

## Psychological counseling needs among middle and high school students with separated/divorced parents in Hue city

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### Abstract

**Background:** Adolescents who live in incomplete families may be vulnerable to various psychological effects, ranging from mild to complex. This study aims to examine the need for psychological counseling among high school students whose parents are separated/divorced, and to identify factors associated with this need. **Methods:** A cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted on 309 high school students with separated/separated/divorced parents in Hue City. **Results:** The percentage of high school students with separated/divorced parents who need psychological counseling accounted for 40.5%. The need for psychological consultation about life skills and future orientation accounted for 54.4%, appearance and physicality accounted for 37.9%, family relationships accounted for 33.0% and problems with reproductive health and heterosexual friendship accounted for 31.4%. Factors related to the need for psychological counseling include the time of parents' divorce, close friendship relationship, problems with friends, behavioral problems, violence, family quality and school quality, with a significance level of  $p < 0.05$ . **Conclusion:** High school students with separated/divorced parents need psychological counseling, so it is necessary to combine family and school to create a healthy environment for children.

**Keywords:** *psychological counseling, needs, students, parents separated/divorced.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, issues related to mental health among adolescents are increasing, especially for children in separated or separated/divorced families [1]. According to a study by Nguyen Thi Nhu Thuy and colleagues (2019) on the psychological injury of teenagers in disintegrated families in Ho Chi Minh City, 16.1% of minors have psychological manifestations [2]. Another study by Phillip A. Radetzki and colleagues (2020) also found that children whose parents were separated/divorced were more likely to be affected by adverse mental health outcomes than other children [3]. Children affected by separated/divorced parents are at high risk for a variety of mental health conditions including emotional and behavioral disorders, poor school performance, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, suicide attempt, distress, smoking, and substance abuse [4].

The fact shows that parents' divorce has significantly impacted teenagers' perception of the value of family and life. Teenagers tend to develop more emotions and behavior during the post-divorce period rather than before [5]. Different psychosocial, physical, and transitional disorders can occur in children affected by separated/divorced

parents [4]. Notably, at an older age, children tend to seek emotional compensation and sharing with a tendency to look outside of society, which can lead to many other psychosocial problems [6]. The behavior of children caused by divorce and conflict between parents depends on the child's age and stage of development of the child, and it is important to recognize them to intervene appropriately [7]. A study of psychology in the UK on adolescents with psychological distress showed that those who were advised had significantly reduced levels of psychological suffering than those in the control group [8]. Psychological counseling is an interactive process between a professional with counseling skills and ethics of the counseling profession and a person with mental health difficulties in need of assistance. Through the exchange, intimate sharing, empathy, and acceptance of reality, self-discovery of one's potential to solve one's problems is achieved [9]. In Vietnam, there has been no research on the mental health counseling needs of adolescents with separated/divorced parents. That is why we conducted research "Psychological counseling needs among middle and high school students with separated/divorced parents in Hue city" with two objectives: (1) *To examine the need for psychological*

*counseling among high school students whose parents are separated/divorced in Hue city; (2) identify factors associated with this need.*

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1. Participants

- The criteria of choice: High school students with separated/divorced parents are studying in Hue city and are approved by their guardians.

- Exclusion criteria: Subjects experiencing health problems, are unlikely to participate in the survey.

### 2.2. Time and place

The study was conducted at three schools (2 secondary schools and 2 high schools) in Hue from June 2022 to December 2022.

### 2.3. Study design

Cross-sectional study

### 2.4 Sample size and sampling method

Sample size according to the formula:

$$n = Z^2 \frac{p(1-p)}{1 - \frac{\alpha}{2} d^2}$$

In which:

n: is the smallest reasonable sample size.

z: is the value depending on the desired level of reliability of the estimate; desired confidence level is 95% when  $z = 1.96$ .

p: the estimated ratio of the population  $p = 0.273$ , the percentage of students who want to set up a school psychology consulting room according to research by Bui Thi Hoa [10].

d: is the desired tolerable deviation or the difference between the p ratio obtained on the sample and the actual p ratio in the population;  $d = 0.05$ .

