

Qualitative Paper

Social Support Following Parental Divorce: Students' Experiences of Family, Friends and Teachers

Adedokun Deborah Oluranti^{1*}, Badejo Ayodeji Olawunmi¹, Tahir Muyideen Babatunde¹

Affiliations

¹Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos, Nigeria

ORCID Identifiers

Adedokun Deborah
Oluranti
[0009-0002-3222-2719](https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3222-2719)

Badejo Ayodeji Olawunmi

Tahir Muyideen Babatunde
[0009-0007-2270-0744](https://orcid.org/0009-0007-2270-0744)

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.65820/ejes-22vol2-issue2-2026>

Abstract

Purpose: This study explored the experiences of social support among secondary school students following parental divorce or separation in Lagos State, Nigeria.

Methodology: A qualitative descriptive design was adopted. Eight students, comprising four males and four females, from two public secondary schools participated in semi-structured focus group discussions conducted after therapeutic intervention sessions. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: Three themes emerged: sources and experiences of social support; social support as a pathway to adjustment; and access to social support. Students drew on family members, friends, and teachers in different ways. Family members provided closeness and practical help, friends offered companionship, while teachers provided guidance and reassurance. Social support helped students manage emotional distress and maintain a sense of belonging, often through ordinary activities rather than direct discussion of the divorce. However, access to support was uneven, as shame, fear of judgement, and withdrawal prevented some students from using available relationships.

Novelty and Contribution: The study highlights a distinction between the availability of social support and students' ability to access that support following parental divorce or separation. It contributes qualitative evidence from secondary school students in Lagos State, Nigeria, a context that remains underrepresented in research on post-divorce adjustment and social support.

Practical and Social Implications: The findings have implications for school counselling practice, particularly the need to create supportive environments where students can access existing family, peer, and teacher relationships without fear of judgement or stigma. Schools may strengthen counselling and peer-support approaches that recognise both the availability and accessibility of social support in helping students adjust to family disruption.

Keywords: parental divorce, social support, adolescents, secondary school students

*Corresponding author

E-mail address: debbyadedokun86@gmail.com

How to cite this article:

Adedokun, D.O., Badejo, A.O., & Tahir, M.B. (2026). Social Support Following Parental Divorce: Students' Experiences of Family, Friends, and Teachers. *Elicit Journal of Education Studies*, 2(2), 274-285. <https://doi.org/10.65820/ejes-22vol2-issue2-2026>

1 Introduction

The dissolution of a marriage is rarely a private event. When parents separate or divorce, the consequences ripple outward, reaching into classrooms, peer groups, and the ordinary routines of children's daily lives (Schmidt et al., 2026). In Nigeria, marital dissolution has become an increasingly visible feature of family life, particularly in urban centers. The South-West geopolitical zone, to which Lagos belongs, has a mean dissolution rate shaped by cultural acceptance of separation, high female educational attainment, and financial independence among women (Arigbede, 2025). These demographic realities mean that a substantial and growing number of secondary school students in Lagos are navigating the emotional and social aftershocks of parental divorce.

The research literature on divorce and adolescent adjustment has long recognized that the period following parental separation is one of heightened vulnerability. A recent study of senior secondary students in Delta State, Nigeria, found that parental divorce significantly influences emotional well-being, with effects observed across both male and female students (Ame et al., 2026). Similarly, research conducted in Kano Metropolis documented a significant negative relationship between emotional stress and school adjustment among students from divorced families (Isah & Hassan, 2026). These findings align with earlier work in Edo State, which reported that children of divorced parents experience psychological distress, emotional instability, and social difficulties at elevated rates (Yesufu, 2026). What emerges across these Nigerian studies is a consistent pattern: parental divorce is not a discrete event but a process that disrupts multiple domains of adolescent functioning.

Yet adolescents are not passive recipients of disruption. A growing body of international research has shifted attention toward the protective mechanisms that buffer the effects of family instability, with social support emerging as a central factor. Social support, the emotional, informational, and practical resources provided through relationships, has been identified as a protective factor that helps adolescents adjust and maintain mental health following parental divorce (Murniasih & Irvan, 2023). Research involving Canadian youth found that adolescents relied on mothers, friends, and extended family members as their most helpful supports, with immediate family identified as the best source of support (Breivik & Olweus, 2006; Krug et al., 2024). Teacher support has also been shown to matter: a study of 390 Chinese adolescents from divorced families found that both teacher and peer support had significant direct effects on academic motivation, with peer support exerting a greater influence (Huang & Abdullah, 2026). These findings suggest that the social ecology surrounding an adolescent, not just the family, but also the peer group and school environment, plays a consequential role in shaping adjustment trajectories.

