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The Effects of Parental Divorce on Mental Health and Social Integration Among Adolescent Students in Tanzania

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Abstract

This study examines the effects of parental divorce on the mental health and social integration of adolescent students in Tanzania. It used a phenomenological design with 34 participants and the collected data, through interviews and focus group discussions, was analyzed using thematic analysis, revealing key mental health challenges, including difficulty adapting to new residences, inadequate school facilities, self-isolation, and lack of parental care. Many adolescents struggled with disrupted living arrangements, unfamiliar environments, and separation from peers, contributing to stress, poor concentration, and declining academic performance. In terms of social integration, the findings showed challenges in adjusting to new school environments, increased social withdrawal and isolation, and a heightened risk of social exclusion and stigma, largely due to disrupted social networks and psychological distress such as sadness, loneliness, and low self-esteem. Financial hardships further limited access to essential needs, particularly affecting female adolescents through inadequate hygiene support, while increased household responsibilities reduced opportunities for social engagement. Guided by Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory, these challenges were found to interfere with the Identity versus Role Confusion stage. However, resilience, peer support, and collaboration among parents, schools, and communities emerged as important protective factors promoting positive adjustment. Overall, the study concludes that parental divorce significantly undermines adolescents' mental health and social integration, highlighting the need for stronger parental involvement, enhanced school-based psychosocial support, and community mentorship programs.

Keywords: Parental divorce, adolescents, mental health, social integration, secondary education.

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Introduction

Adolescence is a critical and complex transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, typically spanning the ages of 10 to 19, during which individuals undergo rapid physical, psychological, and social development (World Health Organization, 2023). During this period, friendships become increasingly important for providing social and moral support, yet the parent-child relationship remains a significant factor in identity formation (Branje, 2022; Crocetti et al., 2017). Cognitive development enables adolescents to think abstractly and logically, allowing them to engage in discussions about complex topics and begin setting life goals and developing practical skills, which prepare them for broader roles in adulthood (Dumontheil, 2014; Riveros, 2024; Gotlieb et al., 2024). Disruptions in family structure, such as parental divorce, can significantly affect adolescents during this stage, leading to mental health challenges, poor social integration, and reduced academic performance. Studies indicate that parental separation often results in reduced supervision, relocation, financial constraints, and limited emotional support, which contribute to feelings of sadness, loneliness, and rejection, as well as difficulties in maintaining peer relationships and coping with new environments (Amato, 2010; Lansford, 2015; Eaton, 2018). Understanding these developmental and contextual factors is essential for designing interventions and support systems that enhance resilience, psychosocial well-being, and social integration among adolescents affected by parental divorce, particularly in the Tanzanian urban context.

Socially, adolescents develop a greater sense of self-awareness and independence from their parents. They begin to form their identities, often spending more time with peers and exploring romantic relationships and sexuality (Zhang & Qin, 2023). Friendships become increasingly important for providing social and moral support, yet the parent-child relationship remains a significant factor in identity formation (Branje, 2022; Crocetti et al., 2017). Peer

relationships also play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' self-concept and emotional well-being (Delios et al., 2023). Given the profound changes, adolescents experience, parental guidance and support are crucial. Parents play a vital role in helping adolescents navigate biological changes, such as menstruation, and in providing sex education (Adom, 2016; Haruna, 2018). Interactions with parents help to build confidence and interpersonal skills, offering a sense of security and self-esteem. When parents are together and work cooperatively, they provide a better foundation for their children's future, allowing for open communication and the free expression of feelings. Parents collaborate with other social systems, such as schools and religious institutions, to ensure adolescents successfully navigate this stage.

Parental divorce profoundly impacts an adolescent's development, affecting their educational achievements, emotional well-being, and behavior. Studies indicate that adolescents with divorced parents often show diminished academic performance, lower school completion rates, and behavioral problems (Amato, 2010; Lansford, 2015). The stress and tension leading up to and following a divorce can be traumatic for adolescents, who are old enough to understand and interpret what is happening between their parents. This emotional instability can manifest as poor school attendance, difficulty concentrating, and strained peer relationships. In severe cases, it can even lead to self-destructive behaviors, with some studies showing a correlation between parental divorce and suicide attempts among adolescents (Devapramod, 2024).

