

The lived experiences of children in parental divorce: A call for trauma-informed approach to divorce support in Singapore.

VCF Innovation & Productivity Grant (VCF4007B-1/2021/06/0002)
Parkway Independent Ethics Committee (PIEC/2021/030)

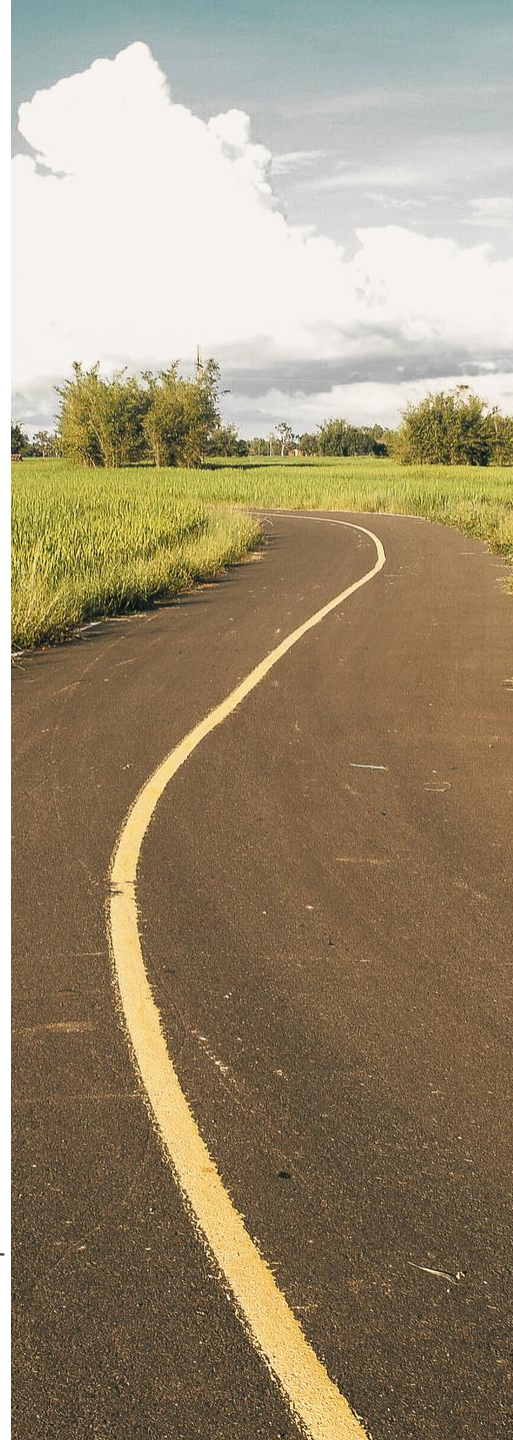
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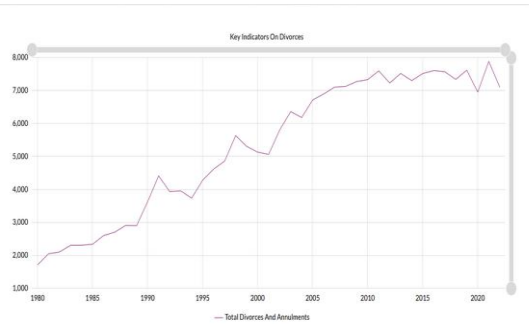
*Vision: ONE **THK**, Empowering the Community*

Mission: To help anyone who needs help, with full respect to their race, colour, creed, language, culture and religion –



Introduction: Local Context

Divorce rates



Singapore Department of Statistics (2023)

Children and youths

Total number and proportion of divorces involving children under 21 years old among 2010 to 2019 divorce cohorts

Divorce cohort (Year)	Total number of divorces	Divorces involving at least 1 child under 21 years of age	
		Number	Proportion
2010	6,969	4,005	57.5%
2011	7,234	4,096	56.6%
2012	6,893	4,017	58.3%
2013	7,133	4,109	57.6%
2014	6,861	3,875	56.5%
2015	7,117	3,935	55.3%
2016	7,207	3,960	54.9%
2017	7,207	3,932	54.6%
2018	6,990	3,868	55.3%
2019	7,330	4,053	55.3%

Ministry of Social and Family Development (2020)

The Study on the Intergenerational Effects of Divorce on Children in Singapore.

