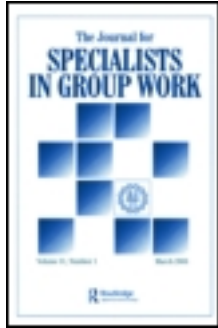


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## The Journal for Specialists in Group Work

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usgw20>

### Becoming stronger at broken places: A model for group work with young adults from divorced families

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Available online: 31 Jan 2008

To cite this article: Sally M. Hage & Mia Nosanow (2000): Becoming stronger at broken places: A model for group work with young adults from divorced families, *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 25:1, 50-66

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01933920008411451>

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# **Becoming Stronger at Broken Places: A Model for Group Work With Young Adults From Divorced Families**

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*Studies that look at long-term effects of divorce on children show lowered well-being and quality of life for children of divorce. This article describes a model for group work with young adults from divorced families using an eight-session psychoeducational group intervention. The goals of the program are to bring young adults from divorced families together to reduce isolation, establish connectedness, and build a stronger sense of identity and empowerment. Educating young adults from divorced families on topics such as assertiveness, communication skills, and self-esteem may give them some extra tools to build trust, intimacy, and enduring significant relationships.*

Over the past three decades, the family environment has changed. Estimates are that one in every two marriages in the United States ends in divorce, with most partners choosing to remarry. Sixty percent of those with children from a prior marriage will redi-  
vorce (Shiono & Quinn, 1994). These figures mean that more than 1 million children experience the divorce of their parents each year. The social, educational, and psychological impact of this life event for many of these children and adolescents appears to be high. Analysis of data collected by the National Center for Health Statistics in 1988 indicates that children in single-parent and remarried families are two to three times more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems than those in intact families (Zill & Schoenborn, 1990).

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JOURNAL FOR SPECIALISTS IN GROUP WORK, Vol. 25 No. 1, March 2000, 50-66  
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In the past decade, longitudinal and cross-sectional studies of young adults have looked at the long-term effects of divorce on children as they grow into adults (Aro & Palosaari, 1992; Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993; Bolgar, Zweig-Frank, & Paris, 1995; Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990; Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990; Guidubaldi, Perry, & Nastasi, 1987; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Wallerstein, 1991; Zill, 1988; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). With few exceptions, the results of these studies point to lowered well-being and quality of life for children of divorce. In addition, the severity of a child's reaction at the time of the parents' divorce does not predict how well the child will be functioning 5, 10, and even 15 years later (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Adolescents who adapt well during their early years may confront issues of love and marriage with anxiety, sometimes with great concern about betrayal, abandonment, and not being loved (Glenn & Kramer, 1987; Senander & Kanton, 1990; Wallerstein, 1991). Children of divorce may also be less likely to pursue higher education and be at greater risk for depression and alcoholism (Wallerstein, 1991; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Those whose parents have been divorced may have significantly lower self-esteem (Evans & Bloom, 1996). Similarly, a Finnish study (Aro & Palosaari, 1992) found a group of children from divorced families to have lower school performance, less education, riskier health behaviors, earlier transition to working life, and more abundant negative life events than children from intact families (i.e., families with two parents married and committed to one another). In addition, interpersonal problems such as overcontrol and submission were identified as being greater in young adult children from divorced families than young adult children from intact families (Bolgar et al., 1995).

Despite recent concern from counseling practitioners to find appropriate interventions to improve the well-being of children and adolescents experiencing divorce, a paucity of interventions and research exists concerning the use of groups with these populations (e.g., Sanders & Riester, 1996; Stolber, & Mahler, 1989; Wallerstein, 1991; Zill et al., 1993). Most evaluations have focused primarily on group-based interventions with children. A review of a number of these studies of group work with children reveals that counseling groups may provide an important experience that can promote the psychological health of children and adolescents from divorced families (Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Carroll, & Cowen, 1989; Anderson, Kenney, & Gerler, 1984; Bussey, 1996; Crosbie-Burnett & Newcomer, 1990; Gwynn & Brantley, 1987; Lee, Picard, & Blain, 1994; Roseby & Deutsch, 1985; Sanders & Riester, 1996; Stolber & Mahler, 1989). Such efforts might also be an important

preventive counseling strategy in reducing the long-term effect of being a child of a divorced family by providing participants with life skills and the capacity for gaining control over their lives.

