
COPING WITH DIVORCE: SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR CHILDREN IN GHANAIAN FAMILIES

***Jemima N. A. A. Lomotey**

Grace International Bible University.

Article Received: 17 May 2026

Article Revised: 05 June 2026

Published on: 25 June 2026

***Corresponding Author: Jemima N. A. A. Lomotey**

Grace International Bible University.

DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.5368>

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study employed focus group methodology to explore the support systems, formal and informal, available to children coping with parental divorce in Ghanaian families, examining how children access, experience, and benefit from various sources of support, including extended family, schools, religious institutions, peer networks, and professional services. Drawing upon Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and Ubuntu Philosophy (Gyekye, 1997), the study conducted six focus group sessions with 44 participants across three stakeholder groups: young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood (16 participants), divorced parents whose children were minors during or after the divorce (14 participants), and family therapists, social workers, and counsellors with experience supporting divorced families (14 participants). Focus group discussions were guided by open-ended questions and narrative prompts designed to elicit participants' experiences of support received, support desired but unavailable, barriers to accessing support, and recommendations for improving support systems. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Six overarching themes emerged from the data: the primacy of maternal extended family support, with maternal grandmothers and aunts identified as the most frequent and effective source of practical, emotional, and financial support for children; the inconsistent and conditional support of paternal extended family, with participants describing paternal relatives who withdrew from children's lives after divorce or offered support only on condition of rejecting the mother; the silence of the school, wherein participants reported that schools rarely provided any support and that teachers were often unaware of or indifferent to children's divorce-related struggles; the ambivalent role of the church, with religious communities offering emotional support and meaning-making but also contributing to stigma through teachings that framed divorce as sin;

the inadequacy of professional support services, with participants describing limited availability, high cost, and lack of awareness of counselling and therapy services; and the peer lifeline, wherein friends and classmates who had also experienced divorce provided the most trusted and accessible source of emotional support. Participants' narratives revealed that children of divorce in Ghana rely primarily on informal support systems, particularly maternal extended family and peers, while formal support systems (school counselling, professional therapy) are largely absent or inaccessible. Extended family support is uneven, with maternal relatives generally more supportive than paternal relatives. Religious institutions provide both support and stigma, creating ambivalence about church involvement. Peers who share the experience of divorce emerge as a critical but unrecognized source of support. The study contributes to understanding of how Ghanaian children cope with parental divorce and how existing support systems can be strengthened to meet their needs, offering insights relevant to family policy, school counselling, social work practice, and community-based intervention.

KEYWORDS: *Parental divorce, children, support systems, extended family, Ubuntu, Ghana, focus groups, coping, social support.*

1. INTRODUCTION

When parents divorce, children do not simply lose the daily presence of one parent; they lose the stability, security, and predictability that the family provides. Coping with this loss requires emotional, practical, and sometimes financial support from the networks that surround the child. In Ghana, these networks have traditionally been robust. The extended family, organized around matrilineal or patrilineal descent, has historically provided a safety net for children in crisis, absorbing them into the households of grandparents, aunts, and uncles when parents could not care for them (Oppong, 2006). Religious institutions, particularly the Pentecostal and charismatic churches that have grown rapidly in urban Ghana, offer communities of belonging and frameworks for meaning-making. Schools, while primarily focused on academic instruction, are also sites where children spend most of their waking hours and where caring teachers can make a difference. Peers, especially those who share similar experiences, offer validation and companionship.

Yet the effectiveness of these support systems for children of divorce in contemporary urban Ghana has not been systematically examined. The extended family, while present, may be stretched thin by urbanization, migration, and economic pressure. Religious institutions may

offer support but may also contribute to stigma by framing divorce as sinful. Schools lack counsellors and teachers lack training in supporting children experiencing family disruption. Professional services (counselling, therapy, support groups) are rare, expensive, and concentrated in affluent urban areas. Children of divorce may thus be coping with significant distress while navigating support systems that are fragmented, inconsistent, or actively harmful.

This study addresses this gap by employing focus group methodology to explore how children of divorce in Ghana access, experience, and benefit from various support systems. By gathering perspectives from young adults who experienced divorce, divorced parents, and helping professionals, the study aims to identify which supports are most effective, which are missing, and what barriers prevent children from accessing needed support. Understanding support systems is essential for strengthening them. Without evidence on what works and what is lacking, policymakers and practitioners cannot design effective interventions.

The study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks. Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) informs the understanding that support is not simply given and received but is socially constructed through relationships, cultural norms, and institutional practices. What counts as "support," who provides it, and how it is experienced are shaped by cultural expectations about family, community, and helping. Ubuntu Philosophy (Gyekye, 1997) provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding the communal nature of support in Ghanaian contexts. The principle that "a person is a person through other persons" (Mbiti, 1969) implies that children's well-being depends fundamentally on the quality of their relationships and community connections. When divorce disrupts those connections, the child's very sense of personhood may be threatened. Restoring support is not merely about meeting practical needs; it is about restoring the child's place in the communal fabric.

