

The Voice of the Child in Parental Divorce: Healing Stories

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Abstract

The increase in global divorce rates has led researchers to consider the impact of parental divorce on children. Research has traditionally held the notion that parental divorce is detrimental to the well-being of children. While research places some children of divorce at risk for maladjustment, there is evidence to suggest that the majority of children do not experience long term adjustment difficulties. This article aims to identify protective factors that facilitate the positive adjustment of children affected by parental divorce. This article forms part of a larger narrative study that aimed to interview children regarding their perceptions of parental divorce. Five children were interviewed regarding their parental divorce stories using an unstructured interviewing technique. The larger study identified seven themes that centred around the types of stories children told about their parent's divorce. This article explores one of these themes titled *Healing Stories* which highlights factors that contributed to children's positive adjustment to parental divorce. Based on participants' stories this article describes protective factors that may contribute to the positive adjustment of children whose parents get divorced.

Keywords: Adjustment, children, divorce, protective factors, voice of the child.

1. Introduction

The increase in global divorce rates has led researchers to consider the impact of parental divorce on children (Dreman, 2000). Early research on parental divorce held the assumption that divorce is wholly traumatic and damaging to children (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). The usefulness of the research conducted over the past few decades has been impacted upon by its skewed focus on clinical patient samples, and its emphasis on pathology rather than positive adjustment and coping (Dreman, 2000). While research has reported greater risks for children from divorced families, evidence suggests that in the long term the majority of these children do not continue to present with adjustment difficulties (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Current research emphasises the identification of protective factors that encourage positive adjustment and reduce maladjustment (Chen & George, 2005). There is a notable research overlap when comparing children from divorced and non-divorced families, with children in the former group often faring better in certain dimensions (Kelly, 2003). Kelly (2003) explains that some children from intact families experience serious psychological and social difficulties while some children from divorced families do not experience these difficulties. The differences in adjustment between children from divorced and non-divorced families are not extensive. There is notable variability amongst children of divorce with some experiencing challenges and others adjusting well or even improving (Amato, 1993). While children of divorce experience a higher degree of emotional, social, and academic challenges, they have been found to score within the normal range on several psychologically accepted standardised measures (Kelly, 2003). Although stress certainly factors into the parental divorce experience, the majority of children do not experience any significant challenges with regard to adjustment, career attainment, and adult relationships (Kelly, 2003). Children who do not experience extensive stress or loss of resources are likely to fare well, in fact many may benefit if stress is reduced and resources are increased (Amato, 1993). Lansford (2009) suggests that research lacking in methodological sophistication may overestimate the impact of divorce on children. An example of this can be seen when studies which fail to control for socio-economic status, suggest poor adjustment in children of divorce. This poor adjustment is however, often more a result of having fewer economic resources. While research links parental divorce to children's adjustment, many of these findings reveal that the effects of divorce do not operate in the same manner for all children. Research has argued that family processes are more influential than family structures with regard to children's well being (Lansford, 2009). Adults play an important role in the promotion of protective factors and the management of risk factors. Researchers also identify individual and environmental protective factors (e.g. Chen & George, 2005) some of which are discussed below.

2. Protective Factors Affecting Children's Adjustment to Parental Divorce

2.1. The parent-child relationship.

The parent-child relationship has been found to be an important mitigating factor in children's adjustment to parental divorce (Tippelt & König, 2007). A positive post-divorce parent-child relationship has the potential to facilitate coping and decrease stress in both parents and

children (Chen & George, 2005). The psychosocial stress and reduced resources that often occur as a consequence of the divorce process are buffered by a positive parent-child relationship (Tippelt & König, 2007). If one or both parents remain involved with and supportive towards children post-divorce, the negative effects of the divorce can be reduced (Faber & Wittenborn, 2010). Faber and Wittenborn (2010) state that the attachment bond that children experience with both parents is an often overlooked protective factor related to their post-divorce adjustment.

2.2. Parental adjustment to divorce.

A well-adjusted custodial parent can serve as a buffer for the challenges that children face during the divorce process (Dreman, 2000). Children's adjustment to divorce is enhanced by their parents' ability to adjust well to divorce. Children look to their parents to model positive coping skills and to provide consistency and stability (Karuppaswamy & Myers-Walls, 2003). A psychologically stable custodial parent is a protective factor associated with positive adjustment in children, and is considered one of the best predictors of children's psychological well-being after divorce (Hetherington, 1999). Amato (1993) hypothesised that a psychologically well custodial parent, who is able to offer support and discipline, plays an instrumental role in child adjustment. Research has also uncovered indirect support for this hypothesis, finding positive adjustment in children whose custodial parents received support from their extended family members (Amato, 1993).