Used administrative data to track long-term outcomes of Singaporean children of divorced parents, with a focus on their economic and marriage & parenthood outcomes at age 35.

Methodology: Exact matching of children whose parents divorced, with children whose parents remained married across various demographic factors

Findings: Children whose parents divorced had

- lower likelihood of obtaining a university degree
- lower earnings
- lower CPF balances
- slightly lower marriage rates
- higher likelihood of divorce

Findings were based on average outcomes, i.e., there were instances of children of divorced parents who did comparably well or better than their peers.

Study highlighted the need to strengthen support for children when their parents file for divorce.

Ministry of Social and Family Development (2020)

Objectives

To examine the impact of parental divorce on children's long-term psychological adjustments.

- To gain an understanding of the relationship between parental divorce and children's psychological adjustments before, during and after the divorce.
- To identify the intervention gaps and propose recommendations to support children coping with acrimonious divorce.

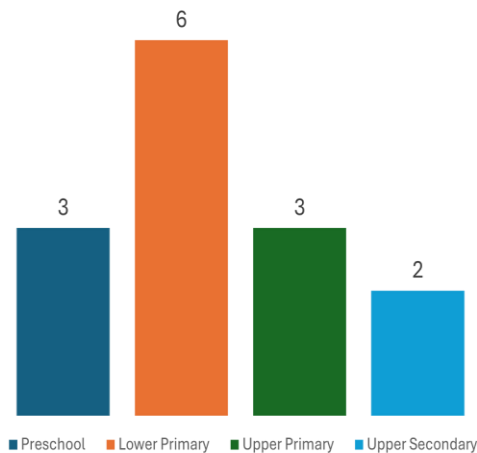
Research Questions

1. How did children respond to parental divorce from adolescence to adulthood?
2. What are the proposed recommendations that can better support children's psychological adjustment following parental divorce?

Qualitative Methodology

- Semi-structured interviews
- N = 14 young adults
- Study period: Jan 2022 – Nov 2023
- Data collection period: Mar 2022 – Dec 2022
- Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006)