The purpose of this article is to describe a model for group work with young adults from divorced families using an eight-session psychoeducational group intervention. The goal is to provide counselors with relevant factors related to being a young adult of divorce that need careful consideration when employing general group techniques.

## **A GROUP WORK MODEL**

### **Theoretical Framework**

Despite the common occurrence of divorce, many young adults from divorced families describe feeling alone and different as a result of their family situation and face issues related to interpersonal relationships and self-esteem. The authors' experience leading groups has shaped their view that increased awareness of self and family most easily occur during group interaction with peers who have gone through similar difficult experiences. A group intervention may offer members support and community through sharing stories and feelings with peers who have been through similar experiences (Yalom, 1995). In addition, research with college students highlights the importance of effective coping strategies in facilitating sound postdivorce adjustment (Grych & Fincham, 1992). Preventive interventions and skill-building activities can address such issues as lowered self-esteem, overcontrol and submission, and anxiety about relationships.

### **Key Issues**

Key issues highlighted in this group model are drawn from both the review of literature and the authors' experience leading groups for children, adolescents, and young adults from divorced families. One issue relates to group members' difficulty trusting others, which may be tied to the grief and loss issues of being a child of divorce (Nosanow, Hage, & Levin, 1999). Trust and cohesiveness may be increased by focused attention to building cohesion at the beginning of the group and by exercises that offer the opportunity to work in pairs and require greater involvement on the participant's part. Giving members choices about possible activities and involving them in decision making about how time is spent in the group may also be helpful to group cohesion. Termination issues need to be attended to carefully as members may open up

significant areas of pain and loss in the group and ending the group may connect with participants' unresolved grief related to the break-up of their families.

Another important issue for facilitators of these groups to be aware of is the importance of modeling and promoting spontaneity and humor for participants. One method to encourage spontaneity in the group is the incorporation of unstructured personal sharing time in each group session (e.g., discussion of both joys and difficulties from the previous week). With time, members may connect these current life events and experiences with the effects of their own experience of divorce. The sharing time provides opportunities for normalization and mutual support among group members.

A final key issue related to the authors' experience of leading groups and engaging in counseling work is that spiritual issues are often the unspoken dimension at the core of a student's story or concern. Spirituality as a strength and survival strategy distinguished from religiosity represents a "new course" for the counseling field (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1997). As facilitators, it is important to understand the lives of group participants from their own perspective and to recognize the role of spiritual interventions as a possible strategy for strengthening the coping skills of group members (O'Connell Higgins, 1994).

### Goals

The overall theme of the group is to honor the unique experiences of young adults from divorced families. The primary goals of the program are to provide participants with (a) connection in an atmosphere of mutual support to others who have experienced parental divorce and (b) increased awareness of the impact parental divorce has had on their families and personal lives. In addition, there are eight secondary goals, one for each group session.

*Recruiting.* Potential members may be recruited through letters and posters sent to campus organizations and departments including the counseling center, international student services, academic advising centers, and student organizations. Information about the group may be written on classroom chalkboards and disseminated in classroom presentations. In addition, counselors and psychologists at the counseling center may be contacted directly via telephone or in person for referrals of undergraduate and graduate students whose parents are divorced or in the process of divorce and who may benefit from a group focused on mutual support and psychoeducation on issues such as intimacy and self-esteem.

*Screening and preparation.* When potential members call about the group, they may speak with one of the group cofacilitators to schedule a 30-minute initial screening interview. In this way, potential members are able to begin a relationship with the cofacilitators from the first phone call and screening interview. Potential members may be assessed for inclusion in the group by the cofacilitators during a screening interview. Facilitators select members (a) whose goals are compatible with the goals of the group (e.g., connection with others who have experienced parental divorce and increased awareness of the impact parental divorce has had), (b) who will not hinder the group process (e.g., not extremely aggressive or hostile), and (c) who are not so vulnerable that they may be psychologically hurt by the group (e.g., individuals who are suicidal, paranoid, or in the midst of significant crises). Examples of questions potential group members may be asked include the following: What is your previous experience of being a member of a group? What current concerns would you bring to the group? What has your experience as a child of parents who are divorced (or divorcing) been like? What are your expectations and goals for the group? Why are you interested in this particular group? Exclusion criteria includes severe depression, significant deficits in interpersonal skills, or inappropriate goals or experience (e.g., failure to come from a divorced family).