However, the presence of potential supporters does not guarantee that adolescents will access or benefit from their support. Help-seeking is not automatic. Adolescents may avoid disclosing their family circumstances out of shame, fear of judgment, or a desire to avoid being seen as different. Research has shown that adolescents are more likely to seek support when they experience peer support, receive general messages of support, or recognize a personal need for help (Mcphail et al., 2024). Conversely, withdrawal and reluctance to disclose can isolate young people from the very relationships that might help them cope. Adolescent experiences of parental divorce found that six of nine participants reported inadequate support from schools left lasting effects, with several describing missed school days, disengagement, and the absence of meaningful support from teachers or counselors (Auersperg et al., 2019). This distinction between support availability and support accessibility carries important implications for schools and counseling services, particularly in contexts where formal mental health resources are limited.

The Nigerian research landscape on this topic has grown, but gaps remain. Much of the existing work has prioritized quantitative measures of psychological outcomes, emotional stress, self-esteem, academic performance, while offering less insight into how adolescents themselves describe and interpret the support they receive (Isah & Hassan, 2026; Ame et al., 2025). Qualitative approaches can complement this body of knowledge by capturing the texture of young people's experiences in their own words: whom they turn to, what makes support feel helpful or unhelpful, and what prevents them from reaching out. The present study addresses this gap by examining the experiences of secondary school students in Lagos State who have experienced parental divorce or separation.

Research Questions

The following research questions are addressed in this study:

RQ1. How do students experience social support from family members, friends and teachers following parental divorce or separation?

RQ2. What factors shape students' access to and use of social support following parental divorce or separation?

2 Literature Review

Parental Divorce and Adolescent Adjustment: The Nigerian Context

The impact of parental divorce on adolescents has drawn sustained scholarly attention, yet the Nigerian literature remains relatively thin. Studies across Nigerian states have documented elevated rates of emotional distress, academic difficulty, and social withdrawal among secondary school students whose parents have separated or divorced. A study of senior secondary students in Delta Central Senatorial District found that parental divorce significantly influenced emotional well-being, with effects observed across both male and female students (Ame et al., 2026). Research in Kano Metropolis similarly documented a significant negative relationship between emotional stress and school adjustment among students from divorced families (Isah & Hassan, 2026).

What these Nigerian studies share is a recognition that divorce is not a discrete event but a process. It unfolds over time and disrupts multiple domains of adolescent life. Research conducted at the Federal University of Technology, Minna, found that among undergraduate students with divorced parents, 32.6% experienced the divorce between ages 6 and 10, while 30.5% experienced it between ages 11 and 15 (Garba et al., 2026). These are formative years, and the timing matters. Students reported moderate levels of emotional stress and difficulty concentrating. Parental involvement is strongly linked to academic success, and reduced support following divorce contributes to lower academic performance (Oroma & Agbor, 2025).

Yet the picture is not uniformly bleak. Many adolescents demonstrate considerable resilience when navigating family transitions. The Minna study concluded that while parental divorce had a moderate effect on emotional well-being, it did not significantly hinder academic performance (Garba et al., 2026). Adolescent outcomes following divorce vary widely depending on individual characteristics, coping strategies, and the quality of support systems available (Schmidt et al., 2026). The question, then, is not simply whether parental divorce harms adolescents, but under what conditions and with what resources young people manage the disruption.

Social Support as a Protective Factor

Social support has emerged as one of the most consistent protective factors for adolescents navigating parental divorce. A recent literature review examining 17 studies on the psychological well-being of adolescents from divorced families identified social support as a key external factor contributing positively to adjustment (Murniasih & Irvan, 2023). What distinguished those who adapted well was not the absence of difficulty but the presence of supportive relationships.

Family members, particularly mothers and extended relatives, often serve as primary sources of support. Research involving Canadian youth found that adolescents relied on their mothers as they coped with parental marital transitions, with immediate family identified as the best source of support (Krug et al., 2024). A South African study found that grandparents played a significant role in providing emotional and financial support when effective co-parenting was absent (Henderson et al., 2009). Extended family can promote resilience, especially where formal counselling services are limited or stigmatised.

