

Parental Divorce: Its Ramifications on Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Parental divorce has implications for children's cognitive, emotional, behavioral and psychological realms. The present study enables an understanding of the effects of parental divorce on adolescents in Kerala. A mixed methods research design was used to explore the impact of parental divorce with an emphasis on the adolescent. The data was derived from in-depth interviews and responses on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). The respondents were 20 adolescents (11 girls and nine boys), aged 12- 17 years, whose parents had been legally divorced for at least one year. Thematic analysis of the data showed that all adolescents were negatively impacted by the divorce. The adverse effects were seen in academic and conduct problems, anxiety, insecurity, conflict with peers, and withdrawal from participation in functions at school, church and festivals. After an initial period of distress, most adolescents adapted to new family structures and dynamics. Parentification of adolescents was seen in the study, where emotional parentification was seen more often with male adolescents in the custody of their mothers. For girls more instrumental parentification in the form of caregiving was seen. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) identified academic problems, conduct issues, hyperactivity and internalizing behaviour among adolescents. Adolescent boys exhibited external expressions of emotion and frustration, compared to girls. The research indicates the need for pre-divorce and relationship counselling for families and adolescents to deal with the aftermath of divorce.

Keywords: Parental divorce, parentification, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, pre-divorce counselling

Marriage is a primary institution in most societies and is an important life event for an individual. In India marriage is considered as sacred and it has an inbuilt system of checks and balances, and roles and priorities defined by the society for the couple. The wedding is undoubtedly the most important event in one's lifetime and is solemnized with utmost sanctity from ancient times. There are many differences in the nature and practice of marriage and divorce among various religious groups and regions in India (Chadha, 2012; Karve, 1993).

Divorce

An extreme of marriage is divorce that occurs at any point of living togetherness in a couple's life, ending the marital union. Divorce can be a life transforming experience for the family as

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a whole; for the couple, the children, and the family beyond the nuclear unit. Research on divorce over the years has found that children who experience the divorce of their parents are at a higher risk for a wide range of negative consequences; with the risk being two to three higher as compared to children who have not been exposed to divorce. Divorce has its repercussions on children's cognitive, emotional, behavioral and psychological realms (Johnson & Mazingo, 2000; Charles & Bryner, 2001; Adams, 2007). The majority of research studies on divorce in the world indicate different aspects of the effects of divorce on children and families. However, there are few studies that examine the effects of divorce on children and families in the Indian scenario and specifically in the context of Kerala.

Divorce is stressful for children, sometimes children think that the divorce is their fault and that they are losing one of their parents. This stressful event and its after effects contribute to different emotional issues in the child and the children become more vulnerable to behavior problems (Hewitt, 2009). The children are mentally affected if a divorce happens in their family and the experience of separation of parents makes their minds against family values and love relations. A study conducted by Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, (1999) found that divorce benefits families, "leading to more autonomy and personal growth, improved career opportunities, richer social lives, better parenting, and improved self-confidence (for women) and interpersonal skills (for men and adolescents)". Families around the world experience a variety of positive outcomes after going through a divorce (Duggal, Sriram & Chatterjee, 2019).

Adolescents' Adjustment to Divorce

Analyzing the immediate and long-term effects of divorce on adolescents, the immediate effect is less complicated. In the period immediately following separation, the family can experience shock, distress and confusion. The family also learns sometimes in an environment of diminished adjustment to negotiate their changed relationships with parents, and children, because separation is often the occasion for moving and transitions.

Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1996) conducted a longitudinal study of the social and emotional adjustment of 522 adolescents in 365 families in which a parental divorce had occurred four years previously. The study was conducted in the US and assessed social-emotional outcome measures: externalizing and internalizing behaviour problems, and adjustment in school. In research on adolescent adjustment, investigators have often distinguished between two forms of adjustment difficulties: the "externalizing" forms, which include aggression, substance use, truancy, and a variety of delinquent or antisocial acts. This is contrasted with the "internalizing" responses, which include depression, anxiety, withdrawal and suicidal impulses. There are studies that indicate that adults from families with divorced parents were more insecure than those who came from intact families (Brennan & Shaver, 1993; Hazelton, Lancee & O'Neil, 1998).