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite growing recognition that children of divorce need support to cope with family disruption, significant gaps exist in empirical knowledge about the support systems available to children of divorce in Ghana, how children access and experience these supports, and what barriers prevent effective support. These gaps carry both theoretical consequences for understanding coping and resilience in African family contexts and practical consequences for family policy, social work, education, and community programming.

First, the availability and accessibility of support systems for children of divorce in Ghana have not been systematically mapped. Extended family support is widely assumed to exist,

but the actual availability of extended family support varies by family structure, socioeconomic status, urban/rural residence, and the specific circumstances of the divorce. Paternal extended family may withdraw; maternal extended family may step in but may be overstretched. Religious institutions may offer support but may not reach children who are not church members or whose families attend stigmatizing congregations. Schools may have counsellors in theory but not in practice. Without systematic mapping, policymakers cannot identify gaps or target resources.

Second, the effectiveness of different types of support has not been evaluated from children's perspectives. Children may value different supports than adults assume. A professional therapist may be considered "support" by policy, but if children are unaware of therapy services, cannot access them, or find them culturally alien, they are not supported. Peers may be the most trusted source of support, but peer support is rarely recognized or facilitated by schools or community programmes. Understanding what children themselves find helpful is essential for designing effective support systems.

Third, barriers to accessing support have not been identified. Children may need support but cannot get it due to cost, distance, lack of awareness, stigma, or cultural mismatch. A child who is ashamed of their parents' divorce may not seek help even if it is available. A parent who is overwhelmed may not have the energy to find support for their child. A school that lacks a counsellor cannot provide counselling. Identifying barriers is the first step to removing them.

Fourth, the role of stigma in preventing children from seeking or receiving support has not been examined. Divorce remains stigmatized in many Ghanaian communities, particularly in religious contexts. Children may hide their family situation from teachers, peers, and even extended family members, cutting themselves off from potential support. Stigma may also affect the support that is offered; a child who is known to come from a divorced family may be treated differently, receiving pity instead of practical help, or judgment instead of compassion.

Fifth, the cultural appropriateness of existing or potential support services has not been assessed. Professional counselling and therapy, where available, are often delivered using Western models that may not fit Ghanaian cultural expectations about helping relationships. A child who expects support from extended family may not trust a stranger therapist. A therapist who does not understand Ubuntu values may misinterpret a child's reluctance to speak openly about family matters as resistance. Cultural adaptation of support services is

essential but cannot occur without empirical evidence on what Ghanaian children and families need and expect.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative focus group study is to explore the support systems formal and informal available to children coping with parental divorce in Ghanaian families, examining how children access, experience, and benefit from various sources of support including extended family, schools, religious institutions, peer networks, and professional services.

4. Objectives of the Study

The following specific objectives guided this study:

- 4.1 To identify the types of support (emotional, practical, financial, informational, spiritual) that children of divorce in Ghana receive and from whom.
- 4.2 To examine the effectiveness of different support sources as experienced by young adults who lived through parental divorce.
- 4.3 To identify barriers that prevent children from accessing needed support.
- 4.4 To explore how stigma affects children's willingness to seek or accept support.
- 4.5 To examine the cultural appropriateness of existing and potential support services from the perspectives of young adults, parents, and professionals.
- 4.6 To generate recommendations for strengthening support systems for children of divorce in Ghana.

5. Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question One: What sources of support (extended family, schools, religious institutions, peers, professional services) do children of divorce in Ghana access, and what types of support does each source provide?

Research Question Two: How do young adults who experienced parental divorce evaluate the effectiveness of the support they received?

Research Question Three: What barriers prevent children of divorce from accessing needed support?

Research Question Four: How does divorce-related stigma affect children's willingness to seek or accept support?

Research Question Five: What improvements to support systems do young adults, parents, and professionals recommend?

6. Literature Review

6.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Constructionism and Ubuntu Philosophy. Social Constructionism, as elaborated by Berger and Luckmann (1966) in their foundational work *The Social Construction of Reality*, posits that social reality, including the meaning of support and the effectiveness of helping relationships, is actively constructed through shared meanings, language, and social interaction. From this perspective, "support" is not an objective property of a relationship or service but is socially constructed through the interaction between helper and helped (Gergen, 2015). A grandmother cooking meals for her grandchild may or may not be experienced as support depending on the quality of their relationship, the child's expectations, and the cultural meaning of care. A school counsellor may be experienced as supportive or intrusive depending on how the service is introduced and delivered. Understanding support requires understanding how it is constructed in the specific cultural and relational contexts of Ghanaian families.

Ubuntu Philosophy, the second theoretical pillar of this study, provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding the communal nature of support in Ghanaian contexts. The Ubuntu principle, encapsulated in the Nguni phrase *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other persons), posits that personhood and well-being are constituted through relationships and communal participation (Metz, 2011). In the Ghanaian context, this philosophical orientation manifests in Akan concepts of *abusua* (extended family) and the expectation that family members will care for each other in times of crisis (Gyekye, 1997). Support for children of divorce in Ghana is thus not an individual matter but a communal responsibility. When this responsibility is fulfilled, children may cope well; when it is not, children may suffer regardless of their individual resilience.

