Case Studies of Children's Social and Emotional Adjustment at School After the Permanent Separation of Their Parents

Gillian Kirk

*Edith Cowan University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons](https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons)

Part of the *Educational Psychology Commons*

**Recommended Citation**

This Thesis is posted at Research Online.
Case Studies of Children’s Social and Emotional Adjustment at School After the Permanent Separation of Their Parents

By
Gillian Kirk B.Ed Honours

A Thesis Submitted for the Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Award of Bachelor of Education with Honours

Faculty of Education
Edith Cowan University
28th November 2000
Edith Cowan University

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.

The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

- Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.

- A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. Where the reproduction of such material is done without attribution of authorship, with false attribution of authorship or the authorship is treated in a derogatory manner, this may be a breach of the author’s moral rights contained in Part IX of the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).

- Courts have the power to impose a wide range of civil and criminal sanctions for infringement of copyright, infringement of moral rights and other offences under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
The number of children who have experienced the separation of their parents is constantly rising. An increasing amount of children are entering classrooms contending with their day-to-day stressors as well as the stress originating from their home lives. Many of these children are not prepared with the knowledge or understanding of their stressor, nor are they equipped with strategies that would help them deal with stress. Observations and interviews were conducted with four children who had experienced the separation and divorce of their parents over a period of six months.

As the data for this study needed to be rich and informative, a qualitative methodology was chosen. Data was collected using participant observations and semi-structured interviews. The data is presented in case study format. Each case study explores each participant's family background, classroom context, their teacher, the quality of their interactions with teachers and peers and the participant's social competence.

A number of factors emerged from the data. Firstly, for children to cope effectively with their stressors, they need to develop the three support systems of esteem, social and informational support. Secondly, it emerged that the classroom teacher has an important role to play in assisting children cope with stress. Finally, it appeared from the data that teachers lack the knowledge and skills that are necessary in helping children learn how to cope with their stressors. Further research in this area will help teachers know how to respond to these children, thus strengthening our resolve to provide children with the best quality education.
DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

(ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text: or

(iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signature: ____________________________

Date: 16/2/01
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to express my sincerest gratitude to “Brandon”, “Grace”, “Jason”, and “Daniel” and to their teachers and schools for allowing me to visit them and learn from them. I would also like to thank the children’s custodial parents who allowed their precious children to become a part of this study. For their trust in me, and their faith in this study I feel truly privileged and thankful.

I would also like to thank Dr Carmel Maloney for not only taking a deep interest in this study, but for also supporting me emotionally during all those times when it all seemed too much. Carmel never ceased in her patience, support and encouragement over the two years we shared in writing the thesis. Thanks Carmel.

I would also like to thank my wonderful husband Ian who always believed in my abilities, and my beautiful children Anjela, Mitchell and Eliza who have always been a source of strength and encouragement for me. Thanks must also go to my wonderful brother, Nathan, for patiently proof reading my work, my Mum, Dad and sister Ronelle and to my friend Sheridan for the continued support throughout the thesis writing that gave me the energy to persevere. Thank you.
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Erikson’s model of psychosocial development 15

Figure 2. Diagram of conceptual framework depicting interrelationship of factors influencing the child’s social and emotional competence 28
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Summary of factors affecting children after the permanent separation of their parents 14

Table 2. Summary of participant’s details 32
## CONTENTS

Abstract
Declaration
Acknowledgements
List of Figures
List of Tables

Chapter One: Introduction
- Background to the Study
- Significance of the Study
- Purpose of the Study
- Research Questions
- Definition of Terms

Chapter Two: Review of Literature
- Introduction
- Effects on Children
- Children's Social Development
- Children’s Emotional Development
- Summary

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework
- Conceptual Framework

Chapter Four: Methodology
- Introduction
- Qualitative Methodology
Research Design 30
Participants 31
Research Instruments 33
Procedure 35
Data Analysis 36
Limitations 37

Chapter Five: Case Studies 40

Case Study One 41
Brandon 41
Family Background 41
Classroom 42
Teachers 43
Brandon 44
Social and Emotional Adjustment at School 45
Friendships 52
Social Competence 54
Summary 56

Case Study Two 57
Grace 57
Family Background 57
Classroom 58
Teachers 59
Grace 60
Social and Emotional Adjustment at School 62
Friendships 69
Social Competence 72
Summary 73
Case Study Three
Jason
Family Background 74
Classroom 76
Teachers 77
Jason 78
Social and Emotional Adjustment at School 80
Friendships 86
Social Competence 88
Summary 89

Case Study Four
Daniel
Family Background 91
Classroom 92
Teachers 93
Daniel 95
Social and Emotional Adjustment at School 96
Friendships 102
Social Competence 103
Summary 104

Chapter Six: Discussion
Social Support 109
Brandon 110
Grace 111
Jason 112
Daniel 115
Esteem Support

Brandon 117
Grace 118
Jason 118
Daniel 119

Informational Support 120

Chapter Seven: Conclusion 126
References 135
Appendices 138

Appendix 1 139
Appendix 2 140
Appendix 3 Sample of Field Note Entry 142
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

11th August 1999: Brandon.
The children came charging into the library. Their faces were alive with anticipation as they walked purposefully to their seats and put their stationery boxes down in front of them. Mrs McCormack instructed them to put all the resources that were brought in on to the centre table. The library came alive with this busy activity as the children did as they were asked and then went to search for something else to take out. Many of the children chatted merrily with a partner as they searched through the library. Brandon's face held the same empty gaze as it always did, as he quietly and slowly went about his business. He directed his stare toward some children on the computers, and then walked over to the table of interest. His irresolute manner and his vacant stare separated Brandon from his peers. Amidst all the children, he was visibly very much alone.

Grace stood at the front of the room with her arms folded and her body leaning to one side. She impatiently stared at one of the children, and then informed the class that she would not begin telling her news until Harry pays her his attention. When Harry stopped what he was doing, Grace started telling her news about how she was going out to celebrate her grandfather's birthday. Grace stopped talking and informed the class that she would not resume until a certain someone paid attention. She stared at the child, and then once again resumed. After a while, Grace called on one of the children and asked them to be quiet.
while she told her news. Finally, Mrs Tess asked Grace to wind up and let someone else have a turn.

10th August 1999: Jason.

Mrs Bouche instructed the children to move away from anyone they may speak to. Jason smiled at Lillian and then started edging away from her. Lillian did not look at Jason. He continued to smile and move away until he had found a spot by himself. One of the children asked Mrs Bouche to do some hand games. Jason asked Mrs Bouche to do the “church”. Mrs Bouche went through the church finger game. She then went through “knives and forks” and followed that finger game with introducing the children to a new game called “Johnny, Johnny”. All the children participated in the finger games, and stopped when Mrs Bouche started reading the story “Franklin”. Jason, however, continued to do them. Mrs Bouche stopped reading and told Jason they had finished doing the finger games. Jason put his hands down.

10th September 1999: Daniel.

Mr Hunt initiated a bingo game. Daniel sat with his head resting in his hand as he marked off his bingo sheet. After a while, Daniel put his finger in his mouth and started chewing on it. When some children called out bingo, Daniel put his head in both his hands. He then looked up and smiled at a boy near him. Mr Hunt started another game. Daniel kept his head in his hand as he worked on his bingo sheet. As the game progressed, Daniel became a little more anxious and started looking around the room at the other children. Mr Hunt decided to round the game off and told the children to stand as soon as they got
bingo. As he started randomly calling out numbers, scores of children began standing. After a while, Daniel stood up, folded his arms and looked around the room smiling.

The four children described in the previous passages are different in many ways. They come from different families and they have different friends; they live in different suburbs and attend different schools. However, there is one similarity that runs true with all of them – all four of them have experienced separation and divorce. This study followed each of these four children over a course of six months, making records of their interactions with peers and teachers, their apparent emotions, likes and dislikes. The observations undertaken focused on how the children who have experienced the permanent separation of their parents are socially and emotionally coping at school.

The Background to the Study

Young children who experience the permanent separation of their parents are often faced with a number of changes in their lives. In some cases, these changes can have a positive effect on the children’s development. Conversely, the changes may negatively influence their development. Whatever the effect separation has on the children, it cannot be ignored that a significant change has taken place in their lives.

Accompanying the changes that can take place is a myriad of unfamiliar emotions. These emotions are at times coupled with a sense of vulnerability that originates from knowing their lives have been changed without their consent. Many young children lack the verbal skills to express their emotions and to effectively communicate their need for emotional support. The frustration of not being able to effectively communicate may
manifest itself in inappropriate behaviour. At times, this inappropriate behaviour may be a means of attracting the companionship and the emotional support of their peers. Often, the need for this support outweighs the need to conform to the rules of the classroom, and unfortunately this may result in behaviour perceived by the teacher as inappropriate.

Research conducted by Frieman (1993) identified that young children want their teachers to know about their family situation. Although his statement may meet with some contention, it cannot be refuted that many children in this situation look to their teachers for emotional support. If children are dismissed by their teachers as being resilient, or troublesome, then the cause of their stress may not necessarily be addressed and, subsequently, the children's overall development can be affected.

Unfortunately, due to a number of factors, it is not always simple to determine how all children think and feel. Funder & Kinsella (1991) suggest that the manner in which children adjust to the permanent separation of their parents is dependent on several aspects of their psychological well-being, such as their temperament and self-concept. Additionally, as Hetherington and Parke (1993) point out, there is great diversity in children's responses to the change in their family. Regardless of this diversity, there remains the fact that conflict resides. As Howe (1999) stated, "Conflict-less divorce, at least where children and property are involved, is surely a figment of the imagination" (p. 183).

Due to this conflict, Howe (1999) recommends that early childhood teachers pay particular attention to how children are coping. Similarly, Briggs and Potter (1997) believe that the school acts as a major socializing institution that may play an important role in
offsetting some of the negative effects of family separation. The early childhood teacher is in the perfect position to help children struggling with divorce and other family problems (Bredekamp, 1987 cited in Frieman, 1993). It is up to teachers to keep abreast of societal and familial changes so that they know how to respond to the needs of children (Butterworth, 1989).

For younger children in particular, the permanent separation of their parents presents them with some overwhelming and often confusing feelings. Amato and Booth (1997) stated that young children tend to feel guilty about the separation of their parents as they are unable to objectify the situation (cited in Howe, 1999). Accompanying these feelings of guilt, younger children may also fear they will lose their relationship with one or both their parents (Howe, 1999).

Young children are inexperienced in dealing with stress, and as a result, they lack the coping strategies that many adults have. Strategies that children may employ at this age are commonly referred to as defence mechanisms (Black & Puckett, 1996). The dilemma is that children may over rely on these mechanisms, and as a result, may risk having social and emotional problems. Parents and teachers must be able to read children’s behavioural cues and respond accordingly in order for the children to experience healthy psychological development.

The Significance of the Study

Many adults do not think that children ‘grieve’ for the loss of their two parent families. Paddy Glasgow, the Relationships Australia senior counselor and therapist
reported in a recent interview with “The West Australian” newspaper that “the impact of divorce on a child’s sense of well-being and security should not be underestimated. [Children’s] developmental needs don’t change. We tend to forget that we live in a technological age where life seems to get faster, yet healing and grieving go at the same pace they always did” (Stevens, 2000).

This study is significant because it intends to raise teachers’ awareness of how children are observed to be socially and emotionally coping at school after the permanent separation of their parents. This is the first step toward being able to empathize with and respond appropriately to the children. In order to be in a position to offer children support, the early childhood teacher must have some insight into how children interact socially and emotionally on a day-to-day basis. They have to understand the needs of the child.

Problems that are not addressed at this stage may impact on a child’s development in years to come. If family disruption negatively influences children’s psychosocial development, this may also negatively influence their ability to socialize with their peers and adults at a later stage. Positive social interaction is essential for the overall development of the individual. Not only do individuals form a sense of self, they also construct cognition (Moll, 1993).

**The Purpose of the Study**

This study examines four children who have experienced the separation of their parents. The children were observed over a period of six months as they went about their
day-to-day classroom activities. The purpose of observing these children was to gain an insight into how they functioned socially and emotionally within the classroom context.

**Research Questions**

This study is designed to investigate the following questions:

1. How are children observed to be socially and emotionally coping at school after the permanent separation of their parents?
2. What behaviours do children exhibit when socially and emotionally coping at school after the permanent separation of their parents?

**Definition of terms**

*Permanent separation:* In this study, this term refers to parents who have separated on a permanent basis. It is used instead of divorce because:

a) It is the parental separation that affects children, not the legal divorce (Funder & Kinsella, 1991; Howe, 1999). As Ochiltree (1993) states, the separation is more upsetting than the actual divorce.

2. Statistics show that between 1989 and 1996, there was a 16% rise in the annual rate of children whose parents divorced. However, the percentage of children in one-parent families more than doubled that figure due to separating cohabiting couples (Kilmartin, 1997).

*Social development:* In this study, social development refers to children's ability to recognize, interpret and respond to social situations (Hendrick, 1992, cited in Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993). Behaviour that is indicative of healthy social
development includes being responsible; independent; friendly; co-operative; purposive; self-controlled; able to give and receive emotional support (Baumrind, 1970; Bloom, Hastings, and Madaus, 1971, cited in Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993).

**Emotional development:** In this study, emotional development denotes the interpretation children give to their physiological responses to certain stimuli. This interpretation is dependent on the children’s notion of reality (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993). For example, it is library day at school, and although Mitchell loves library day, this particular day he had left his book at his dad’s house. He starts to think about what the librarian might say to him. His stomach turns in knots and his heart pounds almost audibly. Mitchell interprets these feelings as anxiety or fear of being told off. Had Mitchell remembered his book, he might have interpreted the same physiological response as excitement.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

Introduction

The range of familial environments children are leaving when going through separation or divorce is diverse. Many researchers have studied how separation or divorce affects young children, and have arrived at findings that are diverse, and in some cases controversial (DiSibio, 1981; Hetherington & Parke, 1993; Howe, 1999). Even though such researchers have reached different conclusions, due to the aforementioned diversity of familial environments, these conclusions can not be discounted as there can be no one right answer.

This chapter provides an overview of the research conducted on the social and emotional adjustment of children from homes where their parents have permanently separated. The review also offers evidence of the growing numbers of children experiencing the separation or divorce of their parents and the possible impact it may have on young children, reinforcing the need for continued research in this area. It discusses various findings on how children respond to changes in their family's structure, how long reactions tend to last and the differences in the responses to divorce or separation shown by girls and boys. In addition, the literature on children's social and emotional development is reviewed including an overview of Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory in order to provide background to the ages and stages of emotional development.
The Australian Bureau of Statistics recorded that between 1991 and 1996 the number of one-parent families counted in Western Australia increased by 21.1%, from 51,300 to 62,116 (http://www.abs.gov.au). During the same period of time, the Bureau of Statistics reported the number of one-parent families Australia wide increased from 12.8% to 14.5%, from 552,336 to 672,868 (http://www.abs.gov.au).

In 1997, fifteen percent of children under the age of five and nineteen percent of children aged between five and fourteen years were living in one parent families (Kilmartin, 1997). Kilmartin reported that the annual rate of children whose parents were divorced rose by sixteen percent between 1989 and 1996. The percentage of children in one-parent families, however, more than doubled that figure due to separated cohabiting couples. Howe (1999) reported there are almost one million children in Australia who have experienced the permanent separation or divorce of their parents. Howe’s figures do not include the children of cohabiting couples.

