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## Divorce, Loss and Grief: An Overview of Their Effect on Children and Adolescents and Theoretical Framework

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### ABSTRACT

During the marriage process, parents play a very important role for their children's mental health, social and emotional development. The development of children who grow up in a peaceful environment with their parents and do not experience parental loss is healthy. However, frequent and severe conflicts and disagreements within the family affect children negatively in many ways. Like adults, children and adolescents may encounter many negative experiences throughout their lives. The experience of losing a loved one can also reveal feelings such as sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, anger, and guilt. Individuals in childhood and adolescence, whose personality, social, emotional and psychological development continue, can also be seriously affected by these negative experiences. In this context, in this study, theoretical information about the divorce of parents, loss and grief processes were examined based on the literature, and the effects of these experiences on children and adolescents were discussed.

**KeyWords:** Divorce, loss, grief, child, adolescent.

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## **Introduction**

The family is the smallest unit in the social structure formed as a result of the relations between couples, children and siblings based on marriage and kinship. The life that creates the family is marriage. Marriage; It is an experience that satisfies the psychological and physiological needs of people, causes changes in people's lives, changes their habits, and includes practicing the perceived couple roles in society (Küçükali, 2018; Şener & Terzioğlu, 2008). From past to present, people have always needed to get married and create a family within social norms. Thus, the family, which has become one of the most important institutions for the society, has been seen as the most important factor for a healthy society. In addition, the problems and conflicts in the family negatively affect the cultural and social structure of the society (Öztürk, 2006). Families play an important role for children to be psychologically, emotionally and socially compatible and healthy (Fiyakalı, 2008).

Only people know that one day they will surely die. For this reason, it is inevitable to experience anxiety (Geçtan, 1990). According to the statistics of the World Health Organization, approximately 57 million people die every year in the world (WHO, 2016). The causes of these deaths are health problems, war, violence, terrorism, disasters, traffic accidents, suicides and murders. People who have lost their loved ones experience a grief process. After the death of a person they care about, people have to deal with feelings such as pain and grief.

People can experience many impressive negative events in their lives, such as divorce, loss, and the ensuing grief. Children and adolescents who experience these negative experiences can be adversely affected by these processes. For this reason, it is very important to investigate the effect of the grief process after divorce and loss on children and adolescents. By identifying these effects, it is aimed to increase the awareness of these children and adolescents.

This research, in which the qualitative research method is used, is a review research. According to Herdman (2006), review studies contribute to the synthesis and summarization of research and theoretical approaches on a subject. In this context, in this study, a general theoretical approach is presented about divorce and loss and the grief process caused by them. In addition, the effects of these processes on children and adolescents are discussed.

## **Divorce**

When the couples are alive, the termination of the marriage union based on a valid excuse within the framework of the law is called divorce (Akıntürk, 2002). Although divorce is seen as an escape from unhappiness, it also means the end of marriage and family, which started with great expectation, happiness and hope. Even if the divorce is a necessary condition, different problems may arise for the couples. Since divorced couples can be negatively affected psychologically and socially, the divorce process should not be seen as a return to single life (Yörükoğlu, 2012).

The sociocultural and economic changes experienced in recent years have caused significant changes in the family and marriage structure. Societies that showed more patriarchal characteristics and consisted of extended families in the past have taken on more democratic structures nowadays, and nuclear family and fragmented family structures have begun to emerge. Undoubtedly, children are most affected in broken families. As a result, the social and emotional development of children and adolescents may be interrupted (Bilici, 2014; Öztürk, 2006).

The phenomenon of divorce, which exists with marriage in every period from primitive societies to today's modern age, has been seen as an experience that is difficult to accept (Sezal, 1996). Divorce rates in developing and developed countries have increased

significantly in recent years. Although divorce rates in Turkey are lower than in Western countries, they continue to increase in recent years (Binay, 2018). While the number of divorced couples in Turkey was 143,573 in 2018, this number increased to 155,047 in 2019. While 36% of divorces occur in the first five years of marriage, 20% occur between 6-10 years. A large number of children and adolescents are affected by this event. These children have to live with either their mother or father. In 2019, 139,660 children were given custody to one parent due to divorce. It was determined that 76% of these children were given to their mothers and 24% to their fathers (TUIK, 2020).