Potential members may be informed about the general content of the groups and general group ethical and behavioral guidelines (see Session 1 outline). The cofacilitators may share the earlier mentioned goals for the group and ask each potential member what they hope to achieve by participating in the group, thus helping group members to formulate clear individual goals. Appropriate individual goals might include finding a place to talk about an issue that their friends do not seem to understand, learning more about themselves, or getting support to talk to family members in a new way.

*Group format.* The group meets once a week for eight consecutive weeks for 90 minutes each time. The group sessions follow roughly the same format from week to week. They begin with a brief introduction by the cofacilitators as to the topic of the day and with an invitation for group members to begin with a check-in. After the check-in, the weekly topic and group exercise are introduced by the cofacilitators. After completion of the weekly exercise and discussion, time remains for group members to engage in further sharing and discussion followed by a brief check-out.

*Leadership style.* The leadership style needed to facilitate the groups falls into two categories: client-centered counseling and active teaching

techniques. Counseling techniques include active listening, reflection, empathy, linking statements and themes or ideas between group members, and caring confrontations. Teaching strategies involve the use of art activities, informational handouts, guided imagery, and experiential activities designed to engage group members in discussion of specific aspects of their lives.

## THE SESSIONS

### Session 1: Picture of Your Family

#### Theme

The theme is picturing families and the unique place that each person has in his or her family system.

#### Goal

Participants will become aware of their family structure, ways that their family members interact, and their unique relationship to each family member.

#### Activities

1. In this introductory session, group guidelines are reviewed (e.g., confidentiality, importance of each group member, sharing what you feel comfortable sharing, starting each group with a check-in, and beginning and ending on time).
2. Group members get to know each other by breaking into pairs and sharing a few items of personal background and their goals for the group. Then, the pairs join the large group, and the group members introduce their partners to the group.
3. The facilitators ask the group members to draw a picture of their family. The group members draw a picture of themselves (the facilitators emphasize that the drawings do not need to be polished artwork) and place the rest of their family (as defined by the group member) around the page. The quality of the relationship between the group member and other family members is indicated by a strong solid line or a weaker dotted line. Members may then be invited to share their pictures with the whole group. Facilitators may use the following questions to process this activity: What did you learn about yourself and your family relationships through this activity? What similarities do you see between your drawing and those of other group participants? What feelings emerge for you during this drawing exercise?

4. As the group members introduce their families to the group, the facilitators point out the patterns and differences between group members in their family relationships. The facilitators note distinguishing features of each group member's artwork such as the family being drawn very small in one corner of the page or each family member being well-connected to each other. Facilitators might affirm the uniqueness of each family and suggest that there is no right way to be a family.

#### **Emerging Issues**

There are many topics that might emerge during this initial session. Group members may express some relief in finding others with a similar story. They also may express feelings of betrayal from their parents, especially if issues of extramarital affairs, finances, or an absent parent are present. Some group members may have deep feelings of anger at the loss of their childhood or sadness at the loss of one or more relationships due to divorce. Group discussion will naturally lead from any of these topics.

### **Session 2: Games People Play**

#### **Theme**

The theme is exploration of issues of divided loyalty in families.

#### **Goal**

The goal is to gain awareness of situations where loyalty is divided between parents and/or other family members and to increase understanding of appropriate boundaries and strategies to avoid triangulation.

