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# Perceived Effectiveness of Group Therapy in Elementary School Settings with Children Experiencing Parental Divorce

Jennifer L. Kronenberg  
*St. Catherine*

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Perceived Effectiveness of Group Therapy in Elementary School Settings with  
Children Experiencing Parental Divorce

by

Jennifer L. Kronenberg, B.A., CSW

MSW Clinical Research Paper  
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Committee Members  
Kendra Garrett, Ph.D., (Chair)  
Tasha Alexander, MSW, APSW  
Luke Fedie, LPC

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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**Abstract**

This research explored the perceived effectiveness of group work for children experiencing parental divorce in elementary school settings. This research collected qualitative data from eight school social workers in the state of Minnesota. The workers ranged in years of practice, licensure level and size of district. This research found that immediacy of intervention, length and time in group, closed membership and varied activities all greatly contributed to overall effectiveness. In addition, this research found noteworthy effectiveness including positive emotional and behavioral outcomes, emotional expression, increased self-esteem and identified positive supports. The findings of this research did not support the involvement of parents within the group process. Future research should explore parental and systems involvement as related to group effectiveness.

### **Effectiveness of Group Work for Children Experiencing Parental Divorce**

Divorce has proliferated modern day culture. It has become a generally accepted practice that occurs when spouses can no longer stay in marital union with one another. Divorce, as a concept, is not new. The first known use of the word divorce dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a word of Anglo-French origin, meaning to divert (Divorce, 2014). This diversion has grown in to an accepted reality amongst many. Divorce's more current definition in the Merriam-Webster's dictionary reads, "The ending of a marriage by a legal process, a complete separation of two things" (2014). The standard dictionary definition is far too simplified when examined further. While the definition purports two things are separating, often times the number is far greater than two. This simplification fails to consider the separation of a household with many unique members including in-laws, co-workers, colleagues, friends and most importantly, the fruit of many marriages: children.

The statistics of divorce are staggering. According to the Vital Statistics of the United States (1960), in 1960, there were 393,000 divorces in the United States. In 2011, the number had more than doubled reaching 877,000 divorces in one year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). With the number of marriages ending in divorce on the increase, so too, are single- parent households. The Annie E. Casey foundation found that in the United States in 2012, 1,703,000

children, 43% of the total population of children, were living in single- parent homes (National Kids Count, 2014).

While the statistics continue to climb, the costs associated with divorce are rising at unprecedented rates. According to Hoffman (2006), “Estimates on the average cost of a divorce in the U.S. range from \$15,000 to \$30,000. The bulk of it, predictably enough, goes straight to the lawyers. Matrimonial law work is currently a staggering \$28 billion a year industry” (p.1). As social and financial costs continue to climb, the emotional and psychological tolls imparted on families experiencing divorce rises at similar rates.

To understand where interventions are best targeted, it is helpful to know the roots of this social phenomenon. As noted in Furstenberg (1994), “Divorce rates in the United States began to rise shortly after the Civil War and continued on a steady upward course for more than a century. Over this time, rates have fluctuated, often falling in poor economic times and generally surging after major wars” (p.30). While divorce has spanned the ages, divorce did not prosper within American culture until the 1960’s. There was a significant spike during this era that has continued an upward trend since. This trend has been explained in the literature for a variety of reasons including the increased ideation of individualism (Furstenberg, 1994). Americans value individualism and support the choice to be alone. No longer must a person derive part of his or her identity from his or her spouse. In addition to this rise in individualism, the women’s movement into the

workplace has also been an agent for marital change. Families are no longer dependent on one worker producing one income. Instead, women are working, making them less vulnerable to the loss of financial support that may accompany divorce. Along with this shift, the increase of pre-marital sex coupled with the increased availability of birth control also has led to a decrease in marriages. As noted in Furstenberg (1994),

As premarital sex with decreased risk of pregnancy became more accessible in the 1960s, the lure of early marriage lessened. The spread of birth control to unmarried youth and the availability of abortion played a part, but the growing visibility of sex that occurred in the post-Kinsey era was probably as influential as the availability of methods of fertility control in changing sexual practices (p. 34).

The primary American view point supports that individuals not be married to have sex. Therefore, marriage has become less appealing. Another significant driver in the proliferation of divorce within the American culture has been the shift in divorce laws (Cherlin, 1992). The current laws support a no-fault divorce, which has expedited the legal process making divorce relatively swift (The history of divorce law in the US, 2014). The sum of these circumstances has given rise to the dissolution of marriages, resulting in adverse effects for adults and children alike. As these adverse effects take rise, children must be given the proper support that they need to effectively cope with and move beyond their parents' divorce.

This research seeks to understand the effectiveness of group work with elementary school students who experience parental divorce.

### **Literature Review**

As divorce can present a multitude of challenges for children and families, there are many reasons for mental health practitioners to take notice of children experiencing divorce. To understand divorce's wide net, this literature review will examine the effects of divorce on adults and children. The review will also address how differences in children's ages and genders can impact the way in which they are affected by a divorce. Further, the review will examine an understanding of how to best help children experiencing divorce. The research offers multiple interventions. To understand what direction social workers should travel when engaging children experiencing divorce, the literature provides a clear system of therapeutic group intervention.

### **Effects on Adults Experiencing Divorce**

As family dissolution occurs as a result of divorce, the impacts felt by families can be wide ranging and numerous. "In the 1980's, people had the comforting illusion that divorce was a limited-time crisis, that children were resilient and that within a year or two at most everyone in the family would settle down and life would improve for all," with research showing us otherwise (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p.8). The great body of literature has informed that families can be and often are, affected by divorce long after the ink has dried

on the legal papers (Kimball, 1994; Krementz, 1984; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Divorce affects parents in many ways including interference with psychological health, including an increase in anxiety and depression, economic hardship, decreased health, poor nutrition and decreased emotional availability (Amato, 1994; Bagshaw, 2007; Duncan & Hoffman, 1985). In addition, the loss generated by divorce can lead to dysfunction including sexual acting out behaviors (Thompson, 1998). Another injurious consequence of divorce that adults experience is a decrease in their ability to effectively parent. As noted in Tschann et al. (1989), “Parents often communicate less well with their children and demonstrate a diminished capacity to parent after separation” (p. 1034). This assertion is also supported in research by Wallerstein (2005),

It is important to understand at the outset that the agenda of the divorced parent who seeks to rebuild his or her social, sexual, and economic life is out of sync with the needs of the child, especially the young child, for the kind of supportive parenting that requires time, constant attention, and sacrifice (p. 405).

Adults going through the process of a divorce may experience increases in psychological stressors, economic difficulties, decreased physical health, sexual acting out and a decrease in their capacity to appropriately parent their children.

