’s practical experience. It is a fact that divorce has a definite influence on all children, however it became clear to the researcher that the degree to which parents are able to form “limited” partnerships in the interest of their children, plays a significant role in the degree to which the divorce impacts on the children. The better the “partnership”, the easier children adjust to the changed circumstances. In this study the researcher wanted to explore whether children tend to adjust to divorce with less difficulty when they are able to maintain the

family relationships that were important to them prior to the divorce and when their parents are able to co-operate and be generally supportive of one another. Bailey (2001) states: “Divorce changes, but does not end a family. Now children are members of two families.” Judge Edward Sosnick (in Tracht, 2005:3) one of the founders of the Smile (Start Making It Liveable for Everyone) programme says: “The best gift you can give to your children in your divorce is the right to love you both”.

Outline of motivational aspects:

- During ten years working as a social worker the researcher dealt with several divorce cases. The question arose why some divorces caused fewer traumas in children’s lives, while in other cases the divorces were extremely traumatic for children.
- Even though a divorce occurs, irrespective of the child’s age or gender, some parents succeed in making the adjustment easier and less traumatic for their children.
- There is information and research available on the influence of divorce on children and on divorce mediation. However, no information was found regarding guidelines on making a divorce less traumatic for children, especially in middle childhood.
- The researcher aimed to contribute to establishing guidelines for parents in terms of making parental divorce easier on children, thus in effect minimising the trauma for children in their parents’ divorce.

The researcher also consulted with experts on the topic for the research. They agreed that divorce has a tremendous influence on children. Rossouw (2005) feels that both the increased frequency of divorce and the resultant increase in single parent households or stepfamilies leave a large number of children with great vulnerability and pain. She also feels that divorce is a major disruptive experience that imposes a primary impact on all family members, but much more so on children. Divorce could be made easier on children if their parents could address the break-up with more responsibility and less disagreement.

According to Welker (2006:2): “Conflict between parents after divorce and the level of the custodial parent’s emotional distress place children at high risk for poor emotional and behavioural adjustment.” Labuschagne (2005) feels that a divorce is disruptive and emotional for most children, irrespective of their age. She believes that children in continuously intact two-parent families, even if their parents argue or disagree, are better off compared to children who experience divorce. She, as a practising social worker working with children of all ages for the past 25 years, feels strongly that children suffer due to parental divorce.

In practice it has been shown, according to Labuschagne (2005) that children prefer to keep their parents together, even if they do not get along with each other. Amato and Booth (1997:2) hold the same opinion regarding the matter of living in a marriage that is less than satisfactory when they state: “Spending one-third of one’s life living in a marriage that is less than satisfactory in order to benefit children – children that parents elected to bring into the world – is not an unreasonable expectation.”

Van Niekerk (2006) states that children are caught up in the middle of their parents’ divorce. He feels that divorce seriously jeopardizes children emotionally, intellectually and psychologically. Divorce and its influences are an old phenomenon and he predicts that nothing will change the way parents handle their divorce. “Nothing is more emotionally devastating to children than prolonged conflict between their parents” (Whitehead, 1997:17). The researcher agrees with Whitehead, seeing that, no matter what the circumstances, children will be caught in the crossfire of their parents’ divorce.

Most professionals agree that divorce affects a large number of children, not only in their own families, but also indirectly in the families of their friends. They also feel that divorce affects children, whether the divorce is good or bad, and that their lives change irrevocably.

## **1.2 PROBLEM FORMULATION**



The problem formulation, or statement of the problem, “gives a more accurate approach to the issue and clarifies the purpose of the study and is usually formulated as a question” (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000:29). A research problem is expressed as a general question about the relations between two or more variables.

The formulation of a problem introduces the necessity of clearly defining all the concepts used and of determining the variables and their relationships. According to Mouton and Marais (1990:38), three factors determine the manner in which research problems are formulated: the unit of analysis, the research goal and the research approach.

As a social worker working with families and children, the researcher agrees that happy families or families of origin do not exist in reality. The growing divorce rate in South Africa means that many children are affected by the trauma of divorce. The fact that divorce is today accepted as a normal part of life does not ease the process of growing up for the affected children. The researcher also feels that children suffer extensive trauma, problems and emotional pain in a divorce.

The problem is not only to indicate the kind of trauma children go through or to look at the influence of divorce on children. Even amongst the experts, there are widely differing opinions as to how great the effect of the separation of parents may be on a child. The problem that the researcher would like to address through this study is how some parents are able to deal with the divorce transition with greater ease, helping their children in middle childhood to adjust to the negative consequences of divorce and suffer minimum effects.

Van Zyl (1997:49-50) on the other hand feels: “That recent research has revealed that divorce has a far greater impact on children than was first thought. He states that from the findings a picture has begun to emerge of the considerable adverse effects divorce has on some children.” The question that the researcher asked was: How do some parents succeed in making

their divorce easier and less traumatising for their children whilst others cannot?

After completing the research, the researcher aims to provide parents (who have already decided to get divorced), with knowledge and information regarding divorce, in particular the way it affects the children, and how the parents can make the transition easier and less traumatic for the child. The researcher plans to equip parents with the ability to realise that the choices they make about their divorce will have an influence on their children's acceptance of and adjustment to the divorce.

The problem of divorce is still as huge as was thought to be in the 1970's (Whiteman, 2001:18). Divorce rates are currently nudging 50%. Many children go through the experience of a family break-up each year. One third of all children will spend some time in a single parent family before they reach the age of eighteen. Growing up in a divorced home is not a rare occurrence, but rather a norm for today's society. Divorce may seem more normal these days, but it still takes its toll on children. The trauma is just as real as ever, even though it is more common. "A family is a system. We cannot underestimate the pain inherited by our children caused by marriages that are unworkable. Children of divorce suffer" (Peterson, 2003:3).

The research is not to show that parental divorce is harmful for children, but understanding how some parents are able to take responsibility in providing the stability and guidance needed to care for their children through the trauma of divorce.

### **1.3 PURPOSE, GOAL AND OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY**

The terms *goal*, *purpose* and *aim* are often used interchangeably, as synonyms for one another. Their meaning implies the broader, more abstract concept of "the end towards which effort or ambition is directed", while "objective" denotes the more concrete, measurable and more speedily attainable concept of such "end towards which effort or ambition is directed". The one goal (purpose or

aim) is the “dream”; the other (objective) is the steps one has to take, one by one, realistically at grassroots level, within a certain time-span, in order to attain the dream (Fouché, 2002a: 107-108).

### **1.3.1 Purpose of research**

Social research, of course, serves many purposes. Three of the most common and useful purposes are exploration, description and explanation (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:79). The purpose of this study is exploratory. Bless and Higson-Smith (1995:44) state that the aim of exploratory research is “...to gain insight into a situation, phenomenon, community or individual.”

The purpose of this study is to explore the contribution of parents in minimising the traumatic experience of children in a divorce situation.

### **1.3.2 Goal of study**

According to Fouché (2002a:107) the words *aim* and *goal* can be used interchangeably to refer to “...the end towards which effort or ambition is directed”. The goal of the study was to determine what the contribution of parents is in minimizing the impact of their divorce on children in the middle childhood.

### **1.3.3 Objectives of the study**

According to Fouché (2002a:107-108) the objectives are the “...steps one has to take, one by one, realistically at grassroots level, within a certain time-span, in order to attain” the aim or goal. Fouché (2002a:119) further states that the objectives should be specific, clear and achievable.

In order to achieve the goal, the following objectives for the study were formulated:

- To investigate the effects that parental divorce has on children.

- To conceptualise middle childhood within the different developmental tasks that children need to achieve within the context of the relationship with both their parents with specific focus on parental divorce.
- To do an empirical investigation by means of a case study on parental divorce and what parents can do to minimise the influence on their children in middle childhood.
- To draw conclusions and make recommendations to professionals, involved in working with families that go through a divorce, on the aspects that make the transition during parental divorce easier.

#### 1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION FOR THE STUDY

Williams *et al* (1995:81) are of the opinion that: “Hypotheses are only relevant to studies with an explanatory purpose, whereas other studies only have research questions.” Since this study has an exploratory purpose a hypothesis is not relevant.

Bless and Higson-Smith (1995:18-19) state that research questions should be “specific, precise and well-delimited”. They also feel that a research question is based on the research problem and reduces that problem to ensure that it can be handled in a single study.

The research question for this study was the following: **What are the contributions that parents can make to help their children in middle childhood to cope with their parents’ divorce and to minimise the impact it has on their children?**

#### 1.5 RESEARCH APPROACH

There are two main approaches to research, namely the quantitative paradigm and the qualitative paradigm (Struwig & Stead, 2001:3). Fouchè and Delport (2002:79) define a quantitative study as an inquiry into a social or human problem, based on testing a theory composed of variables, measured with

numbers and analysed with statistical procedures in order to determine whether the predictive generalisations of the theory hold true.

Mouton and Marais (in De Vos, 2002a:363) view the quantitative approach as highly formalised, as well as more explicitly controlled than the qualitative approach, with a range that is more exactly defined and relatively close to the physical science.

The researcher used both the qualitative and quantitative approaches for the purpose of the study. The researcher utilised Creswell's dominant-less-dominant model. In this analysis the researcher presents the study within a single, dominant paradigm (De Vos, 2002a:366). The dominant approach to be used was qualitative in the form of a case study and the data was collected through unstructured interviews and observations. Creswell (1998:15) agrees on the use of a qualitative approach, which he defines as: "Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports, detailed views of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting." The less-dominant approach was quantitative. The researcher utilised a standardised measuring instrument to explore the parent/child relationship affected by divorce.

## 1.6 TYPE OF RESEARCH

The typology of research deals with the concepts of basic and applied research, classifying the functions of research in the degree of direct practical application inherent to the findings. Research may therefore be labelled as either basic or applied (Fouché, 2002a:108). Studies that aim primarily to solve a particular problem confronting a group of people are often referred to as ***applied social research*** (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000:37).

The aim of this study was to discover, after doing an in-depth study of a case that fits all the descriptions, why some parents succeed in making their divorce less traumatic for their children, whereas some parental divorces are terrifying

for children in their middle childhood. The study will not solve or lessen the impact of divorce in society, but it might give some valuable insight into the effects that some divorces have or do not have on children. The result aims to develop specific guidelines for parents which they could follow, once making the final decision to divorce, to achieve a better transition for their (middle childhood) child when going through parental divorce.

In the case study, the primary ideas were to study the parents' divorce as a whole and to see what the parents had in place to minimise the effects of their divorce on their children.

## 1.7 RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGY

### 1.7.1 Research strategy

Creswell (in Fouché, 2002b:271) defines ***design in the qualitative context*** as “the entire process of research from conceptualising a problem, to writing the narrative”, while **tradition of inquiry** is the term used to refer to “...an approach to qualitative research that has a distinguished history in one of the disciplines and that has spawned distinct methodologies that characterise its approach”.

Creswell (in Fouché, 2002b:272) identifies the following five strategies of inquiry or traditions that could be used to design qualitative research, namely biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and the case study.

The researcher used a case study. The case study is an intensive investigation of a single unit. According to Creswell (1998:61) a case study can be regarded as an exploration or in-depth analysis of a “bounded system” or a single or multiple cases, over a period of time. Stake (in Fouché, 2002b:275) argues that the sole criterion for selecting cases for a case study should be “the opportunity to learn”.

The exploration and description of the case take place through detailed, in-depth data collection methods, involving multiple sources of information that are rich in context (Fouché, 2002b:275).

The researcher did an in-depth study of a family who succeeded in minimising the impact of changing from an intact family to a divorced family.

### **1.7.2 Research methodology**

According to Mouton and Marais (1998:192) the most important steps in the research process are the following: statement of the research problem, research design, data collection and analysis, and interpretation should be incorporated in the specification of methodological guidelines.

The researcher decided to make use of a single case study. The case study would give an idea of what a specific outcome, in this case a divorce, could be if both parents try to make the transition less traumatic for their children and in the best interest of the child. The aim of the study was to explore a single family over a period of time to gain insight into the contributions the parents made to minimise the impact of their divorce on their children.

A case study is an intensive investigation of a single unit (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 281). They also feel that the unit of the case study may be an individual person, but case studies can be done of other units such as a family (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:281). They see a social group study as a study of both small direct contact groups (e.g. families) and even larger more diffuse groups (e.g. occupational groups).

The qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with all the family members, namely the father, the mother and the two children in middle childhood. The interviews were recorded and the responses analysed in terms of themes and sub-themes. Data analysis in a qualitative inquiry involves a twofold approach.

De Vos (2002a:341) states: "... the first aspect involves data analysis at the research site during data collection. The second aspect involves data analysis away from the site following a period of data collection".

For the quantitative data two standardised measuring instruments, namely the Hudson Scales for children's attitudes towards their parents, were used to explore the parent/child relationships after the divorce. These responses were analysed according to the prescribed format provided by Perspective College.

## 1.8 PILOT STUDY

A pilot study can be defined as the process whereby the research design for a prospective survey is tested (New Dictionary for Social Work, 1995:45). Bless and Higson-Smith (in Strydom, 2002a:211) define a pilot study as a small study conducted prior to a larger piece of research to determine whether the methodology, sampling, instruments and analysis are adequate and appropriate.

A pilot study involves testing the actual program on a small sample taken from the community for whom the program is planned. This allows the evaluator to identify any difficulty with the method or materials and to investigate the accuracy and appropriateness of any instruments, which have been developed (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000:52). No pilot testing was necessary in this case, seeing that the case study is unique and cannot be duplicated. The measuring instruments are standardised and tested for validity and reliability.

It is often useful to assess the feasibility of a research project, the practical possibilities to be carried out, the correctness of some concepts and the adequacy of the method and instrument of measurement by doing a pilot study. The pilot study can therefore be seen as a way of preparing for the actual empirical study to take place.

According to Bless and Higson-Smith (2000:18-19) **feasibility** refers to whether or not the proposed study is manageable, taking into account the available



time, financial means, the size of the sample and the method or instrument of collecting data.

The researcher used a single case study of a family. The family gave their permission to participate in the research. The only costs that the researcher had were that of transport and paying for the standardised measuring instruments obtained from Perspective College. Therefore, this research was regarded as cost effective.

## 1.9 RESEARCH POPULATION, SAMPLE AND SAMPLING METHOD

The entire set of objects or people, which is the focus of the research and about which the researcher wants to determine some characteristics, is called a population (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000:94; Wilkinson & Mc Neil, 1996:63). Arkava and Lane (in Strydom & Venter, 2002:198) draw a distinction between the terms **universe** and **population**.

**Universe** refers to all potential subjects who possess the attributes in which the researcher is interested. The **universe** of this study is families with children in middle childhood that experienced parental divorce.

**Population** is a term that sets boundaries to the study units. It refers to individuals in the universe who possess specific characteristics. The **population** of this study was families that handled their transition from an intact family to a divorced one by keeping everyone in the family in mind. The children were less traumatised and the parents adopted a co-parenting lifestyle.

The family was a selected sample of the entire divorced population. According to Bless and Higson-Smith (2000:156) a **sample** refers to the group of elements drawn from the population, which is considered to be representative of the population, and which is studied in order to acquire some knowledge about the entire population. **Sampling** on the other hand refers to the technique by which a sample is drawn from the population (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000:156).

Before selecting a sample, the sample size must be chosen. The ideal is for the sample to be as large as possible, since this makes the sample more representative (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000:96). The researcher decided on one family where an in-depth study was conducted.

There are two broad categories of techniques for selecting a sample, namely **probability** and **non-probability sampling** (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000:156). **Probability (random) sampling** refers to sampling techniques where the probability of each element of the population included in the sample can be determined.

**Non-probability sampling** refers to sampling techniques where the probability of each element of the population included in the sample is not known (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000:156 and 155). Non-probability sampling through purposive sampling will be used. Singleton *et al* (in Strydom & Venter, 2002:207) feel that this type of sample is based entirely on the judgement of the researcher, in that a sample is composed of elements that contain the most characteristic, representative or typical attributes of the population.

The criteria for selection of the family were the following:

- Parents that went through a divorce in the last five years.
- Children in middle childhood.
- Parents that have a co-parenting style after their divorce.

Since it is not possible to include the entire population in the study, the researcher chose a family that crossed her path in a purposive manner. The particular type of non-probability sampling technique that was chosen was **purposive sampling**. In purposive sampling a particular case is chosen because it illustrates some feature or process that is of interest for the study (Silverman, 2000:104). Struwig and Stead (2001:122) add that this sampling technique allows the researcher to select “a sample of information-rich participants.”

During her sojourn in hospital, the researcher noted a well-balanced family: a mother and father sitting next to the bed of a sick child. She was thinking to herself that this is what marriage should be all about, namely that both parents should take part in raising their children, in good and bad times. She was astonished to hear that those two competent and involved parents had been divorced. The impact of what was witnessed motivated the research: If they can do it, with this amount of mutual respect and love for both their children, other couples should be able to do it as well.

The researcher decided to use this family, as a sample of the universe, because they had most of the elements that were representative for the study that the researcher had in mind.

## **1.10 ETHICAL ISSUES**

Wilkinson and McNeil see Ethics as: “Generally considered to be the moral obligation of professionals to comply their trades appropriately, competently, and with respect for the consumers they serve. Similarly, in research, human subjects must be treated with dignity, fairness and respect.”

Babbie (1998:438) explains: “That ethics is typically associated with morality, and both deal with matters of right and wrong.” Strydom (2002b:63) offers the following definition of ethics: “Ethics is a set of moral principles that is suggested by an individual or group, is subsequently widely accepted, and offers rules and behavioural expectations about the most correct conduct towards experimental subjects and respondents, employers, sponsors, other researchers, assistants and students.” Different authors emphasise more or less the same ethical issues, each of which will now be briefly discussed.

### **1.10.1 Harm to experimental subjects and/or respondents**

Social research should never harm the people being studied, regardless of whether they volunteer for the study or not. Perhaps the clearest instance of this norm in practice concerns the revealing of information that would

embarrass them or endanger their home life, friendships and jobs (Babbie, 1998:439).

The research could bring questions that could harm the parents and children, or take them back to the trauma of their divorce. During the individual interviews the researcher gave time to the parents and children to talk about their feelings and perceptions. If problems occurred, the family would immediately be referred to Ms L. Rossouw, a practising psychologist.

### **1.10.2 Informed consent**

“Informed consent is an explicit agreement between subject and researcher specifying the responsibilities of each” (Wilkinson & McNeil, 1996:70). Peil (1995:17) feels that beyond any official permission, which is required, all participants in the research should also have an opportunity to give or withhold their consent.

The parents gave written consent to participate in the study. Seeing that the children are under age the parents gave written consent on their behalf as well. All the participants had the right to withdraw from the research whenever they felt the need to do so. This was explained to all participants: the parents and the children. The children also gave written assent to participate in the study.

In order to give informed consent, participants need to be told something about the project. Peil (1995:18) feels that the participants have a right to know the following:

- Who is sponsoring the study?
- What area is being investigated?
- How much of their time it will take.
- Whether the results will remain confidential so that their answers cannot be traced back to them.
- How the results will be used.

In the beginning of the research the researcher explained all the objectives of the study, the fact that the results would remain confidential, what the researcher expected from them, the fact that the research was voluntary and how the results would be used. The researcher asked every participant to sign a consent form beforehand. The standardised measuring instrument that was completed, to determine the parent/child relationship, was anonymous and the results would be kept confidential.

### **1.10.3 Deception**

Loewenberg and Dolgoff (in Strydom, 2002b:66) describe the deception of subjects as “deliberately misrepresenting facts in order to make another person believe what is not true, violating the respect to which every person is entitled”. In this research the real goal of the research was given, the function of the actions of the subjects were not hidden and the experience of the children was be recognised. No deception took place.

### **1.10.4 Violation of privacy/anonymity/confidentiality**

A respondent may be considered anonymous when the researcher cannot identify a given response with a given respondent (Babbie, 1998:528). On the other hand a confidential survey refers to the researcher being able to identify a given person’s responses but essentially promises not to do so publicly (Babbie, 1998:441).

Singleton *et al.* (1988:454) further explain that “...the right to privacy is the individual’s right to decide when, where, to whom and to what extent his or her attitudes, beliefs and behaviour will be revealed”. Privacy implies the element of personal privacy, while confidentiality indicates the handling of information. Confidentiality was assured. The children were given the assurance that the answers to their questionnaires would not be discussed with their parents.

### **1.10.5 Actions and competence of researchers**

According to Strydom (2002b:69) researchers are ethically obliged to ensure that they are competent and adequately skilled to undertake the proposed investigation. As a practising social worker who conducts interviews, handles different emotions and who deals with family problems on a daily basis, the researcher was confident that she was competent to do the research and to cause no harm to respondents.

#### **1.10.6 Release or publication of the findings**

The findings of the study must be introduced to the reading public in written form, otherwise even a highly scientific investigation will mean very little and will not be viewed as research (Strydom, 2002b:71).

The consent form included a section informing the respondents that the results of the study would be published at the Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria, and would therefore have no influence whatsoever on their daily lives.

#### **1.10.7 Debriefing of respondents**

“The easiest way to debrief participants is to discuss their feelings about the project immediately after the session or to send a newsletter telling them the basic findings or results of the study” (Salkind, 2000:38).