Effects on children

Reported effects of divorce/separation on children

The following section discusses literature that reports the effects of separation and divorce, and even though they are diverse, due to the range of differences in familial backgrounds, each case contributes to our understanding of this phenomenon.

DiSibio (1981) cited psychological findings that suggest one-parent families are possibly a better alternative for children than intact families in which the parents are in continual conflict. He suggests, however, that even though the parental separation may
eventually prove to be beneficial for the children, the time of separation is difficult for children to cope with.

Richards (1996) supported these findings but added that even if children are leaving undesirable backgrounds, the advantages are often offset by new negative factors (cited in Howe, 1999). These new factors tend to be associated with separation; for example, there may be a reduction in income (Wadsworth & Maclean, 1986, cited in Funder & Kinsella, 1991; Ochiltree, 1993), a loss of resources which reduce the social and educational opportunities in which children can participate (Funder & Kinsella, 1991; Ochiltree, 1993), a loss of stability in housing and a loss of social networks (Ochiltree, 1993; Richards, 1996, cited in Howe, 1999).

How well children adjust in response to the permanent separation of their parents is dependent on numerous variables. Dubow & Tisak (1989) examines children's adjustment to stressful events and identified three different support systems that children were able to draw on to cope with stress. These were: “social support”, “esteem support” and/or “informational support”. Dubow & Tisak explain that social support interacts with stress so that the “high levels of social support moderate the negative effects of stress on adjustment” (p. 1413). Social support informs an individual that he or she is cared for, loved, esteemed and valued (p. 1412). The esteem support is defined as the individual believing others value him or her and as such they have more self-esteem and “feelings of mastery over stressors” (p. 1413). Finally, informational support allows children to understand the stressors, and consequently reduce the perceived threat and importance of the stressor (p.1413).
The social support variable has received the most research attention as a “potential moderator of the impact of stress” (Dubow & Tisak, 1989, p.1412). According to Barrera (1986), social support encompasses at least three aspects which are: “perceived support”, where one evaluates his or her environment as helpful; “social embeddedness”, involves the quantity and identity of individuals in one’s network, and “enacted support” which takes into consideration the actual support offered by network members (cited in Dubow & Tisak, 1989, p.1412).

The length of time that children show signs of the effects of separation

How long the effects of separation act on young children appears to be a point for conjecture. Kato (1997), for instance, found that children suffer longer and deeper than was previously thought, and points out that each developmental stage that the children pass reveals the burden of the separation (cited in Howe, 1999). Conversely, Hetherington, Camara & Featherman, (1983) reported evidence that suggests that within a year or two the effect of parental divorce on children diminishes or disappears (cited in Fields, 1993). Briggs and Potter (1997) and Berk (2000) also stated that children might feel emotional disturbances at school for up to two years after the separation of their parents. Hetherington and Parke (1993) report, however, that some children appear to adjust well to the separation of their parents in the early stages, but may show delayed effects later during their development; in particular, adolescence.

Kurdek (1981) suggested that how quickly children recover from the initial “shock” of separation or divorce may be dependent on two factors. These include how stable the environment is, and the availability of social supports after the separation or divorce (cited
in Kaplan, 1991, p.501). In regards to the long-term effects, Wallerstein (1983) suggested how well the parents get on has a determinant effect on how long the children will “suffer” (cited in Kaplan, 1991, p.502). In addition, Kurdek (1981) found that the children cope better if financial problems and parental conflict is kept to a minimum and sound social supports are in existence.

**Reported differences in coping found between young girls and young boys**

Several studies have found that boys are more adversely affected by the separation of their parents than girls (Bisnaire, Firestone & Reynard, 1990; Kaye, 1989; Millward, 1990 cited in Fields, 1993). Heatherington (1973) suggests that boys and girls tend to react differently to the permanent separation of their parents. Boys tend to react strongly to their parent’s separation early and it lessened with age, whereas the effect on girls tended to remain latent until adolescence (cited in DiSibio, 1981).

On the other hand, Palker (1980) found that boys from one-parent homes tended to actively seek the attention and help of their teachers, play less maturely, be more dependent, “act out” more, and be less cooperative for a longer period of time than girls from one-parent homes (cited in DiSibio, 1981, p.13). Kurdek (1981) also found the long-term effects of divorce to be greater for boys than girls (cited in Kaplan, 1991). Huston (1983) speculates that one of the reasons why boys react more strongly could possibly be due to the absence of a male authority figure (cited in Kaplan, 1991).

Research conducted by Hammond (1979) found that boys from homes where their parents have separated tended to “act out” more than boys from intact homes. However,
Hammond did not find any significant difference in their peer relations, immaturity or withdrawal (cited in DiSibio, 1981).

The following table is a summary of the most critical factors reported in the literature review that could potentially have an effect on children whose parents have permanently separated.

**Table 1**

Summary of Factors Affecting Children After the Permanent Separation of Their Parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length of time after separation</td>
<td>In most cases, the affects of separation or divorce tend to diminish after two years. Factors such as how stable the children’s environment is and their social supports act to determine how quickly children recover.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Age</td>
<td>Young children often experience feelings of guilt and separation anxiety. Older children may engage in disruptive, antisocial acts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>Children with high self-esteem are able to cope with stress better than children with low self-esteem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Boys in mother-custody homes generally ‘act out’ more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social supports</td>
<td>Children tend to cope better when the separation remains amicable and there is a network of social support – generally offered by extended family, friends and teachers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Children’s Social Development**

_Erik Erikson – Psychosocial model_

Erik Erikson (1963) developed a psychosocial model that strengthens our understanding of the significant encounters between children and their social world (Black & Puckett, 1996, p.136). This model describes eight stages of personality development that Erikson proposed are typified by fundamental life conflicts that are to be resolved. The
eight stages are hierarchical in nature as each stage builds on one another, with each stage serving as the foundation for the next (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993). Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman state that for optimal emotional development to occur, the final resolution of a conflict should be weighted toward the positive side (p.114). Erikson, however, argues that people should strive for a healthy balance between the negative and positive sides of the scale (Kaplan, 1991).

Erikson’s psychosocial model (see Figure 1) offers a clear indication of the conflicts faced by people at different ages and stages of development. Considerations for the culture and socialisation that act on the individual as they contend with each conflict are interwoven throughout Erikson’s model. Although there are criticisms of Erikson’s theory—chief among them that it is difficult to test - it remains a “convenient way of viewing development” (Kaplan, 1991, p.66). The model below illustrates the different life conflicts that are represented in each stage.

![Erikson's model of psychosocial development](image)

**Figure 1.** Erikson’s model of psychosocial development. (adapted from Black & Puckett, 1996, p.295)
Six to eight year old children are in Erikson’s fourth stage, developing a sense of industry. Children seek to master real tasks, and in doing so their skills and interests become evident (Black & Puckett, 1996). The school environment offers real tasks for children to master, and as such, children’s sense of competence tends to be enhanced by teachers, peers and the curriculum. Children take comparisons seriously in this stage, and they may stop trying if their work is compared with one of their peers and treated unfavourably (Kaplan, 1991). Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, and Loeble’s (1980) study found that children within the 7-8 year age bracket tend to use social comparison as a means of determining their underlying abilities. During this period they begin to self-attribute stable traits and determine who and what they are through the comparison with people who are similar to themselves (Perry & Bussey, 1984). Children who repeatedly experience failure, both academic and social, tend to develop a sense of inferiority and a low self-concept (Black & Puckett, 1996). Alternatively, some children may become depressed, adversely affecting their social and emotional development (Cox & Desforges, 1987, cited in Briggs and Potter, 1997). These feelings have a negative influence on children’s abilities to perform real tasks, as a result, they are more prone to develop a sense of inferiority. A more detailed explanation of Erikson’s model follows in chapter four.

Social competence

Children who are socially competent engage in “satisfying interactions with adults and peers” and through these interactions “further improve [and develop] their own competence” (Katz & McClellan, 1997, p.1). Haggerty, Sherrod, Garmezy & Rutter (1996) add that “social competence involves the capacity to integrate cognition, affect and behaviors to achieve specified social tasks and positive developmental outcomes” (p.275).
Socially competent children are capable of successfully making “judgments about how to reconcile differences between their own needs and interests and the demands and expectations of the social environments in which they live” (Oppenheimer, 1989, cited in Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993, p. 2).

In our society, evidence exists that children are perceived to be socially competent when they are: responsible rather than irresponsible; independent [rather than] suggestible; friendly, not hostile; cooperative instead of resistive; purposive rather than aimless; self-controlled, not impulsive; able both to give and receive emotional support (Baumrind, 1970; Bloom, Hastings, and Madaus, 1971, cited in Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993, p. 2). In addition, socially competent children are characterized by their positive self-regard, self-confidence, curiosity, spontaneity, humor, warmth, sense of right and wrong, self-discipline, adaptability, helpfulness and/or ability to give and receive praise (Black & Puckett, 1996, p.302). Furthermore, children are socially competent when they are able to regulate their emotions, they have social knowledge and understanding and they have the skills required to act on that knowledge and understanding (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

According to Katz & McClellan (1997), “Emotion regulation is defined as the ability to respond to the ongoing demands of experience with the range of emotions in a manner that is socially tolerable” (p.3). The under-regulation of emotions such as fear, anger and frustration may impede the learning of social knowledge and skills. Conversely, children who over regulate their emotions may resist interactions and consequently lose opportunities to practice basic social competencies (Katz & McClellan, 1997).
Social knowledge is constructed through the knowledge of the norms and the social customs of the group the children participate in, the mastery of the language that is used by peers and potential friends and the sharing of knowledge of stories, legends, heroes, and movie and TV program characters (Katz & McClellan, 1997). Social understanding includes the ability to accurately predict other people’s reactions to the common events of peer interaction, to foresee another’s preferences and to empathise with other people’s feelings (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

When children practise basic social competencies, they are given the opportunity to develop their social skills. Those skills that produce favourable responses from others are usually retained by the children, likewise, those that produce unfavourable responses tend to be discarded (Thibault and Kelley, 1959; Lamovec, 1989, cited in Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993). Children who experience more rewarding interactions tend to feel better about themselves, and consequently become more socially competent than children who experience costly or unrewarding interactions.

Children’s social competence is determined by evaluating the quality of children’s peer relationships as opposed to the quantity. Intimate, caring, reciprocal relationships are more likely to enhance mental health and quality of life throughout the life span (Katz & McClellan, 1997, p.2). It is possible for a child to appear sociable and popular, yet be unable to “feel deeply attached to, care for, or feel responsible for a few friends and engage in intimate reciprocal give and take with them” (Katz & McClellan, 1997, p.2).
There are many factors which impact on the development of children's social competence. Some of these factors include the role of the family, in particular: parenting styles, the amount of attention children receive in their family unit, the amount of years between siblings, the availability of alternate caregivers within a household and a close relationship with a sibling (Werner & Smith, 1982, cited in Katz & McClellan, 1997, p.14); the role of the community; and the role of the peers. Peers play an important role in social development, because if peers reject a child, or that child lacks the social skills that enable him or her to enter into positive social interactions, a crucial source of social information is lost (Katz & McClellan, 1997, p.17).

**Social development of children whose parents have separated**

Social behaviours and actions are closely related to emotional adjustment in that they are often the expressions of children's emotions. Anger, for example, is often how children express their hurt. DiSibio (1981) observed a number of social behaviours in children from single-parent families including: aggression, antisocial behaviour, absenteeism, health problems, tardiness, truancy, sex role identification and responsibility roles. It should be noted that DiSibio also claims it could not be said in all certainty that these behaviours were a result from the permanent separation of the parents.

As a result of some of these behaviours children may alienate themselves from their peers. When alienation occurs, children may lose crucial social supports, often resulting in the intensification of the children's feelings of anxiety and despair (DiSibio, 1981; Kurdek, 1981; Family Court of Australia, 1990). Alienation also reduces the opportunities for children to practise their social skills that are important for healthy social development.
Inadvertently, as social competence develops through interactions with others, alienation will reduce children’s ability to be socially competent (Black & Puckett, 1996).

Children experience stress after the separation of their parents, not just because of the separation, but also from having to come to terms with a new family structure. Many of these children are expected to take on some of the responsibilities that were previously held by the absent parent, such as looking after younger children, and more household chores. Children tend to react differently to additional responsibilities; on one end of the spectrum, some children may regress, while, on the other end, they increased in maturity (DiSibio, 1981).

Within the classroom, teachers have reported that children whose parents have separated often lacked concentration and appeared “spaced out” (Frieman, 1993, p.60). Bisnaire, Firestone, & Rynard (1990) suggest the children appeared inattentive because they were preoccupied with what was happening in their family lives (cited in Frieman, 1993). Black and Puckett (1996) offer an explanation for children’s withdrawal as a self-comforting strategy that enables them to cope with negative emotional events (p.297).

**Children’s emotional development**

Young children experience an array of emotions. Throughout their early years, they begin to develop an understanding of these emotions, and they learn the vocabulary that will enable them to label the emotions they feel. Additionally, as children gain more social knowledge, they begin to modulate their emotions to fit in with what is acceptable to their cultural and contextual norms. When emotions are modulated in positive, socially
productive, and self-affirming ways, the children are given the opportunity to enter into rewarding social interactions (Black & Puckett, 1996). Rodd (1999) suggested that having access to at least one person that children can trust when their own resources are inadequate, such as not being able to articulate and regulate their emotions, is an essential aspect to developing resilience in life.

Separation and divorce have a powerful emotional effect on children (Keith & Finlay, 1988; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989, cited in Frieman, 1993, p.58). Research has shown that immediately following the separation of the parents, children tend to enter a period of mourning, this may be followed by feelings of grief, denial, helplessness, anger, resentment, hostility, depression and anxiety (DiSibio, 1981, p.8; Hetherington & Parke, 1993). The Family Court of Australia (1990) added that these children might also experience shock and confusion, especially if they were unaware of their parents’ marital or cohabitating difficulties.

In addition to these emotional responses, younger children also tend to deal with a fear of abandonment (DiSibio, 1981; Frieman, 1993). Furthermore, many of them may experience guilt feelings, as they feel responsible for their parents’ separation. Black (1979) attributes these feelings to their egocentric stage of thinking (cited in DiSibio, 1981).

As a result of these emotions, many children may act out their feelings disruptively, or alternatively, they may become withdrawn, depressed or anxious (DiSibio, 1981; Frieman, 1993). A study made on the impact of divorce on seven and eight year old
CHAPTER THREE

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical assumptions that underpin this study are derived from Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory. The following offers an explanation of this theory, and how it is applied to this study.

Erikson (1950, 1963) identified eight social/emotional stages that represent conflicts people are confronted with throughout the course of their lives. The conflict consists of two extreme emotions, one positive and the other negative, and a central emotional task. This task is defined by Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman (1993) as resolving "the conflict that arises between the two emotional extremes" (p.114). Erikson's theory supports an early experience/later development hypothesis. Successful outcomes at each of Erikson's eight stages of emotional development are thought to prepare the child for subsequent stages (Black & Puckett, 1996).

Children between the ages of six and eleven are in Erikson's fourth stage of psychosocial development, which is characterised as a conflict between industry and inferiority. "Industry" is defined as children mastering social and academic skills necessary to feel self-assured and competent (Black & Puckett, 1996, p.485; Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993). "Inferiority" is where children do not master social and academic skills, or they perceive themselves as not mastering these skills, and consequently they do

Within this stage, children are eager to learn how things work and want to master "real" tasks. Whilst the previous stages were characterized by process, products become important as children begin to take pride in their abilities to create and to produce. The children's activities are, in a word, industrious. Also throughout this stage, individual skills and interests become evident. Aspirations emerge, though levels of aspirations often outpace capabilities. Children find their skill areas as they explore a variety of interests and enjoy the products of their own labours that emerge from these explorations. The proceeding stage of the development of identity (versus role confusion) has its origins in these early skill discoveries (Black & Puckett, 1996).

