

# A Coping Strategy in Adolescent with Parental Divorce

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**Abstract.** Parental divorce is one of the triggers of long-term stress and can have a negative impact on children. Therefore, adaptive coping strategies are needed in dealing with these stressors. This study aims to explore the coping strategies used by adolescents in dealing with parental divorce. The method in this study is qualitative with a phenomenological approach. The participants in this study amounted to 4 people with an age range of 18-20 years. Based on the results of the interview, there are five themes of coping strategies that emerged, namely: (1) Expressing emotions; (2) Establishing communication with parents, (3) Seeking help and support from others, (4) Interpreting parental divorce more positively, and (5) Accepting parental divorce. This research is based on the real experiences of the participants and the findings raise awareness about choosing adaptive coping strategies to minimize the negative impact of parental divorce. The results of this study can be used as a benchmark by families and practitioners to help divorced families.

**Keywords:** Adolescent, Coping, Parental Divorce.

## 1 Introduction

Divorce is the breakup of a marriage relationship (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2017). Data from Indonesia's Central Statistics Agency (BPS) shows that the divorce rate in Indonesia reached 448,126 cases in 2022 in various provinces in Indonesia. This number of cases has increased from previous years, namely 447,743 cases in 2021, 291,677 cases in 2020, and 438,013 cases in 2019. The most frequent factors causing divorce are continuous disputes and arguments and the economy.

The family as the first and main social group for children has an important role in every period of child development. The formation of a child's personality is influenced by the good and bad environment and family conditions in which he or she grows up. Divorce will indirectly change the role of each family member, the relationship between family members and the function of the family itself. The victims of this divorce are not only the married couple themselves but also the children of their marriage (Dahlia & Tartilla, 2020). In general, parents are better prepared to deal with divorce than children. In addition, children are often more affected by divorce than their parents (Czapiewski, 2014).

Parental divorce can occur when children are in the childhood, adolescent or adult age range. The effects of parental divorce on children are seen as an ongoing process that can affect children's subsequent development. A large number of previous family studies have shown that children of divorce tend to experience psychological, social, and academic difficulties than children raised in intact families (Sun, 2001). Similar results were also found by Sarbini (2014) in her research on the psychological conditions of children from divorced families with participants of children from divorced families who were aged 6-17 years. The results of this study show that the psychology of children from divorced families experiences negative impacts, such as low self-esteem towards their environment, temperament, and a prolonged sense of disappointment towards parents. Children of divorced parents often experience the disadvantage of experiencing vague traumatic pain that can last a lifetime (Czapiewski, 2014). Parental divorce is a traumatic stressor and needs to reframe the parent-child relationship (Amato, 2014; Anderson, 2018).

The researcher conducted initial interviews with three adolescents whose parents were divorced. Based on the interviews, the three adolescents considered the event of their parents' divorce very difficult to forget because it had a big impact on their social life. Some of them felt jealous of their friends with intact families, lonely, had difficulty accepting and forgiving their parents, and became more difficult to control their emotions. They were confused about how to manage the various emotions that arose because of the divorce. As a result, two out of three respondents vented their emotions by breaking things and trying to hurt themselves. While other respondents preferred to withdraw from their social environment and confine themselves to their rooms. This made it difficult for the respondents to complete their responsibilities at school.

Parental divorce also has an impact on the development of children when they reach adolescence. Adolescence is a transition period from childhood to adulthood and in it there is a process of self-discovery. Adolescence is a period full of "storms and mental stress", which is a time when there are major physical, intellectual and emotional changes in a person that cause sadness and indecision (conflict) in the person concerned, as well as causing conflict with their environment (Seifert & Hoffnung, 1987). Therefore, parents play an important role in guiding adolescents to face conflicts in their lives and find their identity. But unfortunately, parental attention and support are not necessarily obtained by adolescents from divorced families. Research by Hasim, Juliza, Mustafa, and Hashim (2015) states that dysfunctional parent-child relationships can increase the likelihood of adolescents committing crimes or problems with addiction. Adolescents who experience parental divorce tend to have no satisfaction in life, weak self-control, and no happiness (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). In addition, adolescence is a period of self-identity formation, so it is not easy for adolescents to tell people around them that they come from a divorced family. Other research explains the impact of divorce experienced by adolescents is the attitude of withdrawing and behaving unfriendly towards their family and environment and the impact of divorce will affect adolescents up to 10 or 15 years later (Kleinsorge & Covitz, 2012). Adolescents from families that are not intact due to parental divorce will try to adjust to their lives by developing feelings of insecurity, denial, shame, rejection from the family, blaming themselves, often feeling guilty, anxious, and being able to hate one of

their parents (Kasih, 2017; Magpantay, Malabrigo, Malijan, & Manarin, 2014; Miller, 2021).

