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Essay 3

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

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Authentication Statement

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

I have chosen to focus on the specialist area of divorce for the purposes of this essay. I will describe the main issues and concerns in counselling children and young people with regard to divorce, with particular awareness of the affects on the child and the child's development and cognitive ability. I will take a look at circumstances in which straightforward counselling might be inappropriate or ineffective and I shall consider the benefits and contraindications of using other interventions.

The divorce rate has risen steadily in post-war Britain and whilst the Family Law (Scotland) Act 2006 reduced separation periods for divorce and made divorce proceedings less complicated, the emotional consequences of divorce are no easier for either the parents or the children and young people involved.

According to the *Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (2004)*, over one third of cohabiting couple families in Scotland have dependent children living with them and it found that cohabiting couples were more likely to have had a previous relationship that ended compared to their married counterparts. In a quarter of marriages in 2004 in Scotland, one or both parties were divorced at the time of marriage. Children and young people therefore are increasingly likely to experience multiple parental separations and divorces. High levels of parental divorce and separation mean that children are more likely nowadays to be raised by lone parents, stepparents and grandparents and to have step siblings and half brothers and sisters.

Research shows that divorce affects children and young people in the short-term and that the way parental separation is handled makes a difference to the long-term impact. Overall researchers (Amato & Keith, 1991 & Amato, 2001) have found that children from divorced families were on average somewhat worse off than children from intact families, however, Amato (1994) stresses that not all children in divorced families are worse off than all children in intact families, but that as a group, children from divorced families have more problems than intact families.

Rodgers and Pryor (1998) say that in the short-term children are likely to experience unhappiness, low self-esteem, problems with behaviour and friendships, and loss of contact with a significant part of the extended family. Good continuing communication and contact between children and both parents appear especially important in helping children to adapt to parental separation.

Ideally children should be informed about what is going on and why, but information needs to be appropriate to their level of understanding and cognitive development. For example children at Pre-operations Stage, roughly between the ages of 2 and 7 years, do not understand euphemisms and will interpret what they hear literally and are likely to connect unrelated things. At this stage, the children's world is still an egocentric one, which is characterised by magical thinking.

'Because children in this stage tend to personalize everything and believe that their own thoughts, or wishes, or actions are responsible for whatever happens to them (and to other people) their thought process is often called "magical thinking".' (Jewett p9)

In magical thinking, children often believe that loss is a transient state, capable of reversal and temporary and that their parents will get back together again. A child

who is at this stage might believe that if she were to avoid stepping on the cracks in the paving stones, for example, that her daddy might come home again. However, whatever their age, it is very important to ensure that children are clearly reminded, perhaps repeatedly, that the separation is a permanent. Children frequently blame themselves for their parent's separation and they need reassurance that there is nothing they could have done, or can do to keep their parents together. It is not uncommon for children of all ages to fantasise that their parents will get back together and this may be particularly so when there is little parental conflict.

Children feel abandoned and unloved when their parents leave them. They will adjust better if both parents are able to continue being involved in parenting, even if they are not all continuing to live together, though this might not always be possible or helpful if for example the absent parent were violent or abusive. Children may feel powerless and helpless to get their parents to stay together or to have a say in which parent they live with or where they live.

Dunn et al (2001) reported that those children and young people who were given some choice over living arrangements and visiting, had more positive feelings and less painful memories. Children frequently experience conflicts of loyalty and can get caught up in the middle between both parents, but if parents can put their children first and put their own differences to one side, they may avoid children feeling that they have to take sides.

Rodgers and Pryor (1998) say that the immediate distress following parental separation usually fades in time and most children settle into a pattern of normal

development, however, they say that differences between the children of separated families and those from intact families can sometimes be observed many years after separation and into adulthood in a range of economic, social, psychological and physical health outcomes.

In terms of finance, separated families tend to have lower incomes, poorer housing and experience greater financial hardship than intact families. Conflicts over money such as maintenance payments are not unusual between separated parents and are likely to have an effect on children both in terms of continuing parental conflict and in financial hardship. Children from divorced families tend to perform less well academically, achieve fewer qualifications and do less well in socio-economic terms.