Although divorce presents significant challenges, certain parenting strategies can help to mitigate its negative effects. Maintaining open communication between divorced parents and their adolescent children is critical for helping them adjust to the new family dynamic. Regardless of the circumstances, parents must take proactive steps, either individually or collectively, to reduce the impact of divorce on their children. Providing consistent support and guidance helps adolescents to navigate this difficult period and minimize the long-term trauma that can extend into adulthood (Hugh-Jones et al., 2025).

Literature Review

Parental divorce is widely associated with negative mental health outcomes among adolescents, yet this relationship is neither uniform nor uncontested. While Amato (2014) and Kalmijn (2016) conclude that adolescents from divorced families are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and behavioral difficulties, these studies have been critiqued for implicitly treating divorce as the primary causal factor. This perspective overlooks the possibility that pre-divorce family conflict, rather than divorce itself, may be the most significant determinant of adolescent well-being. As a result, attributing negative outcomes solely to divorce risks oversimplifying a complex family dynamic.

Similarly, Lee and Bax (2020) emphasize disruptions in caregiving and financial instability as key stressors. However, their work assumes relatively uniform postdivorce experiences, failing to account for variations in resilience and adaptive coping among adolescents. In contrast, other scholars argue that in some cases, divorce may reduce exposure to parental conflict and thereby improve psychological outcomes (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Amato, 2010). This contradiction highlights an ongoing debate within the literature: whether divorce should be conceptualized primarily as a risk factor (Amato, 2000; Wallerstein, 2000) or as a potential transition that may have both negative and positive implications depending on context.

Methodological limitations further complicate the interpretation of findings. For example, studies by Hawkins et al., (2017) and Yun and Li (2022) rely largely on cross-sectional designs, which restrict their ability to establish causality or track long-term developmental outcomes. In contrast, longitudinal research such as that of Sodermans and Matthijs (2014) provides stronger evidence of enduring psychological effects. However, even longitudinal studies often fail to sufficiently integrate social and cultural variables, limiting their explanatory power across diverse contexts.

The literature on social stigma and exclusion similarly reveals both consensus and gaps. Serewicz and Canary (2018), along with Afifi et al., (2015), document experiences of labelling, bullying, and marginalization among adolescents from divorced families. However, these studies are predominantly based in Western settings and may not be directly transferable to non-Western societies. For instance, Rugira and Ndimande (2016) argue that in African contexts, where family cohesion is highly valued, the social consequences of divorce may be more severe. However, there is limited empirical research that systematically compares these contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how cultural norms mediate adolescents' experiences of stigma.

Moreover, existing studies tend to treat psychological and social outcomes as separate domains, with insufficient attention to how they interact with each other. While Tumin and Qian (2017) acknowledge that social exclusion can intensify psychological distress, they do not fully explore the mechanisms through which school environments and peer dynamics reinforce this cycle. This represents a significant conceptual limitation, as adolescence is a developmental stage where social and emotional experiences are deeply intertwined.

Overall, studies provide important insights but are characterized by three key limitations: an overreliance on generalized assumptions about divorce as a uniformly negative experience (Rich et al., 2023; Sezer, 2025), methodological constraints that limit causal and contextual understanding (D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019; McLanahan et al., 2013), and insufficient attention to cultural and institutional variation (UNICEF, 2021). These gaps are particularly evident in the Tanzania context, where research on adolescent students' mental health and social integration following parental divorce remains scarce and underdeveloped (UNICEF, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

The present study addresses these limitations by focusing specifically on adolescent students in Tanzania, examining both mental health and social integration as interconnected experiences within school and community settings. By situating the analysis within a specific socio-cultural context and critically engaging with both psychological and social dimensions, the study seeks to provide a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of the effects of parental divorce in the Tanzanian context.

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

- a) How does parental divorce affect the mental health of adolescent secondary-school students from divorced families in Ilala Municipality?
- b) In what ways does parental divorce influence the social integration of adolescent secondary-school students from divorced families in Ilala Municipality?

