

**Support Systems and Coping Strategies used by
South African Children of Divorce**

by

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Declaration

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Date: 3 March 2009

ABSTRACT

Divorce is a stressful experience for individuals, especially children, who are still in the school age or adolescent development phase. It is often associated with loss, such as the loss of a parent in the home, and in some cases loss of financial stability.

The primary aim of this study was to determine what support systems and coping strategies South African children of divorce make use of. The secondary aims were to investigate whether there are any age or gender differences with regard to coping strategies as well as support systems, and to investigate which support systems are perceived to be helpful and why certain support systems are not utilized.

The study made use of a cross-sectional design and a sample of 41 South African children. Support systems were measured with a semi-structured questionnaire (Support Systems Questionnaire) that was developed based on a previous study conducted by Braude and Francisco-La Grange (1993). Children's use of coping strategies was measured with the Children's Coping Strategies Checklist – 3rd Revision (CCSC-R3).

Results indicate that children make use of *avoidance coping strategies* most often, followed by *active coping strategies* and *support coping strategies*. The majority of the children named the mother as the most helpful source of support after the divorce.

Findings show certain age and gender differences in the support systems used by the children. Older children (13- to-17-year-old) were more likely to speak to adults other than their parents about the divorce than younger children (8- to- 12-year-old). Girls were more likely than boys to confide in their friends, psychologists and adults other than their parents about the divorce.

There were no age or gender differences regarding the three main coping strategies used by the children (*active coping*, *avoidant coping* and *support coping*). There were, however, differences regarding the more specific coping strategies. Younger children were more likely than older children to use *wishful thinking* as a coping strategy. They also made more use of parents for *support for problem solving* and *support for*

feelings than did adolescents. All of the children in the sample made some effort to cope with their problems and had some form of support system.

OPSOMMING

Egskeiding is 'n stresvolle ervaring vir individue, veral vir die kinders wat steeds in die skool-ouderdom of adolessente ontwikkelingsfase is. Dit word dikwels geassosieer met verliese, soos die verlies van 'n ouer in die huis, en in sommige gevalle verlies van finansiële stabiliteit.

Die primêre doel van hierdie studie was om te bepaal van watter ondersteuningsisteme en hanteringstrategieë Suid-Afrikaanse kinders wat deur egskeiding geraak is gebruik maak. Die sekondêre doelstellings was om te ondersoek of daar enige ouderdoms- of geslagsverskille bestaan wat betref die gebruik van hanteringstrategieë sowel as ondersteuningsisteme, en om te ondersoek watter ondersteuningsisteme beskou word as waardevol en waarom sekere ondersteuningsisteme nie aangewend word nie.

Die studie het gebruikgemaak van 'n dwarsnitontwerp en 'n steekproef van 41 Suid-Afrikaanse kinders. Ondersteuningsisteme is gemeet met 'n semi-gestruktureerde vraelys (die *Support Systems Questionnaire*) wat ontwikkel is aan die hand van 'n vorige studie deur Braude en Francisco–La Grange (1993). Kinders se gebruik van hanteringstrategieë is gemeet met die *Children's Coping Strategies Checklist – 3rd Revision (CCSC-R3)*.

Navorsingsresultate het daarop gedui dat kinders die meeste van vermydinghanteringstrategieë gebruik gemaak het, gevolg deur aktiewe - en ondersteuninghanteringstrategieë. Die meerderheid van die kinders het hul moeder genoem as die mees hulpvolle bron van steun na die egskeiding. Daar is aanduidings van sekere ouderdoms- en geslagsverskille gevind wat betref die ondersteuningsisteme wat deur die kinders gebruik is. Ouer kinders (13-tot-17-jariges) was meer geneig om met ander volwassenes as hul ouers oor die egskeiding te praat, as jonger kinders (8-tot-12-jariges). Meisies was meer geneig as seuns om hul vriende/vriendinne, sielkundiges en ander volwassenes as hul ouers, in hul vertroue omtrent die egskeiding te neem.

Daar was geen ouderdoms- of geslagsverskille wat betref die drie hoofhanteringstrategieë (aktiewe hantering, vermydingshantering en ondersteuningshantering) wat deur die kinders gebruik is nie. Daar was egter verskille wat die meer spesifieke hanteringstrategieë betref. Jonger kinders was meer geneig as ouer kinders om wensdenkery as 'n hanteringstrategie te gebruik. Hulle het ook meer as adolessente van ouers vir ondersteuning vir probleemoplossing and ondersteuning vir gevoelens gebruik gemaak. Al die kinders in die steekproef het 'n poging aangewend om hul probleme te hanteer en het oor die een of ander vorm van ondersteuningsstelsel beskik.

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- A: Tygerberg Ethics Committee: Letter of Approval
- B: Western Cape Education Department: Permission letter
- C: Parents: Information Letter
- D: Consent Form
- E: Children's Support Systems Questionnaire

Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Introductory remarks

Divorce is an experience that causes much stress, disruption and heartache in the lives of those involved. The impact of divorce often begins before the actual separation takes place and may last for years thereafter, therefore the effects of divorce on children are continuous (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Keirnan, 1995; Cohen, 2002; Yongmin & Yuanzhang, 2002). After divorce follows a period of adjustment and reorganization, therefore children need to cope with the aftermath as well as the divorce itself. There are usually many changes that children need to deal with following parental divorce, for instance, the absence of the non-custodial parent, changes in relationships and routines, moving to a new house or a new school, financial difficulties and, eventually, the parents' new partners.

Events such as birthdays, holidays or school events may increase a child's sense of loss (Cohen, 2002), as the family is no longer intact for these occasions. In order to adapt, children need to find ways to cope with the loss and sadness associated with parental divorce. The main research question of the present study is as follows: What are the support systems and coping strategies used by South African children of divorce?

The divorce rate in South Africa is high, and a large number of children experience parental divorce each year. In 2005 there were 32 484 divorces in South Africa, and 32 394 children were involved. This is an increase from 2004, where 31 768 divorces occurred and 29 597 children were involved in parental divorce. The modified crude divorce rate for 2005 was 528.2 per 100 000 married couples (Statistics South Africa, 2005).

It is a painful experience for children when their parents get divorced, and it may have adverse effects on a child – short term as well as long term (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998). It is therefore important for us to understand how children cope with divorce, as well as what support systems they make use of.

Support systems are “Social interconnections which are considered by the individuals to be socially and emotionally supportive” (Braude & Francisco-La Grange, 1993, p.7). Family, friends and other individuals (e.g., teachers, neighbours or psychologists) or organizations (e.g., counselling centres) can all form part of an individual’s support system, and receiving emotional support from others can help an individual to deal with his or her problems more easily (Compas, 1987; Huddleston and Hawkings, 1993; Teja and Stolberg, 1993).

Coping can be defined as the “Constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141).

Some strategies may be beneficial to the individual, such as problem-focused coping (strategies aimed at changing something about the source of stress) and emotion-focused coping (strategies aimed at managing or controlling one’s emotions related to the stressor) (Compas, 1987). Certain coping strategies, however, may be detrimental to the individual, such as avoidance strategies (Armistead, McCombs, Forehand, & Wierson, 1990; Sandler, Tein, & West, 1994).

As children get older, their cognitive skills become more developed. During middle childhood (6– to- 12–year-old) children’s abilities to reason improve, and this may lead to new ways in how they handle situations. During early adolescence, a child’s thinking becomes more reflective (Newman & Newman, 2003) and they are able to make use of more cognitive coping strategies, such as cognitive decision making. It is therefore important to take into account the development of children and adolescents when discussing their coping abilities. The psychosocial developmental theory, as described by Newman and Newman (2003), will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

1.2 Motivation

Divorce has been studied extensively – there are entire academic journals dedicated to this topic, such as *The Journal of Divorce* and *The Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*. There are many international studies on the coping strategies of children of divorce, but to the researcher's knowledge, virtually no South African studies on this specific topic; although there have been recent South African studies about children's coping strategies in domains other than divorce (Burkhardt, 2003; Ebersöhn & Eloff, 2002; Loxton, 2004; Malan, 2003; Moran, 1994). A South African study was conducted by Braude and Francisco-La Grange (1993) investigating what support systems are used by children of divorce. They found that the mother was the strongest source of support for children, and that other informal sources of support were underutilized.

According to a meta-analysis conducted by Amato and Keith (1991), few studies have involved direct comparisons of children of divorce in distinct age groups. The present study aims to investigate age differences as well as gender differences with regard to coping strategies and support systems utilized by children of divorce.

The present study is socially relevant as it is important to further our understanding of how children deal with parental divorce. Research on children's coping is significant because the ways in which children cope with stress may be important mediators of stress on current and future adjustment (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thompson, & Wadsworth, 2001). The support systems used by children may also have an impact on stress and adjustment, as support seeking is a method of coping. The different variables that will be used in the study (i.e., coping strategies, support systems, age groups and gender) may contribute to a richer understanding of the differences in children's coping strategies and support systems.

1.3 Broad aims of the research

The primary aim of this study was to determine which support systems and coping strategies South African children utilize after their parents' divorce. The secondary

aims were to determine (a) whether there are differences between younger and older children of divorce with regard to the support systems and coping strategies used by them, (b) whether there are gender differences in the coping strategies and support systems used by the children, and (c) to identify the support systems that have been regarded as the most helpful, and to determine why certain support systems were *not* utilised.

1.4 Concepts

The following are definitions of the main concepts of the study:

Divorce: The legal dissolution of a marriage. In the eyes of children, “divorce” may not necessarily have a legal meaning, but may be equivalent to the final separation of the parents, for example, when one of the parents moves out the house. Legal proceedings do not usually involve the children directly. For this reason, the time of the divorce may include the final separation of the parents and not solely the legal termination of the marriage.

Coping: “Constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141).

Active Coping: Coping strategies in which an individual focuses on a stressful event in order to change the situation or to think about it more positively (Ayers, Sandler, West, & Roosa, 1996).

Approach Coping: Strategies involving active problem-solving and information gathering (Bonica & Daniel, 2003).

Cognitive Decision Making: “Planning or thinking about ways to solve the problem” (Ayers et al., 1996, p.929).

Direct Problem Solving: “Efforts to change the problem situation by changing the self or by changing the environment” (Ayers et al., 1996, p.929).

Seeking Understanding: “Cognitive efforts to find meaning in a stressful situation or to understand it better” (Ayers et al., 1996, p.929).

Control: “Thinking that whatever happens can be dealt with” (Smith et al., 2006, p.453).

Avoidant Coping: Coping strategies which attempt to control emotion by trying to avoid the problem or stop thinking about it completely (Ayers et al., 1996).

Avoidant Actions: “Efforts to avoid the stressful situation by staying away from it or leaving it” (Ayers et al., 1996, p.930).

Wishful Thinking: “Using wishful thinking or imagining the problem was better” (Smith et al., 2006, p.453).

Support Coping: Support-seeking strategies which make use of other people to assist in seeking solutions to the problem (Ayers et al., 1996).

Problem-Focused Coping: Coping strategies that are directed at managing or altering a stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Emotion-Focused Coping: Coping strategies which attempt to manage or control one’s emotions related to the stressor (Compas, 1987).

Positive Cognitive Restructuring: Thinking about a problem in a more positive way; minimizing the problem or the consequences thereof (Sandler, Tein, & West, 1994).

Primary Appraisal: Judgement of whether or not a situation or event is a threat to the individual (Lahey & Cohen, 2000).

Secondary Appraisal: “Evaluations of personal and social resources available to cope with the event” (Lakey & Cohen, 2000, p.34).

Social Support: “The resources provided by other persons” (Cohen & Syme, 1985, p.4)

Support Systems: “Social interconnections which are considered by the individuals to be socially and emotionally supportive” (Braude & Francisco-La Grange, 1993, p.7).

Ethnicity: “Acceptance of the group mores and practices of one’s culture of origin and the concomitant sense of belonging” (American Psychological Association, 2002, p.9).

