

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Parents' experiences of their child's participation in divorce groups in Norway: A phenomenological study

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**Abstract**

**Background:** Children and youth who experience divorce are found to have increased risk of emotional and behavioural adjustment problems. Different prevention programmes have been developed to help and support children. Previous studies have focused on the child or the group leader's experience with divorce groups, but studies describing parent's experience are missing. The aim of this study was to explore parents' experiences of their child's participation in divorce groups.

**Methods:** An inductive, qualitative and descriptive design was applied with philosophical orientation in naturalistic inquiry based on the outlines of a phenomenological perspective. Two fathers and three mothers from two different counties in Norway participated whereof four of them were interviewed twice. Systematic text condensation was used for the analysis.

**Results:** Three themes emerged from the analysis: encouraging the child, missing communication and challenging situations. Parents described how they encouraged the child to attend divorce groups and hoped they would gain a deeper understanding of their parents' divorce and their own feelings. Missing communication relates to lack of information about the groups from the school, the group leader and from the child. Missing information was found to be a challenge for the parents and made them think that the divorce group was beneficial for the child but maybe not always for the family. Parents described challenging situations due to the divorce, and they struggled to understand their child and their own behaviour.

**Conclusions:** The opportunity for the child to talk to other children in the same situation in divorce groups was positive for the parents. To be beneficial for both children and their parents, structured information and cooperation among the school, the child and both parents are important. The knowledge from this study can support the development and use of intervention programmes in the future.

**KEYWORDS**

child, divorce, interviews, parents, qualitative research

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## BACKGROUND

Children and youth who experience parental separation due to divorce or cohabitation dissolution are found to have increased risk of emotional and behavioural adjustment problems [1]. Earlier research has focused primarily on the divorce experience itself and the consequences for the involved [2]. Parental separation proves to be stressful for most children and can affect their health as adults [1, 3–5]. Studies from recent years also include other aspects that can influence health and self-conceptual problems such as parent–child relations [2], custody arrangements [6–9] and children's experiences [7, 10].

To help and support children who experience parental split, different prevention programmes have been developed to prevent negative psychosocial consequences [11]. International studies have described the impact of intervention programmes for children of divorced parents, giving children and young people ability to handle their new life situation, free them from guilt and help them develop coping strategies [12, 13]. In Norway, school nurses started developing a divorce group programme in 2004 [14, 15] and it is described as a selective preventively intervention for children and young people who have experienced parental split and is offered by the school nurse during school hours. The intention of the divorce groups is to support children through meetings with peers having the same experiences. The intervention is based on health promotion principles and the concept of salutogenesis [14, 15] supporting the children to cope with their situation, freeing them from feelings of guilt and helping them find coping strategies [16]. The salutogenic theory by Antonovsky [17] describes one core element: the sense of coherence including three components; comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness as the ability to identify and use one's own health resources and reflects a person's capacity to cope and respond to stressful situations.

According to Forsetlund and Vists report [11], children who participated in divorce groups experienced less anxiety symptoms and improved adaptation to the situation surrounding family break up compared to children who did not attend. Norwegian studies and reports have described children's experience of living in two homes after their parent's divorce [7], the meaning of participating in divorce groups [18], divorce groups as health-promoting measures [19] and how group leaders experience the value and effectuating divorce groups [20]. However, knowledge of parents' experiences of their child's participation in divorce groups which is important for evaluating divorce groups is lacking. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore parents' experiences of their child's participation in divorce groups.

## METHODS

### Design

A qualitative descriptive design with an inductive approach was chosen, with philosophical orientation in naturalistic inquiry, based on the outlines of a phenomenological perspective [21–23].