### **Effects on Children Experiencing Divorce**

“Americans traditionally have believed that a two-parent family is necessary for the successful socialization and development of children” (Amato, 1994, p. 143). As two-parent households have declined, children experiencing divorce have shown a variety of concerns upon dissolution of the family unit, separate from the concerns of their caregivers. Robinson et al. (2003) found that children are active participants in their parents’ divorce and, thus, experience symptoms beyond what an adult may experience. Farmer (1987) found that, “While emotional upheaval related to separation and divorce appears to last at least two years for parents, a child’s distress may exceed this timetable by a wide margin” (p. 42). With children experiencing the effects of divorce for a greater amount of time than their parental counterparts, the opportunity for greater disruption in functioning may exist.

A review of the research confirms that children experience adverse effects of divorce that impact both their physical and psychological health (Cowen et al., 1990; Emery, 1988; Hodges et al., 1984). In addition, some researchers have compared the effects of divorce on children to that of death. Kubler-Ross (1969) found that children grieve the loss of their family as though it were a death, experiencing denial, isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

### **Decline in Overall Functioning as Response to Divorce**

In addition to likening divorce to the experience of death, divorce can impact the overall well-being of a child. As noted in Farmer and Galaris (1993),

“Parental separation or divorce can have an adverse effect on any child’s immediate and long-term emotional, social and academic functioning” (p.40). Research conducted by Jouriles et al. (2000) found that children who felt responsible for parental conflict during divorce were more likely to show symptoms of anxiety and depression and were more likely to engage in acting out behavior than children who did not feel responsible for parental conflict during divorce. Additionally, not just in childhood, but longitudinally, Wallerstein (2005) notes that,

The experience of having been through parental divorce as a child impacts detrimentally on the capacity to love and be loved within a lasting, committed relationship. At young adulthood when love, sexual intimacy, commitment and marriage take center stage, children of divorce are haunted by the ghosts of their parents’ divorce and terrified that the same fate awaits them. These fears, which crescendo at young adulthood, impede their developmental progress into full adulthood (p. 410).

Children are impacted in a multitude of ways when their parents’ divorce. These effects are not just seen immediately, but have been shown to have long-term effects as well.

Research indicates that the age of the child is particularly important to understanding how he or she is affected. As noted in Van Velsor (2004),

facilitators must take considerable care when determining maturity and developmental age, as placement in an appropriate group is significantly correlated with achieving successful outcomes.

### **Elementary School -Aged Children**

Elementary school children are typically aged between 5 and 10 years old. The developmental stages during these ages provide a base to understand the effects that children feel as their parents are divorcing. Children in this age group often experience Piagetian egocentrism as a function of their development (Sonnenshein-Schneider & Baird, 1980). Children place themselves at the center of their story and believe that their experience is unique from other children. In addition to conceptualizing themselves in this manner, children in elementary school also experience behavioral problems such as anger and conduct disorders; emotional concerns such as depression, grief, and self-blame; and academic concerns such as inability to focus and follow directions (Amato & Cheadle, 2008). In addition, research conducted by Benedeck (1998) found that elementary school- aged children also experience somatic concerns associated with their parents' divorce including upset stomach and headaches. Elementary school- aged children may experience behavioral acting out, psychological stresses, difficulties in academics and increased somatic concerns, as a result of parental divorce.

### **Middle School- Aged Children**

Middle school presents a new stage in the developmental process, which impacts how children respond to divorce from this age range. Middle school students are typically aged between 11 and 13 years. Sonnenshein-Schneider and Baird (1980) found that children in this age group are typically seeking out peers as a means to, “Affirm autonomy from adult supervision” (p. 88). In completing the literature review, there was insufficient research regarding middle school aged children. Therefore, a gap exists in the empirical research.

### **Gender Differences**

While age may be a factor in how children experience divorce, research has suggested that gender may also influence this experience. As stated in Farmer and Galaris (1993), “Disruption of the parental marriage also leaves scars, questions and fears about relations between the sexes” (p. 43). Amato (1994) supported the disparities that gender can provide when coping with divorce, “Early influential studies found that boys in divorced families had more adjustment problems than girls did” (p. 147). Rutter (1970) also supported gender differences finding that boys may be more vulnerable than their female counterparts. Amato (1994), added to the gender discussion pooling researching and concluding,

The estimated negative effects of divorce on social adjustment are stronger for boys than for girls. Social adjustment includes measures of popularity, loneliness, and cooperativeness. In other areas however, such as academic

achievement, conduct, or psychological adjustment, no differences between boys and girls are apparent (p. 147).

While the research is mixed about the significance of differences between genders, all of the research agrees that children are in some way, impacted by parental separation and divorce.

### **Systems Interventions**

With divorce becoming a prolific experience for children in the United States causing difficulty in emotional, behavioral and academic functioning, several interventions have been researched to determine the means of effective intervention. Some research has suggested that systems interventions can positively impact families experiencing divorce. Below, these interventions are addressed and evaluated.

### **Lowering the Incidence of Divorce**

Many researchers have astutely determined that if, as a society, people make a more conscious effort to prevent divorce, children will not be subjected to its adverse effects (Fthenakis, 1998). In addition, medical practitioners have suggested that, “The high rates of divorce and single parenthood have raised concerns of enduring deleterious effects on the development of children and society at large” (Children of Divorce, 2001, p.1). Thus, if we are able to reduce the number of divorces, these significant concerns can be reduced. While this

makes practical sense, reducing the number of divorces in America does not appear to be a viable intervention at this time.

### **Joint Custody**

Another intervention that has been suggested to help children cope with divorce is joint physical custody. As reported in Halpenny et al. (2008), “Transitions related to divorce and parental separation typically involve possible loss of contact or diminished contact with one parent and the potential for reduced parental availability and responsiveness” (p.312). These transitions, wherein, one parent becomes less connected to the child through a loss of physical presence, can cause significant stress for the child. A study conducted by Smart et al. (2001), found that children expressed a desire to have reasonable and flexible arrangements in their contact with parents following the divorce. By increasing joint custody, children are able to continue their bond with the non-custodial parent. While this intervention has proven helpful from a child’s perspective, it still does not address the wide range of psychological stressors that divorce brings.

### **Economic Interventions**

Along with joint custody, research has suggested that economic interventions may be an effective intervention in the mitigation of the effects of divorce. As families experience dissolution, the overall economic welfare of the unit is impacted. These impacts negatively consequence children in many ways

including poorer health, declines in academic achievement and increased psychological distress (Amato, 1994). Research has suggested that along with increasing joint physical custody among parents, child support reform may be an intervention that could be helpful for children. A 2001 study completed by the American Board of Family Medicine concluded, “Despite progress during the past decades, only 50% of those households headed by the mother have child support agreements from the father, and only 50% of those receive the full amounts due” (Children of Divorce, 2001, p.4). Emery et al. (1995) found that of the households who had a support agreement in place, 25%, were receiving no payment at all. While it may be helpful for children to receive increased economic support through the non-custodial parent, this will not alleviate the psychological concerns that accompany the divorce process.