2.3. Reduced parental conflict.

Research has shown that the parental conflict-cooperation balance during the divorce process is a significant predictor of adjustment in children (Dreman, 2000). The amount of conflict prior to a divorce impacts directly upon children's psychological well-being as well as their capacity to adjust (Sheehan, Darlington, Noller, & Freeney, 2004). A reduction in parental conflict has been found to be associated with children experiencing increased levels of comfort in their homes after parental separation (Hogan, Halpenny, & Greene, 2003). Children report more positive relationships with their parents, due to the cessation of parental conflict, and the opportunity to spend time alone with each parent. For many children parental divorce offers a welcome solution to inter-parental conflict, and is thus seen by children as beneficial to all family members (Hogan et al., 2003). Inter-parental cooperation has been associated with positive outcomes for children. Children valued gestures such as custodial parents encouraging positive contact with non-custodial parents (Hogan et al., 2003). Research also supports the notion that parenting skills improve once parents are removed from high conflict situations (Dreman, 2000).

2.4. The personality of the child.

Children have unique personalities and coping skills that are likely to impact upon the way in which they respond to parental divorce (Louw & Louw, 2014). Some children tolerate stress with ease while others become angry or depressed (Karuppaswamy & Myers-Walls, 2003). Temperament has been associated with adjustment to parental divorce, with persistent children coping well due to their capacity to be flexible and to persevere through challenges (Chen & George, 2005). Children with an easy temperament cope well with parental divorce while children with a difficult temperament often struggle to cope (Santrock, 2013). Hetherington (1989, 1991) found that children with characteristics such as intelligence, competence, an easy temperament, high self esteem, an internal locus of control, and a sense of humour were more able to adapt to divorce related challenges and stress, and were better able to evoke the support of others. Lansford (2009) identified certain attributes that are associated with positive adjustment in children (Lansford, 2009). These include attractiveness, easy temperament, and social competence. This is partly due to the capacity of children with these attributes to develop strong social networks and elicit positive responses from others (Lansford, 2009). The child's personality also impacts the parent-child

relationship which influences adjustment (Chen & George, 2005). In addition, children who adopt positive coping strategies develop a greater sense of self efficacy, which is associated with a decrease in internalising problems (Chen & George, 2005).

2.5. Information given to children regarding parental divorce.

Children are better able to adapt if they are provided with the necessary information about divorce (Karuppaswamy & Myers-Walls, 2003). Children need to know that they are still loved by both parents and that the divorce is not their fault. Children also need information regarding the process and the changes involved in the divorce, for example, where they will live and what school they will attend (Louw & Louw, 2014). Children in these circumstances have been found to experience a sense of relief if they are well informed particularly during times of transition (Dowling & Gorell-Barnes, 1999). The importance of a coherent story is highlighted by Dowling and Gorell-Barnes (1999) who found that children needed help in finding an explanation for the divorce of their parents. The reassurance that both parents will remain involved and responsible for their children is protective. Explanations help children to move away from taking responsibility for the divorce and disincline children from trying to reunite their parents. Butler, Scanlan, Robinson, Douglas, and Murch (2002) interviewed 104 children between the ages of 7 and 15 years from South Wales and West England in order to explore their experiences of parental divorce. Children in this sample reported an increased capacity to establish equilibrium if they were given explanations for their parents' divorce. While these children were not able to do anything about the immediate emotional repercussions of their parents' separation they did consider a degree of cognitive control over events to be protective. Some children equated being left out of explanations to being sidelined completely. Children consistently expressed the need to be informed even if they were not able to process all of what was taking place between their parents. This information facilitated coping, reduced their anxiety about the future, and helped them to create a frame of reference for future relationships (Butler *et al.*, 2002).

Chen and George (2005) note that psychological preparation for separation and divorce has been associated with notable reduction in stress and confusion in children. Adequate information about divorce related decisions and appropriate communication, may limit the extent to which children feel abandoned or at fault for the divorce. Children also create meaning through coherent stories regarding the divorce and this facilitates coping (Chen & George, 2005). Children benefit from clear communication regarding visitation and reassurance that they can spend time with either parent, free of any guilt (Dowling & Gorell-Barnes, 1999).

2.6. Post-divorce stability.

The disruption caused by parental divorce can be buffered if children experience a certain amount of stability post-divorce, that is, if they continue to live in the same house, attend the same school, and keep the same friends. Changes in these areas are likely to further challenge children and impact upon their self esteem and confidence (Dreman, 2000). If changes in these areas are well managed, children are well informed, and given a clear sense that their feelings and preferences are important, they are better able to adapt (Maes, De Mol, & Buysse, 2011). Smith, Taylor and Tapp (2003) found that children valued having their opinions sought regarding residence and contact, and appreciated flexibility within these arrangements. Parents who were supportive during transitions and included children in negotiations helped provide stability for children. Well informed and well prepared children who were given assistance in maintaining contact with pre-divorce social contacts were found to cope well with divorce related transitions (Moxnes, 2003).

2.7 Joint custody.

Joint custody as opposed to sole custody has also been found to serve as a protective factor. Children living in joint custody arrangements have been shown to be better adjusted in emotional, behavioural, and academic domains when compared to children in sole custody. This adjustment was evident regardless of level of conflict (Bausermann, 2002). Lee (2002)

also found support for the benefit of joint custody but suggested that the existence of high parental conflict would stifle this benefit. Hetherington (2003) points to the protective nature of shared parenting in which there is support and cooperation between divorced parents with regard to matters concerning the child.

