Advocating Group Counseling for Children of Separated and Divorced Parents in the Curriculum

Alicia R. Fry
EDFI 611
Dr. Savilla Banister
Bowling Green State University
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Rationale: Advocating Group Counseling for Children of Separated and Divorced Parents in the Curriculum

A standard wedding invitation may read: “The said bride and the said groom, or the parents of the said bride and groom, request your presence to share in the union or exchange of marriage vows as the said bride and groom begin their new life together.” On the other hand, a more practical, perhaps pessimistic, wedding invitation might read: “The said bride and the said groom request your presence as they attempt to exchange marriage vows which may or may not hold true in the said future. Gifts are subject to return upon legal separation prior to one year of holy matrimony; after one year, said gift(s) shall be assigned to either the said groom or said bride depending on the party in attendance at the initial wedding ceremony (pending any existing notarized prenuptial agreement(s)).” Obviously, the later invitation smothers the romantic and optimistic sentiments towards the institution of marriage. Nevertheless, the reality of today’s marital society reveals that wedded couples have approximately one in two odds of remaining together. In fact, it appears to be common knowledge that there is a fifty percent success rate for marriages in the United States. As far as mental healthcare professionals are concerned, this is a traumatic coin toss that can ultimately leave two individuals emotionally devastated. Separation and divorce can be an emotional rollercoaster for parting couples. Unfortunately, the two married individuals often bring into the disunion other entities that are affected, namely, their children.

In truth, too many children become pawns in ugly and ruthless separations and divorces. They are sometimes forced to choose sides and can even join in the manipulative process. In other cases, the parents try to do everything possible to shield their children from the painful side-effects of parental separation and divorce. Regrettably, even with the meaningful attempts by parents to shelter their children from the unsightliness of parental separation and divorce,
children still retain emotional scars that accompany them throughout life. More specifically, children of separated and divorced parents frequently exhibit signs of depression, anger, resentment, isolation, neglect, and often have trouble with issues of trust and emotional attachment throughout their lifecycle. As a result, it may be necessary for children of separated and divorced parents to seek counseling. For school aged children, the school counselor may be the most practical choice in receiving support for the traumatic experiencing of parental separation and divorce. Furthermore, a group counseling program spearheaded by the school counselor might be the ideal method of counseling for these children in that it would expose them to the sheer numbers of children who are confronted with parental separation and divorce. Consequently, it is imperative that school systems understand the significance and impact divorce has on students, and help advocate group counseling into the guidance curriculum.

**Purpose: Studies and Perceptions of Children of Separated and Divorced Parents**

In essence, it’s not difficult to find material on the subject of divorce. Americans seem to be infatuated with the subject, and the tabloids and media sensationalists are all too willing to prey upon this obsession and feed the general public’s insatiable appetite. However, one can find the subject of divorce not just in Hollywood, but also in one’s beauty parlor or local grocery store. Separations and divorces have even become everyday gossip at water coolers everywhere. Beneath the media hyped and local gossiped rumors of separations and divorce, there seems to be numerous publications that underscore the detrimental effects separation and divorce have on children. For example in a recent article, Dr. Herb Mandell, a child psychiatrist, states, “the fact that divorce is so common doesn’t erase the hurt it often causes. In a typical case, the divorce tears up the child’s sense of the safety and security of their home. You’ve kind of ripped that in half, and you need to replace it with another reality that’s equally supportive” (Price, 2005, p.7).
As Mandell admits, there seems to be no condolence in the fact that divorce is extremely commonplace. The stark reality is that one third of the children in the United States come from families of divorce or separation. Or in other words, “1.5 million youngsters go through a divorce each year” (Peterson, 2002, p.9). That makes for a number of troubled children, but that’s not to say that children cannot overcome the problems associated with divorce. According to a number of experts, children do succeed in spite of the troubles they’ve witnessed due to the disjointing of the family. Still, “a growing body of literature shows that the children of divorce are more likely to have mental health problems, do worse in school and use drugs than those from intact families” (Peterson, 2002, p. 9). Unfortunately, a majority of the older literature only reveals and focuses on the problems that children of divorced parents are going through after the physical separation of divorce.