Strydom (2002b:73) states the following as a summary of the process:

- Debriefing sessions after the study, during which subjects get the opportunity to work through their experience and its aftermath, is one way in which the researcher can assist subjects in minimising possible harm that may have been done in spite of all precautions taken to prevent such reactions.
- The researcher must rectify any misperceptions that may have arisen in the minds of participants after completion of the project.

- Termination and withdrawal of the therapy must be handled with utmost sensitivity in cases where subjects benefited from the therapeutic aspects of the research.

Participants were briefed about the subject before the research commenced. The research merely consisted of an in-depth study and a standardised measuring instrument and was unlikely to cause misperceptions or harm.

The participants had the right to withdraw from the research project whenever they felt the need to do so. From the start they were all informed that arrangements had been made with a psychologist and that they could make use of her services whenever they felt the need to do so.

## 1.11 DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS

Neuman (1997:98) defines **key concepts** as: “An important term for a topic that is likely to be found in a title.” Goldenberg (1992:50) feels that it is important that the reader will be “speaking the same language when comparing notes or attempting replications or even when being critical.” For the purpose of this study, the following key concepts are relevant to provide a theoretical framework for the research study:

### 1.11.1 Divorce

Divorce is the conclusive act of dissolution of marriage (Brodkin, 1997:18 and Newsletter, 2005:1). Benokraitis (2005:427) sees divorce as: “The legal and formal dissolution of a marriage.” *The Essential English Dictionary* (1999:65) explains divorce as a legal permission to separate from one’s married partner and to marry someone else if so desired, or to officially end a marriage. *The New Dictionary of Social Work* (1995:19) states divorce as the dissolution of a marriage by a judicial order. Cohen (2002:1019) states that: “Divorce is the termination of the family unit.”

“Divorce speeds up change, reaches so deeply into the lives of those affected by it” (Bosch, 2005:132). Divorce is a failure of a couple’s commitment to their marital and family roles. This includes parental responsibilities to their children’s psychological and emotional development (*Understanding and dealing with children during divorce*, 2004).

The researcher sees divorce as the legal ending of a marriage or romantic relationship between two people. Divorce breaks the relationship between parents and ends a family unit, not a relationship between parents and their children. Divorce is not a single event. It is a complex process that unfolds over time and requires extensive reorganisation and a series of adjustments, for both parents and children.

### **1.11.2 Intact family**

Benokraitis (2005:5) explains a family as: “A unit made up of two or more people who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption and who live together, form an economic unit, and bear and raise children”. She sees the family as: “...an intimate environment in which two or more people: live together in a committed relationship, see their identity as importantly attached to the group and share close emotional ties and functions” (Benokraitis, 2005:5).

*The Essential English Dictionary* (1999:113) states *Intact* as: “untouched, unharmed and with no part missing”. The *Essential English Dictionary* (1999:79) describes *family* as: “a household, parents and children or a group of things in some way related to each other”.

“Definitions of family range from the nuclear family of breadwinner father, homemaker mother and two children to multiple families living together as a whole” (Thompson and Rudolph, 2000:313).

For the researcher the intact family is a family as a whole: mother, father and children living together, sharing relationships and who respect each other.



### 1.11.3 Middle childhood

“Middle childhood is a developmental stage bound by the passage from home to school on one end and the brink of adolescence on the other. After the ages of five to seven, children take a giant step towards adulthood, socially as well as intellectually. “In middle childhood, the present, rather than the future or the past, is the centre of attention” (DeFord, 1996:220-212).

Freud sees this stage as the **psychosexual latent phase** and Piaget calls it the **concrete operational stage**. It spans the years from seven to eleven (Louw, Ede & Louw, 1998:326). Louw, Ede and Louw (1998:326), feel that this developmental phase is important for children and that it is a relatively calm period in their lives, that it is an important phase for children cognitively, socially, emotionally and for their self-concept development.

For the purpose of this study the child in middle childhood refers to a child of elementary school age, starting at six years old and ending at twelve years. It is the time between entering school and reaching adolescence. During the middle childhood the family plays a crucial role in socialization.

### 1.11.4 Co-parenting

*The American Heritage Dictionary* (2000:176) sees co-parenting as: “An arrangement in a divorce or separation by which parents share legal and physical custody of a child or children”.

Hansen (2004:139) describes co-parenting as: “The best way for parents to support their child’s emotional stability by continuing to provide a loving environment in which to nurture development. Regardless of parents’ feelings for one another, preserving the relationship with their children must take priority.”

Bozeman’s is view of (2002:3) co-parenting is: “After divorce, children are members of two families and former spouses need to co-operate to make both

homes supportive and secure for their children.” He feels that children are generally better off when they are able to maintain the family relationships that were important to them prior to the divorce and when their parents are able to co-operate and be generally supportive of one another. Co-parenting can refer to any arrangement where people are sharing parenting responsibilities. It is often used to refer to two or more people who choose to parent together outside of romantic or sexual relationships. In co-parenting arrangements the connection between parents is based on shared responsibility for children, not on romantic involvement.

Bosh (2005:98 & 115) explains co-parenting as follows: “A special and civil relationship, feeling that both are still the children’s parents. One thing that we do so well together, a mutual commitment to two young lives in our care”.

Bailey (2001:111) sees co-parenting as follows: “Successful shared parenting is related to how well parents communicate and work with each other in the best interest of their children.” According to Ahrons (2004:111) parents need to develop a “limited partnership” so that they can co-parent. The partnership needs to be clear, include both households and be practical.

For Weintraub and Hillman (2005:231) co-parenting is: “A new phraseology emphasising that both parents are still parents – a crucial concept for making life work after the cataclysm of divorce.”

According to Maureen McInnis (in Bailey, 2001:6) a member of the Montana Mediation Association who operates a custodial mediation practice in Great Falls, “the more parents can co-operate together the more they can stay in control of their parenting plan.”

The researcher feels that co-parenting is a term used when biological parents who have divorced or separated contain their anger and conflict in order to co-operate and compromise on issues regarding their children’s welfare. The most important aspect of co-parenting is that it allows children to be children and adults to be their parents.

### 1.11.5 Transition

*The Essential English Dictionary* (2002:232) refers to transition as: “changing from one state or condition to another.” Divorce is not just a legal process, to survive by ducking your head down, not being involved, and rushing through in an attempt to avoid as much turmoil and pain as possible. Divorce is an emotional transition, a life transition, a financial transition, and yes, a legal transition. Therefore it is important for a family to have a process that supports them through their transition without destroying each other and themselves.

The Telecom Glossary (2001:1) sees transition as “the changing from one significant condition to another.”

Although children love their other parent, the transition between households might still be hard because it is a major change in children’s reality. For children, every reunion is also separation; every transition is bittersweet (Weintraub & Hillman, 2005:266).

The researcher feels that in this study transition refers to the changing from an intact family to being a divorced family. Transition is a process, for some families an experience of growth and increased harmony.

### 1.12. CONTENTS OF THE RESEARCH REPORT

Chapter 1	General introduction
Chapter 2	Divorce and children in middle childhood
Chapter 3	Empirical study
Chapter 4	Conclusion and recommendations

### 1.13 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

During the study the researcher identified the following limitations:

- Literature on parental divorce and the negative influence it has on children was available in huge quantities. Literature on the positive manner in which some children handle parental divorce was limited. The researcher therefore had to make use of literature from overseas.
- The fact that the research was exploratory and descriptive, but also the fact that the researcher made use of a single case study, makes it difficult to use the conclusions and outcomes of the study for the greater population of divorced families. The information on the other hand is valuable in that parents should realise that they could lessen the negative effects of their divorce on their children.
- The use of the “Hudson Scales: Child’s Attitude towards Mother and Father profile” for the testing of both children’s attitudes towards their parents was in some sense restricted. Some of the questions were repeated in more than one way and the reports, even if the final scores were different at the end, the children’s attitude towards both the parents were analysed as the same.

#### **1.14 SUMMARY**

In South Africa, and the rest of the world, it is a reality that one out of every two marriages ends in divorce. The latest statistics of Statistics South Africa (2005:3) shows that the modified divorce rate for 2005 was 528.2 per 100 000 married couples. Whatever the cause, divorce will remain a part of society.

The question remains: Why do some parents have the ability to handle their divorce transition in such a manner that the long term effects are less traumatic for their children and the long term adjustments are made easier?

When planning a research, a reasonable research problem or phenomenon needs to be identified. The researcher should therefore have a sound reason why the specific research is to be undertaken.

The following aspects were outlined in the first chapter:

- The reasons for choosing the topic of parental divorce and the traumatic experience for children were outlined. Literature was studied and

interviews with professionals were conducted, to outline the problem as a researchable topic and as part of a huge, worldwide social problem.

- An accurate approach to the issue and the clarifying purpose of the study were outlined in the formulation of the problem.
- The purpose of this study is to explore the contribution of parents in minimising the traumatic experience of children in a divorce situation. The goal of the study was to determine what the contribution of parents is in minimising the impact of their divorce on children in the middle childhood.
- After that the research question was formulated. The researcher used both the qualitative and quantitative approaches for the purpose of the study. The dominant approach that was used was a case study and the data was collected through unstructured interviews and observations. The researcher utilised a standardised measuring instrument to explore the parent/child relationship affected by divorce, as the less-dominant approach.
- The type of research was applied and a single case study was used.
- The universe of this study was families with children in middle childhood that experienced parental divorce.
- The ethical issues were outlined: harm to respondents, informed consent, confidentiality, deception, debriefing of respondents and publication of the findings.
- Divorce, intact family, middle childhood, co-parenting and transition were defined as key concepts.
- The contents of the research report were also outlined.

## CHAPTER 2

# MIDDLE CHILDHOOD AS PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENTAL PHASE AND PARENTAL DIVORCE

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of this study the concept of children in the phase of middle childhood will be discussed as a psychosocial developmental phase as well as the different developmental tasks that children need to accomplish within the context of the relationship with both their parents. The effects of parental divorce on children will also be discussed with special reference to the effects of parental divorce on children in middle childhood.

There are a number of important concepts concerning parental divorce in this study that need to be understood and therefore the researcher will define these key concepts and relate them to parental divorce. The terms *co-parenting* and *transition* need to be clarified when talking about the process of parental divorce.

### 2.2 MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

#### 2.2.1 Definition of middle childhood

Middle childhood refers to the ages between six and twelve years. “After the age of five to seven, children take a giant step, socially as well as intellectually. At no time are they more ready to learn” (Oesterreich, 1995:211). In middle childhood children typically spend less time with their families and parents, as relationships are formed with friends, teachers and others (DeBord, 1996:64).

Some theorists like Freud and Piaget view middle childhood as a plateau, says Eccles (1999:32). According to them middle childhood is a time when

children develop mastery of the skills that they gained in pre-school, and it is a time of preparing for adolescence.

Freud referred to this stage as the Psychosexual Latency period. He sees the primary task for the child as the development of cognition. In other words, it is a period in which there is significant brain development, with corresponding leaps in the ability to think, process information, learn and participate in formal education (Frazier, 2000:8).

Erikson believed that childhood is very important in personality development and, unlike Freud, felt that personality continued to develop beyond five years of age (Stevens, 1983:73). Eccles (1999:37) explains that: “Psychological theorist Erik Erikson saw the period of middle childhood not as a plateau, but as an important time of transition from the home into the wider social community.” Erikson characterised this time as a tension between industry and inferiority (Louw, Ede & Louw, 1998:326).

For the purpose of this study, children in middle childhood can be seen as being between six and twelve years of age; when they start school up to when they reach adolescence.

Louw, Ede and Louw (1998:326) describe middle childhood as a time relatively easy for physical development, but very important in cognitive, social, emotional and as a sense of self-development. The middle childhood phase is known for many changes and a substantial amount of developmental tasks. Important milestones need to be reached. Each age and stage of development presents different issues and challenges.

“Erikson regards each stage as a “psychosocial crisis” which arises and demands resolution before the next stage can be satisfactorily negotiated. Satisfactory learning and resolution of each crisis is necessary if the child is to manage the next ones satisfactorily” (Child & adolescent development, 2005:1-4). Something as traumatic as a parental divorce can handicap children in reaching certain developmental milestones. Children regress and

have to start over to try and succeed in performing certain tasks. For the purpose of this study the different tasks that children in middle childhood need to complete before they can move on to the next stage will be discussed.

### **2.2.2 Developmental tasks in middle childhood**

According to Havighurst in Thomas (2002:61) a developmental task refers to: “A task which arises at or about a certain period in the life of the individual, successful achievement of which leads to his happiness and to success with later tasks, while failure leads to unhappiness in the individual, disapproval of society and difficulty with later tasks.”

“Up to this point, children have always looked up to parents as the source of information, but now children judge parents more and label their actions differently” (DeBord, 2005:4). “Middle childhood, from 6 to 12 years of age, is a crucial stage in development when children begin to have sustained encounters with different institutions and contexts outside of their families and to navigate their own way through societal structures. It is during this period that children develop a sense of competence, forming ideas about their abilities, the domains of accomplishment they value, and the likelihood that they will succeed in these domains. During middle childhood the development and aspirations for the future can have major implications for children’s success as adults” (Coll & Szalacha, [sa]).

According to Louw, Ede and Louw (1998:326) the child in the middle childhood phase needs to complete the following developmental tasks:

- Learning physical skills necessary for ordinary games.
- Building wholesome attitudes toward himself/herself as a growing organism.
- Learning to get along with peer group members.
- Learning an appropriate masculine or feminine social role.
- Developing fundamental skills in reading, writing and calculating.
- Developing concepts necessary for everyday living.



- Developing conscience, morality and scale values.
- Achieving personal independence.
- Developing attitudes towards social groups and institutions.

In middle childhood the child experiences a period of tremendous intellectual, physical, moral, personality and social-emotional changes.

### **2.2.3 Physical development**

According to Louw, Ede & Louw (1998:329) children in this age group master and refine their motor co-ordination skills, especially eye-hand co-ordination. Individual differences emerge at this stage, as children specialize in certain skills (Finely, 2006:4). “During this stage there may be quite a difference in the sizes and abilities of children. This will affect the way they get along with others, how they feel about themselves and what they do” (Oesterreich, 1995:203).

DeBord (1996:212) and Kaplan (1998:137) mention the following physical changes during the middle childhood phase:

- Growth is slower than in preschool years, but steady.
- In the later stages of middle childhood, body changes indicate approaching puberty.
- Children recognise that there are differences between boys and girls.
- Children find difficulty balancing high energy activities and quiet activities.
- Intense activity may bring tiredness.
- Muscle co-ordination and control are uneven and incomplete in the early stages, but children become almost as co-ordinated as adults by the end of middle childhood.
- Small muscles develop rapidly, making playing musical instruments, hammering or building things more enjoyable.
- Baby teeth will be replaced by permanent teeth.

- Permanent teeth may appear before the mouth has fully grown, causing dental crowding.
- Eyes reach maturity in both size and function.
- The added strain of schoolwork often creates eye tension and leads some children to request eye examinations.

Louw, Ede and Louw (1998:330) state that this physical and motor co-ordination is necessary and useful for other aspects of personality development. He further explains how these developmental milestones of writing, drawing and the playing of musical instruments affect cognitive development. The mentioned physical developmental tasks even help children to improve their social skills when they participate in group activities. The researcher therefore sees physical development during the middle childhood as a mastering and refining phase. Children are now capable of fine hand and finger movements, something that just needs more exercise. Children persist in an activity until they get tired. During this physical development most children are interested in their own strength.

#### **2.2.4 Cognitive development**

Children between nine and twelve are skilful in reading and writing, while the younger ones are still refining these skills. Biologist and psychologist Jean Piaget, who developed the most well-known theory of cognitive development, called the middle childhood the stage of concrete operational thought (Lefrancois, 1995:401). Piaget defines the Concrete Operational period as: "...a period where the child has the ability to memorise information, uses logic when thinking of different classes, forms relationships and understands numbers and concrete thinking. He also sees this as a period of being aware of right and wrong/good versus bad" (Kaplan, 1998:134).

Thought becomes less intuitive and egocentric. They begin to realise that other people also have thoughts and feelings. Thinking becomes more logical and flexible and is no longer limited to the here and now. Children in this age

group have outstanding learning potential (DeBord, 2005:2). DeFord (1996) feels that: “Children of this age are also beginning to build a self-image as a “worker”. He states that if this is encouraged, this will be positive in later development of career choices.” According to Kaplan (1998:37): “Children from six to twelve are much less egocentric and can look at the world more objectively. They can follow the sequence of events, can master the idea of classification and they are able to use mathematical operations. Their problem solving is based on trial and error.”

DeBord (1996:132-133) explains that children in the middle childhood phase have the following cognitive tasks to master:

- Children begin to think about their own behaviour and see consequences of their actions. Thinking they can group things that belong together.
- Children begin to read and write and should be skilful by the end of this stage.
- They think their actions through and trace back events that happened to explain situations.
- Children learn through active learning.
- Middle childhood children’s attention span is only 15-20 minutes long.
- Children may begin projects but finish few. Nearing adolescence, children will focus more on completion.
- Children in this age group need to experience various friendships while building esteem.
- Children talk through problems to solve them.
- Children can focus attention and take time to search for needed information.
- They can develop a plan to meet a goal.
- There is greater memory capability because many routines are automatic now.
- Many children want to find a way to earn money.

The researcher sees this stage as a period where the primary task for the child is the development of cognition. It is a period in which there is significant brain development with corresponding leaps in the ability to think, to process information, to learn and participate in formal education. Some researchers call this a cognitive explosion.

### **2.2.5 Social and emotional development**

During this stage social networks expand dramatically within this age group. Children move into a broader social world of peers, teachers, other adults and the community. They become more aware of what is socially acceptable and more influenced by peer pressure (Lefrancois, 1995:412). “The child now participates in friendships based on trust, loyalty, faithfulness and values like helping, sharing and affection in their relationships” (Kaplan, 1998:293).

Children develop their own social patterns and their personalities begin to emerge. Some children are popular, confident and outgoing, while others are shy and feel insecure. Self-image also becomes important (DeBord, 1996:36 and DeBord, 2005:4). At this stage children develop their own sense of self, but also as part of a community. Many different aspects can change the way a child grows and develops. A child’s family structure is a big part of the way he/she develops as a person.

DeBord (1996:7-8) and Firchow (2004:2-3) identify the following aspects in a child’s social and emotional development during the middle childhood phase:

- There are signs of growing independence and children now typically test their growing knowledge with back talk and rebellion.
- Common fears include the unknown, failure, death, family problems and rejection.
- Friends live in the same neighbourhood and are from the same sex.
- Children average five best friends and at least one “enemy”, which change from day to day.

- Children act nurturing and commanding with younger children but follow and depend on older children.
- Children are beginning to see the point of view of others more clearly.
- Children define themselves in terms of their appearance, possessions and activities.
- There are fewer angry outbursts and more ability to endure frustration while accepting delays in getting things they “want”.
- Children often resolve conflict through peer judges who accept or reject their actions.
- Children are self-conscious and feel as if everyone notices even small differences.
- Tattling is a common way to attract adult attention in the early years of middle childhood.
- Inner control is being formed and practised each time decisions are made.
- Around age 6-8, children may still be afraid of monsters and the dark. These are replaced later by fears of school, disaster and confusion over social relationships.
- To win, lead or to be first is valued.
- Children often are attached to adults other than their parents and will quote their new “hero” or try to please him or her to gain attention.
- Early in middle childhood, “good” and “bad” days are defined as what is approved or disapproved by the family.
- Children’s feelings get hurt easily. There are mood swings and children often don’t know how to deal with failure.
- Children may be critical of self and others.
- Children may use physical complaints to avoid unpleasant tasks.
- Most children of this age are responsible; they can be depended upon and trusted.
- Children in this age group put great importance on fairness, in self and in others.
- Children like to talk and share ideas.
- They tend to be egocentric, critical and uncooperative.

- They may be tearful, fearful and full of worries.
- Most children's relationships with their mothers are particularly thorny.
- They display anger physically, through fights, by slamming doors and kicking.

“Play becomes more complex and structured. It is important for children to feel that their peers accept them and that they belong to a group. Acceptance and popularity have a huge impact on a child's self esteem. Unfortunately, children can easily feel lonely and rejected and become more vulnerable to bullying by peers (Kaplan, 1998:37).”

According to Erik Erikson's theory of emotional development, children in this age group are faced with the psychosocial crisis called *industry* versus *inferiority*. This means that children develop a sense of *industry* and *curiosity* and are eager to learn. Successful mastery leads to feelings of efficiency. Parents and teachers should therefore provide opportunities for them to practise these skills. If children feel that they don't accomplish anything, they feel inferior (Eccles, 1999:37).

Children at this stage get more used to their own and others' feelings. They tend to express themselves with more confidence than before and they have the ability to judge the expressions of others with greater success. There is a subtle change in relationships with parents. According to Eccles (1999:37): “Children are more independent and responsible and show an increase in the development of their sense of morality. They also experience an increase in the ability to experience empathy as an emotional response resulting from understanding another person's condition.”

### **2.2.6 Moral development**

According to Kohlberg's theory, from age 4-10, two principles guide children's morals. The first is obedience and punishment orientation. Children make moral decisions based on the principle of avoiding punishment and obeying

authority. The second principle is naïve hedonistic orientation where children's morality is governed by the desire to satisfy others who are important to them. "From ages 10 to 12, children make choices in hopes of gaining approval. Children's decisions at this stage also reflect the desire to obey authority and avoid social disorder" (Woolfson, 2001:22).