Peer relationships represent another critical source of support. Adolescents often turn to friends for companionship and opportunities to maintain a sense of normality amid family disruption. A comparative study of Korean adolescents from divorced and intact families found no significant difference in overall school adjustment between the two groups (Lee et al., 2015). However, for adolescents from divorced families, school adjustment improved when they perceived higher levels of teacher support, peer prosocial characteristics, self-esteem, and positive parenting behaviours. The quality of relationships matters more than the family structure itself.

Teacher support has also been recognised as consequential, particularly for students who experience emotional or behavioural difficulties at school. A study of nonparental adults found that adolescents rated teachers and coaches as significant sources of support, with 40.5% of respondents identifying them as people they could count on (Yu & Deutsch, 2019). For some adolescents, teachers become trusted adults who recognise changes in behaviour and offer direction. This role extends well beyond academic instruction.

Barriers to Accessing Support

The presence of potential supporters, however, does not guarantee that adolescents will access or benefit from their support. Help-seeking is not automatic, and several factors can inhibit disclosure. Research has shown that adolescents are more likely to seek support when they experience peer support, receive general messages of support, or recognise a personal need for help (McPhail et al., 2024). Conversely, shame, fear of judgment, and withdrawal can isolate young people from relationships that might otherwise be helpful.

A recent study examining the long-term emotional and mental health impact of parental divorce during adolescence found that six of nine participants reported inadequate support from schools (Auersperg et al., 2019). Several described missed school days, disengagement, and the absence of meaningful support from teachers or counsellors. These findings point to a gap between the availability of support and its accessibility. Students may have friends, classmates, or family members around them while still experiencing their difficulties privately.

The reluctance to disclose family circumstances appears particularly pronounced in contexts where divorce carries social stigma. In Nigeria, where cultural expectations around marriage and family remain strong, adolescents may be especially hesitant to discuss parental separation. A study of Nigerian early childhood educators found that children affected by divorce often experienced emotional distress that reduced social and academic functioning (Oroma & Agbor, 2025). Their resilience depended heavily on nurturing adults. The adults around these children, whether parents, teachers, or counsellors, play a decisive role in determining whether support is actually received.

Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical perspectives help explain how adolescents respond to parental divorce and why some adjust better than others. Three theories are particularly relevant to this study: family systems theory, attachment theory, and social support theory. Together, they illuminate the structural, emotional, and relational dimensions of adolescents' experiences following parental separation.

Family systems theory, developed by Bowen (1978) views the family as an interconnected system in which changes in one part inevitably affect all other members. Divorce disrupts this system, altering roles, communication patterns, and emotional bonds. When the marital relationship breaks down, the family can no longer function optimally to support children's learning and development (Amato, 2010). In Nigeria, where the family is the primary unit of socialisation, this disruption carries particular weight. The restructuring of a two-parent household into a single-parent or co-parenting arrangement alters boundaries and hierarchies, creating stress and uncertainty (Güngör, 2026). Family systems theory thus explains how instability in parents' relationships translates into academic and behavioural changes among adolescents (Oroma & Agbor, 2025).

Attachment theory, proposed by Bowlby (1969), offers a complementary psychological explanation. Secure emotional bonds between children and caregivers promote stability, confidence, and effective learning, while disrupted attachments lead to anxiety, insecurity, and poor adjustment. Parental divorce often weakens the attachment bond between a child and one or both parents, especially when one parent becomes physically or emotionally unavailable. Recent research found that avoidant and anxious attachment patterns significantly influenced loneliness, neuroticism, and well-being among adolescents from divorced families (Finkelstein & Grebelsky-Lichtman, 2022). These emotional challenges interfere with cognitive functioning, classroom participation, and academic achievement (Lansford, 2009). Attachment theory also highlights the potential of other relationships, with teachers, extended family, or mentors, to compensate for disrupted parental attachments. Nonparental adults can provide critical social support during personal hardships (Yu & Deutsch, 2019).

Social support theory provides the conceptual bridge between the disruption of divorce and the resources that facilitate adjustment. The theory posits that individuals manage stress more effectively when they perceive that they are cared for, valued, and part of a supportive network. In the context of parental divorce, support from family, friends, and teachers can buffer stress, maintain belonging, and provide opportunities for coping (Murniasih & Irvan, 2023). Emotional support helps adolescents manage sadness, loneliness, and anger, while instrumental support maintains ordinary routines and informational support helps them develop coping strategies. The value of support depends not only on its availability but also on adolescents' willingness and ability to access it. Research has shown that discussion-based support with professionals and peers during parental marital transitions can be beneficial (Krug et al., 2024), and extended family members, particularly grandparents, can buffer the negative effects of divorce (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001).