Need for the Present Study

Today there is a significant flux in Indian society which has been observed in the institution of family as divorce is on the increase. Attitude towards the term 'divorce' are changing, and more couples are splitting up. There are almost no studies done on the effects of divorce on families and adolescents based on empirical data from Kerala. The overarching goal of the research and analysis described in this study is to provide an empirical and theoretical foundation for discussions of the effects of divorce on adolescents and families in Kerala. According to the information from the Ministry of Law, the highest pending of divorce cases reported at the end of December 2017, in Kerala was 61,970, in Uttar Pradesh 2,64,409, in

Bihar 46,735, in Madhya Pradesh 41,028, in Maharashtra 35,349, and in Tamil Nadu 21, 672 (Shakil, 2018).

Research Questions

1. What are the effects of divorce on adolescents?

Research Objectives/Aim

2. How the effects of divorce affect the adolescents with the self, relationships with family, peers and others, school and academic performance

METHODOLOGY

There is an accelerating growth in divorce rate in Kerala and there are many researches which paved the way to understand the consequences of divorce. But there are gaps in the literature regarding the effects of divorce on children. In this scenario, the present study enables an understanding of the effects of divorce on the emotional and behavioral problems of adolescents from families with divorce. This paper is drawn from a larger study on the effects of divorce on families and adolescents in Kerala, done by the first author as a part of the PhD work, under the supervision of the second author.

Research Design and methods of data collection

Mixed methodology was used in this study with Qualitative and Quantitative techniques to understand research problems. A qualitative explanatory research design was used in this study to explore the insights into the issues related to the behaviour, opinions, beliefs, knowledge and values regarding parental divorce. The study was theoretically based on Bronfenbrenner's developmental theory. Family was seen as a one single system and the changes in one system would affect the whole family. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory focused on the quality and context of the family environment for development. Marital distress or divorce makes the environment more complex and this can raise problems in individuals. The qualitative part of the study involved the administration of a Socio-Demographic Data Sheet for the family, followed by interviews with custodial and non-custodial parents, and adolescents on specific domains of family and peer group relationships and psycho-social consequences of divorce. Quantitative data was obtained concurrently from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

This tool was used to measure the adolescents' emotions, behaviour, and social competencies. "It included 25 items relating to the frequency of positive (prosocial behaviour) and negative behaviors (emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer problems), in normal, borderline and abnormal range" (Goodman, 1997). The Total Difficulties score (Turner, Markie-Dadds & Sanders, 1998) has adequate internal reliability ($\alpha = .76$) and test-retest reliability ($r = .85$). Moderately strong concurrent validity was established by correlating the scores with the Child Behaviour Checklist, Youth Self-Report and the Rutter's Questionnaire, all measures of Childhood Psychopathology. The SDQ is available in Malayalam, among other Indian languages.

Participants for the Study

The study was carried out in Ernakulam district, Kerala state. While studies on the increasing divorce rates and their causes have been done in cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Visakhapatnam, Lucknow and Bangalore, no study has been done in Ernakulam city. The rationale for taking the Ernakulam district was the convenience as well as the increase in the

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number of cases registering for divorce every year in this district. Data for this paper is drawn from twenty adolescents, 11 girls, and nine boys, from families where parents had been legally divorced for at least one year.

The adolescents identified for the study were between 12 and 17 years of age. They were able to verbalize the issues more clearly than younger children. Adolescence is a critical transition period in the lifespan of human beings. Major developmental changes, both biological and psychological, occur during this period (Erikson, 1968). Besides that, adolescents also begin to utilize the prior experiences of self and others to engage in self-reflection and future planning. At this age of life, adolescents are more spontaneously able to verbalize and express the effects of parental divorce in their lives. The researcher excluded all children younger than 12 years and adolescents older than 17 from participation in the individual interviews. Further exclusion criteria were psychotic disorders that impede the capacity of the child to answer interview questions.