Moral development is more difficult to discuss in terms of developmental milestones. Moral development occurs over time through experience. Most researchers imply that if a child knows what is right, he or she will make the right choice (Elkind, 1994:37; De Bord, 1996:10 & Kaplan, 1998:25).

The researcher sees moral development in middle childhood as the process during which children learn to evaluate behaviour in terms of right and wrong. Children regulate their own behaviour according to these principles. Children now realise that other people also have opinions, whether these are the same as their opinion or not. Children at this stage develop a conscience and a scale of values.

### **2.2.7 Personality development**

Freud's theory of child development placed the child's personality during middle childhood as an aspect where the id was repressed; he also described the child's personality solely on the basis of sexuality. Freud saw the middle childhood phase as a latent phase, during which he believed that children reached a plateau of their development (Frazier, 2000:8).

"Erikson developed his theory as an improvement on Freud's psychosexual development. Erikson accepted many of Freud's theories (including the id, ego and superego), but rejected Freud's attempt to describe personality solely on the basis of sexuality. Erikson believed that childhood is very important in personality development and he felt that personality continued to develop beyond five years of age" (Wikipedia, 2006).

According to Erikson, children in this phase want to do something worthwhile. “They want to earn recognition by producing something and by completing it gain the satisfaction of completing work by perseverance” (Thomas, 2002:151). “It is crucial for children at this stage to develop a feeling of success. Children develop a feeling of being competent while comparing themselves with others” (Bee, 1992:337).

With the above-mentioned facts in mind, the middle childhood phase can be seen as a time of mastering various skills. Children learn to relate with their peers according to rules. Children in this phase progress from free play to play that may be elaborately structured by rules and may demand formal teamwork, such as baseball. They trust, are autonomous and full of initiative. They learn quickly and absorb new facts with great ease. However, the mistrusting child will doubt the future. The shame- and guilt-filled child will experience defeat and inferiority.

The researcher sees each stage in life as a time of growth. Middle childhood is a time to bridge dependence with approaching independence. The time of wonder and spontaneity is fading, replaced by feeling self-conscious and on guard. By acting in new ways, children explore their future potential. Some behaviour will pass, but must be experienced in order for them to grow and be ready to face the stage of finding their individual identities during adolescence.

Children develop their own personalities and their self-images become important at this stage. Children’s self concepts broaden and they describe themselves in psychological attributes as *nice* or *kind*.

Erikson (in *Child & Adolescent Development*, 2005:1-14) came to the conclusion: “That children should not be rushed in their development; that each developmental phase was vastly important and should be allowed time to fully unfold. Erikson explained that every time a child is rushed to complete the developmental stage that he is in or any traumatic experience he is subjected to will seriously undermine a child’s ability to succeed in life and emotional harm will be done.”



It is important for parents to be familiar with the characteristics of normal child development so that they can be aware of the changes in their child's behaviour or development, when the trauma of parental divorce occurs. "Each age and stage of development will present different issues and challenges" (Kaplan, 1998, 24).

When trying to understand why children act and react the way they do in response to divorce, it is important to first understand the difference between the ways of thinking of adults and children. Many people mistakenly think of children as miniature adults, therefore it takes a special effort to see the divorce situation through the eyes of a child.

This is emphasized by Dr Stuart Berger in his book *Divorce without Victims* (1990:16): "It is absolutely essential for the parent to realise that until the child reaches young adulthood, his view of the world and the people around him is very different from the adult's. Your behaviour towards your child, whatever his age, during the period of parental separation and divorce, must take into account his particular stage of development".

Age six to twelve is a time when children are developing rapidly and rely on their parents for stability. Parental divorce during children's middle childhood phase brings a different set of developmental problems.

It is important to the researcher that parents know what the reactions of children are during parental divorce. For parents to be more sensitive to their children during the divorce process, they need to know about the short and long term effects. For parents to put the needs of their children first, they should also understand that their behaviour could either harm or help their children during this time of turmoil. Divorce as a process and the middle childhood child's reaction to this trauma will now be discussed.

### **2.3 CHILDREN AND PARENTAL DIVORCE**

### 2.3.1 Children's general reaction to parental divorce

“Children worldwide are more and more exposed to traumatic situations such as divorce, family violence, physical and sexual abuse and chronic diseases such as cancer and HIV/Aids” (Blom, 2004:209 and Luttig, 2006:101). Divorce is a common stress experience for children and it is becoming commonplace in our society (Marano, 1997:9).

It is important for the parents to understand the stress that children often experience when their parents divorce. Children stress about the following:

1. **The family they have always known will be different** – The biggest fear for children is change. With divorce, changes will occur in many household responsibilities.
2. **Loss of attachment** – Children become attached to parents, brothers, sisters and pets. Change in contact with any of these people can cause some distress.
3. **Fear of abandonment** – Children fear that if they have lost one parent, they may lose the other. They may blame themselves, feel unlovable or not feel safe.
4. **Hostility between parents** – Arguments and tension between parents may make children feel guilty, angry and alone. Trying to make the children take sides or turn against the other parent creates confusion for children and places them in the middle of an adult struggle. Children's reaction to stress may vary from relief and complete acceptance to great sadness, anger or anxiety. Children often find themselves caught in an emotional whirlpool during parental divorce (DeBord, 1996:14). “Usually children are aware of problems between their parents long before the actual separation (Oaklander, 1988:251).” Bosch (2005:23) explains: “Although we had not told them yet, it was clear to me that they sensed something terrible was happening.”

In 2002 a study of 2 500 children of divorce who were observed for thirty years by Professor Mavis Hetherington of the University of Virginia revealed the following:

- “The great majority (between 75-80%) showed very little long term damage and, as adults, functioned well.”
- “Specifically, within two years of the parents’ separation, the great majority were doing well.”
- “These figures also mean of course that 25% of children did not do so well” (Hooper, 2005: xi).

The aim of this research study is to understand why adjustment to divorce is easier for some children than for others. What influences children when confronted with parental divorce? Another survey carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2004 suggested that:

- Family conflict before and after separation makes life much harder for the children.
- Parental ability to recover from the distress of separation affects the children’s ability to adjust.
- Multiple changes in the family structure increase the probability of distress later.
- Quality contact with the non-residential parent can improve the children’s emotional well-being (Hooper, 2005: xi).

Children will react to parental divorce in several ways. Blom (2004:209) explains that divorce causes grieving reactions in children that can manifest in different kinds of behaviour, for example temper tantrums, depression, poor school performance, psychosomatic complaints and interpersonal conflict. Grieving children often fear rejection, abandonment, loss and isolation or not having their basic needs met. Obviously their understanding of what this means will be shaped by their age and stage of development. Children of all ages will show several commonly experienced signs of grief.

A number of studies have demonstrated that most children have similar patterns in reaction to their parents’ divorce (Kelly, 2000:79):

- Some children exhibit minor reactions to their parents' break-up. They do go through their own grieving, but these children would appear to be no different from the average child.
- The second group is children who have more severe reactions, but eventually work through their grieving and go on to live productive, healthy lives.
- The final group is children who have severe reactions and never seem to recover from their parents' divorce.

The good news, however, is that two-thirds of children of divorce work through the trauma of their parents' divorce and achieve reasonably healthy adulthood (Whiteman, 2001:52). "Children's reactions will be influenced by the ability of the parents to provide continuing support and a sense of security" (Children cope with Divorce, 2002:1). Every child is an individual and will react in his or her unique manner. Some children react immediately while others take time to work through the process.

## **2.3.2 Immediate reactions**

### **2.3.2.1 Questioning**

This may not happen when parents first break the news, but it is highly likely to recur over the ensuing weeks. An announcement of parental divorce shifts and rocks a child's world. The children's need for repeated explanations is their method of coping with and working through the perplexing situation (Blom, 2004:218 and Hooper, 2005:23-24).

### **2.3.2.2 Crying**

If children cry, don't try to make them stop or tell them to be brave. Crying is a natural expression of their grief and is good for them. If parents teach them to bottle up their feelings and repress their grief, they may find this grief crops up in later life on a range of inappropriate occasions (Hooper, 2005:24).

### **2.3.2.3 Overt reaction**

“If children have little or no reaction to the news, don’t be too surprised. It may mean that they have not yet had time to feel the impact of what they have just been told” (Oaklander 1988:251 and Hooper, 2005:24).

### **2.3.2.4 It is their fault**

It is not a mistake— it happens that the children think they have somehow managed to cause the divorce. They may search their minds for something wicked they have done, something which they feel could have caused their parents to split up (Hooper, 2005:24). These immediate feelings of childish guilt may seem inexplicable and unlikely to parents, who are inclined to dismiss them. But these feelings are real enough for the children and now they prove it.

### **2.3.3 The signs of grief**

Social scientists have thoroughly studied the human grieving process, focusing on people’s reactions to the loss of a loved one. The grieving process is strikingly similar to that when people go through a divorce. The stages of grief, first outlined by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in her studies about human reaction to death, are the same when children lose their families of origin through divorce; they go through the grieving process along with their parents (Thomas & Rankin, 1998:2-3).

First people pretend that it is not happening, and then they get angry about it, after which they seek ways to fix the problem. When these efforts fail, people get depressed. After all that, they finally accept the reality (Whiteman, 2001:59 and Hooper, 2005:25). Rhonda Freeman (1999:12) of the programme, *Families in Transition*, agrees that reaction to divorce is in many ways similar to the reaction to a death. “I think it’s fair to say that both children and adults experience a loss with separation and, in fact, do grieve

the loss, and need time to mourn the changes before they can move on to build a new life after separation and divorce.“

Sue Bourque (2006:1) explains: “It’s particularly hard on children, because parents are going through their own grief and they tend to forget that their child is feeling the same. It doesn’t matter that the parent is thirty and the child is three, they’re both experiencing the same losses.” Children experience a range of emotions when their parents divorce, emotions like disbelief, fear, anger, rejection and grief (Bosch, 2005:33, Weintraub & Hillman, 2005: 243 and Luttig, 2006:101).

The authors feel that a break-up of a family and possibly the loss of one parent is surely one of the toughest hurdles for any child to overcome. Bosch (2005:33) states that the adjustment for children after divorce seems insurmountable.

Grieving and traumatised children may have a lot of needs, such as the need to be aware of their feelings, the need to build trust, the need to have power and control in their life, the need for family support and the need to express their feelings, such as fear, anxiety and anger (Blom, 2004:210). Children of a divorcing couple face profound loss, even more profound than that of their parents.

We can expect children to go through the same grieving process. “Although grief affects children individually (depending on age and experience), it usually contains several well-recognized stages. Middle childhood children grieve the loss of the family they have known and the daily presence of the two parents, familiar in their daily life” (The effects of divorce on children, 2002:1-9). According to Hooper (2005:25) these are not always experienced in the order listed below, but classically they consist of:

- The initial phase - During this phase there are several predominant emotions that can be summarised as shock, denial, anger and searching.

- The secondary phase – During the secondary phase children’s feelings may be very similar to what they felt during the initial phase, namely feelings of anxiety, guilt, bargaining, depression and despair.
- The acceptance phase – The fact that now the child’s defence mechanisms are within the normal range distinguishes the acceptance phase. This phase is known as coping (Whiteman, 2001:59-105 and Hooper, 2005:25-29).

Most children will jump from phase to phase, often regressing numerous times before reaching a point of acceptance. Children will often relapse into other phases of the grieving process whenever new stresses enter their lives, extending well into their adult years (Whiteman, 2001:60).

According to FAMSA (in *Life after divorce*, 2006:1-3), how children respond to divorce, depends on their age and their self-concept. FAMSA feels that: “There are emotions most children experience during divorce. The most overwhelming feeling is intense sadness, which may persist for some time. They feel sad about the loss of the family unit” (Life after divorce, 2006).

Just as parents go through a process before they can accept the divorce, so do the children (Blom, 2004:212). Children on the other hand do not have the language skills to verbalise it, nor the cognitive ability to understand, identify or express their feelings. The child will express his or her feelings through play, drawing and non-verbal behaviour, and their feelings will be felt physically (Blom, 2004:212). Initially they are shocked and unable to believe what has happened. They may deny it and say things like “My parents are not getting divorced; they just are not married anymore.” They may become very angry, directing the anger at one or both parents. Children need help to express this anger in acceptable ways.

Children can be exposed to a variety of occurrences that can influence their healthy growth and development, of which divorce is a big factor (Blom, 2004:211). The normal reactions to loss and trauma are grieving and post

traumatic stress reactions. Hyer and Brandsma (1999:134) state that: “A trauma situation can also include elements of loss and vice versa.”

The researcher realised that a child’s passage through the stages of grieving his loss is a very individual process. The speed of the journey depends on the child’s personality, his developmental stage as well as how easily the divorce unfolds. Although children have a natural ability to recover, the possibility exists that the lives of these children could be radically influenced.

### **2.3.4 The phases of grief**

#### **2.3.4.1 *The initial phase***

During the initial onslaught of information regarding the break-up of the family, the child may protect himself from this devastating news by avoiding the information. First the child is shocked and then uses denial. At a point when denial doesn’t work anymore, children become very angry, using their anger to deflect what they can’t deal with (Worden, 1996:147-148; Whiteman, 2001:60 and Blom, 2004:214).

- **Shock** - This may result in a child instantly bursting into tears and just as instantly getting over the tears and wanting to go back to play; exploding into frenzy screaming; looking dazed and uncomprehending or most visibly withdrawing; not wanting to talk, cry or let go of any emotion (Hooper, 2005:25).
- **Denial** - Whatever the case, children are not prepared to handle the news that their whole world is about to fall apart. The child who first learns that his parents are about to separate or divorce, goes into a type of emotional shock that temporarily numbs the pain he feels. We can see denial as a natural reaction. The denial of an emotional blow has its place in preparing the way for eventual acceptance (Whiteman, 2001:62). For the researcher, denial is an attempt by the children to convince themselves that the divorce is not really happening, that the problem will just go away.



It is sometimes so threatening to think of the family as never being the same again that some children just can't accept it. Even though most children understand what has been explained, they will tell themselves and their friends that their father has gone away on business. This of course embodies wishful thinking (Hooper, 2005:26-27). The middle childhood child may have a similar type of denial; however, one may hear more questions about how their lives will change. They are stunned by the news, but now they have a better intellectual ability to reason and question than they did when they were younger. Their behaviour may even improve during this time, as they try to deny the break-up and their feelings about it; they want to avoid any behaviour that will bring reality crashing down on them. As the denial wears off, the children become aware of their own hurt and begin to act out their own pain (Whiteman, 2001:64). The researcher sees denial as an escape route for children, because they don't know another way to handle the news of their parents' divorce. They are scared, confused and hurt; and have no one to talk to, seeing that their parents themselves are in denial or emotional shock.

- **Anger** - If parents give the child honest information and avoid "playacting" in front of them, they will help them realize that the separation and imminent divorce of their parents is a reality that they will have to face. One of the first feelings is a fearful insecurity (Whiteman, 2001:68 and Luttig, 2006:123). Even though children use denial, some realisations inevitably trickle into their inner selves. Once these realisations accumulate to a point where they must face certain issues, children are filled with fear and anxiety. The way that most children of divorce handle their fears and anxieties during the initial phase is with anger (Whiteman, 2001:68). Children once again use this tool to protect themselves from the reality of the situation. The announcement may bring an angry reaction either immediately or, just as likely, later, after the children have had time to think about the news. This may come via actions rather than words (Hooper, 2005:26). Whiteman (2001:72) feels that this is a reaction to the anger they feel about the situation in general, rather than toward a person.

Weintraub and Hillman (2005:245) state that the anger children feel during parental divorce, if not constructively channelled, can become outwardly destructive or self-destructive. Hidden feelings can fester and manifest in ways that seem unconnected to the separation.

#### **2.3.4.2      *The secondary phase***

Beyond the initial phase of shock, denial and anger, children usually become very frustrated, because they learn that they cannot make the problems disappear by pretending they are not there and because their anger only seems to make the problem worse (Whiteman, 2001: 84). Children's feelings might be similar to the initial phase, however now they are handling the feelings differently. Instead of denying their feelings or deflecting them by blaming others, they are now allowing themselves to feel some of them.

- **Anxiety** – It is common for children who experienced such a huge loss, to feel the fear of losing other important elements in their lives. Hence it is important to keep as much as possible of the children's life as intact as it was before the separation (Hooper, 2005:27). "Children worry about money, about the ability of the parents to cope without each other, about who will cook and care for Dad or even who will take them to school" (Life after divorce, 2006:2).
- **Guilt** – "Guilt is a classic reaction to divorce and children need constant reassurance from each parent" (Hooper, 2005:27). Most children have feelings of guilt and are always trying to make right what is wrong.
- **Bargaining** – Bargaining is a form of manipulation that the child uses to lessen the pain or to change the situation to make it more acceptable. The bargaining stage is probably the most difficult stage to understand and to recognise. "It is when children become so frustrated with the situation that they try to find simple solutions to a very complex problem" (Whiteman, 2001:85). Children merely want to make the pain go away and often the goal is just to get the parents back together. This usually involves fantasy and magical thinking; but for those who are eight or older, actual

manipulation of the situation is very apparent. Children will use bargaining as their predominant defence mechanism. This usually comes out of the frustration that their anger, guilt and sadness make them feel worse (Whiteman, 2001:86).

- **Depression** - Depression is actually a natural reaction to overwhelming life changes and pain. According to Whiteman (2001:89) this kind of depression is also called “reactive depression”, since it is in reaction to specific life stresses. This is different from depression caused by a chemical imbalance. He also states that assuming the child’s depression is merely reactive; one needs to understand it as a natural and necessary part of the child’s grieving. It is also the way the child protects himself from more extensive damage (Whiteman, 2001:90). Depression begins once the reality of the situation sets in; this means that the children have moved beyond denial, recognising that they cannot control their parents or their feelings. Whiteman (2001:91) states that for younger children, depression can appear as sadness and withdrawal, but for some it may actually appear as increased activity and acting out emotions.

Whiteman (2001:91) calls this “masked depression”: “Even though these children seem to have a high activity level or be quite anxious, the underlying feeling is still depression. Children merely cover their sadness with activities. During this state of depression most children have signs of regression to previous developmental stages. Regression seems logical when viewing the sense of loss from a child’s perspective. As they move along, growing in knowledge and independence, suddenly their whole world seems to start falling apart.”

They immediately begin to go back to an earlier, more comfortable stage of development. This helps them feel more secure; they stay there until they feel comfortable enough to step out again in to new directions (Whiteman, 2001:92). Children demonstrate their depression through insecurity and almost clingy dependence. Most children show signs of apathy, change in behaviour, emotional ups and downs, anxiousness, complaints of stomach aches, loss of appetite, sleep disturbances or develop a school phobia (The

effects of divorce, 2002). It can last for weeks and months. For young children there is little to do but wait for the situation to become more stable and secure. This will take time, time for them to grow up and time for them to see that they can begin to trust again (Whiteman, 2001:92).

Many of the things that worsen depression are worries about practical problems. If children felt terribly sad before, these worries could be enough to make them quiet, fearful and depressed (Blom, 2004:216 and Hooper, 2005:28). Children worry about practical issues, such as where they will be living, how they will get to school and whether Dad still loves them. Hooper (2005:29) states: "That parents with the very best of intentions sometimes fail to pick up the significant clues or cues that cause their child to fall into a deep depression."

#### **2.3.4.3      *The acceptance phase***

All divorcing parents want their children to reach a point of acceptance as quickly as possible. Yet parents must remember that the grieving process is a natural reaction that must be allowed to run its course. Parents are usually premature in thinking that the adjustments are over, just to realise that every child's process is different.

Whiteman (2001:104) states: "That the acceptance phase is distinguished by the fact that the child's defence mechanisms are within the normal range now. Instead of deflating or distorting their feelings, the children are now able to allow new information about the family or the environment to affect them directly. Most information passes through the defensive layers, and is then able to reach the inner self without distortion."

For the child in middle childhood there is an increasing awareness of the extent of the loss in his life. Children of this age have an increasing ability to reach a point of acceptance. This does not mean that none of the children who witness their parents' break-up while in this age range will have a delayed reaction (Whiteman, 2001:106). Whiteman (2001:106) explains that

many children are able to reach acceptance within a couple of years and then honestly handle the mini crises as they occur throughout their lives. Children of ages six to eight will return to youthful play, fantasy daydreaming and childlike trust as part of acceptance.

Other signs of acceptance within this age range may include a restoration of self-confidence and personal security, a return to normal scholastic achievement, the ability to focus on new and renewed friendship and an acceptance of the new family structure so that few, if any, adjustments are needed when the former spouse visits or calls (Whiteman, 2001:107). Hooper (2005:35) and Bosch (2005:98) feel that the key ingredients are the fact that the child is now able to cope with the changes in life, facing the family situation with a sense of acceptance and restored hope. It is important to remember that a child's grieving is a natural process, which must run its course at an individual tempo.

### **2.3.5 The perception of children in middle childhood of parental divorce**

In *Surviving the Breakup* (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1996:49) the authors provide perhaps the finest and most comprehensive discussion of the impact of divorce upon children, keyed to age and developmental level. In this research study the focus will be on children in the middle childhood phase.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1996, 46-52) divide the middle childhood phase into two groups – the young children (6-8) and the pre-adolescent children (9-12). The younger children (early latency) predominantly express feelings of sadness and abandonment. These children will often openly grieve for the departed parent (Eleoff, 2003:2). This age group finds it difficult to express their anger to their departed father, and they entertain fantasies, often secret, that their parents will reconcile.