#### **Activities**

1. At the start of this second session, group behavioral and ethical norms are reviewed.
2. Group members are asked to think about times that games or indirect methods of communication have been used in their family (e.g., times when they felt in the middle). Then, group members divide into pairs (different pairing from the first session) to discuss those games and how they may be affecting their lives now. The pairs return to the whole group to share and discuss the information they revealed and learned.
3. Facilitators link common experiences and ask group members how they have dealt with those experiences. Possible questions to assist in exploring this activity include the following: What games or indirect methods of



communication were shared in your dyad? What feelings emerged during your discussion? What strategies have been effective in coping with these negative patterns of communications? Facilitators further discuss the possible positive and negative implications of experiences that group members share.

#### **Emerging Issues**

Some group members may have been in the middle or a “spy” for one or both parents and may seek valuable insights from other members on how to create effective boundaries. Some young adults may feel sadness that they lost part of their childhood because they were overresponsible for family matters when they were children. For example, some children of divorce may describe being aware of and deeply concerned about their family’s financial situation. They may assume increased responsibility to compensate for the loss of a parent. This sense of overresponsibility leads to the loss of knowing how to be spontaneous and have fun. Group members may talk about the need to learn how to be themselves in social situations.

### **Session 3: Losses in Divorce**

#### **Theme**

The theme is the many types of loss resulting from divorce.

#### **Goal**

The goal is awareness of the variety of losses associated with divorce such as finances, the family unit, and social connections; and increased appreciation for what each member needs to bring healing into his or her life.

#### **Activities**

1. Facilitators introduce the topic of losses in divorce through sharing the stages of loss and grief (Kubler-Ross, 1969).
2. Group members collaboratively generate an extensive list of losses (e.g., stability, normality, family traditions, and friends/relatives) and discuss the similarities or differences among members’ concepts of loss.
3. One facilitator leads the participants in a guided imagery exercise in which the participants visualize themselves as children in a safe place and discover within themselves what they need to heal from their loss. Participants are invited to journal about the exercise and then process with the group their reactions to the exercise.

4. Facilitators may deepen this discussion and integrate discussion of coping skills by helping members to talk about steps they are taking in furthering their own healing process. Possible questions to assist in exploring this activity include the following: What feelings emerged for you during the guided imagery and journal time? What did you discover within yourself that needed healing? What resources did you visualize that could be helpful to your healing process?

#### **Emerging Issues**

Some group members may have strong feelings of sadness in reaction to this topic. Facilitators can help group members to benefit from catharsis by expressing their feelings of sadness and grief. Some group members may realize for the first time the extent of their losses or recognize how those losses continue to impact their lives (e.g., difficulty in trusting others).

### **Session 4: Building Self-Esteem**

#### **Theme**

The theme for this session is accessing internalized beliefs and building a stronger self.

#### **Goal**

The goal is to recognize the impact that being a child of divorced parents has on their internalized beliefs about self and to provide suggestions for building a more positive and stronger self.

#### **Activities**

1. In a large group, members generate a list of self-esteem traits and the internal beliefs that define positive self-esteem. The facilitators and group members work together to create a definition of healthy self-esteem.
2. The group generates strategies members have tried or know about to build a stronger self and engage in discussion about these strategies.
3. An alternate or additional exercise is to ask the group members to write letters to each of their parents. These letters are not meant to be sent. In the letters, participants describe the positive gifts their parents gave them as adult children as well as the challenges to positive self-esteem that they may be dealing with perhaps as the result of their divorce.

#### **Emerging Issues**

The issue of perfectionism may be brought up. The discussion may center on how growing up as the child of divorced parents potentially

affected members' self-esteem. Members might express that they are often hard on themselves through exceedingly high expectations. Some members may have difficulty with self-confidence in work or school situations and in relationships.

### **Session 5: Dealing With Intimate Relationships**

#### **Theme**

The theme is attributes of positive intimate relationships.

#### **Goal**

This session's goal is to understand one's own priorities for intimate relationships and to learn ways to improve or enrich current relationships.