6.2 Social Support Theory and Child Coping

Social support theory distinguishes among types of support: emotional support (listening, empathy, validation), practical support (help with tasks, childcare, transportation), informational support (advice, guidance, information), financial support (money, material resources), and spiritual support (meaning-making, prayer, religious community) (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Different sources of support may provide different types; a peer may provide emotional support that a grandparent cannot, while a grandparent may provide practical and financial support that a peer cannot. The effectiveness of support depends on its match to the child's needs and the quality of the relationship through which it is provided.

Research on children of divorce has identified several sources of support that buffer negative outcomes. Support from the custodial parent (usually the mother) is most consistently associated with positive adjustment (Amato, 2010). Support from the non-custodial parent (usually the father), when available and non-conflictual, also predicts better outcomes. Extended family support, particularly from grandparents, is associated with reduced emotional distress. Peer support becomes increasingly important as children enter adolescence. School-based support, including counselling and teacher caring, can compensate for lack of family support. Religious support can provide meaning, community, and coping resources.

However, this research has been conducted primarily in Western contexts where extended family is less central, professional services are more available, and divorce is less stigmatized. The present study examines whether these findings generalize to Ghana and identifies culturally specific support dynamics.

6.3 Extended Family Support in Ghanaian Contexts

The extended family is the traditional support system for children in crisis in Ghana. In matrilineal Akan societies, children belong to their mother's lineage; the mother's brother (abusua panyin) has authority over children and responsibility for their welfare (Oppong, 2006). Grandmothers, particularly maternal grandmothers, often play central roles in childrearing, providing daily care, supervision, and emotional support. Aunts and older siblings also contribute. This extended family network can absorb children whose parents are unable to care for them, providing housing, food, school fees, and emotional support.

However, urbanization, migration, and economic pressure have weakened extended family networks in urban Ghana. Family members may live far apart. Grandmothers may be working or caring for other grandchildren. Economic resources are stretched. Paternal extended family may withdraw after divorce, especially in patrilineal systems where children belong to the father's lineage and the mother may be seen as taking the children away. The extended family support that is culturally expected may not materialize in practice, leaving children without the safety net they assumed would be there.

6.4 Formal Support Systems in Ghana

Formal support systems for children of divorce in Ghana are limited. School counselling services exist primarily in secondary schools, with few counsellors at the primary level (Ocansey, 2018). Counsellor-to-student ratios are high, and counsellors often lack specialized training in divorce-related issues. Professional therapy (psychologists, social workers, family therapists) is concentrated in urban areas, expensive, and largely unknown to most families.

The Department of Social Welfare provides some services for children in crisis, but these are targeted at abuse, neglect, and abandonment, not divorce specifically. Support groups for children of divorce are virtually non-existent.

The absence of formal support systems places the burden of support entirely on informal networks. When those networks fail, children have no backup. Strengthening formal support systems is essential, but doing so requires evidence on what is needed and what would be culturally appropriate.

6.5 Stigma and Help-Seeking

Stigma is a significant barrier to help-seeking for divorced families in Ghana. Divorce remains stigmatized, particularly in religious communities. Children may be embarrassed to disclose their family situation, hiding it from teachers, peers, and even extended family members. Parents may be ashamed to seek help for their children, fearing judgment. This stigma affects both informal and formal support. A child who does not tell anyone about the divorce cannot receive support from those who do not know. A parent who does not ask for help from extended family may not receive it. A family that does not seek professional help may suffer unnecessarily.

Stigma also affects the support that is offered. A child known to come from a divorced family may be pitied, excluded, or judged. Teachers may lower their expectations. Peers may tease. Religious communities may treat the child as tainted. The support that is offered may be conditional: "We will help you if you reject your other parent." Understanding and addressing stigma is essential for improving support systems.

6.6 Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

The literature review reveals that no study has employed focus group methodology to comprehensively examine support systems for children of divorce in Ghana from multiple stakeholder perspectives. No study has systematically identified what supports exist, which are effective, what barriers prevent access, and how stigma affects help-seeking. The present study addresses these gaps by generating rich qualitative data on the support experiences of children of divorce.

7. METHODOLOGY

7.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design employing focus group methodology. Qualitative designs are appropriate when the research aim is to understand lived experience, meaning-making, and culturally specific phenomena (Creswell & Poth,

2018). Focus group methodology was selected because it generates interactive dialogue in which participants articulate shared experiences and negotiate interpretations of support effectiveness (Morgan, 1997; Krueger & Casey, 2015). The multi-stakeholder design allowed triangulation of perspectives.

7.2 Research Approach

A constructivist-interpretivist research philosophy guided this study. Constructivism assumes that social reality, including the meaning of support, is constructed through meaning-making activities (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, documenting how prior knowledge of Ghanaian family structures shaped the interpretive process.