Ethical Considerations

The aim of the researcher was to study at least one adolescent child in a family where there has been a divorce. Each adolescent's emotional conceptualization of their parents' divorce their perceptual experiences of the same reality, and their ability to cope with the situation will be different. However, consent from the parents was necessary for data collection. Written consent given by the adolescent and their custodial parents was considered for participating in the study. It assured the respondents about anonymity and gave them the option of not participating in the study if they did not wish to. Ethical consideration of the research was formulated according to the norms and the suggestions received from the Doctoral Advisory Committee (DAC) members, Research Guide as well as from the Institute Review Board (IRB) at Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS).

Data Collection

The data for the study were collected from the respondents through the help of advocates practicing in the family court, Child Welfare Committee (CWC) members in the district, and mental health professionals working on family problems. Each of the participants were contacted personally by the researcher and once consent was obtained the place and time for the interviews were fixed with each participant.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed concurrently, i.e., qualitatively and quantitatively based on the research objectives. The aim of the research was to capture both the unique and common voices of the participants of the study. Thematic analysis was chosen as the data analysis method. The process began with transcription. The interviews were translated into English from Malayalam and manually transcribed simultaneously. The best possible equivalent meaning of the Malayalam usage was done, to preserve the gist. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and no attempts have been made to correct the grammar of the participants, to maintain the richness of the data. The nonverbal nuances from the interviews were also transferred to the interviews. These codes were compared and studied to identify the consistencies across the interviews. Repeatedly occurring codes and patterns seen in them were then utilized to derive themes. The themes identified distinctive patterns to understand the families and the adolescent's experience of divorce in a coherent and meaningful fashion.

The SDQ was scored according to the manual and results analysed concurrently. The scores of SDQ gave the overall adjustment along with adjustment in various socio-emotional spheres.

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SDQ data was analyzed in a descriptive format and was used to support the themes that emerged from the interview data. The voices of the adolescents in the interviews were integrated with the SDQ data to obtain a coherent and meaningful picture. This comprehensive data was later summarized to aid the process of weaving together the experience of the effects of divorce on adolescents.

Understanding the Participants of the Study

Before commencing with the findings from the data, it would be important to understand the participants of the study. There were twenty adolescents who participated in the study. The adolescents were in the age range of twelve to seventeen years. There were eleven girls and nine boys. Fourteen adolescent respondents were first born, while the other six were single children. The parents had been divorced for periods of two to five years. All adolescents were in school. Five adolescents lived with their fathers, while fifteen lived with their mothers. In the case of custody arrangements, the father was the custodial parent for four girls and one male child. Mothers were custodial parents for seven girls and eight boys. According to the reports from the participants in the study, in five of their families, the fathers had initiated the divorce proceedings, and in the other fifteen, the mothers had filed for divorce.

RESULTS

This paper examines the effects and outcomes of divorce on children. It has been observed that divorce impacts adolescents mainly at psychological levels; seen as emotional and behavioural outcomes. Some of the themes were directly linked to the objective, for e.g. conduct issues to the objective of the effects of divorce on the self. The links of some other domains were much more indirect, e.g. hyperactivity was seen going with academic lag, as mothers mentioned adolescents get distracted more easily resulting in academic lag.

The Emotional Effects of Divorce

During interviews with the participants, we observed a relationship between divorce and emotions. A significant connection was seen between conflict in the family, the divorce of the parents, and the self-concept in the adolescents. The adolescent participants reported a negative self-concept. They reported the following experiences: feelings of anxiety, low mood, fear, insecurity, low self-confidence, aggressiveness, and shame. Most of the adolescents experienced a sense of togetherness with their parent/s and they were concerned for their parents. In the words of Neema, an adolescent girl of 14 who lived with her mother;

I don't feel, or I don't want to think that I am alone. Now I am thinking of my mom. She needs more support. Sometimes I found that when she talked about the times before the divorce, she had tears in her eyes. Neema, age 14

Many adolescents reported anxiety about the future and an increased sense of responsibility toward their families. Thobias, an adolescent boy, of 17 years shared his experience, "*I was caring towards my brother and mother. I always have anxiety about my mother and brother. I am thinking of what I can do for them in the future*".

Feelings of Emptiness. Most of the adolescents in the study themselves reported that they felt a kind of inner emptiness, because of the absence of their noncustodial parents.