However, sometimes school can be a distraction from what is going on in the family and some young people are able to really focus on their academic work and do very well. Rodgers and Pryor say that children from divorced families are more likely than children from intact families to act out delinquent, aggressive or anti-social behaviour. They are more likely to become sexually active and get pregnant at a young age and they are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs as adolescents.

One of the major effects of divorce on children and young people is the sense of loss experienced; both of the loss of the intact family and the loss of the non-custodial parent. As they experience loss they go through a grieving process similar to mourning a death. Grief is a normal process of grieving for loss and adapting to change, which under normal circumstances takes about two years to complete, though Jewett (1982) says it may take longer especially for older children.

Throughout our lives, we experience losses, some of them less significant than death or divorce, but losses nonetheless. Losses can lead to growth, but it is how we are able to process the loss, which impacts on how we develop. It is important that our losses are acknowledged and that we are able to express our emotions of sadness and anger etc.

'There is no growth without pain and conflict; there is no loss which cannot lead to gain.' (Pincus 1974 p278)

Clearly though, although the grief process is similar, divorce is different from death. When someone dies there is finality, whereas with divorce the loss and grieving can go on and on. The grieving process could be completed after separation only to be triggered again as parents go through divorce or when a parent introduces a new partner to the family or gets remarried. Although death may trigger feelings of loss at times of significant life events such as anniversaries and birthdays, divorce continues to affect the whole family. However, the way that parents behave can make a significant difference in how they deal with for example, sports' day, parent's evenings, graduations and weddings etc.

According to Jewett (1982), there are three phases of grief: early, acute and integrating or subsiding and she proposes that no matter how trivial or great the loss, the same process must be completed, although the length of the grieving process and the intensity of the feeling of loss may differ.

'Each child's experience with grief will be unique. Yet every child's grief process will include three basic phases: early grief, acute grief, and subsiding grief. Though the phases may follow one another, overlap or shift backward and forward, each will include several components that occur in a somewhat predictable order'. (P64)

Angie's mother left the family home when Angie was 11 years old. In the first phase of grief, she was shocked, alarmed and in disbelief and denial. At 11 years old, Angie is likely to have been progressing from Concrete Operations Stage to Formal Operations stage, but it is not unusual for children to regress to an earlier stage of development as a result of divorce. Regression may occur in terms of physical coordination such as returning to wetting or soiling or thumb sucking, or regression in terms of language skills. Jewett says that regression is usually a temporary and normal part of the healing process and if children are permitted and encouraged to express their feelings of loss and to make necessary adjustments, they usually regain the skills they previously had acquired fairly quickly.

Adolescence is probably one of the worst times for parents to split up. It is a time when young people are experiencing a lot of changes in their lives. Their beliefs about the world, their moral stance and their bodies are all changing and they need their parents to be rock solid. Angie lost her mother, she lost her childhood with the onset of puberty shortly afterwards and she didn't have her mother around when she needed her first bra, when her menstrual periods began, or as a role model of womanhood.

In the stage of Formal Operations, friends and school start to be more important and young people of this age usually want to spend more time away from their family, but they need their family to be available to them. Wallerstein (2000) found that the normal adolescent developmental move towards independence and separation from parents is threatened by divorce, as adolescents perceive that parents have separated from them.

Angie did not see her mother regularly after the separation and their relationship has been difficult. Divorce often results in loss of contact or very infrequent contact with one parent. Hetherington & Kelly (2002) and Amato & Gilbreth (1999) found that it was not the amount of contact time with the absent parent, but the quality of the relationship with the non-residential parent, which was the determining factor.

'The quality of the parental relationship whether the parents are together, separated or divorced, is of major importance to the adolescentIt might be expected that the adolescent will benefit from being in families where there are stable and adaptively functioning parental relationships. Such an environment is likely to provide the young person with feelings of security and safety during a period in life when much is changing. Additionally, a well-functioning parental relationship can provide modelling of suitable ways of relating in couple relationships for the adolescent'.
(Geldard & Geldard p 27)

Angie's father was not available to her for support as he drank heavily after his wife left him and was emotionally absent. It can be very distressing for children if parents cannot care for their children and they may feel very vulnerable and unsafe. The parent who does not choose to end the relationship may also be going through a sense of loss after separation whilst the parent who chose to end the relationship may be feeling guilty.