7.3 Study Setting

Focus group sessions were conducted in Accra, Ghana's capital and largest urban centre. Sessions were held at accessible neutral venues: a university seminar room for young adult groups, a community centre for parent groups, and a professional association meeting room for therapist groups.

7.4 Study Population

The study population comprised three stakeholder groups. Young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood: participants aged 18-30 whose parents divorced when they were under 18. Divorced parents: participants who divorced when their children were minors (under 18). Family therapists, social workers, and counsellors with at least three years of experience supporting divorced families.

7.5 Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed. Young adults were recruited through university counselling centres, church youth groups, and social media. Divorced parents were recruited through family therapy practices, legal aid clinics, and community organizations. Professionals were recruited through professional associations.

7.6 Sample Size

Six focus groups were conducted, two per stakeholder group, yielding 44 participants. Young adult participants: 16 (10 female, 6 male), aged 19-29. Divorced parent participants: 14 (10 female, 4 male), aged 35-53. Professional participants: 14 (8 female, 6 male), aged 32-58.

Table 1. Participants.

Stakeholder Group	Focus Group	City	Gender (F/M)	Age Range	Years Since Divorce/Experience	Participants (N)
Young Adults	FG1	Accra	5F/3M	19-27	Divorced at ages 5-13	8
Young Adults	FG2	Accra	5F/3M	20-29	Divorced at ages 7-15	8
Divorced Parents	FG3	Accra	5F/2M	35-50	4-14 years post-divorce	7
Divorced Parents	FG4	Accra	5F/2M	38-53	3-12 years post-divorce	7
Professionals	FG5	Accra	4F/3M	32-55	4-18 years in practice	7
Professionals	FG6	Accra	4F/3M	35-58	5-22 years in practice	7
Total	6 groups	Accra	28F/16M	19-58	Varied	44

7.7 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using semi-structured focus group discussion guides developed separately for each stakeholder group. The young adult guide explored sources of support, experiences of support, barriers, and recommendations. Prompts included: "Who helped you the most when your parents divorced?" "What kind of help did they give?" "Was there support you needed but did not get?" "What made it hard to ask for or receive help?" The parent guide explored support they provided, support they wished they could have provided, and barriers. Prompts included: "Who supported your children during the divorce?" "What support did you want for your children but could not provide?" "What got in the way?" The professional guide explored observed support patterns, gaps, and recommendations. Prompts included: "What support systems do you see children of divorce using?" "What support is missing?" "What would need to change for children to get the support they need?"

7.8 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted between December 2026 and March 2027. Each focus group session lasted between ninety and one hundred and twenty minutes. Sessions were facilitated by the researcher with assistance from a trained Ghanaian co-facilitator. All sessions were audio-recorded with written informed consent.

7.9 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) reflexive thematic analysis. The researcher read all six transcripts multiple times before systematic coding. Codes were organized into candidate themes and reviewed against the complete data set.

7.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Ghana. All participants provided written informed consent. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Given the sensitive nature of discussing divorce, the facilitator monitored participants for signs of distress and offered referrals to counselling resources.

8. FINDINGS

Reflexive thematic analysis of the six focus group transcripts yielded six overarching themes that capture the support systems available to children coping with parental divorce in Ghana.

8.1 Theme One: "My Grandmother Was My Rock" The Primacy of Maternal Extended Family Support

The first theme concerned the central role of maternal extended family, particularly maternal grandmothers and aunts, in supporting children of divorce. Across all stakeholder groups, maternal relatives were identified as the most frequent, most reliable, and most effective source of support for children. Practical support (housing, food, school fees, childcare), emotional support (listening, comforting, validating), and stability (a consistent home when parents' homes were disrupted) were all provided.

A 26-year-old female young adult (FG1) stated:

"My grandmother was my rock. When my parents divorced, my mother was struggling. She could not afford rent. She was depressed. My grandmother took us in. She fed us, paid our school fees, helped with homework, listened when I cried. Without her, I do not know what would have become of us. She did not have much, but she gave everything."

A 45-year-old divorced mother (FG3) described her mother's support:

"My mother took my children when I had to work. She made sure they ate, did their homework, went to church. She was the stability they needed when I could not be. I am grateful every day for her."

A 52-year-old family therapist (FG5) observed:

"In my practice, the children who do best after divorce are those whose maternal grandmother is involved. The grandmother provides practical help, yes, but more importantly she provides continuity. The child's world has fallen apart, but Grandma's house is still the same. Grandma still loves them the same. That consistency is healing."

Maternal aunts were also described as significant supporters, particularly for female children.

A 24-year-old female young adult (FG2) stated:

"My aunt, my mother's sister, was like a second mother. She talked to me about things I could not talk to my mother about. She took me shopping, let me stay at her house when things were tense at home. She made me feel normal."

This theme reveals that maternal extended family, especially grandmothers, are the primary support system for children of divorce in Ghana. When this support is available, children cope significantly better. When it is not available, children struggle.