Socioeconomic Status: Participants’ socioeconomic status was estimated as a composite score that is calculated according to a formula, and takes into account the breadwinner’s highest level of education as well as the highest occupation in the household. This formula was adapted by Loxton based on a formula initially used by Riordan (Loxton, 2004).

1.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Tygerberg Ethics Committee (see Addendum A) and the study was conducted according to their ethical guidelines. Written informed consent was obtained from parents as well as children before including them in the study. If a child had at any time indicated that he or she wished to stop during the interview, then the interview would have been ended immediately and debriefing would have taken place (none of the children in the present study expressed the need to stop the interview process).

1.6 Organization of the thesis

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the thesis. It discusses the motivation for as well as the broad aims of the study, distinguishing between primary aims and secondary aims. The operational definitions of the concepts are provided, the ethical considerations are discussed, and the organisation of the thesis is laid out.

Chapter 2 deals with the theoretical principles of the study. It discusses the psychosocial development theory (Newman & Newman, 2003) and how it ties in with the present study. It describes the four-dimensional model of coping which relates to the Children's Coping Strategies Checklist (Ayers, Sandler, West & Roosa, 1996) and discusses the stress and coping perspective of social support and support systems.

Chapter 3 overviews the relevant literature, which includes studies about coping, divorce and support systems. Gender and age differences regarding coping strategies are explored.

In **Chapter 4** the research problems are stated in more detail, distinguishing between primary aims and secondary aims.

Chapter 5 provides a description of the methodology used in the study. This includes a discussion of the research design, participants, measuring instruments, procedure and statistical techniques used.

In **Chapter 6** the results of the study are reported. Gender and age differences are explored with regard to both coping strategies and support systems.

Chapter 7 entails a discussion of the results and how they relate to the findings of previous international as well as South African research studies.

Chapter 8 consists of a summary of the findings, recommendations for future research and a critical overview of the study.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Principals

There are two theories that are relevant to the present study. The first is the psychosocial developmental theory as described by Newman & Newman (2003) and the second is the four-dimensional model of coping developed by Ayers, Sandler, West, and Roosa (1996).

2.1 Developmental theory

When investigating the effects that divorce has on children of different ages, a developmental perspective should be applied in order to obtain a theoretical foundation for prevention or intervention (Muir, 1977). Studies suggest that there are differences in the ways that younger and older children cope with stressful situations (Curry & Russ, 1985; Lynch, Kashikar-Zuck, Goldschneider, & Jones, 2007; Wertlieb, Weigel, & Feldstein, 1987) and that cognitive development plays an important role in the development of coping skills (Ryan, 1989).

According to Newman & Newman (2003), there are four organizing concepts that form psychosocial theory: *stages of development*; *developmental tasks*; *the psychosocial crisis* and *the process of coping*. The psychosocial stages, as described by Erikson (1982), are the following:

1. Infancy (birth to 2 years)
2. Toddlerhood (2 – 4 years)
3. Early school age (5 – 7 years)
4. Middle school age (8 – 12 years)
5. Early adolescence (13 – 17 years)
6. Late adolescence (18 – 22 years)
7. Early adulthood (23 – 30 years)
8. Middle adulthood (31 – 50 years)
9. Later adulthood (51 years and older)

Each psychosocial stage has certain developmental tasks associated with it. These tasks are a set of skills and competences that the individual attains as he achieves

mastery over his environment. Mastering tasks in the later stages of development may depend on successful mastery of earlier tasks.

There are certain phases in a psychosocial stage that are sensitive periods for learning developmental tasks. These periods are phases when a person is most ready to attain a new ability, and if an individual does not learn that ability during the sensitive period it may be more difficult to learn it later. Therefore, if something hinders a person's acquisition of a task during the period in which they should attain it, they may struggle to acquire that task later.

The stages of development that are relevant to the present study are *middle school age* and *early adolescence*. During middle school age a child's peers play a significant role in his or her behaviour and decisions. There is a need for approval amongst peers, and children learn the social norms for acceptance and rejection and act accordingly, as there is pressure toward conformity. People tend to experience societal demands as expectations as to how to behave. For instance, boys often learn that "boys don't cry" and that they should be tough and strong. Therefore many boys, especially the older ones, might not show emotion or use crying as a way to cope with stressors.

The developmental tasks of middle school age are: *social cooperation; self-evaluation; skill learning* and *team play*. Children develop an increasing appreciation of the different points of view of their peers. They become more sensitive to social norms and experience intimacy with a same-sex peer. Middle childhood is a period where self-evaluation is approached from a framework of self-confidence or self-doubt, and the peer group becomes a source of criticism and approval. Children learn about team play and competition. Close dyadic relationships are formed, and the best friend(s) start playing a bigger role in the child's support system. Support systems are important when it comes to coping with stressors, and friends form a significant part of the support system, since children can often tell them things that they might not want to disclose to their parents.

According to Erikson (1982), the psychosocial crisis of middle childhood is *industry versus inferiority*. This relates to children's expectations about the possibility of success. Industry relates to children's eagerness to develop skills and contribute to the

social community, whilst inferiority is related to feelings of inadequacy due to skills not being mastered to a satisfactory level. Education plays an important role in this psychosocial crisis, as it aids children in developing various skills.

Early adolescence is a period when children start becoming increasingly independent from their parents and they spend more time away from home. They establish their own tastes and make their own decisions, and close friends become a very important source of social support.

The developmental tasks of early adolescence are: *physical maturation; formal operations; membership in the peer group and heterosexual relationships.*

Adolescence is accompanied by rapid physical change; adolescents must adjust to a changing body image, which can be rather awkward for them. With the task of formal operations an adolescent's thinking becomes more abstract and is directed by more logical principles than his or her own perceptions and experiences. Adolescents can anticipate the consequences of their actions and think about how things may change in the future.

During early adolescence the peer group is more structured. Certain peer groups include or exclude members according to certain standards and young adolescents are susceptible to peer pressure. Heterosexual relationships are formed and flirting and dating occurs, as well as sexual relations amongst some adolescents.

The psychosocial crisis of early adolescence is *group identity versus alienation.* Adolescents spend more time with peers and there is pressure to identify and belong to a type of group of peers. Self evaluation occurs within the context of the group, and if an adolescent does not "belong" to a group, he or she may feel alienated. The resolution of the crisis is group pressure – an adolescent should find a group that gives him or her a sense of belonging.

In middle childhood and adolescence, friends play an increasingly important role in the child's support system, though ideally children should still retain close relationships with their parents and other family members, as family is also an important source of support during difficult times.

2.2 The Coping Model

Before an individual attempts to cope with a situation, he or she appraises it according to whether or not the situation is a threat (primary appraisal) and whether or not the individual has sufficient personal and social resources to cope with the situation (secondary appraisal) (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Various people may differ with regard to the coping strategies that they use, and there are various types of coping strategies available.

The four-dimensional model of coping developed by Ayers et al. (1996) consists of the following four dimensions: active coping strategies, distraction strategies, avoidance strategies and support-seeking strategies. These coping dimensions contain 10 sub-categories. The four dimensions, as well as the more specific coping strategy components, will be discussed in the section that follows.

The first dimension is active coping, which refers to strategies in which an individual focuses on the stressful event in order to change the situation or to think about it more positively. Active coping has two components. The first component, *problem-focused coping*, consists of coping strategies that are directed at managing or altering a stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and includes the following coping categories: *cognitive decision making, direct problem solving, and seeking understanding*.

The second component of active coping is *positive cognitive restructuring*, which involves the individual thinking about problems in a more positive way or minimizing the problems or its consequences (Sandler et al., 1994). This includes *control, optimism, and positivity*. Positive cognitive restructuring, avoidance and emotional expression (e.g., crying) are types of emotion-focused coping (strategies aimed at managing or controlling one's emotions related to the stressor) (Compas, 1987).

The second coping dimension involves distraction strategies. This refers to when individuals use another activity or stimulus to distract themselves from thinking about or dealing with the problem. This includes *physical release of emotions and distracting actions*.

Thirdly, avoidance strategies attempt to control emotion by trying to avoid the problem or stop thinking about it completely, and include *avoidant actions* and *cognitive avoidance*. Finally, support-seeking strategies refer to making use of other people to either assist in seeking solutions to the problem (*problem-focused support*) or to listen to feelings and provide understanding to the individual (*emotion-focused support*) (Ayers et al., 1996).

2.3 Social support: The stress and coping perspective

Social support refers to “the resources provided by others” (Cohen & Syme, 1985, p.4). According to House and Kahn (1985), there are four main types of social support: informational, instrumental, emotional, and appraisal.

Informational support is information that a supportive individual provides to another during stressful times. *Instrumental support* refers to tangible aid or substantial goods provided to an individual. *Emotional support* refers to love, trust, caring and empathy which is provided. *Appraisal support* is communicated information which aids self-evaluation rather than problem-solving (House, 1981).

Support systems can be defined as “social interconnections which are considered by the individuals to be socially and emotionally supportive” (Braude & Francisco-La Grange, 1993, p.7).

According to the stress and coping perspective, social support is beneficial as it “reduces the effects of stressful life events on health (i.e., acts as a stress buffer) through either the supportive actions of others (e.g., advice, reassurance) or the belief that support is available” (Lakey & Cohen, 2000, p.30). Lakey and Cohen maintain that advice, reassurance and other supportive actions may improve coping, and even the perception that support is available may lead to more positive appraisal of threatening situations (i.e., the situation is perceived to be less stressful).

2.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter, the three theories relevant to the present study were discussed. The first is the psychosocial theory of development as described by Newman and Newman (2003), which explains the various developmental tasks of individuals in different life stages. The second theory is the four-dimensional coping model of Ayers et al. (1996). This theory describes the coping scales and subscales that are related to the Children's Coping Strategy Checklist. Lastly, the concept of social support and the stress and coping perspective were discussed.

In chapter 3 the relevant psychological literature will be reviewed.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Children of divorce

Divorce has been studied extensively over the years, as it brings much pain and difficulty to the individuals involved. Some post-divorce stressors include inter-parental conflict, the non-custodial parent moving away, parental distress, and loss of material possessions (Wolchick, Wilcox, Tein, & Sandler, 2000).

Children often do not understand why their parents no longer want to be together. They are especially vulnerable to negative effects of divorce, and they are sometimes exposed to divorce-related stressors such as marital conflict, custody battles, financial difficulty, and changing schools or moving. Bowyer (2007) found that 61% of children of divorce had to move house or change schools after their parents separated. Divorce is in many cases associated with losses, such as having one parent in the home instead of two. Many South African children perceived their life after parental divorce to be more difficult than it was before the divorce. (Braude & Francisco-La Grange, 1993).

The majority of South African children reported that the reason that their lives are more difficult after divorce is that they miss their father (Braude & Francisco-La Grange, 1993), who is usually the non-custodial parent. The lack of contact between the child and the non-custodial parent was a problem expressed by many children; one that they must learn to cope with (Drapeau, Samson, & Saint-Jacques, 1999). It is important for children to have emotional support from their parents following divorce, and if there is a lack of contact between the child and the non-custodial parent, it may result in a lack of emotional support from that parent. It may also be difficult for parents to provide adequate emotional support for their child when they are focused on their own stress and heartache.

According to Simons (1996), children of divorce were at least twice as likely as children of intact families to exhibit problems such as delinquency, early sexual intercourse, emotional distress, and academic difficulties. Radovanovic (1993) found

that inter-parental aggression was significantly associated with childhood adjustment problems, even if the parents were separated. She also maintained that children who were able to think flexibly about stressors and could interpret them in a positive manner tended to be better adjusted than those who were unable to do so.