“They are fearful of expressing anger towards their custodial mother and show divided loyalties, even when their parents are not pressing them to take sides. There is a noted preoccupation with fantasies that distinguishes the reaction

of this group. Children in this developmental stage have an especially difficult time with the concept of the permanence of the divorce” (Eleoff, 2003:2).

The older children (later latency) demonstrate surprising poise and courage when they are deserved, and their soberness and apparent clarity of thought are in stark contrast to the younger children, who frequently appear immobilised by their grief. In attempting to overcome their humiliating powerlessness these children seem galvanized into activity, through which they try to manage their feelings.

Anger and a feeling of powerlessness are the predominant emotional response in this age group (Eleoff, 2003:2). Robinson and Skinner (1991:84) state: “That the most striking feeling from this group was their capacity to express and direct their anger.” The researchers point out that children of this age need parental figures, not only for protection and nurture, but also in order to consolidate their age-appropriate identification.

“These children are vulnerable and influenced by the anger of one parent against the other, and they are often battle allies with one parent (usually the mother) against the other, even though they may have been very close with that parent prior to the separation. These children experience a grief reaction to the loss of their previously intact family” (Eleoff, 2003:2). Eleoff (2003:3) further explains: “That there is a greater tendency to label a “good” parent and a “bad” parent and that these children are very susceptible to attempting to take care of a parent at the expense of their own needs.”

Children of this age have developed a better understanding of family dynamics. The new intellectual and emotional advances increase the capacity of children at this age to understand the meaning of the divorce, as well as some of its specific implications for them. The most striking response among the six to eight year old children will be pervasive sadness (Wallerstein, 1980:65). This comes at an age when children also have to experience entry into the school system for the first time and it may complicate a smooth transition (Blom, 2004:218).

Hooper (2005:35) feels that: “The most positive fact to emerge from the newest material is that many children felt that they were coping perfectly well with life two years later. Some psychologists believe the adjustment to parental divorce is more difficult for elementary school children than for younger or older children. School-age children are old enough to understand that they are in pain because of their parents’ separation. They are too young, however, to understand or to control their reactions to this pain.”

Children in middle childhood learn the following aspects very quickly when they are exposed to a loss situation, like parental divorce (Pennells and Smith, 1995:10):

- They learn whom they can trust with their emotions and feelings.
- They notice very carefully the reactions of adults to the divorce situation and may even deny their own feelings in order to shield the feelings of adults.

Professor Mavis Hetherington of the University of Virginia noted that some women and girls actually developed greater competence and strength as a result of the divorce (Hooper, 2005:35). The older children were more able to explain their suffering. Older children were aware of their suffering but did not know how to relieve it. Hooper (2005:36) states that most children older than eight years worry about what will happen in the future; they cry a lot and have feelings of rejection. Wallerstein (2000:125) feels strongly: “That seven years of age is the worst age for children to see their parents divorce.”

Children older than eight years work hard to master the conflict feelings they are experiencing. Whiteman (2001:106) states that: “Middle childhood children use denial, avoidance, courage and activity as well as seeking support from others to take charge of their emotions as well as seeking support from others. These children feel shame about the divorce and frequently become very angry with their parents.”

### 2.3.6 The impact of divorce on children

Today there are an increasing number of materials being published about the long-term effects of divorce on individuals. Judith Wallerstein (2000:37) feels strongly that: “Children involved in divorce are doomed forever.” Wallerstein’s work is helpful in assessing the long-term dangers of parental divorce. Divorce has a significant long-term impact on people’s lives and relationships. Difficult as it may be handling one’s own emotions, parents must consider their children’s as well.

On the other hand there are researchers like Hetherington (in Whiteman, 2001:116 and Hooper, 2005:xi) who feel that parents can avoid the doom if they know the dangers and prepare and educate themselves and their children. Brodtkin (1997:18) explains that children have a very different perception of divorce. Divorce can be a very painful and disruptive experience for children, with long-term effects. Some children manage to survive their parents’ unhappy marriage and painful divorce and grow past it; other children suffer from the effects for years afterwards. “How children are affected by divorce largely depends on their personality, the circumstances surrounding the divorce and the parents’ sensitivity to their children” (Brown, 2005: iii).

Research has shown that approximately one-third of the children involved in divorce never seem to recover from the trauma of their parent’s divorce. Whiteman (2001:118) states that the above-mentioned children are the most seriously affected of the children of a divorce group, both from long-term and short-term perspectives. Each child is different and each parental divorce will be different.

Many researchers (DeBord, 1996:13; Wallerstein, 2000:123; Whiteman, 2001:119; Hooper, 2005:33 and Weintraub & Hillman, 2005:227) feel that there are a number of factors that determine how children will be affected by parental divorce. The researcher will list a few of the more **influential factors:**



- ***The age of the child at the time of the divorce*** – Researchers estimate that a child’s personality is almost fully developed by the age of six. This does not mean that there are no changes in their personality beyond that time, but for those children who witness their parents’ break-up at a younger age, there is a greater chance that it will have an effect on their personality.
- ***The number of changes that result from the divorce*** – The impact of divorce on children is greater when other life stresses are added on, such as moving to a new home, new church, new school, adding a new spouse to the picture or trying to blend a family. Whenever possible, parents need to control the number of changes and perhaps even make sacrifices to limit the upheaval.
- ***The adjustment of the custodial parent in the divorce*** – While both parents are of key importance in the eventual well-being of the children, researchers indicate that the emotional health of the custodial parent is the greatest predictor of the children’s adjustment. Almost all couples have conflicts during the early stages of the divorce, but if these continue beyond the actual divorce settlement, it can put a lot of stress on the children.
- ***The relationship with the non-custodial parent*** - For years the importance of the relationship with the non-custodial parent was ignored. Many researchers have found that the primary reason for the negative effects of divorce on children is the loss of contact with one parent. Consistent and frequent contact with the non-custodial parent has repeatedly been shown to correlate with well-adjusted children, unless that parent is abusive or otherwise unfit. The well-being of the child has proven to be particularly strong when the custodial mother encouraged continued contact with the father.
- ***Other specific traumas that accompany the divorce*** - Most of the children of divorce who fall into the one-third of the children who never seem to recover from their parents’ divorce are also the ones who have to contend with other specific traumas. These traumas include, but are not limited to, physical abuse, sexual abuse, severe emotional or verbal

abuse, extended neglect, drug or alcohol addiction of one or both parents and mental illness.

Research by Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989:13); Kurdek (1995:23-27); Brodtkin (1997:18-19) and Whitehead (1997:16-19) list nine common impacts that children who have gone through a parental divorce may experience. These impacts may hinder the children's social advancement when compared to other children who live continuously with both of their biological parents. The researcher feels that if parents learn to recognise these symptoms they will help their children cope with divorce and build a stronger family relationship. Parents will thereby help children avoid bitterness and anger caused by the divorce.

- Parental divorce is a major stressor. Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee (1989:13) have done several studies to find what stressful effects divorce has on children. "Children consistently rate parental divorce as one of the most stressful life experiences they encounter" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989:13). Wallerstein (2000:34) feels that: "Parents seem to recover emotionally from the divorce in three years, while the effects on children may continue for decades. Some children have an extremely difficult time coping with divorce and it may become too much for the child to handle emotionally."
- "Children who experience parental divorce are likely to be exposed to parental conflict" (Kurdek, 1995:195). In many cases of divorce, anger and hostility is exchanged between parents right in front of the children. Children then witness things that they cannot understand. The worst thing parents can do to their children is making them choose one parent over the other. "Nothing is more emotionally devastating for children than a prolonged conflict among their parents" (Whitehead, 1997:17). Yet this happens to millions of children. Wallerstein (2000:37) sees that in the conflict children will be caught in the crossfire.
- Parental divorce involves a degree of loss of the parent who moves out of the house" (Kurdek, 1995:195). Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989:17) state that: "Every three in five children of a divorce have felt rejection by at least

one of their parents.” This just goes to show that relationships are weakened when the parent leaves.

- “Parental divorce results in money problems” (Kurdek, 1995:196). Anyone can see that when a wife and husband divorce there is instant trouble with finance. Many children experience a severe and lasting drop in their standard of living after a divorce.
- “The divorce may involve the children developing faulty beliefs regarding their role in why the divorce happened” (Kurdek, 1995:196). Children tend to feel that they did something that caused the family to split up.
- “Divorce involves many changes in the settings in which children develop” (Wallerstein, 2000:13 and Kurdek, 1995:196). The child may have to lose all familiar surroundings. Not only does the child lose the family structure in the divorce, but all his or her friends as well.
- “Divorce may affect the quality of parenting” (Kurdek, 1995:196). The children no longer have both parents interacting with the child as much as they once did and raising children is not an easy task.
- “Parental divorce...is that children assume roles and responsibilities that are beyond them” (Kurdek, 1995:196). With the lack of the other parent, children may be given tasks that are more appropriate for older children and adults. Weiss (1989:99) said, “Although it is generally good for children to be given responsibility, too much responsibility is not a good thing”.
- Lastly, society as a whole does not always help the children out in the instance of divorce. Many times in a parental divorce there are negative reactions from those in the community. Children still recovering from the effects of divorce are teased and picked on because their parents do not follow the normal nuclear family. “Children feel intense loneliness. Divorce is an acute, painful, long-remembered experience that children must often negotiate with the sense that they are alone in the world” (Wallerstein, 1989:61).

### **2.3.7 The effects of parental divorce on children**

### **2.3.7.1      *The short-term/immediate effects of divorce on children***

The short-term effects of divorce are those reactions that begin immediately and can last for a number of years. The short-term reactions don't truly end until the child reaches a point of acceptance. Whiteman (2001:118) states that: "Even though children have worked through the grieving of their family break-up, they still have to work through the implications of growing up in a single parent home." The following is a list of ways divorce can affect the emotions and behaviours of children. Some effects of divorce emerge rapidly following separation and some of this increase over the first years following divorce and then decline; still other may emerge later:

- Anger, resentment, aggression and hostility
- Sadness
- Alcohol/drug use or abuse
- Anxiety and confusion
- Acting out
- Bedwetting
- Clinging
- Crying
- Denial
- Depression
- Destructiveness
- Divided loyalties
- Eating problems
- Embarrassment
- Economic hardship
- Fear of abandonment
- Feeling rejected
- Feelings of guilt
- Increased dependency
- Insecurity
- Irresponsibility
- Impulsivity

- Interpersonal conflict
- Learning difficulties
- Low self-esteem
- Life stress
- Less parental supervision
- Less consistent discipline
- Moodiness and temper tantrums
- Nervousness
- Nightmares or other sleeping problems
- Perceived parental loss
- Reconciliation fantasies
- Regression to early childhood behaviours
- School truancy
- Shame, worry and social withdrawal

(Amato & Booth, 1997:356-365 and Brown, 2005:12).

Many of these short-term effects can adversely affect long-term development in that they build up over time. The researcher realised that most children don't learn healthy coping skills and their parents don't give them the opportunity to forget the divorce – these children lead a lifestyle of continuing struggle, depression, anxiety, difficulty in personal relationships and other problem behaviour.

### **2.3.7.2 *The long-term effects of parental divorce on children***

Several research studies indicate that certain effects of divorce are quite persistent even when a wide range of pre-divorce conditions is considered. Some of the summary statements from a few of these studies are the following:

- “Research suggests that problematic parent-child relations associated with divorce persist throughout the life course” (Amato & Booth, 1997:362).

- “One cannot predict long-term effects of divorce on children from how they react at the outset” (Wallerstein, 1989:10).
- “...the long-term consequences of parental divorce for adult attainment and quality of life may prove to be more serious than the short-term emotional and social problems in children” (Amato & Keith, 1991:275).
- “...children from disrupted families are significantly more likely to express discontent with their lives as measured by an index of life satisfaction” (Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994:175).

Whiteman (2000:118-119) states that: “Each child is different, and the long-term effects of divorce will be different for each child of divorce.”

Armato and Booth (1997:360-365), Van Zyl (1997:49-57), Wallerstein (2000:37-39) and Whiteman (2000:118-129) note the following long-term effects:

- **Intergenerational transmission** - The main problem associated with divorce is its “intergenerational transmission” or passing down through the generations. Young adults of both sexes from broken homes experience difficulty in establishing intimate interpersonal relationships. Children of divorce who experience high levels of pre- and post-divorce conflict have been shown to decrease beliefs in the benevolence of people and the impersonal world and in the dependability of their future spouses. There is also decreased trust in their mothers and fathers and between their parents, and less optimism about their future dating relationships and marriage.
- **Self-esteem** – Links between divorce and lower levels of self-esteem have also been found. Research links lower levels of self-esteem to higher levels of marital conflict, to unhappy versus happy home life, and to rejecting versus accepting homes. This drop in self-esteem has been related to a decline in the quality of the parent-child relationship. Diminished parenting style is characterised by less consistent discipline and affection, and tends to be a more rejecting style of parenting, which has been linked repeatedly to emotional and behavioural problems in

children. The subsequent implications of a lowered self-esteem and negative self-concept are linked to later interpersonal difficulties in a number of ways. A low self-esteem implies a lowered self-efficacy, and this combined with negative expectations of marriage, and a predisposition to divorce, could mean that any difficulties encountered in the intimate relationship are not dealt with effectively.

- ***Diminished motivation*** – When children are intelligent and talented, there is an even higher tendency for them to show little direction or purpose in their lives.
- ***Boy versus Girl*** – The immediate problems found soon after and during marital conflict and divorce, tends to be more pronounced in boys, while girls tend to exhibit problems later in life. So whereas girls tend to internalise the problems, boys tend to externalise them. Aggression, conduct disorders, and delinquency are among the problems most frequently associated with parental discord.
- ***Accepting responsibility*** - Children often accept responsibility for the divorce. Their feelings are not logical, but they think things like “If I had only cleaned up my room....” Quite often parents don’t even tell their children why they are getting a divorce. They think the children are too young to understand. This often has the effect of confusing the child.
- ***Children feel unloved*** – It doesn’t matter how many times a parent verbally affirms love or brings gifts on visitation days, the child bears of resentment. Children often ask: “Why did my parents have children if they were going to divorce?”
- ***Divided loyalty*** – Some divorced parents compete for the loyalty of their children. When they discuss the previous spouse with their children, they always cast them in the worst possible light. Children hear it from both sides and often feel confused.
- ***Loss*** – Most, if not all, children of divorced parents feel a sense of loss. Even in those families where life was difficult, there were good times and those good times are firmly etched in the memories of the children.

- **Insecurity** – Many young children experience separation anxiety. Some try to deny their insecurity by claiming to be happy all the time. Some develop fantasies.
- **Anger** – The two people who were supposed to love the children more than anyone else deserted them. Life is more complex than it used to be.
- **Poor parent-child relationship** – Most children have poor relationships with their parents. Some children show aggression towards parents.
- **High levels of problem behaviour** – One way that children express their hurt during parental divorce is by behaving in ways that either push others away, or draw attention to their plight. A child who is getting into trouble in class, getting into fights, yelling at parents or pushing siblings may be demonstrating hurting symptoms.
- **Education** – Researchers have found that children of divorce tend to end their educations earlier than children of intact families. There is an increased likelihood of dropping out of school, due to less financial support from parents.
- **Children-vulnerability** – Because of their insecurity and low esteem, children of divorce are highly vulnerable. Children's desire to prop up their self-esteem often drives them to seek approval anywhere they can find it.
- **Respect for authority** – Unfortunately children's respect for the authority model may go out the window with the divorce of their parents. The children may realise that two key authority figures (parents) could not respect each other and provide a reliable environment for their children. If they couldn't obey the basic rule of marriage, then what good are all the rest of their rules? Sadly, the children are bombarded with examples of authority figures breaking their own rules.
- **The sleeper effect** – Some children grow up to experience problems in their own romantic relationships as a result of being a child of divorce. As a consequence of the divorce, they may fear the potential of betrayal in a relationship, rather than embracing commitment. Avoidance is another coping strategy used by children who experience the sleeper effect.
- **The overburdened child** – When a marriage breaks down, it is common for both the mother and the father to do less parenting. Both parents



struggle with their own reactions and recovery. Unable to meet the challenges of single parenting, many parents begin to lean on their children to pick up the slack. The child's role becomes instrumental to the well being of the parent. These children take on too much responsibility early in their life.

The researcher comes to the conclusion that divorce has come to be viewed as a transition in children's lives – a period of stress and instability that requires the child to use coping mechanisms to deal with stress and to make lifestyle adjustments and reassess his or her trust in others.

Ellis (2000:35) concludes that: "The most consistent outcome across age and gender groups was that the children of divorce are angrier and have a poorer bond with both their parents. Divorce appears to double the rates of a wide variety of adjustment problems in children. Children of divorce are unhappy and have more problems in life than their counterparts from intact families."

Sun (2001:712) suggests that the negative outcomes for children who experienced parental divorce may be best accounted for by pre-disruption factors. Divorce or separation "may actually reduce the face-to-face interpersonal confrontations and emotional stress associated with such confrontation, resulting in relatively little further damage to child well-being."

With this research the researcher would like to prove the statement of Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1997:194): "In the long run, most children adapt to their parents' divorce and demonstrate resiliency. The resources that are available to support the children in dealing with parental conflict and divorce appear to be strongly correlated with positive outcomes when children experience family transition." The researcher would like to study the resources that assist children in the transition going through parental divorce.

## **2.4 THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF PARENTAL DIVORCE**

It is hard to believe there could be anything positive to say about divorce. Researchers Andrew Cherlin and Frank Furstenburg (in Jost, 1991:361) want parents to realise that divorce does have some good effects compared to other circumstances. For example, if the parents of the children had not divorced, the children might have retained equally painful and damaging memories of a conflict-ridden marriage. Whiteman (2000:130-135) shares some positive outcomes for children of divorce on how parents' divorce has built strength of character and moral resolve into their personalities.

These children have been forced to face realities of life at an early age; realities like: life isn't always easy and there are no guarantees in life. One child feels that her parents' divorce has forced her to be more practical and down to earth. "I know that I'm a more responsible and resourceful person today because of the divorce." Whiteman (2000:131) states that: "First and foremost, all the children indicated that there is nothing good about a parent's divorce in the beginning. But over a long period of time, they realised that positive characteristics may emerge."

Whiteman (2000:131-135) gives some common themes when interviewing children of divorce about the **positive aspects** of divorce:

- **Children of divorce are more sensitive to other kids and their problems** - When you've been through a significant life trauma and have felt as if no one else understands your pain, once you work through that, you are bound to be more compassionate with other people and the difficulties they face.
- **Children of divorce tend to be more mature and responsible than their peers** – Even though their maturity has developed through difficulties, many of the children of divorce have wisdom beyond their years. This comes from having to grapple with issues that other kids don't have to face until they are much older – issues like loyalty, betrayal, adultery, child support, court hearings and rejection. Children of divorce must choose either to fight the changes in their life or become more responsible people. After a sometimes-rebellious transition, most children

of divorce settle down to a belief system that is based on what they have concluded about life, rather than what their parents have taught them.

- **Children of divorce are better able to put experiences into a proper perspective** – John (In Whiteman, 2000:133) said: “When you’ve been through some of the worst things that can happen in life at age eight, everything else that comes your way seems so much easier. You’ve survived divorce and so now you’re determined that nothing else is going to get you down. I still have difficult times, but I always go back to my parents’ divorce and compare it to that. Then I know I’m going to be just fine.” Growing up in a storybook life may leave children with the expectation that they are going to live “happily ever after”. Some adults come apart because they were not prepared for the realities of life, realities that children of divorce learn early.
- **Children of divorce are very motivated to succeed in marriage** – Having experienced firsthand the effect of divorce, the children usually become determined that it won’t happen to them. Children of divorce learn at a very young age that good people (their parents) can hurt them and perhaps can’t always be trusted. When looking for a mate, these children tend to be much more cautious.

Constance Ahrons in his book *The Good Divorce* (1994:73) said:

“What I heard from them is that not only did they survive their parents’ divorce but the vast majority thrived, despite the stress and upheaval that are common in the early stages of parental divorce. The majority told me that they felt that their families were normal and their relationships with each of their parents had actually improved. As adults – most in intimate relationships themselves, some married, others cohabit, still others looking for mates – most felt that their parents’ divorce was a good decision and that both they and their parents were better off because of it.”

It is important that parents realise that they can help their children to adjust to the trauma of parental divorce. In the long run children should learn appropriate skills to accept their parents' divorce and make the best of a bad situation.

## 2.5 ADJUSTMENTS FOR CHILDREN WHO EXPERIENCE DIVORCE

“Children who experience divorce must adjust to a new family situation. The adjustment can be difficult and may take years” (Brown, 2005:14). For children to make a successful adjustment to parental divorce, they must usually come to terms with the following areas of change (Brown, 2005:14):

- ***Separating from parental conflict*** – Children often get “caught in the middle” of the parental conflict. This can be quite painful and dangerous for children. Emotional and behavioural problems may result and therefore children should be separated from parental conflict to safeguard their mental health.
- ***Facing the reality of the divorce*** - Children generally have difficulty accepting the fact that their parents are going through a divorce or are divorced. Children should learn to face the reality of divorce to maintain their mental health and continue to mature emotionally.
- ***Letting go of reconciliation fantasies*** – Most children hope their parents will resolve their difficulties and get back together. Failure to let go of reconciliation fantasies can put additional emotional stress on parents and children.
- ***Getting over the sense of loss*** – Children usually are deeply hurt because of the absence of a parent. Children must learn to understand and accept the loss of the former family situation, if they are to gain from the experience and grow past it.
- ***Resolving anger and tendency to blame*** – Children may stay outwardly angry or keep their anger hidden for years. These unresolved feelings can separate children from the family and from reality.
- ***Building realistic hopes for the future*** – Many children who have experienced divorce worry about repeating their parents' mistakes. They

may develop a fear of intimacy and find it difficult to trust in their own ability to love and be loved. With time, after emotional maturity and successful adjustment to divorce, most children gain the confidence needed to become healthy adults and parents.

