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School Psychologists' Perceptions of Selecting Divorce-Themed Books
for Elementary-Aged Children Experiencing Parental Divorce

Tarryn Elizabeth Roberts

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Educational Specialist

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ABSTRACT

School Psychologists' Perceptions of Selecting Divorce-Themed Books for Elementary-Aged Children Experiencing Parental Divorce

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Divorce is a common event in the United States; an estimated 50% of marriages end in divorce. With so many divorces each year, a substantial number of children are impacted. Divorce can have negative effects socially, behaviorally, emotionally, and academically, in both the short term and the long term. Bibliotherapy is a therapeutic tool centered on the use of books and stories to assist in the understanding and expression of an event. Bibliotherapy has been shown to be effective for children who have experienced similar traumatic events such as loss. Research suggests that bibliotherapy could be a flexible, cost efficient, time efficient, and therapeutically effective intervention for children experiencing divorce.

This research project attempted to further understand and identify the perspectives of school psychologists on the selection and use of bibliotherapy for children experiencing divorce in their families. Participants ($n=11$) discussed their perceptions of 16 preselected children's divorce books. They also discussed their perceptions on important selection criteria to consider when selecting a book to use with children of divorce. Overarching themes indicated that participants proposed that an effective book individualizes treatment; portrays realistic experiences; includes topics that are practical, comprehensive and multi-dimensional; provides an engaging and interactive story; and addresses and identifies emotions. Future research is recommended to explore the effectiveness of using carefully selected stories in supporting elementary-aged children experiencing parental divorce.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, school psychology, divorce, children's literature, elementary school students

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The face of the American family is rapidly changing. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2017) reports a marriage rate of approximately 6.9 marriages per 1,000 population compared to a divorce rate of approximately 3.2 divorces per 1,000 population. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), in 2014 only 62% of children who were under the age of 18 lived with two married parents. This same report indicated that a little more than one in four children lived in a home with only one parent.

Divorce

Family life in the United States and around the world is changing. Because of divorce, decline in marriages, and couples not living in the same household, there is a decline in two-parent households in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2015). It is estimated that approximately 50% of marriages end in divorce or separation (Pew Research Center, 2015). By the age of nine, more than 20% of children born within a marriage and more than 50% of children born within a cohabiting union will experience a parental breakup (Livingston, 2018). With a large amount of marriages ending in divorce, a substantial number of children experience parental separation and divorce.

During, as well as after parental divorce, research shows that children experience higher levels of internalizing problems and externalizing behaviors, lower levels of academic achievement, and more problems in social relationships (e.g., Amato, 2010; Arkes, 2015; Galluzzo, 2012; Weaver & Schofield, 2015). Research by Amato (2010) has specifically shown that children in divorced families perform lower than children in intact families, specifically in regard to emotional health, behavior problems, social skills, physical health, and academic

achievement. Although, in general, children are highly resilient to life's challenges, the negative effects of divorce on children's functioning can be both short-term and long-term, affecting some individuals well into adulthood and across their life spans (Sands, Thompson, & Gaysina, 2017; van der Wal, Finkenauer, & Visser, 2019; Weaver & Schofield, 2015). Therefore, finding interventions to strengthen children's coping skills and adaptive behavior is critical in supporting children effected by divorce (Jewell, Schmittl, McCobin, Hupp, & Pomerantz, 2017).

Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy, the use of books and reading materials in counseling, is often a therapeutic tool used to help individuals cope with various forms of loss and trauma. Bibliotherapy has been shown to be an effective treatment for addressing externalizing behaviors and internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety, fear, and loss (Lewis, Amatya, Coffman, & Ollendick, 2015; Montgomery & Maunder, 2015). Additionally, bibliotherapy is used to normalize a child's grief reaction to loss, reduce feelings of isolation, reinforce problem solving, and support constructive coping (Berns, 2004). However, minimal research has investigated bibliotherapy as a treatment for children who are coping with the challenges following parental divorce. Yet, some evidence suggests that children of divorce would benefit from bibliotherapy (Mumbauer & Kelchner, 2018; Sketoll, 2012).

Statement of Problem

In the United States, approximately 50% of marriages are voluntarily disrupted through divorce or separation (Amato, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2015). Slightly more than half of divorces involve children under the age of 18 (Amato, 2000). For many children, divorce, associated stressors, and changes in family life are correlated with negative effects, including higher levels of internalizing problems and externalizing behaviors, lower levels of academic

achievement, and an increase in social skills problems and problematic social relationships (Amato, 2010; Galluzzo, 2012; Lansford, 2009; van der Wal et al., 2019).

Although a significant number of children are impacted by divorce, few school-based programs are currently available (Angacian et al., 2015). It is important for these children to receive the assistance they need during this stressful transition, helping support their emotional needs and improving their outcomes following parental divorce. One time-efficient and potentially effective resource is bibliotherapy, easily implemented by school-based mental health professionals, such as school psychologists.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to further understand and identify the perspectives of school psychologists on the selection and use of bibliotherapy for children experiencing parental separation and divorce. Research suggests that bibliotherapy could be a flexible, cost-efficient, time-efficient, and therapeutically-effective intervention for children experiencing divorce (Pehrsson, Allen, Folger, McMillen, & Lowe, 2007; Sketoll, 2012). However, little research exists on practitioners' perspectives and experiences with bibliotherapy as a tool for helping children cope with parental divorce.

This study aims to understand school psychologists' perspectives of bibliotherapy as a helpful resource for children experiencing divorce-related challenges. In particular, this study proposes to investigate school psychologists' perspectives regarding selection criteria for divorce-themed books used for bibliotherapy. Additionally, researchers aim to provide a comprehensive list of practitioner-recommended books for school practitioners and parents to assist them in supporting children experiencing parental divorce and separation.

Research Questions

When choosing books to support early elementary-aged children (grade K–3) who are coping with the emotions and challenges often associated with parental divorce:

1. Which pre-selected books do practicing school psychologists perceive as most helpful in addressing specific challenges the children face?
2. From practicing school psychologists' perspectives, which criteria are most important when selecting divorce-themed books?

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Divorce, separation, and the termination of a marriage, affects almost half of U.S. children. In 2016, the National Center for Health Statistics estimated 827,261 divorces within the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Given the high divorce rate, the U.S. Census Bureau (cited in Connolly & Green, 2009) estimates that over one million young children experience divorce in the United States each year. Due to this large number of children experiencing divorce in the United States in both the past and the present, a large amount of research has investigated the effects of divorce on children.

Effects of Divorce on Children

Children experience various changes in their lives that affect their overall adjustment to life during and after divorce. These changes can include “declines in household income, poor psychological functioning among resident parents, ineffective parenting from resident parent, loss of contact with nonresident parents, and continuing conflict between parents and the absence of cooperative co-parenting behavior” (Amato, 2010, p. 656-657). Additionally, changes can include less effective parenting, continuing parental discord, less involvement with the noncustodial parent, addition of new family members, decline in fiscal resources, and moving schools (Amato, 2000).

Prior to and after parental divorce, research shows that children experience higher levels of internalizing problems and externalizing behaviors, lower levels of academic achievement, and more problems in social relationships (e.g., Amato, 2010; Arkes, 2015; Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Galluzzo, 2012; Lansford, 2009; Potter, 2010; Sun & Li, 2002). Although Amato (2010) specifically indicated that children in divorced families score lower than

children in intact families in measures of emotional health, social skills, health, and academics, some research indicates that these differences are marginal approximately two years following parental divorce (Arkowitz & Lilienfeld, 2017; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Short- and Long-Term Negative Effects

Research has shown that divorce can affect children in the long term as well as the short term (e.g., Amato, 2010; Amato & Keith, 1991; Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995; Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985; Wallerstein, 1991), meaning that the negative effects of divorce can continue across the lifespan. Adults of parental divorce are more likely to “obtain less education, have lower levels of psychological well-being, report more problems in their own marriages, feel less close to their parents (especially fathers), and are at greater risk of seeing their own marriages end in divorce” (Amato, 2010, p. 653).

Although a large body of research has supported the negative and long-lasting effects of divorce, there is research that suggests improved outcomes for children of divorce over time (Arkowitz & Lilienfeld, 2017; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Research suggests that the majority of children of divorce demonstrate resiliency and do not experience these negative effects long term (Arkowitz & Lilienfeld, 2017; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Although almost all families, or children, experience negative effects immediately after parental divorce, many children are able to recover from these negative effects, over time, usually within one to two years (Hetherington, Henderson, & Reiss, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Lebow, 2019). In fact, after that initial time period, children of divorce are almost indistinguishable when compared to children of intact families in the areas of happiness and functioning (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

However, research on divorce does indicate that although the long-lasting negative effects of divorce on children may be overstated, the experience of parental divorce still brings severe emotional pain and is among the most significant of life stressors (Lebow, 2019).

Although research may be inconclusive regarding the long-term effects of parental divorce, research still supports that the immediate transition period following divorce is a difficult and stressful time for the majority of children and their families (Faber & Wittenborn, 2010).

Divorce can have a strong, and sometimes lasting, influence on children because it is a form of loss, resulting in an experience of both grief and stress. Fiorini and Mullen (2006b) give the following definition of grief:

Grief is an inevitable, never-ending process that results from a permanent or temporary disruption in a routine, a separation, or a change in a relationship that may be beyond the person's control. This disruption, change, or separation causes pain and discomfort and impacts the person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Although loss is a universal experience, the causes and manifestations of it are unique to each individual and may change over time. (p. 10)

Given that divorce can have negative, and sometimes long-lasting, effects on children, research in this area has been and continues to be very important and meaningful. Past and current research in the field of divorce has specifically been very informative on the various effects (emotional/internalizing, social, academic, and behavioral/externalizing) that divorce can have on children in both the short term and long term.

Effects on internalizing behaviors. Research has shown that the stressful events of divorce negatively impacts/adversely affects the overall well-being and psychological health of children (e.g., Amato, 2010; Hetherington, 2003; Kenny, 2000; Sandler, Tein, Mehta, Wolchik,

& Ayers, 2000). Specifically, children of divorce are more likely to experience internalizing problems when compared to children of non-divorced families, such as higher levels of depression and anxiety, as well as lower levels of self-esteem (Hetherington, 2003). Additionally, they are vulnerable to internalizing feelings such as shock, shame, anger, fear, depression, and insecurity, as well as feelings of abandonment, rejection, blame, and hopelessness (Kenny, 2000). According to Cookston, Sandler, Braver, and Genalo (2007), children of divorce are twice as likely than their peers from non-divorced homes to have negative mental health outcomes such as aggression, lower self-esteem, emotional liability, and other internalizing problems.