Collectively, these theories provide a robust framework for understanding the experiences of secondary school students following parental divorce. Family systems theory explains structural disruption (Oroma & Agbor, 2025), attachment theory explains emotional consequences (Finkelstein & Grebelsky-Lichtman, 2021), and social support theory explains how relationships beyond the immediate family facilitate adjustment (Murniasih & Irvan, 2023). What emerges is a recognition that adolescent adjustment is not determined by divorce itself but by the quality of the social ecology surrounding the young person. When support is unavailable or inaccessible, because of shame, withdrawal, or the absence of trusted adults, the risk of poor adjustment increases (Yesufu, 2026). This understanding informs the present study's focus on how students experience support from family, friends, and teachers, and what factors shape their access to it.

3 Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive design to examine students' experiences of social support following parental divorce or separation. The qualitative component formed part of a broader mixed-method study conducted in public secondary schools in Lagos State, Nigeria. The design was appropriate because the study sought to capture students' accounts of family, peer and teacher support in their own words.

Participants and Data Collection

Eight students participated in the study. The group comprised four males and four females drawn from the two schools where the therapeutic interventions were implemented. Two males and two females were selected from each school (Table 1). Participants had direct experience of parental divorce or separation.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of FGD Participants

Participant	Gender	School/Group	Parental Status
Student 1	Male	School 1	Parents divorced/separated
Student 2	Female	School 1	Parents divorced/separated
Student 3	Male	School 1	Parents divorced/separated
Student 4	Female	School 1	Parents divorced/separated
Student 5	Male	School 2	Parents divorced/separated
Student 6	Female	School 2	Parents divorced/separated
Student 7	Male	School 2	Parents divorced/separated
Student 8	Female	School 2	Parents divorced/separated

Data were collected through a semi-structured focus group discussion (FGD) conducted after the intervention sessions. The discussion explored students' experiences at home and school, the challenges they faced following parental divorce or separation, how they managed these challenges, and changes in their relationships with family members, friends and classmates. The FGD was held after regular school hours and lasted approximately one hour.

The discussion was conducted in an informal setting, with students seated in a circle to encourage participation. We used a semi-structured guide and allowed participants to elaborate on issues that arose during the discussion. Participants were assured that there were no right or wrong answers and that their contributions would remain confidential. School counsellors were available during and after the discussion to provide emotional support where needed.

Data Analysis

The FGD data were analysed using thematic analysis. The transcript was read several times to develop familiarity with the data. Relevant statements were coded according to their meaning and grouped into related categories. The categories were then examined for recurring patterns across participants and refined into themes and subthemes.

Three themes were developed from the analysis: sources and experiences of social support; social support as a pathway to adjustment; and access to social support. The analysis also considered differences in students' accounts, particularly between those who actively sought support and those who withdrew or were reluctant to disclose their experiences. Direct quotations are presented in the Results section to retain the students' voices.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the broader study was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee of Lagos State University. Informed consent was obtained from the students and, where required, their parents or guardians. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of participant codes. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, emotional support was available during and after the FGD.

4 Results

The findings show that students drew on family members, friends and teachers in different ways after parental divorce or separation. The value of this support depended not only on who was available, but also on whether students felt able to approach them. Three themes emerged: sources and experiences of social support; social support as a pathway to adjustment; and access to social support.

Theme 1: Sources and Experiences of Social Support

Students identified family members, friends and teachers as important sources of support. However, the nature of support differed across these relationships. Family members often provided closeness and practical support, friends offered companionship and opportunities to remain socially connected, while teachers provided guidance and reassurance at school.

Family support

Family relationships became particularly important during periods of emotional difficulty. Several students described becoming closer to particular family members after the separation. Student 2, for example, reported becoming closer to her sister, while Student 4 developed a stronger relationship with her aunt. Student 6 described increased closeness with her mother:

"I became closer to my mum because she was the one I stayed with most of the time."

Student 5 similarly described greater closeness with his siblings. These accounts suggest that changes within the family did not affect all relationships in the same way. While some relationships became more distant, others became stronger and provided students with a sense of continuity.

Extended family also provided opportunities for connection. Student 8 described receiving support from relatives and developing new relationships within the extended family. Student 5 also referred to spending time with cousins and attending family gatherings. Such relationships gave students opportunities to remain connected to people outside the immediate parental relationship.

Peer support

Friends were another important source of support, particularly when students needed companionship or an opportunity to take their minds away from family difficulties. Student 1 described friends and football as helpful during a difficult period:

"My friends helped me because I could play football with them and forget about things for a while."