Today, there appears to be an added concentration on the preexisting problems children face prior to the actual physical separation of the parents. For instance, a study conducted by Tara S. Peris and Robert E. Emery, both from the Department of Psychology at the University of Virginia, found the following to be true:

Prior to marital disruption, youth in subsequently disrupting homes evidence higher levels of externalizing behavior problems compared to their counterparts in continuously intact homes. The difficulties experienced by youth in these homes persist in the period immediately following marital disruption, expanding in scope to include higher levels of internalizing behavior and more frequent use of psychological services. (2004, p.701)

Obviously, children of divorced parents either consciously or unconsciously recognize the parental tension in the marriage prior to the physical separation of the parents. In some cases this
tension cannot be avoided, such as in cases where there is abuse involved prior to separation. Consequently, it is only natural to assume that the children would be psychologically affected by this visible and/or invisible tension prior to the actual physical separation of the parents.

For the purpose of this paper it is imperative that one also look at the role separation and divorce play on a child’s academic achievement. Recent research results “suggest that current family structure plays a significant part in adolescents’ grades and attendance” (Ham, 2004, p.173). According to one study, “adolescents from intact families outperform students from other family structures. [In addition, the study also found that] females were more negatively impacted by family structures resulting from divorce […] than were males” (Ham, 2004, p.159). As a result, school counselors and psychologists are needed in helping children of divorced parents so that they may be successful within the classroom while coping with the dissolving of the nuclear family infrastructure. That is, if school counselors can advocate group counseling into their curriculum then the possible beneficial side effects can spillover into the academic realm of the school’s curriculum.

All in all, there is a consensus in the recent body of literature that suggests that additional research is needed to ascertain how other factors of child behavior are related to the increase in parental divorces, such as intimate partner violence and depressive symptoms among adolescents. According to Jennifer L. Hardesty and Grace H. Chung, “research on children and fathers is needed, [as well as] qualitative research to bring children’s voices to the literature and identify their needs” (2006, p.208). On the whole, school counselors can play a large role in this process. Their counseling techniques in regards to children of divorced parents can give researchers insight into how children respond to certain counseling methods, as well as how they
help them adjust to the classroom environment. This information could then be used to substantiate the need for group counseling into the school and guidance curriculums.

**Group Formation:**

Prospective members are referred by teachers, counselors, parents, or students (self-referrals or friends). The group is designed for six to eight students in grades nine and ten who have parents who are separated or divorced. Potential members of the group will be screened individually prior to the first session. Students must be willing to be included in the group. Parental permission slips will be sent home and returned prior to the first session. After the first session, the group will be closed in order to keep the group cohesive.

**Program Structure:**

The purpose of this group is to provide a supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere in which students can express their feelings. The group will meet once a week for a total of six sessions. Each session will be 45 minutes in length and will meet in the high school guidance office.

**Session 1:** “Meet the Group”

**Goals:** To understand the purpose and process of the group and to introduce group members to one another. Also, to begin a foundation for comfort and trust.

**Materials:** Candy Dish, Candy, Handout of Rules, Interview Questionnaire Handout, Writing Utensils

**Beginning:** Candy Dish
Pass around a candy dish and allow each member to take some candy. Prior to eating the candy, each member is asked to share their name and one piece of personal data for each piece of candy selected. Personal data may include (but is not limited to) personal interests, hobbies, sports interests, travels, favorite music or food, etc.

**Intro to the Group:**
*Explain why the group was formed and what the members have in common, that is, each student lives in a home where their parents are either divorced or separated. Explain that living without one parent can be difficult at times, and that it can cause a person’s moods to go up and
down. Every child who is involved in a divorce or separation experiences different feelings in reaction to the divorce or separation.

*Explain the purpose of the group. Stress that although there is a theme for each session, it is more important that members discuss what is happening in the present. Thus, each session begins with an opportunity to share current feelings.

* [This can be done after the main activity] Explain the importance of having group rules, emphasizing that the rules should allow everyone who wants to talk or share the opportunity to do so. Go over ground rules and allow students to add any they think would be helpful. (See Appendix 1) Give each member a copy of the rules.

**Main Activity:** “Getting to know you” [Building off of candy dish activity]
Place students in dyads and pass out an interview questionnaire (see Appendix 2). Ask students to take turns interviewing one another. When everyone is finished, students introduce their partners to the group.