Young children from ages five to nine tend to show signs of internalizing problems after divorce. One reason is because young children often do not have the coping skills or vocabulary to express what they are feeling on the inside (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006a). Research suggests that these children display internalizing problems such as lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of depression, with an average effect size of -0.8 ($p < .001$), after parental divorce when compared to peers from nondivorced homes (Connolly & Green, 2009). Young children can have a harder time expressing their feelings of sorrow and grief following the divorce of their parents.

Also, young children tend to have feelings of self-blame or guilt following their parents' divorce. According to Mack and Smith (1991) children tend to feel responsible or guilty about losses they experience. They may blame themselves for their parents' divorce, thinking they could have said or done something to stop it from happening. These feelings of guilt or responsibility only add to the internal anxiety and insecurity that children from divorced families experience.

Effects on externalizing behaviors. Research has shown that children of divorce are negatively impacted behaviorally as well, displaying more externalizing problems at home and in school after parental divorce (e.g., Amato, 2000; Amato, 2010; Hetherington, 2003; Weaver & Schofield, 2015). According to Hetherington and Kelly (2002), children from divorced families are twice as likely to display externalizing behaviors when compared to children from non-divorced families. Externalizing behaviors can include aggression, withdrawal, reoccurring nightmares, frustration, anger, and a sense of powerlessness (Burns, 2010; Fiorini & Mullen, 2006a).

The domain of externalizing behaviors has been found to be one of the largest and most consistent effects of divorce on children (Hetherington, 2003). When compared to children in two-parent, non-divorce families, children of divorce show increased levels of aggression, conduct disorder, disobedience, non-compliance, decreased self-regulation and social responsibility, as well as poorer classroom conduct (Hetherington, 2003). Research has shown that these externalizing problem behaviors increase immediately after the separation or divorce and can still be evident later in the child's development (Weaver & Shofield, 2015).

An increase in externalizing behaviors from parental divorce can lead to other behaviors and events that negatively affect the children later in life. Hetherington (2003) found that when compared to children from non-divorced families, children of divorce had a two to three-fold increase of risk for behavioral as well as psychological problems. These problems include academic difficulty, dropping out of school, participating in early sexual activity, having children out of wedlock, substance abuse, unemployment, involvement with antisocial peers, and other delinquent activities (Hetherington, 2003).

Effects on social skills and relationships. While there is only a small amount of research addressing social skills and relationships for children of divorce, research has shown that divorce negatively impacts a child's social skills and relationships (e.g., Amato, 2010; Angacian et al., 2015; Beaty, 1995; Kim, 2011; Wallerstein, 1991). Social and interpersonal skills have been found to be critical to the social and academic success of students in schools and later in life, as they play a key role in the prevention of negative relationships (Elliott, Malecki, & Demaray, 2001). Children of divorce have been found to score lower on measures of social conditions when compared to children of intact families (Angacian et al., 2015). Specifically, a child's relationship with parents, siblings, and peers can be negatively affected by their parent's divorce and separation. These negative effects can be characterized by increased conflict, aggression, negativity, and coercion in these interpersonal relationships (Hetherington, 2003). Additionally, the social and interpersonal problems stemming from divorce can have a lasting effect, influencing children well into young adulthood. Research by Kim (2011) found that there were negative effects on children's interpersonal skills during both the in-divorce and post-divorce stages. One reason that children of divorce may have a harder time with interpersonal skills during the divorce, as well as later in life, such as forming stable, satisfying, intimate relationships, is because they may have been exposed to poor parental models of interpersonal behavior during and after the divorce (Amato, 2000).

Effects on academic performance. Research has shown that divorce negatively impacts academic performance in children (e.g., Amato, 2000; Amato, 2010; Frisco, Muller, & Frank, 2007). Frisco et al. (2007) identified consistent findings showing that children whose parents divorce experience poorer academic achievement, fail courses, and get lower grades than children whose parents were not divorced. Research shows that there may be many factors

affecting a child's academic performance after divorce, one of those factors being the presence of internalizing and externalizing problems during or after parental divorce (Hetherington, 2003). These internalizing and externalizing problems can make it harder for children to be successful in the academic setting. According to teacher report, children who come from divorced families had heightened anxiety surrounding failure in academics, increased irrelevant talk, increased inattention, and a decreased ability to reflect (Emery, 1999). Additionally, children may have a harder time concentrating in class, which results in a declining of grades (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006a). These academic difficulties are likely related to the stress and trauma that the children are experiencing at home dealing with the divorce and family transitions.

Interventions to Support Children of Divorce

Since divorce has become such a common occurrence in the United States, there have been many interventions developed for children who are experiencing or have experienced parental divorce. Some common forms of divorce interventions include individual counseling settings, group counseling settings, and school-based programs. The aim of these interventions is to help children process and understand the experience of their parent's divorce. There are both benefits and challenges to each of the mentioned types of interventions.

Individual vs. group counseling. Individual counseling has been found to be a common but challenging form of intervention for children of divorce, especially for younger children (Kronenberg, 2015; O'Gorman, 2011). Difficulties reported with individual counseling include children being difficult to work with and the child not being willing to participate in an individual setting (O'Gorman, 2011). Additionally, because individual counseling is time and cost consuming, many parents are not able to afford this type of counseling for their children following the divorce (Amato, 1994).

Group counseling is seen as the most efficient, practical, and effective treatment for children experiencing parental divorce (Amato, 1994; Rose, 2009; Yauman, 1991). There are many benefits to providing intervention in a group setting. Group counseling offers a more cost and time effective way for children to cope with divorce (Ziffer, Crawford, & Penney-Wietor, 2007) as well as provides a peer social support that greatly improves outcomes (Halpenny, Greene, & Hogan, 2008). Through normalizing the occurrence of divorce within the group, group counseling also helps decrease feelings of isolation and shame that many children experience while experiencing parental divorce. It also provides an opportunity for the children to be validated by peers and experience peer modeling of appropriate behavior, as well as alternative ways of thinking and feeling (Yauman, 1991). Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, & Alpert-Gillis (1990) found that effective group counseling for children experiencing divorce resulted in reduction of anxiety, greater awareness, and greater openness in talking with others about divorce.

School-based intervention. Research suggests many benefits to school-based interventions for divorce (Drake, 1981; Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, & Mcloughlin, 1983). The school is seen as both an appropriate and reliable setting for children experiencing divorce to participate in group counseling. Since children are already present in the school setting every weekday, schools are a very practical setting for divorce interventions. If parents are under stress they may not be able to provide the support and guidance that children need during this stressful and traumatic time. Often, the school and school staff, such as school psychologists, become a critical source of support, nurturance, and stability for children during this life transition (Yauman, 1991).

Additionally, many researchers support the school as a primary and appropriate setting for group counseling. Ziffer et al. (2007) state that,

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)

Since divorce affects overall academic performance it is intuitive that the school should provide services to support children emotionally and academically. Providing divorce group counseling services in the schools fosters academic success, normalizes the experience, provides critical guidance, and creates an ongoing support system of peers and school personnel.

Parent involvement in intervention. Research has shown that there is often a lack of parent-child communication and parent involvement following divorce (Ängarne-Lindberg, Wadsby, & Berterö, 2009; Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Jewell et al., 2017). This lack of involvement can lead to a decrease in parental attention, help, and supervision (Amato & Keith, 1991) as well as add to a child's confusion, guilt, and stress regarding the separation of their parents. Research by Amato and Cheadle (2005) suggests that, regardless of amount of conflict or closeness prior to divorce, the quality of parent-child relationship often decreases following divorce. Conversely, some evidence indicates that parental involvement after divorce can have a positive impact on the child's adjustment (Bronstein, Clauson, Stoll, & Abrams, 1993; Sobolwski & Amato, 2007; Yauman, 1991). An involved parental role can be beneficial in divorce intervention and increasing a child's adjustment to divorce (Jewell et al., 2017).

Many researchers, past and present, have recommended a greater inclusion of parent participation in divorce intervention (Dillman Taylor, Purswell, Lindo, Jayne, & Fernando, 2011; Goldman & King, 1985; Jewell et al., 2017; Richardson & Rosen, 1999; Stolberg & Mahler, 1994; Yauman, 1991). Ways that parents can be more included in the intervention process include participation in questionnaires, parent meetings, and parent-child interactions. In a study by Stolberg and Mahler (1994), researchers provided workbooks during their intervention in order to increase and enhance child-parent communication as well as encourage the parents to be involved with their child's experiences. The addition of parental involvement yielded improvements in self-rated, trait anxiety when compared to other treatment conditions. This study provides evidence that parent involvement and increased child-parent communication are beneficial tools for divorce interventions.

Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy has varying definitions; however, the overall concept of bibliotherapy includes the use of books and reading materials to bring about a change in behavior or affect (Berns, 2004). The premise of bibliotherapy is that individuals are able to identify with literary characters and in doing so express emotions, gain new direction, and understand new ways of interacting. Change in behavior is achieved through catharsis, insight, or copying of character behaviors (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). Additionally, bibliotherapy is used to normalize a child's grief reaction to loss, reduce feelings of isolation, reinforce problem solving, and support constructive coping (Berns, 2004).

Bibliotherapy comes in two major forms. Reactive bibliotherapy involves giving children or individuals a book with a relatable character or story that they can read on their own, while interactive bibliotherapy involves an individual, such as a school psychologist or parent, reading

a book to children and then discussing it with them afterwards. Both reactive and interactive bibliotherapy are forms of creative bibliotherapy. Creative bibliotherapy is the guided use of fiction or poetry as prevention or treatment for behavioral and emotional problems or maladjustment (Montgomery & Maunders, 2015).

The therapeutic bibliotherapy process consists of three steps or stages including: *identification/projection*; *catharsis*; and *insight/integration* (Berns, 2004; Mendel, 2016). These three stages enable children to gain a better understanding of their feelings about their experience or situation. Berns (2004) describes the three stages as follows: In the first stage, *identification/projection*, the child identifies with the characters or events in the story. In the second stage, *catharsis*, the child becomes emotionally involved in the story and is able to experience emotions within a safe environment. During the third stage, *insight/integration*, which requires the help of an adult facilitator, the child becomes aware of possible solutions for both the book's characters as well as himself/herself.

There are many important elements to consider in the administration of bibliotherapy to children experiencing divorce. Pardeck and Pardeck (1993) defined four elements that are crucial for a successful bibliotherapy process including: *identification*, *selection*, *presentation*, and *follow-up*. Each of these elements should be guided by a skilled adult. *Identification* includes identifying the child's issues and needs. *Selection* includes using the most appropriate materials and resources available in order to serve the child's needs. *Presentation* includes skill in timing and presenting the literary material. Finally, *follow-up* includes administration of a follow-up activity, conversation, or emotional exploration of the materials being shared. This stage is crucial for therapeutic validity as well as children gaining insight.