Along with child support reform, other research has suggested that economic programs that target single mothers may provide a greater support to children experiencing divorce.

Given that the employment of single mothers does not appear to be harmful to children and can provide a higher standard of living for children than does welfare, and given that economic self-sufficiency would probably improve the psychological well-being of single mothers, it seems likely that these will benefit children (Amato, 1994, p.156).

Economic programs can help to reduce the deleterious effects of divorce on children including nutrition, housing stability and parental availability but still fail to address the psychological affects that children experience as their parents' divorce.

### **Individual Therapy**

While there is research that supports that the above interventions may aid children in their process of experiencing divorce, the great body of research supports therapeutic intervention as the primary modality of treatment. One way to therapeutically intervene is through the use of individual therapy. Fthenakis (1998) found that children and adults experiencing divorce were, on average, two to three times more likely than intact families to receive professional counseling. The research notes that while therapy is sought for many children experiencing parental divorce, there are a unique set of challenges that accompany this process. O'Gorman (2011) reports difficulties in individual therapy including that children can be challenging to work with, as they are not always willing to participate in individual therapy. In addition, O'Gorman (2011) reports that parents experiencing high conflict often have difficulty engaging their child in the therapeutic process and prefer to share their experience rather than their child's. This initiative on behalf of the parents takes away from the child's process and the child in turn, is unable to benefit from individual therapy. In addition, research

suggests that many single parents are not able to afford individual services following the loss of an income through the divorce process (Amato, 1994).

### **Group Therapy**

To alleviate the costs of individual therapy, group therapy offers a cheaper and more effective means of coping with divorce for children (Ziffer et al., 2007). While all of the previous suggested interventions have been proven to be effective in their own respects, the greatest researched intervention, with the highest rates of success, are group interventions (Amato, 1994; Rose, 2009). Group interventions are, “Evidence-based interventions and preventative programs, are often short- term, community- based efforts. Most programs have a psychoeducational component... and a more “hands-on” skill enhancement component” (Regev & Ehrenberg, 2012, p.221). Additional research notes that most groups, “Involve several core objectives, including increasing-self-esteem, development of coping strategies through clarification of divorce-related issues, improving communication and problem solving skills, and validation of adverse experiences” (Farmer and Galaris,1993, p.41).

Further research supports that peer validation as a form of social support in a group setting is a key element in achieving positive outcomes following divorce (Schaefer & Moos, 1998; Sonnenshein-Schneider & Baird, 1980). Halpenny et al. (2008) found that “The opportunity that services provided for

children to share their experiences with peers who were living through similar transitions in their family lives” was a key piece to improved outcomes (p. 318).

In addition to sharing their experience, research supports additional positive outcomes for children in group modalities. Cowen et al. (1990) found that there were clear patterns that could be derived from effective group therapy for children experiencing divorce, including reduction of anxiety, less worry, clearer awareness surrounding changing the status of their parent’s relationship and more openness in talking with others about divorce. Similarly, Farmer and Galaris (1993) concluded that, “Outside the home supports can facilitate the child’s adjustment by increasing the child’s understanding and acceptance of the events and by increasing quantity and quality of discussion and interaction among the child, family members, and others in close contact during the course of divorce” (p. 49). Rose (2009) also supported the effectiveness of group work with children of divorce, noting that along with the strengths previously mentioned, the prevalence of divorce, the hazard created by divorce and the uncomfortable affects raised by divorce, all make group work a worthwhile cause. “Effective groups have found programmatic ways of reaching children of divorce, communicating with them on issues of importance, providing support, enhancing their skill development, and promoting their mental health” (Rose, 2009, p. 227).

### **Specific Group Therapy Curriculum**

It has been established that group therapy is the preferred modality for decreasing psychological symptoms for children experiencing divorce. Upon further examination of the research, there have been many curricula developed specifically for children experiencing divorce. Below, these curriculums are detailed regarding specifics and are examined for effectiveness as indicated by empirical research.

### **Caught in the Middle (CIM) Program**

One such curriculum that has been studied is the Caught in the Middle (CIM) program. The CIM program is, “Designed to help children and their parents cope with a recent separation of divorce. The mission of the program is for children to feel less caught in the middle of their parents’ disagreements” (Regev & Ehrenberg, 2012, p. 222). The CIM program has three main components including providing support, normalizing the divorce and building coping skills, that are all streamed in to the curriculum. Along with the children participating in group, there is an additional parent group that coincides (Regev & Ehrenberg, 2012).

Research conducted by Regev and Ehrenberg (2012) on the effectiveness of the CIM program, measured children and adult’s perceptions of group effectiveness prior to and following program participation. Regev and Ehrenberg (2012) concluded that, “Children reported feeling supported by attending the group and having an overall positive experience, which could foster the use of

skills taught in the group in the longer term”(p. 227). In addition, the research concluded that the CIM program was successful in meeting the stated outcomes of the program, including reduction of blame and a marked decrease in feelings of triangulation (Regev & Ehrenberg, 2012, p. 227).

In addition to positive outcomes reported by children, adults in the CIM program reported overwhelming support for the project as well. Regev and Ehrenberg (2012) found that, “Parents reported feeling informed about the adverse effects of family transitions on children and reported an understanding of the need to support their children accordingly” (p.228). Parents also found that they were able to apply learned skills for their and their child’s benefit. Results of the study appear to support the Caught in the Middle program as an effective group intervention for children and parents experiencing divorce, although, as noted, additional research to support this curriculum should be conducted.

### **Marriage Council Program**

Another curriculum that has been researched for children experiencing divorce is the Marriage Council program. The group usually runs for four months, is facilitated by one male and one female leader, is heterogeneous in respect to gender and one session must include a parent (Famer and Galaris, 1993). There are 10 sessions, that each span 90 minutes of time. The model supports six major themes that are addressed in group including fear of the custodial parent leaving, children expressing fear over loss of parent, children

expressing desire to have parent's punish the child's behavior rather than punish the other parent, fears regarding stepparents, children's role in helping parents cope with divorce and the experience of the legal system (Farmer and Galaris, 1993). The unique features of this model are the, "Opportunities to develop competence through taking creative risks, structured by the leaders to permit their own discovery" (Farmer and Galaris, 1993, p.45). These creative opportunities include expression through puppets, clay, other arts and crafts, storytelling, and play.

Farmer and Galaris (1993) researched the effectiveness of the Marriage Council model based on drawings done by the children and parental input. Following group participation, parents reported, "Greater ease in negotiating with their children on matter of household routine, with a decrease in both intensity and number of angry exchanges between family members" (Farmer & Galaris, 1993, p. 48). Parents also reported that following group participation, their children were more likely to engage in conversations surrounding parental separation with people outside the family unit (Farmer & Galaris, 1993).