The researcher is of the opinion that it is important that parents keep in mind not to argue in front of the children. This would give the children the opportunity to separate themselves from parental conflict. Children going through parental divorce have their own issues and unresolved feelings that they should work through. Children should come to terms with their parents' divorce and accept the reality they are faced with, in order to be emotionally matured and adjust successfully. When children come to terms with the above-mentioned changes, they can be successful in their own intimate relationships, without the fear of repeating their parents' mistakes.

## **2.6 WHAT PARENTS CAN DO FOR THEIR CHILDREN WHEN GOING THROUGH DIVORCE**

Parents should realise that divorce does not mean the end of a family. Divorce changes the form of the family. "Good divorce", a term introduced by Constance Ahrons' influential 1994 book titled the "The Good Divorce", typically is used to describe the amicable divorce that avoids pitfalls such as involving children in parental conflict. It has been thought to prevent or substantially lessen the negative consequences on children, supporting the notion that divorce itself is less important than the way parents handle it. The findings and the perspective of Ahrons (2006:1-5) show that divorce does not need to destroy families and that, in fact, many parents form parenting partnerships after divorce that permit them to meet the needs of their children.

The researcher agrees with Ahrons in that many decisions that parents make when they decide to divorce or rearrange the family can either make it better or worse for the children – such things as how you tell your children about the separation, what kind of living and custody arrangements you make for them, how flexible or rigid these arrangements are, how often the children see their

fathers, how they feel about their parents' dating and new partners, how remarriages are handled, what it feels like to have an "instant" new family. The most consistent one for children is how parents relate to each other, both during the marriage and long after that makes the biggest difference of all.

Elizabeth Marquardt (in Washington Post, 2005:6) states that: "It's not the act of divorce that's the problem, but simply the way that parents handle it." Experts agree with this and begin to assure parents that if only they conducted a "good divorce" – if they both stayed involved with their children and minimized conflict – the kids would be fine.

Most children can probably handle divorce if both the mother and the father continue being close, supportive parents and if both parents put their animosity and differences aside, not involving the children. It brings us to the point of guidelines that every parent can use to make his children's adjustment after divorce easier.

Researchers have shown the following suggestions to make the process less painful for children. Parents will need to interpret them in their own ways; honesty, sensitivity, self-control and time itself will help to begin the healing process. It is important to remember that every situation and every family is different (Amato, 1994:75-79; Blakeslee, Fassler & Lash, 1994:132-135; Achen, 2001:77-84; Tynan, 2004:101-117 and Raab, 2006:1-3). What do children need from parents?

- ***Encourage your child to talk as openly as possible about his or her feelings – positive or negative – about what has happened. Make that an ongoing process*** – It is important for divorcing parents to sit down with their children and encourage them to say what they're thinking and feeling. Keep this separate from your own feelings. Children experience a sense of loss of family life and may blame you or the other parent or both. As children get older and become more mature, they may have different questions or concerns that they haven't thought about previously. It's natural for children to have many emotions about divorce. Some children will be able to voice their feelings, but depending on their age and development, others just won't have the words. Children have a right to

their feelings. Children need to know that parents recognise the impact of divorce on children's lives. By listening to children's thoughts and feelings about the divorce, parents demonstrate their ongoing care and concern.

- ***I need both of you to stay involved in my life*** – Children need both parents to stay actively involved in their life. Parents must always remember that divorce does not mean that you are giving up your children. If you don't live close by, write letters and make phone calls and ask lots of questions about the children. When parents don't stay involved in their children's lives, children feel rejected and unloved. Hetherington (in Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1997:85) explains: "Not every child needs two live-in parents, but almost every child needs a highly involved, loving mother and father, not just an every-other-weekend visit to eat out." Both parents must talk to the children about their lives, discipline the children, and be there in good times and bad, involve the child in decision-making and serious discussions and comfort them when they hurt.
- ***Stop arguing and work hard to get along with each other*** – Children feel safe and loved when parents agree on matters related to them and their needs. When parents argue about the children, it feels that they have done something wrong and children then feel guilty. "Children who have contact with their divorced-but-still-clashing parents are at very serious risk. Children in this high conflict after divorce families are at high risk to have more behavioural and emotional problems" (Johnston & Roseby, 1997:96).
- ***Don't bad-mouth your ex-spouse in front of your child, even if you're feuding*** – This is one of the hardest things to do. But it is important not to say bad things about your ex. It is equally important to acknowledge real events. Your children's relationship with their other parent is separate from yours. Respect their relationship (Weintraub & Hillman, 2005:242). When talking about the other parent, please say only nice things or don't say anything at all. When a parent says mean, unkind things about the other parent, children feel put down and expected to take sides. Always remember that children are half of one and an equal half of the other.

- **Communicate directly with the other parent so that you don't use your child as a messenger** –A child doesn't need to feel that he or she must act as a messenger between hostile parents or carry one adult's secrets or accusations about another. From the start communicate directly with the other parent about matters relevant to your child, such as scheduling, visitation, discipline or school problems.
- **Support your child and the time he/she spends with the other parent** - Children want to love both parents and enjoy the time that they spend with each parent. If you act jealous or upset, children feel as if you want them to take sides and love one parent more than the other. Children should be encouraged to have a positive relationship with each parent and to love him or her individually.

Parents, who are able to love and support their children, find that their kids are able to rebound and develop as well as kids in traditional families. "The single most important determiner of a child's successful adjustment is the parent's ability to create a nurturing, protective environment with at least one parent" (Harrington, 2000:2-3). Children should maintain positive relationships with both Mom and Dad.

"It is important that both parents step back from their own anger and move closer to what should be a common goal for their children – maintaining a nurturing environment and minimising the potentially traumatic by-products of the so-called "broken home" (Mitchely & Bregman, 2005:4).

Parents need to work together to have a process that supports them through their transition without destroying each other and themselves. Divorce is not just a legal process, to survive by ducking your head down and not being involved and rushing through in an attempt to avoid as much turmoil and pain as possible. Divorce is an emotional transition, a life transition, a financial transition and a legal transition. Children fare better if both parents still remain part of their lives and daily routine.



Most researchers feel that divorced parents should make use of the co-parenting agreement to give the child the opportunity to have all their needs met. Grayson explains: “In co-parenting arrangements, children have less behaviour and emotional problems, higher self-esteem and better family relations and school performance than children in sole-custody settings.”

The researcher feels that children do not actually need to be in joint physical custody to show better adjustment. It is the amount of time spent with both parents and both parents’ involvement in their lives that is critical. It is important that former spouses are able to establish a relatively conflict-free parenting relationship for the benefit of their children.

Blau (1995:69) sees co-parenting as: “arrangement, parents communicate directly and in a business-like manner regarding the children and co-parenting schedules.” Co-parenting involves divorced or separated parents who are sensitive to their child’s distress and who find ways to avoid putting the children in the middle of their disputes.

The researcher is of the opinion that children should always come first, despite bad feelings between divorcing parents. Both parents should remember that their children did not create their own lives, nor did they choose for their family to split up. Parents would probably not be divorcing if they were getting along well and managing their differences in productive ways. But parental conflict needs to be handled without further stressing children.

Tracht (2005:1-3) feels that: “Most psychologists and people working with child development feel that for a child to reach his maximum potential, input from both the mother and father is necessary. If parents are more concerned about their children making a good adjustment to the divorce than they are in seeking revenge on their ex-spouse, then they will put some real thought into co-parenting.”

Constance Ahrons (1994:79) states that spouses divorce each other, but they do not divorce their children. Therefore it is important for former spouses to establish a relatively conflict-free parenting relationship for the benefit of their children. Parents need to develop a “limited partnership” so that they can co-parent. The partnership needs to be clear, include both households and be practical.

After divorce, children are members of two families and former spouses need to co-operate to make both homes supportive and secure for their children. Children are generally better off when they are able to maintain the family relationships that were important to them prior to the divorce and when their parents are able to co-operate and be generally supportive of one another.

Researchers (Ahrons, 1994:80-82; Whiteman, 2001:156-159; Bailey, 2001:12; Benokraitis, 2005:249; Bosch, 2005:115; Hooper, 2005:72-75 and Weintraub & Hillman, 2005:231) summarise that a good parenting plan is an outline on how parents will perform co-parenting responsibilities. A good parenting plan will include ideas about how both parents will work to maintain a close and loving relationship with their children. This involves parents discussing certain terms and conditions, but also being flexible enough to deal with the changes of a daily schedule. Inevitably there will be times when accommodating the needs of the other parent should be necessary. Some areas of contention might be:

- Finances and support issues.
- Visitation or childcare schedules.
- Attending or participating in school events.
- Parenting styles and discipline.
- Decisions about medical and dental treatment.
- Decisions about vacations and schools.
- Rules for teenagers, including parties, driving, dating and curfew.
- Dealing with new relationships, possible remarriage and blended families.

Hansen (2004:17) states that: “Parents must move towards a cooperative style of parenting, in which both parents are involved and continuing to work together to nurture and care for their children. Regardless of parents’ feelings for one another, preserving the relationship with their children must take priority.” She states that parents must:

- Understand that the relationship with the other parent is a crucial part of their relationship with their children.
- Focus on the well-being of the children.
- Be creative about contact and residence arrangements.
- Be able to set aside anger and bitterness.
- Solve one problem at a time.

If parents can adhere to the above suggestions, she explains, they can move from parallel parenting – in which parents maintain contact with the children but not one another and engage in outright or covert conflict – to co-operative parenting.

The researcher concludes by emphasizing the importance of co-parenting with a parenting plan for the adjustment of children. It is unfair and unwise to discuss contentious divorce issues with your children, or to badmouth the other parent, as this creates additional stress for children. Maintaining positive relationships will avoid making a child choose loyalties and live with secrets to protect parents from each other.

Co-parenting is a complex relationship that requires trust, mutual respect, some level of shared values and the ability to creatively work through the unexpected. Above all else, it is important to remember to be a parent, which means acting like an adult and putting the child first, despite the hard feelings which might exist between ex-spouses. Protecting and loving children during tough times will help build trust; improve adjustments to the new situation and avoid the long-term negative impact of parental divorce.

## 2.7 CONCLUSION

With the above-mentioned facts in mind the researcher comes to the following conclusion on the subject of parental divorce and the effect it has on children in middle childhood:

- Middle childhood is the period between age six to twelve, from the time when children enter school, up to just before adolescence.
- Children in the middle childhood phase experience a period of tremendous intellectual, social, emotional and physical changes. School demands increase, friends become as important as family and puberty begins to reshape children's bodies. This is also a time when individual differences among children become more apparent.
- Divorce is indeed a source of stress for children and it can result in a decline of well-being. Children's adjustment is determined by their age and their parents' reaction. It is important to keep in mind that every child is an individual and will go through the process of parental divorce at his own pace. If children's emotions and feelings are not acknowledged and dealt with during the trauma of parental divorce, it will influence their development and they will usually regress to previous developmental stages.
- Most children exhibit emotional and disciplinary behaviour that stem from their confusion, fear, sadness, anxiety and anger. The process that children go through when their parents divorce is similar to the process of loss when someone they love dies.
- Parents have an important role to play in the outcome of children's reaction to their divorce. How parents handle divorce may be the most important factor in determining how children are affected. When parents handle divorce in a mature and healthy way, their children have a strong chance of making a positive adjustment to divorce.
- Divorce is tremendously traumatic for all children involved and children will have similar reactions. Divorce will have short-term and long-term effects on children. Some children will act out their feelings, while others will internalise theirs.

- Children's feelings should be acknowledged and they should be reassured that they can grieve for their loss in their own time.
- Children are not doomed by parental divorce. The effects can be substantial for children, but with the help and support of both parents, children can cope and lead normal lives after some time.
- Some children manage to survive their parents' divorce and grow past it while other children suffer from the effects for years.
- Divorce often makes parenting and raising children more difficult. Parents should form a partnership to meet the needs of their children and both should be part of the child's life and daily routine.

## CHAPTER 3

# EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

In chapter one an introduction and general orientation was given. Chapter two consists of a literature study and focuses on divorce and the child in middle childhood. This is done in terms of a definition and the important developmental tasks a child between the ages of six to twelve needs to complete. The term divorce is explained and the effects it has on children are given, concentrating on children in middle childhood.

In this chapter the results of the empirical study are given and will be explained in detail. A summary, conclusions and recommendations will be given in the final chapter.

The first part of this chapter will consist of background information about the family that was used in the in-depth study. The researcher used both the qualitative and quantitative approaches for this study. Results of the study will be given in the following format:

- The biographical information of the specific case.
- The results of the quantitative research, namely the scales that the children completed, will be presented - the Hudson Scales, and specifically the children's attitude towards the father (CAF) and their attitude towards the mother (CAM).
- The results of the qualitative research will be explained. The results of the semi-structured interview schedules of both parents and children will be given.

With these results the researcher aims to develop specific guidelines for parents to follow to achieve a better transition for children in middle childhood when going through parental divorce.

## 3.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher used a single case study. The case study gave an idea of what a specific outcome, in this case a divorce, could be if both parents try to minimise the impact of the divorce on their children. The aim of the study was to explore the case of a single family over a period of time to gain insight into the contributions the parents made to minimise the impact of their divorce on their children. Babbie and Mouton (2001:281) see a case study as an intensive investigation of a single unit.

The researcher used Creswell's dominant-less-dominant model (De Vos, 2002a:366). The dominant approach used was qualitative in the form of a case study and the data was collected through semi-structured interviews and observations. The less-dominant approach was quantitative. Standardised measuring instruments were used to explore the parent/child relationship affected by divorce. The information obtained through the scales, will be used as a part of the research, making it the less dominant part of the research.

The researcher spent a considerable amount of time with the family, observing their interaction with each other and through conducting unstructured interviews. The qualitative part of the research was completed with semi-structured interviews that all the members of the family answered individually. The information obtained through the quantitative and qualitative approaches will be presented in identified themes and linked to relevant literature.

During the study the traumatic influence of parental divorce was never understated. The emotions of the children and parents were acknowledged and time was spent with them individually to give each member the opportunity to tell his and her own story. Recognition to each family member and the individual experience of the trauma of divorce was related.

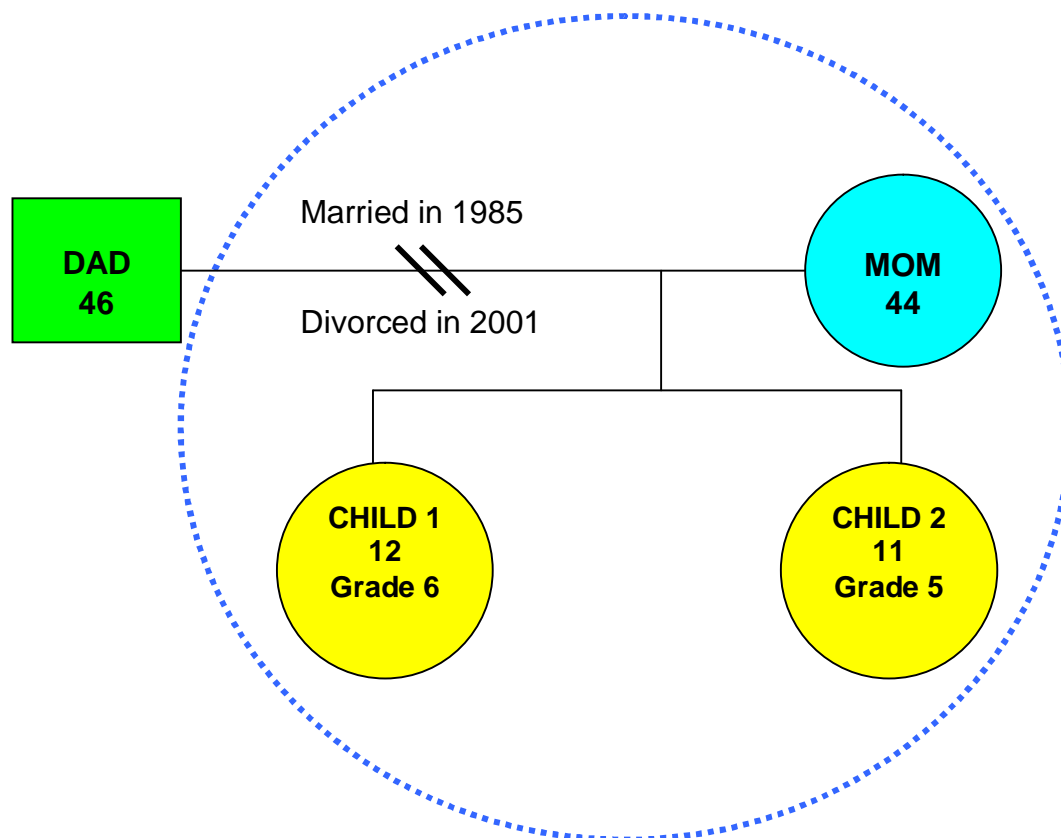
### 3.3 BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION OF THE FAMILY

#### 3.3.1 Family composition

The family used in the research is a dissolved family. The parents were married in 1985 and two children were born out of the relationship. The oldest girl is now twelve years old and in grade six. The second girl, is eleven years old and in grade five. After some conflict the parents had, due to an affair the father had, they decided to get a divorce. In 2001 they were divorced and since then the children and parents have formed a dissolved family. The fact that they were divorced did not mean that their roles as parents were different.

#### 3.3.2 The family genogram

FIGURE 1: FAMILY GENOGRAM





**Keys**

□ Male

○ Female

**Type of Relationship**

— // — Divorced Parents

— Very Close

==== Moderately Close

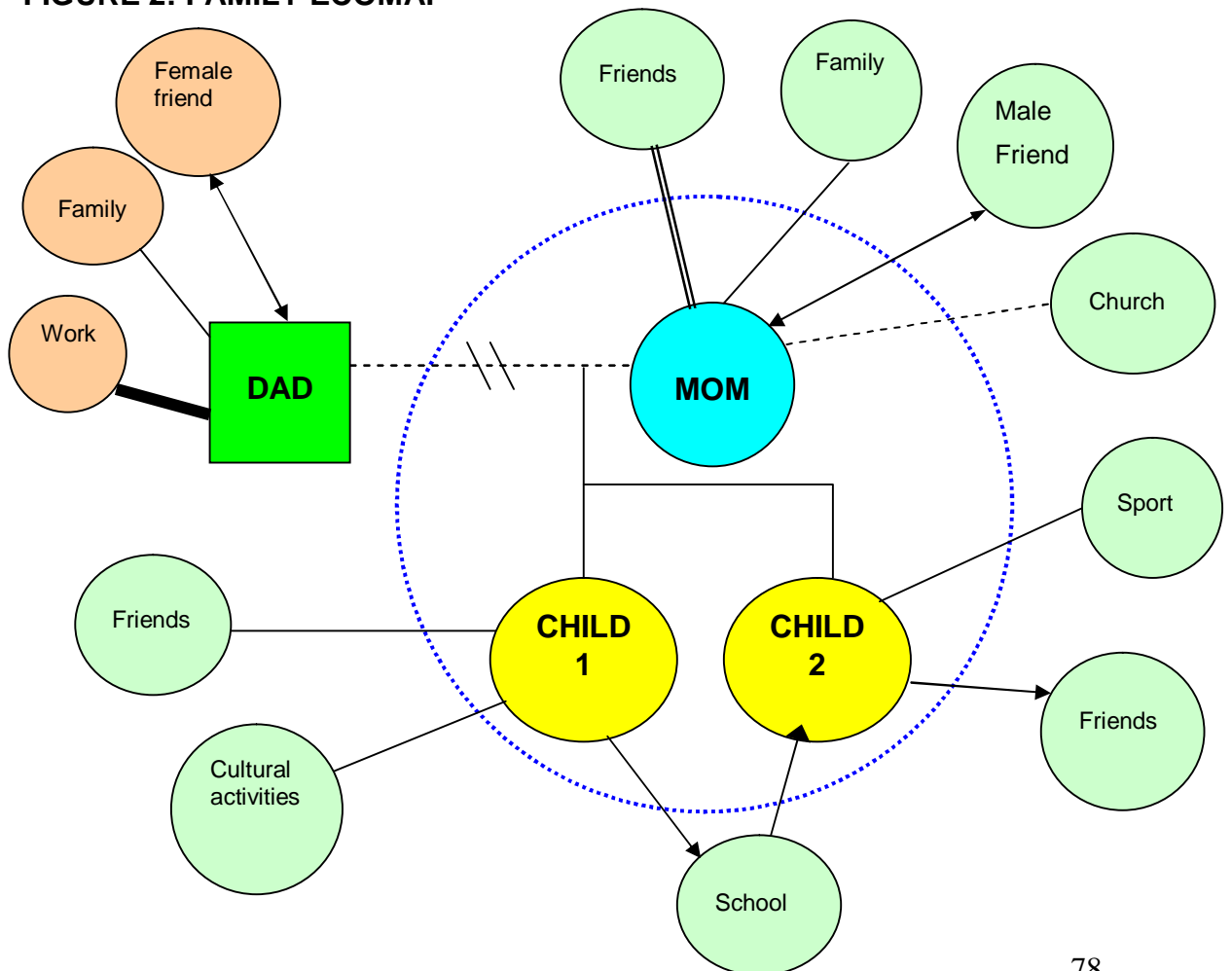
- - - Slightly Close or Distant

○ Members of a Single Household







(Thomlison, 2001:61-62)

**3.3.2 The family ecomap**

**FIGURE 2: FAMILY ECOMAP**



## Keys

	Strong relationship
	Shows tenuous relationship
	Shows conflicting relationship
	Shows flow of energy
	Shows stress or conflict
	Very close

(Tomlison, 2002:62-65)

According to Tomlison (2002:62-64): “Ecomaps highlight the types of relationship families have inside their family structure and outside the immediate family.” The dissolved family has a good ecomap, even if they do not live together. The circle around the mother and children shows that their single household family is functioning well. The circle shows enough space for every member. Although the father is living alone, he is near the single household family, showing that the father has regular contact with his ex-wife and children. The communication between both girls and their parents is good and regular. The mother and father have a close relationship, although they are divorced.