From the formula and the facts above we calculate  $n = 305$ .

In fact, in this study, we collected 309 students who agreed to participate.

### Method of selecting the sample

Selection of multiple stages.

Stage 1: Randomly selected two secondary schools out of 26 schools and two high schools out of 11 schools in the city of Hue.

Stage 2: Take the sample of all students living in a family whose parents are separated/divorced.

Stage 3: Conduct interviews with all students selected to collect research information.

### 2.5. Data collection

- Data collection tools: The toolkit is designed based on built-in variables.

- Investigators are trained and instructed on the toolkit and approach, interviewing research subjects.

### 2.6. Measurements

- Dependent variable: the need for psychological counseling of secondary school and high school students.

We assessed based on seven questions about the need for psychological counseling support in seven areas: emotional, behavioral, school relations, family relations, appearance and physical, reproductive health and friendship, life skills and future orientation. The questions are scored, 0 = no need and 1 = need, so the highest total score is 7, the lowest is 0 and from 3 points above is the need for psychological support [11].

- Independence variables: Demographic factors: age, gender; family factors: family economy, time of divorce of parents; psychosocial-behavioral factors: internet usage status, bullying status, state of violence, behavioral problems, having problems with friends, close friends relationships; school quality; family quality.

- Assessment of school violence and school bullying based on the GSHS 2019 questionnaire [39].

+ Harassed experience: Divided into two groups and measured over the last 30 days (no bullying and harassment).

+ Violence experience: Divided into two groups and measured over the past 12 months (no violence and violence).

- There are behavioral problems and problems with friends: Assessment of student mental health based on the SDQ-25 questionnaire: Questionnaire assessing strengths and difficulties (Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire) 25 questions were evaluated over 5 aspects of emotional problems, behavioral problems, problems of increased attention, friend's problems, positive social problems and scored as follows: 0 - wrong, 1 - partially right, 2 - right. Excluding sentences 7, 11, 14, 21, 25 each corresponding answer: 2 - not correct, 1 - partially correct, 0 - surely correct. In our study, children were assessed as having mental health problems (MHP) when the total score was abnormal and children were not assessed with MHP when there was a normal and boundary total score. Therefore, the behavioral problems were divided into two groups in the analysis process: having behavior problems (from 5-10 points) and no behavioral problems (from 0-4 points); friend's problems were classified into two categories in the process of analysis including having friend's problems: (from 6-10 points), and no friend's issues (from 0 - 5 points).

- Quality of school: We assessed based on nine

questions how often behaviors have occurred over the past six months, which revolved around questions about students' feelings about school (pleasure at school; score pressure; safety in school; being encouraged by the teacher; being listened to by the professor; being treated fairly; being able to get acquainted with new friends; being criticized by the master; being helped by friends). Each sentence scores a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 5 depending on the specific answer: 1 - never, 2 - rarely, 3 - occasionally, 4 - frequently, 5 - always; the critical factor itself scores the opposite. The score is calculated by adding the total score of the answers, ranging from 9 to 45. And they were assessed based on cut points with  $\geq 30$  points and not  $< 30$  points.

- Family Quality: On family quality assessment, we assessed based on 7 questions about the frequency of behavior over the past 6 months, the questions revolving around problems of student feelings towards parents and adults in the family (crying, insulting, pressure and expectations of learning; beating; not feeling loved; not listening, caring, sharing; comparing with friends; interest, encouragement, praise, sharing). Each sentence scores a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 5 depending on the specific answer

as follows: 1 - always, 2 - frequently, 3 - occasionally, 4 - rarely, 5 - never; individual factors of interest, encouragement, sharing, and praise are scored the opposite. The score is calculated based on the sum of the total score of the answers, the score ranges from 7 to 35 and is evaluated as follows. And they were assessed based on cut points with  $\geq 25$  points and not  $< 25$  points.