### **The Boomerang Bunch**

A third approach that has been researched for effectiveness is the Boomerang Bunch. The Boomerang Bunch, like other curriculums mentioned here, has children's and adult support group components. The group was facilitated by two therapists, with each session spanning 90 minutes, for eight

weeks. Unlike the curriculums examined thus far, this particular approach did not use a standardized curriculum, but instead, used group activities including expressive therapies, sand trays, puppets, art and drama. In addition, this particular group approach included combining the adult and children's groups to explore family building activities.

The goals of the Boomerang Bunch included examining belief systems, strengthening bonds of the emerging family and improving communication (Ziffer et al., 2007). Following the group completion, Ziffer et al. (2007) conducted follow up interviews three years later, with a 100% completion rate. This rate of completion was gleaned as success for this particular approach to group therapy. This study did not remark specifically on outcomes but did make favorable statements regarding the rate of participation in follow ups and reported positive feedback from parent participants (Ziffer et al., 2007).

### **Rainbows**

A fourth curriculum that has been extensively researched is the Rainbows program. The Rainbows group has 12 sessions, lasting 40 minutes each time. The main goal of the Rainbows program is to, "Provide an opportunity for children to accomplish the psychological tasks of emotionally healing after the disruption of their family by coming to terms with a variety of irrational beliefs and negative feelings" (Skitka & Frazier, 1995, p.160). The activities that comprise the Rainbows group include a daily theme, an activity, discussion and reflection.

Kavanagh (1991) found positive outcomes for group participants including social attention, social attractiveness to peers, self-confidence and self-esteem. Skitka and Frazier (1995) attempted to replicate Kavanagh's (1991) work, using a larger sample size and a control group. Using the Children's Beliefs About Parental Divorce Scale, Skitka and Frazier (1995) measured outcomes for group participants. Contrary to the results obtained within other programs in this research, Skitka and Frazier (1995) found, "No statistical evidence to support the effectiveness of the Rainbows group in addressing self-esteem or lowering levels of depression following the divorce" (p. 170). Other researchers, however, did find the Rainbows group helped to lessen some of the negative impacts of divorce (Alpert-Gillis et al., 1989; Gwynn & Brantly, 1987)

### **Kids Konnect**

The final curriculum that has been empirically researched in the literature is the Kids Konnect program. The Kids Konnect program, "Is an eight-week supportive-educational group program to help children understand and more successfully cope with the stresses, changes and emotional challenges" resulting from divorce (Abel et.al, 2013, p.137). The program provides a curriculum specifically aimed at reducing behavioral and emotional outbursts. In addition to the curriculum, "Themed books and therapeutic games are also recommended to supplement" (Abel et. al, 2013, p.138). Kids Konnect, along with several of the

other curriculums that have been explored, also provides a Parent Group that coincides with the children's support group.

Using information gleaned from evaluations, pre-post test instruments and parent and child self-report, Abel et al. (2013) were able to conclude, "Statistically significant improvements" in regards to social skills and attending behaviors (p. 143). They were also able to determine that group, "Intervention might be effective in helping the children cope with their reactions to the recent disruption of their family" (Abel et al., 2013, p. 143).

Of the curriculums documented and studied within the great body of literature, the majority of the research supports the effectiveness of group therapy as the primary treatment of modality. Group work with children has been empirically shown to reduce behavioral concerns, validate the emotional experiences of the child, increase social skills and allow the child space to grow and learn.

### **School as Appropriate and Reliable Setting**

While many of the curriculums mentioned here could be administered in an outpatient mental health facility or other community based program, research suggests that schools are the most pertinent place for these groups to occur. As noted in Sonnenshein-Schneider and Baird (1980), "School personnel have long been aware of the symptoms exhibited by the children of divorce... the basic benefit of group is the development of individual problem-solvers capable of

applying their new skills at home and at school”(p. 88). As Hawthorne et al. (2003) suggested, “Of particular importance were the needs to facilitate communication between children and their parents, help children understand what is happening, and facilitate children’s networks for support, including maintaining school and community links (p.314).” Anderson et al. (1984) also noted that, “Empirical studies have shown that multimodal groups are effective in changing the attitudes of children toward divorce and improving their classroom conduct” (p. 225). Similarly Ziffer et al. (2007) supported school as the primary place to deliver group as,

The school’s mission is to stimulate the child’s academic achievement, and the school counselor’s responsibility is to nurture the child’s social and emotional well-being so that the child can grow cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically in positive ways. Without emotional and social well-being, academic progress will slow or stall altogether (p.155).

The greatest network of support that a child has during these critical transition periods during parental divorce is within the school, where they spend a good majority of their day.

With group intervention being the most evaluated mode of helping children cope with divorce, this research seeks to determine school social worker’s perceived effectiveness of group work with children experiencing divorce in the school setting.

### **Social Worker as Link to Therapeutic Intervention**

As children experience difficulty in school settings, the school social worker's role becomes more central to helping the child develop a network of support and connect with appropriate resources. Huffman (2013) states,

School social workers help support student learning through direct service, service coordination, and advocacy in an academic setting. School social workers also provide a comprehensive approach to support the psychosocial and mental health needs of schools, students, and families, as research consistently states that there is a relationship between addressing the social outcomes of children and subsequent positive academic outcomes (p. 40).

School social workers bridge the gap between home and school and can help in a variety of ways as noted above. In addition, school social workers often serve as the sole mental health provider within an academic setting. School social workers, facing extreme budget cuts, must maximize their time and effort (Huffman, 2013). In doing this, school social workers often choose groups as the primary modality of the delivery of mental health services. For this reason, group work within school social work settings with children experiencing divorce will be considered.

### **Theoretical Conceptualization**

Prior to addressing the particular study at hand, it is necessary to explore the theoretical underpinnings that inform direct social work practice. While there

are many theoretical orientations that could inform this particular study, this study was conceptualized based on models of human development, ecosystems theory and group work theory.

### **Human Development Perspective**

Beginning with a human development model, Erickson purported that there were eight psychosocial stages within the context of normal development. These stages explain specific developmental contexts and help professionals understand behaviors. As noted in Forte (2007), “Social workers use the model to assess a client’s success in meeting developmental tasks, to develop a comprehensive developmental history, and to identify and understand current coping difficulties and ego strengths as these relate to unresolved psychosocial crises” (p. 302). This particular study is concerned with the latter. In understanding development, a social worker can gain a context of appropriate coping and how a child may be struggling within this area. For this particular study, the stage of development most relevant to the work is the latency stage of industry versus inferiority. It is within this stage that,

Teachers and peers become role models. Serious work is added to play routines, and children learn that recognition follows the production of things. Children learn how to participate in an apprenticeship and develop abilities for task identification. Their accomplishments should result in a

sense of pride, competence and efficiency. A sense of industry and the basic ego strength of competence ideally emerge (Forte, 2007, p. 300). With children experiencing divorce within this stage, they may have difficulty feeling competent and may experience disruption in the formation of basic ego strength (Kim, 2011). In addition, this stage of development lends itself well to group work, as children view peers as role models. By engaging with peers who are also experiencing divorce, they are able to receive and give appropriate feedback. For these reasons, children of elementary school age will be focused on in this research.