Loneliness was very commonly experienced by many of the adolescents who felt a sense of abandonment. It was succinctly expressed by Kevin, aged 16 years, "*I felt that the friends were trying to make me lonely. I felt that nobody cared for me. I felt that I am set apart from*

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my colleagues". A similar experience was shared by Hridya, "I used to sit alone and talk to myself. After that I feel comfort". Adolescents appeared stressed with a lot of emotional turmoil and most of them felt that they had to keep it to themselves and were unable to share with anyone. This could have a longstanding impact on the individual in the future. In the words of Ardrin,

Sometimes I really miss my parents. I can't share with anyone my feelings. I never used to share my things with others. If I feel more stress or tension then I write it out on paper and later I tear it off.

During the initial stages of the divorce process, most participants reported feeling extremely sad and depressed about their situation.

Akshay shared "sometimes I need both of my parents to live together, I feel if both were together it would have been good". This feeling of emptiness often led to a sense of insecurity and feeling fearful of others. Additionally, adolescents reported feelings of insecurity regarding their future. Gyothsana, shared her feelings about the absence of her father after the divorce,

I feel sometimes that I need my father, I am missing him. If he was with me he would satisfy all my needs. He has lots of money. Now my mother is struggling for money.

Now for any needs and any outing, I need to depend on others. Mother is busy with her school. After the divorce, I did feel not good. I feel kind of lost. Because I don't have a father now. My mother is really struggling and if my mother has any issues, then there is nobody to look after me. Sometimes my grandpa used to take alcohol and shout at my mother.

Experiences reported by participants in this study corroborate previous findings of Deutsch, 2008; Holtzworth-Munroe, Applegate, D'Onofrio, & Bates, 2010.

Positive Feelings of Divorce. From the analysis of the collected data from the study, there emerged a theme of 'Positive Feelings after the Divorce' in the participants' narratives. Participants' responses corroborated the findings of previous studies on divorce (Duggal, Sriram, & Chatterjee, 2019; Mohi, 2015). Half the adolescents in the present study reported that their parents' divorce had a positive effect on their ability to maintain or sustain a good relationship with peers, which was not corroborated by the others. Thobias said, "now we have happiness and peace in our family. I have many friends in my school. My mother supports me in being with my friends. So, the divorce had a positive impact on our life". Kevin also shared, "I am happy and my mother is also happy after the divorce with the father. I have good friends with me in the new school and I felt more need for friends, they are understanding me". An adolescent girl, Pinky had the opinion,

At night I can sleep in calm without any fear of hearing the sounds of the fight between my parents. Earlier I was waking up suddenly hearing the sounds of my parents. I have a close friendship with my cousins after the divorce of my parents. My cousins live close to my mother's house.

Shakir reported, "Now we have a good situation in our family and we are mentally good, we are enjoying peace. I have lots of friends in school and in this neighboring home". Kasthuri

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shared, “we are proud to be with our mother, no issues and we are doing very well than before, she sends me to dancing and music classes, everywhere I have good friends”. Another adolescent girl, Gyothsana said, “There are both negative and positive things in divorce, but I am not thinking about the past”. The data indicates that children in families were aware of and were affected by the adverse relationships between the parents. In cases where there was violence and substance use, divorce meant that the noise level within the families was substantially reduced, resulting in calm.

Data from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). The SDQ assessed the following areas: academic performance, conduct problems, and peer group relationships. Table - A shows the scores from the SDQ on items pertaining to “emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer problems”. It also shows dimensions of internalizing and externalizing problems with high scores indicating difficulties in these particular domains of the behaviour. A total difficulties score was generated by summing up scores from all the scales except the prosocial scale. The externalising score ranges from 0 to 20 and is the sum of the emotional and peer problems scales. The internalising score ranges from 0 to 20 and is the sum of the emotional and peer problems scales. High scores in SDQ were categorized in the following range, i.e., for total difficulties score; 18-19, for emotional problems score; 6, for conduct problems score; 5, for Hyperactivity score; 7, for peer problems score; 4, and for prosocial score; 5.