#### **Activities**

1. To better understand their own definition of a good relationship, the group generates a list of important qualities in a healthy relationship.
2. Facilitators present information on healthy and unhealthy relationships. Key points in the presentation are that: (a) both persons in a healthy relationship are able to maintain their individuality while nurturing each other, (b) both people are willing to work to make a healthy relationship successful, and (c) feelings about one's partner go beyond physical attraction to include both love and commitment.
3. A discussion of members' experiences in their families and current intimate relationships is initiated. Possible questions to assist in exploring these experiences include the following: What are healthy and unhealthy aspects of your most important relationships? How do these aspects impact these relationships on a day-to-day basis? How might you relate your experiences and beliefs about relationships to your experience of your parents' divorce?
4. Facilitators may link some of the topics discussed and/or point out patterns that emerge in the members' experiences of their parents' divorce and the impact on their intimate relationships.

#### **Emerging Issues**

Discussion may include lack of or difficulty with trust in current relationships and the importance of loyalty and commitment. Members may look for ideas on coping with problems in a current relationship. Some members may want to discuss the meaning of permanence in relationships.

### **Session 6: Effective Communication and Problem-Solving Skills**

#### **Theme**

The theme is the important components of effective communication.

#### **Goal**

The goal is improving skills to communicate feelings and needs within family and community.

#### **Activities**

1. Facilitators present information on assertiveness and communication. Material includes information and specific examples about conflict resolution, active listening (verbal and nonverbal), and effective communication (techniques for delivering a message such as the use of "I" statements).
2. Group members gain experience and input in problem solving through a special role-playing exercise. Each group member writes a communication problem on a note card. The cards are shuffled, and then each participant anonymously reads one card out loud and provides a comment or suggestion. All group members are invited to give feedback and discuss the communication issue on each card after the reader provides suggestions. Group members may use time to role-play some of the scenarios to gain experience with using direct communication.

#### **Emerging Issues**

Issues that may arise include how to confront someone sensitively, triangulation with other family members, or how to more clearly state one's wishes. Group members are encouraged to recognize their progress in learning to trust others with problem solving in a safe environment such as the group.

### **Session 7: Finding Meaning and Purpose**

#### **Theme**

The theme is discovering what gives meaning and purpose in members' lives.

**Goal**

The goal is to become aware of the role of spirituality and the need for wholeness and integration in one's life.

**Activities**

1. Facilitators introduce and provide several definitions of spirituality for participants to discuss. They invite participants to share their own definition of spirituality and/or center of meaning in their lives.
2. A facilitator leads the group in a guided imagery exploring their own life purpose. Participants are asked to imagine themselves in the future at a time when their lives feel whole and centered.
3. Each group member shares one life goal from the exercise. Possible questions to assist in exploring this activity include the following: What images arose for you during this activity? What aspects of your life felt whole and centered? What new goals emerge for yourself as you begin to imagine your ideal future?
4. Facilitators introduce the topic of termination to the group. They address termination issues through discussion of participants' possible feelings of loss at the ending of the group as well as positive feelings of success as they review their own progress in the group.
5. A homework exercise exploring the topics of transitions and risk taking may be given out to be completed for the final session.

**Emerging Issues**

Discussion may include the desire to balance personal goals with family responsibilities, become successful in a career, and find a healthy significant relationship. Participants may also work to further generate a vision of themselves as happy and beyond the place that they are at right now. A significant discussion may ensue regarding group members' feelings about ending the group.

### **Session 8: Summing It Up: Becoming Stronger at Broken Places**

**Theme**

The theme is naming members' strengths and directions for the future.

**Goal**

The goals are to identify strengths and new ways to build on them in relationships and to summarize learning in the group and areas for future growth.

**Activities**

1. Group members share their completed risk-taking and future plans exercise with the group.
2. Group members and facilitators share what they learned from each other and say goodbye. Members remember highlights from the group or thank other members for specific times that they were helpful.
3. Facilitators offer specific feedback to each participant regarding his or her growth and development during the duration of the group. Facilitators also directly address the potential feelings of sadness at saying goodbye to group members and in ending the group.

**Emerging Issues**

Discussion topics may include members' experiences in the group, feelings about risk taking and connection with others in the group, future plans in general, and specific goals and avenues for continuing each participant's work on issues related to being an adult child from a divorced family. Members may realize for the first time how deeply their parents' divorce has affected them (Nosanow et al., 1999).