**Processing Questions:**
- What similarities did you notice among each other?
- What differences did you learn about each other?
- How did you feel about interviewing another student? Explain.
- How did you feel when your partner was telling the group about you? Explain.
- Is there anything else that you would like the group to know about you that might be interesting or helpful?
- You have learned a little bit of information (general and personal) about members of the group today. What do you still need to help you feel comfortable to share more about yourself with the rest of the group?

**Closing:** (Using a Round):
Ask each group member to complete this sentence:
“One thing I learned in group today was ________________.”

**Session 2:** “Me and my Family”

**Goals:** To help group members continue to become better acquainted with one another. Also, for group members to think about their own family and to see similarities with other group members’ families.

**Beginning:** “I’m a Jacket, You’re a Jacket…” [Use school mascot]
Group members will sit in chairs in a close circle. [Have one less chair than the total number of group members]. One member will stand in the middle of the circle and say, for instance, “I’m a Jacket, you’re a Jacket, if you have a dog.” All members who have this thing in common get up and move quickly to another chair. The person left standing is now in the middle.
Unfinished Business: Give members the chance to ask any questions or make any comments about the last session, “Meet the Group.” Also, allow group members to share any current concerns/feelings (specifically about their parent’s separation or divorce).

Materials: Paper and Writing Utensils

Main Activity: “My Dinner Table”
-Distribute a sheet of paper to each member and give the following directions:
“Draw a table that would represent your dinner table. At this table, represent each female by a circle, each male by a triangle, and then put the figures where these family members usually sit at the table. Draw a figure for yourself where you sit at this table and include others who are at or near the table, such as personal friends, family friends, etc.”
*Be prepared to deal with some students who do not eat together as a family. For instance, maybe they eat on the couch/chairs in front of the T.V. Students could draw this scenario.
-Ask each member to describe the table he/she has drawn and explain the relationships within his/her family.

Processing Questions:
• What do you like most about your dinner table? Explain.
• What do you like least about your dinner table? Explain.
• If you could add or delete someone from your table, who would it be and why?
• How has dinner time changed since your parent’s divorce/separation? What has been the hardest thing to adapt to since the change? The easiest?
• If you could change anything about your dinner time and/or table, what would it be and why?
• In general, what changes have been easy and/or difficult for you since your parent’s divorce/separation?

Closing: (Using a Round) Each member is to complete the following sentence:
“A similarity that I noticed about my and my group members’ dinner table is ______________.”

Session 3: “Myths about Divorce”

Goal: To understand the truth about separation and divorce.

Beginning: Two Truths and a Lie
Group members are asked to make three statements about themselves, two that are true and one that is a lie. The leader will pass a mini-ball to one member who will start the activity. Then, the group has to guess which statement was that person’s lie. This person will then toss the ball to another member. This will continue until all members have shared.

Unfinished Business: Give members the chance to ask any questions or make any comments about the last session, “Me and my Family.” Also, allow group members to share any current concerns/feelings (specifically about their parent’s separation or divorce).
Materials: Book: *Divorce Happens to the Nicest Kids*, by Michael S. Prokop
(Book can be obtained from BGSU’s Jerome Library, CRC), Beliefs Handout, Writing Utensils, Mini-ball

Main Activity: “Debunk the Myths”
Provide 14 statements (false beliefs) about divorce (see Appendix 3). Have students put a (+) sign by each statement that they believe to be true for themselves (or even used to believe). After each member has completed the handout, read each statement out loud and ask members to raise their hand if they had a + mark. Allow students to share their feelings/beliefs/ experiences as you go through each statement. However, before moving on to the next false belief, read the true statement from *Divorce Happens to the Nicest Kids*, by Michael S. Prokop (pp. 15-28).

Processing Questions: [*This may take more than 1 session to process*]
- What experiences have caused you to believe some of these myths?
- What experiences have you had that helped you realize that these statements are not true?
- How long have you held some of these false statements?
- What will it take for you to believe all of these statements are false?
- Which statements can you relate to the most? The least? Why?

Closing: (Use a Round) Conclude the group by asking each member to complete this sentence: “One thing I know to be true about divorce is__________________.”

Session 4: “Feelings about Divorce/Separation”

Goals: To encourage students to identify and express their feelings and possible reasons for their feelings. Also, to enable members to share their feelings with others and to learn that they are not alone in their feelings and experiences involving divorce/separation.