Both parents may be struggling to adapt to the changes and it is not uncommon for parents to feel depressed following divorce. The psychological adjustment of parents is an important factor in children's wellbeing and Amato & Keith (1991) found that children whose parents are better adjusted fare better than children whose parents are not adjusting well.

Adolescents don't like to be different and if there are few others going through a similar experience they are likely to feel alone. Although single parent families were not unusual amongst Angie's peer group, she felt very different because she lived with her father and in fact according to *Growing up in Scotland* (2007), 99% of lone parent families in Scotland are headed by the child's natural mother.

Unlike many children of separated parents Angie continued to live in the family home. Many children have to move away to a new area as a result of separation and divorce, and this may mean adjusting to a new school and having to make new friends in a new neighbourhood whilst coping with the loss of a familiar community and support network.

Experiencing strong emotions is a feature of the acute phase of mourning which is likely to be the longest and most painful part of the grieving process and Angie's initial feelings about her parent's separation were soon followed by feelings of guilt, frustration, shame, anger, sadness and deep pain.

'The second phase of mourning has several components: yearning and pining; searching; dealing with sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt and shame; experiencing disorganization and despair; and finally beginning the job of reorganization'.
(Jewett p80)

Children experiencing separation anxiety may become very clingy to the remaining carer and fearful that s/he might also be lost. They may suffer from insomnia and nightmares or they may need a lot more sleep than previously. If children are experiencing separation anxiety, a reliable routine can be very reassuring and parents should be consistent with regard to discipline.

Bowlby (1979) found that the disruption of affectional bonds during childhood could lead to long-term psychiatric disturbances such as psychopathy, sociopathy, depression and suicide. Writing of psychopaths and sociopaths, he says:

'More often than not the childhoods of such individuals are found to have been grossly disturbed by the death, divorce or separation of the parents, or by other events resulting in disruption of bonds, with an incidence of such disturbance far higher than is met with in any other comparable group, whether drawn from the general population or from psychiatric casualties of other sorts.'
(P 890)

The various components of the second phase of mourning each help recovery from the loss, acceptance of what has happened and the move towards healing. Children need to be told that it is normal to grieve, that it is painful, that it takes time and that there are no short cuts. Support, tolerance, permission to grieve and acceptance of the expressions of children's emotions and feelings by parents or counsellor, can make a major difference to the outcome.

The final phase in the grieving process is the subsiding phase where the loss is accepted, adaptations and adjustments are made to the loss and the child or young person is able to become involved in a new life, which incorporates the loss. Angie is working in counselling through her feelings and emotions towards reorganising herself sufficiently in order to get on with her life

Creative Interventions

Straightforward counselling might not be suitable for young children whose language skills are not yet sufficiently developed and who only have limited ability to express themselves verbally. Creative interventions are a helpful alternative or addition to talking. They can be very useful ways of enabling children to express their losses and

feelings of hurt, anger and abandonment as part of the healing process, in a creative way. However counsellors should be mindful not to use creative interventions because the child is not talking, as it may be that the child just does not want to talk.

Worden (1996) says that interventions can enhance the process of recovery, enable people to see from a different perspective, help to release repressed feelings and underlying issues, identify feelings and thoughts which clients may not have been aware of before and restore a sense of control to clients.

There are a variety of creative interventions which counsellors can make use of and each has their own strengths and particular areas of focus. It is important to ensure that an intervention is appropriate to the goals of therapy and appropriate to the setting in which it is used. Creative interventions are very powerful metaphors which work at an unconscious level and it is imperative that the counsellors ensure that the clients feels safe, secure and supported and that the intervention will not retraumatise the client.

Creative interventions are alternative ways of working, which includes nondirective play activity such as miniature animals, dance, drama, art, drawing, clay, puppets, creative writing, story telling, music, and guided visualisation amongst others.