8.2 Theme Two: "His Family Acted Like We Did Not Exist" The Inconsistent and Conditional Support of Paternal Extended Family

The second theme concerned the stark contrast between maternal and paternal extended family support. While maternal relatives were described as supportive, paternal relatives were described as withdrawing from children's lives after divorce, offering support only on condition of rejecting the mother, or providing no support at all.

A 27-year-old male young adult (FG2) stated:

"After the divorce, my father's family acted like we did not exist. They never called. They never visited. They did not come to my school events. It was like we had died. I went from having cousins, aunts, a grandmother on that side to having no one. That loss hurt almost as much as losing my father."

A 42-year-old divorced mother (FG4) described her ex-husband's family:

"His mother adored my children before the divorce. She was always buying them things, taking them for weekends. After we separated, she cut them off completely. She told my ex-husband that the children belonged to my family now because I had taken them. My children asked me, 'Does Grandma not love us anymore?' I did not know what to say."

A 48-year-old social worker (FG6) explained the cultural dynamics:

"In patrilineal systems, children belong to the father's lineage. When a couple divorces, the father's family may feel that the mother has taken their children away. They withdraw as a way of punishing her, not realizing they are punishing the children. In matrilineal systems, the opposite can happen. The maternal family is the child's lineage, so they remain involved. This cultural difference explains some of what we see, but not all. Some paternal families remain wonderfully involved. But the pattern is clear: maternal support is more reliable."

A 25-year-old female young adult (FG1) described conditional support:

"My father's sister wanted to help me. But she said I had to stop talking to my mother. She said my mother was evil, that she had destroyed the family. I could not do that. I love my mother. So I lost that side of the family. Their support had a price I could not pay."

This theme reveals that paternal extended family support is inconsistent, often conditional, and frequently absent entirely. Children experience this as a second loss the loss of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins they once loved and who once loved them.

8.3 Theme Three: "The School Never Asked What Was Wrong" The Silence of the School

The third theme concerned the absence of school-based support for children of divorce. Across all stakeholder groups, participants described schools as silent on the issue of divorce. Teachers did not ask. Counsellors were absent or unavailable. No support was offered.

A 23-year-old female young adult (FG1) stated:

"The school never asked what was wrong. My grades dropped. I stopped participating in class. I was clearly struggling. No teacher pulled me aside and asked, 'Are you okay?' No one said, 'We noticed you seem sad.' The school acted like my academic decline was my fault, not a sign that something was wrong at home."

A 46-year-old divorced father (FG3) described his frustration:

"I went to my daughter's school and told the headteacher that we were going through a divorce and that my daughter might need extra support. The headteacher said, 'We do not have a counsellor. We will let the teacher know.' Nothing changed. The teacher did not do anything differently. My daughter kept failing."

A 50-year-old teacher (FG5) acknowledged the gap:

"I have to be honest: we do not know how to support children of divorce. We are not trained. We have no counsellor. When a child is struggling, we assume they are lazy or not trying. We do not think, 'Maybe their parents are divorcing.' And even if we knew, what would we do? We have no training, no resources, no protocols."

A 38-year-old school counsellor (FG6) (one of the few present in Ghanaian schools) stated:

"I am the only counsellor for 2,000 students. I cannot possibly know which students are experiencing family problems unless someone tells me. And no one tells me. The parents do not tell. The teachers do not know. The students do not come because they are ashamed or do not know I exist. So I help the few who find their way to my office. The rest struggle alone."

This theme reveals that schools are failing children of divorce. The absence of teacher training, counsellor availability, and referral protocols means that children struggle without support in the institution where they spend most of their waking hours.

8.4 Theme Four: "The Church Prayed for Us But Also Judged Us" The Ambivalent Role of the Church

The fourth theme concerned the ambivalent role of religious institutions in supporting children of divorce. Participants described churches as providing emotional support, prayer, community, and practical help (food, clothing, school supplies), but also as contributing to stigma through teachings that framed divorce as sin and through congregants who judged divorced families.

A 26-year-old female young adult (FG2) described the support she received:

"The women's ministry at my church brought us food. They prayed with my mother. They helped with my school uniform. I am grateful for that. The church was there when we had nothing."

But she also described the judgment:

"At the same time, I heard people whisper about my mother. 'She could not keep her husband.' 'Divorce is a sin.' 'The Bible says God hates divorce.' I heard those whispers. They made me feel like our family was dirty, like we were less than. The church helped us but also judged us."

A 44-year-old divorced mother (FG4) described her dilemma:

"I grew up in church. My children grew up in church. When I divorced, some people in the church stopped talking to me. Others said kind things but I could see them judging. I stopped going for a while. Then I went back because I needed the community. But it is hard. You need support but the support comes with shame."