Beginning: “What are you doing?”
Group members are to pair up with a partner. Within the pair, one member will perform an act (example: brushing teeth). The other member will say, “What are you doing?” and the member performing the action will respond with any other action than ‘brushing teeth,’ such as “putting on my shoes.” The other person will then begin performing the action of ‘putting on shoes.’ The process repeats with the other member asking “What are you doing?”

Unfinished Business: Give members the chance to ask any questions or make any comments about the last session, “Myths about Divorce.” Also, allow group members to share any current concerns/feelings (specifically about their parent’s separation or divorce).

Round: Each group member will respond with one word to the question: “How do you feel about your parent’s divorce/separation?”

Materials: paper plates, markers, and feelings handout [create a handout on which there are faces that depict feelings and emotions]
**Main Activity:** “Revealing your Feelings about Divorce/Separation”
- On the outside of a paper plate, group members will write feeling words to express how they think others perceive how they feel about their parents divorce/separation. On the inside of the paper plate, members will write the feeling words that represent how they really feel about their parents’ divorce/separation. (Members can also draw features that represent their own physical facial features on both sides of the plate).
- Members will take turns sharing the faces (outside and inside) that they created.

**Processing Questions:**
- How did you feel when you first heard that your parents were getting divorced/separated? How do you feel now?
- Which side of your face do you show most often? Why?
- Are there people, places, or times when you feel more comfortable sharing what’s inside/outside?
- What prevents you from sharing the emotions you hold inside?
- What happens when you hold these feelings in?
- What can you do to deal with your emotions in a more positive way?
- Do you think it is important to know how someone else is feeling? Why or Why not?
- Has someone ever misunderstood how you felt, especially about your parent’s divorce/separation? Were you able to tell them your feelings?

**Closing:** (*Remind the group there will be only two more group sessions.) Using the face you created today, which side are you going to show the group from this point forward? [Group members hold up the side they have chosen and show it to the rest of the group.]

**Session 5:** “Coping with Divorce/Separation”

**Goals:** To enable members to increase their understanding of the impact the divorce/separation has had upon themselves and their home life. Also, for members to recognize the differences and similarities of divorce situations and to encourage members to focus on the positive aspects of their family life.

**Beginning:** Musical Chairs [*need music, CD player, and chairs*
[Place chairs in a circle and start with one less chair than the number of group members.] The leader will play some music and the group members will walk around the chairs. When the music stops members must find a chair to sit in. The person that is standing is out. The group will play a game of musical chairs until a winner is determined.

**Unfinished Business:** Give members the chance to ask any questions or make any comments about the last session, “Feelings about Divorce/Separation.” Also, allow group members to share any current concerns/feelings (specifically about their parent’s separation or divorce).

**Materials:** Sentence completion handouts, writing utensils
**Main Activity:** Sentence Completion (See Appendix 4)
Ask members to fill out the sentence completion handout. After members are finished writing, process the handout. When processing the activity, allow members to brainstorm suggestions for each member’s difficulties in dealing with divorce/separation. Suggest that a problem be role-played. Then, allow time if the member would like to rehearse the behavior he/she wants to apply to the situation. *Try to discuss positive versus negative thinking and stress the importance of being a positive thinker.

**Processing Questions:**
- Is your most difficult problem with your parent’s divorce solvable or unsolvable? How do you know?
- How do you cope with difficult situations? What else could you try?
- How do you feel about the changes in your life? How do you deal with changes in your life? [What have you done in the past?]
- What have been the hardest things to adjust to since the separation/divorce? The easiest?
- What can you do to try to focus more on the positives in your life?
- What have you learned by hearing about the other members divorce situations?
- Have you shared your concerns with your parents? Why or why not?

**Closing:** (Round) *Remind the group that there is only one more session!*
Conclude the group session by asking students to complete the following sentence: “One way I can cope with difficult times at home is to ____________.”

**Session 6:** Review and Termination of the Group

**Goal:** To summarize learning and achievements made during the group process.

**Beginning:** Magic Box
Tell the group “In front of you is a box. If this box could deliver to you the one thing that would make you happy, what would be in the box?” Members write their responses on an unsigned card. Collect the cards and read them aloud to the group. Members will try to guess the authors.