2.8 Social support.

Little research has been conducted on support systems directly available to children during the divorce process (Dreman, 2000). Research exploring risk and protective factors associated with children and traumatic events has established social support as one of the most significant predictors of healthy psychological adjustment (Vigil & Geary, 2008). Social support provides information, facilitates understanding, and enhances children's sense of security and belonging, and thus serves as a vital factor influencing children's adjustment to parental divorce (Dreman, 2000). Social support may come in the form of grandparents, siblings, friends, teachers, housekeepers, the church, or professionals such as psychologists or social workers (Huurre, Junkkari, & Aro, 2006; Karuppaswamy & Myers-Walls, 2003).

Parents are the most accessible source of support in the form of information, advice, and emotional provision with the residential parent best positioned in this regard (Butler et al., 2002). Research findings reveal that while parents play an important role in facilitating post-divorce adjustment, the support of peers, schools, communities, extended family, and clergy also form part of the safety net that protects children during the divorce process (Chen & George, 2005). Sheehan et al. (2004) found that children with at least one sibling were able to find some of the support that they needed during the divorce process within the ongoing sibling relationship. Positive sibling relationships in post-divorce families have been associated with positive outcomes for children (Hetherington, 2003). The extended family has also been found to be a significant source of psychological and economic support (Dreman, 2000). Extended family was also found to be an important source of support for separated parents and thus some children saw more of their extended family members than they did prior to parental separation (Hetherington, 2003; Hogan et al., 2003). Closeness to grandparents has been associated with positive adjustment (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001). Grandparents were viewed by children as an important source of time, support and attention, with their homes often seen by children as neutral territory. Children acknowledged the role of grandparents in supporting their parents, often in practical ways, and they viewed this as beneficial provided their grandparents did not take sides (Butler et al., 2002; Hetherington, 2003). School provides continuity and safety during the transitions brought on by parental divorce (Dowling & Gorell-Barnes, 1999). Some children found teachers supportive but most children simply found it useful if their teachers were aware of their parents' divorce so that they had an explanation for any changes in children's behaviour (Butler et al., 2002). Schools with authoritative teachers and firm routines and structures facilitate coping and adjustment in children of divorce (Hetherington, 2003). Friends also serve as an instrumental source of support, particularly for children who find it difficult to access support from their parents. Close friends have been specifically identified as being more likely to understand, particularly if these friends had also experienced parental divorce (Butler et al., 2002).

2.9 New family members.

Amato (1993) found some support for improved well-being in children whose custodial parents remarry but not all studies supported this association. Allison and Furstenberg (1989) suggested that step-fathers improve adjustment in boys but have little impact, and sometimes negative effects, for girls. Amato (1993) found positive outcomes for children when their step-parents were the same sex as they were, but the way in which step-parents are introduced is important. Children adjust well if their step-parents are introduced slowly, allowing time for children to get to know them (Moxnes, 2003). Flowerdew and Neale (2003) also emphasise the importance of allowing sufficient time for children to adapt to new family members. Children cope well when their opinions are sought as to the logistics of incorporating new family members (Moxnes, 2003). Moxnes (2003) found that many children saw step-fathers introduced into their place of primary residence as a friend and

many were aware of the financial support that their step-fathers brought to their households. Children responded well to step-fathers who appeared to make their mothers happy, who participated in household chores, and who limited their interference in the lives of the children (Moxnes, 2003). Flowerdew and Neale (2003) also found support for the notion of perceived parental happiness in the acceptance of new step-parents. A close authoritative relationship between a step-parent and step-child has been found to improve well-being in children (Hetherington, 2003).

3. Research Methodology

The aim of this article is to identify protective factors that facilitate positive adjustment to parental divorce. The study on which this article is based aimed to conduct a narrative inquiry regarding the parental divorce experiences of 9 and 10 year old children. Specific attention was given to honouring the voices of children and documenting their stories of parental divorce. The narrative framework was well suited to this research as it allowed the researchers to conduct an in-depth exploration of children's experiences, and what meaning these experiences held for each participant (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kramp, 2004).

Since narrative inquiry aims to provide a thick description rather than generalisable findings (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009) a sample of five children was deemed sufficient. Participants were drawn from a Nelson Mandela Metrople (NMM) primary school where one of the researchers was employed as a counselling psychologist. Children between the ages of 9 and 10 years whose parents had been divorced for 6 months or more met the inclusion criteria for participation. Two male and three female participants whose parents had been divorced for between 2 and 7 years were interviewed. Participants were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonym.

A single open-ended question was used to facilitate the story telling process:

I would like to hear about what it was like for you when your parents got divorced. You can tell your story in any way you feel comfortable. You can draw, write or paint. You can use playdough, toys or the sandtray or you can just use your voice. Perhaps you can begin by telling me a bit about before the divorce happened and then what it has been like for you since the divorce.

As the participants and the researchers co-constructed their stories of parental divorce, rich descriptive data was recorded, transcribed and interpreted. The narrative analysis focused on the identification of themes. The research process aimed to attend to, document and accurately interpret the voice of the child.