### Sampling and data collection

A purposive sample was applied. The inclusion criteria were parents' whose child had attended divorce groups within the previous 2 years. No exclusion criteria were set up. The administration for school nurses in 11 different counties in Norway was contacted and 3 of them responded that they would contribute to the sampling. Five school nurses, from two major cities and one small town in Norway, who had been group leaders for divorce groups, sent out written information letters by e-mail to a total of 51 available parents in the counties, and of these, six parents responded. Two fathers and four mothers showed interest in the study and received two information letters, one with information addressed to them and one letter to their child with age-appropriate information about the purpose of the study. One mother never answered and was therefore not included. The participants came from two large cities, in two different counties in Norway, aged 35–45 years and had been divorced between 2 and 7 years ago, and were not in marital conflict with their former partner. Each participant had between two and four children and altogether experiences from children attending seven different divorce groups.

Before the interviews began, the five participants were informed about the aim of the study and gave informed consent. All five participants were offered to take part in a follow-up interview, one of whom declined on the grounds that there was nothing more to add. Four of the participants were interviewed a second time, 3 months after the first interview. All nine interviews were conducted by the first author (D-EU), not acquainted with the participants, through Voice over Internet Protocol [24], using Teams, in November–December 2020. For the five first interviews, a semi-structured interview guide was used with three open-ended questions. The content in the interview guide was built on an interview guide used in an earlier study about lived experience of teenagers' participation in divorce groups [18]. Although the interview was planned to be unstructured, three overall questions were used to get a comprehensive picture of the perceived phenomenon from each parent. Each interview started with the opening question: “What was

your experience of your child's participation in the divorce group?". Other questions included "What impact do you feel this participation has had on your child in retrospect?" and "How do you think the child's participation in the group has affected the family?". Follow up-questions such as "Please talk more about that" and "What was your experience of that?" were used to a greater or lesser extent depending on how the interview proceeded. In the second interviews, data from the first interviews were individually elaborated, by using the same questions in the semi-structured interview guide to a certain extent. However, the follow-up interview made it possible for the parents to extend and reflect on the content of the first interview, which contributed to use of the questions in a slightly different way. In phenomenology, it is therefore not wrong to deviate from the interview guide, rather it is encouraged to follow the informants in their stories [25]. All interviews took place at a time chosen by the participants when they were at home. The interviews lasted between 25 and 50 min. All digitally recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author (D-EU).

## Data analysis

Systematic text condensation was used to analyse data material as a four-step modified version of Malterud [26]. The purpose of the phenomenological analysis was to develop knowledge about the informants' lived experiences and the world of life within the specific field [26]. In the first step, each interview was read by three of the authors (D-EU, RS and IKH) to get an overall impression of the content and to find preliminary themes. Thereafter, meaning units describing the participants' experiences of their child participating in divorce groups were identified and marked and the text was organised into code groups by the first author (D-EU) and then discussed in consensus with two of the authors (RS and IKH). Next, the first author (D-EU) identified subgroups in each code group, and the meaning units in all subgroups were summarised and condensed and were thereafter discussed with two of the authors (RS and IKH) until consensus was reached. Condensates formed the basis for the final analytic text. Finally, three of the authors (D-EU, RS and IKH) read and approved the analysis, and investigator triangulation involving several researchers was used to uphold the trustworthiness [27]. As a final check for confirmation of the analysis, one of the authors (H-ÅP) read all the transcripts and took part in the analysis process and the interpretations of the findings. Quotations were applied to elucidate the participants' experiences. To ensure confidentiality, the participants' and children's name and sex

was pseudonymised. Examples of the analytical procedure are given in Table 1.

## RESULTS

This qualitative study gave voice to parent's experiences of their child's participation in divorce groups such as the importance for the children to talk to others in similar situations by attending these groups. The parents were overall satisfied with the divorce groups, however, lack of communication and information was described as a barrier to increased cooperation between the child and the parent. Three themes emerged from the parents' experiences: encouraging the child, missing communication and challenging situations.

### Encouraging the child

Parents encouraged their child to attend divorce groups and the most important reason was that they found it important that the child had their own forum to talk about the divorce. Parents described that they previously had no knowledge about divorce groups and did not know that the school arranged them. When their child was offered by the school to participate in a divorce group, they appreciated it and supported their child to attend. The parents were aware that disadvantageous situations might occur when their child talked about the divorce and their behaviour and emotions, but they still thought it was a good idea.