**Unfinished Business:** Give members the chance to ask any questions or make any comments about the last session, “Coping with Divorce/Separation.” Also, allow group members to share any current concerns/feelings (specifically about their parent’s separation or divorce).

**Materials:** a box, 3×5 index cards, writing utensils, sheets of paper, evaluation forms

*Remind the group that this is the last meeting!

**Main Activity:** Wishing Well
Have group members think about their wishes and hopes for every member of the group. Pass out sheets of paper and ask each member to write at the top of the paper “Wishes for (Their Name.)” Pass the papers around the circle. Each member will write words or make a symbol to represent his/her specific hopes/wishes for the member whose name is at the top. Continue the process until each person had made an entry on each group member’s paper. Members will then
hold up their “Wish List” and allow the other members to explain what they wrote or drew (if needed).

**Processing Questions:**
- What do you think about the wishes given to you? How do you feel about them?
- Which wish is most meaningful to you? Why?
- Which wishes will be the easiest for you to try and obtain? The hardest?
- How do you feel about group ending?
- How do you now feel about your parent’s divorce/separation?
- How do you now feel about yourself and your ability to deal with your parent’s divorce/separation?
- What do you wish for yourself?

**Evaluation:** Have each member fill out an evaluation form about the Divorce/Separation group. (See Appendix 5)

**Closing:** Sitting in the circle, members are to hold hands with the person to their left and right. The leader will squeeze the hand to his/her right and that person will squeeze the next person’s hand. The process continues until the squeeze reaches the leader and then the leader will send the “feeling squeeze” back around the group by squeezing the person’s hand to his/her left.

**Bulletin Board:** (See Appendix 6)

The bulletin board represents common statements that children of divorce may tend to believe. These statements will be discussed in the third session of the group “Myths about Divorce.” In this session, the group will explore false beliefs about divorce adapted from the book *Divorce Happens to the Nicest Kids* by Michael S. Prokop. Even though this book is targeted for younger children, adolescents could also benefit from this book. That is, children who are experiencing their parent’s divorce or separation can probably relate to several of the false beliefs presented in this book no matter what their age may be. Consequently, I used some of these beliefs in the creation of the bulletin board with the idea that if students read the statements and felt that they could identify with the statements, then that may spark their interest to seek out more information about the group.
Appendix 1: Ground Rules

1. **Attendance:** Attend regularly.

2. **Promptness:** Be on time.

3. **Honesty:** Be honest. However, you have the right to pass from any activity that is embarrassing or particularly difficult for you.

4. **Participation:** All members are encouraged to participate in every session. Listen to every member, share your thoughts, and give helpful feedback when appropriate.

5. **Responsibility:** Do class assignments ahead of time that are due the day of the group and submit them to the teacher before missing class for group.

*6. **Confidentiality:** Anything said within the group may not be shared with others outside of the group. Group members are encouraged to share their own feelings about their parent’s divorce/separation with family, friends, teachers, and/or counselors. However, you are asked NOT to discuss the personal feelings of other group members with anyone. It is important that trust be created among members.

Appendix 2: Interview Questionnaire

Name: ____________________________________ Grade: __________________________

1. How long have your parents been separated or divorced?

2. Who currently lives in your house? How many siblings do you have?

3. What’s your favorite subject?

4. Do you have any pets? If so, what and what is its name(s)?

5. What is something fun that you like to do?

6. Tell me something that makes you special.

7. Who is a person whom you respect and why?

8. Is there anything else you would like to share that would help the group get to know you better? If yes, please explain.
Appendix 3: Belief Statements
(Adapted from *Divorce Happens to the Nicest Kids*, by Michael S. Prokop)

Place a + mark beside every statement that you believe to be true or had once believed to be true.

___ 1. I am the cause of the divorce/separation.

___ 2. Parents who get a divorce/separation don’t love their children.

___ 3. I will be abandoned and no one will take care of me after the divorce/separation.

___ 4. I think that divorce/separation ruins or destroys the family.

___ 5. Children cannot be happy living with one parent.

___ 6. Divorce/separation only happens to a few bad kids.

___ 7. If I do not tell my feelings or thoughts to anyone, they will just go away. The problem will just disappear or vanish.