As mentioned previously, one of the first steps and most critical elements for an effective bibliotherapy intervention is the selection of the books being used (Montgomery & Maunders, 2015). While different interventions can differ substantially, it is critical that selected books are “age- and literacy-appropriate narrative materials conducive to the therapeutic objective at hand” (Montgomery & Maunders, 2015, p. 38). Additionally, books used for bibliotherapy interventions should also have literary merit and be a useful tool for communication, self-discovery, and change with accurate and honest terminology (Berns, 2004).

Bibliotherapy to Support Children Following Parental Divorce

Bibliotherapy is often a therapeutic tool used to help individuals cope with various forms of loss (Berns, 2004; Morgan & Roberts, 2010). Berns (2004) defines loss as the “absence of something or someone important within one’s universe” (p. 322). While minimal research has studied the effects of bibliotherapy on children experiencing divorce, research has suggested that bibliotherapy would be an effective and appropriate treatment for children experiencing parental divorce since divorce is considered an event of loss (Kramer & Smith, 1998; Pehrsson et al., 2007; Sketoll, 2012). Bibliotherapy has been shown to be beneficial in helping children and individuals cope with loss. Since divorce is considered a form of loss, theoretically, bibliotherapy should also be beneficial in helping children cope with parental divorce. Additionally, research has indicated that bibliotherapy has the potential to help children identify emotions and provide skills for them to deal with emotions and emotional stress (Mumbauer & Kelchner, 2018).

Specifically, young children often have difficulty in defining and verbalizing their thoughts and feelings, especially during traumatic or stressful experiences. It has been found that through the use of bibliotherapy children are more inclined to talk about these feelings or

thoughts (Berns, 2004). Additionally, the use of bibliotherapy allows for children to feel less isolated, fearful, awkward, and more hopeful about their situation (Berns, 2004).

Bibliotherapy has also been shown to help reduce internalizing and externalizing behaviors in children, which are two major domains affected by the experience of parental divorce (Montgomery & Maunders, 2015). Internalizing and externalizing behaviors include those such as depression, anxiety, aggression, and acting out. A reduction of these behaviors can lead to greater adjustment to divorce and greater coping skills.

There are many reasons bibliotherapy can be an effective and efficient therapeutic intervention for children experiencing parental divorce. Bibliotherapy can be administered in a group setting, individual setting, and school setting which makes the intervention both flexible and efficient. Additionally, bibliotherapy can be a low-cost and easy-to-disseminate intervention to help children cope with parental divorce (Montgomery & Maunders, 2015). Bibliotherapy can also be used as a stand-alone intervention or in conjunction with other interventions. Additionally, after the literature is introduced in the counseling setting it can be sent home and be used to facilitate communication between the parent and child.

CHAPTER 3

Method

Permission to conduct this research study was granted by Brigham Young University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and by the participating school district. The IRB permission letter is included in Appendix A.

Participants

For the two focus groups conducted in this study, participants were school psychologists from an urban community in the intermountain west. These participants were considered to be a convenience sample. Participants were initially invited via a participating school district's email invitation; followed up by peer-to-peer encouragement to participate, considered snowball sampling. The sample included 11 participants, split into two groups, one group with five participants and the other group with six participants. Each participant was a current practicing school psychologist licensed to work in K–12 schools.

All participants met the selection criteria. Participants were selected based on their experience using bibliotherapy and counseling children who had experienced parental divorce. Participants were required to have experience counseling with children of divorce, as well as experience using bibliotherapy as a therapeutic tool. Participants had varying degrees of experience in these two areas (minimally one academic year). All participants identified as “Caucasian/White” with a mean age of 38 ($SD= 11.8$). The majority of participants were female ($n=10$).

Research Design

A descriptive phenomenological approach was used in this study. Phenomenological research is often used to gather information regarding the subjective lived experiences of an

individual or community of individuals; it investigates participants' first-hand perspectives on an issue or topic (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007; Englander, 2012). The phenomenological approach is intended "to capture as closely as possible the way in which the phenomenon is experienced within the context in which the experience takes place" (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 27). This qualitative approach allowed for researchers to understand the perspectives of school psychologists who commonly use bibliotherapy as a counseling tool and who commonly interact with children experiencing parental divorce.

Descriptive phenomenological data were collected through the facilitation of a focus group interview. Focus group interviews are a qualitative research method often utilized in order to gather information from individuals who are experienced or knowledgeable in the specific area being researched (Rabiee, 2004). Focus group interviews were used for this study in order to gather descriptive phenomenological data from a group of individuals who use bibliotherapy and who also counsel children experiencing parental divorce.

The focus group interview consisted of an open discussion. To facilitate discussion between participants, the interviewers relied on a set of semi-structured open-ended questions. Interview questions explored participants' perceptions of 16 preselected children's books. The interview questions also explored participants' perceptions of book selection criteria.

Setting

The two focus groups were held in a school district office building that was often used for trainings of local and state groups of school psychologists. This location ensured a comfortable gathering place that was familiar to participants. The two rooms in which the focus groups were conducted were large enough to comfortably accommodate the 11 participants and the 2 researchers. Each room had a table large enough to hold the preselected books and an area for

personal items and a light meal. The focus group interviews were held after school hours, as to not interfere with participants' work schedules. Each focus group lasted approximately 120 minutes (2 hours).

Book Selection

Research shows that some of the most common challenges children face when their parents' divorce includes the following: living in two homes; interacting with new family members; experiencing reduced contact with parent(s), particularly the non-custodial parent; observing parents' interpersonal conflict; and experiencing feelings of rejection, abandonment, guilt, blame, shame, fear, anxiety, insecurity, anger, and frustration (Amato, 2000; Amato, 2010; Kenny, 2000). Each book used in this study addressed one or more of these common challenges.

Books were also selected to be age appropriate. Research has shown that one of the most important aspects of book selection for effective bibliotherapy is the selection of age-appropriate books (Montgomery & Maunders, 2015). The selected books were also chosen because these books are typically recommended for grades K-3. The selected books were also reviewed by the research team for age appropriate content and literacy level.

The selected books were reviewed for quality of content through Amazon book reviews (star ratings), Horn Book Guides (professional library reviews), conversations with professionals familiar with bibliotherapy and counseling children, and website recommendations, including the following websites: [<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/kids/the-best-picture-books-that-deal-with-divorce/>]; [<https://wonderscounseling.com/a-list-of-childrens-books-about-divorce/>]; [<https://bookriot.com/2019/02/04/childrens-books-about-divorce/>]; [<https://www.pinterest.com/lmllawyers/childrens-books-that-deal-with-divorce/>];

[<https://www.pinterest.com/MajeskiLaw/childrens-books-about-divorce/>]; and [<https://wonderscounseling.com/a-list-of-childrens-books-about-divorce/>].

Based on these reviews and recommendations, the selection of books was chosen by the research team based on the perceived quality of content as reported through these resources. Selected books met the following criteria: a consumer rating of 4+ stars on Amazon, a Horn Book Guide rating between 1-3, and a recommended grade level of K-3. The list of selected books is included in Appendix B.

Guiding Question Development

The guiding questions were developed by the research team to compliment a descriptive phenomenological approach. Research indicates that “the questions that are part of a phenomenological interview should meet the criteria of description” (Englander, 2012, p. 25). This study’s guiding questions focused on extracting information on the experiences that participants have had when using bibliotherapy with children who experienced parental divorce. Additionally, guiding questions explored how these experiences with bibliotherapy shaped participants’ perceptions of what makes a certain book *effective* or *appropriate* (book selection criteria). Research shows the importance of probing with descriptive phenomenological questions that elicit participants’ descriptions of specific experiences of the phenomenon (Englander, 2012). This is because “Asking for a situation is vital since the discovery of the meaning of a phenomenon... needs to have been connected to a specific context in which the phenomenon has been experienced” (Englander, 2012, p. 25).

This study’s research questions were the basis of the guiding discussion questions. The guiding discussion questions were designed to align with the descriptive phenomenological approach. Although the guiding discussion questions were not asked verbatim, the guiding

questions helped to structure the focus group interviews. The guiding questions are included in Appendix C.

Instruments

Participants were asked to complete four forms during the course of the focus group interviews. These forms included a demographics sheet, a consent form, a rating/ranking form, and a categorizing form. The demographics sheet (Appendix D) featured eight questions regarding basic demographic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, etc.

The consent form (Appendix E) contained information regarding procedure, risks, benefits, confidentiality, compensation, and participation in the study. Participants were asked to read and sign the consent form prior to participating in the study.

The rating/ranking sheet (Appendix F) featured a table that contained all 16 book titles. Participants were asked to assign a rank order and a rating for each book. On the form participants were asked to rate each book individually on a scale of 1 (*not effective*) to 5 (*very effective*) and to rank the books from 1 (*most effective*) to 16 (*least effective*). To assist participants in remembering the 16 books, a small colored picture of each book cover was organized in an 8 ½” by 11” table, included on one sheet of paper. Participants referred to this paper as they rating and ranked the books.

The categorizing form (Appendix G) featured a table consisting of the 16 book titles and common challenges faced by children of divorce. Participants were asked to indicate, on this form, their perceptions of the usefulness of the books for these specific challenges.

Data Collection

Both focus group discussions were recorded using two separate audio recording devices to ensure that complete dialogue of all participants was captured. Within a few days of the data

collection, audio recordings were transferred to a password-protected computer and made available to the transcriber. De-identified audio recordings were transcribed by an undergraduate student. Prior to transcribing, the undergraduate student completed the university's Collaborative Institutional Training Institute (CITI Program) ethics training course. Audio recordings were deleted after they were fully transcribed and the researchers reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy and completion.

Procedure

Approximately 40 potential participants were recommended by the participating school district's guidance coordinator. Potential participants were then emailed a link to a survey addressing their experiences with bibliotherapy and experiences working with children whose parents were divorced or separated. The survey also asked if they were 18 years or older and currently employed as a school psychologist. Eleven participants responded and all met the participation criteria. These 11 individuals were invited to participate in the study. All 11 participants who agreed to participate gave written consent were included in one of the two focus groups.

Approximately two weeks in advance of the focus groups being held, participants were notified of the date, time, and location of the focus group meeting. Participants were reminded a second time on the day prior to the focus group, then again on the day of the focus group.

