

# The Psychological Challenges Faced by Children of Divorced Parents and Their Impact on School Performance in Selected Secondary Schools in Yobe State

Mutawalli Alhaji Sule

Department of Social Development Mai Idris Aloomo Polytechnic, Geidam, Yobe State Nigeria.

## Abstract

This study examines the psychological challenges encountered by children from divorced families and their subsequent impact on academic performance in secondary schools within Yobe State, Nigeria. Divorce has become increasingly prevalent in Nigerian society, with significant implications for child development and educational outcomes. This research explores the multifaceted psychological effects of parental divorce on adolescents, including emotional distress, behavioral changes, and academic difficulties. The study reveals that children from divorced families often experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and adjustment disorders, which directly correlate with decreased academic performance, increased absenteeism, and reduced engagement in school activities. The findings emphasize the need for targeted interventions and support systems within educational institutions to address the unique challenges faced by these students.

**Keywords:** *Divorce, children, psychological challenges, academic performance, secondary schools, Yobe State*

## **1. Introduction**

The institution of marriage and family structure has undergone significant changes in contemporary Nigerian society, with divorce rates showing a notable increase across various regions, including Yobe State. This phenomenon has profound implications for children who find themselves navigating the complex emotional and psychological terrain that accompanies parental separation. The dissolution of the family unit through divorce creates a cascade of challenges that extend far beyond the immediate family environment, significantly impacting children's psychological well-being and academic performance.

Yobe State, located in northeastern Nigeria, faces unique socio-cultural dynamics that influence family structures and child development. The region's diverse ethnic composition, including Kanuri, Fulani, Hausa, and other ethnic groups, brings varied cultural perspectives on marriage, divorce, and child-rearing practices. Understanding how divorce affects children within this specific cultural context is crucial for developing appropriate interventions and support mechanisms.

The psychological impact of divorce on children is a multidimensional issue that encompasses emotional, behavioral, social, and cognitive aspects of development. Research consistently demonstrates that children from divorced families are at higher risk for developing various psychological difficulties, including depression, anxiety, aggression, and academic problems. These challenges often manifest during the critical developmental period of adolescence, when students are already navigating complex identity formation processes and academic demands.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

The impact of divorce on children can be understood through various theoretical lenses. Attachment theory, developed by Bowlby (1969), provides a foundational understanding of how disruptions in primary relationships affect child development. When parents' divorce, children experience a fundamental disruption in their attachment relationships, leading to feelings of insecurity and abandonment that can persist into adolescence and adulthood.

The family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974) offers another perspective, viewing the family as an interconnected system where changes in one part affect all other components. Divorce represents a major systemic disruption that requires significant reorganization of family roles, boundaries, and communication patterns. Children must adapt to new family configurations, often including step-parents, half-siblings, and complex custody arrangements.

### **2.2 Psychological Challenges**

#### **2.2.1 Emotional Distress**

Children of divorced parents frequently experience intense emotional reactions that can include grief, anger, confusion, and fear. Wallenstein and Kelly (1980) identified several stages of emotional response to divorce, beginning with initial shock and denial, followed by anger and bargaining, depression, and eventual acceptance. However, this process is rarely linear, and children may cycle through these emotions repeatedly.

Research by Amato (2001) indicates that children from divorced families show elevated levels of anxiety and depression compared to their peers from intact families. These emotional difficulties can manifest as mood swings, irritability,

withdrawal from social activities, and somatic complaints such as headaches and stomachaches.

### **2.2.2 Behavioral Changes**

Divorce often triggers significant behavioral changes in children, including increased aggression, defiance, and acting-out behaviors. Some children may regress to earlier developmental stages, displaying behaviors they had previously outgrown. Others may prematurely assume adult responsibilities, taking on caretaking roles for younger siblings or emotionally supporting a distressed parent.