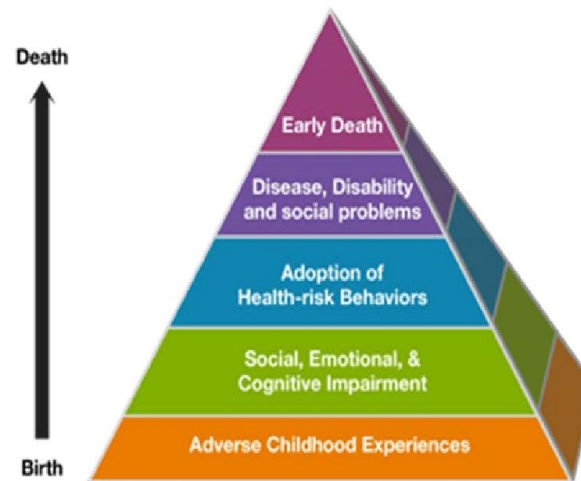
Age of Parental Divorce



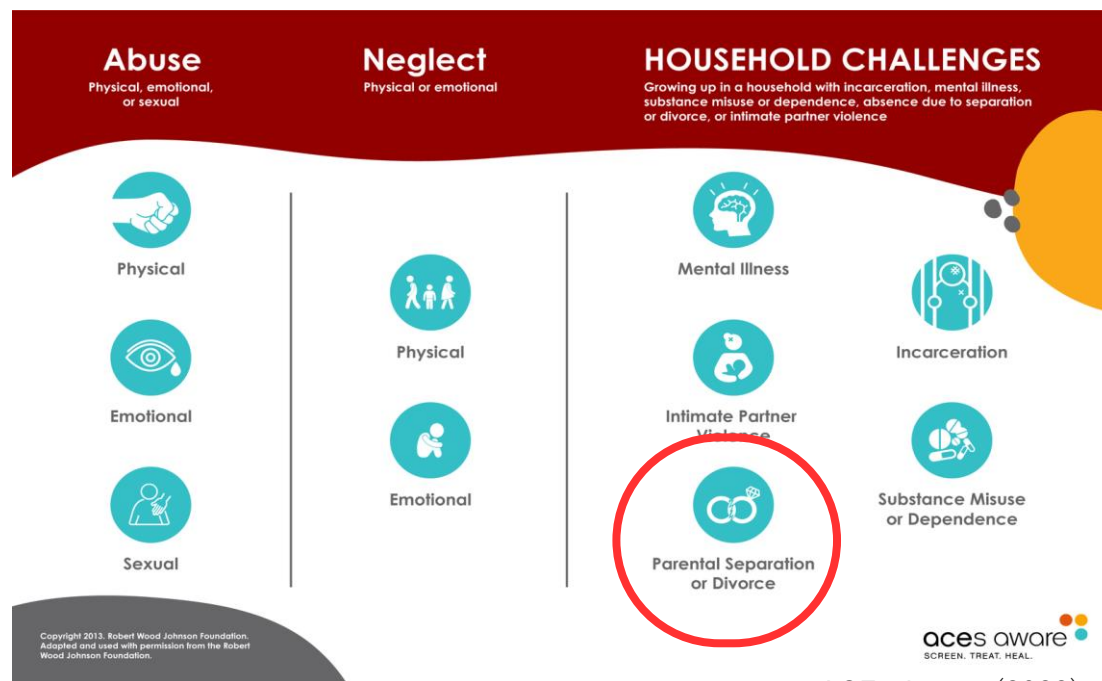
Code	Age	Gender	Highest Education Level	Employment Status	Marital Status	Age of Parental Divorce	Care Parent	Victim of physical abuse	Victim of emotional abuse	Victim of sexual abuse	Victim of physical and emotional neglect	Witnessed family violence
VOC 1	21	Male	Pursuing Degree	Part-time	Single	11	Mother	Yes				Yes
VOC 2	29	Male	Degree	Employed	Single	9	Mother					
VOC 3	24	Female	Pursuing ITE Certification	Unemployed	Single	11	Father	Yes			Yes	
VOC 4	33	Female	Primary School	Part-time	Married	8	Father				Yes	Yes
VOC 5	22	Male	ITE	Unemployed	Single	9	Mother					
VOC 6	22	Female	ITE	Unemployed	Single (parent)	16	Mother	Yes				Yes
VOC 7	33	Female	ITE	Unemployed	Married	5	Mother	Yes		Yes	Yes	
VOC 8	21	Male	Pursuing ITE Certification	Part-time	Single	17	Mother				Yes	
VOC 9	26	Female	Primary School	Home-based business	Married	8	Mother	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes
VOC 10	23	Female	Degree	Unemployed	Single	8	Father					
VOC 11	23	Female	Degree	Employed	Single	5	Mother					
VOC 12	26	Female	Degree	Employed	Single	3	Mother	Yes	Yes	Yes		
VOC 13	26	Female	Degree	Unemployed	Single	9	Father	Yes				Yes
VOC 14	26	Female	Degree	Employed	Single	10	Father	Yes	Yes			

Conceptual Framework: Adverse Childhood Experiences

- A strong relationship between the breadth of exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACE) and multiple risk factors for several of the leading causes of death in adults. (Felitti, 2002)



- Individuals who experienced at least 4 ACEs are at an increased risk of poor outcomes including chronic disease, mental illness and health risk behaviours (Boullier & Blair, 2018)