Upon arrival at the focus group location, each participant was seated in the focus group room. Prior to starting and during the focus group, a light meal was provided for all participants. Also, prior to starting the focus group, participants completed a demographics sheet (Appendix D) and consent form (Appendix E).

After participants completed the demographics sheet and consent form, the researcher started the focus group with a standard introduction that included a welcome message, an overview of the meeting's purpose, and guidelines for the meeting. A copy of this introduction is included in Appendix C. Following the introduction, the researcher allowed approximately 50 minutes for participants to read and analyze the sample of 16 K-3 books. Once all participants had the opportunity to read all of the 16 preselected books, the group of 11 participants were split into two groups (one with five participants and one with six participants). The primary researcher and the secondary researcher served as discussion facilitators, each leading one group. Each group facilitator started the discussion with an initial guided question. Guided questions are included in Appendix C.

Two researchers facilitated the focus group discussions. The primary researcher, a 23-year-old Caucasian female, was a second-year Educational Specialist student in Brigham Young University's School Psychology Program. This project focused on using children's books to address children's challenges in adapting to their parents' divorce or separation. This research was part of her thesis study that, prior to conducting the focus groups, she had studied extensively over the past two years. The primary researcher also extensively studied focus group research during this time. The secondary researcher was a 63-year-old Caucasian female who had extensive experience using children's literature to address a variety of challenging life events, including divorce. She is a licensed psychologist (Utah) and a Brigham Young University professor in the School Psychology Program and has extensive experience conducting focus group research. This second researcher trained the primary researcher in focus group research prior to conducting this study. This included how to use the semi structured guiding questions in

a focus group; how to ask open-ended questions that gently probed for information; and how to encourage group discussion that included all participants.

During the two focus group discussions, each researcher acted as a facilitator and moderator. The researchers provided prompts and probed for additional information related to the research questions. Additionally, the researchers read nonverbal cues such as facial expressions or body language to assist in knowing when to prompt for additional information.

Through the course of the focus groups the researchers utilized the guiding questions, facilitating discussions that addressed the research questions. The researchers did not participate in the discussion other than keeping the group on topic and encouraging individuals to participate.

Another responsibility of the group facilitators was to take notes on the discussion and provide additional information. These notes ensured that responses of participants were noted when the audio recording may have missed certain non-verbal communication, when participants may have talked over each other, or when participants' comments were not clearly stated and may have been misunderstood.

At the end of the focus group discussion, the researchers asked participants to complete the rating/ranking form (Appendix F) and categorizing form (Appendix G) for the 16 preselected books present at the discussion. Participants were asked to indicate their perceptions of the usefulness of the books for specific challenges and each book's overall effectiveness. In gratitude for their participation, the participants were also given the opportunity to complete an optional compensation form. If interested, participants provided a mailing address and selected three books they desired to receive. The participants' options for book selection were the same books

that were reviewed in this study. At the time of recruitment, participants were given notice of the optional compensation.

At the conclusion of the focus group, after collecting all the forms from participants, the discussion leaders stopped the audio recording. The focus group was concluded and participants were thanked for their time and participation.

Appendix A includes Brigham Young University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval letter. The IRB concluded that this study did not meet the regulatory definition of human subject research that posed a risk to participants. The research team was given approval to move forward in conducting the proposed study by both the IRB and the participating school district.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Both the primary and secondary researchers read through the transcripts of both focus groups. While analyzing the transcribed data gathered from the focus group discussion, the researchers used open coding and theme analysis to identify key themes in participants' comments. The purpose of qualitative data analysis is to "organize and reduce the data gathered into themes or essences, which, in turn, can be fed into descriptions, models, or theories" (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 549). Theme analysis is one process of qualitative analysis that includes searching through raw data for emerging themes that are critical or important to the phenomenon being described (Daly, Kellehear, Gilksman, & Daly, 1997). Open coding was used to find and develop the emerging themes and keywords within the transcripts. Open coding is the process of breaking down data, comparing data, and placing similar data in categories (Walker & Myrick, 2006). It is also a process that organizes data by inductive reasoning and allows researchers to construct themes and theories (Walker & Myrick, 2006). While searching and re-

searching the transcription data using open coding techniques, keywords and themes were analyzed and reanalyzed by the primary and secondary researchers to search for and discuss similarities and differences in respondents' comments and statements.

After the two researchers had thoroughly considered and analyzed the keywords and themes that arose from participants' comments, the mutually agreed upon themes were then reviewed by a third researcher who served as an auditor. This auditor was familiar with qualitative data analysis and theme analysis. Specifically, the auditor had experience with focus group research and transcripts. This auditor reviewed the focus group transcripts and the analysis completed by the primary researchers. Through the use of this auditor, triangulation was utilized to confirm the established themes. Triangulation is a method used in data analysis that improves the validity and reliability of qualitative research data analyses and helps to verify findings. Additionally, triangulation helps control for researchers' bias (Golafshani, 2003). This third researcher's input was sought to assist in further clarifying and refining the themes and to ensure that the selected themes were representative of the transcribed interview data. Further discussion of each theme, in light of the auditor's input, assisted the primary reviewer in clarifying minor descriptive details and validating the results of the qualitative analysis.

Quantitative Data Analysis

In addition to qualitative data analysis, quantitative data analysis was utilized in evaluating participants' perceptions of the selected books and book selection criteria. Additionally, qualitative data analysis was utilized to evaluate participants' perceptions on specific challenges each book may or may not have effectively addressed. Participants were asked to complete a rating and ranking sheet and a categorizing sheet. During this time

participants were given access to all 16 books to use for reference and each participant had an 8 1/2" by 11" table of 16 pictures that represented each book cover.

Rating and ranking sheet. After reading the 16 preselected books, participants were asked to rate and rank each book individually on a rating and ranking form (Appendix F). For each preselected book, participants were asked to assign a rank order and a rating.

Participants were asked to rank the books from 1 (*most effective*) to 16 (*least effective*). Participants' scores were summed and the books were ranked as follows: the book with the lowest cumulative score was the highest ranked, considered to be the most effective of the books that were reviewed; the book with the highest cumulative score was the lowest ranked, considered to be the least effective of the books that were reviewed. These results are presented in Table 1.

Participants were also asked to rate each book individually on a scale of 1 (*not effective*) to 5 (*very effective*). All participants' scores were then summed and averaged. Each individual book was described with an average rating score (*M*) and a standard deviation (*SD*). This information is summarized in the Results section in Table 1.

Categorizing sheet. After reading the 16 preselected books, participants were asked to indicate their perceptions of usefulness of the books for specific challenges. Participants were presented with a categorizing form (Appendix G) featuring eight common challenges faced by children of divorce. Participants were asked to indicate with a 'check' or 'x' the common challenges they perceived each individual book effectively addressed. This information was summarized and described, resulting in a total percentage of participants who indicated which of the challenges each book effectively addressed. These results are presented in the Results section in Table 2.

CHAPTER 4

Results

Children who experience the divorce and/or separation of their parents struggle to cope with the ensuing changes (Elam, Sandler, Wolchik, & Tein, 2016). Interventions are needed to support children in adjusting to their new family structure and to learn strategies of managing strong and painful emotions. This study was conducted in order to gather feedback about selecting and sharing divorce-themed stories, in particular, identifying aspects of those stories that could potentially support children. The following sections describe the results of this study.

Participants

Eleven school psychologists participated in a focus group discussion. All participants had experience counseling with children whose parents divorced. All participants had experience using bibliotherapy as a counseling tool/technique when working with children who experienced parental divorce. Additionally, all participants were currently working as school psychologists in elementary or secondary public-school settings in urban and suburban communities. These factors shaped the personal context and environment in which participants experienced the focus groups and responded to semi structured guiding questions.

To increase opportunities for individual participation, participants were split into two focus groups, six in one group and five in the other group. Each group was moderated by a research team member. During the two-hour focus group participants discussed their perspectives of the 16 preselected books (listed in Appendix B). Participants considered their experiences of counseling with children who experienced their parents' divorce. They discussed their perceptions of important book selection criteria.

Overarching Themes

Focus group participants reviewed the preselected children's books. In this review, they identified important selection criteria, particularly elements they considered important when using the books for bibliotherapy with children experiencing parental divorce. These important criteria, or story elements, are presented in the following sections as themes. Additionally, the results of participants' ratings and rankings of the preselected children's books, are described. The ratings and rankings are helpful in describing each specific book's potential to support children who are experiencing parental divorce and struggling with the challenges associated with their parents' divorce. The following themes arose from the focus group discussions and are described in the following sections. Each section describes a selection criterion for stories that would be shared with children affected by parents' divorce or separation. Overarching themes indicated that participants proposed that an effective book individualizes treatment; portrays realistic experiences; includes topics that are practical, comprehensive and multi-dimensional; provides an engaging and interactive story; and addresses and identifies emotions. Each theme will be discussed below.

Individualizes treatment. A large overarching theme throughout both discussion groups was individualizing the treatment intervention and the need to, as one participant said, "consider each kid" and their circumstance. Considering the aspects of the child's individual circumstance, and developing the treatment plan based on that circumstance, will allow for improved book selection. A story that matches the child's situation will strengthen therapeutic outcomes (Betzalel & Shechtman, 2017). Specifically, participants indicated the following criteria as important in successfully individualizing treatment: match the book to the student and their

specific needs, consider story elements that help the child identify with the story, consider the story's alignment with the student's diversity, and use the book as a tool.

Match the book to the student and their specific needs. The most critical aspect of individualization was the importance of matching the book or story to the child and their personal experience. This is critical when selecting effective books to read to children experiencing parental divorce. One participant stated that you need to “be careful with your book selection” and you “need to use your professional judgement” when selecting a book to read with children. As a mental health professional, school psychologists should be using their counseling expertise and their knowledge of the child to make book selections. Another mentioned that it is important to “know the background story of these kids” prior to selecting a book. When discussing a particular book, a participant noted that “it totally depends on *who*” you read it to, “so it could be good or it could be awful.” One participant noted that “if you didn’t have the right kid” for the right book it “wouldn’t work.” Another participant warned that you would “have to pick carefully with who you use that one [book] for” when discussing the book, *I Don’t Want to Talk About It* (Ransom, 2000).

Participants in the focus groups mentioned several elements to consider when matching a book to the child, including their background, their demographics, their age, the emotional stage they are in, how recent the separation or divorce was, their developmental level/maturity, their triggers, their emotions, the timing, and the living or custody situation. Considering these many details, participants emphasized the importance of matching the story to the student’s needs and particular situation. This matching allows the student to more closely identify with the story and/or characters. Identifying with the story is a critical aspect of the bibliotherapy process.