### **2.2.3 Social and Interpersonal Difficulties**

The social impact of divorce on children extends beyond the family unit to peer relationships and social functioning. Children may experience embarrassment or stigma related to their family situation, leading to social withdrawal or difficulties forming close relationships. Trust issues may develop, affecting their ability to form secure attachments with peers and authority figures.

### **2.3 Impact on Academic Performance**

The relationship between divorce and academic performance is well-documented in psychological and educational literature. Multiple studies have demonstrated that children from divorced families show significant declines in academic achievement compared to their pre-divorce performance and to peers from intact families.

#### **2.3.1 Cognitive Effects**

Divorce-related stress can impair cognitive functioning, including attention, concentration, and memory. The chronic stress associated with family conflict and instability can affect brain development, particularly in areas responsible for executive functioning and emotional regulation (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).

#### **2.3.2 Academic Engagement**

Children experiencing parental divorce often show decreased engagement with academic activities. This may manifest as reduced participation in class discussions, failure to complete assignments, and decreased motivation to achieve academic goals. The emotional preoccupation with family problems can make it difficult for students to focus on learning.

#### **2.3.3 School Behavior Problems**

Academic settings often become arenas where children express their divorce-related distress through behavioral problems. These may include increased absenteeism, tardiness, discipline referrals, and conflicts with teachers and peers. Such behaviors create additional barriers to academic success and may lead to a cycle of academic failure and behavioral escalation.

### **2.4 Cultural Context in Yobe State**

Understanding the impact of divorce on children in Yobe State requires consideration of the cultural and religious context. The predominantly Islamic culture emphasizes family cohesion and specific gender roles within marriage and child-rearing. When divorce occurs within this context, children may face additional challenges related to cultural stigma and changes in religious practice and community support.

Traditional extended family systems in Yobe State may provide some protective factors for children of divorce, offering alternative sources of support and stability. However, rapid social changes and urbanization may be weakening these traditional support networks, potentially leaving children more vulnerable to the negative effects of divorce.

## **3. Methodology**

This research employed a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively examine the psychological challenges faced by children of divorced parents and their academic performance in selected secondary schools in Yobe State.

### **3.1 Research Design**

The study utilized a cross-sectional survey design with both quantitative and qualitative components. This approach allowed for the collection of standardized data on psychological symptoms and academic performance while also capturing the nuanced experiences and perspectives of participants.

### **3.2 Participants**

The study involved 450 secondary school students aged 13-18 years from six selected secondary schools across three local government areas in Yobe State: Damaturu, Potiskum, and Gashua. The sample included 225 students from divorced families and 225 students from intact families as a comparison group.

### **3.3 Instruments**

Data collection utilized several validated instruments:

- The Children's Depression Inventory (CDI-2) to assess depressive symptoms
- The Revised Children's Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS) for anxiety measures
- Academic performance data obtained from school records
- Semi-structured interviews with selected participants
- Focus group discussions with teachers and counselors

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant educational authorities in Yobe State. Informed consent was secured from parents/guardians and assent from participating students. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

## **4. Results and Findings**

### **4.1 Demographic Characteristics**

The study sample consisted of 52% males and 48% females, with ages ranging from 13 to 18 years (mean age = 15.2 years). Among participants from divorced families, 68% lived primarily with their mothers, 22% with fathers, and 10% alternated between parents or lived with extended family members.

### **4.2 Psychological Challenges**

#### **4.2.1 Depression and Anxiety**

Students from divorced families showed significantly higher levels of depressive symptoms compared to their peers from intact families ( $M = 18.7, SD = 6.3$  vs.  $M = 12.4, SD = 4.8$ ;  $t(448) = 12.1, p < 0.001$ ). Similarly, anxiety levels were elevated among children of divorced parents ( $M = 22.1, SD = 7.2$  vs.  $M = 15.8, SD = 5.1$ ;  $t(448) = 10.8, p < 0.001$ ).

#### **4.2.2 Emotional Regulation Difficulties**

Qualitative interviews revealed that 78% of students from divorced families reported difficulties managing their emotions, particularly anger and sadness. Many described feeling overwhelmed by conflicting loyalties between parents and uncertainty about their future living arrangements.