Many studies have found that children of divorce have lower levels of well-being than children of intact homes (Amato & Keith, 1991). Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999) maintained that divorce may have aggravated problems in children who were already troubled or poorly adjusted. Children have various reactions when they realise that their parents are going to get divorced. They may feel angry, sad, guilty confused or frustrated, and may even feel some resentment toward their parents (Mthombeni, 1993). According to a study conducted by Kurtz (1996), as children's negative beliefs and attitudes relating to the divorce increased, the probability of behaviour problems increased. Examples of these negative beliefs are self-blame and the hope of reconciliation of the parents. The results of the study also suggest that children who experienced greater self-efficacy (i.e., they were confident that they could perform the behaviours that were demanded in the situation [Newman & Newman, 2003]) may have required the use of coping strategies less often.

3.2 Support systems

There have been various studies which focused on the characteristics of resilient children, that is, the "protective factors" that contribute towards resiliency in stressful situations (e.g., Garmezy, 1985; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Lin, Sandler, Ayers, Wolchik & Luecken, 2004; Smith & Prior, 1995; Spencer, 1986). One of the characteristics of resilient children was the presence of a supportive family environment. This included parental warmth, cohesiveness, closeness, order and organisation. Another characteristic that helped children during stressful times was a having a supportive individual in the environment that could provide the child with a support system that would promote coping (Compas, 1987).

Holahan, Valentiner, and Moos (1995) maintained that adolescents with high parental support were less distressed and better adjusted than those with low parental support.

Children from divorced families, however, tended to experience more dysfunctional support systems than children from intact families (Parish, 1990).

Studies have found that children's adjustment to divorce was positively related to the degree of perceived support and the size of their social support network, but adjustment was not related to a specific area or source of support (Kurdek, 1998; Teja & Stolberg, 1993).

It is important that support systems are available to the individual in times of need. According to Huddleston and Hawkings (1993), the family and friends of adults who divorce usually provided significant help, even when they did not agree with or approve of the circumstances. The more time that the children spent with supportive people (other than their parents) and the more consistent the support, the fewer the internalising and externalising problems (Appleyard, Egeland, & Sroufe, 2007).

The support systems of children may help them to deal with parental divorce, especially if they have enough people who are there for them and with whom they can talk about issues relating to the divorce. According to Teja and Stolberg (1993), strongly perceived support by children of divorce was related to low anxiety, fewer post-divorce problems, less worrying, and awareness that the child cannot alter the divorce (support systems may include family members, friends, members of the community, the school, professional helpers and religious leaders).

Wolchick et al. (2000) maintained that it was important for children to have a strong sense of maternal caring and concern, as it may lead to more support seeking from the mother. When children of divorce experienced acceptance and consistency of discipline from their mothers, it acted as a buffer for the negative effects of divorce stressors on children's adjustment.

Younger children's support systems consist mainly of their parents, parental figures and close family members until they reach school age, where their support systems expand (Appleyard et al., 2007). Through school, children interact more with their peers and make friends, and these friendships also form part of their support systems.

Noack, Krettek & Walper (2001) maintained that adolescents' relationships with their peers were influenced only to a small extent by parental separation, and there were no long-term effects on peer relations. According to Guttman (1993), adolescents with divorced parents had a more fragile best-friend relationship than adolescents in intact families, and they were less inclined to confide in them. This may be due to the sensitive nature of the divorce.

In a South African study, Braude and Francisco-La Grange (1993) found that there was a lack of communication between parents and children, that children were ill prepared for the divorce (i.e., the divorce surprised them), and that the strongest source of support to the children was the custodial mother. Other sources of support (such as friends, extended family, and professional helpers) were found to be underutilised by the children. In contrast, Kurdek (1988) found that children mentioned friends most often as their main source of support, whilst mothers rated themselves and their children's friends as the most frequent source of support.

A South African study found that mothers spent more time than fathers explaining their divorce to children, and that a large majority of children found it hard to talk about their problems as a result of the divorce (Bosman, 1981). When children did talk to a psychologist or social worker about their feelings about divorce, many found it to be helpful (Braude & Francisco-La Grange, 1993); therefore, if children struggle to talk about their problems it may prevent them from getting valuable support. It is important for children to have adult support during times of stress, but when parents get divorced it is usually at a time when they are least able to give this support, as they are dealing with their own losses, frustrations and problems as well.

At times a child's relationship with one or both of his or her parents became strained or deteriorated somewhat following divorce, especially if the child blamed a parent for the divorce or had very little contact with him or her. The greater the marital conflict before divorce, the more problematic the parent-child relationship after parental separation. If a child's relationship with his or her mother or father deteriorated, he or she may have more difficulty adjusting to the divorce and may also have had a poorer coping ability (Tschann, Johnston, Kline & Wallerstein, 1989).

It is important for children to have the support of their family during divorce and its aftermath. Holahan and Moos (1987) maintained that family support was positively related to active coping and was associated with less avoidance coping. The presence of loving grandparents and siblings may have absorbed some of the shock that came with stressful life experiences (Herbert, 1996).

Children do not always make use of all their available support systems. Sometimes children from disrupted families spent less time with their immediate family members; which means that there were fewer opportunities for them to obtain support from their family members. However, these children reported having a higher satisfaction with the quantity of support that they received from their family members than do children from intact families (Drapeau & Bouchard, 1993).

Children may seek support from other adults outside the family, like teachers or family friends. According to Drapeau and Bouchard (1993), children from disrupted families identified teachers and adult friends as giving support more often than do children from intact families. Therefore it appears that adults outside of the family are often available as potential sources of support for children of divorce.

3.3 Social support and age

Peer relationships become increasingly important to children from the age of about 12 years, with a decreasing importance of family relationships. Peer relationships give children the chance for full differentiation from their parents (Teja & Stolberg, 1993), and children can usually talk to their friends about issues that they would not easily share with their parents.

According to Piko (2001), children sought support from others less often as they get older. Adolescents sometimes tended to distance themselves from their parents as they became more independent, and they may have coped with their problems in this way – by becoming more involved in their own plans and their future and less involved with their parents' lives (Teyber, 1992).

3.4 Social support and gender

Parish (1990) maintained that boys may have been more at risk due to greater support system failure than girls. Girls from disrupted families tended to have more people in their social network than girls from intact families (Drapeau & Bouchard, 1993). Studies have shown that girls made use of social support and emotional behaviours as a method of coping more often than boys (Hampel, 2007; Hampel & Petermann, 2005; Ryan, 1989). Ryan (1989) maintained that the reasons boys used social support less often than girls may be due to parental expectations, societal influences and genetic disposition. When it comes to coping, males were traditionally encouraged to use less emotionally focused techniques. Girls would more frequently use crying and talking to a friend as a method of coping (Copeland & Hess, 1995).

According to Felson and Zielinski (1989), parental support affected the self-esteem of children, but the self-esteem of the children also affected how much support is received by the parents (according to children's perceptions). Parental support tended to have a larger effect on the self-esteem of girls than that of boys.

3.5 Children's coping strategies

There have been several international studies investigating coping in children. Curry and Russ (1985) found that most children made an effort to cope in a stressful situation, and that the average child used several different types of coping. Successful coping was beneficial to a child, as it helped them to deal with stressful situations and problems in their home environment, and could lead to feelings of control and mastery (Louw, van Ede, & Ferns, 1998).

Certain coping strategies may be beneficial to use, whilst others may actually be detrimental or ineffective. For example, problem-focused coping is related to less adjustment problems (Hampel & Petermann, 2006) and active coping is associated with positive adaptation (Herman-Stahl, Stemmler, & Petersen, 1995). Avoidant coping, on the other hand, is considered to be a negative coping strategy which aggravates the effects of stress, increases symptoms of depression and is associated with physical ailments and psychological problems such as anger, tension and

confusion (Herman-Stahl et al., 1995; Lengua & Long, 2002; Seiffge-Krenke, & Klessinger, 2000; Wilson, Pritchard & Revalee, 2005).

According to Sandler et al. (1994), stress may lead to more frequent use of avoidance strategies, which would then in turn lead to more symptoms of stress. However, the effects of avoidant coping may be reduced when adolescents combine approach coping strategies and avoidant coping strategies (Bonica & Daniel, 2003). The negative effects of avoidance coping can also be neutralised with the combined use of active cognitive strategies or active behavioural coping.

3.6 Age differences with regard to coping

The way in which children, adolescents and adults cope with stressors may change at different stages of life (Piko, 2001), which implies that there may be age differences with regard to coping strategies. Children's coping styles may differ according to what the stressful situation is that they are being faced with, and also according to the age of the child (Band & Weisz, 1988). According to Chase-Lansdale et al. (1995), if divorce occurs when a child is 11- to- 16- years old it was more detrimental than when they were younger (7- to- 11- year- old). Children as young as six years old were aware of stress and coping in their lives and could report the conditions and events that they found stressful, as well as their efforts to cope with these situations (Band & Weisz, 1988).

Curry and Russ (1985) maintained that older children used more cognitive coping strategies and less behavioural coping strategies. Wertlieb, Weigel, and Feldstein (1987) found that emotion-management types of coping were more prevalent among the older children in their sample (9- to- 11- year- old) than the younger children (6- to- 8-year-old). They maintain that older children had increasing capacities for cognitive mediational control, and thus had a greater availability of emotion-management strategies. Hampel (2007), however, found that 12- to- 13-year-old children used less problem and emotion-focused coping strategies and more passive avoidance and aggression than younger children.

Armistead et al. (1990) found that young adolescents used an active-cognitive method of coping most often and an avoidance method the least. According to Drapeau, Samson, and Saint-Jacques (1999), children between the ages of 8 and 13 years first tried to solve problems directly, and after that the most frequently used coping strategies were avoidance and emotional expression. Sandler, Tein, and West (1994) maintained that avoidance may have prevented children from actively working to change the problem situation or cognitively focusing on the event in order to think about it in a more positive, less distressing way. Avoiding a problem is thus an ineffective way to cope adequately.

3.7 Gender differences with regard to coping

Many studies suggested that divorce has had more negative consequences for boys than for girls, and that boys have had more difficulty adjusting socially after parental divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991). Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999) maintained that gender differences were more likely to occur in younger children than in older children, and they further suggested that the vulnerability factors influencing a child's response to divorce included the individual characteristics of the child, the quality of the marital relationship, parenting, and co-parenting.

According to Teyber (1992), girls were more likely than boys to function well and get along with their mothers, while boys are more likely to be aggressive, uncooperative and in conflict with their mothers. One of the problems boys experienced after divorce was that they usually lost their same-sex identification figure in the home, as the mother usually gets custody.

Copeland and Hess (1995) found that boys were more likely than girls to use avoidance, physical diversions and passive diversions to cope with their problems. Girls tended to use coping strategies that included self-reliance and positive imagery. According to a study conducted by Wilson, Pritchard and Revalee (2005), adolescent girls were more likely to use emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies, as well as avoidance. Armistead et al. (1990) found that the more adolescent girls relied on avoidance as a coping strategy, the more impaired their functioning was.

This suggests that using avoidance as a coping strategy may be more detrimental to girls than to boys.

3.8 Support, coping and ethnicity

In America, Black families were more inclined to be involved with their extended families than White families, and their households were twice as likely to include a grandparent or other relative (Cherlin, 1998). Thus, the extended family is often an available source of support for children in Black families. Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999) conducted a review which indicated that the few studies available about cultural differences in divorce show differences in family functioning and child adjustment.

Most studies of divorce (international as well as South African) are based on White, middle-class samples. There is a need for research where ethnic factors are considered (Amato & Keith, 1991; Braude & Franciso-La Grange, 1993; Greene, Anderson, Hetherington, Forgatch, & DeGamo, 2003; Simons, 1996), especially in a culturally diverse country such as South Africa. Children's understanding of the world and their place in it is affected by variables such as ethnicity and the culture in which they were brought up (Loxton, 2004).

3.9 Support, coping and socio-economic status

After divorce, single parents may experience a change in their socioeconomic status. Family economic pressure (i.e., not simply low income but also financial obligations and requirements) increases psychological distress within a family and may disrupt parenting practices (Simons, 1996). Some children become aware of or concerned about declines in their family's socioeconomic status (Drapeau et al., 1999). It may be more difficult for children of lower socioeconomic status to utilise formal support systems such as medical doctors and psychologists, due to the costs involved. In conclusion, it is evident that divorce often has detrimental effects on children. Children have different ways of dealing with divorce; some experience more negative

effects or problems than others, and some children cope more successfully than others. It is important to explore the ways in which children deal with parental divorce and the various differences between these children, as those children who cannot cope with parental divorce adequately are more vulnerable and may experience more negative effects than those with adequate coping strategies and support systems.