Consider story elements that help the child identify with the story. Being able to identify with the story is a very important aspect of the process of bibliotherapy. Many participants expressed that identification with the story was an important aspect to consider when selecting a book. One participant discussed that when students identify with the story it allows them to “look at it more at a distance,” “a kind of safe distance,” which allows the student “to understand it better,” in a more objective way. Participants also discussed how identifying with the story or characters would allow the child to feel safe in talking about the topic and their own experience or emotions. One participant noted that the book *I Don’t Want to Talk About It* (Ransom, 2000) could “be a good one to get them talking.” Another participant stated that “when there’s something they can relate to you, stop, and you can talk as long as you need to about that.”

Consider the story’s alignment with the student’s diversity. One challenge that participants noted with individualization and matching the book to the student, was the lack of ethnic diversity within the book selection. One participant commented that there was only one “book that had like any ethnic diversity in it.” Another participant mentioned how some of the books were “really stereotypical... like for someone who is more upper class” and noted that those books may not be effective when working with students outside of that demographic. When selecting a book, it is important to consider the diversity of the student, including ethnic, cultural, religious, and social demographics.

Use the book as a tool. A common theme throughout both focus group discussions was that the book should be used as a tool by the practitioner and reading the book should not be the entire counseling intervention. Participants discussed using the book as a tool to encourage discussion or interaction or as an addition to another therapeutic activity or technique. One participant warned against using the book as the only aspect of the intervention stating that,

“sometimes people read these books instead of having a conversation with a kid.” However, another participant noted that the book can be used as a conversation starter or as a tool to open the door to discussion. Participants also discussed focusing “on a part” of the book or “in addition to something else,” depending on the child’s situation or what the child needs. Overall the group consensus was to use your professional judgement on whether the book is a good therapeutic tool for the child you are working with and to not rely solely on the book to guide the intervention. One participant stated “I would just use it as a tool, we don’t have to let the book guide it, we can guide [the counseling intervention] how we want.” Ultimately, the practitioner is in control of the counseling intervention and should use their own expertise to guide the counseling pathway.

Portrays realistic experiences. Another major overarching theme was the importance of the book in portraying a realistic experience. Without this realistic portrayal it may be difficult for a student to truly identify with the characters or story being presented. As discussed above, identification with the story and/or characters is a vital part of the bibliotherapy process. Many participants made comments about the books not being “very realistic” and being “too positive” or “too perfect.” The biggest concern was that some of the stories were not portraying “what they [the children] went through” and didn’t “address the real” experience. Many participants felt that the books and stories portrayed “the ideal” outcome and experience of a divorce instead of a realistic one. Some of the books did include realistic elements and experiences, focusing on a realistic portrayal and experience. Participants identified many realistic elements that were included, or that should have been included, in the stories including: absence of one or more parent, non-amiable parents, unequal time between homes, parents fighting, conflict, support networks outside of family, pain, unreliable parents, and parental mental illness. On the other

hand, some participants expressed concerns about a few of the stories being “too raw” for some children. However overall, participants agreed that the best books had a good balance between addressing the real, raw experience of divorce and portraying things too perfectly.

Participants also noted that while being realistic, it was important that the books instilled a sense of hope and strength that the child will “make it through.” While participants agreed on the unrealistic portrayal found in many of the books and stories, they also expressed that a sense of hope and strength was vital as well. One participant commented that “the best books offer hope” and that it was important for “direct hope” to be written into the stories. Another participant commented that “it’s important to show the example of success” and for kids to believe that they can be “a survivor,” even though this has happened to them. Another mentioned that a support system can be an area of strength and hope. The message that “you’re not alone in this” can help to ensure children that they will survive. Overall, participants felt that a sense of hope or strength is an important element for effective and successful stories.

Includes topics that are practical, comprehensive, and multi-dimensional. Another important theme discussed throughout the focus groups was the importance of the books being practical, comprehensive, and multi-dimensional. Many participants expressed that the most practical books were the ones that covered multiple topics and stages, were applicable for multiple ages, and were versatile enough to apply to multiple students. One participant stated that she liked the book *When Mom and Dad Separate* (Heegaard, 1991) because of the fact “that it’s very practical.” Another participant discussed that the importance of a book being “comprehensive” and discussing both the simple and “complex things that can happen with divorce.” When asked about common features among the most effective books one participant noted that “a common feature for the ones... that we think are better is that they touch on a lot of

different topics.” Another participant agreed, noting that the best books were “multidimensional.” Another mentioned that the “practical use” of the book or the “ability to utilize it as a tool” was an important common feature as well. Overall, the majority of the participants agreed that *Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families* (Brown & Brown, 1986) and *It’s Not Your Fault Koko Bear* (Lansky, 1997) were the most comprehensive books in the selection and that they were “highly applicable” to most students. Additional book elements mentioned that participants felt helped to create a practical, comprehensive, and multi-dimensional book included: addressing divorce directly and clearly, teaching divorce terminology, and determining the usefulness of the story as a resource for parents.

Addressing divorce directly and clearly. One element mentioned by participants was the importance of the book being direct and clear in explaining divorce which can help to clear up “some confusion that they’ve had.” One participant stated that often people “assume that children know these things or they’re just going to get these things” however, in reality a lot needs to be explained to them directly. Another participant mentioned that “you kind of have to make it explicit.” One participant also noted that a strength was when a book “addresses the problem directly in real terms but also gives kids strategies for problem solving.” Additionally, participants discussed the need of the book to have “a little more depth in why parents get divorced.” One participant “appreciated the books that had more descriptions” of the reasons the parents were getting a divorce. Ultimately, it is important for the story or book to address divorce directly and clearly in order to avoid confusion for the child.

Teaching divorce terminology. Another element that is important in a practical, multidimensional, and comprehensive book is the inclusion and defining of divorce terminology. Participants described that an important element for a book is “good solid terminology.”

Participants felt that the inclusion and defining of terminology could help to clear up some the confusion about divorce that a child, family, or practitioner may have. One participant stated that in her experience sometimes practitioners “or families throw out words... and they’re all like well what does that mean?” One participant noted that “it’s really important” to “define all the terms” because it can help the child to understand and make it so that “it’s not such a scary process.” However, one problem that a participant noticed was the lack of “terminology to refer to when the parents were not married” which could cause children whose parents were never married to feel excluded or “ostracized.” Ultimately the inclusion and defining of terminology was seen as a good addition to a book although, as discussed in previous sections, it is always good to understand the experiences of the children you are working with.

Usefulness as a resource for parents. Another aspect that the participants found made the books practical and multi-dimensional was the usefulness of the book as a parent resource. Many participants described interacting with parents that “had no idea what to do” or “don’t know how to talk about it.” One participant expressed that because they aren’t sure what to do “a lot of parents just don’t have conversations” with their children. Because of this, books that a parent can easily read with their child are important and increases the usefulness and practicality of the book overall. One participant stated that “the global ones are nice if you’re recommending them to parents or something because it kind of supports the parents in working through some of those issues” with their children. Specifically, a participant mentioned that they liked the book *It’s Not Your Fault Koko Bear* (Lansky, 1997) because “it did provide some pretty good therapeutic tips at the bottom of each page” that could be helpful to parents. Overall, books that could also be recommended to or used by parents were perceived as useful.

Provides an engaging and interactive story. Another overarching theme discussed within the focus groups was the importance of the stories being engaging and interactive for the child. One participant also mentioned that an important element is that the kids are able to focus on the story. Another participant explained that it is important for the child to “enjoy reading it” which might lead you to “have more cooperation” from the child. Many participants mentioned that they “didn’t love the illustrations” on some of the books and preferred the books with “color” and colorful pictures. Another participant noted that she didn’t like to “use books that have too many words.” Elements mentioned by participants that could increase engagement and interaction included: a good flow to the story, a “rich” story, a good tone, a good connection to the story, less wordiness, the use of metaphors, colorful pictures, rhyming, pop-ups, and graphics.

Addresses and identifies emotions. Another overarching theme that participants discussed was that the stories addressed and identified common emotions that children might feel during or after parental divorce. Many children have a hard time identifying their emotions during and after a significant loss, such as a divorce (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006a). Stories, such as the ones in this study, can help children to “think about [their] feelings.” One participant noted that children “need help identifying their emotions” because “kids with parents that divorce can kind of blank” on their emotions anyways. Another participant mentioned that there is often a “confliction” of feelings and children do not know what to do about that. However, one participant liked that the book *When Mom and Dad Separate* (Heegaard, 2000) prompted emotion identification but “was kind of blank in a sense so kids could kind of project what they wanted onto it.” Overall participants felt it was important for the book to help children with the

process of figuring out their emotions and how they are feeling about the divorce and subsequent changes in their lives.

Ratings, Rankings, and Categories

Our research study was conducted to gain insight on school psychologists' perspectives on 16 children's picture books that portrayed parental divorce or separation. Additionally, we aimed to identify which specific divorce-related challenges each of the 16 preselected books effectively addressed. The following tables present data concerning the participants' rankings, ratings, and categorization of the presented children's books. Table 1 presents the participants' overall rating and ranking for each preselected book. Additionally, this table provides a short description of each book and its Amazon star ratings and reviews.

Table 2 presents common challenges (categories) faced by children of divorce. For each book, participants indicated, in their opinion, which challenges the book effectively addressed. Table 2 presents the percentage of participants who indicated each challenge as being effectively addressed, for each individual book.