4. Findings and Discussion: Healing Stories

Despite some adjustment difficulties, all of the participants told stories of healing, coping and even thriving. We found ourselves curious as to what made it possible for children to adjust positively after the divorce of their parents. This wondering may have contributed to the use of questions like, *What helped?* or *What made it better?* The answers received challenged our preconceived ideas about a child's capacity for insight and agency. Participants enlightened us on their ideas of what helped them to cope, but also what they did to help themselves.

4.1 "Once you find your way to take care of it you, you fine"

In the above statement a participant who called himself NikNak described divorce as a *dark cloud*. Throughout the interview he used this metaphor to describe his adjustment, suggesting that over time the cloud had become lighter in colour. He explained that his strategy for *taking care of this dark cloud* involved *going along with what mom and dad said*. Other participants also spoke of healing or the potential for healing. Lily saw the possibility of moving past or *getting over* the divorce as being tied into whether or not her mother remarried, as well as the potential of *fill her heart with love*.

Lily: Yes it is, eventually I'll get over the whole thing. I'll have another family. If my mother finds another one...

Researcher: So how does one get one's heart back together after it's torn apart?

Lily: Well, once it's broken the person fills my heart again with love. My mother and whoever else.

Sinjin referred to his parents' divorce as the *big sigh*. He seemed to perceive himself as having recovered fully from *the big sigh*, attributing this partly to having received his *benefits back*. By *benefits* he referred to living in a bigger home, having satellite tv and big birthday parties.

Researcher: OK. Are there still very hard parts, or sighs, right now, at this, at this time?

Sinjin: At this time there aren't no, there aren't sighs.

Researcher: There aren't sighs.

Sinjin: Mm mm.

Researcher: What's left now, what are, what is there now?

Sinjin: There's um, there's fun now, there's (pause) I get, I got my benefits back (smiles).

In line with Sinjin's statement, Amato (1993) found that children who do not experience extensive stress or loss of resources are likely to fare well, in fact many may benefit if stress is reduced and resources are increased. While in certain instances above NikNak, Lily, and Sinjin saw their healing as being partially linked to the actions of adults in their lives, other instances involved participants experiencing themselves as influential in their own adjustment. For example, NikNak also saw his achievement of passing Grade 3 as a contributor to the fading of the *dark cloud* of what he called *divorcement*. This also resonates with Erikson's (1963) theory that children who are successfully resolving the developmental stage of *industry versus inferiority* will experience themselves as *competent*.

NikNak suggested that his mom and dad provided him with guidelines for dealing with the divorce, and his decision to follow these guidelines, along with his decision to continue living his life (*I just went along*) made for a *happy life*. Lily also spoke about the notion of carrying on with life.

Lily: Well I just ignore everything, I go on with my life. I go to school, I come home I do whatever.

Similarly Sky explained that she just *kept on smiling*. Participants also found other forms of distraction, for example, Sky found solace in *watching television*. Lily, who seemed to find herself in a post-divorce context where parental conflict remained ongoing, suggested hiding or playing as coping strategies.

Lily: Well they shout, when I'm there I rather would go hide under my bed or go play next door than be in that house.

NikNak likened divorce to his *arm being chopped off*. In the interview he spoke of the potential for his *arm to grow back* if he engages in activities that he enjoys.

Researcher: Can the arm grow back?

NikNak: Yes if um.. if I like did stuff that I like a lot.

Anne's thoughts on dealing with parental divorce involved keeping calm as well as writing down and expressing her feelings. She explains these processes in the two interview extracts below.

Anne: I would just say that you should just keep calm and if you don't like it then just try and write down your feelings or get your feelings out or talk to your mother or something. Just try and get your feelings out or maybe just say it to yourself or something, or scream into your pillow.

Anne: ...and if I'm angry I just write down why I get angry and how I got angry, then I just crunch it up and throw it in the bin.

Anne even explained some of her coping mechanisms to her parents and reported that when her parents became angry with each other she would get them to employ her technique of taking a deep breath and counting to ten.

Anne: ...and they a bit angry, they just do what I tell them to do. Take a deep breath, count to ten, and don't say anything, that's what makes me happy.

The researchers were amused by NikNak's very practical and insightful advice.

Researcher: Mmmm um and what advice would you give to someone whose um mom and dad are already divorced and they've got that dark cloud?

NikNak: Go to sleep early.

(both laugh)

Researcher: How will that help them?

NikNak: By being fresh and not being moany because... if you moan the cloud gets darker.

Maintaining or re-establishing emotional security is an important task for children during the parental divorce process (Schermerhorn, Cummings, & Davies, 2005). Butler *et al.* (2002) found that while children experience parental divorce as a crisis they are able to re-establish equilibrium through the mobilisation of internal and external resources. Children presented as active and competent participants in the parental divorce process. The findings of the current study are partly in agreement with the research of Butler *et al.* (2002), as the participants demonstrated varying capacities to mobilise internal and external resources. Butler *et al.* (2002) found that during the divorce process their sample of 104 English and Welsh children between the ages of 7 and 15 years were capable of accessing and making appropriate use of help from within their own resources and with the assistance of others. These children reported on the benefit of providing themselves with distractions such as friends, sports, listening to music or keeping busy. In this study we see participants *going on with their lives*. NikNak chose to engage in activities he enjoyed while Sky used television to distract herself. Some children in the research of Butler *et al.* (2002) reported on the value of being able to cry while others made use of quiet reflection and writing down their thoughts. In this study Anne discussed the value of writing down and processing her feelings in various ways. According to Butler *et al.* (2002) many children were able to reframe their experiences in a more positive manner by considering the positive aspects of their lives. In the case of NikNak there was some sense of this positive reframing as he cautioned against *being moany*. Butler *et al.* (2002) found that children also viewed themselves as a source of emotional and practical support for their parents. In Anne's story we see her efforts at providing her parents with some of her own coping mechanisms.