Compas (1987) maintained that there may be adverse effects of social support. Children may have greater vulnerability to stress in the event of loss of supportive others. They may also experience the effects of stressful events in the lives of members of their support network. Nevertheless, supportive relationships with friends and family and other individuals are resources for coping with stress.

3.10 Chapter summary

This chapter reviewed the relevant psychological literature. There is evidence that there may be age and gender differences in the ways that children cope with divorce.

Chapter 4 describes the primary and secondary aims are laid out.

Chapter 4: Statement of Research Aims

4.1 Primary aims

The primary aim of the study was twofold:

1. To investigate the nature and helpfulness of different support systems used by children of divorce, and to compare it for different age and gender groups.
2. To investigate the frequencies with which different coping strategies are used by children of divorce, and to compare it for the total sample, as well as for the different age and gender groups.

4.2 Secondary aims

The secondary aims of the study were the following:

1. To determine why certain support systems were not used.
2. To investigate children's perceptions of the divorce regarding positive and negative aspects as well as changes that occurred after the divorce.
3. To explore children's own perceptions of how they dealt with the divorce, that is, what they did or thought in order to console themselves.
4. To investigate parents' perceptions regarding changes in children's behaviour or schoolwork.
5. To determine the availability of the non-custodial parent.

4.3 Chapter summary

In this chapter the primary and secondary aims of the present study were laid out.

Chapter 5 describes the methodology of the study, which includes the research design, sampling procedure, measuring instruments, procedure and data analysis.

Chapter 5: Method of Research

5.1 Research design

The study was of an explorative nature. A basic, quantitative, cross-sectional design was used.

5.2 Participants and sampling procedures

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Tygerberg Ethics Committee before recruiting participants (See Addendum A). The participants were recruited from five schools in the Somerset West, Strand and Gordon's Bay areas. Permission was obtained from the Western Cape Education Department (See Addendum B) as well as from headmasters of the schools before contacting the parents of potential participants. Letters were sent to the parents informing them of the study with regard to the aims, procedure and ethical considerations (See Addendum C).

More than 60 parents replied, but only 43 children fit the criteria for the study, as some of the parents had been divorced for too long and some of the children were too young. Exclusion criteria were related to age and time of divorce - children had to be 8 to 17 years of age, and the parents could not have been divorced for longer than seven years. Of the parents whose children fit the criteria, two parents opted not to let their children take part. One parent felt that the divorce was still too fresh and painful, and the other parent felt that the child had finally come to terms with the divorce and so should not rehash any related issues. Written informed consent was obtained from parents and children who took part (See Addendum D).

This study made use of a convenient sample of 41 children aged 8 to 17 years. Ideally one would prefer to include only those children whose parents were divorced fairly recently, the reason being that they would be able to recall events and coping behaviour more adequately. It was a pragmatic decision to choose a cut-off point of 7 years. It should also be kept in mind that coping with parental separation does not

imply coping only with the moment of divorce, but also with the period following divorce. This being said though, it is also important to keep in mind that the ability to recall certain events might have had a more detrimental effect on the younger children.

The final sample consisted of 22 girls (54%) and 19 boys (46%) between the ages of 8 and 17 years. With regard to comparisons between younger and older children, the sample was divided into two age groups: Middle School Age (8 – 12 years) and Early Adolescence (13 – 17 years). The middle school age group consisted of 24 children (11 girls and 13 boys) and the early adolescent group consisted of 17 children (11 girls and 6 boys). The majority of the children in the sample were White (92.7%) whilst the rest were Coloured (7.3%).

5.3 Measuring instruments

5.3.1 Demographic Questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire was given to the custodial parent of each participant in order to gather data such as the child's family composition, custody arrangements, whether or not the child had been to a counsellor or therapist, and parents' perceptions on changes in their child's behaviour or schoolwork. The parent completed the questionnaire while the participant was being interviewed.

5.3.2 Measurement of the Support Systems

A semi-structured questionnaire was developed in order to measure support systems (See Addendum E). This Support Systems Questionnaire (SSQ) is based on children's perceptions of their use of support systems according to a survey type interview schedule used by Braude and Francisco-La Grange (1993) in their study on the support systems of children of divorce (White South African primary school children were used in their study).

The questionnaire was adapted from the outline of the results of the study done by Braude and Francisco-La Grange (1993), as the original questionnaire could not be obtained. The outline of their results describes the questions that were used in the interview schedule. The adapted questionnaire includes additional questions that provide additional information about the children's support systems, such as why certain support systems were not utilised and which were regarded as being helpful. The SSQ is applicable to children and yields results that are relevant and essential to the present study. Some of the questions require the child to choose an answer from a list of options, and some questions are "yes" or "no" answer questions. Other questions are open-ended and children can answer freely.

The questionnaire contains 53 items in all and focuses on the children's perceptions of their use of support systems such as family members, friends, and the school, as well as religious leaders, medical doctors, psychologists, social workers and teachers.

5.3.3 Measurement of the Coping Strategies

The questionnaire that was used for measuring coping is the *Children's Coping Strategies Checklist – 3rd Revision* (CCSC-R3, Program for Prevention Research, 2006). It has been used in previous studies (Ayers et al., 1996; Sandler, Tein, & West, 1994; Weyer & Sandler, 1998), and the latest version of the measure, as well as permission to use it, has been obtained from the director of the Prevention Research Centre of Arizona State University.

The measure is a structured questionnaire which identifies various coping strategies that are used by children during difficult times. It has previously been applied to children aged 8 years and older (Ayers et al., 1996; Sandler et al., 1994; Weyer & Sandler, 1998). The CCSC-R3 measures the frequency of the use of various coping dimensions since a stressful event has occurred; in the case of the present study, the divorce of the child's parents. The questionnaire was applied to the children individually by the researcher, and the children had a copy of the questionnaire in front of them to look at. The researcher

has had previous experience interviewing children for research purposes. The instructions for the CCSC-R3 were as follows:

Sometimes kids have problems or feel upset about things. When this happens, they may do different things to solve the problem or to make themselves feel better. For each statement I read, choose the answer that best describes how often you usually did this to solve your problems or make yourself feel better. There are no right or wrong answers, just indicate how often you usually did each thing in order to solve your problems or make yourself feel better since the divorce (Program for Prevention Research, 1999, p.14)

The questionnaire makes use of a 1-to-4 point Likert type scale: 1 = *never*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often*, and 4 = *most of the time*. The mean scores of this scale were used as an indication of the frequencies with which the different coping strategies were used.

The questionnaire has 56 items in all, and there are three scales: The active coping scale, avoidant coping scale, and support coping scale; and included within these are 12 specific types of coping strategies.

The **active coping scale** has two components: Problem-Focused Coping and Positive Cognitive Restructuring.

(1) Problem-focused coping includes the following coping dimensions:

- Cognitive decision making (example of an item is: “you thought about which things are best to do to handle the problem”)
- Direct problem solving (e.g., “you tried to make things better by changing what you did”)
- Seeking understanding (e.g., “you thought about why it happened”).

(2) Positive cognitive restructuring includes the coping dimensions of:

- Control (e.g., “you told yourself that you could handle this problem”)
- Optimism (e.g., “you told yourself that things would get better”)

- Positivity (e.g., “you tried to notice or think about only the good things in your life”).

The **avoidant coping scale** contains the following items:

- Avoidant actions (e.g., “you avoided it by going to your room”)
- Wishful thinking (e.g., “you daydreamed that everything was okay”)
- Repression (e.g., “you didn’t think about it”).
-

The **support coping scale** consists of items that assess the degree to which children use other people as resources for support, and consists of the following two subscales:

- Support for feelings, which refers to having other people listen to feelings and provide understanding.
- Support for problem-solving, which refers to other people acting as resources in order to assist in finding solutions to the problem situation.

The alpha coefficients for the three scales were .81, .55 and .85 respectively (Weyer & Sandler, 1998).

Two additional questions were added after the items of the CCSC-R3 in order to obtain qualitative information regarding the children’s coping. These questions did not affect the validity or reliability of the CCSC-R3, as they were considered separately from the quantitative questions. The added qualitative questions were the following:

- What did you do and what did you think to deal with the divorce?*
- Do you think there are any good things about the divorce? (If yes, state what)*

5.4 Procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Tygerberg Ethics Committee before commencing research. Permission was also obtained from the Department of Education to recruit participants from five of the schools in the Somerset West, Strand and Gordon’s Bay areas (three primary schools and two high schools). Individual

meetings were arranged with headmasters, and afterward the parents of children who were suitable for the sample were contacted.

Informed consent was obtained from the parents of potential participants, as well as from the children themselves. A letter was given to them describing the nature, procedure and aims of the study, and results of the study were made available to parents who were interested. Parents and children were assured that any information given by them would be strictly confidential, and the child would remain anonymous in the study.

A timetable for interviews was set up according to the availability of participants, and the researcher travelled to their home (or another venue preferred by the participant's parent) in order to conduct an individual interview. In certain cases parents opted to rather have the interview at the school. Whether the interview was held at the child's home or at the school, it ensured that the child was interviewed in a venue that was comfortable and familiar to them.

During individual interviews, one of the parents of each participant (i.e., the custodial parent) was given a demographic questionnaire in order to obtain biographic and demographic information, such as their custody arrangement and family composition. The researcher briefly explained the procedure to the parent, and rapport was established with the child before commencing the interview.

The Children's Coping Strategies Checklist (CCSC-R3) was implemented first. Parents were allowed to sit in for the first few questions of the CCSC-R3 if they or the child wanted to do so, as it made the parent and/or child more comfortable with the procedure. The parent was then asked to move to another room and was not allowed to sit in for the rest of the interview as it may affect the child's responses. The Support System Questionnaire (SSQ) was implemented after the CCSC-R3. Answers to both questionnaires were completed by the interviewer on behalf of the child. The child had a copy of each questionnaire in front of him or her to look at during the interview.

Debriefing took place after each individual interview, which involved a pleasant activity such as playing a game, telling a story, or conversing about a positive subject

(activities depended on the age of the child, e.g. younger children may enjoy games whilst adolescents may rather have a conversation). If at any point during the interview a child felt uncomfortable and wished to stop, the interview would have been ended immediately and debriefing would have taken place. However, none of the children expressed the wish to terminate the interview. If results indicated that a child was in need, that is, the child had ineffective coping strategies and/or lack of support systems, help was provided for that child (he or she was referred to a counsellor). The supervisor of the study is a clinical psychologist, and there were two registered psychologists specialising in children who advised the researcher with regard to the project.

5.5 Data analysis

Statistica was used to analyse the data. The statistical analyses were done by a professional statistician. Age and gender differences were investigated with a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for the Children's Coping Strategies Checklist, and with a Chi-square test for the Support Systems Questionnaire.

5.6 Chapter summary

This chapter described the research methodology of the study. This includes the research design, the participants, the measuring instruments and the research procedure. Chapter 6 reports on the results of the present study.

Chapter 6: Results

6.1 Results of the demographic questionnaire

6.1.1 Description of the sample

The sample consisted of 22 (54%) girls and 19 (46%) boys. The gender distribution of the participants is illustrated in Figure 6.1. There were 24 (58.5%) younger children (Middle School Age), that is, 11 girls and 13 boys, and 17 (41.5%) older children (Early Adolescence), consisting of 11 girls and 6 boys. Three (7.3%) of the participants were Coloured South African children, whilst 38 (92.7%) of the participants were White South African children.

Important note:

When referring to percentages with regard to the results, it is in relation to the total sample (N=41), unless otherwise stated.