Table 1

Participants' Ratings and Rankings of Preselected Children's Books That Support Children Experiencing Parental Divorce

Book title	Author	Participants' book ranking ^a	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) Participants' book rating ^b	Amazon ratings/reviews ^c	
				Star rating	No. of reviews
<i>Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families</i>	Laurie Kransy Brown and Marc Brown	1	4.8 (0.4)	4	184
<p>This picture book is a resource for families to understand the changes they experience with divorce including: terminology, why parents' divorce, living with one parent, living in two homes, celebrating holidays, having step parents or siblings, etc. These topics are discussed through the story of a dinosaur family.</p>					
<i>It's Not Your Fault Koko Bear</i>	Vicki Lansky	2	4.2 (1.1)	4.2	85
<p>This story follows Koko, a young bear, as he experiences his parents' divorce. He learns what divorce is, how to deal with changes in his life, and how to identify and cope with his feelings and emotions about the divorce.</p>					
<i>Living with Mom and Living with Dad</i>	Melanie Walsh	3	3.5 (0.8)	4.6	34
<p>This story is about a young girl whose parents aren't living together anymore. The story discusses how she sometimes lives with mom and sometimes lives with dad. Even though her parents may live apart, their love for their child does not change. The book includes an interactive "lift the flap" format and bright simple illustrations.</p>					
<i>When Mom and Dad Separate</i>	Marge E. Heegaard	4	3.5 (1.6)	4.6	39
<p>This workbook includes white and black blank illustrations and activities for children to color and complete. The activities in the workbook address the basic concepts of marriage and divorce as well as the feelings of grief, sadness, anger often associated with divorce.</p>					
<i>Emily's Blue Period</i>	Cathleen Daly	5	3.8 (1.7)	4.4	16
<p>This story is about a girl named Emily. Emily wants to be an artist when she grows up. After her dad moves out, Emily's life changes in a lot of ways. As a Picasso fan Emily decides that, like Picasso once was, she was going to be in her "blue period" of sadness. The story discusses how Emily manages the changes in her life and eventually gets out of her blue period.</p>					
<i>Always My Dad</i>	Sharon Dennis Wyeth	6	3.7 (1.1)	4.8	4
<p>This story is about an African-American family held together through a bond of love between a parent and two children. A young sister and brother don't get to see their dad often since he moves around a lot and changes jobs. While they live with their grandparents, the brother and sister remember the times they have had with their father during his unexpected but loving visits.</p>					

Table 1 (continued)

<i>I Don't Want to Talk About It</i>	Jeanie Franz Ransom	7	4.2 (0.9)	4.1	30
<p>This story is about a young girl who finds out that her parents are getting a divorce. When her parents tell her the news, she doesn't want to talk about it. Instead the young girl uses metaphors to express her emotions surrounding the divorce. By the end of the story, with the help of her mom and dad, she begins to realize that even though there will be many changes in her life, the one thing that won't change is her parents' love for her.</p>					
<i>The Best of Both Nests</i>	Jane Clark	8	3.4 (1.2)	5	2
<p>This story features a young bird named Stanley. When Stanley's mom, Mrs. Stork, tells Stanley that his father is flying away to a new nest Stanley worries about his father missing "Flyday." However, Stanley's finds support at school and his friend encourages him and tells him that "two nests are better than one".</p>					
<i>When My Parents Forgot How to Be Friends</i>	Jennifer Moore- Mallinos	9	3.9 (0.8)	4.1	45
<p>This book follows a young girl through the process of her parents' divorce. It discusses how sometimes parents argue a lot and then decide to get divorce. The story reinforces that children are not responsible for their parents' divorce. And even though parents may not live together anymore, both parents still love their children.</p>					
<i>Mom and Dad Glue</i>	Kes Gray	10	3.5 (1.2)	4.6	9
<p>When a young boy's parents divorce, he goes out looking for glue to put his family back together. After searching many different places, the boy realizes that there is no glue for his mom and dad. However, he realizes that even though his parents are no longer together, they both still love him.</p>					
<i>You Make Your Parents Super Happy</i>	Richy Chandler	11	3.1 (0.8)	n/a	0
<p>This book contains very simple graphics that portray the message that your parents love you and are proud of you. This book also discusses why some parents live separately, reminds the child that they are special, and lets the child know that their parents still love them as much as they did before.</p>					
<i>Standing on My Own Two Feet</i>	Tamara Schmitz	12	3.2 (0.9)	4.8	60
<p>This story discusses a boy named Addison. Addison is a normal kid and his parents are going through a divorce. This story aims to inspire children in the midst of divorce and teaches them that having two homes can be just as good as having two good feet to stand on.</p>					
<i>Two Homes</i>	Claire Masurel	13	3.3 (1.1)	4.6	319
<p>This book contains a simple story about Alex, a young boy who learns that even though he has two homes, he is loved at both. The story features two unique homes and focuses on what can be gained in divorce, rather than what is lost.</p>					
<i>My Mom's Wedding</i>	Eve Bunting	14	3.3 (0.9)	4.5	2
<p>This book discusses a young girl named Pinky who is learning to adjust to another change in her family. Her parents have already divorced and now her mother is getting remarried. The story addresses the conflicting emotions that can come with remarriage including feelings of loyalty, excitement, and reluctance.</p>					

Table 1 (continued)

<i>No Matter What</i>	Debi Gliori	15	2 (1.0)	4.8	221
This short story features a parent fox and child fox. It conveys the message that parents will love their child no matter what.					
<i>Good-bye, Daddy!</i>	Alan Marks and Bridgette Wineeager	16	2.4 (1.0)	4	7
This book features a young boy named Tom. Tom is upset that his dad lives in another house and hates when he has to leave. The book then tells a story about a bear who lives in a forest but has problems just like Tom does.					

^a Participants' ranking of each book: 1=most effective; 16=least effective

^b Participants' rating of each book, based on a 1 to 5 rating scale: 5=very effective; 1=least effective

^c An average of Amazon's consumer ratings are based on a 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) rating scale

Table 2

Participants' Indications of Challenges Addressed in Preselected Children's Books That Support Children Experiencing Parental Divorce

Book title	Common challenges: Percentage of participants that indicated each common challenge as being effectively addressed							
	Living in two homes	New family members	Reduced contact with parents	Parents fighting or arguing	Feelings of rejection or abandonment	Feelings of guilt, blame, or shame	Feelings of fear, insecurity, or anxiety	Feelings of anger or frustration
<i>Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families</i>	100%	91%	73%	91%	36%	73%	55%	82%
<i>It's Not Your Fault Koko Bear</i>	91%	0%	64%	36%	55%	82%	82%	73%
<i>Living with Mom and Living with Dad</i>	100%	9%	64%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<i>When Mom and Dad Separate</i>	55%	9%	55%	55%	64%	73%	91%	100%
<i>Emily's Blue Period</i>	100%	0%	19%	18%	36%	19%	27%	45%
<i>Always My Dad</i>	9%	0%	100%	9%	45%	9%	36%	0%
<i>I Don't Want to Talk About It</i>	91%	0%	64%	73%	55%	27%	73%	100%
<i>The Best of Both Nests</i>	100%	0%	55%	64%	55%	55%	45%	64%
<i>When My Parents Forgot How to Be Friends</i>	82%	0%	73%	91%	27%	73%	73%	9%
<i>Mom and Dad Glue</i>	9%	0%	9%	36%	36%	91%	82%	27%

Table 2 (continued)

<i>Book title</i>	Common challenges: percentage of participants that indicated each common challenge as being effectively addressed							
	Living in two homes	New family members	Reduced contact with parents	Parents fighting or arguing	Feelings of rejection or abandonment	Feelings of guilt, blame, or shame	Feelings of fear, insecurity, or anxiety	Feelings of anger or frustration
<i>You Make Your Parents Super Happy</i>	82%	0%	19%	64%	27%	9%	64%	9%
<i>Standing on My Own Two Feet</i>	100%	0%	55%	73%	19%	64%	19%	0%
<i>Two Homes</i>	100%	0%	19%	0%	9%	0%	9%	0%
<i>My Mom's Wedding</i>	18%	91%	64%	0%	9%	36%	27%	0%
<i>No Matter What</i>	0%	0%	55%	9%	73%	9%	36%	27%
<i>Good-bye, Daddy!</i>	36%	0%	73%	45%	45%	19%	27%	9%

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

Parental divorce is a common challenge faced by many children in the United States. Approximately 50% of marriages end in divorce or separation (Amato, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2015). The purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives of school psychologists in order to better understand the selection of children's divorce-themed books and the use of bibliotherapy for children experiencing divorce in their family.

Divorce has negative effects on children and is associated with higher levels of internalizing problems, externalizing behaviors, lower levels of academic achievement, and increased problems in social relationships (Amato, 2010; Galluzzo, 2012; Lansford, 2009). Unfortunately, many children do not get the support they need to help them cope with this stressful life event (Angacian et al., 2015). It is important that children who experience parental divorce receive the assistance they need during this stressful transition. Appropriate intervention would assist in supporting children's emotional needs and would support adaptive coping and adjustment following the divorce.

Although practitioners may recommend using children's literature to support children in coping with divorce, minimal research has investigated this use of bibliotherapy (Mumbauer & Kelchner, 2018; Sketoll, 2012). However, practitioner-based literature provides supportive resources for children of divorce that includes lists of recommended children's books (Heath, Sheen, Leavy, Young, & Money, 2005; Kramer & Smith, 1998; Pehrsson & McMillen, 2010). Unfortunately, those who recommend children's books have not taken further steps to seek feedback from practitioners or other professionals on their perspectives of the practical

effectiveness of these books. The question remains, how helpful are these books in supporting children who are experiencing parental divorce?

This study was conducted to address the lack of research in this area. Prior to conducting the focus groups with school psychologists, the primary researcher sorted through the frequently recommended divorce-themed books and resources available for children of divorce. After identifying 16 books to share with the participants in this study, focus groups were conducted to seek the perspectives of currently-practicing school psychologists to evaluate the effectiveness of the selected children's books. We specifically focused on having the practitioners identify the criteria that made the books, in their opinion, more likely to be effective for bibliotherapy with children experiencing parental divorce. Additionally, we had the practitioners identify the specific divorce related challenges each selected book, in their opinion, effectively addressed.

From the information and perspectives gathered from the participants' focus groups, we identified a few overarching themes to carefully consider when selecting a book to use with children experiencing parental divorce. Participants' themes that arose during the focus group provided direction, indicating that an effective book individualizes treatment; portrays realistic experiences; includes topics that are practical, comprehensive and multi-dimensional; provides an engaging and interactive story; and addresses and identifies emotions.

The first, and most discussed, overarching theme was the individualization of treatment. The most important step in individualizing treatment is to know the child you are working with and their background. Pardeck and Pardeck (1997) discusses how the most important aspect to consider when selecting a book for treatment is the presenting problem or problems. Briggs and Pehrsson (2008) state that "counselors should always... make selections that match client needs and presenting concerns" (p. 40). This understanding of the child and their problem(s) enables

the practitioner to choose a story that fits their experience and allows them to identify with the story or characters in the story. This identification with the story, in turn, increases the effectiveness of the bibliotherapy intervention (Berns, 2004). It is also important that the book is used only as a strategic therapeutic tool and not as the entire counseling intervention. The key is that the practitioner uses their professional judgement of the book, the child, and their circumstance to judge the path of the counseling intervention.

The second overarching theme discussed the importance of the book portraying a realistic experience while at the same time instilling a sense of hope and strength. Pardeck and Pardeck (1997) stated that “it is essential that when using fiction that the book contain believable characters and situations that offer realistic hope for the child” (p. 58). If the story is too ideal, students may have a hard time identifying with and understanding the story. It is vital that the story is realistic so that the child can identify with the story. At the same time, one of the purposes of bibliotherapy is to help normalize the child's loss and to help them to gain a sense of hope that they navigate through their challenges. The message that “you’re not alone in this” helps to assure children that they will survive this change in their life. The best books offered a good balance of being realistic while, at the same time, offering hope and strength for children.