Table - A

The Scores from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

Name	AGE	M/F	TOTAL DIFFICULTIES	EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS	CONDUCT PROBLEMS	HYPERACTIVITY	PEER PROBLEMS	PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR	EXTERNALIZING	INTERNALIZING
Neema	14	F	10	1	3	3	3	9	6	4
Thobias	17	M	17	4	3	7	3	10	10	7
Kevin	16	M	19	5	5	6	3	9	11	8
Hridya	16	F	17	8	2	3	4	8	5	12
Amal	13	M	18	4	4	8	2	9	12	6
Delna	13	F	15	4	3	5	3	9	8	7
Ardrin	12	M	12	0	3	6	3	10	9	3
Akshay	14	M	16	4	4	6	2	8	10	6
Aparna	17	F	20	3	6	7	4	5	13	7
Agnus	14	F	16	8	2	3	3	9	5	11
Jerom	12	M	25	6	7	6	6	6	13	12
Gyots	14	F	21	8	4	8	1	8	12	9
Pinky	16	F	11	4	2	3	2	8	5	6
Rksana	13	F	23	8	4	8	3	9	12	11
Linet	13	F	17	4	2	4	7	7	6	11
Ksthuri	17	F	12	2	5	4	1	6	9	3
Melbin	17	M	18	4	4	7	3	7	11	7
Shakir	17	M	18	4	4	7	3	9	11	7
Inzu	13	M	18	3	5	7	3	8	12	6
Athulya	16	F	11	5	2	3	1	9	5	6

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SDQ data was analyzed in a descriptive format, the high scores showed the problem area. The data from the SDQ was triangulated with the data derived from the interviews with the adolescents and the parents.

Twenty adolescents were interviewed and among them, eleven girls and nine boys responded to the SDQ. The scores obtained were categorized according to the manual of the SDQ. It was used to support the qualitative themes that emerged from the interview data. Some of the themes were directly linked to the objectives of the study.

Findings from the SDQ clearly indicated conduct issues arising from the effects of divorce on adolescents. Adolescent boys were more prone to exhibit external expressions of emotion and frustration, compared to girls. If we consider Kevin, he got high scores in Total Difficulties, Emotional Problems, and Conduct Problems and the same emerged in the qualitative interview with him and he described his difficulties more elaborately during the interviews. Overall, we found that adolescents' interviews supported the scores of SDQ. Adolescent boys tend to act out feelings of anger, hurt, rage and frustration. This caused trouble at school and incidents with peers, such as fights and other confrontations. Adolescents expressed their frustrations or started conflicts with peers, school and also with parents to vent their frustrations.

It was found that there were psycho-social difficulties in adolescents after the separation of their parents such as conduct problems, acting out, and academic lag. Adolescents showed some difficulties in day- to -day functioning after the divorce and they reported experiencing feelings of anger, outrage, shame, and sadness. Adolescents sometimes reexamined their values and disengaged from the family at this time. Boys showed more acting out, aggressive, and hyperactive behavior as compared to girls.

The links between other domains were more indirect. For example, a relationship with the domains of SDQ, i.e., hyperactivity accompanied academic lag, and adolescents who mentioned that they were easily distracted had academic problems. It had been observed that all children obtained high scores for Hyperactivity. It was reasoned to be arising due to externalizing behaviour at this age. All children achieved high scores for Prosocial Behaviour, which could be due to engagement with peers in school settings and social interaction.

Conduct Issues. Adolescents from divorced and single-parent families demonstrated conduct problems that may be seen as stemming from different transitions after parental separation. Adolescents from financially stable families exhibited fewer behavioral issues as compared to families with limited economic means. Our study corroborates Lensford's findings that after the divorce of their parents' adolescents showed behavioural issues in their circumstances (2006).

After the divorce few adolescents showed stealing behavior, creating parenting challenges for custodial parents. The Custodial mother of Amal shared that, *"he used to steal money from my purse, and sometimes he used to steal things from his friends after the divorce"* Adolescents from divorced families particularly those in divorced single-parent families, often display antisocial, stealing and violent behavior (Breivik & Olweus, 2006).