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study

Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory is highly relevant to this study. According to Erikson, adolescence is a critical stage of development known as "Identity vs. Role Confusion," where individuals seek to establish a clear sense of self, purpose, and belonging (Erikson, 1950). During this phase, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to emotional and psychological disturbances caused by major life events, such as parental divorce. Divorce creates emotional instability, reduces parental support, and disrupts the secure environment needed for adolescents to explore their identities. As a result, adolescents may experience confusion, low self-esteem, anxiety, or depression (May, 2022; Sigal et al., 2012). Furthermore, Erikson's theory emphasizes the importance of social relationships in identity formation. When adolescents face disruptions in their family systems, such as parental separation, their ability to form meaningful peer connections and integrate socially may also be affected. In the Tanzanian context, where communal relationships and family values are often central to social development, the impact of divorce may be particularly significant. Adolescents from divorced families may face stigma, isolation, or a lack of guidance, making it more difficult for them to engage positively in school or community life (Benjamin et al., 2025). Therefore, Erikson's framework helps to explain not only the psychological impact of divorce on adolescents but also its broader effects on their social development and integration.

Methodology Research Approach and Paradigm

This study employed a qualitative research approach grounded in the social constructivist paradigm. Social constructivism assumes that individuals construct meanings through social interaction and lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). This paradigm was appropriate because the study sought to understand how adolescent students interpret and make sense of their experiences of parental divorce. A phenomenological research design was adopted to explore the lived experiences of adolescents affected by parental divorce. Phenomenology was considered suitable because it facilitates in-depth exploration of participants' subjective meanings and perceptions regarding a particular phenomenon. The design enabled the researcher to examine how parental divorce influences adolescents' mental health and social integration within the school context.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Ilala Municipality, one of the five municipalities in Dar es Salaam Region. Ilala covers an area of 210.1 square kilometers and is the most densely populated municipality in the region, with a population of

1,649,920 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Given its large and diverse population, the municipality is likely to have a considerable number of divorced families, making it an appropriate setting for this study.

Study Population

The study population comprised adolescent students from divorced parents, secondary school teachers, social welfare officers, parents or guardians. Adolescent students were included in the study because they directly experience the effects of parental divorce. Teachers and social welfare officers were included due to their professional responsibilities in supporting students' academic and psychosocial development. Parents or guardians were involved because of their central role in adolescents' upbringing and educational support.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedures

A total of 34 participants were involved in the study, comprising 20 adolescent students from divorced parents, 8 class teachers, and 6 parents. The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new themes, perspectives, or insights emerged from subsequent interviews. Saturation was considered to have been reached when participants' responses became repetitive, and no additional information relevant to the study objectives was generated. Furthermore, the inclusion of different participant categories facilitated the triangulation of perspectives, thereby enhancing the credibility, depth, and richness of the findings. Therefore, a sample size of 34 participants was considered adequate to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Participants were purposively selected based on specific criteria and their relevance to the study objectives. Adolescent students were the primary participants because they directly experience the effects and were therefore in a position to provide firsthand accounts of its effects. Class teachers and social welfare officers were selected based on their professional roles in teaching, custody, and duty of care, which enabled them to offer valuable insights into the experiences and well-being of adolescents affected by parental divorce. Parents were included because of their central role in child upbringing and their responsibility to provide emotional, social, and educational support to their adolescents. Prior to selecting individual participants, four secondary schools were chosen using various criteria including school type, student gender, location, and academic performance records. The selection criteria also encompassed factors like student enrollment, school location, gender composition (single-sex or co-educational), and school ownership (public or private). Jangwani Secondary School, Kitunda Secondary School, Airwing Secondary School, and Nyeburu Secondary School were selected based on these criteria, with the number of schools chosen contingent upon participant adequacy and data saturation.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Interviews were conducted in Swahili to ensure participants could express their perceptions and coping strategies comfortably. These sessions typically lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. For instances, where the discussions extended beyond this time frame, measures were taken to prioritize participants' comfort and ensure their willingness to continue. FGDs, also conducted in Swahili, were organized with up to five participants per group, owing to the sensitive nature of the topic. The small number of participants created a supportive environment for sharing experiences and perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant school authorities. A detailed process was followed to ensure informed consent and assent. Guardians of adolescent participants were contacted to provide written consent, while adolescents under 18 years of age provided written assent. The purpose and procedures of the study were clearly explained to all participants to ensure their understanding and voluntary participation. Verbal consent from guardians, verified through phone numbers, was supplemented with signed written forms to uphold ethical standards.