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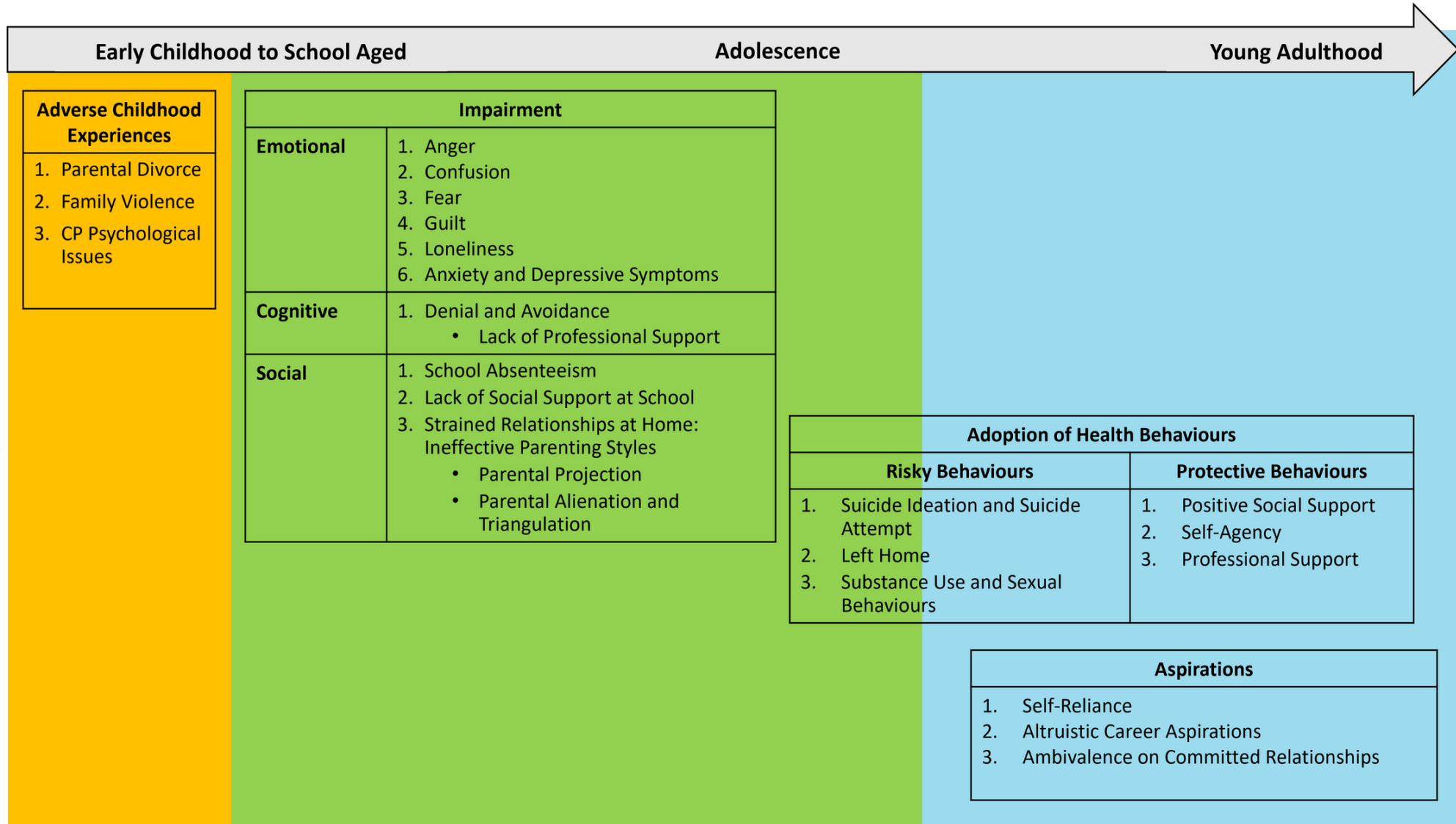
aces aware
SCREEN. TREAT. HEAL.

ACEs Aware (2023)



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Results



Emotional Impairment

- Anger
- Confusion
- Fear
- Guilt
- Loneliness
- Anxiety and Depressive symptoms

*“I was doing my assessment books, and then I would get so frustrated that I will start crumpling the pages, or like start like scribbling very hard with my pen, because there was just an **overwhelming feeling of rage**, and I didn’t know where it came from...” (VOC 10)*

*“Whenever my mom goes to work, I (would) suddenly have this feeling of **immense sadness, and anxiety**...and I will get worried. And I’ll be like, ‘oh, no, (what if) my mom goes, like leaves also.” (VOC 11)*

*“If I did not argue as much with my mom, if I kept a bit quieter, and just kind of did the things that I was told, **if I was kind of a better kid, then I guess the divorce wouldn’t have happened.**” (VOC 14)*

Cognitive Impairment

- Denial and Avoidance

*“I **buried real deep**, until they (negative thoughts and feelings about parental divorce) **kind of fade**. Yes, pushed it down real deep.” (VOC 13)*