Student 2 similarly became involved in sports and clubs. These activities provided opportunities for social interaction and helped maintain some sense of normality at school.

However, peer support was not available to all students in the same way. Some students withdrew from classmates because they felt embarrassed or feared being judged. Student 4 explained:

"I became quiet and avoided some social activities because I felt ashamed."

Student 7 also described keeping his difficulties to himself because he was afraid that others might laugh at him. Thus, the presence of friends did not necessarily mean that students felt comfortable seeking their support.

Teacher support

Teachers were particularly important for students who experienced emotional or behavioural difficulties at school. Student 3 described how teachers responded when he became angry and involved in arguments:

"My teachers noticed and encouraged me. They guided me and advised me like parents."

This account shows that teachers were not viewed only as academic figures. For some students, they became trusted adults who recognised changes in behaviour and offered direction.

Teacher support was also reflected in students' efforts to remain focused on school. Student 5 reported spending more time in the library and concentrating on his academic work. Although this was partly a personal coping strategy, the school environment provided a structured space in which he could remain engaged.

Theme 2: Social Support as a Pathway to Adjustment

The accounts indicate that social support helped students manage emotional distress, maintain connections and continue with everyday activities. Support did not remove the difficulties associated with parental separation, but it gave students ways of responding to them.

Emotional reassurance

Several students described periods of sadness, loneliness, anger, worry and confusion. Student 1 reported feeling lonely and finding it difficult to concentrate. Student 2 described sadness and crying, while Student 6 experienced worry about the future and financial circumstances.

Support from others helped some students manage these feelings. Student 6 became closer to her mother, while Student 3 received guidance from teachers. Student 8 also found support within the extended family. These accounts suggest that emotional support was often provided through ordinary relationships rather than through formal counselling.

Students also developed personal ways of managing difficult emotions. Student 4 used diary writing, Student 6 used music and songwriting, Student 7 used prayer and meditation, and Student 8 turned to creative art. These activities often existed alongside interpersonal support rather than replacing it.

Belonging and acceptance

A sense of belonging was important in helping students maintain a connection with others. Friends, siblings, cousins, teachers and other relatives provided opportunities for students to feel accepted and included.

Student 1's involvement in football with friends helped him remain connected to his peers despite the difficulties at home. Student 2 used sports and clubs to stay engaged with school life. Student 8 reported forming new friendships and receiving support from extended family members.

The findings also show the consequences when students did not experience this sense of acceptance. Student 7 became quieter because he feared that others would laugh at him. Student 4 avoided some social activities because of shame. For these students, withdrawal reduced opportunities to receive support from others.

Encouragement and everyday connection

Support was often expressed through everyday interaction rather than direct discussion of the divorce or separation. Playing football, participating in school activities, spending time with relatives and receiving advice from teachers were all ways through which students remained connected to others.

For Student 3, encouragement from teachers helped him respond to anger and conflict. For Student 1, friendship and football provided a break from problems at home. For Student 5, academic engagement and time in the library provided structure during a period of family change.

These experiences indicate that support could be valuable even when students did not openly discuss the separation. Being around people, receiving encouragement and maintaining ordinary routines provided a degree of stability during a period of disruption.

Theme 3: Access to Social Support

Although students identified several potential sources of support, access to that support was uneven. Trust, availability and acceptance encouraged students to seek help, whereas shame, fear of judgement and withdrawal limited disclosure.

Trust and availability

Students were more likely to rely on people who were consistently present and whom they trusted. Student 6 became closer to her mother because she was the parent with whom she stayed most of the time. Student 4 developed a closer relationship with her aunt, while Student 3 relied on teachers who noticed his difficulties and responded with guidance. These accounts suggest that availability mattered alongside emotional closeness. Support was more accessible when students had regular contact with someone who was willing to listen or provide direction.

Fear of judgement

Fear of how others might respond was a major barrier to seeking support. Student 4 avoided social activities because she felt ashamed. Student 7 was concerned that people might laugh at him and therefore kept his feelings to himself. This finding is important because it shows that the availability of social relationships did not automatically translate into access to support. Students could have friends, classmates or family members around them while still experiencing their difficulties privately.

Withdrawal and reluctance to disclose

Withdrawal was another barrier. Student 1 stopped joining classmates and found it difficult to concentrate. Student 5 withdrew from some school friends and became more focused on academic activities. Student 7 became quiet and stopped talking about his experiences.