#### **4.2.3 Self-Esteem Issues**

The study found that children from divorced families exhibited lower self-esteem scores ( $M = 28.3, SD = 6.7$ ) compared to their peers ( $M =$

34.1,  $SD = 5.2$ ;  $t(448) = -10.2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Students frequently expressed feelings of being "different" or "damaged" due to their family situation.

### **4.3 Academic Performance Impact**

#### **4.3.1 Grade Point Average**

Analysis of academic records revealed significant differences in Grade Point Average (GPA) between the two groups. Students from divorced families had lower GPAs ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) compared to students from intact families ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ;  $t(448) = -7.3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

#### **4.3.2 Subject-Specific Performance**

Mathematics and English Language showed the most significant performance gaps, with children from divorced families scoring an average of 12-15 points lower on standardized assessments. Science subjects showed moderate differences, while practical subjects like arts and physical education showed minimal differences

### **3.3 School Engagement**

Students from divorced families demonstrated lower levels of school engagement, including:

- Higher absenteeism rates (average of 18 days per term vs. 9 days for intact families)
- Reduced participation in extracurricular activities (32% vs. 67%)
- Lower homework completion rates (64% vs. 84%)

### **4.4 Coping Mechanisms**

The study identified various coping strategies employed by children of divorced par

#### **4.4.1 Adaptive Coping**

- Seeking support from friends and extended family members
- Engaging in religious practices and seeking spiritual guidance
- Focusing on academic goals as a means of future stability
- Participating in school counseling services

#### **4.4.2 Maladaptive Coping**

- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Aggressive behavior and acting out
- Substance experimentation (reported in 12% of cases)
- Academic avoidance and truancy

### **4.5 Teacher and School Perspectives**

Focus group discussions with teachers and school counselors revealed several key themes:

#### **4.5.1 Behavioral Observations**

Teachers consistently reported noticing changes in student behavior following parental divorce, including decreased concentration, increased emotional volatility, and reduced academic motivation. Many teachers expressed feeling unprepared to address these challenges effectively.

#### **4.5.2 Support System Gaps**

School counselors identified significant gaps in available support services, with most schools lacking specialized programs for children experiencing family disruption. Limited training in family crisis intervention was cited as a major barrier to effective support provision.

## **5. Discussion**

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## **5.1 Interpretation of Findings**

The results of this study align with international research demonstrating the significant psychological and academic challenges faced by children of divorced parents. However, the findings also reveal unique cultural factors specific to the Yobe State context that influence how children experience and cope with parental divorce.

The elevated levels of depression and anxiety observed among children from divorced families underscore the profound emotional impact of family dissolution. These psychological symptoms appear to create a cascade effect, interfering with cognitive functioning, academic motivation, and school engagement. The significant difference in GPA between the two groups suggests that the impact on academic performance is both substantial and measurable.

## **5.2 Cultural Considerations**

The study revealed several cultural factors that influence the divorce experience for children in Yobe State:

### **5.2.1 Stigma and Social Perception**

Many participants reported experiencing stigma related to their parents' divorce within their communities. This social stigma appeared to compound the psychological stress associated with family disruption and created additional barriers to seeking support.

### **5.2.2 Gender Differences**

The research identified notable gender differences in how children responded to divorce, with girls showing higher rates of internalizing symptoms (depression, anxiety) and boys displaying more externalizing behaviors (aggression, acting out). These patterns appeared

to align with cultural expectations regarding emotional expression.

### **5.2.3 Extended Family Support**

Despite challenges, the study found that traditional extended family networks in Yobe State provided important protective factors for some children. Those who maintained strong connections with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other family members showed better adjustment outcomes.

## **5.3 Implications for Educational Practice**

The findings have several important implications for educational practice in Yobe State secondary schools:

### **5.3.1 Need for Specialized Support Services**

Schools require specialized counseling services and support programs specifically designed to address the needs of children from divorced families. This includes training teachers and counselors to recognize signs of divorce-related distress and implement appropriate interventions.