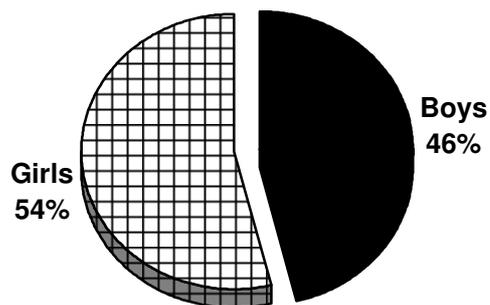


Figure 6.1. Gender distribution of participants.

The age distribution of the participants is illustrated in Figure 6.2.

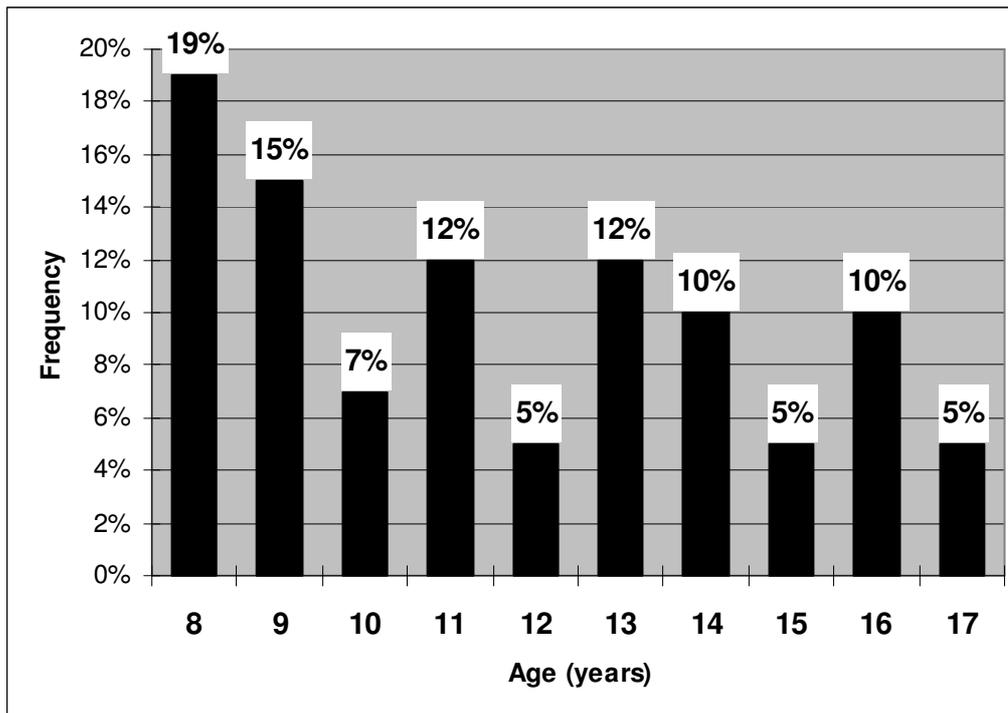


Figure 6.2. Age distribution of participants.

The length of time since the parents' divorce varied between 7 years and a few months. Figure 6.3. illustrates the distribution of the time when the divorce occurred. In most cases, the mother had custody of the children (85.4% of the participants), whilst in other cases the father had custody (4.9%) or parents had joint custody (9.8%). There were two cases where the mother had full custody, but asked the father to raise the children, and there was one case where the mother had custody, but the participant had decided to live with his father instead (i.e., 3 of the participants whose mothers had custody were living with their fathers). The distribution of custody is shown in Figure 6.4.

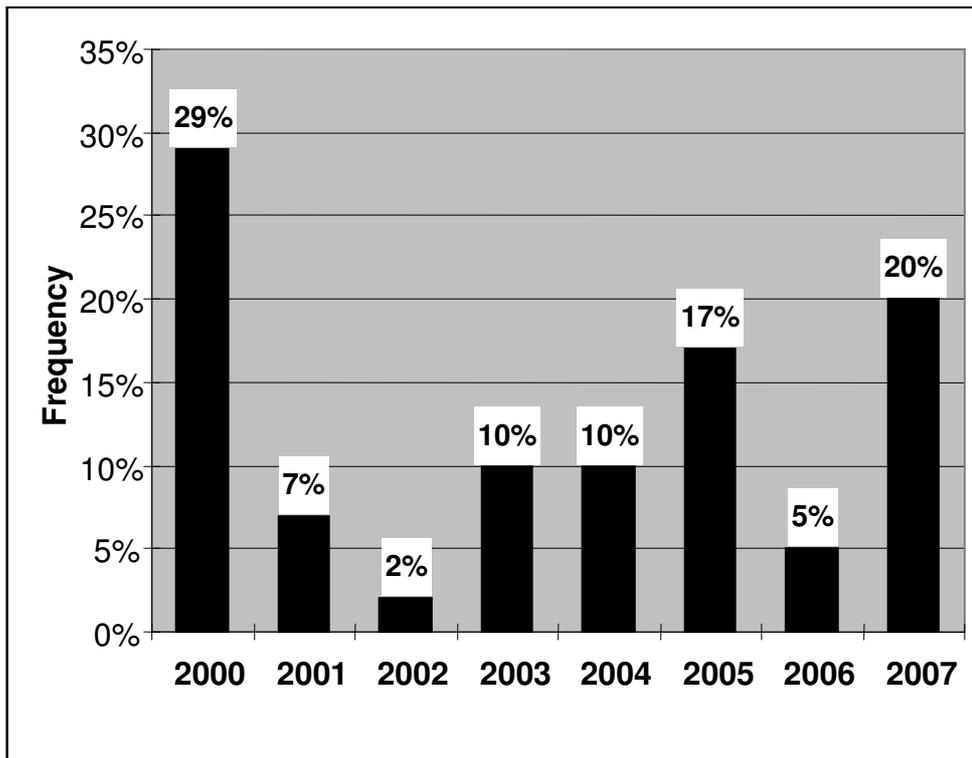


Figure 6.3. Distribution of time spans since divorce occurred.

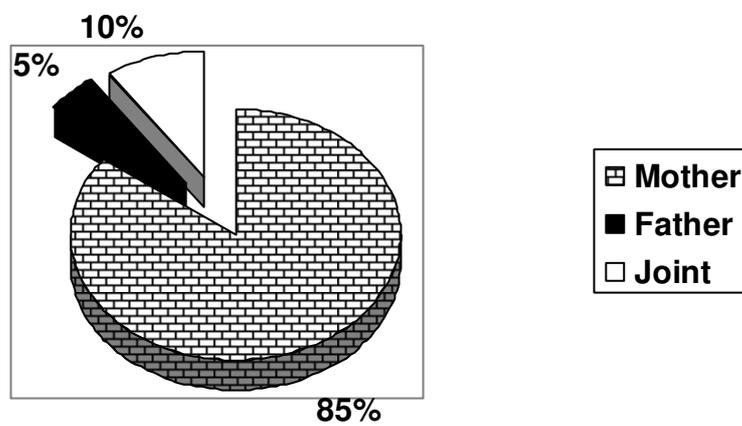


Figure 6.4. Distribution of custody.

6.1.2 Parents' perceptions of changes in children's behaviour and schoolwork

Many of the parents (61% of participants' custodial parents, n = 41) felt that there had been changes in their child's behaviour since the divorce. Parents reported children being more withdrawn, moody, aggressive, anxious and emotional. Some children were more insecure and needed attention or reassurance. In other cases positive changes occurred, where children became stronger and more independent. Only a few (27%) of the parents reported changes in their child's schoolwork. Most reported deterioration in school work and marks, while others reported an improvement.

6.1.3 Availability of the non-custodial parent

Most of the participants (71%) saw the non-custodial parent about zero to two times a week. Figure 6.5. illustrates how often children see the non-custodian per week.

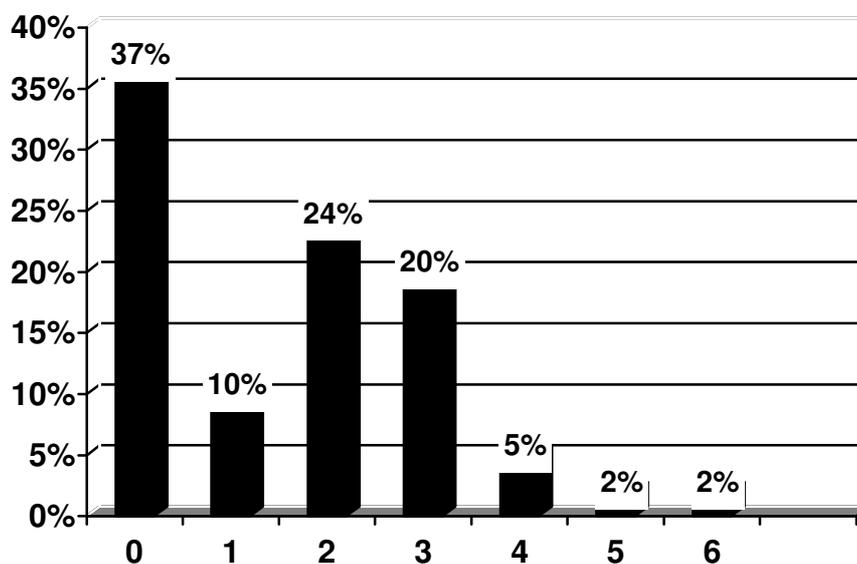


Figure 6.5. Number of times per week that child sees non-custodian.

6.2 Support systems

6.2.1 Sources of support used and judgement of its helpfulness

In order to investigate which confidants were considered by the children to be the most helpful, a frequency distribution was conducted. The results appear in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequency Distribution of Children's use of Confidants and Perceptions of Their Helpfulness (N = 41)

Person confided in	Children who confided in an individual (N = 41)		Children who felt that talking to confidant was helpful	
	<i>n1</i>	(%)	<i>n2</i>	(% of n1)
Mother	31	76	26	84
Siblings	21	51	17	81
Friends	20	49	18	90
Psychologist	18	44	18	78
Father	17	41	15	88
Teacher	12	29	10	83
Grandparents	10	24	10	100
Mother's friends	9	22	9	100
Other adults	8	19	6	74
Church leader	6	15	6	100
Father's friends	3	7	3	100
Doctor	1	2	1	100

Children made use of a variety of confidants, and most children found it to be helpful to talk to a confidant about their feelings about the divorce. The results indicate that most children (76%) confided in their mother, and more children confided in their siblings (51%) and friends (49%) than in their father (41%) or grandparents (24%).

The majority of children who confided in someone about their feelings about the divorce found it to be helpful.

Participants were asked which person in their life had helped them the most in dealing with their parents' divorce. Figure 6.6 illustrates the sources of support considered by the children to be the most helpful.