**Evaluation of the Group**

One way to evaluate the effectiveness of the group experience is for participants to complete an individual, half-hour exit interview with the group facilitators about 1 week after the final session. This interview provides an opportunity for group members to reflect on what they have gained from the group experience as a whole and to obtain important feedback on the activities and processes of the group. Possible interview questions might include the following: How have you changed as a result of your experience in the group? What would you say you learned in the group? How was the group helpful in improving your relationships? How was the group helpful in your school work? How was the group helpful in creating a healthier lifestyle? Was there anything you expected to get in the group that you did not? Was there anything that you got from the group that you had not expected? Any other comments you would like to make about the group?

In addition, facilitators might select from among available process and outcome measures designed to assess group process, dynamics, and

outcomes (DeLucia-Waack, 1997). One possible measure that could be used is the Group Cohesiveness Scale (GCS) (Budman, Soldz, Demby, Davis, & Merry, 1993), which provides information to facilitators about the level of connectedness in a group and could be given early to help shape planned interventions. The Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (IIP) (Horowitz, Rosenberg, Baer, Ureno, & Vallasenor, 1988) assesses two behavioral areas significant for many adult children of divorce; namely, interpersonal skills related to control and affiliation. Other examples of outcome measures that could be used if this group were adapted for children and adolescents include the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (P-HSCS) (Piers, 1989; Piers & Harris, 1969) and the Children's Beliefs About Parental Divorce Scale (CBAPDS) (Kurdek & Berg, 1987). The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale could be used as an outcome measure to explore the self-attitudes of children and adolescents in grades 3 through 12 in the areas of behavior, intellectual and school status, physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, popularity, and happiness and satisfaction. The Children's Beliefs About Parental Divorce Scale could be used to measure children's pre- and postgroup beliefs about or understanding of their parents' divorce.

## DISCUSSION

An important issue for counseling practitioners to consider in designing and leading groups for young people from divorced families is the depth of alienation participants may feel related to emotional isolation around their parents' divorce. Participants may express relief on realizing their experience with their parents' divorce is normal (i.e., similar to the other group members). This concept is similar to Yalom's (1995) group therapeutic factor of universality. The implication for counselors relates to the importance of helping group participants identify with being a young adult from a divorced family, thus normalizing this part of their identity and reducing feelings of shame. In addition, counselors can play an integral role in providing emotional support and understanding for these clients who may never have felt understood and accepted in relation to issues regarding their parents' divorce.

Another issue that appears critical in group work with this population is the presence of a lack of spontaneity and increased need to control day-to-day events some adult children of divorce experience. The heightened responsibility they may assume due to their parents' involvement in the divorce combined with lack of control over their parents' choice of divorce may have contributed to a lack of flexibility. Bringing these issues out in the open in a counseling setting can help

clients gain awareness and set goals for the future regarding their desire to be more flexible as well as assertive about their needs.

Third, the desire for connectedness and difficulty with group cohesiveness may be particularly problematic for young adults from divorced families. These individuals may have problems trusting others that continue to impact their lives long after their parents' divorce. Counselors may need to be prepared for a longer period of relationship building at the beginning of counseling. Issues of trust in relationships may underlie many of these clients' presenting issues. In addition, lack of assertiveness and communication skills in general may compound these problems and need to be addressed as distinct issues.

Finally, participants of a short-term group for young adults from divorced families may realize for the first time the profound impact that their parents' divorce continues to have in their lives. Counselors need to be sensitive to the possibility that their parents' divorce may play a bigger role in their clients' behavior and choices than is reported by the client. Much can be done to identify the impact of parental divorce, normalize the current client situation, and potentially connect the divorce experience to current maladaptive coping behaviors.

The model presented for group work with young adults from divorced families describes an eight-session, psychoeducational, counseling group intervention. Significant factors related to being a young adult of divorce that need careful consideration when employing general group techniques have been discussed. The group experience of the authors underlines the importance of bringing young adults from divorced families together to reduce isolation, establish connectedness, and build a stronger sense of their own identity and empowerment. In addition, educating young adults from divorced families on topics such as assertiveness, communication skills, and self-esteem may give them some extra tools to build trust, intimacy, and enduring significant relationships in their lives.

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