Recognizing the absence of professional counselors in the schools, alternative measures were adopted to address potential psychological distress. Guardians, school matrons, patrons, and class teachers were engaged to provide emotional support to participants when needed. During interviews, any instances of emotional reactions were handled with patience and understanding. Participants were allowed to pause or discontinue sessions as they deemed necessary. Following such instances, guardians or designated school personnel were informed and involved in

providing follow-up support to ensure the well-being of the adolescents. These measures reflect the study's commitment to ethical responsibility and safeguarding of participants' emotional health.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data systematically. The process included transcription, familiarization, coding, and theme generation, aligned with the study objectives. Themes were refined to capture recurring patterns and contextual factors influencing adolescents' coping strategies. Data trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation and cross-checking, ensuring the findings reflected the participants' experiences comprehensively.

Findings

The study found that parental divorce negatively affects adolescents' mental health and social integration. Key mental health challenges included difficulty adapting to new living environments, inadequate school facilities, self-isolation, and lack of parental care. In terms of social integration, adolescents faced challenges adjusting to new schools, experienced social withdrawal and isolation, and were at an increased risk of exclusion and stigma.

Effects of Parental Divorce on Adolescents' Mental Health

Difficulty Adapting to New Residence

The study revealed that parental divorce strongly affects adolescents' emotional well-being, often leading to psychological distress and poor academic performance. This study has revealed that many adolescent participants reported difficulties in adapting to or coping with new living conditions after their parents' divorce. One of the most common challenges was the increased distance between home and school, often due to relocation or transfer to a new school. Parental divorce disrupts this developmental process. When adolescents are relocated, separated from one parent, or placed in unfamiliar households, their emotional security is weakened. The instability described by participants such as feeling like "visitors" in relatives' homes or struggling with strict new rules can interfere with identity formation. Instead of focusing on self-development and academic goals, adolescents become preoccupied with stress, survival, and emotional adjustment. This led to fatigue, absenteeism, and poor concentration in class. One student explained:

"I stayed with my grandmother, but the school was very far from her house. I still tried to attend the same school, but most mornings I was late because of the long journey. By the time I arrived, I was very tired and struggled to concentrate in class. Sometimes I missed lessons entirely, and I felt frustrated and stressed that I couldn't keep up with my classmates" (16- year-old boy, Form Two)

Adolescents also described challenges associated with unfamiliar household environments, and new rules in host families. These included restrictions related to the use of furniture, television, and other domestic items, as well as adjustments to different meal routines, clothing expectations, prayer practices, and communication norms. From Erikson's perspective, such stressors create role confusion by undermining adolescents' confidence and sense of competence. Persistent anxiety and sadness may therefore delay healthy identity development and increase vulnerability to depression and low self-esteem. Coping with unfamiliar elder relatives in host households further created feelings of discomfort and emotional distress. One participant noted:

"When I went to stay with my uncle, things were very different from my own home. Even eating was controlled, and I had to follow strict rules that I wasn't used to. I felt like a visitor in the house, not really part of the family, and it made me feel uncomfortable and out of place. Sometimes I just stayed in my room because I didn't know how to fit in or speak up" (17- year-old boy, Form Three).

Relocation following parental divorce often causes emotional distress and disrupts social integration among adolescents. Participants reported fatigue, anxiety, poor concentration, and feelings of loneliness when moved to distant relatives' homes or new schools. Changes in routines and household expectations added stress, sometimes leading to withdrawal and difficulty maintaining friendships. Relocation often separated them from established friendships, making it difficult to rebuild social networks. These experiences can lower self-esteem and increase vulnerability to mental health challenges, such as depression or anxiety, while hindering social development. One student noted:

“After my parents separated, I had to move to my aunt’s house far from my school. I missed my friends, the teachers I knew, and the routine I was used to. I felt lost and lonely, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t focus in class or keep up with my lessons” (14-year-old girl, Form One).