4.2 “The thing that made me happy was seeing them happy.”

Knowing that his parents were happy was an important theme for Sinjin. He spoke consistently of his happiness being linked to that of his parents.

Researcher: What made it ok?

Sinjin: Um seeing, just looking at my parents and seeing them happy.

Researcher: Seeing them happy. Mmmm. You've said that a few times now, that, that your parents' happiness was important to you?

Sinjin: Yes ma'am.

Researcher: I'm interested in your happiness?

Sinjin: No it did... 'cause... I was happy because they they... the thing that made me happy was seeing them happy.

In their study on South African children, Bojuwoye and Akpan (2009) found that during divorce children tend to prioritise their own need for security over their parents' happiness.

Other researchers found evidence that children placed high value on their parents' happiness (Flowerdew & Neale, 2003; Hogan et al., 2003). Sinjin seemed to see his parents' happiness as a prerequisite for his own.

4.3 "He looks after us."

The support of a well-liked step-parent was a consistent theme within and across interviews. Participants seemed to suggest that a step-parent who offered support in various forms contributed towards their *stories of healing*. Sky spoke of her mother engaging in several relationships after the divorce. She explained that these different step-parents *looked after* her and her mother. Much of this support seemed to come in the form of financial support which allowed for eating out at restaurants and going on holidays.

Sky: When they'd look after us, then they'd cook, sometimes they'd cook and then sometimes they wouldn't, and then some times they'd take us out and look after us, then we'll go on holidays and stuff like that.

Researcher: And what does that mean, if someone is looking after you?

Sky: It's like they taking care of us, buying us food.

Sky also made reference to the role these step-parents played in providing enjoyment and fun, although she consistently returned to the importance of food and the role of her mother's partner in the provision of sustenance. Sinjin also viewed his step-parent as a source of enjoyment and fun, as he explained the following about his step-father.

Sinjin: Ja, his... he has a kid personality.

(Both laugh)

Researcher: Tell me about a kid personality, what's that like?

Sinjin: It's like gaming and he (pause) it's just games, and he plays online. He does a whole lot of things, he's helping me with my rugby.

Researcher: Mmmm.

Sinjin: Ja. It's been awesome.

His step-father appeared to be an important source of support in terms of spending time with Sinjin and investing in his sporting activities.

Sinjin: He's an outside person, that's why he can like, he has also a rugby, he had a rugby career so he can still, he can say that stuff 'cause my mom doesn't know much about rugby, and he can like, he can help me, not with swimming, my dad can help me with that, but he can help like, he tells me, and like with fitness or something he helps me with that, ja.

As was the case with Sinjin, other participants also experienced the positive involvement of their step-parents. Anne's step-mother appeared to be perceptive of Anne's preferences as seen below.

Researcher: It sounds like you and your step-mom have a lot in common.

Anne: We have the same interests, we like Winnie the Pooh and sometimes she puts on my favourite movie...

Sky also described a step-parent who seemed to invest time in her interests.

Researcher: What was she like?

Sky: She's fun, she likes playing games with us.

NikNak told a similar story of his step-father.

NikNak: Like he bought me Guinness book of records 2015. It was out before 2015.

NikNak: ...Yes for Chirstmas. And (pause) he watches rugby a lot, he watches rugby a lot, he's very tough, and he's fun to play around with.

In some respects it appeared that these step-parents were able to fulfil a gender specific role that the residential parents may have been less equipped to fulfil. It could be speculated for

example that NikNak's step-father served as a father figure when he was not with his own father. It appeared that participants in the current study valued step-parents who were able to invest in things that were important to their step-children. Similar to the findings of the current study, Moxnes (2003) found that many children saw step-fathers introduced into their place of primary residence as a friend and many were aware of the financial support that their step-fathers brought to their households. Financial stability has been found to improve in the case of custodial mothers who remarry, however the adjustment of their children remained unchanged (Kelly, 2003). In contrast, Sky's adjustment appeared to be notably affected by the financial involvement of a step-father. She expressed a great deal of awareness about the financial benefits of having a step-father. Moxnes (2003) also found that children responded well to step-fathers who appeared to make their mothers happy, who participated in household chores, and who limited their interference in the lives of the children (Moxnes, 2003). Although these findings may apply to the children in this study, they did not specifically incorporate these factors into their stories. Rather, they placed emphasis on the positive involvement of step-parents in their own lives, including their involvement in sport, hobbies, and leisure activities.

4.4 “I feel more safer ‘cause she’s asking me how I’m feeling about it.”

