

POST-QUALIFYING CERTIFICATE IN  
COUNSELLING CHILDREN AND YOUNG  
PEOPLE

EDINBURGH 2006

**BRENDA DUTHIE**

**“Describe one specialist area of work with young people and evaluate the use of a variety of creative interventions in your working practice”**

*(Word Count: 3215 excluding titles, quotations and references)*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This assignment requires close consideration of a specialist area of involvement in counselling young people and an assessment of creative methods of intervention in practice. As a counsellor working with children whose parents have separated or divorced I will focus my attention on this topic, looking at the principal issues arising these young people and their families. I will consider the affects on the young person bearing in mind their developmental stage and cognitive ability.

The grief model is a useful method of looking at divorce as it offers an opportunity to view the effects on children as part of a normal process of grieving for the losses in their lives and adapting to the changes required. It also assists us when they become stuck along the process and develop symptomatic behaviour. Comparisons have often been made as to outcomes for children from families where there has been a divorce or a death and it is interesting to look at the similarities and differences of these two groups. This is particularly pertinent to my practice given that a number of the young people I see have been bereaved by a close family member as well as by their parents' divorce.

Finally I shall evaluate the effectiveness of straightforward counselling for this client group and consider other creative interventions that can be helpful in the therapeutic setting. I will assess their appropriateness given the age and stage of the young person, paying attention to any contraindications.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Increasing divorce rates in the UK highlight the need to pay attention to the needs of children affected by parental separation. It is estimated that 19% of children born to married couples will experience divorce by the age of 10 years and 28% by the age of 16. However these figures underestimate the number of young people affected by family breakdown as they exclude those whose cohabiting parents have separated (Rodgers and Pryor 1998).

Many children cope extremely well after their parents' separation and indeed may cope better if there is an improvement in their situation, for example in the case of

those affected by alcohol, drugs or violence. Problems tend to be short-term and include feelings of sadness, guilt and concern, low self-esteem, difficulties in relationships and losses in family or friendship supports. Adjustments are required to cope with changes in finances, housing, school and family structure. However, children can cope if there is amicable communication between parents and good, regular contact with both parents. As stated by Rodgers and Pryor:

*“The immediate distress surrounding parental separation fades with time and most children settle into a pattern of normal development” (Rodgers and Pryor 1998).*

Nonetheless, studies between children from separated families and those from intact families indicate poor outcomes for the former group. It would be too simplistic to assume that divorce or separation in itself is the prime factor and it is fundamental that we view divorce as a process that families experience rather than a one-off event.

Worden identifies some of the distinguishing features between loss through divorce as opposed to death. Fantasies of parents reuniting can continue for these children. Acceptance of the finality of the situation is less likely and the task of rebuilding a new life becomes difficult. Conflict before, during and after a separation places stress on children by making them feel they need to take sides.

## **ISSUES AND CONCERNS**

The grief model is a useful method of comprehending the complexities of the divorce process. Worden proposes that the grief process can be considered as four “tasks”:

- To accept the reality of the loss
- To experience the pain of grief
- To adjust to an environment in which the significant person is no longer present
- To reinvest emotional energy (Worden 1982)

These tasks are not finite stages and overlap with each other. Young people may appear to complete all the tasks only to return to the early task again at another significant transition in their lives such as during adolescence or when graduating, marrying or having a child:

*“Mourning for a childhood loss can be revived at many points in life, especially when important life events reactivate the loss” (Worden1996)*

Jewett speaks of three basic “phases”: early grief, acute grief and subsiding grief (Jewett 1982). She points to the fact that no matter how trivial the loss seems, the same process must be gone through each time even if the length and intensity differ. In my practice I am aware of children completing these phases after a separation only to go through the same process when the divorce is settled or a stepparent is introduced, often many years later. David, at 9 years old became less clingy to his mother after some initial counselling but returned to see me two years later when he felt jealous of his mother’s new partner.