Parents described that they thought that their child's attendance would be a positive experience for the child and the family. They described the importance of their child having a place to talk about their feelings and the divorce together with other children who were in a similar situation. The parents hoped that their child would gain an increased ability to express their thoughts and needs. The parents also wished that their child could formulate their own story, would understand what had happened and could find ways forward. They hoped that their child's understanding would increase by hearing other children's stories and experiences:

"I hoped something would show up, because my daughter would not talk to the school nurse about her wellbeing herself. I understood attending the groups was very fun. At first, I thought it was because of the cookies and drinks. But she told me she learned a lot from the experience. I did not realize that earlier. It was a relief that she came

TABLE 1 Example of the analysis process.

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning unit	Code	Theme
Regardless, I think it's a nice offer. I think I might have been more uncertain if he hadn't been in the group in some way. It has been a security that he has been there then.	Feeling optimistic about the opportunity for the child to participate in the groups.	Positive to and safe with participation	Encouraging the child
I found it very positive, that she seemed very happy and satisfied when she had been there those days and that it was a nice experience. That it was social and a bit of cozy, a break from everyday school life. In addition, the fact that she got to talk about things when being in the group.	Positive to the child's response to attend the group which contributed to benefits like social interaction, a break from school life and the opportunity to talk with others.	Acknowledged the benefits with the groups	Encouraging the child
When I called the school nurse after the group was over and asked a little if she could say something, it was like no there is nothing to say. So it was nothing, in a way I didn't get any substance out of asking for a little more of that kind of feedback on my child.	In contact with the school nurse there was no information given and a lack of feedback on my child.	Little information from the school/health nurse	Missing communication
I hear that there are many people who have used the word confidentiality, and who have taken it very seriously that what is being talked about here, we should not talk about outside, so they take it very seriously then, and at the same time I think a little about that, it limits a bit. As a parent, we don't get to know what might be good to talk about a little more at home.	Confidentiality is seriously taken among the child, which limits the discussion with the parent at home about aspects that are discussed in the group.	Limited information about the group discussions	Missing communication
I think it is positive that she is informed about what rights she has, and that she has the right to co-determine. But of course, it's like that there is so much talk about it, and so much stuff is made, then, then it almost becomes like that, then you can create fertile ground for a conflict then. So of course, it's just that it's more convenient to be at home with the mother. Because there you are closer to, for example, your friends or something like that.	A positive aspect is that the child receives information about his rights, however, this can become a source of conflict as it results in an increase in the stay in the other parent's home.	Situations that can be difficult for one of the parents to cope with	Challenging situations
There is a new person in my world whom they have not heard of and whom they have not met. And they probably won't meet her for a while. But I'm going to say she exists.	A new partner is present but has not been introduced to the children.	Introducing a new partner can be a demanding task	Challenging situations

home so happy. It was nice that it could be like that in between everything else that was so hard.”

(Parent 4, interview 1)

Parents also described that they valued that the school was the organiser of the groups. They appreciated that the

groups were run by a neutral person whom the child felt comfortable with. They expressed that the children were positive to attend the group and described it as a good place to meet others and they appreciated that information in the group was kept secret. Parents described that their child had expressed that divorce groups should be offered to all children with two homes:

“Having the group at school is much easier and less scary than having it at an institution that not necessarily is a part of everyone’s life. At school they will attend together with children they go to class with and which they know well. I think that made it much easier to get a familiar and safe environment for the child.”

(Parent 2, interview 2)

## Missing communication

The parents described missing communication as affecting their experience with divorce groups from school, the group leader and their child. Parents described that they missed information in several ways and the information they got was limited and random. They described that only one of the parents got information about the divorce group through a note in their child’s school bag or by e-mail from the school or the school nurse. The parents did not know if it was a regular event, who got the opportunity to participate or if siblings were able to participate in the same or another divorce group at the same time.

The parents expressed that they did not receive information about what the divorce groups entailed. They missed information about the intention of the divorce group, and they did not know about the themes discussed during the different group sessions. They questioned that they were not supposed to know about what was discussed and had appreciated brief weekly information about their child’s attendance in the divorce group.