### **Ecosystems Theory**

In addition to conceptualizing group work and understanding children from a developmental perspective, ecosystems theory can also inform direct social work practice when working with children experiencing divorce. Systems theory purports that people must be considered in the context of their environment. "Living systems are connected to each other and the environment" (Forte, 2007, p. 186). Within this framework, children experiencing divorce must be viewed within the context of their family. They may be experiencing high familial conflict and stress as a result of the divorce. Children become a product of their environment. In regards to this study, the increased psychological stressors, decreased physical health and decline in academic functioning of

children experiencing divorce should all be considered from an ecological perspective, as results that are directly correlated with the environment.

### **Group Work Theory**

A final theory that was used to inform this research and connect to social work practice is theories of group work. Group work has been a part of the social work treatment repertoire as a preferred method for decades.

Social group work, as one of the methods of the social work profession, was introduced during the first quarter of this century. It emerged at a time when there was a renewed dichotomy within the profession between social workers who primarily regarded the causes of social problems as those within people and others who located these causes primarily within the social situations in which people with problems were living (Wilson, 1956).

Group work is a process that seeks to, “Help individuals to enhance their social functioning through purposeful group experiences and to cope more effectively with their personal, group or community problems” (Konopka, 1963). By participating in group, children are able to receive beneficial tools that aid them in coping more effectively. Children are able to learn from the experience of others in a group setting and apply these experiences to their own.

Group theory, developmental theory and ecosystems theory are the key theoretical constructs that informed this research. Children develop at specific,

measurable stages. Within the latency stage, children who experience a divorce, may experience a disruption, in which the most effective method to treat such disruption is group work. These children are a product of their environment and experience divorce as a member of a family system. Group work seeks to move children beyond the experience of parental divorce and towards more positive coping skills.

### **Methods**

This study sought to discover the perceived effectiveness of group work with elementary school aged children experiencing parental divorce. There were many methods in which to gather data within this research. For the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach was taken. This method of research allowed for the observation of verbal and nonverbal behavior, the ability of causal sequences to be constructed, insightful data to be gleaned and to aid in accessing limited groups (Monette et al., 2011). Within the present research, qualitative interviews were conducted.

Qualitative interviews involve, “An interviewer reading questions to a respondent and then recording his or her answers” (Monette et al., p.164). In this particular method, interviewers follow a specific schedule of prepared questions for respondents to answer. This free form allows for a wide variety of information gathering in which great insight can be observed. As noted in Turner (2010), “Interviews provide in-depth information pertaining to participants’ experiences

and viewpoints of a particular topic” (p.754). This participant experience was precisely the focus of this research.

Qualitative interviews provided information and perceptions of elementary school social workers in the state of Minnesota. As discussed within the literature review, research has shown that group work is the most effective method for helping children cope with parental divorce. Building from this knowledge, participants were asked to reflect on the role of school social workers, their experiences in working with children experiencing parental divorce, the effectiveness of divorce groups in the school settings and their knowledge around community- based resources for divorce. A full schedule of the questions addressed within this research can be located in Appendix

A.

The specific setting for this research was in an elementary school, in which the school social worker facilitated groups for children experiencing divorce. The goal of this research was to explore the effectiveness of group work as perceived by school social workers working with children experiencing divorce.

### **Sample**

The current research involved the collection of data from eight different interviews of school social workers within the state of Minnesota. The research reached out to the Minnesota School Social Workers Association (MSSWA) to

obtain a list of practicing social workers within the state of Minnesota. Names on the list were contacted via email to seek out participation within the research. The email was sent out to the group, rather than on an individual basis. In addition, two research participants indicated that they had forwarded the research requests on to other workers they knew of that may have an interest in participating. School social workers responded electronically about their willingness to participate in interviews. Email was then used to schedule interviews with interested participants. Social workers were screened prior to the interview, to ensure that they were currently practicing within an elementary school setting and currently facilitate or have facilitated a divorce group for children.

The school social workers selected for participation in this study ranged in their years of practice from five to 28 years. Licensure level varied within the sample and included Licensed Social Workers (LSW), Licensed School Social Workers (LSSW), Licensed Independent Social Workers (LISW) and Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LICSW). The school social worker sample also varied in the size of the school district ranging from more rural areas with total district enrollments near 2,000 students to large metro districts with enrollments near 30,000 students. In addition to this variation in the sample, the school social workers also varied in their primary work function, including some workers with emphasis on Special Education.

### **Protection of Study Participants**

When working with these social workers, it was important to protect their confidentiality and ensure that they received an informed consent around their participation in the research. To protect the human subjects within this research, participants were provided an informed consent as outlined by the University of St. Thomas. This informed consent, as located in Appendix B, contained an explanation of the research, procedural outlines to be conducted during the interview, statements and protections for confidentiality and the right to voluntarily consent to participation. The researcher and interviewee signed the consent forms upon commencing the interview. For the purpose of this research, one copy was kept by the researcher. An additional copy of the signed informed consent was provided to the research participants. In addition, participants were advised that they could stop the interview at any time and that they had the ability to not answer any question within the interview schedule.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data was collected within the interview process. Data collection occurred simultaneously with the interview process. The interview was audio taped to record the verbal feedback offered by the interviewee. In addition, the researcher wrote down information during the interview including interviewee responses and general observations.

Upon completion of the interviews, the audio tapes were listened to and an official transcription was created. The transcriptions were then coded and

examined on an individual basis. Transcripts were coded line by line. Following this line by line coding, the transcript was assigned themes based on the individual coding. Following individual coding, all transcripts were assessed as a whole to determine themes within the interviewee's responses. Generalizations were then made to appropriately assess the perceived effectiveness of group work in helping children experiencing divorce.

### **Findings**

Upon analyzing the transcripts, three main themes emerged regarding the perceived effectiveness of divorce groups including group structure, positive psychological and emotional outcomes for children and parental roles related to group. In addition, an emerging theme arose within the research regarding systems involvement and its impact on group effectiveness.

### **Group Structure**

In completing this research, it became evidently clear that respondents believed that group structure is particularly important when determining the effectiveness of divorce support groups for elementary school students. Elements of group structure included immediacy of concern, length of group, closed membership and activities presented. Each of these elements were repeatedly discussed and identified throughout the interview and coding processes.