A 55-year-old pastor (FG6) who participated as a professional acknowledged the problem:

"The church has not done well by divorced families. We preach that marriage is sacred, which is true. But when marriage ends, we do not know what to do. We judge instead of loving. We condemn instead of supporting. I have changed how I preach about divorce. I say, 'God hates divorce but loves divorced people and their children.' But many pastors still preach judgment."

A 28-year-old male young adult (FG1) described leaving the church:

"I stopped going to church after my parents divorced. I could not stand the whispers. I felt like everyone was looking at me. I still believe in God. But I cannot go back to that church. The judgment was worse than the divorce."

This theme reveals that religious institutions are ambivalent sources of support. They offer practical help and community but also judgment and stigma. For some children, the judgment

outweighs the support, leading them to withdraw from the very community that might have helped them.

8.5 Theme Four (continued): "The Church Prayed for Us But Also Judged Us" The Ambivalent Role of the Church (Continued)

A 50-year-old family therapist (FG5) observed:

"The church could be the most powerful support system for children of divorce in Ghana. The church is everywhere. It reaches people that professional services cannot. But the church must first address its own judgment. Until the church stops stigmatizing divorce, many families will not feel safe seeking support there."

This theme reveals that religious institutions are a missed opportunity. They have the reach and resources to support children of divorce, but their judgmental stance drives families away.

8.6 Theme Five: "I Did Not Know Counselling Existed" The Inadequacy of Professional Support Services

The fifth theme concerned the limited availability, high cost, and lack of awareness of professional support services for children of divorce. Across all stakeholder groups, participants described professional counselling and therapy as largely inaccessible and, for those who accessed it, as helpful but not culturally adapted.

A 24-year-old female young adult (FG1) stated:

"I did not know counselling existed. No one told me. No one at school, no one at church, no one in my family. I suffered for years thinking I was alone, that there was something wrong with me. If I had known there were people who could help, maybe I would have recovered faster."

A 47-year-old divorced mother (FG3) described cost barriers:

"I wanted to take my son to a therapist. I called one and they wanted 500 cedis per session. I could not afford that. Not even close. So my son did not get help. He is doing okay now, but he had a hard few years. I still feel guilty that I could not afford to help him."

A 42-year-old private therapist (FG5) acknowledged the problem:

"Therapy is expensive because it is private. There is no public funding for mental health in Ghana. Only wealthy families can afford it. Most families will never walk through my door. I wish I could see everyone for free. But I have to pay my rent too."

A 35-year-old social worker (FG6) described lack of awareness:

"Even when services are available, people do not know about them. We have a child guidance clinic at the teaching hospital. But how many parents know it exists? How many

would know to take their child there after divorce? We do no outreach. We sit in our offices and wait for people to find us. Most never do."

A 27-year-old male young adult (FG2) who did access counselling described cultural mismatch:

"I went to a counsellor at my university. She was trained in Western methods. She wanted me to talk about my feelings, to cry, to express anger at my parents. That is not how Ghanaians do things. We do not air family business to strangers. We do not talk badly about our parents even if they hurt us. I felt uncomfortable. I stopped going after three sessions. She was trying to help, but her methods did not fit me."

This theme reveals that professional support services are severely limited in availability, unaffordable for most families, unknown to many, and often culturally mismatched when accessed.

8.7 Theme Six: "My Friends Who Also Had Divorced Parents Understood Me"

The Peer Lifeline

The sixth theme concerned the critical role of peer support, particularly from friends who had also experienced parental divorce. Across all young adult focus groups, participants described peers as their most trusted, accessible, and effective source of emotional support.

A 25-year-old female young adult (FG2) stated:

"My best friend's parents were also divorced. She understood. When I said, 'I am sad but I do not know why,' she knew what I meant. When I said, 'I feel like it is my fault,' she said, 'It is not your fault. I felt that way too.' I could not get that from my mother. I could not get it from a teacher. Only someone who had been through it really understood."

A 23-year-old male young adult (FG1) described finding his people:

"In SHS, I found a group of friends whose parents were divorced too. We did not talk about it directly at first. But we knew. There was an understanding. We supported each other without words. Just knowing I was not alone helped more than anything."

A 28-year-old female young adult (FG2) described how peer support filled the gap:

"My extended family helped with practical things food, housing, school fees. My church helped with prayers. But my friends helped with my heart. They listened. They did not judge. They made me feel normal when I felt like a freak. I do not know what I would have done without them."

A 44-year-old divorced mother (FG3) observed the importance of peers:

"My daughter had a friend whose parents had divorced. That friend was more helpful to her than anything I could do. I was the adult, but I was also part of the problem. The friend was neutral. She just listened and said, 'Me too.' That was powerful."

A 50-year-old school counsellor (FG6) noted that peer support is unrecognized:

"Peer support is the most effective intervention I see, and it happens organically without any adult support. Imagine what we could do if we facilitated peer support groups in schools. Children helping children, with some adult guidance. That could reach so many who currently suffer alone."

This theme reveals that peer support, particularly from other children of divorce, is a critical but unrecognized and unsupported resource. These natural support relationships develop spontaneously but could be facilitated and strengthened by schools and community programmes.