When information was given about the content in the group, the parents became aware of the discussed topics which gave a possibility to discuss and reflect together with the child and gave them a foundation, a sense of security and input on how to handle various challenges in the future:

“The second time we got nice reports from the group leader after each group meeting. It described the topic of the day and encouraged us to talk about it with our children. I thought that made a huge difference. It felt safe.”

(Parent 3, interview 1)

Parents who experienced negative changes linked to their child’s participation in the group were sceptical about the information their child might have been given in the group. The parents explained that it would be beneficial for them to have a person at school to contact about their questions and concerns. They wanted to know that

someone would contact them if their child had a hard time. They understood that all said in the group was kept confidential but questioned how they as parents could be in the position to help their child if confidentiality prevented them to get the information needed to support the child.

Parents described that their child did not share information, feelings or experiences from the divorce group. They were told that the child was prohibited from telling what they talked about in the group due to confidentiality. Parents were concerned about this, feared that their child was struggling and found the duty of confidentiality as an obstacle for them to talk with their child. The parents described how they missed information about what their child had shared in the group. One parent said:

“For my benefit, it would be nice to get some information about the child’s progress. How did the group leader experience my child’s progress, without not necessarily quoting him. Did the school nurse experience that it had been any change within him, did he open up in anyway? Was he especially vulnerable to any specific theme? I would love to know. I ask myself and wonder about it. But I would like to know.”

(Parent 3, interview 2)

## Challenging situations

Challenging situations were described during and after the divorce that affected the parents and their child in different ways. Parents explained that the time before, during and after the divorce was demanding and entailed several difficult situations. Even so, they strived and managed to take good care of their children. Parents expressed that the divorce and split custody gave them an opportunity to give the child their full attention every second week. They pointed out that the divorce allowed them to get involved in parts of the child’s life that earlier had been covered by the other parent. Parents experienced when they were sad, angry or said disadvantageous things about the other parent they felt they put their needs first and failed to understand their child.

Parents wanted to be able to talk to their child about difficult situations that arose due to the divorce and did not feel the divorced group helped in that way. Several concerns were present among the parents such as what their children thought about living in two homes and of their new partner. They did not want to add pressure on the child and described that it was hard to know if they



should ask questions, be supportive or take on a completely passive attitude.

Parents described how their child experienced loyalty conflicts between the two homes and that the child found it hard to leave the parent behind, the week they stayed in the other home. They observed that their child's behaviour changed a day or two before the move and that it took several days for them to settle again. Parents described that their child did not talk much about what happened in the other home due to the child was used to have two different lives in two different homes.

Parents also described that it was important for them that the child spent the same amount of time in both homes. Changes in agreed joint custody were described as unfortunate and disturbing to the family life. Parents questioned why such changes showed up when the child attended divorce groups and they blamed the group for the changes that happened:

“I might be critical, but I am wondering why he does not want to live here as much as before. If it is only because it is more convenient to stay at dad's place, because it is closer to friends and school, then I do not think it is a good enough reason to choose where he is going to live. I think it is positive that the child spends equal time with both parents. I don't think it's wrong to encourage that.”

(Parent 1, interview 2)

Parents described the difficulties they had communicating with their ex-partner and described that they only communicated through e-mail or text messages and did not talk in person. They knew the child would prefer them to talk and spend time together and had appreciated someone that could help the parents to improve their communication.

The parents emphasised that all information about the divorce groups should be given to both parents. If not, it might not reach the other parent, or it could be deficient. It was important that both parents attended if there was offered any counselling or tuition about how to support their child according to the divorce:

“The only information I got was through his mum. It was in bits and pieces. It was nothing. She said she had signed our son up for a program and questioned if it was okay. I applauded. That is all I know about the group.”

(Parent 1, interview 1)

Introducing new partners was described as hard and something that brought strong reactions from the child

as it changed the stability the families had gained. Seeing beyond their own happiness was described as difficult. Starting again with a new family was experienced as something good and therefore difficult to see how it might affect their child:

“They were scared I have hurt their fathers' feelings when I got a new partner. I had to tell them it was all good and that the dad and I did not want to be together anymore. They think it is sad, I totally get that. It breaks my heart.”