Sky's story of parental divorce was characterised by several post-divorce transitions, many of which appeared to compromise her adjustment. A protective aspect of her adjustment involved her mother's inclination to consult with her regarding transition-related decisions.

Researcher: How do you feel when mom asks you?

Sky: I feel more safer ‘cause she’s asking me how I’m feeling about it.

Maes et al. (2011) found that if children are given a clear sense that their feelings and preferences about divorce related decisions are important, they are better able to adapt. Smith et al (2003) found that children valued having their opinions sought regarding residence and contact, and appreciated flexibility within these arrangements. Parents who were supportive during transitions and included children in negotiations helped provide stability for children (Moxnes, 2003). Well informed and well prepared children who were given assistance in maintaining contact with pre-divorce social contacts were found to cope well with divorce related transitions (Moxnes, 2003). Sky's mother seemed to ensure that Sky could maintain contact with her extended family members who proved to be an important source of support for her.

4.5 “I think that people can help me get better somehow.”

This study found some support for the role of social support in adjustment to parental divorce. Research findings reveal that while parents play an important role in facilitating post-divorce adjustment, the support of peers, schools, communities, extended family, and clergy also form part of the safety net that protects children during the divorce process (Chen & George, 2005). In the dialogue below Sky discussed her extended family.

Researcher: What makes you smile?

Sky: When I think about my family that’s in Johannesburg...

*...and then they’ll joke with me and they’ll tell my mom, ‘I miss Sky more than you.’
(laughs)*

Lily explained that she often spoke to her aunt about her parents' divorce.

Lily : So people, I also talk to my aunty, she’s also good at this stuff.

The extended family has also been found to be a significant source of psychological and economic support during parental divorce (Dreman, 2000). Closeness to grandparents has been associated with positive adjustment (Dunn & Deater-Deckard, 2001). Grandparents were viewed by children as an important source of time, support and attention, with their homes often seen by children as neutral territory (Butler et al., 2002; Hetherington, 2003). Anne did not make any reference to the involvement of her extended family, but she discussed the role of her friends.

Anne: Like they kind, and sometimes my mother didn't have time to make me lunch in the morning, then they will share me some of their lunch. And uh, if I'm stuck and there's a friend that's close to me I just ask her.

While Anne spoke of friends as a practical source of support Lily viewed her friend as an emotional source of support who appeared to be an important role player in her *story of healing*.

Researcher: ...are there other things that helped your heart to heal?

Lily: Well, my friends sort of 'cause they filling me with friendship.

Lily: ...There was this one friend, she was my best friend, we told each other everything so she was the first person I actually told, 'cause she actually helped me.

Lily: Well, my friend said I better tell her or my family and she said if I tell her it won't do anything and if I tell my family it can be better but I didn't feel like telling my family yet.

Researcher: Telling them?

Lily: That my mother and father were divorced and how I feel. So I told her first. Her father does therapy, that's why I told her.

Lily appeared to see value in trusting a friend whose father *did therapy*. Butler et al. (2002) found that friends served as an instrumental source of support, particularly for children who find it difficult to access support from their parents. Close friends have been specifically identified as being more likely to understand, particularly if these friends had also experienced parental divorce (Butler et al., 2002).

NikNak spoke about receiving assistance from a psychologist.

Researcher: What did the psychologist do to help you?

NikNak: Well they just like explained stuff and we do fun activities.

Researcher: And doing fun stuff helps your arm grow back?

NikNak: Yes I like fun.

Karuppaswamy and Myers-Walls (2003) found that social support provided children with information regarding divorce and helped to facilitate understanding. At the end of the interview the researcher reflected the perception that Anne seemed happy. In response Anne indicated the value of being able to express her feelings with a trusted person.

Researcher: You seem happy now.

Anne: I am, because I got to express my feelings with someone that I know I can trust.

Inadvertently, Anne had experienced the research interview as a form of social support. Research has found that social support can come in the form of extended family, siblings, friends, teachers, the church, or professionals such as psychologists or social workers (Huurre, et al., 2006; Karuppaswamy & Myers-Walls, 2003; Louw & Louw, 2014). This study identified sources of support in the form of extended family, friends and professionals. Dowling and Gorell-Barnes (1999) found the school to be an important source of support during parental divorce in terms of its provision of continuity and safety. Hetherington (2003) found that schools with authoritative teachers and firm routines and structures facilitated coping and adjustment in children of divorce. The researchers wondered if school-related stories remained untold in this study, not because they did not exist but because they may have gone unnoticed by the participants. It was however, important to acknowledge our own expectation in this regard, with one of the researchers being an employee of a school, this experience has led us to believe that schools can serve as important contexts of social support.

4.6 “I love my dad... every day I will chat to him.”

An important aspect of coping with parental divorce appeared to be that of regular contact with non-residential parents. Sky spoke positively of her visits to her father and emphasised his role in amongst others, providing sustenance.

Sky: Yes, he will, when it's time for me to go to him then he'll make sure that we'll eat what we want and what we like, he'll always make sure that all the stuff is prepared for us to eat, and when he comes to fetch us he'll take us out to the beach or something and then he'll take us home, we'll watch movies and play games and then we'll eat.