### **Immediacy of Intervention**

In each of the eight interviews conducted, there was full consensus regarding immediacy in addressing divorce. All of the school social workers interviewed indicated that addressing the divorce in a swift manner was particularly important in regards to group effectiveness. The sooner a referral is made and the child is in group, the more likely that the school social worker is able to support the student and achieve better outcomes for that child. Workers perceive that early intervention is particularly important for this age group, as this is a crucial period in identity and familial development. One worker addressed this,

*Typically when we do groups, we target kids that ...their parents are separating or going through divorce right now or have very recently. It's not typically kids that have been in that situation for a while. Its kids that are new to it. The goal is to talk about it, see how they are feeling about it, get them talking to each other about it and just again normalizing that and figuring out where they are at... We are not sure how they [children] feel about it because they are not going to talk about it at home. They are not really sure how to talk to mom and dad so it's about getting a feeling for how they are feeling, where their heads at, if it is affecting them and how it is affecting them.*

In immediately addressing the divorce, school social workers are able to effectively determine where the children are in their process and offer group intervention that specifically helps them address their needs.

### **Length and Time of Group**

Along with early intervention, another key element aiding in the effectiveness of group work with children experiencing divorce in elementary school settings is the length and time spent in group. School social workers agreed that the group should run once weekly for a minimum of four weeks and a maximum of 12 weeks. On average, workers indicate that they are running groups for eight weeks. Each of the workers interviewed felt that the group was most effective when run over six weeks and under ten weeks. One worker noted their experience with attempting to shorten a group,

*The group I have now is meeting weekly. Most of my groups meet weekly but I try to wean them to every other week as the year goes on. At six weeks, I try to wean them off. It is really hard. I weaned this one group as I was trying to get this group to meet less often and right away there was a noticeable difference in their behavior. A couple of the kids were having trouble... When the group started [again], they really calmed. I went back to meeting once a week.*

Along with length of time in group, the amount of time that group runs was also a key determiner of group effectiveness. Of the workers interviewed,

five of eight indicated that afternoon was typically the best time to host group, as the core academic classes generally occur in the morning hours. As noted in one interview,

*When I run groups from families that are divorcing it is important in a school setting to set up a time that those emotions can't be overwhelming to the kids... the purpose of being in school is to learn reading, writing and math... The groups are best done at the end [of the day] or before lunch and recess so that they...aren't stuck with their feelings and emotions and then having to learn social studies. The timing and structure are very important.*

In addition, it was further indicated that the least amount of time in group is 30 minutes and the great amount of time is 90 minutes. Most workers agreed that an hour or less was best for this age group, based on their developmental ability to maintain attention.

### **Closed Membership**

In addition to meeting weekly and for a limited duration during the school day, school social workers also spoke of the importance of closing membership for the duration of the group. Six of eight school social workers interviewed offered closed groups that began and ended with the same members. These six workers indicated that this was most effective as the children are often building

relationships with each other, as well as sharing experiences in a trusting setting.

One interviewee addressed this succinctly stating,

*They [children] need a clear beginning and end because they have a hard time with those boundaries and what that looks like. The beginning and the end was my favorite model. They know that this is eight weeks and this what we are doing from beginning to end and if there are other needs that present themselves, we will do another group that will start over at week one.*

In closing the membership of the group, children are able to anticipate interactions and develop appropriate boundaries within the group setting.

### **Activities, Relationship Building and Effectiveness**

The final piece of group structure that school social workers perceived as crucial to group effectiveness was the varying of activities and relationship building within the group setting. Of the eight workers interviewed, all eight were working from at least one curriculum that had specific interactive activities including art, books, videos and worksheets. Within this sample, no one worker was using the same curriculum. What was stressed by each worker was not the importance of having a curriculum, but instead using interactive activities that allow individual expression and the opportunity to build a trusting relationship as noted,

*It just depends. Sometimes, you could pull out a video and the kids are bored. You could pull the same video and it goes great. It depends. I think it more has to do with the activity, but it is about how you approach the kids. It is your comfort level with the topic and how you make kids feel. It is important that they are there. They are special. It is all about that versus the curriculum. You pull out the other stuff, but it is mainly your therapeutic relationship with them...My favorite book which is really basic...is called Dinosaur's Divorce...It goes through just about every single topic and you can open one page on feelings and spend the whole group talking about feelings.*

Other workers shared similar experiences about starting off with one activity, which evolved in to a discussion. The key piece that consistently occurred within the research was not sticking to a specific curriculum, but rather the response of the school social worker to the child in allowing them to share and be interactive within the group setting regardless of activity presented.

### **Positive Psychological and Emotional Outcomes**

According to the respondents, the perceived four key elements of group structure that make groups with children experiencing parental divorce in elementary school settings effective included early intervention, length and time in group, closed membership and interactive activities that build therapeutic relationships. Along with these elements, school social workers also indicated

that they have been able to determine group effectiveness based on specific outcomes related to each child participating in group. Each of the workers within the sample indicated group effectiveness was gleaned through behavioral and emotional observation, as well as through formal assessment and child self-report.

### **Behavioral and Emotional Observation**

Of the eight school social workers sampled, all eight indicated positive behavioral and emotional changes that were observable in group participants during the group process. Workers reported that from a behavioral approach, children often appeared more regulated and engaged in academics as a result of participation in divorce group. As observed by one worker,

*I think the biggest one that I have [noticed] is this kind of kid that used to be really engaged in class, they aren't as engaged in class when they start group. They might be clinging to a parent or sibling, withdrawn, [or] easily upset. Kids will get upset because they get an answer wrong or things like that. If they do group...they come out of that a little bit. They are more engaged in class... [They are] a little bit more independent. You know once they are comfortable with the situation at home and with you and the people in group and feel like they have a little more support, they are more independent.*

Along with behavioral changes, school social workers were also able to observe emotional changes within the children participating in groups. Observations noted

included development of positive supports, social skills development, emotional identification and expression, acceptance of divorce and increases in self-confidence. One worker observed,

*I would say definitely just the way they carry themselves and their self-confidence. Them knowing that they are not alone. That is huge. They just feel like they are the only ones going through this. To build up their self-confidence. You can see...them feeling better about themselves as the group progresses. They are able to let the steam out of that balloon...Their feelings get bigger and bigger and bigger and the balloon pops. Just to be at that increased piece of where they are at [with emotional understanding] and the acceptance [of the divorce] is something very cool to see.*

School social workers reported significant positive, observable behavioral and emotional changes following group participation.

### **Formal Assessment**

Along with observation, three school social workers also reported that they were conducting formal assessments to measure group effectiveness including pre and post tests and written evaluations. These workers indicated that they have received positive feedback from these assessments. Examples of feedback included increased affect regulation, increased acceptance of divorce

and feeling supported by the group. In addition, two workers reported having used these assessments as formal support for group work within their districts.

### **Child Self-Report**

In addition to observation and formal assessment, children's self-reports were also reported as a means to measuring group effectiveness. All eight workers reported that they had received feedback from children throughout the group process. Each worker indicated that children report positive outcomes related to being understood, feeling as they are not alone, developing strategies to cope with their feelings and identifying a safe person to speak with.