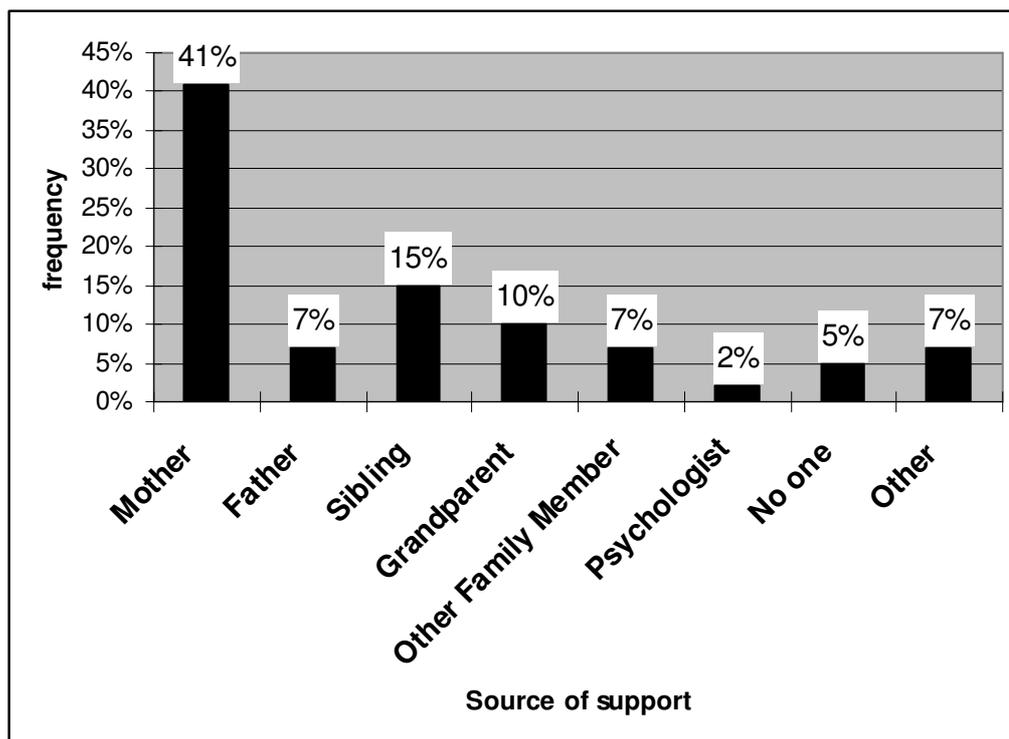


Figure 6.6. Source of support that children found to be most helpful

The mother was named most often (41%), followed by a friend (15%), a grandparent (10%), the father (7%), other family member (7%), other (7%), no one (5%) and a psychologist (2%).

6.2.2 Parental support

The majority of the children (76%) could talk to their mothers about their feelings about the divorce, while less than half (41%) were able to talk to their fathers. The

children gave several reasons for not being able to talk to their fathers about their feelings about the divorce. A frequency distribution was conducted to investigate the reasons that children did not confide in their father. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Frequency Distribution of Reasons why Children did not Talk to Their Fathers About Their Feelings About the Divorce (n = 24)

Reasons for not talking to father	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
He wasn't there	5	21
I don't know	4	17
He is preoccupied with girlfriends	2	8
I am closer to my mother	2	8
We don't talk about it	2	8
The divorce is in the past	2	8
He won't say anything	1	4
He won't care	1	4
He lives far away	1	4
We don't have a good relationship	1	4
He is childish	1	4
He has changed	1	4
We drifted apart	1	4

The reason stated most often (21%) was that the father was not there, that is, he was not available. Some of the children (17%) stated that they did not know why they did not confide in their father. Of the children who did speak to their father (n = 17), the majority (88%) thought it was helpful. Of the 31 children who spoke to their mother about the divorce most (84%) also found it to be helpful.

6.2.3 Support from grandparents

Most children (76%) did not speak to their grandparents about their feelings about the divorce (Three participants no longer had any living grandparents). A frequency distribution was conducted in order to investigate the reasons why children did not confide in their grandparents. The results appear in Table 3.

Table 3

Frequency Distribution of Reasons why Children did not Talk to Their Grandparents About Their Feelings About the Divorce (n = 31)

Reasons for not talking to grandparent(s)	n	%
They live far away	6	19.4
I don't see them	6	19.4
They don't talk about it	3	9.7
I don't know	3	9.7
Grandparents are deceased	2	6.5
They are old	2	6.5
I just didn't want to	2	6.5
I talk to my parents instead	2	6.5
The divorce doesn't bother me	1	3.2
I don't like them anymore	1	3.2
Grandparent(s) had a stroke	1	3.2
It makes me sad	1	3.2
There is negativity about the divorce (including negativity about the other parent)	1	3.2

Two of the reasons that children gave most often for not talking to their grandparents about the divorce (n=31) were: "They live far away" (19.4%) or "I don't see them much" (19.4%). Thirteen various reasons were given for not discussing feelings about the divorce with grandparents.

It is important to note that almost half the children (45.2%) did not have the support of their grandparents available to them, for the following reasons: the grandparents live far away, the child seldom sees the grandparents, or the grandparents are deceased. All of the children who spoke to their grandparents about the divorce felt that it was helpful. This suggests that support from grandparents is a helpful source of support, and that more children may benefit from it if their grandparents were available.

6.2.4 Support from siblings

About half the children (51%) spoke to a sibling about their feelings about the divorce, while the rest (46%) did not. One participant was an only child. Of the 21 children who spoke to their siblings about the divorce, the majority (81%) felt that it was helpful. Table 4 presents the results of the frequency distribution conducted to investigate the reasons why children did not confide in their siblings.

Table 4

Frequency Distribution of Reasons why Children did not Talk to Their Sibling(s) About Their Feelings About the Divorce (n = 21)

Reasons for not talking to sibling(s)	<i>n</i>	%
He/she is too young	5	23.8
I don't know	3	14.3
We don't like each other	2	9.5
I don't talk to him/her	2	9.5
There's no real bond/we don't get along that well	2	9.5
It is too personal	1	4.8
He/she doesn't understand	1	4.8
I keep my feelings to myself	1	4.8
He/she wasn't there	1	4.8
We don't talk about things like that	1	4.8

The reason for not talking to a sibling about the divorce that children gave most often (23.8%) was that their brother or sister was too young and so would not understand. About 14% of the children were not sure why they did not confide in their sibling(s).

6.2.5 Support from friends

About half of the children (49%) spoke to their friends about the divorce while the other half (51%) did not. Out of those who did speak to their friends (n=21), the vast majority (90%) found it to be helpful. A frequency distribution was again conducted in order to explore the reasons why children did not confide in their friends. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Frequency Distribution of Reasons why Children did not Talk to Their Friend(s) About Their Feelings About the Divorce (n = 21)

Reasons for not talking to friend(s)	n	%
I don't trust them	4	19
I don't know	4	19
I didn't want to	3	14.3
They don't know about it/I didn't want them to know	3	14.3
They are immature	1	4.8
There are none of them that I can really talk to	1	4.8
I keep my feelings to myself	1	4.8
They can't relate – their parents aren't divorced	1	4.8
It's a personal family matter	1	4.8
It's not easy to talk about it	1	4.8
I didn't have any friends when we moved	1	4.8

The children who did not speak to their friends about the divorce gave various reasons (n=21). One of the reasons given most often was that they did not trust their friends or were afraid they would gossip (19%). Some of the children (19%) did not know why they could not talk to their friends; they could not give a reason.

Most children (90%) knew other children whose parents are divorced, and 78% felt it was helpful to know children who are in a similar situation, as it makes them feel like they are not alone - they are not outcasts, as divorce is a common occurrence. Only about half (51%) of the children who knew other children of divorce spoke to them about their own experiences.

6.2.6 Support from other adults

Less than half (46%) of the children reported talking to adults other than their parents about their feelings about the divorce. The adults that children spoke to are the following: aunt, uncle, grandparents, psychologist, school counsellor, church leader, teacher, parents' friends, and house-keeper.

Children were asked whether they had spoken to any of their parents' friends about the divorce. Few of the children (22%) spoke to their mother's friends, but they all felt that it was helpful. Even fewer (7%) spoke to their father's friends about the divorce, and these children also found it to be helpful to them. One of the main reasons given for not speaking to parents' friends about the divorce was that the child did not know them that well.

6.2.7 Support from teachers and church leaders

Most children (85%) said that their teachers knew about the divorce. Of the children whose teachers were aware of the divorce (n=35), it was usually the mother (37%) or the child (27%) who had told the teacher about the divorce. The majority of the children in the sample (71%) did not talk to their teachers about the divorce. Of those who did (n=12), most (83%) found it to be helpful. A few of the children (15%)

spoke to a church leader about their feelings about the divorce, and all of them felt that it had helped them to feel better.

6.2.8 Support from doctors and psychologists

Hardly any children (2%) spoke to their doctor about the divorce. Less than half (44%) spoke to a psychologist, although most of those who did (78%) found it to be helpful.

6.2.9 Age differences with regard to support systems

A Chi-square test was conducted in order to investigate age differences regarding children's use of support systems. The results appear in Table 6.

Table 6

Age Differences Regarding the use of Different Support Systems

	Middle Childhood	Adolescence	χ^2
Mother	83	65	1.85
Father	50	29	1.77
Grandparents	25	23	0.01
Siblings	50	53	1.09
Friends	46	53	0.20
Mother's friends	21	24	0.04
Father's friends	8	6	0.09
Other adults	29	71	7.05**
Teacher	25	35	0.51
Psychologist	42	47	0.12
Church leader	13	18	0.21

**p<0.01

The Chi-square test revealed a slight trend that the younger children (middle childhood) were more likely to speak to their mothers about their feelings about the divorce than older children (adolescents), although it was not statistically significant ($p = .17$). There was a highly significant difference between younger and older children with regard to confiding in adults other than their parents. More adolescents spoke to adults other than their parents about their feelings about the divorce than did younger children ($p = .008$; $p < .01$).

6.2.10 Gender differences with regard to support systems

A Chi-square test was also conducted in order to explore the gender differences in children's coping strategies. Table 7 displays the results of the Chi-square test.

Table 7

Gender Differences Regarding the use of Different Support Systems

	Girls	Boys	χ^2
Mother	73	79	0.22
Father	32	53	1.83
Grandparents	18	32	0.99
Siblings	55	47	1.65
Friends	64	32	4.27*
Mother's friends	27	16	0.80
Father's friends	5	11	0.54
Other adults	64	26	5.88*
Teachers	36	21	1.17
Psychologist	59	26	4.56*
Church leader	9	21	1.18

* $p < .05$

The Chi-square test showed a significant difference between girls and boys with regard to confiding in siblings, psychologists or adults other than their parents about the divorce. Girls were more likely to confide in friends than boys ($p = .04$; $p < .05$). Girls were also more likely to confide in psychologists ($p = .03$; $p < .05$) and other adults ($p = .02$; $p < .05$).

6.3 Reliability of the Children's Coping Strategies Checklist (CCSC)

The Cronbach alpha coefficients for the avoidance scale and the support scale were .65 and .78 respectively. The alpha coefficients for the problem-focused coping component of the active coping scale were .78, and for the positive cognitive restructuring component of the active coping scale it was .77. As for the subscales of the support scale, the coefficients alpha were .64 for the *support for feelings* subscale and a low .47 for the *support for problem solving* subscale. When the support subscales were divided according to the source of support (e.g., support from peers), *support for problem solving (parents)* yielded a very low alpha coefficient of .48. The rest of these subscales had acceptable alpha coefficients.

6.4 Coping strategies

6.4.1 Descriptive statistics

In order to measure coping strategies, the Children's Coping Strategies Checklist (CCSC-R3) was used. The descriptive statistics, that is, the means and standard deviations, are presented in Tables 8, 9, and 10.