### 2.7. Statistical Analysis

The data collected was imported using the Epidata 3.1 software. Data processing with SPSS 20.0 software. Use descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage %); use a logistical multi-variable regression model to identify factors related to the need for psychological consultation on the subject.

### 2.8. Ethics statement

The research was approved by the Ethics Council in Biomedical Research of the University of Medicine-Pharmacy, University of Hue and the funding support of Hue University with code DHH2021-04-155.

The study is carried out only with the approval of the study subject and guardian. Research is conducted in a spirit of respect for the privacy of the subject of study.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Common characteristics of participants

**Table 1.** Common characteristics of participants (n = 309)

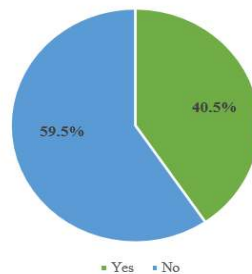
| Characteristic                          |                              | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Gender                                  | Male                         | 175           | 56.6           |
|                                         | Female                       | 134           | 43.4           |
| Age group                               | $\leq 15$                    | 172           | 55.7           |
|                                         | $> 15$                       | 137           | 44.3           |
| Family economy                          | Poor/near poor               | 11            | 3.6            |
|                                         | Not poor                     | 298           | 96.4           |
| Time of parents' separation/<br>divorce | $\geq 5$ year                | 70            | 22.7           |
|                                         | $< 5$ year                   | 239           | 77.3           |
| Status of Internet Use                  | Use more than expected       | 267           | 86.4           |
|                                         | Not used or used very little | 42            | 13.6           |
| Best friend relationship                | Yes                          | 284           | 91.9           |
|                                         | No                           | 25            | 8.1            |
| Friend's problems                       | Yes                          | 47            | 15.2           |
|                                         | No                           | 262           | 84.8           |
| Problem with behavior                   | Yes                          | 53            | 17.2           |
|                                         | No                           | 256           | 82.8           |
| Harassed experience                     | Yes                          | 17            | 5.5            |
|                                         | No                           | 292           | 94.5           |
| Violence experience                     | Yes                          | 26            | 8.4            |
|                                         | No                           | 283           | 91.6           |

|                   |          |              |      |
|-------------------|----------|--------------|------|
| Quality of school | Good     | 104          | 33.7 |
|                   | Not good | 205          | 66.3 |
|                   | X        | 29.23 ± 5.13 |      |
| Family quality    | Good     | 148          | 47.9 |
|                   | Not good | 161          | 52.1 |
|                   | X        | 24.79 ± 3.94 |      |

The results show 56.6% of students are male; 44.3% of students are over 15 years old. 3.6% of students reported their family economics are poor/near poor. 77.3% of students have parents divorced/separated less than 5 years. 86.4% of students reported using the internet more than expected. 8.1% of students have no friends; 15.2% of students have problems with friends; 17.2% of students have problems with behavior. 5.5% of students reported being bullied; 8.4% of students reported being violent. 66.3% of students rated the school quality inadequate; 52.1% of students rated family quality inadequate.

### 3.2. The need for psychological consultation in the subject of study

PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING NEEDS(%)



**Chart 1.** The need for psychological consultation of the study subject

In the study sample, the percentage of high school students with separated/divorced parents who needed psychological counseling was 40.5%.