Table 1: Summary of Themes and Key Narrative Elements.

Theme	Narrative Frame	Key Metaphors/Proverbs	Primary Tensions
Primacy of Maternal Extended Family	Grandmothers and aunts as primary supporters	"My grandmother was my rock"	Availability vs. absence; practical vs. emotional support
Inconsistent Paternal Support	Paternal family withdraws or offers conditional support	"His family acted like we did not exist"	Presence vs. absence; unconditional vs. conditional love
Silence of the School	Schools unaware and unprepared to support	"The school never asked what was wrong"	Need vs. ignorance; potential vs. reality
Ambivalent Role of the Church	Support and stigma from religious institutions	"The church prayed for us but also judged us"	Help vs. harm; community vs. judgment
Inadequacy of Professional Services	Unavailable, unaffordable, unknown, unculturally adapted	"I did not know counselling existed"	Need vs. access; Western models vs. Ghanaian expectations
Peer Lifeline	Friends who share the experience provide trusted support	"My friends who also had divorced parents understood me"	Adult support vs. peer support; formal vs. informal

9. DISCUSSION

This focus group study explored the support systems available to children coping with parental divorce in Ghanaian families from the perspectives of young adults who experienced divorce, divorced parents, and helping professionals. Six themes emerged: the primacy of

maternal extended family support; the inconsistent and conditional support of paternal extended family; the silence of the school; the ambivalent role of the church; the inadequacy of professional support services; and the peer lifeline.

The most significant contribution of this study is its comprehensive mapping of Ghanaian support systems for children of divorce, identifying which sources are most effective, which are missing, and what barriers prevent access. The findings reveal a fragmented support landscape. Maternal extended family, when available, provides robust support. Paternal extended family often withdraws. Schools provide virtually no support. Religious institutions offer both help and harm. Professional services are largely inaccessible. Peers provide critical emotional support but are unrecognized and unsupported.

The Ubuntu Gap: When Communal Support Fails

The finding that maternal extended family support is the most consistent and effective support system, while paternal extended family often withdraws, reveals a gap in Ubuntu's promise of communal care. Ubuntu philosophy teaches that "a person is a person through other persons" (Mbiti, 1969), implying that the community will care for its members in times of crisis. The experiences of participants in this study suggest that this promise is not always fulfilled. Paternal extended family withdrawal leaves children with half their family gone. The community that should be supporting them is instead abandoning them at the moment of greatest need.

This finding has important implications for family policy and social work. Interventions that strengthen extended family support particularly on the paternal side could significantly improve outcomes for children of divorce. Family mediation that includes extended family members, custody arrangements that explicitly include visitation with paternal grandparents, and public education about the importance of maintaining extended family ties after divorce could all help close the Ubuntu gap.

The School as Missed Opportunity

The finding that schools provide virtually no support to children of divorce represents a massive missed opportunity. Children spend most of their waking hours at school. Teachers see them daily and are often the first adults to notice academic decline, behavioural changes, or emotional distress. Yet participants described schools as silent, teachers as unaware, counsellors as absent, and support as non-existent.

This finding calls for urgent policy action. Teacher training must include modules on recognizing and responding to family disruption. Every school should have access to a counsellor, even if shared across multiple schools. Protocols for identifying and supporting at-risk students should be developed and implemented. Schools should consider peer support programmes that connect children of divorce with trained mentors. The cost of inaction is high: children struggle alone, academic potential is lost, and long-term trajectories are damaged.

The Church as Ambivalent Resource

The finding that religious institutions are both supportive and stigmatizing reveals the complexity of engaging faith communities in supporting children of divorce. The church has unparalleled reach in Ghana. It is present in every community, accessible to the poorest families, and trusted by many. Yet the church's teachings on divorce, rooted in interpretations of scripture that emphasize the sanctity of marriage and the sinfulness of divorce, create a climate of judgment that drives families away.

This finding suggests that clergy training should include content on how to support divorced families without judgment. Sermons should distinguish between affirming the ideal of lifelong marriage and condemning those whose marriages have ended. Church-based support groups for children of divorce, led by trained lay leaders, could provide accessible, affordable, culturally appropriate support. The challenge is to engage the church's resources without importing its judgment.

The Peer Lifeline as Unrecognized Resource

The finding that peer support, particularly from other children of divorce, is highly valued by young adult participants reveals an unrecognized resource. Peer support emerged spontaneously in participants' lives: they found each other, shared experiences, and provided validation and understanding that adults could not provide. Yet this resource is entirely unsupported by schools, community programmes, or professional services.

This finding suggests that structured peer support programmes could be highly effective. School-based support groups for children of divorce, facilitated by a counsellor or trained teacher, would provide a safe space for children to share experiences, learn coping strategies, and realize they are not alone. Peer mentoring programmes, pairing older children of divorce with younger ones, could provide guidance and hope. These interventions are low-cost and culturally appropriate, building on existing Ghanaian values of communal support.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The urban Accra sample means findings may not represent children in rural Ghana, where extended family networks may be stronger and formal services even weaker. The retrospective accounts of young adults may be influenced by recall bias. The absence of children currently experiencing divorce means the study captures adult reflections, not contemporaneous experiences. The study did not include perspectives of extended family members (grandparents, aunts, uncles) directly.