Parental divorce in this case is a source of stress or stressor for a child who is a teenager. Folkman and Lazarus (1984) revealed that stress is caused because individuals are faced with internal and external situations that afflict them. Stressors are important to overcome because they disturb the balance of the body and will hinder individual developmental tasks (Bretch in Sunaryo, 2010). There are ways to deal with these stressful experiences, namely with coping strategies. Coping strategies are methods used by individuals in responding to environmental changes, problems or certain situations (Rizky T, 2014). Folkman and Moskowitz (in Santrock, 2007) define coping as an attempt to manage burdensome situations, expand efforts to solve life problems, and try to overcome or reduce stress.

Folkman and Lazarus (1984) classify coping strategies into two forms. Problem focused coping is coping that focuses on the problem. Individuals will learn new ways or skills to overcome problems and change the situation. While emotion focused coping is coping that focuses on emotions towards the stress they experience. When individuals are unable to change stressful conditions, individuals will tend to regulate their emotions. A study has found that problem-focused coping is believed to reduce the risk of mental health problems (Sandler, Tein, Mehta, Wolchik, & Ayers, 2000). Meanwhile, quantitative research conducted by Afifi, Huber, and Ohs (2006) revealed that the way of communication between adolescents and their parents is positively related to children's ability to deal positively with parental divorce. Research related to the psychological well-being of adolescents with divorced parents also shows that the use of effective coping strategies in dealing with stressors in the form of parental conflict and post-divorce changes can be a protective factor that affects adolescents in achieving psychological well-being (Aghniacakti, 2016).

This research focuses on coping strategies used by adolescents in dealing with their parents' divorce. Researchers used phenomenological methods to find out more about the life experiences of adolescents after their parents divorced. The purpose of this study is to find out how coping strategies used by adolescents in dealing with the experience of parental divorce.

## **2 Method**

The method used in this research is qualitative with a phenomenological approach. Patton (in Poerwandari, 2005) argues that the reason for choosing an approach in a study is tailored to the research problem and is best for answering the problem. The phenomenological approach was chosen to explore the experiences of each research participant related to coping strategies used in dealing with parental divorce.

The determination of research subjects in this study was carried out using purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling focuses on selecting cases (or individuals) that have certain information that can answer research questions (Patton, 2002). The criteria for participants selected in this study are: a) participants are in the adolescent age range,

which is between 15-21 years old, both male and female (Monks, Knoers, and Haditono, 2006), b) participants have divorced parents, when the divorce occurred in the range of 2-3 years ago, and c) willing to be a research subject and conduct interviews, by filling out an informed consent sheet. Based on these criteria, three female participants and one male participant were obtained. The participants were between 18-20 years old and lived with one parent for 2-3 years after their parents' divorce. All participants signed the informed consent, meaning that they allowed the researcher to conduct interviews related to their experiences. Each interview lasted 1 hour to 2 hours and was conducted on two to three occasions. The researcher conducted probing to obtain further explanations from the participants.

The data collection technique in this study used interviews in the form of semi-structured interviews. Before conducting interviews, researchers made interview guidelines to limit the topics discussed in this study. In general, the interview questions in this study were divided into four parts. In the first part, questions were asked to find out the participants' life experiences before their parents' divorce. Questions such as "How was your parents' relationship before the divorce?" or "What was the cause of their arguments?". The second part aimed to explore the participants' life experiences after their parents' divorce. Examples of questions in this section are "How do you feel after your parents divorce?" or "What are the changes in your life after your parents' divorce?" or "How is your relationship with your parents after the divorce?". The questions in the third section aimed to find out the ways participants used to adjust and cope with the stress of divorce. Questions such as "How did you cope with the pressure or stress caused by the divorce?" or "Who helped you cope with the stress?". In the final stage of the interview, the questions asked aimed to find out the participant's acceptance of his life after his parents divorced, such as "How do you think about your life now?" or "What do you think now if you remember your parents' divorce?"