**Table 2.** Some areas of study require psychological consultation

| Characteristic                                                        |     | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|---------------|----------------|
| Psychological Counseling on Emotions                                  | Yes | 83            | 26.9           |
|                                                                       | No  | 226           | 73.1           |
| Psychological counseling on behavior                                  | Yes | 43            | 13.9           |
|                                                                       | No  | 266           | 86.1           |
| Psychological Advice on Relationships at School                       | Yes | 48            | 15.5           |
|                                                                       | No  | 261           | 84.5           |
| Psychological advice on family relationships                          | Yes | 102           | 33.0           |
|                                                                       | No  | 207           | 67.0           |
| Psychological advice on appearance and physical                       | Yes | 117           | 37.9           |
|                                                                       | No  | 192           | 62.1           |
| Psychological Counseling on Reproductive Health and Sexual Friendship | Yes | 97            | 31.4           |
|                                                                       | No  | 212           | 68.8           |
| Psychological counseling on living skills and future orientation      | Yes | 168           | 54.4           |
|                                                                       | No  | 141           | 45.6           |

The areas in which the subjects in need of psychological counseling accounted for the majority were life skills and future orientation accounting for 54.4%, appearance and physical accounting for 37.9%, family relationships accounting for 33.0%, and reproductive health issues and friendship of other sexes account for 31.4%.

**3.2. Some factors related to the need for psychological consultation in the study subject****Table 3.** Multivariable regression model logistic factors related to the need for psychological consultation

| Independence variables              |                              | OR   | KTC (95%)    | p    |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|------|--------------|------|
| Gender                              | Male                         | 1    | -            | 0.83 |
|                                     | Female                       | 1.05 | 0.62 - 1.79  |      |
| Age group                           | ≤ 15                         | 1    | -            | 0.07 |
|                                     | > 15                         | 1.65 | 0.94 - 2.89  |      |
| Family economy                      | Not poor                     | 1    | -            | 0.06 |
|                                     | Poor/near poor               | 4.16 | 0.97 - 17.79 |      |
| Time of parents' separation/divorce | ≥ 5 year                     | 1    | -            | 0.01 |
|                                     | < 5 year                     | 2.80 | 1.32 - 5.95  |      |
| Status of Internet Use              | Use more than expected       | 1    | -            | 0.25 |
|                                     | Not used or used very little | 1.58 | 0.72 - 3.46  |      |
| Best friend relationship            | Yes                          | 1    | -            | 0.02 |
|                                     | No                           | 3.11 | 1.16 - 8.32  |      |
| Friend's problems                   | No                           | 1    | -            | 0.01 |
|                                     | Yes                          | 2.76 | 1.24 - 6.16  |      |
| Problem with behavior               | No                           | 1    | -            | 0.01 |
|                                     | Yes                          | 6.36 | 2.68 - 15.06 |      |
| Harassed experience                 | No                           | 1    | -            | 0.81 |
|                                     | Yes                          | 1.21 | 0.24 - 5.91  |      |
| Violence experience                 | No                           | 1    | -            | 0.02 |
|                                     | Yes                          | 4.61 | 1.18 - 18.02 |      |
| Quality of school                   | Good                         | 1    | -            | 0.03 |
|                                     | Not good                     | 2.01 | 1.06 - 3.78  |      |
| Family quality                      | Good                         | 1    | -            | 0.01 |
|                                     | Not good                     | 2.38 | 1.39 - 4.07  |      |

Results from the multivariable logistic regression model suggest that the factor associated with the need for psychological consultation is the time of parents' separated/divorced (< 5 years with OR = 2.80; 95%CI:1.32 - 5.95); close friendship (no close friends with OR = 3.11; 95%CI: 1.16 - 8.32); having friendship problems (with OR = 2.76; 95%CI: 1.24 - 6.16); having behavioral problems (with OR = 6.36; 95%CI: 2.68 - 15.06); violence (with OR = 4.61; 95%CI:1.18 - 18.02); school quality (not achieve with or = 2.01; 95%CI: 1.06 - 3.78) and family quality (no achieve OR = 2.38; 95% CI: 1.39 - 4.07) with  $p < 0.05$ .