- Lack of Professional Support

*“I was just **unaware of all the resources** that you can find online. I just thought that it was a personal problem that I had to solve on my own.” (VOC 12)*

Social Impairment

- School

Absenteeism

*“At that time, I was also bullied. So, I just avoided everything. I avoided my parents and avoided school. Even if I did go to school, I was bullied. I think I wasn’t really coping. I **just wanted to stay in my room.**” (VOC3)*

- Lack of Social

Support at

School

*“There was this big drama about who was going to get me. It was like, **emotional manipulation, gaslighting left and right**; if you follow your mother, I’m not going to love you anymore.... And that was a big burden on me because I love both very much. And how do I choose? And at that point,*

- Strained

Relationships at

Home:

*they were trying to badmouth each other to make it seem like, ‘follow me [Care Parent] because your mom [Visiting Parent] is going to make you super stress, she is going to make you study’...(So I had to decide) who I wanted to live with (but) **my decision was clouded by a lot of emotional***

Ineffective

***manipulation on both my parents side, because they were trying to get me to side with either one of them.** So yes, I heard a lot of bad things about either parent, from one parent or the other.” (VOC*

Parenting Styles

10)

Adoption of Risky Behaviours

- Suicide Ideation and Suicide Attempt

“In secondary school, every time I had a fight with my mom, I would just spiral down, start cutting myself again or like bite myself.” (VOC 12)

- Left Home

“(There was) no attention given, and I didn’t feel loved. So, I just went out...I spent more time outside than at home because I realised at home, I wouldn’t get that kind of attention. So, I just stayed outside (and) I will not come home for months, or days, just because outside was better than home...over time I just had partners, like boyfriends...I’ll just talk to them. Because I did not have family support, I did not talk to anyone, emotionally, at home. So, I usually had partners.” (VOC 6)

- Substance Use and Sexual Behaviours

Adoption of Protective Behaviours

- Positive Social Support
- Self-Agency
- Professional Support

*“I am quite vocal and quite honest (when) they [Care Parent and Visiting Parent] asked me what I’m worried about, what are my concerns…**I’ll try to communicate** (and) I was bit more aggressive about it…They needed to understand my struggles.” (VOC 2)*

“Yes so I went up, like university had free counsellors and stuff. So, I went (and) my first counsellor, he talked to me about how I had a lot of emotional baggage and how he wants to work with me on my issues with grief basically…(now) I do have a therapist. I started seeing one again, because things got very bad at work.” (VOC 12)

Aspirations

- Self Reliance
- Altruistic Career Aspirations
- Ambivalence on Committed Relationships

“No one owes you a living. You have to mould the future that you want, (you) have to work hard.” (VOC 1)

“I’ve always felt (that I am) very blessed and in a privileged position. I should give back in any way that I can be of support to these kids. I should be there, to be present, and show them that whatever challenges or circumstances do not determine their future.” (VOC 11)

“(Going through parental divorce) led me to believe that marriages are not real, love is not real. Even with my previous partners, I never saw a marriage with them, because I didn’t believe in it. Because I (believe) it will end. So, what is the point of getting married and wasting your money on a divorce. Just don’t get married. You can break up with someone for free.” (VOC 6)

Recommendations

Child-Centred Divorce Support through the

- **Provision of trauma-informed practice and the**
 - **Enhancement of engagement with professional support.**
-
- ✓ Online resources catering to divorced families to be more children/youth centric.
 - ✓ To include helplines/resources for parents experiencing divorce and their children, in media articles on parental divorce.
 - ✓ To engage in dialogue about parental divorce through media platforms (e.g., podcasts).
 - ✓ To leverage on technology to enhance access to services.

Limitations

- Findings reflected assessment of service before the set-up of DSSAs and does not reflect current state of divorce support.
- Study only gathered participants' experiences, without corroborating with family members' experiences.

Future Research

- To gather more data to confirm the adequacy of breadth and depth of data collected in this study.
- To conduct ongoing research to enhance the current state of divorce support services.

Conclusion

- We can enhance support for parental divorce by committing to a child-centred practice in Singapore.
- Improve existing divorce support through the incorporation of child-centred and trauma-informed practices.



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