The interview results were then converted into interview transcripts. Furthermore, the researcher analyzed the data. According to Creswell (2008), the coding method of data analysis is (1) Looking for the overall meaning, choose the most important and shortest; (2) Ask what the data convey and look for the meaning contained in the information; (3) Make coding of each sentence by choosing topics according to the setting and context, participants' perspectives, participants' ways of thinking, and so on. (4) After coding, continue with grouping codes that have the same meaning. This code will later form themes/patterns that contain the main idea/idea. (5) Determine five to seven themes/patterns. There are themes that have been suspected by researchers before and there are also themes that emerge during data analysis / when research is made.

The data validity testing technique carried out in this study is by triangulating the data. Researchers not only interview subjects to obtain data, but also involve other sources or *significant others* to strengthen the subject's answers. This aims to make the data obtained reliable because it is not only obtained from one source.

### 3 Findings & Discussion

Based on the interviews conducted with four respondents, five themes were identified as coping strategies of adolescents with divorced parents. The five themes are a) Emotional validation; b) Establishing communication with both parents; c) Seeking help and support from others; d) Interpreting parents' divorce more positively; e) Accepting parents' divorce.

#### **Expressing emotions**

Research participants revealed that their initial response after learning about their parents' divorce was anger and sadness. They validated their emotions by crying, throwing things, self-harming, and writing diaries.

*"For a month after the divorce, I still cried a lot and stayed alone in my room. I had mixed feelings. Anger, disappointment, sadness, shame, hatred and others. I often wrote in my diary to vent all my emotions because I didn't know who to tell." (Participant LN, personal communication, April 5, 2024)*

*"Honestly, I was really angry with my parents at first because they fought so much that they got divorced. I often got angry, cried, threw things, and had thoughts of hurting myself. My friends knew about it and encouraged me to seek professional help. I learned better ways to express my emotions, I no longer break things and hurt myself." (Participant MN, personal communication, April 6, 2024)*

#### **Establish communication with both parents**

After the divorce, all participants still communicated with their parents. All participants' mothers did not restrict participants from meeting their fathers. Participants said that their relationship with their parents was closer after the divorce. The absence of conflict between the two parents after the divorce also made the mother and father more focused on raising the participants.

*"Now I feel like my mom and dad are more attentive. They make me a priority. As much as possible, they try to make time to be present at my important moments. I'm more open to tell them anything, I don't have to cover up the badness of one of them." (Participant BG, personal communication, April 7, 2024)*

*"I spend most of my days with my mom, so I have a closer relationship with her. For half a year I lost contact with my father, because I was still angry with him. Slowly my mom gave me understanding until finally I could forgive my father and started communicating with him. Even though my father now lives out of town, almost every day I communicate with him via chat or video call. We ask each other how we're doing or tell him about the day's activities." (Participant LN, personal communication, April 5, 2024)*

#### **Seeking others' help and support**

All four participants actively sought emotional support and sought help from others as one of the problem-solving strategies. Participants LN and MN admitted that support

from friends played an important role in getting through these difficult times. MN's friend was willing to accompany her to see a professional to get a better psychological condition. In addition to friends, participants BG and AL received emotional support from people who also grew up in non-intact families, namely siblings and the community of children from non-intact families.

*"What makes me happy is that I met the right friends. They were the most instrumental in helping me get through difficult times when my parents had just divorced. When I was sad and needed a friend to talk to, they were always there and encouraged me to keep going. They made me not ashamed of coming from an incomplete family" (Participant LN, personal communication, April 5, 2024).*

*"I went to a psychologist for a month. At first my friend accompanied me to the psychologist and then my mom accompanied me. It turned out that it wasn't just me who needed help, my mom also received therapy. I learned how to manage my emotions and forgive my parents. I am very grateful that I met good people who helped me through difficult times." (Participant MN, personal communication, April 6, 2024)*

*"I often tell my mom. We often share our feelings and strengthen each other. I also have a sister who is always there for me. We often go to the mall, watch movies, or just buy coffee so that we don't continue to be sad." (Participant BG, personal communication, April 7, 2024)*