### **5.3.2 Academic Accommodation**

Educational institutions should consider implementing academic accommodations for students experiencing family disruption, such as flexible deadlines, additional tutoring support, and modified attendance policies during critical transition periods.

### **5.3.3 Peer Support Programs**

Establishing peer support groups where children from divorced families can connect with others sharing similar experiences may help reduce feelings of isolation and stigma while promoting adaptive coping strategies.

## **5.4 Limitations**

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings:

1. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences about the relationship between divorce and academic performance
2. Self-report measures may be subject to response bias
3. The sample was limited to specific regions within Yobe State and may not generalize to other areas
4. Long-term follow-up data were not available to assess the persistence of observed effect

## **6. Recommendations**

### **6.1 For Educational Institutions**

1. Implement Comprehensive Support Programs: Schools should develop and implement comprehensive support programs specifically designed for students experiencing family disruption, including individual counseling, group therapy, and academic support services.
2. Teacher Training: Provide regular professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their understanding of the impact of divorce on children and develop skills for supporting affected students in the classroom.
3. Early Identification Systems: Establish systematic approaches for identifying students who may be struggling due to family changes, including regular screening and teacher observation protocols.
4. Family Engagement: Develop strategies for engaging both parents in the child's education despite the divorce, promoting cooperation in supporting the child's academic success.

### **6.2 For Policymakers**

1. Resource Allocation: Increase funding for school counseling services and mental health support in secondary schools throughout Yobe State.
2. Professional Development: Mandate specialized training for school counselors and social workers in family crisis intervention and child adjustment to divorce.
3. Community Partnerships: Foster partnerships between schools and community mental health organizations to provide comprehensive support for affected families.
4. Research Support: Fund longitudinal research studies to better understand the long-term impact of divorce on children's development and academic achievement in the Nigerian context.

### **6.3 For Mental Health Professionals**

1. Specialized Training: Develop specialized training programs for mental health professionals working with children and families affected by divorce in culturally diverse contexts.
2. Evidence-Based Interventions: Implement and adapt evidence-based interventions for children of divorce to fit the cultural context of Yobe State.
3. Prevention Programs: Develop prevention programs for parents considering divorce to minimize the negative impact on children.

### **6.4 For Families and Communities**

1. Parent Education: Provide education for divorcing parents about the potential impact on children and strategies for minimizing negative effects.

2. Community Support: Strengthen community-based support networks for single-parent families and children of divorce.

3. Stigma Reduction: Work to reduce stigma associated with divorce and single-parent families through community education and awareness programs.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study provides compelling evidence of the significant psychological challenges faced by children of divorced parents in Yobe State secondary schools and their negative impact on academic performance. The findings demonstrate that these students experience elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and behavioral difficulties that directly interfere with their educational achievement and overall school engagement.

The research highlights the urgent need for comprehensive support systems within educational institutions to address the unique needs of students from divorced families. This includes specialized counseling services, teacher training programs, and academic accommodations that recognize the complex challenges these students face.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of considering cultural context when developing interventions and support programs. The traditional family structures and community support systems in Yobe State present both challenges and opportunities for supporting children through the difficult process of family dissolution.

Moving forward, it is essential that educators, policymakers, mental health professionals, and community leaders work collaboratively to develop and implement effective strategies for supporting children of divorced parents. Only through such coordinated efforts can we hope to

mitigate the negative impacts of divorce on children's psychological well-being and academic achievement.

The implications of this research extend beyond the immediate educational context to broader concerns about child welfare and development in Nigerian society. As divorce rates continue to rise, understanding and addressing the needs of affected children becomes increasingly critical for promoting positive outcomes and breaking cycles of academic underachievement and psychological distress.

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to better understand the long-term trajectories of children from divorced families, evaluation of intervention programs specifically designed for this population, and investigation of protective factors that promote resilience among children experiencing parental divorce.

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