

Separation and Divorce: School Responses

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Case Study: Jazz

Jazz is 13 and had always been a good student until he moved into Year 10 and went into a new form group. As a result of this and the GCSE choices he has made, he has been separated from some of his friendship group and a timetable clash means he has not been able to take one of his choices. Although it is understood that he would be frustrated at school, his reaction has been over the top and out of character. He has become rude and aggressive and seems to have completely given up on school work.

Jazz's parents separated six months ago and since then his younger sister, who is in Year 7 has excelled in spite of the family breakdown. His older sister in Year 12 has been missing a lot of school recently because of constant illness, which is causing considerable concern for teachers since her exams are imminent. The situation at home is that Jazz's mother initiated the divorce because she no longer loved her husband. Jazz's dad is living alone and although he says he is coping and doesn't blame his wife, it's obvious that this isn't true. He also says he is finding it very difficult being alone and will always love his wife. The situation has been made worse because the paternal grandparents, who had always played a key role in family life, are refusing to have anything to do with Jazz's mum because they say she has brought shame on their family. The girls are being very supportive of their mum, especially the youngest, Sam, who has taken on extra chores like cooking and cleaning to help her mum out. The eldest, Kiran, is never far from her mum's side and is now saying she won't leave and go to university because she should stay and help her mum and she doesn't feel as if she is emotionally ready or physically strong enough. They think their grandparents are being totally unfair on their mum and are very defensive. Jazz feels angry that everyone is running around looking after his mum, but nobody seems to be looking after his dad. He thinks his grandparents are right and feels as if his dad has been completely forgotten and his sisters are acting like their mum's the one who's been abandoned when really it's their dad. Every time he says anything that is supportive of his dad or shares that he is worried about him, he feels as if he is made to feel like he is being stupid and over-reacting. Jazz says that someone has to stand up for his dad and prove that they are on his side.

Questions

1. Who is playing which role?
2. What else may be influencing Jazz's reaction at school?

Research Example: The Enduring Impact of Divorce on Children

This landmark study chronicled the experiences of 60 Californian divorcing families and their 131 children aged 1–22. Initially planned as a one-year study, the researchers found that the transition period for parents and children lasted far beyond what they had expected, and so the project was extended to a five-year study during which the same families gave access to the researchers at specified intervals (at the time of the break-up, after eighteen months and again after five years). It therefore represents the first, large-scale longitudinal study of the consequences of divorce for adults and children.

At the time of the initial separation, Wallerstein and Kelly discovered that, from the children's perspective, the split very often came as a 'bolt of lightning' (p. 11) which they had not been expecting at all. Moreover, the overwhelming majority (90%) of the children much preferred the unhappy marriage to the situation of divorce. The study found that children coped best when they were able to understand and make sense of the divorce as a remedy to a serious problem, and least well when the separation was impulsive and unexpected. The most common themes in the children's experience at this time were fear (about who would look after them and of being abandoned), sadness and yearning for the lost parent, anxiety, a feeling of rejection and loneliness, conflicting loyalties, anger and guilt. The initial separation was followed by a period of adjustment to life with the resident parent (in most cases the mother) and visiting arrangements with the non-resident parent (usually the father). Only 20 per cent of the children were happy with the extent of visiting in the first year, with more than a third reporting disappointment at the infrequency of the visits and by the fathers' apparent lack of interest.

After 18 months, for most children the acute psychological disruptions (fear, anger etc.) precipitated by the separation were nearing an end, and the majority of children had resumed their developmental pace. Wallerstein and Kelly found that only one fifth of the children approved of their parents' decision to divorce and less than one in ten found the divorced family to be an improvement. Childhood depression was diagnosed in one in four of the children and young people, and one in six was still experiencing sleep disturbance. There were also striking differences between the attitudes of boys and girls: boys were more likely to long intensely for their father and to feel rejected by him; they were more opposed to the divorce, more depressed and more stressed within the post-divorce family.

After five years, there were further changes in many of the children's lives. One-third of the mothers had now remarried so nearly a quarter of the children were living in complex family situations with a new stepfather and in some cases step-siblings. In addition almost half of the fathers had remarried. In terms of attitudes, 28 per cent of the children (especially the older children) now approved of the divorce, 30 per cent remained opposed (especially adolescent boys) while the remaining 42 per cent were uncommitted. A majority (56%) of the children still felt that the new family did not represent an improvement on the pre-divorce family, and more than a third (37%) were moderately to severely depressed. Good overall outcomes for the children were associated with support from peers and the extended family, with economic stability and, in particular, with strong, stable relationships with both resident and non-resident parents. The study also found

that, above the age of 9, there was a significant gender distinction: the boys' adjustment correlated more highly with the father–son relationship, while the girls' adjustment correlated more highly with the mother–daughter relationship. Wallerstein and Kelly (1979, p. 303) conclude their ground-breaking study by noting that:

. . . the timetable of the divorcing process is considerably longer than we initially supposed. The multiple changes in the individual lives of the adults and the children and in their relationships with each other, which were set into motion by the decision to divorce, exceeded our expectations in their drama, their complexity, and their widening effects.

Reference

Wallerstein, J. S. and Kelly, J. B. (1979), *Surviving the Break-up*. New York: Basic Books.