Table 8

Means and Standard Deviations for the Active Coping Scale

Scales	Total sample (N=41)		Middle childhood (n=24)		Adolescence (n=17)		Boys (n=19)		Girls (n=22)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Active coping (total)	59.1	7.2	58.8	7.8	59.5	8.3	58.6	8.5	59.5	8.7
Active coping (subscales):										
Problem-focused coping	29.8	6.6	29.4	6.8	30.2	6.4	29.8	8.3	29.7	4.8
Cognitive decision-making	9.7	2.8	9.6	2.7	9.9	3.0	10.3	3.1	9.3	2.5
Direct problem-solving	10.3	2.6	10.2	2.8	10.5	2.5	10.4	3.3	10.2	2.0
Seeking understanding	9.7	2.7	9.6	2.8	9.8	2.8	9.2	3.1	10.2	2.4
Positive cognitive restructuring	29.3	6.4	29.4	6.6	29.3	6.3	28.8	7.0	29.8	6.4
Control	9.0	3.0	8.4	3.1	9.7	2.7	8.9	3.6	9.0	2.4
Optimism	10.0	2.8	10.2	2.9	9.6	2.7	9.4	3.0	10.5	2.6
Positivity	10.4	2.6	10.8	2.5	9.9	2.8	10.5	2.5	10.4	2.8

Table 9

Means and Standard Deviations for the Avoidance Coping Scale

Scales	Total sample (N=41)		Middle Childhood (n=24)		Adolescence (n=17)		Boys (n=19)		Girls (n=22)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Avoidance coping (total)	32.5	5.8	33.5	5.1	31.1	6.6	33.6	6.5	31.6	5.0
Avoidance coping (subscales):										
Avoidant actions	10.6	2.4	10.4	2.3	10.9	2.6	10.9	2.8	10.4	2.1
Wishful thinking	11.6	2.6	12.3	2.0	10.5	3.2	11.7	2.5	11.5	2.8
Repression	10.3	3.0	10.8	2.9	9.6	3.1	10.9	3.5	9.8	2.4

Table 10

Means and Standard Deviations for the Support Coping Scale

Scales	Total sample (N=41)		Middle Childhood (n=24)		Adolescence (n=17)		Boys (n=19)		Girls (n=22)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Support coping (total)	32.3	8.3	32.7	6.6	31.8	10.5	31.2	6.7	33.3	9.6
Support coping (subscales):										
Support for problem-solving	15.8	4.0	15.9	3.4	15.5	4.8	15.3	3.4	16.1	4.5
Parents	4.2	1.7	4.7	1.9	3.5	1.2	4.2	1.7	4.2	1.8
Siblings	4.1	2.1	4.0	1.9	4.2	2.3	3.9	1.8	4.3	2.3
Peers	4.0	2.0	3.6	1.6	4.5	2.5	3.5	1.9	4.4	2.1
Other adults	3.5	1.8	3.5	2.0	3.4	1.7	3.7	1.7	3.3	1.9
Support for feelings	16.6	4.6	16.8	3.6	16.3	5.8	15.9	3.5	17.2	5.4
Parents	4.8	1.9	5.4	2.0	4.0	1.5	4.6	2.2	5.0	1.7
Siblings	4.3	2.3	4.4	2.2	4.3	2.5	4.1	2.0	4.6	2.6
Peers	3.8	2.1	3.3	1.6	4.4	2.5	3.3	1.9	4.2	2.2
Other adults	3.7	1.7	3.7	1.8	3.6	1.6	3.9	1.6	3.4	1.8

6.4.2 Comparative statistics

6.4.2.1 Comparing the three coping variables for the total group

A repeated measures analyses of variance was used to investigate whether there was a significant difference between the frequency of use by the total sample of the three main coping scales (Active coping, Avoidance coping and Support coping). The differences between the three variables were statistically significant, $F(2,80) = 22.33$, $p = .000$. Children used avoidance coping strategies most often, followed by active coping strategies and then support coping strategies

Post-hoc analyses tests were performed, which indicate that Avoidance differs significantly from Support ($p = .00$), and Support differs significantly from Active coping ($p = .00$). Active coping also differs significantly from Avoidance ($p = .05$).

6.4.2.2 Comparing coping strategies with regard to age differences

One-way analyses of variance were conducted in order to investigate age differences with regard to children's coping strategies. The results appear in Table 11.

Table 11

One-Way Analyses of Variance for Differences Between Age Groups

Variable	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Active coping</i>		
Active coping (total scale)	1.12	.27
Problem-focused coping	0.15	.70
Cognitive decision-making	0.16	.69
Direct problem-solving	0.95	.76
Seeking understanding	0.51	.82
Positive cognitive restructuring	0.00	.97
Control	1.92	.17
Optimism	0.39	.54
Positivity	0.94	.34
<i>Avoidance coping</i>		
Avoidance coping (total scale)	1.21	.28
Avoidant actions	0.46	.50
Wishful thinking	4.83	.03*
Repression	1.46	.23
<i>Support coping</i>		
Support coping (total scale)	0.65	.43
Support for problem-solving	0.09	.76
Parents	5.76	.02*
Siblings	0.04	.84
Peers	1.76	.19
Other adults	0.49	.83
Support for feeling	0.11	.74
Parents	6.09	.02*
Siblings	0.01	.91
Peers	3.10	.09
Other adults	0.48	.83

Note. Degrees of freedom (df) are 1 (for between groups) and 39 (for within groups)

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

The differences between age groups for *wishful thinking* was statistically significant, $F(1,39) = 4.83, p = .03$. There were also statistically significant differences between age groups for *support for feelings* (from parents), $F(1,39) = 5.8, p = .02$, and *support for problem solving* (from parents), $F(1,39) = 6.1, p = .02$. Younger children turned to parents for support for feelings and support for problem-solving more frequently than did adolescents. There was a trend that adolescents turned to peers for *support for feelings* more often than younger children ($p = .09$).

With the use of *control* as a coping strategy, there was a slight trend that adolescents made use of control more than the younger children did, but it was not statistically significant ($p = .17$).

6.4.2.3 Comparing coping strategies with regard to gender differences

In order to investigate gender differences with regard to coping strategies, one-way analyses of variance were conducted. The results are presented in Table 12.

Table 12

One-Way Analyses of Variance for Differences Between Gender Groups

Variable	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Active coping</i>		
Active coping (total scale)	1.12	.27
Problem-focused coping	0.01	.94
Cognitive decision-making	1.28	.26
Direct problem-solving	0.10	.76
Seeking understanding	1.45	.24
Positive cognitive restructuring	0.26	.61
Control	0.00	.99
Optimism	0.17	.20
Positivity	0.02	.90
<i>Avoidance coping</i>		
Avoidance coping (total scale)	1.21	.28
Avoidant actions	0.58	.45
Wishful thinking	0.08	.79
Repression	1.58	.22
<i>Support coping</i>		
Support coping (total scale)	0.65	.43
Support for problem-solving	0.42	.52
Parents	0.00	.96
Siblings	0.33	.57
Peers	1.77	.19
Other adults	0.40	.53
Support for feelings	0.79	.38
Parents	0.37	.55
Siblings	0.55	.46
Peers	2.08	.16
Other adults	1.01	.32

Note. Degrees of freedom (df) are 1 (for between groups) and 39 (for within groups)

p* < .05 *p* < .01

No significant gender differences were found regarding coping strategies, although there was a slight trend that girls turned to peers more often when they used *support for feelings* as a coping strategy ($p = .16$).

6.4.3 Children's perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of divorce

Children were asked whether they thought that there were any good things about the divorce. Interestingly, most children (66%) felt that there were good things about the divorce, while some (29%) said there was nothing good about the divorce, and others (5%) were not sure. Figure 6.7. shows the distribution of how children felt about their parents' divorce.

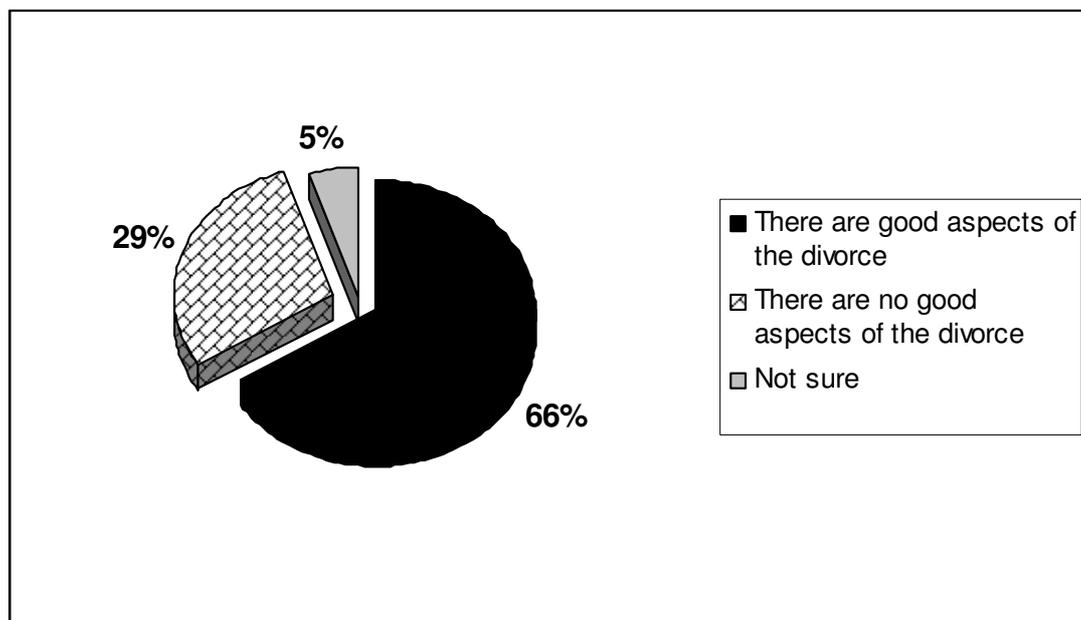


Figure 6.7. Distribution of children's feelings about the divorce.

A frequency distribution was conducted to explore the various aspects of divorce that children considered to be positive. Table 13 presents the results.

Table 13

Children's Perceptions of Positive Aspects About the Divorce

Positive aspect of divorce	<i>n</i>	%
There is no more fighting/conflict	15	58
Parents are happier	5	19
Child has become stronger/more independent	4	15
Mother (custodian) has become stronger/more confident	2	8
Child has two homes	1	4
Child sees grandparents more often	1	4

One of the good aspects of divorce named by more than half of the children (58%) is that the parents no longer fight, and there is less conflict in the home. Another is that the parents were unhappy in the marriage and are now much happier. Some children (15%) felt that they themselves had become stronger and more independent as a result of the divorce.

Children were also asked what they thought was the worst aspect of the divorce. The results of the frequency distribution of these negative aspects are displayed in Table 10.

The negative aspect that was mentioned most frequently was the lack of contact with the non-custodian, which in these cases was the father. The other negative aspects of divorce mentioned by the children are displayed in Table 14.

Table 14

Children's Perceptions of Negative Aspects about the Divorce

Negative aspect of divorce	<i>n</i>	%
Seeing father (non-custodian) less frequently	14	34
Cannot see both parents at the same time	5	12
Parent's new partner/partner's children	5	12
The effect it had on everyone	2	5
Relationship with father deteriorated	2	5
Life changes/moving to new house	4	10
Finding out negative things about a parent	2	5
Fighting/violence witnessed between parents	1	2
Child has to take care of him/herself more	1	2
Could not decide which parent to live with	1	2

The negative aspect that was mentioned most frequently (34%) was the lack of contact with the non-custodian, which in these cases was the father. Other aspects mentioned include issues with a parent's new partner or the partner's child or children, and the fact that the child no longer spends time with both parents simultaneously.

6.4.4 Children's perceptions of how they dealt with the divorce

Children were asked what they did or thought in order to deal with their parents' divorce, or what they did in order to make themselves feel better. Table 15 displays the frequency distribution of the methods that children used.

Table 15

Children's Attempts at Dealing With the Divorce

Thoughts/actions	<i>n</i>	%
Played with/went out with friends	7	17
Avoided thinking about it	6	15
Read the Bible/prayed	5	12
Turned to music (singing/dancing/listening)	5	12
Talked to siblings/friends about divorce	4	10
Cried/screamed	4	10
Played sports/exercised	4	10
Played computer games/video games	4	10
Did not do much about it	3	7
Thought about good things/stayed positive	3	7
Read a book	2	5
Aggression (swearing/bullying)	2	5
Watched T.V/movies	2	5
Thought about the divorce	2	5
Stayed away from home (went out a lot)	2	5
Skateboarded	1	2
Talked to a psychologist	1	2
Carried on with life	1	2
Played with sibling	1	2
Went on picnics	1	2
Did maths sums/homework	1	2
Slept a lot	1	2
Art (drawing)	1	2

Of the things that children thought or did to deal with the divorce, those that were reported most often were “played with or went out with friends” (17%), “avoided thinking about it” (15%), “read the Bible or prayed” (12%) or “turned to music” (12%).