**4. DISCUSSION****4.1. The need for psychological counseling of high school students whose parents are separated/divorced**

The research results on 309 high school students with separated/divorced parents showed that 40.5% of the students required psychological counseling. The general rate of high school students with the need for psychological counseling is in line with a previous study in Quang Ninh, showing that 15.8% of the students had an increased need for counseling;

69.4% had a moderate need; 14.8% had a low need and 52.6% of the students rated that it was necessary or indispensable to have psychological counseling room [11]. Among the counseling fields mentioned above, the three fields that the students had the most need for psychological counseling were the need for living skills and future orientation (54.4%), the need for physical and mental (37.9%), and the need for family relationships (33.0%). Next is the demand for psychological consultation on the emotional, behavioral, school relationship and gender, and

other friendship aspects. The demand for life skills and future direction accounts for the highest proportion, relatively in line with some previous studies, partially reflecting the current situation when students' life skills are limited and need early guidance for future youth [11,12]. However, in our research, the demand for relationships in the family was chosen by the students, showing that parents' divorce/separation had a significant impact on the psychology of the research subjects, and the need for consultation on family relationships was prioritized by the subjects and more desired than some other fields of psychological consultation.

#### **4.2 Several factors related to the need for psychological consultation in the subject of study**

Results from the multivariable logistic regression model suggest that the factors involved in the need for psychological counseling are the time of parents' divorce (< 5 years with OR = 2.80; 95%CI: 1.32 - 5.95); The best friend relationship (No close friends. OR = 3.11; 95%CI: 1.16 - 8.32); Problems with friends (with OR = 2.76; 95%CI: 1.24 - 6.16); There is behavior problem (OR= 6.36; 95%CI: 2.68 - 15.06); by violent (with OR = 4.61; 95%CI: 1.18 - 18.02); Quality of school (not achieved with OR = 2.01; 95%CI: 1.06 - 3.78) and family quality (not achieved with OR = 2.38; 95%CI: 1.39 - 4.07) with  $p < 0.05$ .

In our study, the group of students whose parents separated/divorced less than 5 years is likely to have needs for psychological counseling 2.80 (OR= 2.80; 95%CI: 1.32 - 5.95) times higher than those with parents separated/divorced from five years or longer. Parental post-divorce problems in children vary depending on the judge, which may depend on the time passed since the divorce; physical and psychological suffering increases in the early stages of divorce and will decrease over time [13,14].

Lansford's research and its collaborators showed that parental divorce/separation earlier is more negatively related to the morality of internal and external orientation issues than late divorce/separation [15]. Various psychological, physical, and transition disorders can be seen in the children of divorced parents, causing emotional damage, high levels of depression, difficulty concentrating, suicidal thoughts, sadness, anger, confusion in learning, interpersonal relationships, and a higher risk of many other mental illnesses; this has been noted in some domestic and foreign studies [13,16,17]. Therefore, the period of living with parents has a significant influence on the psychology of children as well as the issues related to psychology.

Students who did not have close friends are likely to have needs for psychological counseling 3.11 (OR = 3.11; 95%CI: 1.16 - 8.32) times higher than those who had close friends, and the group with problems with friends likely to have needs for psychological counseling 2.76 (OR = 2.76; 95%CI: 1.24 - 6.16) times more than the other group. This is quite consistent with many studies on the psychology and mental health of adolescents with the factor of friendship as well as the quality of friendship [18,19,20]. The findings indicate that peer-to-peer friends are the primary source of support for young people with mental health problems, with both men and women choosing friends and family members who are most likely to help when in trouble [21,22]. Research on teenagers in the UK shows a significant positive link between the quality of perceived friendship and psychological resilience [23]. Therefore, students who do not have close friends or have problems in friendship often have more problems to face, difficulty sharing, and the need for support when they have psychological difficulties, which leads to higher needs for support in psychological counseling than those with good friends or close friends.