### **The Causes for Divorce**

Divorce is very important because it is a phenomenon that closely concerns many people in terms of process and outcome. In the literature, there are many studies investigating the reasons for divorce. Gökçe (2020) listed the reasons for divorce as follows in her research on divorced adults: Expectations, conflicts, other relationships, families' approach, children's reactions, and reactions that make it difficult-facilitating. According to the results of the research, the reasons for divorce are; emotional, sexual, economic and relational reasons. According to the research of Kaya and Tan-Eren (2020), the reasons for divorce are; adultery, intent on life, bad or dishonorable behavior, perpetration, living with dishonor, abandonment, mental illness, disruption of marital union, couples' agreement in divorce and de facto separation. According to the research conducted by Aktaş-Akoğlu and Küçükkaragöz (2018), the reasons for divorce are seen as verbal or physical violence, leaving home, bad habits, family intervention by relatives, financial issues, disagreement, irresponsibility, sexual problems and derangement.

It is a known fact that there are divorces in every period, in every society, in every culture and in every country. Although it is known that the reasons for divorce vary according to culture and society, it is understood that there are some main reasons for divorce. The general reasons for divorce are presented below:

- Before marriage, the couples cannot get to know each other well and the person does not have the opportunity to choose the person to marry,
- The couples have different socioeconomic and cultural environments,
- Couples interfering in each other's lives and severely restricting their freedom,
- Couples having communication problems,
- Frequent interference by the families of the couples in the marriage,
- Experiencing economic problems,
- Gaining the ability to seek rights as a result of women gaining economic independence with the increase in their education level,
- Experiencing the problem of pathological jealousy and distrust between couples (Özgüven, 2000).

### **The Effect of Divorce on Children and Adolescents**

During the marriage process, parents play a very important role for their children's psychological, social and emotional health. The psychological development of children who grow up in a peaceful environment with their parents is healthy. However, frequent and severe conflicts and disagreements within the family, uneasiness and tension affect children negatively in many ways (Öztürk, 2006). It is seen that children who are unhappy in the family, whose parents often have problems and who cannot divorce with a healthy communication, experience all the problems that their parents experience. These children, who cannot share their feelings with anyone in a healthy way, are likely to reflect their problems in different ways. Accordingly, these children may experience nail biting, buying

things without permission, wetting the bed, getting sick frequently, experiencing depressive symptoms and being addicted to drugs (Tarhan, 2012).

The reactions of children whose parents divorced are similar to the reactions of their parents. The mostly observed reactions in these children can be listed as follows:

- Not accepting and denying divorce,
- Excessive anger towards the factors that caused the divorce,
- Making an effort to reconcile his parents,
- Beginning to show depressive symptoms,
- Finally, accepting the divorce (Özgüven, 2000).

During the divorce process, many changes occur in the life patterns of children and adolescents. These children and adolescents can leave from their parents and their homes, they may participate in a new social environment, change their school, friends and teachers (Türkarslan, 2007).

Adolescents have the mental capacity to evaluate their parents' divorce decisions. They may think about the solution of problems in marriage and the necessity of divorce (Senol, 2006). However, these thinking skills do not mean that adolescents are not affected by divorce. Adolescents may be greatly affected by the divorce process because of their behaviors similar to their parents and their dependence on them. Behaviors such as low self-esteem, anger towards parents, and excessive dependence may occur in these children (Öz, 2005).

Adolescents whose parents are divorced become risky in many ways. These risk factors are addressed on six bases:

- Low academic achievement,
- Externalization problems (such as aggressive attitudes, criminal behavior),
- Internalization problems (such as low self-esteem, depressive symptoms and anxiety),
- Problems experienced in social development,
- Problems in close relationships (divorce in own marriage, inability to have harmonious relationships),
- Deterioration of psychological functionality in adulthood (Emery, 2003).