The family’s relationship with the community is fairly good, with the normal conflict that consists in a big community full of individuals with different ideas. Both children have stable and positive relationships with each other. All the family members have enough support from friends and family, the parents also support each other on all matters regarding the children. The children have no adjustment problems or academic holdbacks due to their parents’ divorce.

### 3.4 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

#### 3.4.1 Quantitative data

The researcher used standardising measuring scales of the Perspective College to measure both children's attitudes towards their parents individually. The two scales that were used were The Child's Attitude towards the Father (CAF) and The Child's Attitude towards the Mother (CAM). Both these scales are standardised and designed by Walter Hudson (1992).

A formula is used to calculate one total score for each construction that is being measured with the instrument. The formula gives a score ranging from 0 to 100.

***The formula is:***

$$S = \frac{(SX - N) 100}{N (K - 1)}$$

S	=	Final score (%)
N	=	Amount of items correct.
K	=	Amount of response
SX	=	Total of all completed items.

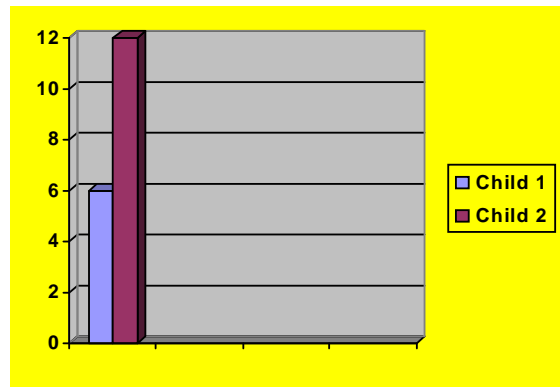
35% is the clinical cut off period and the standard measuring proportion is 5%.

The following scores are therefore important:

- 0% –25% is in the recommended range.
- 25% – 35% indicates a warning area that needs attention.
- 35% + shows need for improvement.

The scores of both children after completing the questionnaires is shown in the following diagram:

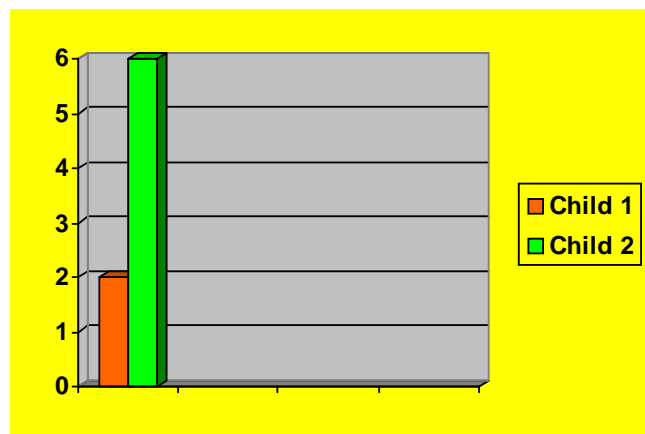
**FIGURE 3: CHILD'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE MOTHER (CAM)**




**Child 1** had a score of 6. The score indicates that she feels that her mother is very patient with her and that she really likes her mother. She feels proud of her mother and that she can depend on her.

**Child 2** had a score of 12. She feels that her mother is very patient with her and that she really likes her. She feels proud of her mother and knows that she can depend on her.

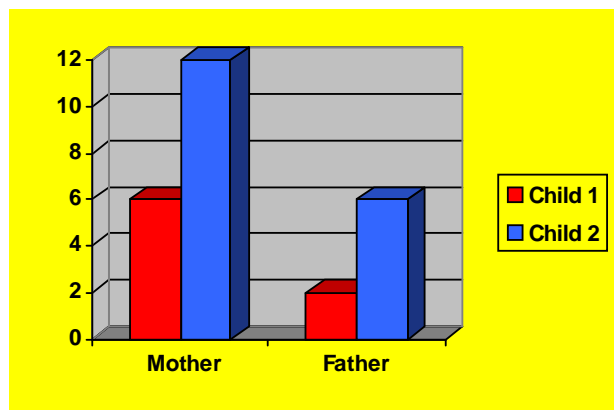
**FIGURE 4: CHILD'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS FATHER (CAF)**



**Child 1** one had a score of 2. She feels that she gets along well with her father and she feels that she can really trust him. She enjoys spending time with her dad and she thinks he is terrific.


**Child 2** had a score of 6. This child feels that she gets along well with her father and that she can really trust him. She enjoys spending time with her father and thinks he is terrific.

**FIGURE 5: A COMPARISON OF BOTH CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS BOTH MOTHER AND FATHER**



The above-mentioned statistics show that it is clear that both children have good relationships with both their parents and that they like to spend time with them. Both children have positive relationships with Mom and Dad separately. They feel that they can trust Mom and that she is very patient with them. Both girls like to spend time with their father. None of the relationships needs any attention and all of them are in the recommended range.

Although child 2 achieved higher scores in her relationships with both Mom and Dad the scores are still within the range and the children also verbalise that they have good relationships with their parents, without feelings of guilt regarding the divorce.

### 3.4.2 Qualitative data

The researcher gathered the qualitative data with unstructured and semi-structured interviews that were done with both parents and children. Different themes and sub-themes were identified from these responses. The researcher will present the questions used during the study and the responses of the parents and children will be taken directly from the transcripts. Interpretation derived from the data was done with the word-by-word analysis

explained by de Vos (2002b:341) as the empirical information and research findings given as found in the transcribed responses.

### **3.4.2.1 Questions to the parents**

#### **Question 1: How was the decision to get divorced, made?**

##### **Interview 1: Mother**

“I first realised the truth about my husband’s relationship he had and realising that it was a fact that he was involved with someone else I decided to do something immediately. I was not being neurotic. I came to the conclusion that divorce was the only option. He was informed of my definite decision the same day”.

##### **Interview 2: Father**

“I was involved in a relationship with a co-worker. My wife suggested I stop the relationship and for us to try again. I was very confused (didn’t want to divorce nor stop the affair at that stage). My wife proceeded with the divorce suit. I thought she would withdraw the divorce suit at a certain stage. She didn’t. I went along although I didn’t want to”.

##### **Main theme from Question 1**

The main theme from question 1 was that the break in trust leads to the decision to get a divorce.

It was clear that the wife was unable to reconcile herself with the affair and decided to file for a divorce immediately. The husband was hoping to reap benefits from both worlds and fell in between. It is clear that the spouses didn’t feel the same about the decision of filing for a divorce. This could create new problems in the future relationship as co-operating parents.

According to Vaughan (2004:2): “Deciding whether to stay married or get a divorce is a complicated decision, and partners don’t usually feel the same

about the decision, but carefully considering all the factors can help people sort through their personal values and priorities to make the decision that best fits their individual situation. By making a carefully considered decision in a rational way, they should reap the benefits of being more confident and at peace with whatever decision they make.”

There is a clear delineation in most divorces of “the leaver” and “the left”. The leaver is usually in the stronger position psychologically in his or her social circle. On the other hand, the “left” person feels wounded (Telling your spouse you want a divorce, 2006:1).

In the case study it was also the wife that made the decision, after thinking it through carefully. She asked her husband several times to stop the affair he was having. The husband couldn’t do it, so the wife made the decision based on her values.

## **Question 2: How was conflict dealt with prior to getting divorced?**

### **Interview 1: Mother**

”I tried to have constant discussions with him about my suspicions about him having an affair, but he was telling me that I was neurotic, always silenced me down. My husband never argued with me. He was never an argumentative person. He always walked away from every problem and conflict we had. It was better for him to deny everything.”

### **Interview 2: Father**

”I never got involved into arguments, nor showed signs of aggressiveness. My wife was very upset in the beginning, but got calmer as time passed by. She still supported me during this time in many ways, although she was devastated.”

## **Main Theme from Question 2**

Parents have different ways of handling their problems once they realise that their marriage is in trouble. These methods differ from constant discussions that end in arguments up to showing support to each other.

The wife tried to have discussions, but the husband through his refusal to join in handled conflict with denial. Although the wife was devastated, she was still supportive of her husband.

## **Sub theme from Question 2**

Conflict was part of the marriage and existed in their relationship. It is important for divorcing parents to keep conflict or feelings the one has towards the other spouse out of the relationship as parents.

Susan Tabbert (2006:24) states that: “Extensive research indicates that the number one predictor of divorce is habitual avoidance of conflict. This occurs when one or both individuals are avoiders, or have a tendency to avoid dealing with conflict when it arises.” Avoiding conflict means that you also avoid solving anything that in turn puts more pressure on your relationship and the opportunity to change behaviour. “How the conflicts get resolved is the critical factor in determining whether a relationship will be healthy or unhealthy” (Dodd, 2002:32). The fact that the husband avoided confrontation led to the wife’s drastic steps to file for a divorce.

## **Question 3: Describe the role of both parents in telling the children about the divorce**

### **Interview 1: Mother**

”I assured them about both parents’ love for them and that the divorce was a result of parental problems. I explained to them that both their father and I would always love them, but that we will be living apart.”



## **Interview 2: Father**

”The mother told the kids in a very nice way that we were going to live apart because of me being away from home so often visiting my friends. I don’t think she mentioned my relationship with the other woman.”

## **Main theme from Question 3**

The mother was solely responsible for dealing with the children. There was no input from the father. The ideal situation is for a mutual handling of this situation by both parents.

According to Tynan (2004:8): “As soon as a person is certain of his plans to be divorced, he has to inform his children about the decision. Both parents should be present when a child is told and feelings of anger; guilt or blame should be left out of the conversation.” Tynan (2004:1-8) feels that parents should keep the following in mind when telling children about the divorce:

- Tell your children together, even if it wasn’t exactly a joint decision.
- Keep your child’s age in mind when discussing the divorce and the reasons for it.
- Children should know that what has happened has occurred between the adults, but that they will always be their parents and will always be there to love and take care of them.
- It is important to emphasize that your child is in no way to be blamed for the break-up and that the unhappiness is not related to them.
- Reassure your children that even though you are getting a divorce, you love them permanently and unconditionally.
- It is important to give children enough information so that they are prepared for the impending changes in their lives, but not so much that it frightens them.

The researcher feels that children don’t need to know all the details; they just need to know enough to understand clearly that although divorce means separating from a spouse, it doesn’t mean parents are divorcing their children.

In this case study the individual family dynamics, the good relationship existing between the parents and individual preferences made it possible for the mother to tell the children alone. The mother also had the ability to put her feelings towards her husband aside and keep the best interest of her children in mind when she had this important conversation with them.

#### **Question 4: How did you tell the children about the divorce?**

##### **Interview 1: Mother**

"After the initial confrontation with my husband, I took each one of them (separately) into their rooms and tried to explain to them that Mommy and Daddy was not cross with each other. We won't be living together anymore, because of some adult problems."

##### **Interview 2: Father**

"Never told the kids we were getting divorced, just separated."

##### **Main theme from Question 4**

The mother told the children about the divorce, the father saw it as a separation. The mother took the children separately and told them about the divorce.

Kim Leon (2005:1-5) feels that: "Parents should limit their discussion to the most important and most immediate issues; children can become confused if they are given too much information at once."

##### **Sub-theme from Question 4**

The mother reassured the children about both the parents' love and support. She also explained to them that the family was not going to be living together any more, but that all their needs would be met. She stated further that it was important for parents to use time to tell children that the divorce was not their fault.

### **Question 5: What did you tell the children the reasons for the divorce were?**

#### **Interview 1: Mother**

"They were still too small to understand what the word 'affair' meant and therefore I explained to them that we didn't get along anymore."

#### **Interview 2: Father**

"I never told the children the reason for our separation."

#### **Main theme from Question 5**

The mother gave the children the basic information about the divorce according to their developmental stage.

In *Ten Tips for Divorcing Parents* (2005:27-32) the researchers feel that: "The first words children should hear about the divorce should be from their parents. The children's age and their developmental stage should be kept in mind."

#### **Sub-theme from Question 5**

The real reason for the divorce was never explained. Only information that would affect the children immediately was given, information about their daily routine and how it would bring immediate change.

If the children are roughly the same age, they should be told at the same time. It can be useful to tell them together and then have separate meetings with them individually, adapting each explanation to each child's level of understanding. When informing children of an impending divorce, parents should not divulge such detail as infidelity or affairs, and they should not blame either parent. "Remember that children don't need to know all the details; they just need to know enough so that they understand clearly and know that their daily lives and routine will be changed" (Divorce, 1999:3).

## **Question 6: What did you do to minimise the impact of the divorce on the children?**

### **Interview 1: Mother**

"I constantly reassured them both of our love for them, even if we don't live together anymore."

### **Interview 2: Father**

"I visited or saw them more often than when we were living together as a family."

### **Main theme from Question 6**

The father made a point of spending more time with the children, quality time, seeing that he is the one that moved out of the house. Ironically enough, in this specific case, the children gained rather than experience a loss.

### **Sub-themes from Question 6**

Both parents were still involved in the children's lives and spent quality time with the children. They explained to the children that they were no longer living together as a family, but both parents will always love them.

Stephen Duncan (1999:4) feels that parents should explain these steps to reduce the negative consequences of divorce:

- "Both parents will continue to love their children and be involved in their lives."
- "Their lives will change because of the divorce and discuss what those changes will be."
- "That they do not have to choose between parents. Living arrangements will change and children should know that they will spend time with both parents."

The researcher is of the opinion that the most important thing to remember is what is in the best interest of the children. Children need both parents regardless of whether they divorce or not. Children need parents who function well, are not experiencing much conflict and who maintain sound relationships with them. Living arrangements changed for the better.

### **Question 7: How was the decision regarding the permanent residence of the children made?**

#### **Interview 1: Mother**

"There was never any debate about the fact that the children would stay with me."

#### **Interview 2: Father**

"I was in the wrong and fully agreed that the mother should have custody of the girls. I knew her as a person with a healthy sense of emotional intelligence and foresaw no problems of getting access to see my little girls."

#### **Main theme from Question 7**

Here, the father acted in a very adult way. He knew what the best arrangement for the children would be and fully trusted his wife for her co-operation. This could be the turning point in the situation.

"It is important to emphasise that custody is simply a legal term, one that fails to fully define the profound meaning of parenthood; it does not have to mean a break in the relationship between a parent and child. Making decisions about where children will live is one of the most frightening and difficult tasks of a divorce" (Emery, 2006:1).

#### **Sub-theme from Question 7**

The parents made a decision about the children's custody and living arrangements before telling them.

Custody is not ownership. Neither parent “owns” the children. Both parents will always be parents, and the relationship the parents have with their children is usually within their own control (Weintraub & Hillman, 2005:236).

The parents decided on custody of their children before telling them. To them custody was just a legal term, both parents decided to be actively involved in their children’s lives. Both parents were confirmed of the fact that they would agree and support each other.

**Question 8: How did you deal with your own feelings while going through the divorce?**

**Interview 1: Mother**

”My feelings fluctuated between disappointment, hurt and anger. My sad feelings I kept to myself in order not to hurt the children. Also in order for the children not to resent their father.”

**Interview 2: Father**

”I pretended to be okay to the outside world but I was lost. My relationship with the other woman continued but deteriorated. I made contact with some of my old loyal friends and spent most of my time with them, in order not to be alone. In front of the children I always smiled and pretended to be happy.”

**Main theme from Question 8**

Both parents dealt with their own feelings individually, deciding separately to keep their feelings away from their children.

**Sub-theme from Question 8**

It was important for both parents not to harm the relationship between the children and the other parent.

Douglas Tynan (2004:7) feels that: “Parents should get help dealing with their own painful feelings about the divorce. If parents are able to make a healthy adjustment, the child will be more likely to do so, too.” The researcher feels the fact that the parents were able to make healthy adjustments, set a positive example for the children to follow.

**Question 9: Were the children involved in the decisions resulting from the divorce? Please explain.**

**Interview 1: Mother**

”No, not at all. We as parents made all the decisions.”

**Interview 2: Father**

”No, the children were not involved in any matters. We as parents felt that they were too small and that we would handle all the matters.”

**Main theme from Question 9**

The children were not involved at all.

**Sub-theme from Question 9**

- The parents made the important decisions without consulting the children beforehand.
- All matters were explained to the children, but they did not have input in adult matters.
- The parents also decided not to disrupt the children’s lives wherever possible.
- The parents had a parenting plan in place and both the children knew that the parents would each have a huge amount of input in their lives.

The researcher is of the opinion that the divorce was a minor issue and the fact of raising the two girls together was priority from the start. Decision-

making was no problem, because of the fact that the parents had a positive relationship and had regular communication.

### **Question 10: How do you arrange visitation?**

#### **Interview 1: Mother**

"He was allowed free visitation rights. At any time in order for both of us to try and keep our special bond with the children."

#### **Interview 2: Father**

"With no problems. We have a wonderful relationship when it comes to our children. I can see the kids at any time and can take them away with me on holiday anytime, even to foreign countries."

#### **Main theme from Question 10**

For the children to be able to maintain a special relationship with the father, both parents had a very adult approach to this matter.

It is important for both parents to maintain a healthy relationship with their children. Visitation schedules based simply on dividing up the number of days in a calendar year without regard for the children's age, psychological needs or temperament can cause unnecessary stress; for very young children, ignoring these factors may cause permanent psychological harm. If parents put the children's needs first and are able to take a step back from their own emotional turmoil, they will greatly relieve the stress on their children (Weintraub & Hillman, 2005:252).

#### **Sub-theme from Question 10**

Visitation was handled with ease, because of the good relationship existing between the parents, concerning the children.



Weintraub and Hillman (2005:262) state that how children fare in the aftermath of divorce largely depends on the degree of sensitivity the ex-spouses have towards the child's needs.

The researcher is of the opinion that handling visitation in an adult manner, parents should move back and put children in centre stage. Children need contact with both parents and adults should respect that.

**Question 11: How do you handle the children's needs with regard to communication with one or both parents?**

**Interview 1: Mother**

"Both children were given cell phones at a very young age, in order for them to contact their father at any time they wished to. From my side I kept their father informed of all their activities, to ensure that he always knew what went on in their lives. When he didn't answer his phone I would send him a SMS of their daily achievements. We prefer open and free communication. The children could phone their father at any time on the home phone. Whenever they have the need to talk to their father, they know that they could do it."

**Interview 2: Father**

"The mother, the children and I are frequently together and there is free communication among all of us. The children's mother will never make me out to be bad in the presence of the children, whether I am present or not and the same rule apply to me. We have in any case never done it before or after the divorce."

**Main theme from Question 11**

Both parents believed in open communication at all times. The mother didn't stand in the way when the children had the need to contact their father. The mother informed the father of important information throughout.

### **Sub-theme from Question 11**

Not one of the parents talked negatively of the other.

The researcher acknowledged the understanding relationship the parents had with each other. The mother shared important information about the children's academic, social and health news with the father. The children were allowed to contact their father whenever they had the need, without feeling guilty. The father visited frequently.

### **Question 12: What arrangements did you make concerning the sharing of the major decisions about the children?**

#### **Interview 1: Mother**

"The only decisions the father had a part in was major medical operations or problems that the children faced."

#### **Interview 2: Father**

"We have a continuous process of making these decisions concerning the children (major or small) together. We always consider the children's happiness, safety and health before any of our personal agendas. I don't think there are any agendas between their mother and me and there will never be."

### **Main theme from Question 12**

There was mutual consultation as far as major decisions were concerned.

### **Sub-theme from Question 12**

Both parties were at ease with the decisions that were made and once again the children's welfare was first priority.

Hooper (2005:57) explains that: “Parents have a great deal of control over the way their children handle life after divorce. By co-operating with the other parent, parents are establishing a life pattern that their children can carry into the future.”

**Question 13: What is the involvement of each parent in the children’s lives?**

**Interview 1: Mother**

”I have the most involvement in their lives, due to the fact that they live with me. The father always tries to be as involved as possible. The last few years their father did a great deal of travelling – even during the week he would visit the children at our house for special events or activities.”