A central theme in Sinjin's interview was that his parents' divorce was a *good decision*. He shared extensively of the positive outcomes of the divorce. In the following extract he explained that divorce would only be a *better thing* if children are allowed access to their non-residential parents.

Researcher: ...What, what advice would you give to someone whose parents are getting divorced now, like what would you tell them about divorce?

Sinjin: I would tell them that um, I would tell them that it's probably a better thing for them that their parents are divorced than being angry at each other and then you don't feel happy.

Researcher: Mmm... Being apart from each other is better than being angry at each other all the time?

Sinjin: Mmm But that's if, like if the parents allow the other parent to see, like the mom and the dad can see the child also.

Researcher: Yes.

Sinjin: Because if that doesn't, if it's not like that then I don't know what I would say to them.

Researcher: Mmm because if it's not like that then...

Sinjin: It's gonna be like unhappy, aren't you gonna be unhappy like you don't, if you were young, then you don't know like, what's your mom's name really, if you don't see your mom, you don't know your, her name, you don't know what her personality is cause your parent, your dad probably won't say anything about it.

Anne told of a particularly close relationship with her father, but she expressed some difficulty with the limited contact she experienced with her father. In the following interview extract we see the innovative means by which Anne and her father had maintained their relationship.

Anne: Yes because I love my dad more. I'm (pause) every day I will chat to him on my mother's phone or my phone. It only depends if my mother bought me airtime.

Researcher: So that's how you stay so close to your dad. You talk on the phone a lot.

Anne: (nods)

Researcher: Ah, I was wondering how you got that right. So can you talk to your dad every day?

Anne: (nods) and every night when I lay and I can't sleep then I just go and chat to my dad and then he tells me, he like sends a voice note of a story, so that makes me a bit sleepy.

Researcher: A bed time story?

Anne: (nods) and then I just think of my dad and I'll fall asleep.

Several studies have found that a supportive and ongoing relationship with the non-custodial parent facilitates positive adjustment in children (Amato, 1993, 1994; Craig & Baucum, 2002; Louw & Louw, 2014). Research associates the positive involvement of non-custodial fathers with higher self-esteem and fewer behaviour problems in children (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Hetherington, 1993). Hetherington (2003) uphold an authoritative non-custodial parent as a potential protective factor, in cases where conflict is low, and particularly when a custodial parent is not coping well (Hetherington, 2003). In their research Smith *et al.* (2003) noted the importance children placed on relationships. Children valued quality time, affection, and support from their parents. Dowling and Gorell-Barnes (1999) found that children benefitted from clear communication regarding visitation and reassurance that they can spend time with either parent, free of any guilt. This study highlights the protective nature and importance of children having an ongoing positive relationship with their non-residential parents.

4.7 “It feels nice that after the big divorce, that they get along so nicely.”

An additional *story of healing* was told about the interactions between divorced parents themselves and between parents and step-parents. Sinjin and Sky seemed to experience acceptance and even positivity expressed by their parents towards their step-parents. As Sky discussed her step-mother there was a sense that she felt positively about this relationship. The researcher expressed this in the conversation below.

Researcher: Ok, so I'm guessing, you tell me if I'm right or wrong, that you like her?

Sky: (nods and smiles)

Researcher: How does your mom feel about that?

Sky: My mom feels ok with it, at least I'm comfortable with them, that's what my mom says.

We were particularly impressed by this response. Sky had mentioned earlier that her parents' divorce was the result of an extra-marital affair. When the researcher asked Sky how her mother felt about her liking her step-mother, the researcher had already decided what the answer would be. It was easy to assume that her mother would dislike this, and perhaps she did, but admirably she did not appear to communicate any negativity she may have felt. Instead, she seems to have encouraged her daughter's relationship with her step-mother. In this *story of healing* we were encouraged by her mother's apparent capacity to uphold her daughter's best interests.

Sinjin's *story of healing* was even more hopeful. He spoke about a positive relationship between his mother, step-father and father. Below he explains that his step-father helps his dad. Although some of his explanation is difficult to understand, what is clear is that his father and step-father communicate and perhaps even consult with one another.

Sinjin: Ja he helped her and my dad helps, my dad helps my par, uh, Uncle Mike, my step-dad and my mom a lot. 'Cause my step-dad he helps, he gets help because he has to, my dad has a rugby family, so Uncle Mike like asks my dad like, what should I do, to help me, like what fitness and that stuff.

At times he even suggested that his three parents were friends. The adults in his life evidently found a way to co-parent Sinjin in an amicable manner, as can be seen in his answer to the following question.

Researcher: And it's like, it's almost like this family works as a team?

Sinjin: Yes they do work as a team when they, when they need help sometimes they ask each other what should I do or something.