The students therefore differed in how openly they used available support. Some sought connection through friends, family or teachers, while others turned inward or relied on private coping activities. This difference suggests that students' adjustment was shaped not only by the support available to them but also by their willingness and ability to access it.

Overall, the findings show that social support operated through relationships, everyday activities and trusted adults. Family members, friends and teachers each played different roles. At the same time, support was not equally accessible to all students. Shame, fear of judgement and withdrawal sometimes prevented students from using the relationships around them. The findings therefore point to an important distinction between support being available and support being accessible.

5 Discussion

The findings illuminate how secondary school students in Lagos State experience and access social support following parental divorce or separation. Three themes emerged: sources and experiences of social support, social support as a pathway to adjustment, and access to social support.

Students identified family members, friends, and teachers as important sources of support, but the nature of that support varied. Family members provided closeness and practical assistance, friends offered companionship, and teachers supplied guidance at school. This aligns with research showing that adolescents rely on multiple sources of support following parental divorce, with immediate family often identified as most helpful (Krug et al., 2024). The finding that students became closer to particular family members, mothers, sisters, aunts, and siblings, after the separation suggests that family disruption does not uniformly weaken all relationships. In some cases, it strengthens bonds with those who remain consistently present.

Extended family played a notable role, with students describing support from relatives and cousins. This resonates with research highlighting the protective function of extended family networks (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Research examining children's closeness to grandparents following parental divorce has found that greater closeness is associated with fewer adjustment problems (Henderson et al., 2009).

Peer support was valuable for maintaining normality. Students who engaged in football, sports, and clubs described these activities as opportunities to take their minds away from family difficulties. This aligns with research showing that peer relationships can buffer the effects of parental divorce (Murniasih & Irvan, 2023). However, peer support was not universally accessible. Some students withdrew from classmates because of shame or fear of judgment (McPhail et al., 2024).

Teacher support was particularly important for students who experienced emotional or behavioural difficulties. One student described teachers as guiding and advising "like parents," illustrating how teachers can become trusted adults. This supports research showing that nonparental adults, including teachers, can provide critical social support during

personal hardships (Yu & Deutsch, 2019). Strong teacher-student relationships have been linked with higher student wellbeing and academic achievement (Huang & Abdullah, 2026).

Furthermore, Social support helped students manage emotional distress, maintain connections, and continue with everyday activities. Students described periods of sadness, loneliness, anger, and worry, consistent with research documenting elevated emotional stress among adolescents from divorced families (Isah & Hassan, 2026). Support did not eliminate these difficulties, but it gave students ways of responding to them.

Emotional reassurance was often provided through ordinary relationships rather than formal counselling. Students became closer to their mothers, received guidance from teachers, and found support within the extended family. Research has shown that discussion-based support with professionals and peers during parental marital transitions can be beneficial (Krug et al., 2024). Students also developed personal coping strategies, diary writing, music, prayer, meditation, and creative art, that existed alongside interpersonal support.

A sense of belonging and acceptance emerged as important. Friends, siblings, cousins, teachers, and relatives provided opportunities for students to feel included. Conversely, students who feared judgment or felt ashamed withdrew from social activities, reducing their opportunities to receive support (Auersperg et al., 2019). Support was often expressed through everyday interaction rather than direct discussion of the divorce. Being around people, receiving encouragement, and maintaining ordinary routines provided stability during a period of disruption.

Although students identified several potential sources of support, access was uneven. Trust, availability, and acceptance encouraged help-seeking, while shame, fear of judgment, and withdrawal limited disclosure. Students were more likely to rely on people who were consistently present and whom they trusted. Research has found that parental continued accessibility and support is important for the adolescent's social and emotional adjustment following divorce (Finkelstein & Grebelsky-Lichtman, 2022).

Fear of judgment was a major barrier. One student avoided social activities because of shame, while another kept his feelings to himself because he feared others might laugh at him. This shows that the availability of social relationships does not automatically translate into access to support. Research on help-seeking has found that stigma is a main barrier among teens (McPhail et al., 2024).

Withdrawal was another barrier. Some students stopped joining classmates, withdrew from school friends, or became quiet and stopped talking about their experiences. These students turned inward or relied on private coping activities. This difference suggests that students' adjustment was shaped not only by the support available to them but also by their willingness and ability to access it.

The distinction between support availability and accessibility carries implications for schools and counselling services. Creating environments where adolescents feel safe to disclose their family circumstances—without fear of judgment or stigma—is essential. Schools can offer a pathway where adolescents can seek help and support, rebuild trust between students and adults, and connect with support services in the community (Schmidt et al., 2026).