Erikson's theory illustrates the importance of developing emotional outcomes that are weighted more toward the positive end of the poles at the completion of each emotional stage (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993). The children's adjustment to the permanent separation of their parents may influence this outcome and possibly hinder their progression toward the next emotional stage.

Throughout the industry versus inferiority stage, children show an interest in joining with others to accomplish tasks and they are interested in contributing to society as a whole (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993, p.116). Due to the associated increase in social interactions, there is the opportunity for children's social knowledge to develop. Social knowledge is important in allowing children to learn which forms of emotional
expression are acceptable in society and which are not (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993). Therefore, this emotional stage contributes to the development of children’s social competence.

**Conceptual Framework**

The concepts that underpin this study have been derived from the work of Erikson and the study conducted by Dubow and Tisak (1989). Figure 2 is a summary of the conceptual framework and illustrates that when children are industrious and have positive social, esteem and informational supports, then they are better equipped to cope with stressors, which include divorce/permanent separation and consequently achieve social and emotional competence.

Erikson (1963) stated that children between the ages of six and eleven are faced with the emotional conflict of industry versus inferiority. The desired result of this conflict is that children should reach a positive outcome in the event of them becoming socially and emotionally competent. It can be presumed then that children who are industrious will be able to cope with stressors, such as the separation of their parents, better than those children who feel inferior.

Dubow and Tisak (1989) cited a number of researchers, such as Rutter (1979), Sandler (1980) and Barrera (1986), who have studied social, esteem and/or informational support systems and how they assist children in modulating and coping with stress. The studies, in particular, focus on accumulated stress over a short period of time, which often occurs when parents exhibit high rates of marital discord, and parent separation/divorce. As
mentioned in the literature review, social support interacts with stress to moderate the negative effects of stress. Social support informs an individual that he or she is cared for, loved, esteemed and valued. The esteem support is defined as the individual believing others value him or her and as such they experience feelings of mastery over stressors. Although quality social support can increase children's self-esteem, this study makes a clear distinction between the two. In this study, the children are considered to have social support when they have formed close, reciprocal relationships with their teacher, and/or their peers and they perceive these relationships to exist. They are considered to have esteem support when their self-esteem is boosted through the positive interactions instigated by the children's industrious behaviour. Lastly, informational support allows children to understand the stressors, such as understand that sometimes parents do break up and it the separation was not their fault, and as such, they do not perceive their situations as threatening. When children successfully draw on social, esteem and informational supports they are able to cope with stressors more effectively, consequently enhancing their social and emotional development.

The following section describes children's social and emotional development and outlines how positive outcomes in Erikson's theory and the three support mechanisms can achieve social and emotional competence.

**Social Competence:** Social development, as it is defined in this study, refers to children's ability to recognize, interpret and respond to social situations (Hendrick, 1992). Social competence emerges from social development. Those children who develop a sense of industry, as opposed to inferiority, tend to be more able to initiate and engage in
interactions. The more opportunities children have in engaging in social interactions, the more competent in interacting with others they grow to be. Children who are socially competent are able to effectively participate in productive social interactions.

In addition, social interactions develop the individual (Wertsch, 1985; Moll, 1993; Black & Puckett, 1996) as all higher forms of mental activity are derived from social interactions with members of the same context. From this, the knowledge and skills that are essential for successful interactions in society are formed (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Furthermore, increased repertoires of social knowledge may assist in increasing the proficiency of further social interactions (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993). This increased proficiency of social knowledge allows children to effectively communicate their emotional needs, and as such, it offers the children a valuable strategy for healthy social and emotional development.

**Emotional Competence:** An important task during early childhood is to learn about emotions and how to express them. This learning involves “labeling” or naming emotions, and “understanding” and “modulating” emotions (Black & Puckett, 1996, p.296-297). Learning to manage emotions “in positive, socially productive, and self-affirming ways is a critical part of the socializing process and has lifelong implications for good mental health and rewarding social interactions” (Black & Puckett, 1996, p. 297). Children may adopt coping strategies such as thumb sucking, withdrawing or seeking the proximity of a close friend to help them cope with negative emotional events (Black & Puckett, 1996). In addition, social, esteem and informational supports, such as close relationships with teacher
and peers and feelings of self-worth derived from industriousness, offer children a means of effectively managing emotions (Dubow & Tisak, 1989).

In respect to Erikson's psychosocial theory, the central emotional issue in the industry versus inferiority stage is whether children will come away with a sense of competence, self-worth and industry, or whether they will feel they are inadequate and inferior (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993; Black & Puckett, 1996).

![Diagram of conceptual framework](image)

*Figure 2:* Diagram of conceptual framework depicting interrelationship of factors influencing the child's social and emotional competence.
CHAPTER FOUR

Methodology

This study used a qualitative method of inquiry to collect data. This chapter describes qualitative methodology; defines case studies and relates their relevance in reporting the study’s data; explains the instruments and the procedure; reports how the data was analysed and states the limitations that this study faced.

Qualitative Methodology

Naturalistic inquiry is a characteristic of qualitative methodology that embraces the natural unfolding of real-world situations as it dispenses with “predetermined constraints on outcomes” (Patton, 1990, p.40). Hence, this method enabled me to investigate and explore how young children appear to be coping socially and emotionally at school after the permanent separation of their parents. Owing to the sensitive nature of the topic, the methodology needed to be able to extract rich and informative data without undue intrusion into the lifestyles of the children.

Furthermore, it enabled me to capture what the children said and did with limited manipulation or controlling of their responses. The benefits of this were twofold. Firstly, this ensured the children were not placed in any stressful or uncomfortable situations and, secondly, the less influence I exerted over the situation, the more authentic the data was.
As Burns (1994) states: “qualitative forms of investigation tend to be based on a recognition of the importance of the subjective, experiential ‘lifeworld’ of human beings” (p.11). Suitably, as this study was centred on the experiential ‘lifeworld’ of the participants, a qualitative mode of inquiry was adopted.

Gathering data as it unfolded naturally and the limited manipulations of the children’s responses were made possible due to the choice in research tools. The study used participant observations and semi-structured interviews as the primary research tools. The participant observations involved taking as many notes as possible on what the participant did. The semi-structured interviews were informal and the content of the discussions were guided by what the children were comfortable with. In the context of this study, as the research tools of observations and informal interviews were unobtrusive, they acted to strengthen the authenticity of the findings. The research tools will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

**Research Design**

**Case Study**

The data was presented in case study design. One of the benefits of using this design was it allowed the data to be described enveloped in the complexity of the context in which the event or events occurred. Burns (1994) states, “the case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events” (p.314). The data, then, offers a rich transcript that will enable the reader to gain an insight into the phenomenon and consequently build an understanding of how each child was socially and emotionally coping at school.
The teachers of Grace, Daniel and Jason all consented to the study to take place within their classrooms and were cognizant of the fact that they would feature predominantly throughout the data. Brandon’s teacher, however, did not consent to the study taking place in her classroom. Instead, the school librarian gave consent for the field notes of Brandon to be taken in the library during her lessons.

Research Instruments

Participant Observation

Since it is only through understanding the children that we can start to explore how they are socially and emotionally coping at school, the research instrument used needed to be able to collect information that was completely focused on them. The data for this study, therefore, was largely gathered through participant observations. Participant observation proved to be an appropriate form of collecting data primarily because “the participant-observer attempts to generate the data from the perspective of the individuals being studied” (Wiersma, 1991, p.229).

The participant observations took place at the same negotiated time every week in the children’s classrooms. The benefits of this were:

- the children could be observed in a familiar context
- they could be observed interacting with familiar peers
- they could be observed interacting with their teacher/s
- the activities remained predictable and constant
the children grew accustomed to me coming into their classroom at that particular time and, as such, I became less and less of a disruption in their routine.

The information gathered through the participant observations offered a clear indication of the children's everyday classroom lives. As this information was embedded in a context, not only did it help create a clearer and more authentic understanding of the participants, offered an insight into how the children were coping socially and emotionally.

**Semi-structured interviews**

In addition to the participant observations, data were collected by interviewing the children. Best and Kahn (1989) promote the interview as the most “feasible method” of eliciting responses from young children (p.201). Apart from the fact that interviews avoid subjecting children to questionnaires or surveys they may not understand, the interviewer is able to clarify or extend children’s responses, resulting in more accurate and in-depth responses (Gay, 1987). Furthermore, the immediacy offered by interviewing provides the interviewer with further opportunity to collect rich and coherent data. In addition to this, background information was provided through informal discussions with the children’s teachers and parents

The interviews were semi-structured so “fixed wording or fixed ordering of questions” could be avoided (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995, p.65), hence allowing the structure of the interviews to possess a degree of flexibility. This flexibility enabled the interview processes to remain sensitive to the children’s emotions.
I scheduled two interviews with each child. The first interview was planned to be extremely informal and it had the dual purpose of allowing each child to grow accustomed to speaking with me and preparing me for the second interview. The second interview therefore, was scheduled approximately one month later and was more formal. This method of including a preliminary interview proved beneficial as one of the participants initially reacted strongly to being set apart from his peers. As such, when it came time to interview him again, it was arranged that additional children were interviewed on that day. This approach made him feel less targeted, and as a result he was uninhibited in expressing his thoughts and feelings.

In addition to these data collecting procedures, I also spoke informally to the children’s parents before any data collection began, and also with the children’s teachers throughout the entire data collecting process. As the discussions were entirely on an informal level, they were used only to provide further insight into the backgrounds of the children.

**Data Analysis**

The analysis of the data for this study was guided by the conceptual framework and organised under common themes that emerged throughout each of the case studies. The identification of each theme was stimulated by the search for incidents that related to the research questions and sub-themes were identified through “snowball sampling” (Burns, 1994, p.259). The incidents that related to the research questions were at times identified whilst making observations, therefore the analysis occurred concurrently with the observations. The snowball samples were also identified and recorded during the process.
of observations. Once the data was completed and organized, patterns were verified. These patterns were examined and discussed along with the differences between each case taking into consideration the varying factors inherent in each case.

**Limitations**

As Burns (1994) stated, it is difficult to apply the usual reliability and validity measures to qualitative studies due to its "subjective nature and its origin single contexts" (p.13). This study cannot be replicated as the "contexts, situations, events, conditions and interactions" that occurred at the times of collecting the data cannot be reproduced (Burns, 1994, p.13).

Measures were taken, however, to limit the degree of subjectivity in the interpretations of the data and to ensure authenticity of responses. For example, events that were noted in the observations formed the basis for questions in the interview allowing the participant to provide the explanations for why they did or did not do things. During the interviews, it was not uncommon for me to ask for the same information in different ways in order to clarify or confirm what the participants said (Best & Kahn, 1989). In this way, I reduced the likelihood of imposing my thoughts and biases by interpreting what the children meant by their responses. In addition, the observations were invariably a record of what I saw. They consisted of notes on what the children said and did, how they behaved, and the expressions on their faces, and not of why I thought the children did or did not do something, or of what I thought they were thinking or feeling. In this way, the observations were kept as objective as possible.
Besides the limitations presented by reliability and validity, I also faced limitations imposed by constraints on the time I was given to observe the participants. These constraints were put in place by my university timetable, the children’s timetables and the most convenient times for the teachers. I was the most constrained in Brandon’s case, as I had to conduct my observations during the thirty-minute library session that was held once a week. To compensate for time constraints, I consistently attended each session and informally spoke as much as possible to the teachers so they could elaborate on how the participant had been behaving over the period I had not seen them. Furthermore, I made a point of observing and recording as much as I could within the imposed timeframes, and immediately thereafter.

Due to the sensitive nature of this study, I experienced difficulty in obtaining participants. Approximately twenty metropolitan schools were approached of which only two were willing to issue my letter to parents requesting participants (see Appendix 1). There was no response to these letters. An advertisement was published in a community newspaper with only one response. Parents were not willing to consent to their children being a part of the study for a number of reasons. Two of the main reasons given were that they considered the whole issue to be too personal and they did not want outside involvement in their personal lives.

The sensitivity of this study proposed yet another limitation. The interviews needed to be carefully monitored so that the children were not put under stress. Therefore, there had to be a balance of sensitivity and forthrightness in the interviews. This balance was
arrived at through both a knowledge of the child gained after months of observations, and an awareness of how the child was reacting that particular day.
CHAPTER FIVE

Case Studies

This chapter presents the data from the observations and semi-structured interviews made of each participant in individual case studies. In order to maintain confidentiality, all names used are pseudonyms. Each case study commences with the participant’s family backgrounds. This section informs the reader on how long the participant’s parents have been separated, the custodial arrangements, if any other siblings were involved and the parent’s current situation. The environmental context in which the observations were made is then described. This context helps situate the participant enhancing the richness of the descriptions. Secondly, the teachers are described and their perceptions on how the participant appeared to be coping are reported. Thirdly, the participants are described as they carried on their day-to-day activities within the classroom. These descriptions also include the children’s physical appearances and their usual dispositions when in the classroom.

The case studies proceed to explore the children’s social and emotional adjustment by firstly examining the participants’ interactions with their teachers. Next it examines the participant’s interactions with peers and then the case studies present an examination of the types and quality of friendships the children formed. The types and quality of these friendships offers an insight into how the children perceive their self-worth and is therefore indicative of the children’s social and emotional well-being. Finally, there is a description of the children’s behaviours that are indicator of their social competence.
CASE STUDY ONE

Brandon
(Seven years old, year two)

Brandon's Family Background

Brandon's parents separated in May 1998 when he was in year one. Initially, both parents had equal share of custody, but at the time of meeting Brandon with his mother (Jan) on the 15th of April 1999, Brandon's father was reviewing the arrangement. He was hoping to change it to seeing Brandon, and his sister and brother, every second weekend. Jan said that all three children were not handling the separation very well and believed the change of custody arrangements had the potential to cause a regression in their emotional state.

Brandon was the middle child in the family. He had an older sister and a younger brother. Jan said that Brandon appeared to be the most affected by the separation, but also reported that the oldest daughter at times appeared to mourn the loss of her previous family life more than the others (informal discussion, 15/4/99).

Brandon's brother, Philip, had a hearing impairment and this caused Jan additional concern (informal discussion, 15/4/99). Brandon had some difficulty getting along with Philip and expressed this by saying: “Sometimes I come to school feeling sad because my brother annoys me” (interview #2, 8/12/99).
board adorned with colourful posters was at the front of the room welcoming the students inside. Behind the board was a ‘table of interest’, which was often covered with topical objects. On the right hand side was the librarian’s desk and further down on the right was a row of computers. The left side of the room was cased with large brown bookshelves. Near them were two or three moveable display racks filled with books that were either new releases or recommended reading.

The children’s desks were situated in the middle of the room. They were usually put in rows and positioned so that the teacher could easily access each child. Toward the computers on the right hand side were two other tables. These were large and round with approximately six seats surrounding each.

**Teachers**

As mentioned above, all the observations for this case study were made in the school’s library. Mrs McCormack was the school’s teacher librarian and Mrs Howard her assistant. Both Mrs McCormack and Mrs Howard were middle-aged ladies who were both very open in expressing their opinions.