Sinjin's words constitute the title of this section and they epitomise his experience: “*It feels nice that after the big divorce, that they get along so nicely.*” Research has examined children's experiences of step-parents in relationship to themselves (Amato, 1993; Dowling & Gorell-Barnes, 1999; Hogan et al., 2003; Kelly, 2003; Lansford, 2009; Moxnes, 2003). The impact of the relationship between step-parents and parents on children appears to have received limited research focus. Hogan et al. (2003) found that children valued gestures such as custodial parents encouraging positive contact with non-custodial parents. The current study also revealed the value of parents encouraging positive relationships with step-parents. The capacity to maintain an ongoing and amicable parental relationship appears to benefit children. Approximately 25% to 30% of divorced parents manage to maintain a cooperative co-parenting relationship involving, frequent communication and joint planning regarding their children (Kelly, 2003). Some co-parenting relationships can serve as a protective factor for children. The majority of parents engage in parallel parenting involving limited communication and emotional disconnection (Kelly, 2003). Positive adjustment can occur in parallel parenting scenarios provided both households provide the child with nurturance and appropriate discipline (Kelly, 2003). Amato (1993) found a large majority of research studies pointing to positive adjustment in children whose parents had been able to interact in a cooperative and low conflict manner. Parents who contained their conflict and excluded

children from argumentative exchanges ensured the protection of children from the negative adjustment (Chen & George, 2005).

4.8 “It’s better when you small.”

A large body of research has been devoted to exploring the age of children as a mediating factor in their adaptation to parental divorce (e.g. MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). Well known divorce researchers, Amato and Booth (1997) and South African researchers Bojuwoye and Akpan (2009) found age to be closely related to the way in which children perceive divorce. This may have inadvertently prompted the question the researcher posed to Lily which led her to discuss why being younger when her parents were divorced was advantageous to her.

Lily: Ja. So I, I don’t remember anything sort of ‘cause that was really when I was little.

Researcher: So it might be a better thing if it happens to you when you’re really little?

Lily: Yes cause then I don’t remember anything, now, so it’s better if you doing it when you’re little. I wouldn’t prefer doing it now cause then I’ll remember it for life.

Lily: ...Because it’s better when you small because you can hardly understand anything and now when you big you can understand everything.

Research findings regarding the impact of age on adjustment to parental divorce are mixed. Emery (1988) attributes these inconsistent findings to three confounding variables, namely: the age of the child at divorce; the time passed since the divorce event; and the age of the child when the research is conducted. With regard to Lily, it is noted that at the time of being interviewed, 5 years had passed since her parents’ divorce. The time that had passed may have allowed Lily to process the divorce and thus lead her to suggest that being young was *better*. In line with research findings, Lily’s interview confirms that the role of age in parental divorce is a complex issue. However, since the aim of the study was to honour the voice of the child the researcher chose to take Lily’s statement at face value. The literature review unpacked the findings of various studies in this regard. Of those that found support for Lily’s perception were Bojuwoye and Akpan (2009) and MacCallum and Golombok (2004) who found that children’s recollections of parental divorce were very limited if the divorce took place when they were very young. Bojuwoye and Akpan (2009) found that children who were 3 years old at the time of the divorce event expressed indifference regarding the divorce and indicated that they were unable to recall their feelings during this time. Some studies have found that the negative effects of parental divorce are greater for children prior to the age of 5 years (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989). Ziemann and Baker-Randall (2000) found that the divorce process was equally disruptive for late pre-school and early middle school children, while toddlers and adolescents were found to be less affected. Other research has found that pre-school children experienced noticeable negative emotions as a result of parental divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Ludolph & Viro, 1998; Richardson & Rosen, 1999). This study cautiously suggests that being younger at the time of parental divorce may serve as a protective factor, but the role of age in adjustment to parental divorce remains a complex topic with several other factors coming into play.

5. Conclusion

Through the identification of factors that may have better facilitated the adjustment of the children to parental divorce, the researcher found several hopeful *stories of healing*. The participants in this study demonstrated the capacity to mobilise their own internal and external resources. Their capacity to cope was enhanced by their own efforts and also by the actions of adults. Children seemed to adjust well when their resources increased and stress decreased. Children not only demonstrated the capacity to orchestrate their own healing process, but also contributed to the healing of their parents. Experiencing a sense of achievement or mastery seemed to benefit participants like NikNak whose dark cloud got lighter when he passed Grade 3. Participants advocated the idea of getting on with life and also suggested employing distractions like television and fun activities as a means of coping. Anne benefitted from

expressing her feelings and from emotional self-regulation techniques, which she even taught to her parents. NikNak pointed out the value of reframing the divorce experience in a positive manner by *going to bed early* in order to avoid being *moany*. Knowing that his parents were happy was an important healing story for Sinjin. The positive involvement of step-parents was found to be protective, particularly when step-parents were able to provide financial and socio-emotional support. Sky highlighted the value of being consulted on transition-related decisions. Social support was also found to be an important protective factors. Participants were able to access support from extended family members, friends and professionals. Regular contact with a non-residential parent was found to play a role in adjustment, and Anne and her father found an innovative way of maintaining contact when physically apart. Participants also appeared to value an amicable post-divorce parental relationship with parents who were supportive of children's relationships with their step-parents. Support was also found for the notion that children cope better if the divorce takes place at a younger age. The identification of protective factors that facilitate children's positive adjustment to parental divorce may be of use to practitioners and parents.

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