The quote above reveals how relocation and changes in living arrangements can negatively affect concentration, engagement in school activities, and overall academic progress. Another adolescent described the social impact of changing schools and peer groups, stating:

“I felt inferior in the new school and often stayed quiet because I was afraid of being judged. I didn’t know anyone, and I constantly worried that others would laugh at me or think I was strange. It was hard to participate in class or make friends, and I often went home feeling sad and isolated” (15-year-old girl, Form One).

These experiences indicate that relocation contributes to heightened stress, feelings of inferiority, and social withdrawal, negatively affecting both mental health and the ability to maintain peer relationships. Adolescents may experience persistent anxiety and sadness, which can lead to low self-esteem and difficulties in forming trusting connections with peers. The disruption of familiar social networks and routines often exacerbates feelings of loneliness and isolation, making it harder for adolescents to engage in classroom activities or participate in extracurricular opportunities. Over time, these emotional challenges can impair the overall psychological well-being, reduce academic performance, and hinder the development of critical social skills necessary for healthy adolescent growth, as reported by an interviewed respondent who said:

“After my parents’ divorce, I was shifted to my aunt’s home, which is far from my school. Every morning, I have to wake up very early, and sometimes I may wait for a bus for two hours before getting school. The journey makes me exhausted and anxious, and by the time I reach class, I cannot concentrate. I miss my old friends, and I feel out of place with the new students, which makes me hesitant to participate in class or join activities” (16-year-old girl, Form Two).

Generally, it is revealed that relocation and disrupted routines contribute to physical fatigue and mental exhaustion, directly affecting academic performance. Simultaneously, social displacement manifested as missing old friends, feeling out of place, or fearing judgment from new peers leads to social withdrawal and diminished classroom participation. Over time, these stressors erode self-confidence, increase feelings of isolation, and exacerbate anxiety and sadness, ultimately hindering both academic achievement and the development of essential social skills. The experiences emphasize the need for targeted support from caregivers, schools, and community programs to help adolescents adapt to new environments, maintain peer relationships, and protect their mental well-being.

Emotional Withdrawal (Psychological/Inner Experience)

Many adolescents experienced deep emotional distress following parental divorce, including feelings of loneliness, rejection, guilt, and helplessness. These emotional experiences reflect an internal psychological response characterized by emotional burden reduced emotional regulation, and difficulty seeking support. Over time, this emotional burden reinforced feelings of isolation, lowered self-esteem, and increased vulnerability to anxiety and depression, thereby undermining the overall mental well-being. According to the Psychosocial Theory, during adolescence, individuals strive to develop a stable sense of identity, competence, and self-worth. Successful progression through the Identity vs. Role Confusion stage requires emotional security, social validation, and consistent support systems. However, parental divorce disrupts these protective factors, thereby weakening adolescents’ emotional stability and identity development. Through group discussion, one respondent had the following to say:

“Life after my parents’ divorce has been very difficult... Every day feels like a struggle. I worry about what to eat, how to get to school, and whether I am causing problems for everyone around me. Who do you think likes to bear their burden? I feel like I am always in the way. Sometimes I just want to disappear because everything is so overwhelming” (16-year-old girl, Form Two).

Such isolation worsened feelings of sadness, anxiety, and depression. Many adolescents reported feelings of being misunderstood, unsupported, and guilty for causing stress to their guardians. During a focus group discussion, one participant shared the following:

“After my parents separated, I started blaming myself for everything. I felt like if I had behaved better, maybe they wouldn’t have fought so much. Sometimes I just stay alone and cry because no one really understands how hard it is” (17-year-old boy, Form Two).

The lack of parental guidance and emotional support often led them to withdraw from peers and social activities, further limiting opportunities for positive interaction. In the longer term, this emotional burden can impair self-esteem, reduce resilience, and increase vulnerability to mental health challenges, negatively affecting both academic performance and social development.