**Interview 2: Father**

”A full 100% - caring, love and support in everything the children do.”

**Main theme from Question 13**

Both parents are fully involved in the lives of the children as far as possible.

Bailey (2001:4) sees “...the parents’ role as an ongoing relationship and that children should understand that their relationship with both parents is forever and that they will never be abandoned.” The researcher realised that the parents’ effort to have ongoing relationships with both their children was very positive.

**Question 14: How did the divorce influence your relationship with your children?**

**Interview 1: Mother**

”In a way it strengthened the relationship, because I mostly had to fulfil the role of mother and father in the day to day living at home.”

### **Interview 2: Father**

"None. I have a full, healthy and loving relationship with both of my daughters."

### **Main theme from Question 14**

The mother/child relationship was strengthened.

"Following divorce, mothers typically receive the majority of physical custody time. This can have a significant impact on the relationship between divorced parents and children. The relationships between mothers and children are more close and positive" (Schneider, 2005:19).

The good relationship with the father continued. Evidence from Ahrons' research shows that half the adult children of divorce believed their relationship with their fathers improved after the divorce and most children reported that their relationship with their fathers also improved as they reached adulthood (Ahrons, 2004:123).

The researcher believes that children fare better in life if both parents remain involved in their lives after a divorce. In this case, good relationships with both parents continued.

**Question 15: Did your role as a mother/father change after the divorce?**

**Please explain.**

### **Interview 1: Mother**

"Yes, I suddenly had to be the mother and father during the week. I was the one who had to take care of the children and discipline them."

### **Interview 2: Father**

"Yes, I feel more responsible for them and will do anything possible for my children."

## **Main theme from Question 15**

Both parents' roles as individuals changed after the divorce.

Rochelle Gold (2005:2) explains that "... the mother and father both face the challenge of parenting outside the usual family framework as they shift to a single or visiting parent arrangement." In both cases their responsibilities intensified. Normally, after a divorce, the mother is the primary care-giver, responsible for structure and discipline as happened in this case. The father normally becomes the one they associate with "fun". In this case, the father did not follow this pattern, but became more responsible and supportive.

## **Question 16: What do you regard as "co-parenting"?**

### **Interview 1: Mother**

"I would say that both parents should try and be equally involved in the disciplining and general upbringing of the children. Both parents should stay actively involved in their children's lives."

### **Interview 2: Father**

"100% input from both sides without any interference or influence from the other parent. The parents must work together in the children's lives."

## **Main theme from Question 16**

Both parents see co-parenting as being equally involved in the discipline and general upbringing of the children. They see it as being equally involved at different times.

Children experience supportive co-parenting when they receive the same message from both parents and when they observe their parents supporting each other's efforts. Both the children in the case study are well adjusted and their overall well-being was important to the parents. The children experienced a strong and co-operative relationship between their parents and

there were no major adjustment problems. The parents created a safe environment that allowed the children to grow and thrive, even in the reality of a single household.

### **Question 17: What advice can you give other parents going through a divorce?**

#### **Interview 1: Mother**

”Depending on the child’s age, the child must understand that he/she should have no guilt feelings and that the problem lies between the mother and father only. The one parent must never badmouth the other parent. Keep arguing in front of the children to a minimum. Both parents should continually reassure the children of their unconditional love for them and that they should never feel abandoned. When both parents are actively involved in their children’s lives it makes the children feel loved and secure.”

#### **Interview 2: Father**

“Don’t rush into a divorce. Give it as much time as possible by separating first. No quarrelling and shouting when the children are present. All decisions made should be made with the objective to benefit the children and only them. No *you* or *me* issue - rather support each other. Sit down calmly and have a look at the big picture after the divorce. Think how the children will be affected and make decisions that the whole family can benefit from. Consider if all your conflict will be worthwhile or change any matters. If you can’t fix things that went wrong, make all decisions in such a way that the children will never suffer. Remember you have messed up, not the children. Be as much a part of your children’s lives and support their mother at all times.”

#### **Main themes from Question 17**

The parents have the following advice for other divorcing parents:

- Children should understand that divorce is between adults and has nothing to do with children. So don’t feel guilty about it.

- Don't argue in front of the children or talk negatively of the absent parent.
- Both parents should reassure the children of their unconditional love and support.
- All decisions made should be in the best interest of the children.
- Your children should never suffer, because of parental divorce.
- Be part of your child's life at all times.

### **3.4.2.2 Questions to children**

**Question 1: How did you hear the news that your parents were getting a divorce?**

#### **Interview 1: Child 1**

"At first Mom told us brief. As we got older and had more questions, being able to understand better, she explained what we wanted to hear".

#### **Interview 2: Child 2**

"Mom told us the news".

#### **Main theme from question 1**

- The mother told the children about the divorce.
- The children were given just the basic information and information suitable for their age. The fact that both girls were in middle childhood made unnecessary explanations unwanted and the reason for the divorce was not told.

The aim of parents is to protect their children while being as open and honest as one can, given the circumstances as well as their ages and development (Weintraub & Hillman, 2005:240).

**Question 2: How did you react/feel when Mom and Dad told you that they were getting a divorce?**

### **Interview 1: Child 1**

”At first I was frightened and sad, but now I’m fine with the fact that my parents are divorced. Especially that both Mom and Dad are part of my life.”

### **Interview 2: Child 2**

”When I first heard the news I was sad and scared, but now I’m used to it.”

### **Main theme from question 2**

The first reaction of children during parental divorce is sadness, being scared and frightened. It will take children a while to get used to the idea of their parents being divorced.

### **Sub-theme from question 2**

It is important for the children that both parents stay involved in their lives.

Amato and Booth (1997:356-365) state that “Divorce affects children in different ways.” Children have the following short-term reactions: anger, sadness, being scared, depression, fear, worrying and guilt. They feel that these reactions don’t end until the children have reached a point of acceptance. Both the children in the research also battled with different emotions, until they learnt that their parent’s divorce was not going to change their relationship between them. After a while and working through the different phases both the girls accepted the divorce and stated that they are doing well.

### **Question 3: What did Mom and Dad tell you the reason was for them getting divorced?**

### **Interview 1: Child 1**

”Mom told us that she and Dad had some problems they couldn’t work out and that they decided that it was better getting a divorce.”



### **Interview 2: Child 2**

”Mom and Dad never told us the reason they got divorced.”

### **Main theme from question 3**

Parents should keep the children’s age in mind when they tell them the reason for the divorce.

Tynan (2004:8) explains that: “Both parents should be present when a child is told and feelings of anger, guilt or blame should be left out of the conversation.” Tynan (2004: 1-8) further more feels that: “Parents should tell their children together, even if it wasn’t exactly a joint decision. They should furthermore keep the child’s age in mind when discussing the divorce and the reasons.”

Children should know that what had happened occurred between the adults, but that they will always be their parents and will always be there to love and take care of them. It is important to emphasise that the child is in no way to blame for the break-up and that the unhappiness of the parents is not related to the children.

### **Question 4: What did Mom say about Dad?**

#### **Interview 1: Child 1**

She explained that her mom would never say anything bad about their father.

#### **Interview 2: Child 2**

”Mom still has a very good relationship with Dad. She never talks bad about him. They are both big friends.”

### **Main theme from question 4**

It is important for children that their parents still have a good relationship.

#### **Sub-theme from question 4**

It helps not to badmouth the other parent in front of the children.

The fact that the parents still respected each other and did not speak negatively in front of the children made the children to feel safe and loved.

#### **Question 5: What did Dad say about Mom?**

##### **Interview 1: Child 1**

"Not anything. They have a good relationship with each other and never talk bad about each other."

##### **Interview 2: Child 2**

"Dad says nothing about Mom."

#### **Main theme from question 5**

It is important that parents still share a good relationship for the sake of their children.

Hooper (2005:79) feels that when talking to their children, parents should set aside their anger. Blaming one parent will only cause confusion, because children are emotionally attached to the other parent. This could create feelings of conflicting loyalty and cause unnecessary hurt when one parent talks badly about the other parent.

#### **Question 6: What did Mom and Dad do to help you to feel better about the divorce?**

##### **Interview 1: Child 1**

"Mom and Dad both said that they still loved us and that they would never do anything to keep us away from the other parent."

### **Interview 2: Child 2**

"Mom and Dad, from the start, stated that they love us both and would always love us. The way that Mom and Dad interact with each other made it a lot easier on us."

### **Main theme from question 6**

It is important that both parents assure their children of their love. Parents can make the divorce a lot easier on their children if they treat each other with respect. Ricci (1997:57) feels that: "If parents want to do something valuable for their children, they should create a positive relationship with the other parent. If it is possible, be positive and treat each other with respect."

### **Question 7: Please describe your feelings during the divorce process?**

#### **Interview 1: Child 1**

"At first it was different, seeing that Dad was not living with us. As time passed and Dad was really involved in our lives and came to all our activities it started to settle down. Now it is OK! But if parents fight or keep their children away from the other parent it get real bad, like some of my friends. I'm lucky that my parents are still friends."

#### **Interview 2: Child 2**

"First I was sad, cross and I hated everyone. Now I'm doing fine, because both Mom and Dad is part of my life."

### **Main theme from question 7**

The first reaction of children is sadness, anger and hatred. Children need time to adjust to parental divorce.

### **Sub-theme from question 7**

It is important for children that parents stay involved in their lives. It is traumatic for children's adjustment if their parents quarrel in front of them.

Duncan (1999:3) feels strongly that: "Parents should help children to share their feelings and help them to deal with those feelings. Parents should let children express their feelings about divorce. Parents should not deny these feelings; otherwise the children won't have the opportunity to work through them. Children need time to grieve at losing some of the "connectedness" of their family and parents should be patient."

**Question 8: What choices were you given about visitations and who arranged for schedules?**

**Interview 1: Child 1**

"We had no choices in when we would visit Dad. From the start we saw Dad every second weekend and during the week when he came to visit and stayed with us. Mostly Dad came and visited us, especially during weekends. Whenever we had the need to contact Dad we were able to do so."

**Interview 2: Child 2**

"Mom and Dad decided that we should live with Mom. We visit Dad every second weekend. If we don't go to Dad he comes and visits us. He stays with us for the whole weekend."

**Main theme from question 8**

Both children accepted the fact that their parents made living-in decisions on their behalf. Children should have the right to have contact with the other parent when they feel like it.

The study once again showed that the children should have the opportunity to have a relationship with both parents. Both the girls had a unique relationship with each parent and both the girls verbalised that this made it easier to adjust to their parent's divorce. The relationships in the dissolved family made

divorce only a change in living arrangements, yet all family members explained that they saw themselves as a family of origin. The children respect their parents for not placing them in the middle of parental conflict or marriage dissolution.

### **Question 9: Describe the role of your Mom in your life.**

#### **Interview 1: Child 1**

"Mom is very much involved in our daily lives, seeing that we live with her. She does a lot for us and with us. She supports us in everything we do or feelings we may have. She helps with homework and takes us to our activities."

#### **Interview 2: Child 2**

"Mom takes us to school, our sports and daily activities. She looks after us and takes us to the doctor when needed. Mom is always there for us."

#### **Main theme from question 9**

Continuous support of the parent should remain in order to create a positive atmosphere for the children.

#### **Sub-theme from question 9**

Children's daily routine should be kept unchanged after the divorce. Parents should deal with their children's feelings throughout the process of divorce and thereafter.

This correlates with the opinion of Whiteman (2001:161) that states that it is necessary for parents not to upset a child's routine too abruptly. Children need a sense of continuity. It is disturbing to them if they must cope with too many changes at once.

### **Question 10: Describe the role of Dad in your life.**

### **Interview 1: Child 1**

"When Dad is visiting us he also does a lot. When it is in Dad's ability or his work allows it, he comes to our activities or important stuff. When he is with us, he also helps with homework and takes us around."

### **Interview 2: Child 2**

"We usually see Dad every second weekend. Either we go and visit him, or he comes to us. Dad attends our prize-giving and our revue. We all go on holiday together. Once a week I talk to Dad. If I ever need to talk to Dad, I just phone him. When something special happens, Mom phones Dad."

### **Main theme from question 10**

- Both parents should be part of the children's daily activities when they are able to.
- Communication between parents and children should be open and natural.
- The non-residential parent should always be part of the children's special events.

Both parents should set aside time alone with each child. This gives them the opportunity to create special bonds and to talk on a deeper level than is possible when all the children are together. Communication between parents should be open and natural (Whiteman, 2001:158). It is clear that the children experience this from their parents. The children value the fact that the father is part of their lives.

### **Question 11: Who comes to your academic prize-giving or special sports events?**

### **Interview 1: Child 1**

"Mostly Mom, but Dad really tries to come to special events. Dad is very involved in our lives and when he has the opportunity he comes to all special events. He travels from Rustenburg in the afternoon and returns early the

next morning, just to be with us. When something less important happens we send him a SMS or Mom phones him.”

### **Interview 2: Child 2**

”Mom and Dad. Dad is very involved in our lives and when he can he comes to all special events. He travels from Rustenburg in the afternoon and returns early the next morning. When he can’t come we SMS him. Mom sometimes phones him about things that are less important.”

### **Main theme from question 11**

- Both parents should stay involved in the children’s lives.
- The non-residential parent should be part of the children’s lives, whether it is important or not.

Bailey and Zvonkovic (2001:535) explain that: “Maintaining a normal parent-child relationship is challenging for non-residential parents and they should work hard to keep in contact with their children’s daily lives and activities.” The father of these children tries hard to be and to stay involved.

### **Question 12: How do you know that your Mom and Dad love you and care about you?**

#### **Interview 1: Child 1**

”I know that through what both of them do for me and they say it a lot.”

#### **Interview 2: Child 2**

”I know that because both of them say that they love me and care for me. Their behaviour also shows that they care.”

### **Main theme from question 12**

- Both parents should tell their children that they love them.

- Both parents' behaviour should show the children that they love them and have their best interest at heart.

Continuing anger or bitterness toward a former partner can injure the children almost as much as the dissolution of the marriage. The feelings shown are as important as the words used (Hooper, 2005:74).

**Question 13: What do you say to other children whose parents are either getting a divorce or have been through a divorce?**

**Interview 1: Child 1**

"I usually tell them that everything is going to be fine; it only takes time to adjust. They must remember that their parents will always be their parents and that you will still see both of them. You are now only going to stay in two different houses, but you will always be part of each other's lives – that is if your parents allow the other parent to do so."

**Interview 2: Child 2**

"I usually tell other children that they should cry whenever they feel to do so. They should know that their mom and dad would always love them. I reassure them that things will be better after a while."

**Main theme from question 13**

- Children need time to adjust to parental divorce.
- Divorce doesn't end the parent/child relationship.
- All family members should realise that they will always be part of each other's lives.
- Their parents will always love them.

**Sub-themes from question 13**



- Children should acknowledge their own feelings and deal with them with honesty.
- Children should know that their parents will always love them.

The children used in the research showed that they handled the transition with the minimum problems and they feel that both their parents contributed to their adjustment. Both girls stated that it is of utmost importance that both parents stay involved in their lives.

**Question 14: What do you think parents can do to help their children when they are getting divorced?**

**Interview 1: Child 1**

“Parents should tell their children that they love them very much. “Parents should not fight in front of their children.”

**Interview 2: Child 2**

”They should tell their children that everything is going to be fine, seeing that both parents will still be involved in their lives. You are going to live in two separate houses, but you will always be part of each other’s lives. Things will only be different if parents want it to be.”

**Main themes from question 14**

- Parents should constantly tell their children that they love them, no matter what happens.
- Parents should not argue in front of their children.
- It is important for all children that both their parents stay actively involved in their lives.
- Things are only different if parents try to make them different.

**Sub-themes from question 14**

- Children should know that they and their parents will always be part of each other's lives.
- Children should know that they will be living apart from a parent.

In the book, *The Rights of a Child in Separation and Divorce* (Prall, 2000:49), professionals state that parents can help the children by obeying the following rules:

- Children should be told that their mother and father still love them and will never divorce him.
- Children should be told that the divorce is not their fault and not to be told about the adult problems that caused it.
- Children should be treated as human beings – not as another piece of property to be quarrelled over, bargained over or threatened.
- Children should have decisions about them based on their best interests, rather than past wrongs, hurt feelings or parents' needs.
- Children should have the right to love both their parents without being forced to choose or feel guilty.
- A child should be allowed to know both his parents through regular, frequent involvement in his life.
- He should also have the financial support of both his father and mother.
- The child should be spared hearing bad, hurtful comments about either of the parents, which have no useful purpose.
- Child should not to be expected to tell a lie or act as spy or messenger.
- A child should be allowed to care about others without having to choose or feel guilty.

From the above-mentioned responses the researchers come to the conclusion that parents can follow some guidelines to minimise the impact of their divorce on their children. The parents' attitude from the start needs to be set in the best interest of their children. If both parents cannot be present when telling the children, one parent can do this successfully. The mother in the study showed that if one parent has the ability to put her own feelings towards her spouse aside, she could explain the divorce without negative remarks towards

the children's father. In this case the children were assured that the divorce was because of parental problems and had nothing to do with them. Sufficient information about the divorce was given according to their age and developmental stage. The real reason for the divorce was not told to the children and the mother took them separately and answered all their questions.

The children were reassured that their relationship with both their parents would continue. Divorce doesn't mean that parents are divorcing their children. After the announcement of the divorce both parents and children made efforts to have good relationships. Both parents made a decision about the children's custody and living arrangements beforehand. These matters were never discussed in the presence of the children. Both children were allowed to give input, but the parents made the final decisions. The parents never quarrelled with each other in the presence of the children.

From the start both parents were involved in the lives of their children and quality time was spent together. Each parent respected the other's relationship with the children and time was given for both to spend time with the children individually. The parents also decided that the lives of their children should not be disrupted and that the children's needs should be put first. Both parents had the ability to step back from their own emotional turmoil and by doing that they relieved the stress on their children.

The fact that the parents had a positive relationship and seeing that they had regular communication set boundaries for the children and also minimised any manipulative behaviour from the children. Both children verbalised that in doing this their parents gave them a feeling of safety. Throughout their responses the children indicated that they needed both parents to be involved in their lives, as they were an intact family, and that each parent should respect this. The mother shared important information on the daily activities of the children with their father and kept him informed of things that happened in their children's lives.

The parenting roles were clearly identified and a co-parenting plan was followed. The children experienced a strong and co-operative relationship between their parents and therefore they were not exposed to negative adjustment problems.

From the above-mentioned facts it is clear that children going through a divorce and the fact that they should adapt to a single household family, mean that they need a sense of continuity and clear boundaries from both parents. The children used in the research showed that they handled the transition with the minimum problems and that both their parents contributed to their adjustment.

### **3.5 CONCLUSION**

- The contents of the literature study in chapter two formed the base for the questions that were put to both parents and children.
- The questions were asked to all the family members separately and transcriptions were done.
- The questions were answered directly by the parents and children.
- The researcher identified main and sub-themes from the questions.
- The themes were emphasized by the information that was gathered during the literature study.
- From the questions and themes important information was identified about what occurs when both parents and children go through a divorce.
- From the study both parents and children state that the following can be done to contribute to limited trauma when going through parental divorce:
  - Divorce is between adults and has nothing to do with them.
  - Parents shouldn't argue in front of the children or talk negatively of the absent parent.
  - Both parents should reassure the children of their unconditional love and support and be part of the child's life at all times.
  - All decisions made should be in the best interest of the children.
  - The children should never suffer, because of parental divorce.

- Parents should constantly tell their children that they love them.
- Things are only different if parents try to make them different.
- Children should know that they and their parents would always be part of each others' lives.

## **CHAPTER 4**

# **GENERAL SUMMARIES, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

The aim of the study was to explore what parents did during their process of divorce and particularly the way it affected their children. The researcher aimed to investigate the effects that parental divorce has on children and also to investigate what parents can do to minimise the influence on their children in middle childhood. Divorce, intact family, middle childhood, co-parenting and transition were identified as the key concepts and were also defined as such.

The first chapter was assigned to planning the research process and setting up the research goal, objectives and research question. The researcher decided on using both the qualitative and quantitative approach for the purpose of the study. The researcher utilised Creswell's dominant-less-dominant model. In this analysis the researcher presents the study within a single, dominant paradigm (De Vos, 2002a:366). The dominant approach that was used was qualitative in the form of a case study and the data was collected through unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews and observations. The less-dominant approach was quantitative. The researcher utilised a standardised measuring instrument to explore the parent/child relationship affected by divorce.

An in-depth literature review pertaining to the key concepts was defined as one of the research objectives and would later direct the compilation of the research questionnaire. Chapter two was assigned to a literature study on divorce with specific reference to the child in middle childhood.

The empirical information was enclosed in chapter three. The information that was gathered through the research questionnaires was coded and data was captured. Information was analysed through direct use of the answers of the

respondents. The research results of the empirical study were divided into main and sub-themes.

In the course of chapter four all the chapters will once again be outlined in the form of a summary, conclusion and appropriate recommendations.

## **4.2 CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

### **4.2.1 Summary**

In the first chapter the research methodology and the research approach were outlined. The following aspects were described in detail:

- An introduction to divorce and a general description of the extent of the problem.
- Motivation for the choice of the topic.
- Problem formulation.
- Purpose, goal and objective of the study.
- The research question.
- Research approach.
- The type of research, research strategy and methodology.
- The research population, sample and sampling method.
- The ethical guidelines that had to be adhered to.
- A definition of the most important key concepts applicable to the research.
- An outline of the contents of the research report.