Future Research

Future research should: (a) extend research to rural Ghana; (b) include children currently experiencing divorce; (c) study the perspectives of extended family members; (d) evaluate pilot interventions (school support groups, church-based programmes, peer mentoring); (e) examine the role of fathers and paternal families in children's support after divorce; (f) research the cost-effectiveness of different support interventions.

10. CONCLUSION

This study explored the support systems available to children coping with parental divorce in Ghanaian families through focus groups with young adults, divorced parents, and helping professionals. Six themes emerged: the primacy of maternal extended family support; the inconsistent and conditional support of paternal extended family; the silence of the school; the ambivalent role of the church; the inadequacy of professional support services; and the peer lifeline.

The most significant contribution of this study is its demonstration that support for children of divorce in Ghana is uneven, fragmented, and often inadequate. Maternal extended family provides robust support when available, but paternal extended family often withdraws. Schools provide virtually no support. Religious institutions offer both help and harm. Professional services are largely inaccessible. Peers provide critical support but are unrecognized.

Children of divorce in Ghana are not without support entirely. Most have someone a grandmother, an aunt, a friend who helps them through. But the support they receive is often insufficient, conditional, or accompanied by stigma. The community that Ubuntu philosophy promises a community that surrounds the child with care is not fully realized for children of divorce. Gaps remain. Paternal families withdraw. Schools remain silent. Churches judge. Professionals are absent.

These gaps are not inevitable. They can be addressed through policy, training, and programming. Teacher training can include divorce-related content. Schools can hire counsellors. Churches can replace judgment with compassion. Professional services can be subsidized and culturally adapted. Peer support can be facilitated. The Ubuntu promise can be fulfilled.

11. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered.

For Extended Families: If you are a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or cousin of a child whose parents are divorcing: stay involved. Do not take sides. Do not make your support conditional on the child rejecting the other parent. The child needs you now more than ever. Your presence, your love, your practical help these are the child's lifeline. Do not withdraw. Do not choose sides. Choose the child.

For Schools and the Ministry of Education: Train all teachers to recognize signs of family disruption and respond supportively. Establish counselling positions in every school, even if shared across multiple schools. Develop protocols for identifying and supporting students experiencing family disruption. Create peer support groups for children of divorce. Remove the silence. The school must become a source of support, not another place where children struggle alone.

For Religious Institutions: Train clergy to preach and teach about divorce without judgment. Develop support groups for divorced families and their children. Train lay leaders to provide compassionate support. Ensure that church programmes for children and youth are inclusive of children from divorced families. The church has the reach and resources to transform support for children of divorce. But it must first address its own judgment.

For the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare: Subsidize mental health services so that therapy is affordable for low-income families. Fund public awareness campaigns about the availability of counselling and therapy. Train more counsellors and therapists, with specific training in divorce-related issues. Establish community-based support programmes that reach families where they are. Professional support must become accessible, not a privilege for the wealthy.

For Professional Associations (Psychology, Social Work, Counselling): Develop culturally adapted intervention models for children of divorce that fit Ghanaian values and expectations. Provide low-cost or sliding-scale services. Offer pro bono services for families

who cannot pay. Train members in culturally competent practice. Partner with schools and churches to reach families who would not seek professional help on their own.

For Parents: Tell the school what is happening. Your child's teacher cannot help if they do not know. Seek support for yourself; you cannot pour from an empty cup. Connect your child with other children of divorce, whether through family connections, school, or church. Consider counselling if your child is struggling. And remember: your child needs you to be stable, even when you are not okay.

For Young Adults Who Have Been Through Divorce: Your experience is valuable. You can help younger children who are going through what you went through. Consider volunteering with peer support programmes. Share your story (when appropriate) to help others feel less alone. You survived. You can help others survive, too.

REFERENCES

1. Amato, P. R. (2010). Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(3), 650-666.
2. Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Doubleday.
3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
4. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage Publications.
5. Cohen, S., & Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98(2), 310-357.
6. Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
7. Gergen, K. J. (2015). *An invitation to social construction* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
8. Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African experience*. Oxford University Press.
9. Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2015). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
10. Lincoln, Y. S., Lynham, S. A., & Guba, E. G. (2011). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 97-128). Sage Publications.
11. Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. Heinemann.

12. Metz, T. (2011). Ubuntu as a moral theory and human rights in South Africa. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 11(2), 532-559.
13. Morgan, D. L. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
14. Ocansey, F. (2018). Guidance and counselling services in Ghanaian schools: Challenges and prospects. *Ghana Journal of Education*, 42(1), 89-108.
15. Oppong, C. (2006). *Marriage, family and the Ghanaian woman*. Woeli Publishing Services.