Acting Out. Most of the adolescents in the sample demonstrated hyperactivity in their behaviour. After the divorce of their parents, in an attempt to survive in a hostile environment, children have been noted to take the side of the parent they were presently living with, and

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this was seen among fourteen adolescents in our study. This may manifest in refusal to talk to the other parent on the phone, or reluctance to share time with the other parent. Seven adolescents showed this kind of behaviour initially after the divorce, of which five were girls. Adolescents were acting out in ways similar to how their parents were behaving. Delna, aged 13 years said, *“I used to get angry immediately. I don’t know how it happened to me. But at the same time, I support my mother”*.

Boys are regarded as more externally expressive than girls, they act out their anger, frustration, and hurt (Ubaidi, 2017). They may get into trouble in school, and fight more with peers and parents. Girls have been seen as internalizing their distress. They may become depressed, develop headaches or stomach aches, and have changes in their eating and sleeping patterns. Akshay, an adolescent boy expressed similar feelings, *“now I am getting more angry towards others. I don’t know exactly what was happening. Sometimes I can’t control myself”*. Linet, a thirteen-year-old girl, expressed almost similar problems, *“I get angry very soon. I fight with my twin brother. At that time, mother used to scold me more, then I used to back answer her”*. Kevin complained that after the divorce of his parents, he experienced somatic issues like stomach aches and headaches during his studies. Many children reported physical complaints while concentrating on their studies rather than any psychological issues. But from the expressions of the participants, it was understood that there was a psychosomatic relationship in their experiences of ‘physical illness’. According to Jerome, *“sometimes during the studies, I feel headache; at that time, I am not able to study anything”*.

It was observed that adolescents tested their parent's loyalty. Adolescents expressed their anger over the divorce through different behaviors. Some refused to spend time with or talk to the non-custodial parent, even on the phone and sometimes the child badmouthed the other parent. Sometimes an adolescent told to each parent different and opposing things about what they wanted and other times adolescents tried to please both parents and reported experiencing divided loyalties. Sometimes adolescents played the role of mature child or ‘little adult’ indicating levels of parentification. They did not want to hurt either parent and sometimes they forced the parents to interact in an attempt to prevent the divorce from happening. Observations during the interviews revealed that Kevin, Pearly’s son, often supported his mother and tried to make her comfortable and reduce her stress about the future.

Academic Lag. Most of the children reported that they did not face any issues in academic performance. While looking through the interviews of adolescents with divorced parents, the researcher was able to detect a pattern that ran through their answers. Although most participants reported that they did well in school, and did not have much trouble with academics, there were differences in experiences. During the initial stages of their parents’ divorce, many faced difficulties in their studies because of a change in school. Fifteen adolescents reported that they had to change schools after their parents’ divorce. But after one or two years, they were able to adapt to the new situations. Neema said that *“I never had an issue in my studies and always scored more than 90 percent of marks. Before that I had tension that whether I would be able to study the ICSE syllabus, I would cope with reality”*. Gyothsana also had a positive remark,

No issues in studies; but in my previous school I was enjoying more with my friends and the teachers were well known to my family. Then also I am concentrating more on my studies. I am getting good scores here.

When asked how they would overall describe their academic life adolescents experienced a dip in school performance immediately following the divorce. Literature indicates that youth

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who experienced parental divorce attain lower levels of education (Sigal, et, al, 2012). Adolescents achieved a lower overall grade as compared to the previous academic years. They reported difficulty in concentrating on their studies. Shakir shared, *“there is a problem in my studies. I am not able to concentrate on my studies as I had in the earlier”*. Linet, an adolescent girl also had a similar opinion; according to her;

Earlier I was studying in an English medium school and the present school is Malayalam medium. I am trying my best through the tuition but not getting enough marks in the exam. The school changed only because of the shift of our residence from my father’s home to my mother’s home and it was after the divorce.

A study done by Van Dolen, Weinberg, and Ma (2013) found that adolescent children of divorced parents had “higher levels of misbehavior and aggression, poorer academic performance and reduced likelihood of participating in school education” (p.- 178).