The early phase of grief is characterised by feelings of shock, alarm and denial. Children may be shocked if they were not aware of difficulties in their parents’ relationship. They may believe that something magical will happen to make parents change their minds or may go about their lives as if nothing has happened and keep the reality at a distance. Children may be fearful about who will care for them when parents appear more vulnerable. They may become clingy or overactive. In denying the reality they may reject a parent or a parent’s new partner. Jake, aged 7 years, told me that his wish was for his mother, father and stepfather to live together even although he witnessed aggression between all the adults whereas Marie, aged 14 years could not accept her mother’s new partner even though she felt that he was good to her and her mother. Often children blame the absent partner and feel rejected though on other occasions they may blame the resident parent, particularly if that parent instigated the break-up. Joe, aged 15 years was always close to his mother but when she decided to end the marriage Joe refused to see her and moved to live with his father, with whom he had a distant relationship.

Worden's task of helping the child to accept the reality of the loss is paramount. At this stage children need adults to communicate openly and honestly with them, without burdening them with adult issues. This needs to be done at an age appropriate level. Children may notice overt or covert messages about how to please one parent to the exclusion of the other or may believe that they should deny any feelings. Jewitt refers to a "conspiracy of silence" which denies the child's right to display emotions. Whilst a certain amount of denial to be expected, if the child becomes stuck then they may have difficulty in forming other relationships (Jewitt, 1984).

In the acute phase of grief children will yearn for the loss of a parent and the loss of the family and fantasise that parents will reunite. This is even when there has been violence or abuse, particularly with young children at the magical thinking stage of development. Children will find this phase especially difficult due to visits from the absent parent. When these visits are unreliable, the resident parent often ceases contact, believing this to be in the child's best interests. However, Jewett cautions against such action:

*...this part of grieving is best resolved over the long term by experiencing the yearning, by being able to share it without it being discounted, and by letting go a bit at a time of the hope that the wish will come true. Visiting also allows the child, through trial and error, to work towards not only accepting the situation but making the best of it. It helps him take as completely as possible the good available from the visiting parent, without losing her completely; and it helps remove the child's feelings that the vanished parent found him unlovable or not good enough." (Jewett, 1982)*

Jewett believes that there is a conflict between giving up what has been lost and wishing to hold onto it. Although the conflict is painful, if it is buried, it may not be resolved and may appear later in life. Rachel was referred to me when she was 10 years old due to her preoccupation about seeing her father with whom she had lost contact. Due to her father's inconsistency her mother had terminated contact but years later Rachel yearned to re-establish contact.

Experiencing strong emotions is also a feature of this second phase of grief. Feelings of anger, guilt, sadness, fear, concern and shame are significant. Worden states that it is important to work through these emotions otherwise they will display themselves in other ways. A child's ability to express the feelings aroused by the loss will be influenced by the adults' expression of emotions and it is important that adults are assisted in coping with their distress. Adults trying to cope with children's emotions may feel too upset or guilty to allow their children to be heard. Ian's father was unable to accept that his son was struggling after the separation as every weekend he involved him in a busy schedule that did not allow for feelings to be expressed. Ian, aged 15 years, believed that if he were to express his emotions his father might not see him again. As Jewett points out:

*“Even in peripherally involved adults a child's loss strikes a deep chord, triggering strong feelings left over from past losses, separations or rejections of their own” (Jewett 1982)*

Despair is the most painful stage of grief to experience. Physical symptoms, a pessimistic outlook and a lack of interest in normal activities often accompany this stage. Suicidal ideation may feature. Scott, aged 16 years, showed me his song lyrics in which he aired his bleak thoughts about himself and his future. The death of his grandmother shortly after his parents' separation had given way to such despair.

The final aspect of the acute phase is reorganisation where the child is able to involve himself in a new life, has an acceptance of the loss and has adapted to it. This leads onto the final phase of subsiding grief where the child is able to integrate the loss and has increased self-esteem. Joseph returned to see me a year after the original referral simply to let me know how well he was feeling after a very troubled period in his early teens.