Whereas Mrs Howard tended to remain non-interactive throughout the library session, Mrs McCormack organized and delivered the whole lesson. Mrs McCormack had a loud, clear voice, a kind of voice that was casual yet authorative. She would greet the children every afternoon and commence immediately with what she had planned for that day. Her lessons were sometimes completely teacher-directed as she would gather the children around her large blackboard and instruct them on how to complete the worksheets.
that she would be handing out. At other times, her lessons were interactive. She would commence these lessons by reading a book and then encourage the children to participate in a brief related discussion. Later, she would involve the children in an activity that explored the story even further.

Whichever way Mrs McCormack delivered her lessons, her delivery was always executed expediently. It became obvious throughout the observations that Mrs McCormack was always conscious of the short time in which she had the children and as a consequence, she had no patience for those children who tried to waste her time. Mrs McCormack put the wayward children back on track by simply informing them, in no way that could be misconstrued, that they were wasting her time.

Initially, Brandon was perceived as one of those children who were time wasters, however, Mrs McCormack described Brandon as having “improved” from when he started at the beginning of the year. She said he had been “a bit of a space cadet” but in the last few weeks he had become more attentive. Mrs McCormack added that it was hard for her to build a relationship with Brandon considering the limited time that she taught him throughout the week (informal discussion, 1/12/99).

**Brandon**

Brandon was slightly built, being both short and slim. He had a small, pale face and very short, dark brown hair. His hairstyle tended to draw attention to the size of his eyes, and attract attention toward his gaping mouth making him appear as though he was bewildered.
After a while, Brandon’s hair began to grow and lighten. The softness of the colour and texture of his hair created a gentler, more appealing look for Brandon. Whereas before Brandon’s dark eyelashes made his eyes appear sunken, causing his face to look gaunt, they now accentuated the shape of his eyes and acted to enhance his attractiveness. Despite the change in his appearance, his face remained expressionless.

Every Tuesday afternoon, Brandon would shuffle into the library. Rarely would he go straight to a seat; instead he would walk aimlessly around unenthusiastically examining the room and its contents. Occasionally he would approach other children, but only to see what they were doing; he seldom initiated interaction with them, nor they with him.

When Brandon was confined to his chair, he seemed to find it hard to sit still and to remain on task. In one session, Mrs McCormack sat on a table reading a book to the children who were all seated at the desks. Brandon put his feet on the unoccupied chair in front of him. He put his legs down and then turned his attention to pushing a box with pens and pencils in it across the table. Mrs McCormack put the box out of Brandon’s reach. He sat motionlessly for about two seconds before starting to swing his feet. Brandon stopped swinging his legs and started swinging on his chair back and forth and then rested the chair balancing on two legs (Observations, 11/8/99).

Social and Emotional Adjustment at School

Interactions with teachers

This section first describes Brandon’s relationship with Mrs Ball who was Brandon’s regular classroom teacher. The information was gained from the interview with
Brandon, because, as it was mentioned previously, I had not observed Brandon interact with Mrs Ball. Following this description, there is a discussion on how Brandon was observed interacting with Mrs McCormack.

Mrs Ball had a slim build and stood at about five foot and six inches. She had pitch-black, straight hair that was cut into a shoulder length bob. The blackness of her hair made a striking contrast with the paleness of her skin. This, coupled with her choice of office-like attire, created an air of authority about her. Brandon implied that he was intimidated by Mrs Ball’s sense of authority and aloofness: Brandon handed his finished work to Mrs McCormack. She looked at it and then asked him if it was his best work. Brandon nodded slightly and said it was. Mrs McCormack asked him if he would like to show his work to Mrs Ball. Brandon’s eyes suddenly widened as he stared hard at her. His face revealed a pained expression as he shook his head slowly and answered ‘no’. Mrs McCormack asked him why not and Brandon replied, “Because I would get told off.” He said something else that was made inaudible by his fingers covering his mouth. Mrs McCormack told him to take his fingers away and to go do the work again. He did. (Observations, 18/8/99).

According to Brandon, Mrs Ball and he rarely interacted with each other and consequently, they had not built a close relationship. When Brandon was asked about his interactions with Mrs Ball he responded: “She doesn’t talk to me at all”. Then he went on to claim this did not bother him, in fact he said, “… it makes me happy actually.” (interview #2, 8/12/99). This barrier in communication also meant that Brandon did not
seek Mrs Ball's help when he thought the other children were bullying him, as the following excerpt illustrates:

Brandon: ... and sometimes Callum tries to fight me. He thinks he's stronger than me, but he's not. He takes my stuff and won't let me use his.
Interviewer: Have you told Mrs Ball?
Brandon: No
Interviewer: Do you want to tell her?
Brandon: No (interview #2, 8/12/99).

Mrs McCormack stated that she and Brandon had found it difficult to build a strong relationship due to the limited time they shared together. In addition to the time constraints, the quality of interactions between them tended to remain on a business level. Upon the children entering the library, Mrs McCormack would greet all the children as a whole class and the children would respond appropriately. I had not seen Brandon or Mrs McCormack greet each other outside of this conventional ritual nor did they appear to engage in any discussion outside work related issues.

One day, however, Mrs McCormack offered Brandon positive feedback on his work and for the rest of that lesson Brandon actively sought her attention. Although the feedback consisted only a few positive words, it had a powerful impact on Brandon as the following notes from the observations show: Mrs McCormack approached Brandon and pointed to his work and said "Well done". Upon hearing this compliment, Brandon looked shocked—his eyes widened, his mouth opened as he stared intently at Mrs McCormack. His look of surprise was broken with an ear-to-ear grin and immediately he returned to his work. For the rest of that session Brandon worked feverously, only periodically getting out of his seat to approach Mrs McCormack and ask her to help him spell a word. When he had finished, he shadowed Mrs McCormack who was walking around the room keeping his work held up
high for her to see. Mrs McCormack told everyone to pack up. Brandon returned to his desk and quickly packed up his pencils and then approached Mrs McCormack once again trying to show her his work. This time she looked at it and told Brandon it was well done. Once again, Brandon's face lit up. He walked out of the library with a smile firmly planted on his face (Observations, 22/9/99). This event made a marked difference in Brandon’s work ethic and his social strategies. Brandon had been introduced to a strategy that had the potential of rewarding him with positive interactions.

The following week, Brandon was once again observed working harder than usual. Although his peers periodically distracted him, his attention always returned to his work. Once again, he received positive feedback from Mrs McCormack and once again he strove to earn more reinforcement from her. Mrs McCormack’s initial compliment marked the onset of Brandon’s new work habits and was the instigator of the more positive interactions that were to occur between Brandon and Mrs McCormack.

In summary, during the early observations, Brandon did not appear to value interacting with Mrs McCormack. After Mrs McCormack offered Brandon praise on his work, however, his values changed. Brandon commenced actively seeking Mrs McCormack’s attention because he valued and desired the positive reinforcement. This desire for more positive praise resulted in a new-found motivation to interact positively with Mrs McCormack.
responded. Brandon repeated his question without altering his monotone intonation and once again no one replied. Brandon then motionlessly stood, silently watching the children. (Observations, 1/9/99).

Although Brandon was observed always sitting at the desks next to Callum, there was minimal positive interaction between them. As it turned out, Brandon had to sit next to Callum as the two boys shared the same stationery box. Brandon did not like this arrangement as he claimed that “Callum always takes the box because he always wants to choose where we sit” (interview #2, 8/12/99). When Brandon was asked if he protested over this treatment, he replied, “I say I’m taking the box. He doesn’t like me taking it but he lets me take it back.” (Interview #2, 8/12/00).

Throughout the observations, it became apparent that most of the boys in Brandon’s class knew they could get away with treating him inappropriately. For example, they would grab things off him, they would use him as a scapegoat when they were getting in trouble and/or they would exclude him from their play. Brandon was aware of the inappropriateness of this treatment and admitted he often became annoyed with his ‘friends’ as “They blame me for things” (interview #2, 8/12/99). Brandon’s annoyance, however, was not observable, as he did not seem to react when the other children’s actions or responses belittled him, for example: Brandon was observed playing with a pencil. A boy sitting on his right sat watching and without warning yanked the pencil off Brandon and started playing with it himself. Brandon’s expression did not change – he did not flinch, he did not resist, he did not protest. He did nothing. (Observation, 18/8/99).
Friendships

Brandon did not perceive himself to be friendless. In the interview, he informed me of how he played with “Reece and some of his mates” at recess time (Interview #2, 8/12/99). When asked if they were his mates as well, he replied that they were. It emerged from the interview, however, that Reece exerted a lot of control over what Brandon did and with whom he associated. For example, Brandon spoke of Daniel, a boy he had met and befriended. As Daniel was not one of Reece’s ‘mates’, Reece exercised his control making it difficult for Brandon to nurture his friendship with Daniel. The following is how Brandon explained the situation:

*Interviewer:* Does he [Daniel] play football with you outside?
*Brandon:* Yes, he plays football with us, but not dodge.
*Interviewer:* Why not dodge?
*Brandon:* No, because Reece doesn’t let him play ... because Reece says he’s the boss of the game. Sometimes he makes me cross (Interview #2, 8/12/99).

Reece gained his control over Brandon, (and possibly other children as the aforementioned vignette implies) by using his heavy-set build to physically overpower him. According to Brandon, Reece would physically punish him if he did not do as Reece wanted him to. Brandon revealed the nature of his friendship with Reece in the following:

*Brandon:* Whenever I do something that Reece doesn’t want me to he grabs me by the back of the shirt [indicating around his neck] and pulls it.
*Interviewer:* What do you do?
*Brandon:* I say, “Reece stop it”. And I say, “Don’t do it” .... Sometimes Reece hits me.
*Interviewer:* Is that often?
*Brandon:* Yes, if I don’t do what he wants, he hits me. He won’t be at this school next year. Yeah, sometimes I want to stay at home because Reece bashes me up (interview #2, 8/12/99).
social competence. Incidents such as these typified Brandon’s inept social competence
during the early months of observations.

Although Brandon’s inattentive disposition, his unresponsiveness and distractibility
could have been strategies that he employed to cope with negative emotions, these
behaviours hindered the positive development of his social competence. The way Brandon
walked into the library every Tuesday afternoon for the first four months, seemingly
possessing no sense of purpose as he aimlessly walked around the room and gazed
disinterestedly at objects and people, offered further evidence of his undeveloped social
competence.

After the time that Mrs McCormack complimented Brandon’s work, he was given
something positive on which to base his future attempts of interactions. He began to use
his work as a means of gaining positive interactions with his peers. In one incident, for
example, immediately after gaining a boy’s attention by showing him his work, Brandon
and the boy entered a friendly and reciprocal discussion (Observations, 1/12/99). As well
as gaining an additional strategy for initiating interactions, Brandon seemed to become
more purposive in his day-to-day activities as he determinedly went about doing his work.

The observations came to a close shortly after Brandon commenced using his work
as a strategy for gaining positive interactions with his teacher and his peers. Had he
continued using this strategy with positive results, he more than likely would have
improved social knowledge and understanding and he also would have been given the
opportunity to practise effective social skills. However, after meeting with Mrs
CASE STUDY TWO

Grace
(Seven years old, year two)

Grace’s Family Background

Grace’s parents separated when she was three years old. Grace was the only child from the marriage. During the past four years her parents had a shared custody arrangement, however, Grace tended to spend more time with her mother. As she said, “… but I spend more time with my mum. That’s just the way it works out” (Interview #4, 14/12/99).

Grace’s mother remained single after the marital separation. When I met her, she and Grace had just moved into a new villa. A few months later as Grace was seated at her desk writing a story, she suddenly stopped work and stated to no one in particular “We are moving out of our house.” When asked why, she responded, “I don’t know, we’ve been told we have to.” (Observations, 17/8/99). In December of that same year, Grace reported: “We’ll be moving again soon. My mum will live in the house that I buy. My dad is giving me the money to buy my own house” (Interview #4, 14/12/99).

Grace’s father had formed another relationship. Grace was still coming to terms with her father’s new relationship. Mrs Tess recalled Grace’s behaviour at a parent’s night held at the school (attended by her father and his new partner) and how Grace had tried
hard to maintain her father’s attention throughout the evening. (Informal discussion, 27/9/99).

**Classroom**

Grace attended a small state school that was under threat of closure due to the growing number of private schools in the area. The school’s location was very picturesque as it was nestled in a valley with tall, well-established trees and expanses of grassed, open areas surrounding it.

The school’s architectural style was characteristic of the designs prevalent in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. All the classrooms were in linear style and built around a large bitumen quadrangle area. Concrete steps stemmed from the quadrangle to the concrete verandahs that led into the classrooms.

Grace’s classroom was very spacious inside. It housed one row of desks for year one children and one row of desks for year two children. It also accommodated two teachers’ desks and chairs while still leaving enough room for the mat area at the front and a library and block corner at the back. In addition to this, there were four computer stations situated around the room.

The classroom was a bright and cheery place. There were two sets of windows optimizing the amount of natural light entering the room and the teachers had decorated every available wall space with colourful work completed by the children. On one wall was a row of shelves that was also utilized for displaying the children’s work.
Teachers

Grace’s teachers, Mrs Darcy and Mrs Tess, shared the teaching role. Mrs Darcy taught the class from Monday to Wednesday. I observed her teaching the writing lesson on Tuesday mornings. Mrs Darcy taught with a very directed and predictable style, as she followed the same writing ritual every Tuesday. Firstly she would read a book to the children and then she would ask them to rewrite the story either with or without modifications. As the children wrote their stories, Mrs Darcy and a parent helper would go around the room pointing out spelling or grammar that needed correction on the children’s work. The children were expected to make corrections to their work so that their final product would be without spelling or grammatical errors.

Mrs Darcy stated that she felt Grace was a relatively well-adjusted little girl. At times she was known to be “a bit dramatic and at times competitive”, but on the whole she was almost the “perfect student” (informal discussion, 3/8/99). Mrs Darcy recalled the following incident as an example of Grace’s competitiveness: It occurred at a school dance held not long before this interview. All the children were dressed up and there was a prize for the best dressed. Grace was chosen in the top ten finalists. While they were waiting for the winner to be announced, Grace quipped to Mrs Darcy as she walked past her, “Think positive!” When two other children were chosen as the winners, Grace was reduced to tears. Mrs Darcy said that it seemed more important to her than it did to any of the other children to win the competition (Informal discussion, 3/8/99).

Mrs Tess taught on Thursdays and Fridays. The observations were taken with Mrs Tess as Grace’s teacher during the art lesson, which was the last period on a Friday
afternoon. Mrs Tess was working on a theme of the circus. She read books of the circus and she would ask the children questions. Then, Mrs Tess would carefully model the artwork the children would be doing that day. Mrs Tess would relay the instructions very explicitly, and at times she would ask one of the children to repeat the classroom rules in regard to using a particular piece of equipment or what to do to get prepared for the lesson. As the children worked, Mrs Tess would busy herself with decorating the classroom and occasionally she would circulate around the room praising the children and offering suggestions in regard to their work.

Mrs Tess also described Grace as “well adjusted” and as “generally very happy and often helpful in the classroom” (informal discussion, 27/9/99). Mrs Tess often nominated Grace to be her helper, asking her to hand out work or equipment. Grace enjoyed these tasks as she walked purposively and importantly around the room.