Lack of Parental Care and Supervision

Teachers and welfare officers observed that insufficient parental involvement undermined adolescents’ mental health. Stress, neglect, and mistreatment by stepparents were common, further intensifying emotional distress and feelings of insecurity among affected students. As a result, many adolescents became more withdrawn and less motivated to engage in academic or social activities, often perceiving school as their only safe space or, in some cases, avoiding it altogether due to emotional exhaustion. The finding is illustrated by one teacher who noted:

“Those who live with their mothers are stressed, often struggling to manage household responsibilities, school work, and emotional needs without sufficient support. Those living with fathers are sometimes mistreated by stepmothers, experiencing neglect, harsh discipline, or exclusion from family decisions, which adds to their feelings of isolation and emotional distress” (Class teacher).

One Social Welfare Officer added the following:

“Many adolescents from divorced families lack consistent guidance and supervision, which makes them vulnerable to poor academic performance, risky behavior, and emotional instability. Without targeted support, these children often struggle to navigate daily life and social relationships” (Social Welfare Officer).

Overall, adolescents frequently reported sadness, loneliness, anxiety, and depression. These feelings were often worsened by inadequate parental support. These compounded emotional challenges often led to withdrawal from classroom participation, limited involvement in extracurricular activities, and difficulties in forming supportive friendships, further exacerbating their sense of isolation and negatively impacting both mental health and social integration.

The Influence of Parental Divorce on Adolescents’ Social Interaction Challenges Integrating Socially In New Schools

Transfers to poorly resourced schools often led to feelings of inferiority, embarrassment, and social exclusion. Adolescents reported difficulties forming friendships and being accepted by peers, frequently feeling isolated or stigmatized due to their changed circumstances. These challenges not only disrupted their sense of belonging but also lowered their confidence and motivation to participate in class or extracurricular activities, further hindering both academic progress and social integration, as echoed by one participant:

“I just shifted to this school after my parents divorced... My friends and neighbors were laughing at me because I moved from a good private school to this one. I felt so embarrassed and didn’t want to tell anyone” (16-year-old boy, Form Three).

Many expressed frustrations over having to adapt to new social norms, different teaching methods, and unfamiliar classmates, which lowered their confidence and sense of belonging. These experiences often contributed to withdrawal from peer interactions, reduced participation in group activities, and diminished engagement in school events. One teacher said:

“I have noticed that students from divorced families often keep to themselves, struggle to make friends, and are hesitant to join group work or school activities. Their confidence seems noticeably lower than their peers, which affects both their learning and social interactions” (Class teacher).

Generally, these findings indicate that parental divorce not only disrupts adolescents’ schooling and academic progress but also undermines their ability to build and sustain meaningful social relationships. From the perspective of Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial Development Theory, such disruptions interfere with the critical *Identity vs. Role Confusion* stage of adolescence. By destabilizing emotional security, peer networks, and family support, divorce limits opportunities for social validation, belonging, and role experimentation, which are key processes through which adolescents develop a coherent sense of self. As a result, the combined academic and social challenges leave

lasting effects on both their social integration and emotional well-being thus increasing the risk of identity confusion, low self-esteem, and prolonged social withdrawal.

Social Withdrawal and Isolation (Behavioral/Social Outcome)

Many adolescents demonstrated reduced participation in peer interactions and social activities following parental divorce. This social withdrawal was expressed through avoidance of group activities, limited communication with peers, and disengagement from school and community activities. Such behaviors reflect observable behavioral outcomes of difficulty in adjusting to the social disruptions associated with parental divorce. In due course, this withdrawal limited opportunities for peer interaction and social engagement, thereby contributing to reduced peer connection and a weakened sense of belonging within school and community settings as stressed by one explained:

“After my parents separated, I had to move to my aunt’s house far from my school. I missed my friends, and I felt lonely. I often stayed in my room instead of playing or talking with other students” (14-year-old girl, Form One).

Another participant added:

“I don’t join group activities anymore. I feel shy and worried that people will laugh at me or make fun of my family situation because my parents are divorced. Even when I want to participate, I feel nervous and unsure of myself, so I just stay quiet and avoid attention. Sometimes I feel lonely and left out, but I don’t know how to change it” (personal communication with a 15-year-old boy, Form Two).

These quotes show that social withdrawal is a behavioral response, where emotional distress and environmental changes (such as relocation or stigma) lead adolescents to physically and socially disengage from peer networks.