The findings align with the theoretical framework. Family systems theory explains how divorce disrupts the interconnected system of the family, altering roles, communication patterns, and emotional bonds (Bowen, 1978). The restructuring of the family unit creates stress and uncertainty, but it also creates opportunities for new forms of connection with extended family and siblings. Attachment theory illuminates the emotional consequences of disrupted bonds, particularly when parental availability is reduced (Bowlby, 1969). Students' accounts of sadness, loneliness, and worry reflect the emotional insecurity that can arise when attachment relationships are weakened. However, attachment theory also highlights the potential of other relationships, with teachers, extended family, and mentors, to compensate for disrupted parental attachments (Yu & Deutsch, 2019).

Social support theory provides the conceptual bridge between disruption and adjustment. The findings illustrate how support from family, friends, and teachers can buffer stress, maintain belonging, and provide opportunities for coping (Murniasih & Irvan, 2023). The theory's emphasis on perceived support—the belief that one is cared for and valued—resonates with students' descriptions of feeling accepted and included through everyday interactions.

6 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved eight students from two schools in Lagos State, and their experiences may not represent the broader population. The focus group format may have constrained individual

disclosure. The study was conducted after therapeutic intervention sessions, which may have influenced students' readiness to discuss their experiences.

These limitations point to directions for future research. Larger-scale studies involving more schools and participants across different geopolitical zones would enhance transferability. Longitudinal designs could track how support needs and access change over time. Future research should also examine specific support types, emotional, instrumental, informational, and companionship, more closely, as few Nigerian studies have explored how these operate for adolescents from divorced families. The role of mental health literacy and stigma in help-seeking warrants attention, given evidence that Nigerian adolescents prefer informal sources over professional support. Finally, comparative studies across family structures would help distinguish divorce-specific effects from broader family disruption, as research suggests parenting quality often matters more than family structure itself.

7 Implications for Counselling

Despite these limitations, the findings carry implications for counselling practice. First, efforts to strengthen support systems must address barriers to help-seeking. Schools can create safe spaces where students feel comfortable disclosing family difficulties. Research on adolescent help-seeking has shown that higher self-stigma and perceived barriers are associated with less favorable attitudes toward seeking professional support (McPhail et al., 2024). Second, support is often provided through ordinary relationships and everyday interactions, suggesting that interventions need not be formal or clinical to be effective. Third, the role of extended family highlights the importance of engaging relatives in interventions.

The findings also point to the value of peer support programmes. Structured peer counselling initiatives can harness the natural influence of peer relationships to promote positive coping and help-seeking. In Nigeria, challenges such as the shortage of qualified school counsellors mean that teachers are often relied upon to provide counselling support despite having little or no counselling training. Investment in training and professional development for counsellors is essential for strengthening school-based support systems.

8 Conclusion

This study examined how secondary school students in Lagos State experience social support following parental divorce or separation. The findings show that students draw on family members, friends, and teachers in different ways, and that the value of this support depends not only on who is available but also on whether students feel able to approach them. Support operates through relationships, everyday activities, and trusted adults, and it can be valuable even when adolescents do not openly discuss their family circumstances. At the same time, support is not equally accessible to all students. Shame, fear of judgment, and withdrawal sometimes prevent students from using the relationships around them. The findings therefore point to an important distinction between support being available and support being accessible, a distinction that carries implications for counselling practice and school-based interventions in Lagos State and beyond.

Acknowledgements

The authors also appreciate the contributions of colleagues and reviewers whose comments and suggestions helped improve the quality of the manuscript.

Funding

This study was conducted without financial support from any external funding agency, institution, or organisation.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to appropriate conditions for data access.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no financial, professional, or personal interests that could have influenced the conduct, findings, or reporting of this study.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

Generative artificial intelligence tools were used solely to assist with language editing, grammar, clarity, and formatting. No generative AI tools were used for the conceptualisation of the study, research methodology, data collection, statistical analysis, interpretation of findings, or development of the study's conclusions. The authors remain fully responsible for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