(Parent 4, interview 1).

## DISCUSSION

In this qualitative study, parents described their child's attendance in divorce groups as important for the child and that they had hoped it would be valuable for the parents as well. However, they did not find the groups as a mediator between the parents and the child.

This study showed that parents experienced insufficient information and communication about the divorce groups, which led to uncertainty and gave the parents a feeling of losing control over their child. Antonovsky [28] describes lack of control as a factor that affects a person's sense of coherence. The feeling of not being a part of what happened in the divorce group might affect the parent's level of motivation and commitment to the child's attendance in the group [28] and can lead to an increased gap between the child and their parents. Parents described that information about the groups was given only to one of the parents and that it was up to that parent to share the information with the other. A body of evidence underline that adverse childhood experiences such as divorce can contribute to negative health effects in adulthood [29–33]. Due to the parent's lack of communication, which can affect the child adversely, it is important that the school and the divorce group leader make sure that both parents get the information needed. Several studies have given attention to the importance of the child including a trusted adult in their protected network to turn to for support [34–36]. By involving the parents and keeping up the confidentiality for the child, divorce groups may bridge the gap between the child and their divorced parents and help them to understand their challenges and find resources to manage them. The group leader has a challenging but important role to facilitate the child's well-being and, if possible, reduce the harm a divorce can cause [34, 35]. Participating in divorce groups might help children in divorced families to find meaningfulness, comprehensibility

and manageability that can build a strong sense of coherence and a better quality of life [28]. Most children benefit from a co-parenting alliance that remains after the divorce and it is important to establish a cooperative parental relationship even if they find difficulties in redefining new boundaries in their relationship [37].

In the present study, parents described that they and their child had difficulties talking about issues concerning divorce, and many children describe the same experience in previous studies [7, 15, 38]. The parents appreciated when they got weekly updates from the divorce groups, and it gave them the possibility to talk to their child about the theme discussed in the group. In a study by Stokkebekk et al. [38], the children described that being silent was how they acted to keep balance in the family and the absence of discussion from the parents could be a strategy to protect the children from family conflict. More parental involvement in divorce groups could lead to children experiencing that their parents show more engagement in the work they put into the group and make it easier for them to talk to their parents. Meland et al. [39] describe that the most decisive factors predicting self-related health among adolescents were linked to confidence in communicating with both parents about bothersome issues. Participation and motivation strengthen the experience of meaning, which is the most important component in sense of coherence, according to Antonovsky [28].

The parents in the present study described that the child experienced loyalty conflicts between the two homes and that moving back and forth was a challenge for their child. This finding corresponds to the study of Johnsen et al. [7], where children described how they felt torn between their loyalty to their parents and stability in their life. Living in two homes can be stressful for children [7], but the parents in the present study described changes in agreed joint custody as unfortunate, disturbing and a result of the child's participation in divorce groups. In Eikrem and Sjøhelle Jevnes' [40] study, communication is highlighted by the parents as an important factor to maintain a consistent life for the children during and after a divorce. An investment in emotional work was emphasised as essential, due to feelings that exposing the children to experiences of a divorce was constantly present. The parents struggled with establishing cooperative co-parenting and it is not "a walk in the park" but they do it for the children [40]. Meland et al. [2] highlighted that the quality of communication with both parents improves the adolescents' self-related health and that it is important to sustain confident relationships between children and both parents. From that perspective, encouraging children to live with both parents seems to be important.

The parents expressed a wish to be involved in their child's participation in divorce groups. The group leader

can strengthen the experience of manageability and the parents' resources through good and adequate information about the themes discussed in the group. By providing help to parents and children at an early stage during the divorce process, the group leader might prevent unfavourable long-term changes in attachment styles and resilience [41]. Educating parents on the importance of being available to the child, communicate in a civilised manner with the ex-partner and protect the child from stormy encounters and instability are described as important [42]. Bertelsen [43] describes that parents' struggle for good parenthood can be explained in terms of symmetry. Equality in the parents' involvement with their children is central and one way to accomplish symmetry is through an intra-parental symmetrical alignment [43]. Children's participation in divorce groups raised several thoughts and feelings in the parents. The fact that the parents did not only highlight positive experiences can contribute to important knowledge for development of intervention programmes for children of divorced parents.