In addition to these problems, some divorces can provide better conditions for children and adolescents. Adolescents who had to live with a family dominated by conflict, restlessness and tension may have higher levels of well-being after their parents divorced. These children and adolescents may begin to live in a calmer and more peaceful environment after divorce (Anderson, 2014; Baynal, 2018; Öngider, 2013). These different findings show that the divorce process does not only have a negative side for children, adolescents and parents.

### **Loss and Grief**

The grief process does not only occur with the death of a loved one. The difficult life events that cause the grief process are diverse and complex. Loss in human life is generally divided into two. Miscarriage during pregnancy, death, illness, and divorce are referred to as "Conditional Loss". "Developmental Loss" includes the loss experiences that occur when a baby is weaned, a child emerges from childhood, and an adolescent is separated from his parents (Wilson, 2014).

There are many research findings that people who have lost a loved one can have serious health problems, weak immune system, and high depressive symptoms (Maddocks, 2003; McCoyd, Koller, & Walter, 2021; Zisook et al., 1994). Parents who lose their children experience anger, hopelessness, insensitivity and guilt (Hazzard, Weston, & Gutterres, 1992).

Grief reactions experienced after loss are generally handled under four main headings: emotional, physical, intellectual and behavioral. Emotional reactions are seen as sadness, anger, shock, fatigue, loneliness, fear, reluctance, hopelessness and helplessness. Physical reactions include a feeling of emptiness in the stomach, feeling sluggish and weak, cotton mouth, stenocardia and asphyxia. Intellectual reactions may include disbelief, confusion, distorted beliefs, distractibility, hallucinations, disturbing thoughts, dreams, and forgetfulness. Finally, behavioral grief reactions may include eating and sleeping problems, obsessive and careless behavior, substance abuse, escaping from things related to the lost person, and denial of the reality of death (Zara, 2011).

### **The Impact of Loss and Grief on Children and Adolescents**

Studies examining the grief process in children are insufficient when compared to studies examining adults. However, considering the problems seen in children and adolescents after experiences such as divorce and loss, the importance of such studies draws attention. There are many factors that affect the grief process in children and adolescents. The child's personality traits, relationship with the deceased, ability to cope with problems, perceived social support, perception of death, socioeconomic status of the family and cultural belief affect the grief process (Bildik, 2013). Depression, trauma, anger, fear, shock and low achievement are observed in child adolescents who experience loss and grief (Balk, 1981; Uluğ, 2008). In addition, children and adolescents in the grief process may react to thinking about the health of the people in their lives, not accepting the changes in their lives, worrying about the future, feeling injustice and loneliness (Goodman, 2007). Grief experienced in early childhood causes situations such as regression, loneliness, sleep problems, social incompatibilities, sadness, disobedience and aggression (Öngören, 2017).

Although children and adolescents who experience loss and grief have various reactions, this process generally follows four stages. First, children and adolescents experience shock, do not believe in loss, deny it, shout, cry, not accept death, or show no reaction. After this, children and adolescents who pass to the protest stage, which is another stage, are quite restless. In addition, these people often cry, feel an intense longing for the person they lost, and often question this event. These children and adolescents in the third stage experience various negative emotions. The most important emotion of this stage is hopelessness. Individuals who feel serious anger at the phenomenon of death can sometimes blame themselves. Individuals who pass the final stage, the acceptance stage, accept that the person they lost will not return. However, these individuals continue their daily lives with rituals such as visiting graves and looking at old pictures (Sezer and Saya, 2009; cited in Kaytez, 2020).

The reactions of children and adolescents who have experienced loss may vary according to their life periods. Reactions in the grief process for children and adolescents are discussed in five periods. Each period has a certain belief and grief reaction.

**Infancy:** Although the concept of death is not expected to be understood in this period, the baby can notice the absence of the deceased. Babies may call this person and cry often. They may have problems with eating and sleeping, they may be emotionally withdrawn and have a sad facial expression. In addition, separation anxiety, hypersensitivity, and loss of developmental characteristics can be observed.

**Ages 3-6:** The phenomenon of death in this period is reversible and temporary. As a grief reaction, baby talk, thumb sucking, wanting to sleep with a sibling or parent, and changes in eating and sleeping habits are seen. As a complicated grief response, frequent crying, outbursts of anger, bedwetting, sleep problems and deterioration in social relationships can be seen.