Many adolescents reported difficulty in sustaining attention while studying and during class. Akshay reported feeling easily distracted in the classroom after the divorce of his parents and also reported feeling fearful in class. According to him, *“I was not able to sit quietly and attend the class. I was a problem child in my school. But sometimes I feel I am alone. I do have the fear feeling, I will get sad soon”*. Delna shared, *“I am not good at scoring good marks in exams”*. Thobias also shared this sentiment, *“after the divorce of my parents I lost interest in studies and all other activities”* as did Kevin, *“regarding the studies I had difficulty in concentration. I felt a kind of loneliness that always made me distracted in my studies. Yes, that was the only issue”*.

Parentification of the Adolescents

Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) used the term “parentification” to refer to “the process through which a child adopts the responsibilities of an adult, with the adult, in turn, adopting the position of the child in the parent-child relationship”. “Parentification refers to the process through which children are assigned the role of an adult, taking on both emotional and functional responsibilities that typically are performed by the parent” (Hooper, 2008, Pp- 213). When discussing parentification, it is important to note that there are two subtypes of the phenomenon, “emotional” and “instrumental” parentification, each of which may be associated with differing consequences for child development and, ultimately, adult outcomes (Aldridge, 2006; Hooper, 2008; Katz, Petracca, & Rabinowitz, 2009).

Emotional parentification requires the child to fulfill the specific emotional and/or psychological needs of a parent and is more often destructive for child development than instrumental parentification (Hooper, 2008). Kevin, an adolescent of 16 years, was the emotional support for his mother. During the interview when his mother started to cry, Kevin identified it and he came to her, consoled her, sat with her, and hugged her. Although a small degree of parentification can be beneficial to child development, this process can become pathological when the tasks become too burdensome or when the child feels obligated to take on the role of an adult (Engelhardt, 2012). From the adolescent respondents of the study, parentification could be observed in the interactions with the custodial parent. Fourteen of the adolescents were first borns and played an active role in the home situation, interceding with their younger siblings for their parents.

It was observed explicitly that emotional parentification was seen more often with the male adolescents whose custody was with their mother. Jerome, an adolescent boy, aged 12 years

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shared that, “I am not able to tell anything sad to my mom because while hearing my problems she starts to cry and I don’t need to see that she is crying. So, I am always trying to make her happy.” Insecure-avoidant attachment is typically observed in children whose caregivers are emotionally unavailable and unresponsive to the child’s needs. These children often appear prematurely independent and consistently avoid contact with the caregiver (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). Emotional parentification causes “particular dysfunction in the mother- child relationship and thereby hinders the development of a secure attachment, the child is typically unable to form healthy peer relationships” (Macfie, Houts, & Cox, 2005).

Instrumental parentification, refers to “the parentification of children through the assignment of functional responsibilities, such as shopping, paying bills, cooking meals for the family, and taking care of the general logistics of running a household” (Engelhardt, 2012). Hridya used to take care of her father and she used to manage many of the household chores in the family. An adolescent boy Thobias, aged 17 years cared for his mother; he said,

I used to take care of my mother. She is afraid of being alone at night. So, if I am late for school I insist my brother be with her in the evening. I myself purchase grocery items from the shop for the house.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the impact of divorce on adolescents revealed both positive and negative changes in emotions, psychological functioning, and behavioral issues. Immediately after the divorce, families reported more negative feelings and experiences and in later stages, individuals gradually adjusted to the reality of divorce with positive feelings and a positive attitude. Adolescents reported missing the non-custodial parent and feelings of anger towards them. They felt more responsible and some reported an increased sense of sympathy with the custodial parent. The majority of the adolescents in this study had academic problems at some time in their schooling, and some adolescents connected their grades with fights between their parents. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) found issues of academic problems, conduct issues, hyperactivity, and internalizing behaviour among the adolescent participants. From academic study we inferred that it was not the divorce that directly affected each student’s grades, but the fighting between parents that contributed to low academic performance in examinations and generally not doing well in classes. While the rapidly rising divorce rate in Kerala has contributed to problems in children’s schooling, it was noted to be less problematic than fighting between parents and the recurrent conflict that comes with that in the intact family.

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