Furthermore, relocation, separation from familiar social networks, and fear of judgment significantly contribute to social withdrawal among adolescents experiencing parental divorce. These disruptions often leave adolescents feeling isolated and disconnected from their peers, as they struggle to navigate unfamiliar environments and adjust to new routines. In many cases, withdrawing from social interactions serves as a coping mechanism, allowing adolescents to manage the emotional distress, anxiety, and uncertainty associated with the changes in their family structure. Consequently, prolonged social withdrawal can limit opportunities for peer engagement, hinder the development of meaningful friendships, and negatively affect the overall social and emotional well-being.

Risk of Social Exclusion or Stigma

Adolescents reported feeling judged or different from their peers, which heightened their risk of social exclusion. Many participants described how their family situation, particularly having divorced parents, made them stand out among classmates, often attracting negative attention, teasing, or subtle comments that made them feel self-conscious. These experiences fostered feelings of inadequacy and anxiety in social settings, leading some adolescents to withdraw from group activities, avoid participating in class discussions, or limit interactions with peers altogether. Over time, repeated exposure to judgment and perceived stigma reinforced a sense of isolation, diminished self-confidence, and hindered the development of meaningful friendships, further limiting their social integration and emotional well-being. One participant noted:

“When I talk to classmates about my home, some laugh or make comments. It makes me want to stay quiet and keep to myself. I feel embarrassed and anxious, and sometimes I skip group activities just to avoid feeling judged” (15-year-old girl, Form One).

During a focus group discussion, one adolescent student said:

“I don’t talk much in class anymore, ...Most of my friends stopped inviting me to hang out after my parents divorced. I feel like they think something is wrong with me, so I just keep to myself” (17-year-old girl, Form Three).

The experiences shared by these participants highlight the profound impact of perceived stigma and judgment on adolescents from divorced families. From the perspective of Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial Development Theory, these experiences are particularly significant during the *Identity vs. Role Confusion* stage of adolescence. Peer approval and social belonging are critical for adolescents to explore roles, develop self-confidence, and establish a coherent sense of identity. Stigmatization and marginalization disrupt these processes by creating feelings of inferiority, anxiety, and self-doubt. The fear of judgment often prompts social withdrawal, silence in classroom

discussions, and avoidance of group activities. Over time, these behaviors reinforce isolation and low self-esteem while limiting opportunities to practice social skills and form supportive peer relationships.

Consequently, perceived stigma and marginalization not only hinder social integration but also negatively affect emotional well-being. Heightened anxiety, sadness, and a diminished sense of belonging can further reduce academic engagement and participation in extracurricular activities. From an Erikson perspective, these cumulative challenges compromise identity development, leaving adolescents vulnerable to long-term social and emotional difficulties.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that parental divorce has profound and farreaching effects on adolescents' mental health and social interaction. A primary challenge reported by participants was adapting to new living arrangements, often with relatives or a single parent, which disrupted familiar routines and school attendance. Adolescents described fatigue, anxiety, poor concentration, and emotional distress as they adjusted to unfamiliar households and rules. These results mirror earlier studies, indicating that divorce compels adolescents to navigate complex family dynamics, often leading to psychological strain and academic disruption (Amato, 2010; Kingsley, 2016; Capan, 2011; Cherlin, 2017).

Financial constraints in post-divorce households further intensified these challenges. Limited access to school materials, hygienic products, and other basic needs reduced adolescents' ability to participate fully in school and peer activities, reinforcing social exclusion and stigma (Amato, 2014; Hassan, 2017; Albertin, 2009). Additionally, increased household responsibilities, such as helping guardians with domestic chores or income-generating activities, reduced the time available for study and peer interaction. Consistent with prior research, these added burdens were linked to absenteeism, poor academic performance, and weakened social bonds (Abbott, 2012; Odenweller, 2014).