6-9 Years: Children in this age group perceive death as a punishment and blame themselves. At the age of seven, there is an idea that death is inevitable and that it will happen to everyone. Children may begin to behave similarly to the behavior of the person they lost. School refusal, suicidal thoughts and regressive behaviors may be encountered in these children, who may have difficulties in adapting to school and focusing on lessons.

Ages 9-12: Children who know what death means have the idea that death is the end. They experience feelings of anxiety, shame, anger, sadness, and guilt, and they behave aggressively and have attachment problems. In addition to these normal grief reactions, it is possible to experience complicated grief reactions such as fear of abandonment and fear of death.

Adolescence (12 years and later): There is a thought that death is an irreversible phenomenon for this age group. Even though they know that everyone will die one day, they think that it will happen for them in a very distant future. Adolescents experiencing loss and grief may experience guilt, responsibility, and anger. Complicated grief reactions include mood swings, low academic achievement, school refusal, depression, substance abuse, sexual behavior, and social isolation (Bildik, 2013).

### **Purposes of Psychological Counseling with Children and Adolescents in Loss and Grief Process**

In grief counseling, it is aimed to support the grief individual to adapt to their life. The therapist has four goals in the grief counseling process. These goals are:

- Enabling the client to accept the reality of death,
- Supporting the client in the loss process in coping with behavioral and emotional pain,
- Helping the client to reorganize their feelings and thoughts after the loss experience,
- Supporting the client to reorganize their life (Worden, 2009).

The attitudes of psychological counselors are very important in the experiences of children and adolescents in the grief process. Winokuer and Harris (2016) explained the aims of grief counseling as follows:

- Preparing a reliable environment where the client can express their feelings and experiences,
- Supporting the client to adapt to the post-loss process and make their own decisions,
- Encouraging the client to adapt to their new life and to maintain their bond with the deceased,
- Providing support to the client so that they can focus on the grief process in a reliable environment,
- Informing the client about the changes that can be seen in people who have experienced grief,
- Supporting the client to make sense of life after the loss of a loved one,
- Giving the client the skills to cope with grief,
- Helping the client to reveal their strengths in coping with the problems experienced,
- Encouraging the client to contact relationships with other people after the loss (Winokuer & Harris, 2016).

### **The Techniques in Psychological Counseling with Children and Adolescents in Loss and Grief Process**

There are some techniques to be used in the counseling process to ensure that the grief process is harmonious. These techniques are listed below:

- **Cognitive Restructuring.** After the loss experience, children and adolescents may have irrational thoughts such as “I am nothing without he/she” or “I cannot achieve anything without he/she”. With this technique, it is aimed that children and adolescents have positive thoughts by restructuring.
- **Letter-Writing.** The child and adolescent are asked to write a letter containing their feelings about the deceased person. The purpose of this technique is to reveal the hidden feelings of the child and adolescent and make them aware of their feelings.
- **Drawing.** This technique is aimed at children who are not skilled at writing. Children who do not have sufficient skills to express their feelings by writing are expected to express their feelings and thoughts by drawing a picture.
- **Role Playing.** It is a technique that aims to reduce the anxiety of children and adolescents who take on new roles after the loss experience. New roles can be implemented in this technique.
- **Provocative language.** It is very important to use words that enable children and adolescents to express their feelings. For example, instead of saying "You lost your mother", it's like saying "Your mother won't be back anymore".
- **Guided tongue.** The adolescent is asked to think of the deceased as sitting in an empty chair. Thus, adolescents relax by revealing their feelings (Worden, 2009).

### **How to Approach Children and Adolescents in Loss and Grief Process?**

The death case should be told to children and adolescents together with the child's relatives. The place should be prepared and a calm environment should be created and the child should be seated. It must be said who died, how he died. It is possible for the child's reactions such as crying, shouting, shock. Untruthful statements about the deceased to children in the process of loss and grief should be avoided. Otherwise, children's feelings and thoughts may become more complex and the grief process may become difficult (Granot, 2005).