Grace

Grace had an attractive appearance. She had long, auburn hair that complimented the paleness of her skin. Her small, oval shaped face was speckled with the soft brown freckles that are often associated with red heads. Grace was small in stature, nonetheless because of the way she walked, with back straight and her head held high, she projected herself as larger than life. In the first two months of observations, Grace wore glasses for reading. She had to stop wearing them because the frames had become too tight near her ears.
Grace demonstrated a love of reading and after each lunchtime when the class had silent reading, she was observed sitting completely absorbed in whatever book she was reading. Grace was also a high achiever, and this seemed to be the reason she claimed she had not enjoyed any of her years at school. She claimed every year had been too easy: “I wish they would give harder work. I may be going to Perth’s Ladies Methodist College ... it’s a bit harder they reckon” (Interview #4, 14/12/99).

Grace was a strong character and she liked being the centre of attention in the classroom. Her attention seeking was facilitated by her ability to be very articulate. Grace’s ability to communicate effectively allowed her to become quite theatrical in even the most mundane tasks. One day, for example, *she was asked to hand out newspapers so the children could line their desks. As she handed each child a paper, she would say, “Would you like this morning’s newspaper sir?”* (Observations, 10/9/99). Her vocabulary was extensive in both her oral and written work. Her written stories were always original, well written and entertaining.

From the time spent observing Grace, it emerged that she tended to respond to personal problems in her life in a certain way in the classroom. During these times she would sit quietly, and although she would look absorbed, it would not be in her work. She would make spelling and grammatical mistakes that she would not normally make and when alerted to them, she would either rub out the error and forget to correct it, or she would not correct it at all. Grace would sit like this for a while, and then, as though she could not contain her problem any more, she would state what was on her mind in a matter-of-fact voice, to seemingly no-one in particular. The following excerpt from the
Grace back down to the floor where she had been sitting and walked away. Grace did not appear to be fazed, instead, she turned around to Veronica who was seated next to her and initiated a friendly discussion (Observations, 6/8/99).

Although Grace was content not to be hugged and emotionally reassured, she did demand that her work be acknowledged. She enjoyed showing off her work to Mrs Tess. Mrs Tess often laughed at the jokes Grace wrote or drew on her page, and she would remark on how clever Grace was to draw the way she did. When Grace showed her work to Mrs Darcy however, there would inevitably be a spelling or punctuation mistake pointed out without any further comment. Consequently, when Grace was with Mrs Tess, she liked Mrs Tess to acknowledge her work and when Grace was with Mrs Darcy she sought the acknowledgement and admiration of her work from her peers.

On one occasion, Mrs Darcy nominated the year two girls to go out to the front of the class and read the stories they had just finished. Grace stood proudly, reading her story with full expression and enthusiasm. Mrs Darcy looked over Grace’s shoulder as she read, pointed to something on Grace’s page and said, “You need to fix up this apostrophe when you get back to your desk.” Grace said nothing, but huffed a little. Her indignation was soon forgotten as she held up her work so her peers could see the picture she had drawn at the bottom of the page (Observations, 24/8/99).

Throughout the observations, Grace continually demonstrated her need to challenge Mrs Darcy’s expectations. The following excerpt from the observations offers an example of how Grace found it difficult to comply wholly with Mrs Darcy’s explicit instructions:
Mrs Darcy had finished reading the story “The Terrible Wild Grey Hairy Thing”. She instructed the children to go back to their desks and write the story in their own words. Grace approached Mrs Darcy and asked her if she could change the characters in the story. Mrs Darcy said she could not. Grace rephrased the question and asked again. Once again, she was told she could not. Grace went to her desk and started writing straight away. Grace’s final story was very different from the story. She had changed every character and had deviated away from the storyline (Observations, 17/8/99).

Generally, however, Grace felt she could approach both her teachers if she had a problem, but specified: “Well, it depends on what it is really. If it is something silly I don’t need them to know, but if it is important, I would” (Interview #4, 14/12/99).

**Interactions with peers**

Socializing with her peers did not appear to be paramount in Grace’s day-to-day activities in the classroom. Grace invested most of her time in her schoolwork and appeared to get greater satisfaction from either having her teachers or her peers compliment her work. However, when Grace did need to establish contact with her peers, she used a number of pro-social strategies, such as, she would smile and immediately engage in conversation, or she would offer her assistance when children were experiencing difficulty in their work. Although Grace also employed anti-social strategies, she did not use them to gain the attention of her peers. Grace demonstrated social knowledge and understandings, enough to realize that these strategies would either repel or harm her peers.
In these early months, Grace had an unpredictable relationship with Rhiannon. Grace often copied Rhiannon’s work as a way of winning her approval and frequently employed ineffective pro-social strategies, such as the one in the aforementioned example, to initiate interactions with her. The reason why her strategies were ineffective may have been due to her deep-seated resentment toward Rhiannon which arose from Grace’s belief that Rhiannon had ‘stolen’ her ex-best friend Emily from her (interview #4, 14/12/99). At times this resentment surfaced itself, resulting in antisocial behaviours as the one described in the following vignette: The children were outside playing a game of dodge. Rhiannon and Michelle were in the centre of the circle and whoever had the ball was required to hit one of them out. Every time someone held the ball, Grace would scream over to him or her, “Hit Rhiannon!” Grace continued to do this until Emily told her to stop because she might hurt Rhiannon’s feelings (Observations, 27/9/99).

Grace took being compared with Rhiannon very seriously and reacted quite intensely if Rhiannon was made to appear “better” than Grace. On one occasion, for example, Grace and a few other children went up to the front of the classroom to show off the drawings they did for a competition. Mrs Tess asked Rhiannon to go up with the others to show off her drawing. Rhiannon, being shy by nature, refused. Craig called over to Rhiannon, “But Rhiannon, yours is the best!” Upon hearing this, Grace froze, her eyes narrowed and her mouth tightened. She turned to Veronica who was standing next to her and mimicked what Craig had said in an exaggerated tone (Observations, 17/9/99). Grace was so conscious of being compared with Rhiannon that even compliments directed toward Rhiannon appeared to be construed by Grace as direct and unflattering comparison with her own abilities.
Toward the end of the year, Grace’s feelings toward Rhiannon appeared to be more predictable and balanced. She no longer copied Rhiannon’s work and she no longer appeared resentful toward her, as she said, “Yes I do get on with Rhiannon. It was a bit sad when she and Emily became friends, but she and I get on.” (Interview #4, 14/12/99). Interestingly enough, even though Grace’s strategies for gaining Rhiannon’s attention had not changed, Rhiannon began to positively respond to her.

At times Grace initiated interactions because she wanted to help one of her peers. Although she would enter these interactions pro-socially she would often become overbearing, causing the child on the receiving end to grow annoyed with her. The boys, however, tended to be more tolerant of Grace than the girls were. The following excerpt from the observations is an example of how a boy named Nicholas often put up with Grace trying to ‘help’, yet completely taking over the situation: Nicholas started to hiccup. Grace turned to him and told him to breathe deeply so that he could get rid of them. Nicholas’s hiccups did not stop. Grace continued to coach his breathing and then suddenly, without warning, she held his nose with her fingers. When Nicholas was asked if he was trying to get rid of his hiccups, he replied in a nasally tone, “I’m not, Grace is.” (Observations, 6/8/99).

Not all of Grace’s interactions with her peers were initiated pro-socially. Grace could be quite demanding of her peers and her manner with them could at times be interpreted as rude or abrupt. For instance, Jessica was asked to give Grace her paper angel to fix up. Grace turned around to her and snapped, “Can’t you do it? I can’t move”.

67
She was tracing a picture. She continued, “Oh, get me some glue, I don’t have any!”

Without question, Jessica got some glue for Grace and left. (Observations, 10/8/99).

Grace was also very competitive. Although some aspects of competition may be positive, Grace was so competitive that she valued winning more than she did the welfare of her peers. Usually when Grace was like this, the other children would either avoid her, or they would apathetically comply with her demands. For example, one day when the children were outside playing a game of “Cat and mouse”, Grace stood in the circle linking arms with Richard and Veronica. She instructed both these children to hold on as tightly as they could so the ‘mouse’ could not get out. She repeated the instruction to Richard. Grace then yelled at Veronica, “‘As tightly as you can,’ I said!” and yanked Veronica’s arm so forcibly that Veronica began to cry. Grace looked at her momentarily not showing any expression on her face, she then returned her attention to the mouse in the centre of the circle (Observations, 27/9/99).

Even though Grace initiated and participated in interactions with her peers, it became increasingly apparent throughout the observations that Grace had a preference for talking to adults. She did not appear to feel there was a difference in status between herself and adults in her relations with them. Grace actually spoke more confidently and more freely in a child-to-adult interaction than she did in a child-to-child interaction. On the first day of observations for example, Grace huffed and sighed over some word charts that Mrs Darcy had recently purchased. She called over to Mrs Darcy and expressed her dissatisfaction of the word charts. She complained that none of the words she was looking
observations of Grace, it became apparent that Grace’s perceptions of friendship were undifferentiated and egocentric.

Grace was obviously still grappling with social understanding, as her perceptions on friendship appeared to be taken from an egocentric viewpoint. She tended to value friendships based on whether the children could fulfill her needs. This did not mean she formed friendships with those children who could offer material goods; instead, she searched for children who could offer companionship (even if she did not like them), or those who could be made instrumental in helping her prove to herself that she was worthwhile, and finally, Grace searched for children who could tolerate her continually trying to help or suggest things to them.

Companionship, especially during morning recess and lunchtime, was important to Grace. She preferred to play with an uncongenial companion at recess and lunchtime than to either have no-one at all to play with, or to play with someone who would dominate the game. She said, “I feel sad when I have nobody to play with, which is quite often. I play with someone I don’t like … Amy” (Interview #4, 14/12/99). She refused to play with Veronica from her class because, “Veronica’s so bossy! She has to be the boss of everything. We are friends, but she is so bossy” (Interview #4, 14/12/99).

Veronica was by no means bossy when she was in the classroom. Grace explained, “In the classroom she is quiet, but you should see her outside!” (Interview #4, 14/12/99). Within the classroom, Veronica was very submissive and undemanding. At times Grace took advantage of this side of Veronica and manipulated Veronica to boost her own self-
esteem. For example, on one occasion both girls sat at their desks tracing pictures. After a while, Veronica left hers and went and found something else to do. Grace however, continued to trace, very slowly and very carefully for the next half an hour. When she had finished, she picked up her picture and Veronica's as well. She gave Veronica her picture and both girls approached Craig. Grace asked Craig which picture he thought was best. Craig wriggled in his chair, then replied, "Both". Grace insisted he had to choose just one. He chose Grace's. Grace smiled and both girls moved to the next child. After both girls had approached five classmates, Veronica looked as though she was going to cry. She started to turn away when Grace grabbed her and told her that someone was bound to vote for hers soon. They approached the next child, and that child chose Grace's picture. Veronica stormed off and slammed her picture on her desk. Grace quickly walked up to where Veronica's picture was and picked it up. She then recommenced asking the children to vote which one was best. When she finished, she approached Craig, who was sitting near Veronica, and asked him, "What's my prize?" When Craig asked what she meant, she responded quite boastfully that her picture received seventeen votes and Veronica's only got two (Observations, 10/12/99).

In the above example, Grace demonstrated her desire to socially compare her abilities against others. At the same time, she also revealed an inability to consider another child's feelings. This inconsideration indicated that Grace placed a higher value on deciding what kind of person she was, made through comparison, than on the thoughts and feelings of her friend. This lack of consideration for her friend may have eventuated from a lack of social knowledge and diminished social competency.
14/6/99). Mrs Bradley felt empathetic toward Jason and in informal discussions with me (27/7/99) related a personal family experience that mirrored Jason’s situation. Her strategy for addressing Jason’s situation was to help him deal with it without becoming a crutch for him (informal discussion, 27/7/99). In this way, she felt Jason would come to terms with his circumstances, thus allowing him to become more independent.

Mrs Bradley was very particular about the working conditions within her classroom. She kept noise levels under control and she managed to maintain a constant stream of productivity from her students. She expected the children to behave in a certain way and vigilantly made sure that they did. Mrs Bradley’s style was structured and predictable. The children liked her and responded well to her. They knew where they stood with her, which is often assuring for young children, as they tend to feel secure knowing where their boundaries lie.

Jason

Jason was seven years old and in year two. He had attended the Catholic Junior Primary School since pre-primary. The observations took place during the language lessons. Jason was very good at the work he did; in fact, he aspired to be an author when he grew up. Jason was also very good at games such as soccer and football. He had scored seven goals in one soccer game. When asked if he was proud of himself, he responded, “I should really try harder” (interview #1, 31/8/99). This comment was reflective of his low self-esteem, and indicative of the effort he felt he had to put in to be regarded as worthwhile.
What was most obvious about Jason was his intensity. Jason was small in stature with scruffy, short, mousy-brown hair. A few freckles scattered across his nose and he had large eyes with a small mouth that was often agape, revealing an assortment of different sized teeth. Jason tended to appear withdrawn as his facial expression rarely showed emotion and he would stare intently into space. His small frame and blank expression gave an impression of fragility.

Although Jason wore the school uniform just like his peers, it tended to look different on him. My initial explanation for this difference was that he appeared unkempt; with his scruffy hair and the large, garish novelty shoelaces he always wore. But, after a while it became increasingly apparent that it was more his mannerisms, his uneasiness that distinguished him from his classmates.

In the first three months of observing Jason, he never appeared to be relaxed. He was, as mentioned earlier, tense. When he was sitting in a group at the front with the teacher, he would stare intently ahead. When he sat at his desk, once again, he would stare intently and then suddenly, with gusto, he would attack his work with that very same intensity.

While I was setting up for the first interview, Jason sat quietly on a chair in the middle of the room. He looked everywhere but at me. He sat on the chair making short jerking movements with his body. After watching his obvious uneasiness, I tried to break the ice with some informal banter. At the sound of my voice, Jason suddenly sat very still and a silence filled the room. Then, without warning, he broke into uncontrollable tears.
Jason sobbed with great emotion, and pleaded not to talk about his mum and dad's separation. Jason had preempted the purpose of our meeting and had reacted defensively. My view of this incident was that Jason had given me a glimpse of the emotional battle that he was dealing with.

**Social and Emotional Adjustment at school**

*Interactions with teachers*

Due to unforeseen circumstances, Jason had to come to terms with coping with three teachers. Each of these teachers had different personalities and teaching styles. Jason's first two teachers, Mrs White and Mrs Bouchè were more similar in their teaching styles, and they both tended to act maternally toward Jason. Mrs Bradley was a little more authoritative in her style of teaching. She was aware of Jason's emotional fragility and she chose to help Jason cope with his social and emotional development in a different manner than his previous two teachers.

Jason had formed a close relationship with Mrs White, his first teacher. Informal discussions with the school Principal and both Mrs Bouchè and Mrs Bradley revealed that Mrs White had acted very maternally toward Jason by giving him hugs when he was feeling insecure or despondent. Discussion with the school Principal also revealed that when Mrs White fell ill, some of the staff were concerned with how her leaving would affect Jason. Although they knew Jason would miss Mrs White, it was conceded he would grow more independent without her (informal discussion with Mrs Bradley, 27/7/99).
Eventually, Mrs Bradley had to tell him not to worry and to get back to his desk (Observations, 6/9/99).

During most mat instruction sessions, Jason would sit at Mrs Bradley's feet. On one occasion, Mrs Bradley asked me if I had noticed that Jason insisted on sitting at her feet for every mat session. She said she had never asked him to sit there (Informal discussion, 3/8/99). Ironically, two weeks later, Jason was seated toward the rear of the group chatting happily to a friend whom I had not seen before. Mrs Bradley constantly looked over to them, and then finally instructed Jason to sit at her feet (Observations 17/8/99). This instruction, although seemingly unimportant, was what I came to realize as a turning point for Jason. It marked the end of Jason seeking the teachers' emotional support within the classroom, and the beginning of his struggle to gain recognition and support from his peers.

