



# How Adolescents Deal With Divorce

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## Abstract

Millions of youth have divorced or separated parents, and many youth experience behavior problems or cope with this family transition in unhealthy ways. At the same time, evidence-based programs to help youth cope with their parents' divorce are limited. Moreover, research with contemporary youth that was designed to inform such programming is further scarce. The purpose of this study was to explore emerging adults' ( $N = 141$ ) perceptions of the challenges, as well as their coping methods throughout their own parents' divorce-related transitions. Themes surrounding feeling caught in the middle between parents and attempting to maintain contact with both parents emerged from the data as two of the most commonly coded categories. Participants also frequently reported struggles regarding parent's new romantic relationships or the remarriage of their parents and feeling sad, depressed, or experiencing other negative emotions. The most frequently mentioned coping aid was friends, particularly someone with a similar experience dealing with parental divorce. These data provide insight into the types of topics and coping strategies that could form the basis for developing outreach efforts for helping youth who are coping with their parents' divorce.

## Research Questions

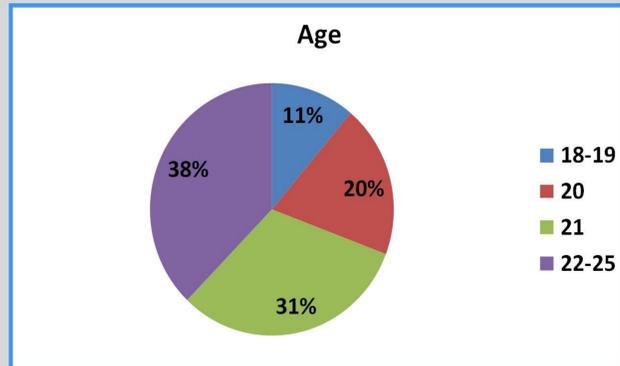
What are common challenges that youth experience while going through their parents' divorce-related transitions?

How do youth cope with their parents' divorce?

## Method

To address these questions, a purposive sampling method was used in which college students recruited individuals to participate in an online survey as part of a class project. The survey was created to explore emerging adults' preferences for online divorce education content and design. Emerging adults (18-25 year olds) were eligible to participate if their parents were divorced, they had online access, and they read English. The survey included demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity), as well as age at the time of their parents' divorce and how they accessed the Internet (e.g., cell phone or desktop).

## Participant Demographics



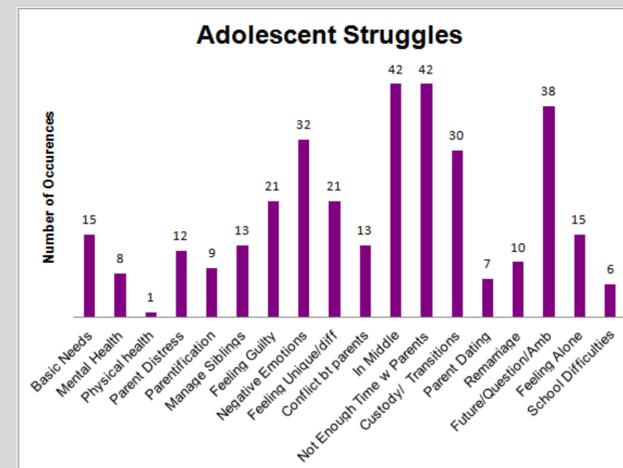
## Individual Characteristics of Participants as Percentage by Sex

Ethnicity	Male N = 24	Female N = 117
African American or Black	4%	3%
Asian or Asian American	8%	5%
Hispanic, Latina, or Latino	17%	16%
Caucasian or White	66%	74%
Biracial	4%	2%
<b>Age when Parents Divorced</b>		
0-5 years old	33%	25%
6-11 years old	33%	31%
12-14 years old	17%	25%
15-17 years old	13%	9%
18-25 years old	4%	10%
<b>Perceptions of Parents' Divorce Conflict</b>		
High conflict	44%	66%
Low conflict	39%	26%
Other?	17%	9%
<b>Parent Education</b>		
Mom - Less than bachelor's degree	43%	49%
Dad - Less than bachelor's degree	43%	55%

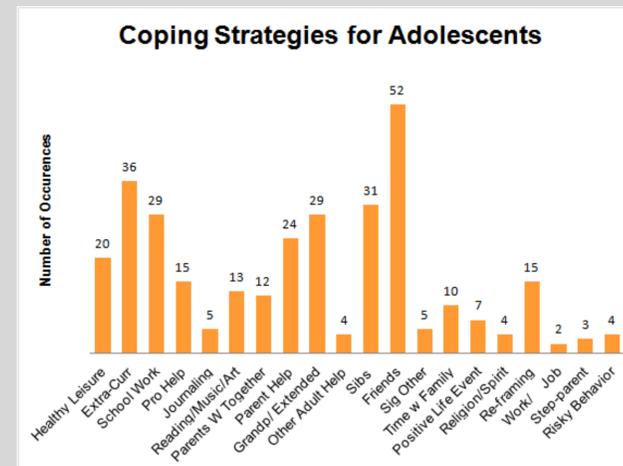
In addition, the survey contained several items designed to quantitatively assess youths' needs and preferences for receiving support following the divorce of their parents. The current analysis, however, focuses on the open-ended questions in the survey where youth were asked to describe major challenges following the divorce and the ways they coped. Themes and categories emerged through open-coding and constant comparative analysis.

## Results

The following categories emerged from the data and represent the most common struggles that youth faced through their parents' divorce and the transition period that followed.



The following categories emerged from the data and represent the most common coping strategies that adolescents utilized during their parents' divorce.



## Examples of Adolescent Struggles

- "Feeling like I was the only one going through it."
- "My mom moved far away, I only got to see her every other weekend."
- "Sometimes I feel awkward in school having to explain to people that my parents were divorced."
- "Being the go-between communication [for both] parents."
- "Fights between parents [and] being caught in the middle of it."

## Examples of Coping Strategies

- "My parents sat me down and explained everything to me about what was happening and answered all my questions."
- "Spending time with friends who were going through the same thing [divorce]."
- "School work and school activities kept my mind off the divorce."
- "My grandparents' house is my favorite place to go, they were like second parents to us."

## Implications for Outreach and Further Research

Our results revealed that emerging adults report a high likelihood to seek information from parents, siblings, and friends, and therefore less formal sources of information. As such, we argue that program developers should foster innovative ways to reach and engage youth with evidence-based divorce education content. For example, education via social media is one strategy for reaching youth as it is less formal than a workshop or support group, and it would provide opportunities for youth to give and receive information from friends, family, or other trusted sources they already describe as utilizing to cope. Future research should include further analysis of challenges and coping at various ages or stages of their parents divorce or separation. Moreover, longitudinal designs would allow for a better understanding of the risk and resilience factors associated with divorce challenges and coping strategies.

## Acknowledgments

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