Writing of nondirective play activity, Worden (1996) states:

'The assumption underlying this approach is that children process conflict and anxiety through play, imagination and creative activity. The counsellor uses these activities to explore the child's adjustment and to facilitate grieving within a safe context' (p155)

Any creative work constitutes part of the therapeutic process and should be kept in a folder or file in the therapy room. The client should be given the opportunity to

choose what to do with it at the end of therapy, but it is important to be mindful that if creative work is taken home that it might be taken out of context and questioned or ridiculed by members of the family.

Family constellation work with miniature animals can be a very effective way for children of exploring and expressing feelings and emotions about the individual members of the divorced family, but may be quite traumatic if the family is not sufficiently stable. The counsellor should be mindful too to leave sufficient time in the session to ensure that children are sufficiently grounded, perhaps by addressing them directly by name, so that they are ready to go back home or back into school afterwards.

Counsellors should be mindful that the animals actually represent family members of the child and so they should be treated respectfully. This type of work is not suitable for children younger than about 8 years old, before the concrete operations stage because they cannot understand that a plastic animal can represent a member of their family.

This type of intervention is probably not suitable for adolescents in the Formal Operations stage from about 11-15 years, but it may be suitable for older adolescents who have a sound sense of self and identity, though it might be more appropriate to use pebbles rather than animals. This intervention works best when there is very little interruption from the counsellor and therefore less contamination of the metaphor by the counsellor.

Music can have a profound effect on our emotions and be therapeutic and restorative. The One in Four campaign run by the Scottish Mental Health Association produced a CD and a booklet which stated that 'music is an art form that has the power to influence attitudes and change lives' and also 'music can play an important part in either reflecting or changing how you feel'.

Lyrics can be very meaningful to our clients, they can reflect their feelings, resonate with them and empathise with their losses and suffering. My client Georgia who is 17 writes her own lyrics, some of which are very dark. She says that she wakes up with lyrics in her head and that she can only really express her feelings and emotions through music.

Often it is the music itself, rather than the lyrics which can have the most profound impact on our emotions. Listening to music can lighten mood and it can be relaxing, inspiring and stimulating. It can transport our clients to another place, either real or imaginary, which may be more appealing than their current situation.

Conclusion

In the immediate aftermath of separation, children are likely to be in denial and in a state of shock. They may feel abandoned and unloved by one or both parents. They may feel helpless and powerless and they may have little or no choice about what happens. They are likely to feel hurt, angry, anxious, embarrassed and sad and they may not be able to express these emotions. They may feel that they are to blame and they may fantasise that their parents will get back together again.

They are likely to experience changes in home, school, step parent, siblings and financial circumstances. They experience loss of their intact family and extended family and loss of their existing support systems including friends and they go through a painful and lengthy process of grieving. They may experience conflicts of loyalty and feel pulled in opposite directions. They may suffer from low self-esteem, anxiety and depression. They may become withdrawn or aggressive and they may regress to an earlier developmental stage.

The effects of divorce depend on the age and stage of development of children. Clear information at a level consistent with their cognitive development, by both parents, a minimum amount of parental conflict and regular contact with both parents if possible will assist readjustment to change and minimise the negative long-term effects of divorce.

Acknowledging children's loss and allowing them to express their feelings and emotions, consistent discipline, competent parenting and ease of arrangements with regard to access make a difference. Parents who have their own support systems in place will cope better themselves and be better able to provide support for children to grieve and readjust.

Early adolescence is probably the worst time for parents to separate because as they are experiencing many changes both physically and emotionally, what adolescents need most is stability from their family. Adolescents doubt their own ability to sustain relationships if their parents divorce and young people from divorced families

tend to be sexually active at a younger age and are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs than their counterparts from intact families.

As counsellors we can provide accessible counselling to support young people and children in the aftermath of separation and divorce and help them to move forward with as little emotional harm as possible both in straightforward counselling and using a variety of creative interventions but always bearing in mind the appropriateness of these interventions to client and setting and mindful of any contraindications.

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