*"It's not easy for me to make friends because I'm an introvert. But I felt I needed a place to share because it's not good to keep it all to myself. So I looked for a community of children from broken homes. I met a lot of friends in that community who also felt the same way I did. From them I learned many ways to handle stress and make peace with my parents." (Participant AL, personal communication, April 7, 2024)*

### **Making sense of parental divorce more positively**

Past events experienced by participants were able to be interpreted more positively by participants, one of which was the divorce of their parents. Participant AL felt that thanks to this incident he was able to know the problems that can occur in married life and how to avoid them. Other participants also became stronger and more independent after facing their parents' divorce. Participant MN revealed that she took many lessons from her parents' divorce after learning to manage her thoughts to be more positive.

*"I tried to see my parents' divorce from a different perspective. I know what family problems are so I know how to avoid them so they don't happen in my married life. I also feel stronger than my other friends." (Participant AL, personal communication, April 7, 2024)*

*"After the divorce, I feel like I learned a lesson about married life. What has been destined must be accepted as it is, even though at first I found it difficult to accept this situation. I learned from a psychologist to try to change my mindset to be more*

*positive. So finally I was able to take lessons from my parents' divorce." (Participant MN, personal communication, April 6, 2024)*

*"My parents' divorce initially seemed like my life was ruined. But I learned a lot from this event. I learned to adapt to uncomfortable situations. I learned to live more independently because I now live with my mom. I also didn't think I could make my own money from selling smoothies. I realized that I'm stronger than I thought I was. If my parents hadn't divorced, I might still be a spoiled child today." (Participant LN, personal communication, April 5, 2024)*

### **Accepting parents' divorce**

The acceptance process related to parental divorce was initially not easy for all participants. The feelings of anger towards parents that participants initially felt when they decided to divorce have disappeared in the participants along with the participants' desire to accept their current condition. Seeing their parents happy despite their different paths, participants BG and AL believed that divorce was the right choice for them. Likewise, participant LN tries to continue to be grateful for her current life.

*"I don't get angry anymore. I always assumed that my parents were incompatible. My parents have been separated for five years so I'm used to sharing my time with my two parents and not much has changed in my relationship with them. I think divorce is the best decision for them and for me." (Participant BG, personal communication, April 7, 2024)*

*"The feeling of regret is gone. Now I am more grateful, from the divorce it turned out to shape my character which is now resilient. Although I still have bad traits, there are many positive ones. I am grateful." (Participant LN, personal communication, April 5, 2024)*

*"By now, I've accepted my mother and father for who they are, so it's easier to accept my current condition. We can't choose what kind of parents we want to be born to, it's all fate. My parents got married when they were too young so they weren't wise enough to figure things out when they had differences of opinion. So they fought a lot. It's better for them to separate so that mom and dad don't hurt each other and they can be happy even though their paths are different." (Participant AL, personal communication, April 7, 2024)*

Not only was it the right decision for her parents, participant MN realized that her parents' divorce made her psychological condition better than when she often saw her parents fighting.

*"At first I couldn't accept my parents getting divorced. I used to cry in my room every day when they fought. I also felt that the world was unfair. But now I realize that my psychological condition is better after they divorced." (Participant MN, personal communication, April 6, 2024)*

## Discussion

Santrock (2003) revealed that most adolescents initially experience considerable stress when their parents' divorce and they face the risk of behavioral problems. A child's ability to adjust varies depending on the coping used by the child in dealing with stressors, which in this discussion is parental conflict and changes that occur after parental divorce. Baron and Byrne (2003) define coping as an individual response to overcome problems, the response is in accordance with what is felt and thought to control, tolerate and reduce the negative effects of the situation at hand. The coping behavior carried out by adolescents whose parents are divorced aims to reduce stressful conditions and painful feelings of distress and adjust to unpleasant events or realities.

Adolescents with divorced parents usually experience difficulties in accepting their parents' divorce in the early stages of divorce (Du Plooy and Van Rensburg, 2015). This idea is in line with the results of the study which showed that all participants felt a wide range of emotions and found it difficult to accept their parents' decision at the beginning of their parents' divorce. Researchers have found that parental divorce is associated with anger (Matters, 2011; Woods, 2008), resentment (Woods, 2008), anxiety (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), loneliness (Matters, 2011), and low self-esteem (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). Research suggests that one contributing factor to children's feelings is parental conflict before, during, and after separation (Galvin et al., 2012; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007).