## **DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES**

Pre-school children feel that they are central to the problem and may believe they caused the separation. They also tend to indulge in magical thinking and believe that parents will reunite. They can become clingy, fear being abandoned and show regressive behaviour. Children at the age of 7 or 8 years tend to think in concrete terms and are less likely to cope with ambiguities and can be very black and white in their thinking. At around 9 years children develop an ability to view life in more abstract ways and can often take a stand about divorce, feeling angry with the parent they feel caused the divorce. During adolescence the child's need to individuate from the family may come into conflict with the needs of the family at a time of crisis. They may worry about their own ability to form relationships (McDonough & Bartha, 1999)

## **CREATIVE INTERVENTIONS**

The use of straightforward counselling is at times sufficient for enabling a child to relate his story, make sense of it and explore options for the future. However, its use in isolation depends very much on the individual child's personal preferences, developmental stage and cognitive ability. Most adolescents are able to use straightforward counselling although in the case of Louise, aged 14, she found it difficult to cope with this approach as eye contact was not easy for her. In her case I had to seek a more creative intervention that did not seem babyish to her and she responded well to art therapy. Michael, aged 8, despite his youth, was quite clear that he had come to talk and did not need to rely on alternative interventions to tell his story.

Creative interventions allow the child to tell his story either directly or indirectly, and to express his emotions. They tend to stimulate the child's interest, help him to relax and enable him to respond in a more natural manner. Geldard & Geldard, 1997 point to the fact that:

*“Media may also allow the child to connect with her emotions and may act as a vehicle through which she can express these emotions. This is a two-*

*stage process: the child needs to get in touch with her emotional feelings, and then to express them.”*

A wide range of creative interventions is available to the counsellor and choice of media depends on the interests of the child and the counsellor and availability. I will highlight some of the options and show their suitability according to the child's developmental stage and cognitive ability as well as the aims of counselling for the child. It is important to note however that many of these interventions are very powerful and to embark upon these without any cognitive work could be damaging for a child, particularly if trauma or abuse has been a feature. Furthermore, any intervention should be carried out with the child's complete acceptance.

### **Puppets**

Puppets are particularly useful when working with younger children. They enable children to devise their own stories and to project ideas on to the puppets. Geldard and Geldard, 1997 point to the difference between imaginative pretend play and using puppets in that in the former the child role-plays and identifies with the character he has created whereas when using puppets the child sees the puppets as separate from himself and can *“without restraint, attribute to the puppets and soft toys, beliefs, behaviours and personalities which he believes are quite different from his own”*. Puppets are a particularly effective way for the child to deal indirectly with difficult issues and can offer a protective element in allowing the child the opportunity to explore feelings without acknowledging them as his own until he feels safe to do so. Melanie, aged 10, had learning difficulties and was unable to articulate the root of her anxious behaviour and nightmares. While using puppets she demonstrated her fear that each time her mother and stepfather argued violence would ensue just as it had when her natural parents were together. Puppets are especially useful in looking at relationships, how the child interprets current interactions and how he would like them to be. Likewise, they can help a child to re-enact past traumas and perhaps impose a different ending. Many of the children I work with like to use puppets to explore ways in which to communicate difficult issues with the non-resident parent. Puppets give them a chance to rehearse. For older children, a more appropriate intervention may be using drama and role- playing.

### **Miniature animals**

Miniature animals can be used when considering the child's relationships. A child can be asked to choose an animal that represents important people in his life and talk about the attributes of that animal. By referring to the animal, rather than to the person, the child can distance himself from the characters and can project characteristics safely onto the animals. In my work, I have found children benefit from this approach when thinking about the effects of people leaving or joining the family. Hannah, 9 years, suggested from her play with miniature animals that she longed for her stepfather to move out of the family home so that her parents could reunite. By isolating the animal chosen to represent her father, she indicated that she was worried about her father being lonely.

Miniature animals are more effective with children over 7 years who are more likely to think in abstract ways. I have found that young adolescents can enjoy this method but may not readily participate if their maturity is being threatened. Usually a good-humoured approach is necessary and adolescents very quickly begin to make connections between the animals and their own relationships.