Some suggestions have been made by the Turkish Psychological Association (2014) on how to approach children who experience loss and grief. These recommendations are presented below:

- Disclosure of the loss process should not be delayed. However, in case of shock, it should be waited.
- No lies should be told and age-appropriate and accurate information should be given about the process.
- It should be helped to express the experienced situation and to enact the event.
- A suitable environment should be prepared for them to express their feelings and thoughts.
- The phenomenon of death should not be explained with metaphysical concepts such as magic.
- Especially parents should be sensitive to their children's reactions and needs.
- Children should be made to feel a sense of sincerity during the grief process.
- Children may blame themselves for the death experienced due to the life period they are in. At this point, adults should be careful and prevent children from judging themselves.
- Children's current habits at home and school should be maintained as much as possible without changing them (TPA, 2014).

### **Results and Discussions**



Like adults, children and adolescents may encounter many negative experiences throughout their lives. While these negative experiences affect people negatively in many ways, they can also cause problems such as anger, hopelessness, guilt and anxiety. Children and adolescents whose personality, social, emotional and spiritual development continue can be seriously affected by these negative experiences. In this context, in this study, theoretical information about divorce, loss and the grief process is given based on the literature, and the effects of these experiences on children and adolescents are discussed.

Children are the most affected by the divorce process, which has been increasing in Turkey in recent years (Türkarslan, 2007). In addition, children and adolescents who have lost a loved one also experience problems. All these difficult experiences bring along a grief process. In this context, children and adolescents who cannot receive the necessary attention, support and help may face serious problems. For this reason, it is very important to know the mental, emotional and social difficulties of these children and adolescents and to take precautions accordingly.

In this review study, studies in the literature and theoretical sources were examined. Children and adolescents who experience the grief process caused by parental divorce generally have problems such as low academic achievement, depressive symptoms, deterioration in social relations and psychological adjustment, low self-esteem, aggressive tendencies, impulsivity and mental health deterioration. (Çakmak et al., 2018; Erdim & Ergün, 2016; Fiyakalı, 2008; Geniş, Toker & Şakiroğlu, 2019; Gregory, 2016; Şirvanlı, 1999). Üzbe-Atalay and Kurt-Ulucan (2018) examined adolescents whose parents were divorced. According to the results of the research, they state that the most common problems are family, psychological, economic, health, relational and school related. On the other hand, it is seen that divorce can have positive effects for parents and children. Sancaklı (2014) conducted a research with divorced parents. In this study, parents stated that their children experienced positive developments such as being self-confident, responsible and resourceful, and relaxed. Similarly, ending the conflict environment in the family, living with a healthy parent, rarely meeting with a problematic parent, and developing positive relationships with both parents can be expressed as the positive effects of divorce on children and adolescents (Alegöz et al., 2017). In another study, many of the participants stated that they felt better after divorce and had a more positive outlook on life. It is seen that children who witness psychological or physical violence in the family also encourage their parents to divorce (Baynal, 2018). When divorce is evaluated in this context, it can be said that it does not have a single dimension and that divorce can have positive and negative effects.

In children and adolescents in the grief process, serious problems such as loneliness, anger, anxiety, inability to accept death, crying frequently, anxiety, guilt, regression behaviors, sleep problems, problematic interpersonal relationships, school refusal, attachment problems, substance abuse and suicidal thoughts may be experienced (Attepe, 2010; Güloğlu and Karairmak, 2017; Özdal and Aral, 2005; Tatarer, 2020; Vural, 2021). If the necessary intervention is not made for loss, divorce and grief, this experience can leave important traces in the lives of children and adolescents. Mental health professionals and family members have important roles in counseling with children and adolescents in these cases. For this reason, it is necessary to increase the research on these issues and to inform the relevant adults.

Some suggestions can be made to researchers who will conduct research in the related literature. Qualitative research can be conducted to reveal the difficulties faced by children and adolescents who experience negative experiences such as divorce, loss and grief. In fact, longitudinal studies examining these children and adolescents can be carried out in order to reveal the long-term effects of these processes. In addition, in order to protect the mental health of these children and adolescents, experimental studies involving psychological counseling can contribute to the literature.

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