*I do...touch base with kids. A lot of time things come up in the group and we talk about how can you get support in dealing with your feelings and they more often than not will say this group and go on and talk about other people in their lives. They self-report that this is helpful to them...You can tell that this experience is very important to them.*

Four workers indicated that beyond the group process, they were contacted by children regarding the group's effectiveness,

*Even now in the middle school, I have kids coming up to me and saying, "I had you in family change group when I was in second grade." That is a success for me. They identify you as somebody that was there for them in the time of need. The kids constantly approach me and say, "I am going to*

*dad's this weekend and there are some things that I am feeling scared about." I have always thought that was nice.*

Observable changes, formal assessment and child self-report were all indicators for each of the workers within the sample that group work with children experiencing divorce was a successful model of intervention.

### **Parental Involvement**

The final piece of determining group effectiveness was the involvement of parents in the group process. There was 100 percent consensus related to parent involvement in group. Every school social worker agreed that parents should not be part of the main group process. It was often noted that parents are experiencing their own changes and emotions, which must be kept separate from that of their children and the emotions they are experiencing. The sample all agreed that parents should be informed of what's occurring in group, but that the focus of group is the child and their feelings. Workers indicated that the job of the parent is to understand the child, but not participate in the group with the child, *"I focus just on the kids and I am very quick at saying that to parents. That's my role as a school social worker."* This sentiment was shared across the sample.

### **Emerging Theme Related to Group Effectiveness**

In addition to the findings stated above, another significant theme emerged regarding systems involvement in the effectiveness of group.

### **Systems Involvement**

Three workers within the sample discussed formal systems involvement and the ways in which group effectiveness is hindered when formal systems become involved. The formal systems specifically mentioned in the research included law enforcement and the judicial system. School social workers in the sample believed that a dynamic was added to group when children discussed ongoing family matters, where formal law enforcement intervention was needed. These workers expressed that this can incite fear in other children experiencing divorce, as children at this age, often rely on other children to validate their experience. One worker shared her experience in a group with a child,

*So that is something that you know, oh my goodness the police were at our house last night and they were yelling so loudly and throwing things. Sometimes that is not appropriate to have in group. We talk about [whether] that [is] something to share in group... We will talk individually about it because kids really need to process that stuff and are frightened when things escalate so much that the police come in.*

Each of the workers was clear that when there is domestic violence or significant family struggle above and beyond the divorce, greater intervention beyond group may be needed.

In addition to the concerns surrounding law enforcement involvement, the family court system also arose within the research. Workers discussed the many ways in which they have been asked to participate in the family court process.

This participation included testifying in court, records subpoenaed for court purposes and requests from parents. Each of the workers that addressed issues within the family court system pointed out their desire to not be involved with the formal proceedings of the court, but rather, to solely assist the child in transitioning through the divorce. As one worker reflected,

*Parents very often during the family change, where they are asking for help, are very eager to help. A lot of times part of the grieving process...is the fear of diving in. They are not quite sure what's going to happen. They want to do what's best for their kids. Very often, especially at the elementary level, they reach out quite a bit. They are very involved. You have to be careful too, as through family changes the courts are involved. It's important that we keep in mind the best interests of the kids when they are in school and not put them in the middle of that court situation. I have talked to parents and lawyers...but I have learned communication techniques to avoid me going to court.*

Involvement with law enforcement and court systems emerged in the research as a concern that can change the practice of social work in schools, including communication with parents and legal representatives. In addition, familial issues above and beyond the divorce itself can present in group, which require additional support on the part of the school social work professional.

### **Discussion**

This research sought to explore the perceived effectiveness of group work with elementary school children experiencing parental divorce. As outlined in the literature review, elementary school children experience significant negative effects as their parents' divorce including psychological, emotional, behavioral, academic and somatic concerns (Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Benedeck, 1998; Cowen et al., 1990; Emery, 1988; Farmer, 1987; Farmer & Galaris, 1993; Hodges et al., 1984; Jouriles et al., 2000; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Robinson et al., 2003; Wallerstein, 2005). With these effects well documented and researched, the body of literature suggests that group intervention with children has the most significant impact on helping them navigate and move beyond the divorce (Amato, 1994; Cowen et al., 1990; Farmer & Galaris, 1993; Halpenny et al., 2008; Rose, 2009; Schafer & Moos, 1998; Sonnenschein-Schneider & Baird, 1980; Ziffer et al., 2007;). Within these groups, the literature suggests that group is most effective in increasing social support, acceptance of the divorce and social skills (Rose, 2009). The findings above support many of the assertions within the research as outlined below.

This research found that the pieces that increase the effectiveness of group included immediacy, time and length in group, closed membership and varied activities that focused on relationship building. According to the literature, group should range between eight and 12 sessions (Abel et al., 2013, Farmer & Galaris, 1993; Skitka & Frazier, 1995; Ziffer et al., 2007). This research supports that time

frame, with the majority of groups occurring on average for 8 weeks. The research also discussed the importance of varied activities that built relationships within the groups and with other peers (Abel et al., 2013; Farmer & Galaris, 1993; Ziffer et al., 2007). This research also confirmed this assertion. The sample consistently reported varied activities including art, play, books, videos and interactive worksheets within the group that were used to build skills and relationships.

While these two pieces of group effectiveness were supported within the research and literature, other pieces were not readily addressed. Within the literature, immediacy and closed membership were not significantly addressed. Therefore, more research may be needed to determine whether these factors significantly contribute to the effectiveness of divorce groups with elementary school aged children.

Along with addressing the significant contributors to group effectiveness, this research also explored the measurement of group effectiveness based on observable outcomes, assessment and child self-report. The literature purported that children show significant gains in social support, coping and social skills development and increases in self-esteem following group participation (Kavanagh, 1991; Regev & Ehrenberg, 2012; Rose, 2009). This research supports these assertions and observed significant emotional and behavior changes for children related to coping skills and self-esteem development. In

addition, this research also showed children making significant gains in developing a positive support within the school setting.

While many pieces of the literature were supported by this research, there was a distinct difference related to parental involvement in group. Previous research found that parental involvement in group increased overall effectiveness and contributed to positive outcomes for children (Regev & Ehrenberg, 2012; Ziffer et al., 2007). This research contradicted this assertion. School social workers within this research believed that parental involvement shifted the focus away from the child. To determine the overall effectiveness of including parents within divorce groups for children, more research is needed.

### **Limitations**

While this research was able to contribute support to the existing body of literature regarding group effectiveness with children experiencing divorce, there are limitations within this research including sample size, geographic area and professional perspective. The sample size within this research was eight participants. A greater sample size may lead to more generalizability of findings. In addition, the geographic area covered within this research included only the state of Minnesota. A larger geographic area may have allowed for greater practice knowledge. A final limitation of this study was the professional perspective addressed. This research solely examined the perceptions of school

social workers. Therefore, this research can only be applied to school social work practice.