### **Art**

A range of activities, such as painting, drawing, collage and construction, comes under this heading and provide an accessible way of allowing children to express feelings and tell their story. From the age of 8 years a child begins to use symbols in a more complex manner. A young child will draw as if a spectator whereas a young adolescent will draw as if he were involved in the scene and use colour to reflect emotions (Geldard and Geldard, 1997). The use of line, shape and colour is interesting in all age groups although the counsellor should avoid placing his own interpretations on the drawing and instead invite the child to do so. The use of art in counselling is particularly effective in helping children explore strong emotions and to express wishes or longings. Lucy, aged 9 years, chose to paint an Angry Monster, claiming that this monster visited her when she was let down by her parents. Eventually, she

began to draw a Peace Monster who chased away the Angry Monster by thinking of all the caring adults in her life. Tom, aged 14 years, drew his father visiting and having a friendly conversation with his mother, something that he longed to happen. It should be noted that painting enables children to connect more easily with feelings whereas drawing seems to be used in a more concrete way.

## CONCLUSION

Given the high incidence of divorce in our society and the indication that a significant proportion of young people are affected adversely, it is incumbent upon us to examine how children are affected by divorce and how we can best support them and their families. The grief model is a very appropriate way of considering the issues raised as it helps us view the effects on families as a normal part of the grieving process as they try to adapt to the loss and change in their lives. It also enables us to help them when they become stuck along the way. Comparisons of children bereaved by divorce and those by death of a parent show poorer outcomes for the former group. This is primarily due to the potential for ongoing conflict between parents and children having divided loyalties. It therefore makes sense to work with the families of this group of children as well as offering individual counselling. Children will explore their emotions if the adults around them enable them to do so freely without giving them overt or covert messages about how the adults wish them to feel.

Referring to Worden's four tasks and Jewett's three phases in the grief process, I have outlined the various stages a bereaved child is likely to encounter as their parents separate and divorce. I have considered the potential for them to become stuck along the way, giving examples from my practice, and looked at the issues for counselling in terms of children's stages of development. What is apparent is that young people may need assistance to express the strong emotions they experience in a safe and neutral counselling environment and parents may need help to understand that their children may not have the same opinions as them. Enabling a young person to experience positive relationships with both parents after a separation is crucial if we are to help them develop self-esteem and confidence in their future relationships.

Straightforward counselling may be sufficient to allow young people to explore their feelings but often this is not enough as it relies heavily on the ability to talk through their issues with the counsellor. Children of all ages may well benefit from the use of creative interventions such as puppets, miniature animals, art and a host of other interventions. Creative interventions allow the child to tell his story either directly or indirectly and to articulate his emotions. However it is important to be aware of the appropriateness of any intervention according to a child's stage of development and the goals for counselling and of course the child's willingness to use such interventions. Contraindications are critical, especially when a child has been abused or traumatised, and given that these interventions can be very powerful, some cognitive work needs to be undertaken first.

Counselling young people who have encountered their parents' separation or divorce can be challenging and complex work, particularly given that their parents whom they have usually relied on during difficult times, are themselves in a state of distress and often in conflict with each other. The importance of this work cannot be undervalued as for many young people this may be their first experience of a major crisis and how they learn to deal with this lays the foundations for coping with future losses and changes. As Jewett points out:

*“And loss is a cumulative experience; unless the child is helped to resolve a major loss, even trivial subsequent losses will provoke similar stress.”*  
(Jewett, 1982)

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Geldard, D., and Geldard, K. (1997) *Counselling Children*. London: Sage

Geldard, D., and Geldard, K. (1999) *Counselling Adolescents*. London: Sage

Jewett, C. (1982) *Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss*. B.T. Batsford Ltd

McDonough, H., and Bartha, C. (1999) *Putting Children First*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

Rodgers, B., and Pryor, J. (1998) *Divorce and separation*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Worden, J. (1996) *Children and Grief*. London: Guilford Press