**Interactions with peers**

When I first began observing Jason, it became apparent he had difficulty with initiating and maintaining positive peer interactions. He tried to gain the attention of his peers by using strategies that were characteristic of anti-social behaviours. Understandably, his peers either ignored him, or did not welcome his attentions. The following observation is an example of some of the anti-social strategies Jason had employed in the first months: *On my first day in his classroom I observed him trying to initiate interactions with some children in the classroom library. One by one, he shoved a book in their faces and watched for their response. Only one child did not ignore him, instead, she screwed up her face and*
pushed the book away. Jason smiled and continued to push the book in front of her until an adult intervened (observations, 27/7/99).

The children seated near Jason had on a number of occasions accused Jason of taking either their pencils or rubbers. This anti-social behaviour resulted in these children withdrawing any chance of them sharing their stationery with Jason. In the following example, Jason shows the girl opposite him a pencil of hers that was in his possession. The girl responds in a fed up and disparaged manner as though she was annoyed with Jason. Her conversation with him alludes to the notion that Jason is responsible for a lot of her stationery going missing: Jason moved to get a rubber from his desk. He came back with a pencil from his desk and said, "I have your silver pencil" to the girl opposite him. She grabbed the pencil off him. He stared at the girl and asked her if he could have a pencil. The girl responded sarcastically, "No, because my sharpener was mysteriously misplaced." (Observations, 6/9/99).

Toward the end of August, when a new boy named Jordan joined the classroom, I observed a change in Jason’s behaviour. Throughout the course of that day, Jason and Jordan happily chatted at every given moment. With the presence of Jordan in the room, Jason’s whole outlook appeared to change. Although he was more mischievous, chatting through instruction time and through other inconvenient times, he was not as tense as he usually was. He appeared to be happy.

At the same time, I observed Jason using different strategies for initiating interactions with his peers. Instead of seeking attention through negative behaviour, he began to play
with his peers. For instance, he began to use humour and he became less tense as the following indicates: one of the boys in the class who had very little interaction with Jason previously, indicated he wanted a pencil from Jason by using sign language. Jason responded using exaggerated sign language. Daniel laughed and returned Jason’s message with a just as exaggerated message. The boys repeated this game for a short while then both laughed as they returned to their desks (observations, 30/11/99).

Jason’s popularity amongst the boys in the class began to grow. He revealed to me his discovery of how to win friends:

Ben probably likes me when I’m silly. I act silly to be his friend. I have to act silly for him … it gets me into trouble. I gotta act silly sometimes for Jordan. I want him to like me and be my friend (interview #3, 14/12/99).

Although Jason’s new social strategy rewarded him with positive interactions with his peers, his silliness resulted in Mrs Bradley’s disapproval. Mrs Bradley reported that, alongside Jason’s increasing popularity came the gradual decrease in his work ethic and behaviour. She said, “… in the first few weeks after the school holidays, Jason was extremely hard to handle – very disruptive … speaking out of turn and generally being silly” (informal discussion, 30/11/99). This had resulted in Jason’s desk being separated from the rest of the children.

Nonetheless, due to the success of his new strategy, Jason did not seem to be prepared to give it up. He was aware of the change in his behaviour and he knew Mrs
Bradley disapproved, however, his need to belong, to be emotionally supported, was so strong that being out of favor with the teacher was a price he was willing to pay.

**Friendships**

Jason placed a lot of importance on friendships. When I asked him why, he reflected for a while and responded by saying “… I don’t know. [Pause] They help me like myself... Yes” (interview #3, 14/12/99). Through the acceptance that friendship offered, Jason was able to feel worthwhile.

Jason pursued two friends in particular in the classroom. They were Ben and Jordan. Although he joked with the other children, such as he did with Daniel, he did not seem to want their friendships as much as Ben and Jordan’s friendships. There are possibly a number of reasons why Jason had chosen those two as friends. One reason could have been because Jason longed for some of the attention Ben and Jordan were constantly receiving from Mrs Bradley (even though the attention was negative). Jason explained another possible reason:

*Interviewer:* If you could be anyone in your classroom, who would you be?
*Jason:* Ben...because he ... he’s, if I was him I would have a brother because he’s got a little brother... and, and they get on well. So, I want to be like them. So I could play with Tim. They have lots of fun” (interview #3, 14/12/00).

It appeared that Jason appreciated the fact that Ben had the companionship of his younger brother. Additionally, Ben’s desirability was heightened by his constant attention gaining behaviour. Both Ben and Jordan were disruptive within the classroom, often being loud and silly in attracting Mrs Bradley’s attention. In addition to this, Ben and Jordan received even more of Mrs Bradley’s attention due to neither of them coping with their
work and as such, they were given extra support. When Jason was asked if he thought he was given enough attention, he looked around until he saw Mrs Bradley and with his gaze fixed on her replied quite softly, “Hmm, I don’t know about that one,” (interview #3, 14/12/99).

Mrs Bradley did not approve of Jason’s friendship with Jordan, nor did she encourage it. Although she was happy that Jason had found a friend, she predicted Jordan would have a negative influence on him because she felt Jordan was “a bit airy” (informal discussion, 17/8/99). Nonetheless, Jason was observed pursuing Jordan’s friendship in much the same way as he had earlier pursued Mrs Bradley’s affections.

The determination behind Jason’s pursuit of Jordan’s friendship can be appreciated in the following context taken from the observations: Jason had drawn a picture of a plane and held it up for Jordan to see. Jordan made a face at it and told him he had not done a good job. Mrs Bradley overheard Jordan and asked the boys why they were not getting on lately. Instead of a reply, Jordan quickly held up his picture for Jason to see. Jason responded with “Cor, let’s see it again!” Jordan hugged it to his body so Jason could not see. Jason remained untroubled by Jordan’s negative responses; instead he remained unrelenting, offering his friendship (observations, 14/9/99). Jason was determined to make and maintain his relationships with both Jordan and Ben.

The reason for his determination can be understood when viewed in the light of his response to the request: “Name four things you like best about yourself”. He did not say he liked the way he could read well, or the way he played on computers, or the way he played
soccer or football. Instead he said, with every surety, what he liked best about himself was he had a best friend named Ben. The other three things that he liked about himself were: “Jordan, Taylor and Mitchell” (Interview #3, 14/12/99).

In conclusion, it was through the friendships Jason formed that he developed his self-esteem and self-worth. Friendship allowed Jason to feel he was valuable. Jason was aware he needed friends to make him feel worthwhile. He was aware that without them, he no longer valued himself, and as such, Jason’s value on friendships was high. It was so high in fact, that Jason was prepared to sacrifice his schoolwork and good favour with Mrs Bradley to form and maintain his friendships within the classroom.

Social Competence

In the first three to four months of observations, Jason demonstrated behaviours that indicated a lack of social awareness. In the instance described earlier where Jason repeatedly shoved the book in the girl’s face and rejoiced at her negative responses, he revealed he did not have either a developed social knowledge or understanding. Had he displayed socially competent behaviour, he would have been less likely to shove the book in front of her face and he would have been more likely to recognize the girl’s discomfort and consequently stopped what he was doing.

During these early months, Jason rarely participated in class activities. Instead, he would sit with a vacant expression on his face. He appeared as though he had completely withdrawn himself away from his social context. Jason’s obliviousness to his surroundings
made it difficult for him to be socially aware, and, as a consequence, he became even more isolated from the social context in which his peers were actively participating.

During the last few months of observing Jason there was a notable change in his behaviour. He demonstrated more self-confidence and independence, and was generally happier. He freely approached his peers and engaged in many successful and rewarding interactions. The success of these interactions was the result of Jason’s increase in social knowledge. The following example illustrates how Jason’s understanding of other children and his social context had developed. His understanding is made apparent through his use of appropriate gestures and the positive non-verbal response he receives from his peer. *Mrs Bradley calls to Jason and asks him to collect his scrapbook. He gets it and returns to his desk. Ben passes him and says something. Jason smiles and watches Ben until Ben reaches his desk on the other side of the room. Ben turns around and both he and Jason exchange smiles. Jason sits down and commences his work* (Observation, 30/11/99). Jason’s behaviour is demonstrative of his developing social competency.

**Summary**

During the first three months of observations, Jason appeared anxious and stressed. He had not acquired strong social supports amongst his peers, and he tried to keep in close proximity with Mrs Bradley. During this early period, although Jason appeared inattentive with his vacant stare and constant fidgeting, he was very studious, and did well with his schoolwork.
Mrs Bradley did not encourage his dependent behaviour, and as a consequence, Jason shifted his proximity seeking from her to his peers. He had learned that if he acted silly the boys in the class, in particular Jordan and Ben, responded favourably to him. As a consequence of this newfound strategy, Mrs Bradley disciplined Jason by moving his desk away from his peers. Jason was aware that his new strategy was disruptive, however, he did not want to give up the social support he felt he needed.
Mrs Bradley did not encourage his dependent behaviour, and as a consequence, Jason shifted his proximity seeking from her to his peers. He had learned that if he acted silly the boys in the class, in particular Jordan and Ben, responded favourably to him. As a consequence of this newfound strategy, Mrs Bradley disciplined Jason by moving his desk away from his peers. Jason was aware that his new strategy was disruptive, however, he did not want to give up the social support he felt he needed.
CASE STUDY FOUR

Daniel

(Eight years old, year three)

Daniel's Family Background

Daniel's parents separated in 1996 when Daniel was in pre-primary. The following is Daniel's mother's recount of the circumstances that surrounded the separation on this particular day. Daniel went to his pre-primary class feeling rather special because his mother was on roster. About mid-morning, Daniel's mother received a phone call. The caller was Daniel's father; he had phoned to say he would not be there when they all got home from school (informal discussion with mother). The custody was arranged so that Daniel and his brother Carl lived with their mother and stayed with their father every second weekend. As the separation was not amicable, so each second weekend drop-off and pick-up was an arduous event for all those concerned (informal discussion, June 1999).

Two weeks after Daniel's father had gone, his mother began a relationship with a friend, Bill. Although Bill and Daniel's mother maintained separate living arrangements, Bill has remained with them up to the present date. Bill had a love for camping and fishing, which made him all the more endearing to both the boys.

A year after the separation, Daniel's father remarried a lady who had a daughter from her previous relationship. Shortly after, they had a son and named him Jeff. The birth of his half brother presented some problems for Daniel as he felt he “was not as good...
as my brother [Jeff].” Shortly after the observations came to an end, Daniel’s father reduced his custody ‘visits’ to a phone call once a fortnight.

Daniel’s brother Carl was only one year younger than him. Although Daniel insisted that during the lunch breaks at school Carl “annoys me to my death” (Interview, 17/12/99), they shared a close relationship. Daniel tended to be the “bossy” big brother with Carl, often taking over his toys, and generally telling Carl what to do. Carl seemed to accept the way Daniel treated him, complying very dutifully with Daniel’s demands (informal discussion with mother, June, 1999)

Classroom

Daniel’s school was first established in 1992. The school’s design complemented the cascading rockeries and the greenery that was offered by the countryside. The building that housed Daniel’s classroom had been elevated above some rocks and could be reached by climbing a flight of open stairs.

In Daniel’s building there were four classrooms. Two on one side of the building and two on the other side, in between them was a spacious room accommodating two computers and a small table and chairs. Each classroom led into this room through their own access doors.

Daniel’s classroom was quite large, especially for a more contemporary school. It was not an overly decorated room, which actually made the room appear more open as opposed to looking sparse. The few things that were hung on the wall tended to be of
educational value rather than for decoration; for example, there was a sounds chart that hung from the wall at the front of the room to the left of the blackboard. Cabinets and shelves took up most of the other wall space.

Even though it was a split years three and four class, the children were not split into their separate classes. Instead, the desks were positioned in a large horseshoe shape with three or four small groups in the middle. No differentiation between class levels could be observed. Two desks were put at the back facing the back wall. Occupying those desks were children the teachers felt did not know how to work with others.

There was an assortment of dictionaries and reference books on one side of the room. Just above the cabinets on which they were stored was a row of large windows that allowed in natural light. On the other side of the room was a shelf that housed games. Most of these games were of a mathematical nature.

**Teachers**

Daniel’s teachers job shared. His teachers, Mr and Mrs Hunt, were a married couple. I did not meet Mrs Hunt, who usually worked with the children every Monday and Tuesday, because for most of second semester 1999 she was on sick leave. Much to Daniel’s delight, Mr Hunt took responsibility for the whole week in her absence.

Mr Hunt was approximately forty years of age. He was about six foot tall and slim. He had very dark brown, curly hair and was clean-shaven. Mr Hunt made his expectations
of the children very clear. The children, in turn, respected his authority and very rarely did any of the children attempt to cross the line with him.

A Friday morning ritual with Mr Hunt was to go through the children's homework. This was a very public exercise, which no doubt encouraged all the children to complete their homework on time. Those children who had completed their homework over a certain period gained points in their point award books. Those who did not complete their homework were encouraged to stay in during recess time to finish it off.

In addition to meeting the children's academic needs, Mr Hunt saw it as his duty to encourage the children to have positive and effective interpersonal skills. He stated that all teachers should recognize their responsibility of teaching children how to co-operate and respect other children and equipment (Informal discussion). He devised self-assessment sheets that were to be completed after team games. The assessments focused on how well they thought their team worked together, who did most of the work and so on.

On some occasions, Mrs Alexander substituted for Mr Hunt. Mrs Alexander felt Daniel did not fit the stereotypical description of a child whose parents have divorced. She reported that she felt Daniel was socially and emotionally well balanced, and that he was the "perfect student" as he always strived to complete his work on time (Informal discussion, 27/8/99).
Daniel

Daniel was eight years old and in year 3. He was big for his age, being both broad and tall. Throughout the period of observations, Daniel’s weight fluctuated between very slim and quite chubby. He had blue eyes, dark brown cropped hair, and pale skin with a sprinkling of brown freckles over his nose. Daniel tended to keep his mouth open, revealing a large set of teeth, with a slightly pronounced overbite.

Daniel had formed a noticeable hand to mouth habit that resulted in him constantly biting or sucking his fingers or thumb. There was no observable pattern to his habit, as he seemed to do it all the time, however, when he became distressed, his biting or sucking became more vigorous.

At times, Daniel laid his head on his outstretched arm on the table and gently chewed on his fingers, intermittently yawning and giving off the appearance that he was half asleep. The way he appeared, however, was not at all indicative of his attentiveness. One day for example, Mr Hunt was instructing the children on how to play a special scrabble game that none of them had played before. Daniel sat at his desk, gazing straight ahead of him with his head in his hand. He’d yawn while maintaining his steady gaze, and when he finished he left his mouth slightly agape. He did not look like he was concentrating. Mr Hunt told the children to start. Daniel immediately got up, got himself a board game, told his friend Tom, “You’re with me” and went and sat with another pair of boys. He then proceeded to repeat Mr Hunt’s instructions, as no-one else in the group knew what to do. (Observations, 30/7/99).
Mr Hunt later informed me that Daniel was in the T.A.G. group, which was the acronym for talented and gifted. Once a week, Daniel would meet with the other T.A.G. students of the school and participate in some extension work. In addition to this, Mr Hunt was very mathematically minded and had made several math games for all the children in the class to use in their free time. These games had the capability of challenging and extending the children. Daniel and a group of his friends often hurried to finish their work so they could play with these games.