Our research showed that the group of students in the unfulfilled school quality factor is likely to have needs for psychological counseling 2.01 (OR = 2.01; 95%CI: 1.06 - 3.78) times higher than the rest of the group. This is relatively consistent with a study "Psychological Health Services in the United States", which notes that schools are currently meeting students' mental health needs and they also show an increasing demand for mental health services and the many challenges that schools face in addressing those needs [24]. A report by UNICEF in Vietnam found that mental health issues are also related to factors of learning circumstances, such as awareness of safety, student engagement, and the learning environment. Adolescents who feel attached to school have fewer psychological symptoms, while children who feel less connected to school - often girls - or have more mental health problems [25]. From the above results can be seen that the school is the environment where children are more exposed and the problems in school have a major impact on the child's psychology, including the services that the school provides including psychological counseling services for students, the need for psychological counseling that may be affected by the learning environment and the desire for psychological counseling influenced by factors from the school.

Family is an extremely important factor for each person, studies at home and abroad that can show that family cohesion, living circumstances, and the quality of family relationships are related to mental and psychological health problems in adolescents [26, 27, 28]. Younger people can seek help for mental health issues by talking to their family and friends, with families more important to younger teens [29]. Our study noted that students with unfulfilled family quality are likely to have needs for psychological counseling 2.38 (OR = 2.38; 95%CI: 1.39 - 4.07) times higher than those with achieved family quality. This result suggests that the family's quality greatly affects the child's need for psychological counseling, which is consistent with some foreign studies. A study in Arab-Israeli minority adolescents showed a higher rate of consultation found in adolescents who felt uncomfortable at home; a study by Myla E. Harrison, Mary M. McKay, and William M. Bannon Jr. suggests that the most significant factors associated with the use of mental health care services are social support and parental skills effectiveness. In addition, another study surveying public school teachers in Southern California noted that families identified as being not fully intact had a particularly strong impact on the issues of psychological counseling [30, 31, 32].

Our results showed that the group of students experiencing violence had a much higher need for psychological counseling than the non-violent group, which was likely to have needs for psychological counseling 4.61 (OR = 4.61; 95%CI: 1.18 - 18.02) times ( $p < 0.05$ ). Our research results are consistent with both domestic and overseas studies. The survey in Nghe An recorded the factors related to depression and anxiety in students due to bullying by friends [33]. Marleen Wong's research and associates showed that children exposed to violence had higher mental health needs than those who were not exposed to violence [34]. The survey by Drotar D, Flannery D, Day E, and associates highlighted the feasibility of developing mental health services to meet the needs of children exposed to violence, particularly family violence, at a critical time after exposure to violence [35].

In our study, the need for psychological consultation was related to the presence of problem

behavior among high school students. The group of students with problem behavior is likely to have needs for psychological counseling 6.36 (OR = 6.36; 95%CI: 2.68 - 15.06) times higher than the group without problem behavior. Children from divorced/separated families had a higher rate of depression than those from intact families, with different behaviors such as agitation, difficulty concentrating, suicidal intent, sadness, and pessimism [17]. Children from divorced/separated families had a significantly higher prevalence of mental health disorders, especially substance use disorders, compared to normal individuals [36]. Another study in Canada showed that psychological needs and factors were strongly associated with the use of health care services [37]. This showed that the mental health issues faced by children from divorced/separated families are higher than those from intact families, and the need for and use of mental health services may be higher. This aligns with many other studies worldwide, where children with behavioral disorders require more mental health services. Family counseling, individual work with the children (especially for younger children), and social support during the post-separation period were suggested to prevent long-term, sometimes lifelong consequences [38]. However, more research is needed on mental health consultation among adolescents, especially those in divorced/separated families.

Some limitations of the study: We use a cross-sectional study, making it difficult to determine the cause-and-effect relationship between the variables. Therefore, more studies with safety design are needed to understand better the situation, needs, and approaches to providing emotional support.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Secondary school and high school students with separated/divorced parents have an increased need for psychological counseling, so it is necessary to combine family and school to create a healthy environment for children.

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