The third overarching theme that arose from the participants’ focus group was that books should be practical, multidimensional, and comprehensive. School psychologists proposed that the most practical books were the ones that covered multiple divorce-themed topics and stages of adaptation to the divorce, were applicable for multiple ages, and were versatile enough to apply to a variety of students and their experiences. It is important for a book to address both simple and complex aspects of divorce. Research by Jackson (2001) indicates that effective books should provide an opportunity for multiple themes and multiple levels of meaning. Additionally,

effective books need to address divorce clearly and directly, and teach children and families divorce terminology. Berns (2004) has stated that “terminology should be accurate and honest” (p. 328). An added benefit of comprehensive and practical books is that parents can utilize these books as resources at home with their children to facilitate honest conversations about the divorce.

The fourth theme discussed the importance of providing an engaging and interactive story for children. An engaging and interactive book will more likely elicit greater focus and cooperation from children which supports therapeutic outcomes. Books with too many words may bore or overwhelm children, causing them to lose interest and lessening the likelihood of identifying with the story. A book with bright illustrations, a rich story, metaphors, rhyming, etc. is more likely to engage children. These findings are supported by Berns (2004) who discusses the importance of using enriching stories with literary merit.

The last overarching theme was that the story identified and addressed common emotions associated with experiencing parental divorce. While research literature has not yet mentioned this as an important element in book selection, participants in this study found the identification of emotions to be a critical element in effective book selection. Since children have a hard time identifying and appropriately expressing emotions following their parents’ divorce, a book that is able to guide them in communicating and expressing their emotions is vital. Carefully selected books that align with children’s specific needs and challenges will help them process and better understand their emotions.

Based on of the group discussions and rating/ranking data there were some books that we found the majority of participants really liked and some books that the majority of participants didn’t like. Books that were discussed frequently and often liked were *Dinosaurs Divorce: A*

Guide for Changing Families and *It's Not Your Fault Koko Bear*. These books were comprehensive, realistic, practical; addressed common challenges and emotions; and provided an interactive story. On the other hand, books that were often disliked were *My Mom's Wedding*, *No Matter What*, and *Good-bye Daddy*. These books lacked several of the important selection criterion discussed during the focus groups and supported by research literature.

Implications for Practitioners

One of the most important points gleaned from this research is the importance for practitioners to individualize treatment by carefully selecting appropriate books based on each child's circumstance and experience with parental divorce. Since each child's circumstance is unique, it is important to match book selection to the needs of the individual child.

Another important factor for practitioners to consider when selecting books is to choose a book that includes a realistic portrayal of a divorce experience. Although some books may portray an ideal or *perfect* divorce experience, in reality, the majority of children do not have an ideal experience following their parents' divorce. If a story is realistic, children are more likely to identify with the story. Identifying with the story is an important aspect of the bibliotherapy process. However, even though it is important for stories to be realistic, it is also important for stories to instill a sense of hope and strength.

Overall this study identified five main themes for practitioners to consider when selecting divorce-themed books for bibliotherapy with children of divorce. These overarching themes indicate that an effective book individualizes treatment; portrays realistic experiences; includes topics that are practical, comprehensive and multi-dimensional; provides an engaging and interactive story; and addresses and identifies emotions. Each of these five themes are important for practitioners to consider. However, it should be noted that these themes should only be a

guide to assist the practitioner in book selection. Practitioners should use their own professional judgement and knowledge of the individual child to ultimately make decisions about which books and therapeutic activities will best support the child in processing feelings and coping with their parents' divorce.

Appendix I provides a summary of this study's findings. This can be used as a handout for practitioners to guide them in the selection of books to use with children experiencing divorce. Practitioners may also give this handout to parents to guide them in selecting books to read with their children.

Limitations

This study had some limitations. One of the limitations was the restricted sample of participants. One criterion for participation in the study was that participants needed experience using bibliotherapy as a therapeutic technique or intervention. This means that the participants recruited to be in the group discussions were interested in bibliotherapy as a treatment and may have had a preferential bias of using bibliotherapy as a treatment option. However, our rationale in using this participant sample was to have participants that would be able to accurately identify important selection criteria and analyze the effectiveness of a book using their professional experience.

Another limitation was the small sample size and the use of convenience sampling. We attempted to recruit practicing school psychologists from a single school district. However, due to busy schedules, a very limited amount of people expressed interest in participating in the study. Due to the lack of interest, we opened participation to school psychologists in adjacent school districts. After opening the recruitment, 11 participants expressed interest in participating in the focus group discussions. In total, we had 11 participants participate in the study. Due to the

small overall sample size, and the use of a convenience sample, generalizability of the findings may be limited.

An additional limitation may have been group member influence. Due to the interviews being conducted in a group setting, participants' perceptions about the books could have been influenced by other group participants' opinions and comments. Although group member influence is a possible limitation, focus group interviews are also credited for encouraging and facilitating conversations.

Implications for Future Research

Although this research took one step towards analyzing the potential effectiveness of children's picture books as a strategy for supporting children affected by divorce, much more research needs to be done in this area. Future studies should investigate parents' and/or children's perspectives of book selection criteria. Gathering their perspectives is of particular importance, given that parents and children are the individuals experiencing the divorce firsthand.

This research did not address how the selected books were actually used with children, specifically children who experienced the divorce or separation of their parents. Additional research on bibliotherapy's actual effect on children of divorce would better inform interventions. We propose that the next step for future research would be utilizing the books discussed in this study and verifying our findings through an intervention-based research study. For example, researchers could investigate the effects of school-based mental health professionals using the selected divorce-themed books with children affected by divorce. Researchers may also consider investigating the effects of divorced parents reading selected divorce-themed books to their children. After reading the books, either at school and/or in the

home, behavioral data could be collected to determine the effects of bibliotherapy on children's externalizing behaviors, internalizing problems, and children's adaptive coping and functioning. Data could also be collected to examine the use of these stories to increase parent-child communication about divorce.

Conclusions

Unfortunately, divorce is a common challenge for many children in the United States. The effects of divorce include many short- and long-term challenges, negatively affecting children socially, academically, emotionally, and behaviorally (Amato, 2010; Galluzzo, 2012; Lansford, 2009). To better support children, bibliotherapy is recommended as a cost and time efficient treatment that has been shown to be effective for many types of loss and trauma (Berns, 2004). It allows for children to normalize their grief reaction to loss, reduce their feelings of isolation, reinforce their problem solving, and support constructive coping skills (Berns, 2004).

Bibliotherapy is an age-appropriate, economical, and feasible therapeutic option for supporting children affected by divorce. Children's stories are easily shared with children in a therapeutic counseling session. This study proposes several overarching themes to assist practitioners in selecting divorce-themed books to support children experiencing parental divorce. These themes indicate that an effective book individualizes treatment; portrays realistic experiences; includes topics that are practical, comprehensive and multi-dimensional; provides an engaging and interactive story; and addresses and identifies emotions. These recommendations will help practitioners in selecting specific stories that will guide and support children through this challenging time.

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APPENDIX A

Review Board Approval Letter

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS

Memorandum

To: Tarryn Roberts, Graduate Student

Department: CPSE

College: EDUC

From: Sandee Aina, IRB Administrator

Date: January 24, 2018

IRB#: A 18-015

Subject: *Selecting Books for Elementary-Aged Children Experiencing Parental Divorce*

The protocol referenced in the subject heading has been reviewed by Brigham Young University's Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects (IRB). The IRB has determined that this scholarly activity does not meet the regulatory definition of human subjects research 45 CFR 46.102(f).

Most research in the social and behavioral sciences involves gathering information **about** individuals. However, this research will involve the collection of data from licensed school psychologists--professionals. The professional will contribute information about some aspect of the external world primarily from the perspective of their special expertise, rather than their personal opinions, preferences, perceptions or experiences.

Please remove BYU IRB's contact information from the consent statement.

Respectfully,

Sandee M.P. Aina, MPA

Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects, Administrator

Office of Research & Creative Activities

Brigham Young University

A-285 ASB Campus Drive

Provo, UT 84602

Ph: 801-422-1461 | <http://orca.byu.edu/irb/>

BYU

APPENDIX B

Book Titles and Authors

Title	Author
<i>Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families</i>	Brown, L. K., & Brown, M.
<i>My Mom's Wedding</i>	Bunting, E.
<i>You Make Your Parents Super Happy</i>	Chandler, R.
<i>The Best of Both Nests</i>	Clark, J.
<i>Emily's Blue Period</i>	Daly, C.
<i>No Matter What</i>	Gliori, D.
<i>Mom and Dad Glue</i>	Gray, K.
<i>When Mom and Dad Separate</i>	Heegaard, M. E.
<i>It's Not Your Fault Koko Bear</i>	Lansky, V.
<i>Good-bye, Daddy!</i>	Marks, A., & Wineeger, B.
<i>Two Homes</i>	Masurel, C.
<i>When My Parents Forgot How to Be Friends</i>	Moore-Mallinos, J.
<i>I Don't Want to Talk About It</i>	Ransom, J. F.
<i>Standing on My Own Two Feet</i>	Schmitz, T.
<i>Living with Mom and Living with Dad</i>	Walsh, M.
<i>Always My Dad</i>	Wyeth, S. D.

APPENDIX C

Semi-Structured Focus Group Protocol

Guided Discussion Questions

Pre-Discussion

Establish rapport
 Provide light meal
 Review research study
 Explain Consent Form
 Explain 3 Sheets to be completed after discussion
 Answer any questions

Signed consent form from participant _____
 (1 copy of Consent Form remains with participant)

Part A: Reviewing books

Start audio and video recordings
 Show empathy
 Express appreciation

Thank you so much for participating. I realize this topic isn't always the easiest to talk about. If at any time you need to take break, redirect questions that might be uncomfortable, or end participating in the focus group, please let me know. We can stop at any time, if needed.

Invite the participants to review the 16 children's books.

Present hard copies of the books and give the participants a chance to review them (approximately 50 minutes). Allow and encourage participants to take notes about the different aspects of the books that they believe would or would not make that item a good supportive resource for a child (K–3) who is experiencing parental divorce within their family.

Our goal today is to have a discussion about these books. We would like to discuss the different elements in the books that make the book either a good choice or a poor choice for supporting a child (K–3) who is experiencing or who has experienced parental divorce within their family. As you may not be familiar with these books the time is now yours to read and review each of these books. Please feel free to take notes on the paper provided on things you liked or did not like, etc., for reference during group discussion. You will have approximately 50 minutes to view the books before our discussion. Are there any questions?