___ 8. After the divorce/separation there is a good chance that my parents will reunite, remarry each other, and live together again as a family with me.

___ 9. There is something wrong with me because I am confused and have had many different feelings before, during, and/or after the divorce/separation.

___ 10. I can solve my parents’ problems and save my parents’ marriage.

___ 11. After the divorce/separation the children have to become “grown up” and take the place of the “missing” parent.

___ 12. When children live with one parent it means they are “taking sides” and don’t love the “missing” parent.

___ 13. Children who experience divorce/separation cannot do well in school.

___ 14. If I see or were to see a counselor or psychologist, it means that I am crazy.
Appendix 4: Dealing with Divorce Sentence Completion

1. Things that are different for me at home because of the divorce/separation are:

------------------------------------------------------------------

------------------------------------------------------------------

------------------------------------------------------------------

2. The most difficult thing about the divorce/separation for me is:

------------------------------------------------------------------

------------------------------------------------------------------

------------------------------------------------------------------

3. What I like most about my home is:

------------------------------------------------------------------

------------------------------------------------------------------

------------------------------------------------------------------

4. I am lucky that:

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------------------------------------------------------------------

------------------------------------------------------------------

5. I am looking forward to:

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------------------------------------------------------------------

------------------------------------------------------------------

6. I really enjoy:

------------------------------------------------------------------

------------------------------------------------------------------

------------------------------------------------------------------
Appendix 5: Group Evaluation Form for Divorce/Separation

1. We talked about things that interested me: a lot ____ some ____ not much ____.

2. I participated in the group: a lot ____ some ____ not much ____.

3. The group was: very helpful to me ____ somewhat helpful to me____
   only a little helpful to me ____ not very helpful to me ____.

4. What activity did you like the most? Please explain.

5. What activity did you like the least? Please explain.

6. What were some benefits you received from the group sessions?

7. Name one thing you have done in this group that makes you proud.

8. Did you learn from any other member’s experiences how to cope with problems arising from
   the divorce/separation of your parents? Explain.

9. What are some changes you would suggest for future group sessions?

10. Would you suggest that your friends attend a similar group? ____________
Appendix 6: Bulletin Board

DEBUNK THE MYTHS
OF
DIVORCE AND SEPARATION

- Parents who get a divorce don’t love their children
- Children cannot be happy living with one parent
- I can solve my parents’ problems and save their marriage
- I am the cause of my parent’s divorce
- Divorce ruins the family
- Kids who experience divorce cannot do well in school

If you believe any of these statements, then maybe you should join the *Group*

*Come to the Guidance Office for more information.
Annotated Bibliography


This article presents a study which looked at the impact both divorce and remarriage had on high school seniors. The study found that adolescents that came from intact families did better in school than those that dealt with parental separation. In addition to the study, the article also provides background information and statistical information about adolescents who face divorce.


Perhaps the utmost value that can be attained from this article is the article’s declaration on what additional steps need to be taken in the researching of divorce. Or in other words, this article spells out missing links in divorce research and provides a roadmap for future studies. The article also provides useful information on intervention and partner violence that was useful in studying the effects of divorce on school-aged children.


This is one of the few articles one may come across during their researching of divorce’s effect on school-aged children that actually observes the predisruption in addition to the postdisruption children of divorce and separation face. The study found that youth exhibit high levels of externalizing behavior problems compared to children of intact homes. The article also supplies its readers with useful information on the different emotions that children of divorce are faced with as a result of the disassembled home.


This article presents basic statistical information attributed to the adverse affect of divorce. The article also presents a brief study that reveals that parents and children that attend classes on coping with divorce are more likely to have fewer adjustment problems in the future. In addition, the article offers parental advice for being a better parent in spite of the separation of the family.

This article begins with statistical information that unveils just how common divorce is in the United States. However, the subjects of the article admit that just because divorce is commonplace doesn’t make the effects any less painful. The article goes on to elaborate on just how painful divorce can be on both the parents and youth.


This text provides its reader with general information about divorce. The majority of the text contains a cartoon story about a family struggling with divorce. The story illustrates a number of the feelings and issues that are common with parental separation and divorce. Perhaps a more useful portion of this book lists a number of false beliefs that children have about divorce. The text then lists true beliefs to contradict the false beliefs.