For the researcher this chapter was necessary in planning and indicating the way in which the study had to be conducted in order to reach the main aim and the objectives.

### **4.2.2 Conclusions**

Based on the research, the following conclusions were made:

- The study was conducted according to the initial proposal without having to make any major changes or adaptations.
- A combination of the quantitative and qualitative approach was used. The quantitative part of the study was the less-dominant part of the study and the “Hudson Scale of Attitudes” towards mother/father was used. The qualitative part of the research consisted of semi-structured questionnaires that were done with both parents and children. This approach worked well to ensure data rich in content.
- The researcher didn’t use a pilot study to approve the outcome of the study. The questionnaires and objectives were sufficient to reach a conclusive outcome of the study.
- The entire study was done in the presence of the family’s own home and therefore proved to be sufficient and time-saving. Because the respondents were able to work on the original documentation, the original documentation made the process of gathering information more legible.
- The researcher realised that limited research was available on the topic of successful outcomes of parental divorce. The questionnaires had to be formulated with this fact in mind.

#### **4.2.3 Recommendation(s)**

- The role of and involvement of the parents in the successful transition of children going through parental divorce can be further explored or incorporated into subsequent studies.
- More literature on guidelines to help children cope with parental divorce and the role of parents in the transition needs to be published.
- Research needs to be done on the long term effects of parental divorce on children and researchers need to concentrate on the positive outcomes.
- The fact that the researcher used only one case study proved to be sufficient as an in-depth research project and to draw a conclusive outcome. The information that was gathered in this research was explorative, which means that further research could make the results more applicable to the wider population.



## **4.3 CHAPTER TWO: MIDDLE CHILDHOOD AS PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENTAL PHASE AND PARENTAL DIVORCE**

### **4.3.1 Summary**

In chapter two the researcher gave a general summary of the child in the middle childhood phase and the influence of divorce. Aspects that were part of the literature study were:

- The concept of children in the phase of middle childhood was discussed as well as the definition of and different developmental tasks children need to complete.
- The impacts of divorce on children as well as the influential factors were given.
- The short and long term effects of divorce on children were outlined.
- Advice on what parents can do for their children when going through divorce was supplied.
- Co-parenting and the content of a parenting plan were discussed.

### **4.3.2 Conclusions**

- Middle childhood is the period between age six to twelve.
- Children in middle childhood experience a period of tremendous intellectual, social, emotional and physical changes. Demands on schoolwork increase, friends become as important as family and puberty begins to reshape children's bodies and minds.
- Divorce is indeed a source of stress for children and it can result in a decline of well-being. Children's adjustment is determined by their developmental stage and their parents' reaction. It is important to keep in mind that every child is an individual and will go through the process of parental divorce at his own pace.
- Most children exhibit emotional and adjustment behavioural problems that stem from their confusion, fear, sadness, anxiety and anger. The process

that children go through when their parents get divorced is similar to the experience of loss when a loved one dies.

- Parents have an important role to play in the outcome of children's reaction to their divorce. How parents deal with divorce may be the most important factor in determining how children are affected.
- Divorce causes considerable trauma for all children involved and most children will experience similar reactions. Divorce will have both short-term and long-term effects on children.
- Children's feelings should be acknowledged.
- Children are not doomed by parental divorce. The effects can be substantial for children, but parents can minimise these effects with support from both parties.
- Some children manage to survive parental divorce with minimum impact on their personal and social lives and will learn to cope with the changed circumstances while other children will suffer from the effects for years afterwards.
- Divorce often makes parenting and raising children more difficult, but these challenges can be made easier by co-parenting.

#### **4.3.2 Recommendation(s)**

- The ages from six to twelve of the middle childhood phase should be kept in mind when looking at the influence of parental divorce. Children in these age groups are vulnerable to any criticism or conflict between significant adults. Researchers should also take note of the regression in age that might take place during the trauma of parental divorce.
- Children in middle childhood have many demands made on them. Coping with the stress of parental divorce usually leads to the regression of certain developmental tasks. The researcher recommends that regression in these developmental tasks should be acknowledged and that children need assistance to cope with these challenges.

- Children should have the right to grieve the absence of the departing parent and their feelings should be acknowledged and parents should support them.
- It is important to take note of the enormous influence of parents in assisting their children in adjusting to divorce.
- The way in which parents work together in raising their children after a divorce is important and both parents should invest in a positive parenting plan.

#### **4.4 CHAPTER THREE: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH**

##### **4.4.1 Summary**

- In this chapter the findings of the empirical research that resulted from the in-depth study were presented. The influence of divorce on children was outlined, as well as the role that parents play in minimising the negative affects.
- The responses to the questionnaires in the in-depth study were given directly and main and sub-themes were identified. This chapter consisted of:
  - Summary of the research methodology.
  - The family biographic information. The family genogram and family ecomap were explained.
  - The quantitative data study.
  - The qualitative data study.

##### **4.4.2 Conclusion**

Based on the research, the following conclusions were made:

- The contents of the literature study in chapter two formed the base for the questions that were presented to both parents and children and formed the base of the main and sub-themes.

- Conclusions from the questions and themes provided important information about what occurs when parents and children go through a divorce.
- From the verbal/direct responses of the respondents to the questions, the researcher could make some definite conclusions of how parents could assist children who go through the transition of divorce with less traumatic consequences.
- The design of the questionnaire made it possible to form main/sub-themes and at the end to address the aim and objectives of the research.
- The respondents' opinions correlated well with facts derived from literature, which made it possible to successfully integrate all the information.
- It is important that parents realise that they can contribute to their children's positive single parent living arrangements with co-parenting and a well-balanced parenting plan.

#### **4.4.3 Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made:

- The possibility of having another family that went through the transition of divorce with more problems and obstacles could be included in a case study to compare responses. At the end the two different outcomes of the studies could be compared to prove the difference in the way that parents contribute to their children's transition.
- For future studies and with the aim to broaden the field of study, having interviews with professionals on their practical work with children from divorced families and what helped them to get through the transition may be considered.
- Further studies could be done on this subject. Seeing that divorce is a huge social problem, this research could help many children to cope with their parents' divorce.

## 4.5 TESTING OF THE AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of research implies “*the broader, more abstract conception of the end towards which effort or ambition is directed*” (De Vos, 2002c:107). The aim of this research was to explore the contribution of parents in minimizing the impact of their divorce on their children in middle childhood.

The objectives in turn refer to the process the researcher plans to follow in order to reach the goal that was given under the previous heading. According to De Vos (2002c:107) the objectives “...are the steps one has to take, one by one, realistically at grass-roots level, within a certain time-span, in order to attain the dream.”

The following objectives and research question were selected in order to reach the end goal:

### 4.5.1 Objective one

***To investigate the effects that parental divorce has on children.***

The objective was achieved through a thorough literature study as well as consultation with experts.

### 4.5.2 Objective two

***To conceptualise middle childhood within the different developmental tasks children need to achieve within the context of the relationship with both their parents with specific focus on parental divorce.***

The objective was achieved. A literature study was done about the phase of middle childhood and the different developmental tasks children need to accomplish in this phase. Middle childhood was defined and the

developmental tasks were outlined. The above-mentioned facts formed the knowledge base for the empirical research.

#### 4.5.3 Objective three

***To investigate parental divorce through an empirical study and what parents can do to minimise the influence on their children in middle childhood.***

The empirical study was done by means of an in-depth case study of a single family that passed through the transition of parental divorce with limited traumatic consequences on their children. The results proved that parents and the decisions they make could have a significant influence on their children's adjustment. Evident themes in the family and their functioning were identified. Main themes and sub-themes that came from the responses of the respondents in the semi-structured questionnaires were integrated with the relevant literature.

#### 4.5.4 Objective four

***To make conclusions and provide recommendations to professionals, involved with families that go through divorce, on the aspects that make the transition during parental divorce easier.***

Conclusions were made after the research was done. These conclusions provided recommendations to parents and service providers.

## 4.6 FORMULATION OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

**What are the contributions that parents can make to help their children in middle childhood to cope with their parents' divorce and to minimise the impact it has on their children?**

The research question was answered. The research showed that parents could minimise the effect of their divorce on their children by making a conscious decision to continue to be part of their children's lives and to use a co-parenting style.

The research has shown that parents can minimise the effects of their divorce by following these basic guidelines:

- Show children that both parents love them and will always care for them.
- Have a good relationship with their children by both being part of the children's lives.
- Acknowledge the feelings children have during parental divorce and the fact that they are affected by parental divorce.
- Make a decision to put the children first and make further decisions based on that fact.
- Keep in touch with their children's lives and support them in all their activities.
- Support each other regarding disciplinary matters and daily routine activities.
- Parents should respect each other and allow each other to be part of their children's lives and the special bond each parent has with his/her children should be acknowledged.
- There should be co-parenting and a parenting plan should be in place, where all the family members with their feelings are acknowledged.
- Never bad-mouth the other parent.

## 4.7 CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

Constance Ahrons first introduced the term “Good Divorce” in 1994, when he proved Judith Wallerstein’s research of children of parental divorce as being doomed forever, as only one side of the coin. He stated that some children of divorce have the ability to overcome the traumatic consequences of parental divorce. This research showed that children have the ability to overcome parental divorce with the support of their parents.

With the divorce rates in South Africa and the rest of the world still raising it is important to give parents some guidelines to follow once they decided on divorce. Children of divorce need the reassurance that they would be fine once they adapted to the transition of parental divorce. The study proved that parents could minimize the affects of their divorce on their children if they are willing to put the needs of their children first.



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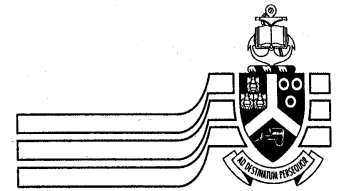
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University of Pretoria

## **APPENDIX 1: INFORMED CONSENT PARENTS**

Department of Social Work and Criminology

Tel. +27 12 420-2325

Fax. +27 12 420-2093

10 July 2006

### **Informed Consent:**

#### Researcher:

Wilma van Jaarsveld

083 5252 685/ (018) 788 2888

5 Hesta Hof, Oranje Street, Carletonville, 2500

#### Title of the research undertaken:

Divorce and children in middle childhood: parents' contribution to minimise the impact.

#### Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this study is to explore the contribution of parents in minimizing the impact of their divorce on their children in middle childhood.

#### Procedures:

The procedure of obtaining the information required for the research will be done with both the qualitative and quantitative approaches. The researcher is going to do an in-depth study of a family who succeeded in minimizing the impact of changing from an intact family to a divorced family. The dominant approach will be in the form of a case study and the data will be collected

through unstructured interviews and observations. The interviews will be recorded and the responses analysed in terms of themes and sub-themes.

For the quantitative data two standardised measuring instruments, namely the Hudson Scales for children's attitudes towards their parents, will be used to explore the parent/child relationships after the divorce. These responses will be analysed according to the prescribed format provided by Perspective College.

#### Risks and discomforts:

The only discomfort that the researcher can foresee is the discomfort or stress that may arise from talking about the traumatic experience of a divorce on all family members. However, the researcher will not continue with the interview if any major concern arises and will ensure that you do not leave the interview process in any distress. If it is necessary for any therapy the researcher has arranged with a colleague, a psychologist, for therapy.

#### Benefits:

The benefit of this research is that professionals may have new insight of contributions that parents can make to minimize the impact of divorce. Your responses may help other families going through a divorce.

#### Participant's rights:

- Participation is totally voluntary.
- You may withdraw at any stage of the process without negative consequences or with any information being published.
- Total confidentiality and privacy. (Expanded below)
- Access to the results of the research, if you so desire.

#### Confidentiality and privacy:

The researcher will allocate pseudonyms for you and your child to ensure that after the data has been collected, no one will be able to identify who you are. The researcher will also destroy all evidence that links you to the research after the research process has been completed. With regard to privacy, the

researcher will respect your privacy and only collect information that is relevant to the research study.

If at any stage you feel that your or your child's privacy is being violated the researcher will reorganise the study to ensure that you are in no way compromised. The questionnaires that the children are going to complete will be anonymous.

The researcher is working under the supervision of a study leader from the Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria, to ensure that she does not do anything unethical. Therefore the study leader does have access to the information collected. However, the study leader is also under strict confidentiality rules.

The researcher can be contacted by telephone, mail or e-mail if desired.

Cell phone: 083 5252 685

Land Line: 018 788 2888

Postal Address: P.O. Box 512, Carletonville, 2500

E-mail: Wilma@westcol.co.za

This document was signed at \_\_\_\_\_ on the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ 2006.

Signature (Guardian/ Parent): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature (Researcher): \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX 2: CHILDREN ASCENT TO PARTICIPATE**

### Researcher:

Wilma van Jaarsveld

083 5252 685/ (018) 788 2888

5 Hesta Hof, Oranje Street, CARLETONVILLE, 2500

### ■ What the study is about:

Divorce and children: what parents do to make the effect of their divorce less traumatic.

### ■ The point of the study:

The point of the study is to see what your parents did to help you when they got divorced. Your information can perhaps help other parents and children when the parents decide to get divorced.

### ■ Steps to be taken:

I will get the facts through talking with both of you at first. I will then talk to you separately about your feelings when your parents got divorced.

I will take notes, so that I do not forget anything that you tell me. The facts received from you will also be recorded, for use in my research. After talking to both of you, I will ask you to fill in some questions about your relationship with Dad and Mom. At the end I will look at everything that we talked about as well as the questionnaire. I will then write down everything that we talked about.

■ Dangers and Doubt:

The only uncomfortable thing might be when you talk about the painful stuff of your parents' divorce. I will not keep on asking questions if you feel any doubt. You can tell me anything that you wish to, without Dad or Mom knowing.

■ Rewards:

You will be able to help other children to cope with their parents divorce. For children your age it would be nice to see that they handle their family brake-up well.

■ Children's rights:

- It is your own choice to participate in the study.
- You may leave at any time without anything happening to you.
- Everything you say will be confidential – it will be a secret between you and me.
- You are allowed to see the final paper.

■ Secrecy and being private:

I will give you false names to ensure that no one will know who you are. I will also get rid of all the papers and questionnaires that you completed. With regard to your secrets, I will only have your good wishes in mind and only get facts that are about the study.

I have a teacher from the University of Pretoria. She will see to it that nothing goes wrong or that you don't get hurt. The teacher will look at the paper at the end, but she will also keep everything confidential.

My telephone number is 083 5252 685 if you need to talk at any time.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (Name) know what the study is about and that I can leave the study at any time if I feel to do so.

I want to take part in the study

I do not want to take part in the study

Thank you

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**Child**

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**Wilma van Jaarsveld**

**Researcher**

**083 5252 685**

## **APPENDIX 3: SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONNAIRE PARENTS**

How was the decision to get divorced made?

How was conflict handled prior to getting divorced?

Describe the role of both parents in telling the children about the divorce.

How did you tell the children about the divorce?

What did you tell the children were the reasons for the divorce?

What did you do to minimize the impact of the divorce on the children?

How was the decision regarding the permanent residence of the children made?

How did you handle your own feelings while going through the divorce?

Were the children involved in the decisions resulting from the divorce? Please explain.

How do you arrange visitation?

How do you handle the children's needs with regard to communication with one or both parents?

What arrangements did you make concerning the sharing of the major decisions about the children?

What is the involvement of each parent in the children's lives?

How did the divorce influence your relationship with your child?

Did your role as a mother/father change after the divorce? Please explain.

What do you regard as 'co-parenting'?

What advice can you give to other parents going through a divorce?



## **APPENDIX 4: SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONNAIRE CHILDREN**

How did you hear the news that your parents were getting a divorce?

How did you react/feel when Mom and Dad told you that they were getting a divorce?

What did Mom and Dad tell you were the reasons for them getting divorced?

What did Mom say about Dad?

What did Dad say about Mom?

What did Mom and Dad do to help you to feel better about the divorce?

Please describe your feelings during the divorce process.

What choices were you given about whom to visit and when?

Describe the role of your Mom in your life.

Describe the role of your Dad in your life.

Who comes to your academic prize giving or special sports events?

How do you know that your Mom and Dad love you and care about you?

What do you say to other children whose parents are either getting a divorce or have been through a divorce?

What do you think parents can do to help their children when they are getting divorced?

## APPENDIX 5: CHILD'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS FATHER (CAF)

### CHILD'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS FATHER (CAF)



Naam / Name: ..... Datum / Date: .....

This questionnaire is designed to measure the degree of contentment you have in your relationship with your father. It is not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers. Answer each item as carefully and as accurately as you can by using the following scale:



Hierdie vraelys is ontwerp om die graad van tevredenheid wat jy ondervind in jou verhouding met jou pa te meet. Dit is nie 'n toets nie, dus is daar nie regte of verkeerde antwoorde nie. Beantwoord asseblief elke item so noukeurig en akkuraat moontlik deur die bostaande skaal te gebruik:

<p>My father gets on my nerves. I get along well with my father. I feel that I can really trust my father. I dislike my father. My father's behavior embarrasses me. My father is too demanding. I wish I had a different father. I really enjoy my father. My father puts too many limits on me. My father interferes with my activities. I resent my father. I think my father is terrific. I hate my father. My father is very patient with me. I really like my father. I like being with my father. I feel like I do not love my father. My father is very irritating. I feel very angry toward my father. I feel violent toward my father. I feel proud of my father.</p> <p>I wish my father was more like others I know. My father does not understand me. I can really depend on my father. I feel ashamed of my father.</p>	<p>1. _____ My pa werk op my senuwees. 2. _____ Ek kom goed oor die weg met my pa. 3. _____ Ek voel dat ek my pa werklik kan vertrou. 4. _____ Ek hou baie min van my pa. 5. _____ My pa se gedrag stel my in die verleentheid. 6. _____ My pa is te veeleisend. 7. _____ Ek wens ek het 'n ander pa gehad. 8. _____ Ek geniet my pa werklik baie. 9. _____ My pa beperk my te veel. 10. _____ My pa meng in met my aktiwiteite. 11. _____ Ek het 'n weersin in my pa. 12. _____ Ek dink my pa is wonderlik. 13. _____ Ek haat my pa. 14. _____ My pa is baie geduldig met my. 15. _____ Ek hou regtig baie van my pa. 16. _____ Ek hou daarvan om by my pa te wees. 17. _____ Ek voel asof ek min liefde vir my pa het. 18. _____ My pa iriteer my. 19. _____ Ek voel baie kwaad vir my pa. 20. _____ Ek voel gewelddadig teenoor my pa. 21. _____ Ek voel trots op my pa. 22. _____ Ek wens my pa was meer soos ander pa's wat ek ken. 23. _____ My pa verstaan my nie. 24. _____ Ek kan regtig my pa vertrou. 25. _____ Ek is skaam vir my pa.</p>
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## APPENDIX 6: CHILD'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS MOTHER (CAM)

## CHILD'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS MOTHER (CAM)



Naam / Name: ..... Datum / Date: .....

This questionnaire is designed to measure the degree of contentment you have in your relationship with your mother. It is not a test, so there are no right or wrong answers. Answer each item as carefully and as accurately as you can by using the following scale:



Hierdie vraelys is ontwerp om die graad van tevredenheid wat jy ondervind in jou verhouding met jou ma te meet. Dit is nie 'n toets nie, dus is daar nie regte of verkeerde antwoorde nie. Beantwoord asseblief elke item so noukeurig en akkuraat moontlik deur die bostaande skaal te gebruik:

My mother gets on my nerves. I get along well with my mother. I feel that I can really trust my mother. I dislike my mother. My mother's behavior embarrasses me. My mother is too demanding. I wish I had a different mother. I really enjoy my mother. My mother puts too many limits on me. My mother interferes with my activities. I resent my mother. I think my mother is terrific. I hate my mother. My mother is very patient with me. I really like my mother. I like being with my mother. I feel like I do not love my mother. My mother is very irritating. I feel very angry toward my mother. I feel violent toward my mother. I feel proud of my mother.  I wish my mother was more like others I know. My mother does not understand me. I can really depend on my mother. I feel ashamed of my mother.	1. ____ 2. ____ 3. ____ 4. ____ 5. ____ 6. ____ 7. ____ 8. ____ 9. ____ 10. ____ 11. ____ 12. ____ 13. ____ 14. ____ 15. ____ 16. ____ 17. ____ 18. ____ 19. ____ 20. ____ 21. ____  22. ____ 23. ____ 24. ____ 25. ____	My ma werk op my senuwees. Ek kom goed oor die weg met my ma. Ek voel dat ek my ma werklik kan vertrou. Ek hou baie min van my ma. My ma se gedrag stel my in die verleentheid. My ma is te veeleisend. Ek wens ek het 'n ander ma gehad. Ek geniet my ma werklik baie. My ma beperk my te veel. My ma meng in met my aktiwiteite. Ek het 'n weersin in my ma. Ek dink my ma is wonderlik. Ek haat my ma. My ma is baie geduldig met my. Ek hou regtig baie van my ma. Ek hou daarvan om by my ma te wees. Ek voel asof ek min liefde vir my ma het. My ma irriteer my. Ek voel baie kwaad vir my ma. Ek voel gewelddadig teenoor my ma. Ek voel trots op my ma. Ek wens my ma was meer soos ander ma's wat ek ken My ma verstaan my nie. Ek kan regtig my ma vertrou. Ek is skaam vir my ma.
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