The emotional impact was also significant. Adolescents frequently reported sadness, loneliness, anxiety, and depression, with these feelings often worsened by inadequate parental support or separation from primary caregivers. Many withdrew socially, avoiding peers and group activities due to feelings of inferiority, fear of judgment, or stigma. This pattern of social withdrawal reflects broader findings that link divorce to low self-esteem, disrupted friendships, and poor classroom engagement (Eaton, 2018; D'Onofrio & Emery, 2019; Hashemi, 2017; Altundag, 2014). When combined with financial instability, these psychological burdens reduced access to supportive environments, leaving adolescents vulnerable to further stressors and exclusion (Fagan, 2012; Amato, 2014; Anderson, 2014; Mauki, 2014; Malinda, 2017; Cassum, 2018).

Overall, the findings confirm that parental divorce negatively impacts both the mental health and social interactions of adolescents. From the perspective of Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development theory, these disruptions affect adolescents' progression through the *Identity vs. Role Confusion* stage. Instability in caregiving, social exclusion, and disrupted routines limit opportunities for identity exploration, role experimentation, and peer validation. Consequently, adolescents may experience low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and uncertainty about their sense of self. These insights underscore the importance of creating stable, supportive, and resourceful environments to minimize adverse effects and promote resilience, healthy identity development, and positive social integration.

Conclusions and Implications

This study concludes that parental divorce significantly undermines adolescents' mental health and social integration. Adolescents from divorced families face heightened risks of emotional challenges such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, and low self-esteem, all of which negatively affect school concentration and daily functioning. These struggles are compounded by disrupted family support systems, rejection, and feelings of isolation, which leave adolescents emotionally vulnerable. At the same time, social interactions are disrupted as adolescents struggle to form and sustain friendships, integrate into peer groups, and engage in school or community activities. Frequent relocation, school changes, and perceived stigma often push adolescents to withdraw from peers and teachers, further hindering their social development.

These findings highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions. Schools should strengthen counseling services, peer-support programs, and inclusive policies to help adolescents navigate the emotional and social challenges of divorce. Equally, parents and guardians should prioritize consistent involvement, emotional reassurance, and

provision of basic needs to reduce stress and stigma. By promoting resilience, strengthening psychosocial support systems, and ensuring stable living conditions, stakeholders can improve adolescents' mental health.

Recommendations

To ensure effective support for adolescents affected by parental divorce in Tanzania, schools should strengthen school-based counseling services within guidance and counseling departments, supported by trained personnel or partnerships with local NGOs and social welfare agencies. These services should provide continuous psychosocial support to help students manage emotional distress, build resilience, and improve peer relationships. In addition, schools should introduce structured peer-support programs, such as student clubs or mentorship groups, where learners can safely share experiences, reduce stigma, and enhance social integration. Parents and guardians should also be supported through community awareness programs led by local authorities to promote consistent emotional care, open communication, and active involvement in adolescents' academic and social lives.

Furthermore, The Government of Tanzania, through relevant ministries and local councils such as Ilala Municipal Council, should implement financial and material support initiatives for vulnerable adolescents, including provision of school uniforms, learning materials, transport assistance, and hygiene products, particularly for girls. Strengthening collaboration between schools, families, community leaders, and social welfare officers is essential for early identification and sustained support. By combining psychosocial services with practical assistance, these interventions can improve adolescents' mental health, promote social integration, and enhance academic performance in the context of parental divorce.

Limitations of the Study

First, the study was conducted with a limited sample size, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to all adolescents from divorced families. Reliance on self-reported data may also introduce bias as participants could underreport or exaggerate their experiences due to social desirability or emotional sensitivity. Furthermore, the study focused primarily on adolescents within school environments, excluding those who may have dropped out or lacked access to formal education, whose experiences could differ significantly.

Areas for Further Research

Future research should explore the long-term effects of parental divorce on adolescents' mental health and social integration, particularly as they transition into adulthood. Comparative studies of adolescents from divorced and intact families could provide deeper insights into differences in coping strategies, resilience, and outcomes. Additionally, studies involving perspectives from parents, guardians, and educators would enrich understanding of how support systems can be strengthened. It would also be valuable to examine the role of cultural context, community support, and socioeconomic status in shaping adolescents' experiences of divorce. Finally, intervention-based research assessing the effectiveness of school counseling, peer support programs, and parental involvement initiatives could provide practical solutions to mitigate the negative effects identified in this study.

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