Part B: Guiding discussion questions

Begin group discussion about the materials that have been reviewed (approximately 50 mins).
Let's start with a general question—

• *After reviewing these materials, are there any that you have used before while working with children experiencing divorce?*

- *What did you like about the material?*
- *How did the child react to the book?*

• *Of all the materials reviewed, which do you think would be a helpful supportive resource for supporting a child (K–3) who is experiencing or who has experienced parental divorce within their family?*

- *What are the strengths of these materials?*
- *What are the weaknesses of these materials?*

What are the selection criteria you use when selecting books to use with children (K-3) who are experiencing or who have experienced parental divorce in their families?

• *Is there anything we should be cautious about when using a particular material?*

- *Why/what would make you not use these materials?*

Think back over our discussion today—

• *Did you see any overarching themes? What features were common between the best materials for supporting a child (K–3) who is experiencing or who has experienced parental divorce within their family?*

• *Are there any books or materials that we have already discussed that you would like to make additional comments about?*

• *Do any materials have strengths that were not previously mentioned?*

Think back, are there any methods or activities you have previously used that were not talked about today that you have used to support children (K–3) who are experiencing or who have experienced parental divorce within their families?

Part C: Categorizing, Demographics, and Compensation

Following the focus group discussion, participants will complete 3 separate sheets.

1. They will categorize and rate all the books from 1–15, of how effective the book would be in supporting a child (K–3) who is experiencing or who has experienced parental divorce within their family as well as indicate the specific challenges each book would effectively address.
2. They will complete a demographic sheet.
3. They will complete the compensation sheet (optional) and provide a mailing address and indicate which 3 books will be sent following the study, as gratitude for their participation.

Categorizing sheet from participant _____
(check for complete answers and legible handwriting)

Demographic sheet from participant _____
(check for complete answers and legible handwriting)

Compensation sheet from participant _____
(check for complete answers and legible handwriting)

Wrap up

Ask the participant if they would be willing to review a transcript of the interview to ensure accuracy and make any corrections or modifications; if so, direct the participant to include their email address on bottom of the Informed Consent document.

Invite the participants to call and email with further comments or thoughts.

Thank the participant for their cooperation and remind them that we will be sending them 3 books in the mail, if they chose to receive that compensation.

APPENDIX D

Demographic Information Sheet**Demographic Sheet**

Please answer the following questions.

What is your age?

What is your ethnicity?

What is your gender?

What county do you currently reside in?

What is your current occupation?

How many years of experience do you have with children who have experienced/are experiencing parental divorce?

Did you find yourself wishing we had more/different materials presented at the focus group?

Were there any materials that we did not discuss today that you have used/seen/think would be effective in supporting a child (K-3) experiencing parental divorce in his/her family? If so, what are their titles?

APPENDIX E

Consent to be a Research Subject

Consent to be a Research Subject

The main purpose of this form is to provide you with information that may affect your decision about whether or not to participate in this study.

Introduction

This research study is being conducted by Tarryn Roberts (School Psychology Graduate Student) and Melissa Allen Heath (PhD, School Psychology Graduate Program Coordinator) at Brigham Young University to understand the school psychologist's perspectives on selection and use of bibliotherapy for children experiencing divorce in their families. You were invited to participate because you are a school psychologist that has experience using bibliotherapy as a counseling tool in schools or have experience counseling children who are experiencing parental divorce and you have indicated interest in participating in the focus group.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- You will participate in a focus group interview (5–8 participants), regarding bibliotherapy and children of divorce, which will be no longer than 150 minutes (2 ½ hours).
- During this interview you will discuss book selection criteria as well as review and categorize approximately 16 books preselected by the research team.
- The focus group will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements
- You will be asked to complete a demographics sheet, a book categorizing form, and an optional compensation form.
- You will be provided with a light meal during the focus group interview.
- The focus group will take place at XXXX School District's office.

Risks/Discomforts

While sensitivity and caution will be used when discussing the topics of divorce, some of the book content, topics, or discussion questions may prompt memories or experiences that trigger sadness, anger, or emotional discomfort. You may decline to answer any question or discontinue participation in the study at any time without penalty. Melissa Allen Heath (licensed psychologist) is supervising this study and is available to discuss concerns and referrals for counseling if desired. Her contact information will be provided for you.

Privacy and confidentiality will be expected from all participants throughout the study. In the group interview setting all participants will be asked to agree to keep information discussed in the group confidential. Each participant will be asked to verbally agree to keep everything discussed in the room confidential.

Thorough measures will be used to protect the privacy of information and data gathered during the study. Only the researcher team (primary researcher, co-investigators) will have access to the data collected. Hard copies of any data collected (demographic questionnaires, categorizing forms, compensation forms, field notes) will be kept in a locked office inside a suite of locked offices, and will be properly destroyed within three months after the end of the data collection.

Benefits

As a direct result of this research, you will participate in a group discussion addressing book selection for and the use of bibliotherapy with students experiencing divorce in their families. You will be able to hear opinions and experiences of other practitioners. The information and knowledge shared in the focus group may be beneficial to you in your career.

Indirect benefits include contributing to the research and literature on book selection for and the use of bibliotherapy with students experiencing parental divorce in their families. This study will provide the literature with the perspectives of school psychologists on these topics.

Confidentiality

Names and other personally identifying items will not be included in any publications or presentations that result from this research. Unique pseudonyms will be used in order to protect confidentiality.

Any electronic versions of data gathered will be kept on a password sensitive Google drive, only available to the primary researcher and co-investigators included in the study. All hard copy data will be turned into electronic data (through Excel and Word Documents), after which the hard copy data will be destroyed.

After all data have been carefully review, electronic copies will be stored for three years.

Compensation

You will receive compensation for your participation in this study. You will be compensated for time spent at the focus group completing forms and discussing relevant topics. Compensation will include a light meal provided at the time of the focus group as well as your choice of 3 of the preselected books that will be mailed to you 2–3 weeks following the focus group interview. Compensation will not be prorated. If you choose to withdraw from participation at any time during the study, you will receive compensation for your time up to the withdrawal point.

Participation

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to yourself.

Questions about the Research

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Tarryn Roberts at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or XXXXXXXXX or Melissa Allen Heath at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or XXXXXXXXX for further information.

Statement of Consent

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

Name

(Printed):

Signature:

Date:

I agree to participate in the focus group. _____ (initial)

I agree to be audio recorded. _____ (initial)

APPENDIX F

Ratings and Rankings Sheet

Please individually rate each book on a Likert Scale (1 to 5), indicating how effectively the book supports children (K–3) who are experiencing or who have experienced parental divorce in their families. Additionally, in the first column rank order (1 – 16) each book based on the effectiveness of the book.

RANKING 1 (most effective) through 16 (least effective)	Title	1 not effective	2	3	4	5 very effective
	Dinosaurs Divorce					
	Always My Dad					
	No Matter What					
	It's Not Your Fault Koko Bear					
	Mom and Dad Glue					
	Living with Mom and Living with Dad					
	When My Parents Forgot How to Be Friends					
	Good-Bye, Daddy!					
	I Don't Want to Talk About It					
	You Make Your Parents Super Happy					
	The Best of Both Nests					
	When Mom and Dad Separate					
	Standing on My Own Two Feet					
	Emily's Blue Period					
	Two Homes					
	My Mom's Wedding					

APPENDIX H

Compensation Sheet

Thank you for your participation in this study! To show our gratitude for your participation today we would like to send you a gift of three books that was discussed at our focus group today. *This is optional, you do not have to provide your name or address, and you do not have to receive any books.*

Please list the titles of the books you would like:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Please provide a mailing address to which we can send these books:

APPENDIX I

Summary of Feedback from Participating School Psychologists

The following information summarizes feedback from the focus groups of school psychologists ($n=11$) discussing the effectiveness of divorce-related books in supporting children experiencing parental divorce.

Rankings of Children's Books

Considering books that helped to support children experiencing parent divorce, school psychologists ranked what they considered to be the "most effective" to the "least effective" books from a selection of 16 books.

Books rank ordered as best choices to support a child experiencing parental divorce

The following six books were ranked as the "most effective" choices:

1. *Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families* by Laurie Kransy Brown and Marc Brown
2. *It's Not Your Fault Koko Bear* by Vicki Lansky
3. *Living with Mom and Living with Dad* by Melanie Walsh
4. *When Mom and Dad Separate* by Marge Eaton Heegaard
5. *Emily's Blue Period* by Cathleen Daly
6. *Always My Dad* by Sharon Dennis Wyeth

Books rank ordered as the worst choices to support a child experiencing parental divorce

The following six books were ranked as the "least effective" choices:

1. *Good-bye Daddy!* By Alan Marks and Bridgette Wineeger
2. *No Matter What* by Debi Gliori
3. *My Mom's Wedding* by Eve Bunting
4. *Two Homes* by Claire Masurel
5. *Standing on My Own Two Feet* by Tamara Schmitz
6. *You Make Your Parents Super Happy* by Richy Chandler

Ratings of Children's Books

When rating books individually, and not comparing them the other selected books, on a Likert Scale (1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest rating and 5 being the highest rating), the following list includes the books that were perceived as being effective in supporting a child experiencing parental divorce. This list includes the six books with the highest cumulative ratings (the highest M):

1. *Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families* by Laurie Kransy Brown and Marc Brown
2. *It's Not Your Fault Koko Bear* by Vicki Lansky
3. *I Don't Want to Talk About It* by Jeanie Franz Ransom
4. *When My Parents Forgot How to Be Friends* by Jennifer Moore-Mallinos
5. *Emily's Blue Period* by Cathleen Daly
6. *Always My Dad* by Sharon Dennis Wyeth

Focus Group Recommendations

Important Things to Consider When Selecting a Book to Support Children Experiencing Parental Divorce

- Individualize book selection based on the circumstance and needs of the child to allow for greater identification with the story.
- Books that are interactive and engaging can increase enjoyment and cooperation.
- Select books that do not have too much text and have engaging and colorful illustrations.
- Select stories that have a realistic portrayal of a divorce experience but that also instill a sense of hope and strength.
- Ensure that the book identifies and addresses emotions in order to help children to understand their own feelings about the divorce.
- Books that are multidimensional and comprehensive are more practical for practitioner use since they can be used to cover multiple topics, stages, and ages.
- Choose stories that are direct and clear about divorce in order to avoid any confusion children may have.
- Remember to use the book as a tool in the intervention, not as the whole intervention.