Social and Emotional Adjustment at School

Interactions with teachers

Mr Hunt was Daniel's favourite teacher. He said that year three had been his favourite year at school and it was because Mr Hunt had been his teacher. Daniel explained the reason why he liked him was because, "He does lots of science, and maths. They're my favourite subjects, maths and science." In addition to this, Daniel said he was comfortable with Mr Hunt and felt he could approach him if he had a problem. (Interview #5, 17/12/99).

Despite this avowed comfortability, throughout the five months of observations, Daniel was only once observed attempting to initiate interaction with Mr Hunt. The manner in which he approached him indicated he was not at all confident on how he would be received as the following excerpt from the observations reveals: *Daniel sat at his desk and watched Mr Hunt as he walked out of the room. He sat staring in the direction of the door, and then started looking around the room. Daniel got up and left the room, he reentered following Mr Hunt who was engaged in conversation with another teacher.*
Daniel stood awkwardly near them waiting for his chance to talk. Even when an opening arose, Daniel did not appear confident enough to assertively attract Mr Hunt, instead, he stood with his head held down and shuffled his feet. He looked at the teachers for a little while, and then looked around the room or at his feet. Finally, Mr Hunt turned to Daniel and asked him what he wanted (Observations, 6/8/99).

On yet another occasion, Daniel sat deliberating over a puzzle. He was struggling to resolve the problem to the point where he became visibly stressed, yet he chose not to approach Mr Hunt for help. It was not that asking for help was not an option, as Mr Hunt was helping a lot of the children. Daniel did not seem to be comfortable with approaching Mr Hunt for help as the following illustrates: Daniel was labouring over the problem, "p-t-mends a hole." Daniel sat at his desk with his mouth slightly open staring intently at Mr Hunt who was at his desk helping other children out with the puzzle. After a while, Daniel walked to the other side of the room and got the dictionary. He returned to his desk with it and flicked through the pages. Daniel sat for quite a while turning the pages and then looked around him. He caught sight of Mr Hunt and once again looked intently at him. Daniel then closed his dictionary and whispered something to Michael who sat next to him. David called over to Daniel “shampoo”. Daniel looked at his work, he put his arm over his back and his head down, his face turned bright red. When Daniel learned the answer, his face returned to its normal colour and his shoulders fell (observations, 3/12/99).

Daniel always worked hard to complete his set tasks. His motivation was derived from three sources. Firstly, he wanted to finish his work so he could play with the
Daniel sat solemnly at his desk. Mr Hunt casually walked by him and told him he could go to recess. Daniel looked inquiringly into Mr Hunt's face for a couple of seconds, and then quickly got up and left the room. Mr Hunt had observed Daniel's discomfort and possible remorse for not completing his homework and it is probable he did not see any benefit in punishing Daniel (Observation, 10/9/99).

**Interactions with peers**

All the children in the class accepted Daniel. However, he limited his interactions to only a small number of his peers. How they were selected was not all that clear. Some of the children were small, some were tall, some were very astute, and others were either average or struggling. One similarity ran true with all of them though; they were all boys.

Daniel very confidently and effectively used pro-social strategies to engage his peers in interactions in the classroom. Although Daniel tended to be selective with whom he interacted with, he was not observed using anti-social conduct to dissuade children's attention in the classroom. The following discusses some of the interactions that Daniel tended to avoid. As the examples used here imply, Daniel either did not respond to the children's attempts at interaction or he avoided situations where interaction would follow.

Although Daniel preferred to be noticed for his academic abilities as opposed to being naughty, he did share in some of the delight when one of the class clowns misbehaved. There was one boy, however, whose silly behaviour Daniel concertedly tried not to encourage. His name was Philip, and toward the end of the year, he was made to sit opposite Daniel. The difference that was observed between the class clowns and Philip was
the class clowns every now and then misbehaved for the amusement of the whole class, whereas Philip targeted only Daniel. Daniel could look up from his work and laugh at the class clowns, and then be free to return to his work. Daniel was not as free to casually return to his work with Philip directing his attentions solely toward him. The following excerpt from the observations illustrates how Daniel tried to discourage Philip from interacting with him: Philip did something. Daniel looked up at him with a look of disdain on his face. He then looked back to his work. Mr Hunt handed Daniel a worksheet and Daniel started it right away. Philip started to fool around. He stared hard at Daniel as he tried to make him take notice of him. Daniel looked up at him once, and did not oblige him any more. When Daniel had finished his sheet, he sat on the floor with Tom and started playing with the math games. Philip stared at them and asked, “Why do you kids do all that stuff all the time? You are all strange.” Daniel replied, “We do this because we do our work.” Philip watched them for a little while and said, “I can do that ... I’m smart too”. (Observations, 10/12/99).

Daniel seemed to find it hard to work with other children. In group situations, he would rarely contribute to discussions and when he was paired up with another child, he sometimes grew intolerant of the way that child approached his or her work and he tried to take everything over. When given the option of working with other children or by himself, Daniel nearly always chose to work alone. Within Daniel’s spelling group, for example, all the other children would pair up or form small groups to complete the worksheets. Daniel was not observed joining up with them. On one occasion, he worked studiously on his sheet, only looking up periodically to see how two of the year fours, Nathan and Monica were going on their sheets. When he finished his sheet he walked up to Nathan and
Monica and informed them that he had finished. He then went and showed his work to Mrs Sullivan who was the substitute teacher for the day. When the other two children had finished, all three of them took out a pile of old computer keyboards and circuit pads and started playing with them. Once again, Nathan and Monica worked together, and once again Daniel worked alone (Observations, 27/8/99).

When Daniel did want to engage in interaction with his peers, the strategies that he used to approach them were typically pro-social, such as smiling or he would gently nudge the person he wanted to speak to on the arm with his elbow. In most cases, Daniel would act confidently and enthusiastically when instigating the interactions. For instance, when the children were told to find a partner to play the modified scrabble game, Daniel turned to Tom who sat next to him, smiled and said, “You’re with me”. Tom smiled in response and the two boys went around the room challenging other couples (Observations, 30/7/99). Similarly, on another occasion, when the children were required to play the same game, Daniel looked over to where Tom was sitting and confidently pointed at Tom and then to himself. Tom nodded and Daniel smiled (Observations, 10/9/99).

Daniel was always responsive when his friends initiated interactions with him. He did not need to discourage their attempts at interacting as his friends tended to share similar work ethics to his and therefore, when they did speak to him during a lesson, the interaction was kept brief. On one occasion when the children were required to go outside to practise their assembly item, Daniel’s friend Tom acted a little more mischievous that usual. He picked leaves up off the floor and put them in Daniel’s hair. Initially, Daniel responded in a very subdued manner, brushing the leaves out of his hair and smiling politely at Tom.
When Tom persisted, Daniel's responses became a little more intense as he playfully shook the leaves out of his hair. Finally, Daniel reciprocated by putting some leaves in Tom's hair and, at doing this, he let out an audible laugh (Observations, 3/12/99).

**Friendships**

Daniel stated that he thought it is “very important to have friends”. They are important, he continued, “because otherwise I’d get bored all the time and because they help me out when I’m in trouble” (interview #5, 17/12/99). Although he acknowledged he had formed a number of good friendships within his class and school, he wished he were Tom “because he has lots of great friends” (interview #5, 17/12/99).

In actual fact, Daniel shared exactly the same friendships as Tom. However, through the observations it came clear that Daniel was not confident in the friendships he had formed. On one occasion, for example, he was observed playing dinky cars with Tom and two other of their friends outside at morning recess. When the boys began to push their cars further away from Daniel, although Daniel did not move in closer to them, he began to look up periodically to monitor the whereabouts of his friends. It looked as though Daniel was concerned his friends would leave him.

Within the classroom, Daniel mainly interacted with Tom. Tom was able to tolerate Daniel being intolerant of the way other people worked. They would often sit together after having completed their work and play with the math games. Although the two boys did not work on anything together, Daniel sometimes became frustrated watching Tom trying to solve his cube puzzle. On a number of occasions, Daniel informed Tom he would help him
solve the puzzle and tried to take it off him. Tom responded by holding the puzzle out of Daniel’s reach and he told him he could do it by himself.

To summarise, Daniel valued friendship for the companionship and collegiality it offered. Although Daniel had formed a number of friendships within his classroom, he felt unconfident in regards to the quality and stability of each friendship. Consequently he perceived his friend Tom as having more friendships than him, even though both boys associated with the same group of children.

**Social Competence**

Daniel was a very composed child. Although at times his emotions did surface, as they did in the example where Daniel did not complete his homework, Daniel consciously exerted a lot of effort into regulating them. His knowledge of our society’s social norms informed him that it would not be in his benefit to release his emotions. Daniel’s consciousness of what society expected of him also prohibited him from throwing himself into the game of putting leaves in your friend’s hair, that Tom initiated when they were out practising for their assembly item. Daniel was aware that the children were there to work, and that Mr Hunt would not approve of this frivolity. However, the short yet loud laugh Daniel released, after finally putting leaves in Tom’s hair, possessed an air of emancipation – a thrill of rebellion. Whereas for Tom it had been mere child’s play, for Daniel it was a release from his exhaustive tendency to over regulate his emotions and behaviour.

As the above indicates, Daniel was very aware of societal expectations and he knew he had to act in a certain way in order to comply with them. However, the rigidity that
Daniel abided by these rules exuded a sense of insecurity. This insecurity ran through with his friendships as well. Daniel showed he was concerned his friends would abandon him when they were outside playing with their cars. In addition, he said he wanted to be Tom because Tom has lots of great friends – the same friends Daniel had. As a result of his insecurity, Daniel’s ability to participate in rewarding interactions was restricted, impeding the optimal development of his social competence.

Summary

Daniel appeared to be generally at ease within the classroom. He was aware that his teacher Mr Hunt thought that he was a good student, and worked to maintain Mr Hunt’s perception. It was only when the “good student” label was under threat did Daniel become anxious and/or upset.

Daniel had established a large set of friends at school. He did not, however, feel particularly close with any of them. Consequently, he wished he was Tom who Daniel felt did feel close to others. Nonetheless, Daniel felt he had established a good relationship with his teacher and he could approach his teacher with any of his problems.
**Jason**

Jason had changed dramatically from the first day of observations to the last. On the first day he was observed sitting with an emotionless expression, his eyes wide open, and his mouth agape. Throughout the course of the morning, he did not speak to any of the children and he would take every opportunity to sit at Mrs Bradley’s feet. Jason was unresponsive, isolated socially and emotionally from his peers and he appeared confused.

When Jason was seated at his desk, he would work studiously and effectively. He appeared to accomplish the tasks that were set for him with relative ease. However, he did not credit himself for his industrious behaviours, possibly because the people he deemed significant did not appear to give him the positive feedback that would have reaffirmed his efforts. He began to seek the attention and reinforcement from his peers.

After a few months, Jason had learned that if he acted silly, the two boys who he wanted to be his friends became more attracted to him. The more attention he received from these boys, the less he wanted to be around Mrs Bradley. No longer did he sit at her feet, or try to steal a hug from her, instead, he swapped mischievous smiles with his friends and spoke freely to the children around him. In comparison with the earlier months, Jason had almost completely changed his behaviour.

**Daniel**

Although Daniel was obviously liked by the other children in his class, he very rarely sought their attention or their companionship. He had a friend named Tom in his classroom who partnered Daniel every time the children were required to do partner work.
Although Daniel preferred to work alone, he was often motivated by the idea that he could compete with his peers, whether there was a competition or not.

Daniel felt he had a good relationship with his teacher, Mr Hunt. However, he appeared to be hesitant in approaching Mr Hunt and he would rarely ask for his help. Daniel just seemed to like that Mr Hunt thought he was clever, and the “perfect student”. In addition, Mr Hunt spent a lot of time making problematic math puzzles for the children to do. Daniel loved these puzzles and was greatly impressed that not only had Mr Hunt made them, but he could also do them better than anyone else.

Although all four children differed in many ways, there were some similarities between them. Grace and Daniel’s parents had separated for the longest time periods; four and three and a half years respectively. Even though Grace appeared to be the most well adjusted out of the four children, both she and Daniel were socially and emotionally coping better at school than Jason and Brandon. Both Grace and Daniel were generally more responsive to social stimuli, and they were also generally happier within the classroom. Although neither child had or perceived they had established a large supportive social network within the classroom, they both felt they had established trusting relationships with their respective teachers. In addition, both children had established effective esteem supports, which was constructed from the sense of self-worth they gained through their industrious behaviours.

Brandon and Jason’s situation was similar in that both their parents had been separated for approximately one year. It was noted in the early months of observations that
both boys had formed inadequate social relationships within the classroom. Consequently, neither child was socially and emotionally coping well. This was made evident through their non-responsiveness and lack of emotional expression in the classroom. Brandon and Jason had established limited social networks in the classroom and they both felt they did not have a trusting relationship with their respective teachers. Although Jason was academically inclined, he tended not to use his academic achievements to improve his esteem supports. Brandon, on the other hand, did not apply himself to his work until later in the year, and as a result he had a limited sense of industry and competency.

The following is a discussion on the four participants' social and emotional behaviour at school in relation to the extent they developed social, esteem and informational support structures as a means of coping with stressors as they went about their day-to-day school activities. Dubow and Tisak (1989) described these support systems as crucial in dealing positively with life stressors. As all four children had experienced the major stress of parental separation, this framework is useful in exploring the extent to which each child was coping at school.

**Social Support**

Social support refers to the amount of support one feels he or she receives from those people he or she values. It is possible for a child to appear socially supported because other children are constantly around him or her, however, if that child does not feel close to, or does not value those children, then he or she will gain little to no support from the relationships. The following section discusses the social support that was offered to each of the participants.
If Brandon’s limited social network and consequent support in the library session mirrored the social networks he had established in all his classes at school, then it can be understood why Brandon remained friends with Reece, the boy who continually bullied him. Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren and Soderman (1993) state that children within the four to nine age bracket desire friendship so much that they prefer to play with an uncongenial companion than with no-one at all (p.383). In Brandon’s case, his need for social support was so strong, and his self-esteem was so low, that he clung to the relationship he had made with Reece.

This relationship, however, did not offer Brandon support. In fact, it was possible Reece’s friendship played an instrumental role in retarding Brandon’s social and emotional development and, at the same time, it diminished opportunities for Brandon to participate in rewarding interactions elsewhere. Once again Brandon was not in a situation that facilitated the development of his positive social skills, nor did it act to enhance his social knowledge and understanding.

**Grace**

The interactions Grace initiated tended to remain on a superficial level, as they were generally one-sided. Reciprocity is an important quality of friendship, and, as Grace’s interactions tended to omit this quality, her relationships tended to be more indicative of superficial interactions between acquaintances rather than deep relationships. It could be surmised that because Grace’s interactions did not appear to progress beyond this level that she often found herself friendless outside in the playground.
However, Grace found companionship in the playground with a girl she did not like. She would rather play with her than to play alone. This preference emphasized Grace's apparent predilection for nonreciprocal interactions, or more plainly, it emphasized Grace's desire to play with a companion who would allow her to dominate the games and possibly even the interactions.

Grace's inability to consider other children's perspectives during everyday classroom interactions had repercussions on the development of her social knowledge, understanding, skills and ultimately her social support. Perry and Bussey (1984) state that the characteristic lively and positive exchanges found between friends promote social skills more so than the interactions made between acquaintances. Consequently, the interactions Grace participated in were not giving her the opportunity to practise and develop her social skills. In addition, the more Grace's opportunity in role-taking diminished, the less likely she was to develop altruistically, hence impeding her ability to form close friendships.

