

Divorced Fathers' Perceptions of Parental Disclosures about Divorce-related Topics to Children

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Overview

- Background
- Current Study
- Methods
- Findings and Discussion
- Limitations
- Implications and Future Directions



Background

- Divorce as a prevalent experience (Eickmeyer, 2016)
- Process of divorce as a stressful transition (e.g., Rodriguez, 2014)
- Parental disclosures as a type of communication for stress reduction (McManus & Nussbaum, 2011) or stress addition (Afifi et al., 2007)
- Parental inappropriate disclosures in post-divorce families (e.g., Afifi 2003)
- Most PID studies have sampled mothers mainly or only (Koerner et al., 2002).



Current Study

- The purpose was to examine divorced fathers' perceptions of parental disclosures about divorce-related topics to children.
- Communication privacy management theory (Petronio, 2002)
 - Benefits and disadvantages of sharing private information
- Research Questions
 - What are divorced fathers' experiences and observations about parental disclosures?
 - What do divorced fathers think about these disclosures?



Methods

- Semi-structured interviews with 20 divorced fathers
 - Sharing legal of physical custody
 - Having at least one child between the ages of 10 and 18
 - Understanding and reading English
- The majority of the participants ($n = 17$) recruited from an educational parenting program for divorcing and separating parents
- Grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015)



RQ1: Fathers' Experiences about Disclosing

- Parents' dating relationships (95%)
- Divorce-related matters (80%)
- Coparenting issues (80%)
- Mundane aspects of everyday life (75%)
- Badmouthing the other parent (70%)
- Disclosures about the father's life and his views on various subjects (50%)
- Positive or affectively neutral thoughts about the ex-wife (50%)
- Disclosures to children that put the child in the middle of parental arguments (35%)
- Parental complaints about work and family responsibilities (30%)
- Disclosures to children about financial issues and concerns (30%)



Fathers' Experiences about Disclosing (Cont'd)

- Parental disclosures as a prevalent phenomenon
 - Fathers, their ex-spouses, their divorced parents, and other fathers as disclosers

“He [my son] knows all about [money]. . . Michelle [my ex-spouse] hates that I involve them in the court proceedings. She thinks they’re too young for it. But I’m raising some smart kids and they’re involved in what we’re doing. I show them the amount of money, “Your mom’s made me spend an extra \$12,000 this year through court systems that could have gone to you guys.””



Fathers' Experiences about Disclosing (Cont'd)

- Parental disclosures as a dilemma

“I wasn’t sure how to approach that situation [communicating the divorce with his children]. I really honestly had no idea what was the proper thing to do for long-term mental health. I had no idea what was the proper thing to do for the short term for my legal health. I mean, what do I tell this kid? Your mom’s a jerk, I’m a jerk, we’re being jerks to each other, and you’re stuck in the middle...”



Fathers' Experiences about Disclosing (Cont'd)

- Disclosing strategies
 - Transparency
 - Limiting
 - Concealment
 - Waiting
 - Unified-front
 - Involving

"I don't recall really saying anything to the kids about it for several months. It was actually fairly convenient for me as a recently divorced father to be in somewhat of a long-distance relationship because I was going through issues with the kids blaming me for all this. Now would not be the time to introduce somebody else."

Waiting Approach



RQ2: Fathers' Views about Disclosing

- Inappropriate disclosures
 - Badmouthing, messages that put the child in the middle, coparenting issues, parent's personal concerns, parents' sexual behaviors and sexual relationships, and messages that unduly emphasize the parent-child relationship
 - Less concerned about their disclosures than disclosures of the same topics done by other parents



Fathers' Views about Disclosing (Cont'd)

“My children were not mature enough to understand that [sexual relations]. It created more confusion, more questions, inappropriate questions because they didn't understand and weren't equipped to understand . . . all the things that go along with sexual relations . . .”

“They [my children] have been very active with my partners that I've had in the past. . . They witnessed their dad, you know, being with another man, sleeping with another man as far as, you know, at night. That is not something I've restricted. I've always been appropriate. I always tell them whatever I would have done with their mother in front of them I would do with Mike, Chen, or James in front of them as well.”



Fathers' Views about Disclosing (Cont'd)

- Disclosures judged to be appropriate
 - Mundane things in everyday life, positive or affectively neutral thoughts about the other parent, self-disclosures about the father's life and his views about things, and financial concerns

“I’ll try to find some way to mention it [a positive thing about my ex-spouse] — “You know, you guys are lucky to have the mother you have.” Or, you know, . . . I made sure I complimented Mom’s cooking on that cause she’s a damn good cook... It’s just [I] try to find something of the day and highlight the positive of it.”



Fathers' Views about Disclosing (Cont'd)

- Contextual disclosures
 - Parents' new dating relationships and divorce-related information

“I’ve been very careful not to say [my ex-spouse] cheated on me. It’s just like she found someone else and, you know... They’ll take that as well, if there’s something wrong, but that’s for them to decide based on their morals and their upbringing and their thing... So I try not to express judgment in that. Give the facts.”



Limitations

- Homogeneous sample
 - Availability of resources
 - Father engagement
 - Expectations regarding parental disclosures



Implications

- Implications for research
 - The inclusion of divorced fathers in research on parent-child communications
 - How parents' disclosing approaches are associated with risks and benefits
- Implications for practice
 - Psychoeducation that challenges parents' perceptual biases
 - Strengthening coparenting relationships