### **Future Implications**

This research provided a snapshot of divorce groups and their overall effectiveness. For future implications, it is suggested that similar studies be completed including greater sample sizes that cover greater geographic areas and across human services disciplines to increase the reliability and validity of results. In addition, it is recommended that research continue to examine group practices in elementary school settings to explore the contributors to overall group success. Specifically, the immediacy of group work and closed membership should be explored to determine whether they are contributing factors to positive outcomes. In addition, future research should explore the involvement of parents within the group setting and the contributions that this dynamic has to outcomes. Lastly, future research should also address how systems involvement impacts group work where divorce is occurring.

### **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

In conducting this research, there were several pieces of information that arose that require further discussion and implementation regarding policy and practice in social work. Practice implications that ascended through this research included assessment, gathering meaningful data and educational outcomes.

Policy implications within this research included proactive and preventative services that focus on all students.

### **Practice**

Within this research, there were very few social workers that were conducting assessments related to group work. With very little assessment being done, there was not an abundance of quantitative data that would support the use of group in schools. While qualitative data can tell some of the story, a significant gap exists in the ability to prove the effectiveness of group work. In addition, with the lack of assessment and quantitative data, there is little information regarding the educational outcomes that these groups provide.

In an era of fiscal cuts, budget constraints and difficult decisions, it is up to social workers to advocate for the children they serve, their work with those children and the vital nature of social work in schools. School social workers should be sharing their good work with stakeholders including administration, school boards, teachers and parents. This advocacy work is not possible without assessment and data that provides durable and measurable positive outcomes.

### **Policy**

Along with the practice implications, there were also policy implications that arose from this research as well, including the emphasis on proactive services that reach all students. Throughout the research, it was echoed that Special Education services have taken priority in the schools. This is a disservice to all

other students that may be experiencing life issues, including divorce. Students in regular education often present with issues that can be mitigated relatively quickly. By not being able to prioritize services for these students, life issues may fester and grow to larger issues that have significant impacts on academics, behavior and overall well-being. Social workers should advocate for the prioritization of group work that maximizes results while minimizing time.

### **Conclusion**

Children who experience parental divorce are at higher risk for negative behavioral, emotional and academic outcomes. To mitigate these outcomes, empirical research has proven the incredible effectiveness of group work with children, especially those experiencing parental divorce. School social workers have the unique opportunity to provide these groups. While there is significant qualitative research, including the research contained here, that supports the effectiveness of group, more research is needed to establish quantifiable data that speaks to the positive outcomes that these groups can produce for children. School social workers are poised to advocate for the prioritization of group work specifically related to mainstream students, where adverse reactions can be mitigated rather swiftly and educational outcomes can be greatly impacted. This work is of particular importance as financial concerns loom, wherein school social workers are being asked about their role, their impact and their benefit to the student. School social workers are doing amazing group work with students

experiencing divorce. With the added measurable data suggested here, the case strengthens and school social work takes its place as a vital and necessary component of every school district.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Schedule of Interview Questions

Topic: Perceived Effectiveness of Group Work in School Settings with Children

#### Experiencing Divorce

- 1) Tell me about your licensure level. How long have you been a school social worker and with what ages do you typically work with?
- 2) What do you notice are greatest needs of children experiencing divorce? What are the goals of groups that address these needs?
- 3) Is there a screening process in place for group participation or are there qualifications to participate?
  - a) How are students identified for group participation?
  - b) Are parents allowed to participate in group? (Are there coinciding parent groups, or are they asked to participate in sessions?)

If so, are both parents invited to participate?  
In what capacity?
  - g) Do students need parental permission to participate in group?

## 4) In running groups:

- a) Do you have a curriculum that you use for these groups? Which curriculum?
- b) Are curriculums ever individualized based on group membership? In what ways do you evolve them to be more individualized?
- b) What kinds of activities do you use to supplement the curriculum?
- c) What are the processes of the group that you provide?  
How is the group time structured?
- d) How often do you meet and for how long?

## 5) Following group participation, what tools, if any, do you use to measure success or change within the student?

- a) Do you specifically notice any behaviors that decrease or increase as a result of group participation?
- b) Are there any indicators that you feel determine the effectiveness of a divorce support group?
- c) Do you provide an assessment to children who participate in group?  
Which assessment?  
How is it presented?
- d) Do you provide feedback to other staff members, such as teachers, parents or administrators?
- e) What behavioral changes have you observed of students who have participated in these groups?
- f) What information have parents reported regarding their children following group participation?

## 6) What services are you aware of for children experiencing divorce outside of the school setting?

7) Is there any additional information that you feel would be helpful for me to know in regards to children experiencing divorce?

## **Appendix B: Informed Consent**

### **CONSENT FORM**

#### **UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS**

#### **The Perceived Effectiveness of Group Work in Elementary School Settings with Children Experiencing Parental Divorce**

**682220-1**

I am conducting a study about the effectiveness of group work with elementary school- aged children experiencing divorce. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are currently practicing social work within the state of Minnesota within a school setting. In addition, you have been selected for this research as you are a professional using groups for children experiencing divorce. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Jennifer Kronenberg under the supervision of Kendra Garrett, Ph.D., School of Social Work, St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas.

#### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness of group work when working with children experiencing divorce in elementary school settings. The research seeks to discover what school social workers believe is most helpful in engaging and supporting elementary school age children as they experience parental divorce. According to the current body of social work literature, group work is one of the most highly used methods in engaging children experiencing divorce. By collecting and analyzing interview data, the research seeks to add to the literature regarding group effectiveness and inform practitioners about best practices for working with these children.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: Participate in one interview in which you will answer a list of eight prepared questions, with relevant follow up questions and provide feedback based on your experience. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes, depending on your input. The interview will be audio recorded and I will also be writing while you are answering questions.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:** The present study has no real risks or benefits.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records I will create include the audio recording being conducted within the interview process the transcript created from this particular audio tape and the informed consent. These items will be stored in a locked file. The research chair and I will be the only individuals with access to this information. The information will be destroyed following the completion of the research, with a destroy date of July 1, 2015.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to one week following the interview. Should you decide to withdraw data collected about you data may be used that you provided, with no connection to your identity. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

**Contacts and Questions:** My name is Jennifer Kronenberg. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 715-379-3878. I am a student in the University of St. Thomas/St. Catherine University School of Social Work, advised by Kendra Garrett, Ph.D. She can be contacted at [kjgarrett@stthomas.edu](mailto:kjgarrett@stthomas.edu). You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

**Statement of Consent:** I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at

least 18 years of age. I agree to be audio recorded for the purpose of transcription of this interview. I understand that my audiotape will be deleted following the completion of this research.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Study Participant**

**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Print Name of Study Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Researcher**

**Date**