The first theme of coping strategies is expressing emotions that arise related to parental divorce. In the early period after divorce, adolescents will generally choose problem-solving strategies that focus on their emotions. They try to express the various emotions they feel, both in adaptive and maladaptive ways. Lazarus and Folkman (in Sarafino, 1998) suggest that people tend to use an *emotion focused coping* approach when they believe that they cannot do anything to change stressful conditions.

Establishing communication with parents after divorce is the second coping strategy theme. Parental divorce will make changes in communication, changes in the amount of physical time spent together between parents and children, changes in family roles and so on. Children who maintain intense communication with their parents can help them develop the ability to solve problems, cope with stress, and adjust to adverse situations (James, 2018). Close relationships with parents are important in adolescent development because these relationships will be carried over time to influence the formation of new relationships (Santrock, 2003). Afifi, Huber, and Ohs (2006), stated that the amount of empathy and affection that parents convey to their children when they tell their stories can contribute to their ability to cope with stress. In addition, research shows that maintaining a good relationship with parents after divorce is an effective coping strategy (Du Plooy & Van Rensburg, 2015; Ijaz P Prof & Zakir Prof, 2020).

The third coping strategy theme used by adolescents in dealing with parental divorce is to seek support from others, such as friends, relatives, counselors/psychologists, and the community. Social support means the interaction of individuals with the environment, which aims to reduce the negative consequences of stressful events (Cohen, 2004). Social support is an important determinant in efficiently coping with trauma (Ogińska-Bulik, 2013). Hortacsu (in Rice & Dolgin, 2002) revealed that the

main need during adolescence is to build relationships with others with whom one can share common interests. Communities or groups also serve as an important source of information (Santrock, 2003). The presence of friends who both have the experience of being raised with divorced parents can indirectly strengthen children, where children will feel no longer alone and make it easier for children to share feelings, problems, and express themselves. In addition, seeking help from professional experts greatly helps the individual process of accepting traumatic events in his life. Ehrenberg et al. (2006) found that counselors/therapists, friends, and extended family are the three best places to seek help.

The fourth theme of coping strategies is to interpret parental divorce more positively. Adolescents with divorced parents try to find lessons or interpret the divorce positively. Some children reported feeling grateful for the new opportunities they got because of their parents' divorce, such as positive lifestyle changes and the formation of a more resilient personality (Hetherington, 2003; Woods, 2008). Making a more positive meaning of divorce is one of the meaning-focused coping strategies (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004), which emphasizes the importance of positive emotions in the stress process and seeing the positive aspects in difficult life experiences in order to accept the current situation as it is.

The fifth theme of coping strategies is acceptance. The results showed that over time adolescents with divorced parents were able to accept their parents' divorce. Strong and DeVault (1989) stated that adolescents find divorce traumatic, but some of them feel relieved that their parents are separated. After the divorce, they tend to see parental divorce as a good idea because they live at home without parental conflict. Research shows that parental conflict has a negative impact on children rather than the divorce itself (Ahrons, 2007; Bernstein, 2007). People must accept and forgive in order to see their traumatic experiences as good lessons to grow into better people in life (Griffin et al., 2016; Jaufalaily & Hima, 2017). This shows that adolescents have used adaptive coping strategies by accepting the conditions that occur in their families.

## **4 Conclusion**

Parental divorce does not always have a bad impact on children. One factor that can minimize the negative impact is by choosing the right coping strategy. Based on the results of the study, there are five themes of coping strategies applied by adolescents in dealing with parental divorce, namely: (1) Expressing emotions; (2) Establishing communication with parents, (3) Seeking help and support from others, (4) Interpreting parental divorce more positively, and (5) Accepting parental divorce. The study also identified that adolescents in divorced families who had the experience of seeking professional counseling had better relationships with their parents compared to those who were not exposed. Therefore, the researcher recommends that counseling services be promoted for adolescents from divorced families to help manage emotions, develop adaptive coping strategies and foster good relationships with their parents after divorce.

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