References

- Amato, P. R. (2010). Research on Divorce: Continuing Trends and New Developments. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 650–666. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00723.x>
- Ame, G., Umuoighoro, B. O., Megbele, M. A., & Ekurume, E. P. (2026). Parental Divorce And Emotional Well-Being Of Senior Secondary School Students In Delta Central Senatorial District: A Gender-Based. *West African Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, 4(1), 49–62. <https://doi.org/10.46654/1tx32m76>
- Arigbede, Y. A. (2025). Geospatial analysis of marital dissolution in Nigeria. *FUDMA Journal of Earth and Environmental Sciences (FUDJEES)*, 2(1), 34–44. <https://doi.org/10.33003/jees.2025.0201/04>
- Auersperg, F., Vlasak, T., Ponocny, I., & Barth, A. (2019). Long-term effects of parental divorce on mental health - A meta-analysis. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 119, 107–115. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2019.09.011>
- Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice / Murray Bowen*. J. Aronson.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. Basic Books.
- Breivik, K., & Olweus, D. (2006). Adolescent's Adjustment in Four Post-Divorce Family Structures: Single Mother, Stepfather, Joint Physical Custody and Single Father Families. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 44(3/4), 99–124. https://doi.org/10.1300/J087v44n03_07
- Finkelstein, I., & Grebelsky-Lichtman, T. (2022). Adolescents in Divorced Families: The Interplay of Attachment Patterns, Family Environment, and Personal Characteristics. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 63(2), 120–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2021.1993017>
- Garba, M. S., Musa, H., & Hajara, J. (2026). The impact of parental divorce on library utilization and academic performance of undergraduate students at the Federal University of Technology, Minna, Niger State, Nigeria. *EBUS Journal of Library Information Science & Technology*, 8(1), 117–138.
- Güngör, A. (2026). Post-Divorce Parenting and Co-Parenting in Times of Crisis. *Family Process*, 65(3), e70192. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.70192>
- Henderson, C. E., Hayslip, B., Sanders, L. M., & Loudon, L. (2009). Grandmother—Grandchild Relationship Quality Predicts Psychological Adjustment Among Youth From Divorced Families. *Journal of Family Issues*, 30(9), 1245–1264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X09334913>
- Huang, Y., & Abdullah, M. N. (2026). Influences of teacher and peer support on academic motivation of adolescents from divorced families: mediating effect of academic resilience. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, April 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-026-08379-2>
- Isah, M. I., & Hassan, M. B. (2026). An assessment of emotional stress and school adjustment among senior secondary school students from divorced families in Kano Metropolis, Nigeria. *Unizik Journal of Educational Research, Science and Vocational Studies*, 4(1), 1–12.
- Krug, C., Vaterlaus, J. M., & Routh, B. (2024). Adolescent Adjustment to Parental Marital Transitions: Experiences in Urban, Rural and Suburban Communities. *Family Transitions*, 65(3), 199–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2023.2295060>
- Lansford, J. E. (2009). Parental divorce and children's adjustment. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. 2009, 4(2), 140–152. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6924.2009.01114>

- Lee, M., Park, J. H., & Chung, H. (2015). A Comparison of Adjustment and Family Environment of Adolescents from Different Family Structures,". *Journal of Korean Home Management Association*, 33(4), 147–160. <https://doi.org/10.7466/jkhma.2015.33.4.147>.
- Mcphail, L., Thornicroft, G., & Gronholm, P. C. (2024). Help-seeking processes related to targeted school-based mental health services : systematic review. *BMC Public Health*, 24(1217), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-18714-4>
- Murniasih, F., & Irvan, M. (2023). Promoting Resilience in Adolescents from Divorced Family : The Role of Social Support and Self-Efficacy. *Journal An-Nafs:Kajian Penelitian Psikologi*, 8(2), 278–293. <https://doi.org/10.33367/psi.v8i2.4310>
- Oroma, O. J., & Agbor, P. E. O. (2025). Perceived influence of divorce and separation on children upbringing in Port Harcourt Local Government Area. *International Journal of Research*, 12(1), 586–604. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.14747739>
- Pryor, J., & Rodgers, B. (2001). *Children in changing families: Life after parental separation*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Schmidt, C. D., Pfeffer, A., & Grigg, J. (2026). From Storm to Stability: How Children Navigate Divorce and Its Developmental Impact. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Counseling*, 12(2), 2655094. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23727810.2026.2655094>
- Yesufu, B. S. (2026). *The impact of parental divorce on child development in Ekosodin Community, Ovia North-East L.G.A of Edo State*. [University of Benin Repository.]. <https://repository.uniben.edu/taxonomy/term/26443>
- Yu, M. V. B., & Deutsch, N. L. (2019). Aligning social support to youth ' s developmental needs : The role of nonparental youth – adult relationships in early and late adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science*, 0(0), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1548940>