6.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter the results of the study were reported. This included the support systems and coping strategies used by the children, as well as gender and age differences with regard to support and coping. Chapter 7 entails a discussion of the results, including a comparison with findings of previous research.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Children's support systems

Most children who talked to someone about their feelings about the divorce, no matter who it was that they spoke to, found it to be helpful. This suggests that it is important for children to be able to confide in people. When children communicate about their feelings or about stress, it improves their ability to cope, for instance, it helps them to cope in a more constructive manner. Therefore, communication skills are important with regard to seeking support (Afifi, Huber, & Ohs, 2006; Gentzler, Contreras-Grau, Kerns, & Weimer, 2005).

The majority of the children in the present study reported that their mother had been their most helpful source of support. This is consistent with the findings of Braude and Francisco-La Grange (1993), as well as those of Belle and Burr (1991), who found that children's mothers are usually their main confidants. In contrast, Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, and Sturgess (2001) found that friends are the main confidants of children when it comes to family matters such as divorce or step-family issues.

In the present study, 37% of the children hardly ever saw the non-custodial parent (or did not see him or her at all). Snow (2003) found that within two years of parental divorce, about 50% of children eventually see their father less than twice a year (if the father is the non-custodian). According to Drapeau et al., (1999), children find the lack of contact with the non-custodial parent to be a problem. After divorce, the child's relationship with the non-custodian may deteriorate somewhat due to lack of contact (White, 1994), and the child may lose out on an important support system. In the present study, less than half (40%) of the children spoke to the non-custodian about their feelings about the divorce.

Holahan et al. (1995) maintained that when adolescents received social support from both parents *and* there is a non-conflictual relationship between them, it had a positive effect on their psychological adjustment. Therefore, if parents can establish a non-conflictual relationship following divorce and can give their child social support, it

may be beneficial to the child and can aid them in dealing with the aftermath of the divorce.

The extended family can also play an important role with regard to children's support systems. Castiglia (1999) found that single parent families were more involved with their extended family than are two-parent families. She also maintained that it is more important *how* the extended family is involved in the child's life than how many people there are in the extended family. Grandparents can play a significant role in a child's life. The quality of their relationship with their grandchild, however, is influenced by the frequency of their contact, and this in turn is affected by whether or not the grandparents live far away (Uhlenberg & Hammill, 1998).

Most of the children in the present study (76%) did not discuss the divorce with their grandparents, and the main reason for this was lack of contact. One can conclude that the less contact between the child and the grandparent(s), the less opportunity there is to receive emotional support from them. Those children who did confide in their grandparents found it to be helpful, and this should be kept in mind when helping, guiding and counselling children.

Support from others is often effective when the person providing the support is in a similar situation and is coping with it better than the distressed individual (Thoits, 1986). This suggests that support from the nuclear family would be valuable, since the members of the nuclear family are all in a similar situation, particularly the siblings. Most of the children with very young siblings reported that they could not turn to them for support, because they were too young to understand the situation. Bowyer (2007) found that most children whose parents were divorced or separated considered their sibling relationships to be very important. In contrast, Sheehan, Darlington, Noller, and Feeney (2004) maintained that adolescents from divorced families have a more hostile relationship with their sibling(s) than adolescents from intact families, although hostility in the sibling relationship does not mean that the relationship cannot be a source of support for the adolescent.

Just under half (49%) of the children talked to a friend about their feelings about their parents' divorce, and according to Guttman (1993), adolescents with divorced parents

are less likely to confide in their best friend than are adolescents from intact families. Some of the children in the present study said that they did not confide in a friend because the divorce is “a personal family matter,” or “their parents aren’t divorce (they won’t understand).” Guttman (1993) maintains that children of divorce may find it more difficult to share secrets with their friends because these secrets are more intimate, and their peers do not necessarily relate to them if they are from intact homes.

7.2 Children’s coping strategies

All of the children in the sample made some effort to cope with their parents’ divorce. This supports the findings of Curry and Russ (1985), which suggested that most children make an effort to cope in a stressful situation. Children used avoidant coping strategies most frequently, which is contrary to the findings of Armistead et al. (1990). Their results showed that adolescents used avoidance least often and made use of active-cognitive strategies most frequently.

It is troubling that South African children use avoidance most frequently as a coping strategy, as research suggests that avoidant coping may be detrimental to the individual (Armistead et al., 1990; Lengua & Long, 2002; Sandler et al., 1994; Seiffge-Krenke & Klessinger, 2000). The use of avoidance may prevent a child from actively dealing with their problems or thinking about them in a more positive way (Sandler et al., 1994), and it is associated with an increase in emotional and behavioural problems (Hampel & Petermann, 2005). Seiffge-Krenke and Klessinger (2000) found that any kind of avoidant coping (whether it is consistent or surfaces later) leads to an increase in depressive symptoms in adolescents.

Adolescents use active coping strategies more often if they have positive family relationships, and they tend to use less avoidant coping strategies if they have a good relationship with their parents (Zimmer-Gembeck & Locke, 2007). According to Herman-Stahl et al. (1995), when adolescents alter their coping strategy from avoidant coping to approach coping, their levels of depression decreased (and vice versa).

Thus, if children and adolescents can learn to make more use of approach coping or active coping, it may decrease the negative effects of avoidant coping.

Drapeau, Samson and Saint-Jacques (1999) maintained that children in middle childhood used avoidance as a coping strategy only after they have tried to solve their problems directly. All of the children in the present study used more than one type of coping strategy to deal with their parents' divorce, therefore none of the children relied solely on avoidance in order to cope with their parents' divorce. This supports the findings of Sandler et al., (1994), who found that in order to cope with a single stressor, children may use various different coping strategies over time.

7.3 Age differences in coping and support-seeking

Various studies have found that there are age differences in children's coping styles (Band & Weisz, 1988; Curry & Russ 1985; Lynch et al., 2007; Wertlieb et al., 1987). Younger children tend to distract themselves from their problems more often than adolescents do, and they make use of more emotion-focused coping strategies (Hampel & Petermann, 2005). The present study found that younger children made significantly more use of *wishful thinking* to cope than did adolescents. This contrasts with a study conducted by Donaldson, Prinstein, Danovsky and Spirito (2000), who found no age differences in coping strategies such as wishful thinking.

Adolescents used *control* more often than younger children, which forms part of *positive cognitive restructuring*. Studies have shown that older children have better abilities when it comes to cognitive mediational control, and that they tend to make use of more cognitive coping strategies (Curry & Russ, 1985; Wertlieb et al., 1987). According to the developmental theory described earlier (Newman & Newman, 2003), adolescents' thinking is more abstract than that of younger children, and they make use of more logical principles.

The findings of the present study indicate no age differences with regard to the subscales of Active coping (*Positive cognitive restructuring* and *problem-focused*

coping). Hampel and Petermann (2005) similarly did not find developmental differences with regard to problem-focused coping.

When seeking support, adolescents tended to confide in adults other than their parents significantly more often than younger children. They also turned to peers significantly more with regard to the *support for feelings* coping strategy. According to Newman and Newman's (2003) developmental theory, children become gradually more independent from their parents when they reach adolescence. This may explain why adolescents turn to their peers and other adults for support, whilst children in middle childhood tend to confide in their mothers more often. The present study found that, with regard to the coping strategies *support for problem solving* and *support for feelings*, younger children turn to their parents significantly more often than adolescents.

7.4 Gender differences in coping and support-seeking

Various studies have found gender differences in children's coping strategies (Hampel, 2007; Hampel & Petermann, 2006; Piko, 2001; Plancherel & Bolognini, 1995; Wilson et al., 2005). Copeland and Hess (1995) found that boys use avoidance more often than girls do. The present study did not find a significant difference between boys and girls regarding avoidance, but there was a trend that girls used religion more often than boys.

The present study found that girls seek support from siblings, psychologists or other adults significantly more often than boys do. Previous research has found that girls tend to rely on support-seeking and social relationships more often than boys with regard to coping with problems (Hampel & Petermann, 2005; Piko, 2001; Plancherel & Bolognini, 1995).

7.5 Children's perceptions of the divorce

Most children stated that the divorce had a positive side, namely that their parents do not fight anymore or that their parents are happier than they were before the divorce. According to Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999), if divorce leads to a more harmonious situation than before (i.e., there is less conflict), children will show less problems after the divorce. They also maintained that divorce may be beneficial to a child if it entails a shift to a less stressful household with less conflict. Some studies suggest that children are worse off in a marriage with a lot of conflict than in a peaceful divorce (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Jekielek, 1998). Studies have found that marital conflict may result in children having more difficulty adjusting to divorce, for instance, poorer ability to cope (Tschann et al., 1989).

If children can see a bright side to the divorce, that is, their parents are no longer fighting, the children no longer have to be subjected to marital conflict, and the parents are happier apart, then it may help them to deal with the divorce (e.g., they can better understand *why* it happened).

7.6 Parents' perceptions of effects of divorce children's academic performance

Studies have found that parental divorce can have a negative effect on a child's academic development (Mullholland, Watt, Philpott, & Sarlin, 1991; Sun & Li, 2002), yet only a few parents in the present study reported that there had been a decline in their child's academic performance.

7.7 Chapter summary

This chapter discussed the results of the present study and how they relate to findings of previous research.

Chapter 8 entails a summary of the study's findings, recommendations for future research, and a critical review of the present study.

Chapter 8: Summary of Findings, Limitations and Recommendations

8.1 Main findings

Of the three main coping strategies – Active coping, Avoidant coping and Support coping – Avoidant coping was used most often by children, followed by Active coping and Support coping. Of the specific types of coping strategies, wishful thinking was used most often (a subscale of Avoidant coping).

8.2 Findings with regard to demographic questionnaire

Most parents (61%) reported that there had been a change in their child's behaviour since the divorce, although few (27%) reported changes in their child's schoolwork. Most children (71%) saw the non-custodial parent zero to two times a week.

8.3 Findings with regard to age and gender differences

Age differences were found for specific types of coping strategies as well as support systems used by the participants. Younger children made use of wishful thinking more often than older children, and adolescents spoke to adults (other than their parents) about their parents' divorce significantly more often than younger children. There were no significant gender differences with regard to coping strategies, although strong trends emerged. Gender differences were found with regard to the support systems used by children. Girls were more likely than boys to confide in siblings, psychologists or other adults about their feelings regarding their parents' divorce.

8.4 Limitations of the present study

The present study was a cross-sectional study with a convenience sample. It might prove to be more beneficial to measure children's coping and support soon after the divorce (e.g., 1-2 years), but for the present study a pragmatic decision was made to

include children whose parents had been divorced for up to seven years. A convenience sample was used as there were not enough participants available to draw a random sample. There was no control for stressors other than the divorce, for example, children might have had problems at school, and adolescents might have had challenges coping with puberty as well.

Another limitation of the study is that the sample was predominately White, and therefore not fully representative of the general population. It was the researcher's intention to obtain a culturally diverse sample; however, one of the predominately Coloured schools* approached by the researcher was unavailable for the study.

Another limitation of the study is that only a self-report measure of coping strategies was used. It might have been beneficial to also have gathered the opinion on this issue from people near the child (e.g., parents and teachers).

8.5 Recommendations for future research

Future research should include a sample which is more representative of the general population – in other words, the sample should have an appropriate ratio of the various cultures. The sample should also be larger.

Future research studies could also divide children into two groups according to the length of time since divorce, in order to investigate potential differences between coping and support of children whose parents have recently divorced and children whose parents have been divorced for a few years.

It may be beneficial for future research to examine the interactions between coping strategies and support systems. Another aspect could be to obtain the custodial parent's perspective with regard to children's coping strategies. In this way one could compare the perspective of the child with that of the parent and obtain a better understanding of children's coping strategies.

**Note: The word Coloured is used in a derogatory sense, but rather to indicate ethnicity*

One could also investigate the relationship between socio-economic status and the use of different coping strategies and support systems – many children mentioned that they played computer games and video games as a way in which to deal with stress, but not all children have this luxury.

In spite of the above-mentioned, the present study contributed toward further knowledge of how South African children cope with parental divorce as well as their use of support systems during the aftermath of divorce.

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