## Strengths and limitations

Various aspects of trustworthiness are discussed by using the concepts of credibility, dependability and transferability [44, 45].

Credibility [45] was ensured when the parents provided rich and clear descriptions of their experiences and quotations from the participants were used. The interviews were performed on digital platforms which made it possible to include parents from a wide geographic area. Parents choose date and time for the interview, and they were interviewed in their own home which might have made them comfortable and relaxed [24]. To deepen the parents' experiences and attain a greater understanding of their experiences, four of the parents were interviewed twice. By providing the opportunity for follow-up interviews, the parents were given time to ponder and reflect on what was discussed during the first interview and also got the possibility to describe their experiences over a longer period, which can be seen as a strength. Conducting follow-up interviews can strengthen credibility and ensure the rigour of the qualitative interviews [27, 45]. Face validity was applied, and four of the five interviewed parents got the opportunity to reflect on their initial interview [44, 45]. In this study, there was a variation between 2 and 7 years since the divorce took place. This can be seen as a strength as the parents may have reached different stages in how the divorce was handled emotionally. The experiences were still clear to the parents, but the time aspect may have affected the findings. Four researchers were involved in the analysis process and the data from the

existing sample size were considered to establish information power due to rich, varied and extensive experiences of the participants. In information power, the data quality is often more relevant than the number of participants [46].

Dependability [45] was ensured by describing the procedure of the study process transparently and with a detailed description of the context, a line-by-line approach and a systematic analyse of data. All authors were involved in the data analysis and contributed with different perspectives [45]. The phenomenological approach, based on a systematic text condensation, described the common meaning of the parents' lived experience of their child attending divorce groups and aimed to get the essence of the experience for all of them. The authors' preunderstanding includes experience in nursing in both paediatric (IH) and public health nursing (D-EU, RS and HÅ-P). Bracketing the authors' preunderstanding to get a fresh perspective of the phenomenon was done by constant reflections and discussions [47].

Two men were included, which can be seen as a strength and increase the transferability of the findings [44, 45] as both parents' perspectives are represented. One limitation was the difficulty in recruiting participants and the small sample size. Due to restrictions from NSD (no. 264374), only informants given by the school nurses could be used and no snowball sampling was allowed. Parents were all native Norwegians from bigger and smaller cities in Norway. All the parents included had higher education and none of them stated marital conflict with their ex-partner. Altogether this reduces the transferability of the study [45].

## CONCLUSIONS AND CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

Divorce groups can contribute to positive experiences for the parents because the child gets opportunities to talk to other children in a similar situation. This study adds knowledge from the parents' perspective which can support the development and use of intervention programmes in future. To make divorce groups useful for the whole family, parents should be involved in different ways, for example, in a joint evaluation of these kinds of groups to overcome communication problems. School nurses who implement divorce groups should support the parents with information adapted to different contexts and suggest involvement to facilitate for the parents and child to combine their separate worlds when living in different homes. Based on the findings in this study, further research is needed that deepen the understanding of parents' experiences of divorce groups in other groups with different cultures and nationalities. In line with the guidelines for

Master programme in public health nursing, the findings in this study can be relevant for education.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Study design: D-EU, RS and IKH. Data collection and analysis: D-EU, RS, IKH and HÅ-P. Manuscript preparation: D-EU, RS, HÅ-P and IKH. All authors read and approved the final analysis and manuscript.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The study was approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (reference number 264374). This study was guided by the Declaration of Helsinki's guidelines [48] and the General Data Protection Regulation [49]. Before the study began, the participants received both oral and written information about its purpose, the confidential treatment of the data and the voluntary nature of participation, including the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

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