Due to Grace's abundance of confidence and her theatrical ways in the classroom, it was a surprise to learn that she did not have friends in the playground. It could have been possible that Grace worked hard to boost her esteem support within the classroom to counteract the lack of social support she had established for herself in the playground. Nonetheless, her teachers were unaware of her inability to socialize outside of the classroom, and as they were unaware, they were not in a position to help her.

Jason

On the first day of observing Jason, he appeared timid, his face lacked expression,
he seemed to be withdrawn and he constantly sought the proximity of his teacher, Mrs Bradley. On the last day I observed Jason, he exchanged mischievous smiles with his classmate from across the room, his face expressed a renewed interest in his surroundings as his eyes eagerly surveyed the room and he sat independently in his reading group.

The social behaviours exhibited by Jason changed dramatically from the first day of observations to the last. Jason's transformation was the most extreme out of the four case studies; yet, change was evident in each child's behaviour. As noted previously, in the early months Jason appeared withdrawn and he constantly sought the proximity of Mrs Bradley. Jason rarely initiated conversations with her or was verbally responsive during mat sessions; he seemed to be comforted merely by being in her presence. Black and Puckett (1996) identified withdrawal and seeking the proximity of a trusted friend as coping strategies some children may acquire to help them come to terms with negative emotional events. Black and Puckett explain that these are self-comforting strategies children employ to modulate their expressions of emotions, and are intended to reduce the intensity and frequency of the emotions. Every Tuesday for the first three months, Jason relied heavily on these strategies. On the day of our first interview (31/8/99), Jason found himself in a threatening environment and let down his self-comforting strategies. Consequently out flowed his emotions in all their unrestrained intensity.

Jason also sought the proximity of Mrs Bradley in an effort to build social supports within his classroom context. His previous two teachers, Mrs White and Mrs Bouché, had nursed the hurt Jason felt emotionally and as such were more nurturing and supported him in modulating his emotions. Jason had initially tried to elicit the same kind of support from
Mrs Bradley. Howe (1999) recommends that early childhood teachers pay particular attention to how children are coping. Mrs Bradley was aware of how Jason was coping and she responded in a way which she was sure would help him. Mrs Bradley wanted Jason to grow in independence and therefore she was less prepared to give him the emotional support he sought.

The strategies Jason used to gain peer interaction in the first few months of observations were largely unsuccessful and indicated he was not aware of positive strategies for initiating interactions. As a result, Jason did not successfully attain satisfying interactions. In these early stages, however, Jason appeared to want attention from Mrs Bradley much more than from his peers.

A significant change in Jason's behaviour was perceived when he began to realize he was not going to recreate the relationships he enjoyed with Mrs White and Mrs Bouché with Mrs Bradley. Consequently, Jason began to concentrate on gaining social support from his peers, in particular, Jordan and Ben. Jason had discovered that acting out won the attention and friendship of these two boys, and accordingly he began to misbehave within the classroom. Jason knew his behaviour was inappropriate for the classroom and that Mrs Bradley did not approve, but he continued to act this way because it awarded him the attention and consequent friendships from his peers and ultimately the social supports he felt he needed.

Jason's classroom environment had been quite unsettling as he had to acquaint himself with three different teachers throughout the course of the year. According to
Kurdek (1981), in addition to social supports, the stability of the environment affects how quickly children recover from the initial "shock" of separation or divorce (cited in Kaplan, 1991, p.501). It could be reasoned then, that even though the school tends to act as a major socializing institution that may play a role in offsetting some of the negative effects of family separation, the changeover of teachers could have impeded Jason's social and emotional recovery in the classroom.

**Daniel**

Although Daniel commented on his close relationship with his teacher, this was not evident throughout the period of observations. What was observed, however, was that Mr Hunt valued the problematic math activities that Daniel enjoyed doing. This could possibly have resulted in Mr Hunt and Daniel being united in a shared interest. Problematic math activities appeared to offer Daniel an opportunity to experience success in constructive and challenging ways, fostering his sense of competency, self-worth, and industry. Furthermore, these activities were performed in a context where Daniel could remain in the company of other children without having to coordinate his behaviour with theirs.

Although Daniel had formed many friendships within his classroom, he preferred not to be a "team player". This did not mean he could not cooperate or coordinate his behaviours with his peers, it simply means he appeared to prefer not to. Like Grace, Daniel had appeared more proficient at building on his esteem support than he did his social support. As a consequence of this, Daniel did not appear certain of the quality of his friendships. Daniel had said in interview that he wanted to be Tom because Tom had many great friends. In reality, Daniel also shared these friendships. It is probable that Daniel did
not feel deeply attached to, nor did he engage in intimate reciprocal give and take with his friends (Katz & McClellan, 1997) and consequently, even though he appeared to be sociable and popular, he was in reality alone. Barrera (1986) explains that in situations like Daniel’s, the social support is not supportive, as the individual does not perceive he or she has support.

It was evident that Mr Hunt and the substitute teacher Mrs Sullivan were not aware of Daniel’s social and emotional loneliness, as both teachers had described him as socially competent and the “perfect student”. Probably as a consequence of their beliefs, both teachers had assumed that the separation of Daniel’s parents had not affected Daniel. As a result, they were less likely to empathise with Daniel’s situation and respond appropriately to his needs.

Esteem support

Children are said to have esteem support when they feel positively about themselves. In particular, they perceive themselves to have worth, competence and control. When the children feel they have a sense of worth, they perceive others value them. When they have competence, they feel they can set goals and accomplish them, and when they have control they feel they can influence outcomes and events. Children, who have positive self-estees, are in fact supported by their esteems when faced with stress, and consequently, they tend to cope more positively. Self-esteem is gained through a number of ways, one way in particular is through industrious behaviours. The following discusses the participant’s esteem support that was evident in their individual contexts.
Brandon

Mrs McCormack was aware of Brandon’s home situation and she did attribute some of Brandon’s unresponsive behaviour toward it, but as she was not Brandon’s class teacher she felt powerless to help him. However, she did unintentionally introduce Brandon to an effective strategy of initiating positive interactions. When Mrs McCormack complimented Brandon’s work, she alerted him to how being industrious could award him with positive and satisfying interactions. After the taste of a rewarding interaction, Brandon worked toward acquiring more by concentrating harder on his work and showing his work to Mrs McCormack so that she would take notice of the effort he had taken. Further positive interactions in turn facilitated Brandon’s developing sense of competence, as he grew to expect positive reactions from his teacher in response to his work (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993; Black & Puckett, 1996).

Brandon’s growing sense of competency spilled over into his skills for initiating interactions. Even though his repertoire remained limited to using his work when initiating interactions, the success he experienced offered him a crucial source of social information (Katz & McClellan, 1997, p.17). Brandon’s perceptions of his own ability to successfully initiate interactions changed dramatically from his earlier apathetic attempts. He began to more confidently approach his peers, and they reinforced his new strategies with positive responses.

Brandon no longer appeared aimless. Instead, he appeared to set a goal of working hard so that he would receive more praise from Mrs McCormack. As a result, Brandon became more responsive in social situations as he eagerly listened to Mrs McCormack’s
instructions and he studiously set about completing his work. Brandon’s once expressionless face now expressed happiness, curiosity and eagerness.

Grace

From the first day of observations Grace demonstrated industrious behaviours that consequently attributed to her sense of competence and self-worth (Black & Puckett, 1996). She always, for example, put a lot of effort into her work and her industriousness was fostered by the praise her work won from other children and her teacher/s. In addition to developing her self-worth and sense of competence, Grace’s aptitude to her work, or sense of industry, also offered her an effective strategy for initiating interactions with her peers. In addition, other children approached Grace for her help with their work, which further empowered Grace’s esteem support.

Perry and Bussey (1984) state that children aged between seven and eight (in the industry versus inferiority stage) tend to compare their performances with one another as a means of determining their own competencies. Kaplan (1991) warns that these children take comparisons seriously and that children who come a clear second through comparisons might develop a sense of inferiority. Whereas Grace gladly embarked on comparing her abilities with those of her peers, she demonstrated she was adversely affected by comparisons made on her work by others.

Jason

In addition to establishing social supports, in the early months of observations, Jason also tried to build his esteem support in an effort to gain a sense of belonging in the
classroom. Jason tried to gain a sense of competency by working toward mastering areas of interest, such as his study of sharks and improving his soccer skills. In other words, Jason tried to gain a sense of competency by being industrious and applying himself more vigorously to his schoolwork. He tended to seek acknowledgement for his competencies from his father by sharing his interest in the topic of sharks.

What was particularly evident was that Jason’s attempts at being industrious went relatively unrecognized by the people he deemed significant. Therefore, Jason’s academic abilities and his ability to play soccer well did not empower his esteem supports. In point of fact, Jason placed so little value on his industriousness that he did not even use it as a strategy to initiate positive interactions with either his teacher or his peers. Jason’s sense of self-worth was so low that he remained trapped within his withdrawn state, not appearing to know how to break out.

**Daniel**

Perry and Bussey (1984) state that to some degree, children’s self-concepts are reflections of the way they are viewed by others (p.146). In light of this perception, it can be considered that Daniel constructed a conception of himself based on the positive comments and responses made by his teachers and peers about his academic abilities and his “perfect” manners within the classroom.

Daniel’s behaviour appeared to be governed by his desire to maintain this image within the classroom. His tendency to over-modulate his emotions and behaviour, for example, may have been to fit in with this perceived image. His apparent preference for
solitary or parallel activity may have been derived from his desire to gain attention through his individual achievements. Daniel's ability to ignore the class clowns was born out of his desire to complete his work and comply with the classroom rules (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren & Soderman, 1993). His sense of competency was gained through his industriousness, and like Grace, Daniel used his esteem support in an effort to gain a sense of mastery over his stressors. In effect, Daniel's schoolwork increased in value, as it now constituted the fibre with which his esteem was woven.

When taking into consideration the value Daniel placed on his work, his intense reaction to not completing his homework is more understandable. Mr Hunt watched as Daniel's face turned red and Daniel beat his eye with his fist. Although Mr Hunt did not comment on Daniel's reaction, he did respond to it by not punishing Daniel for not completing his homework.

**Informational support**

Informational support refers to the amount and quality of support one receives in coming to an understanding about a stressor. Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren and Soderman (1993) state that along with factors such as personality characteristics, feelings of worth, and learned coping skills, the child's perception of how threatening a stressor is determines how a child is affected under pressure. Often, when a stressor is understood, then it can be seen in perspective, hence reducing its perceived threat and importance. Throughout the course of a child's day-to-day activities, numerous forms of stressors may be encountered. For example, tests, making new friends, conflicts, disagreements, negotiating, power struggles to name a few. More significantly, the stressor that unified the four participants
when Grace acted so insensitively toward her peers that she would have benefited from investigations into why she acted the way she did, and how she could modulate her behaviour with her peers in the future. Support in helping Grace understand her behaviour and its effects on others would have helped her understand her circumstances to a greater degree. On the whole, however, Grace appeared to be self assured and confident and this could have been due to the length of time since her parent’s separation and undoubtedly to her home environment.

During the early stages of observations, Jason appeared extremely nervous, he frequently retreated from reality, he lacked enthusiasm and he experienced social withdrawal, all of which are classic symptoms of childhood stress. Jason’s attempts at maintaining proximity with Mrs Bradley seemed to stem from his desire to engage in self-comforting strategies in a way of easing the stress he felt. Mrs Bradley recognized that Jason was vulnerable due to the situation at home. She felt the best way of dealing with Jason was to teach him to be self-sufficient and independent. Mrs Bradley did this by encouraging him to sit with other children and not near her all the time, and she discouraged him from attempting to hug her. However, Jason simply diverted his proximity seeking behaviour from Mrs Bradley to his peers, in particular Ben and Jordan. As Jason began to model himself on these boys instead of Mrs Bradley, his behaviour became increasingly more inappropriate within the classroom.

Even though Jason became more extroverted within the classroom as a result of the friendships he had made with Ben and Jordan, he was still engaging in inappropriate behaviour (no closer to understanding his stress). Jason would have benefited from adult
teachers, although the situation did not arise where she needed to talk to them about her problems. Daniel also said he felt he could approach Mr Hunt with his problems. However, the evidence suggests otherwise as Daniel was observed looking uncomfortable approaching Mr Hunt in regard to an everyday matter. In addition, Daniel would not ask Mr Hunt for help in his work, maybe as another means of protecting the “perfect student” image that he knew Mr Hunt had of him.

When I first met Brandon and Jason, neither of them had well-established support systems. They had not formed a social network within their classroom that they felt they could rely on, and it became evident over the period of observations that they did not have a lot of understanding about their circumstances. Brandon did not apply himself to his tasks and did not work toward gaining a sense of industry or competence. In addition, out of all four participants, he seemed to suffer most from low self-esteem. Jason, on the other hand, did apply himself to his work, but as his efforts went largely unnoticed by those he felt were significant to him, he did not attach a great deal of value to his industriousness. Accordingly, he was not offered a great deal of support which could act to enhance his self-esteem.

Neither Brandon nor Jason felt they could talk to their respective teachers about any of the personal problems they might have had. Brandon said that he would not talk to his teacher Mrs Ball because he did not feel comfortable with her, and he would not talk to Mrs McCormack because he did not know her very well. Jason felt uneasy about talking about his problems with Mrs Bradley and stated that he was more likely to go to a friend with his problems.
It would appear from the data collected, that how well the children cope socially and emotionally following the permanent separation of their parents is determined by the quality of their support systems and the relationship they have developed with their peers and teachers. Data shows that social and esteem supports are critical in ensuring children continue to cope with classroom situations in the aftermath of events what can have devastating short and long term effects on development and learning. Just as important, however, is the need to ensure children suffering from the stress of parental separation are provided with sufficient informational support to help them understand both the stressor itself and how to cope with it.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

Many studies (DiSibio, 1981; Ochiltree, 1993; Howe 1999) recognise that separation and divorce cause children stress. Stress in young children can manifest itself in many ways, some of these ways include: psychosomatic illnesses, such as stomach aches and ear aches; they may have bags under their eyes; they may have a lessened ability to attend to relevant stimuli; they may be indecisive; they may act out, such as acting impulsively and/or they may withdraw. If these symptoms of stress are ignored, they have the potential of negatively influencing children's development and progress including their social and emotional development.

As mentioned in previous chapters, children need to be able to employ strategies that will help them cope with the effects of stress. These strategies are more likely to develop if children receive social, esteem and informational supports. This study found that the effectiveness of the coping strategies used by the four participants appeared to be strongly related to the quality of their social, esteem and informational supports and more particularly to whether they perceived these support systems to be valuable or capable of helping them.

In this study, factors which appeared to influence the presence and quality of coping strategies included; the children's sense of industry, the length of time that had passed after
the parents had permanently separated, the child’s level of self-esteem, and most importantly the quality of interactions with peers and teachers. In particular, this study has found that the teacher plays an integral and important part in helping children cope socially and emotionally with the stress they experience resulting from the permanent separation of their parents. Concluding comments will be made in relation to these factors and how they influenced children’s social and emotional development.

Grace and Daniel’s parents had been separated for four and three and a half years respectively. Given that Grace and Daniel were generally better able to recognize, interpret and respond to social situations, it can be assumed that the length of time that had passed since their parents separation had an effect on the establishment of support systems that helped them master stressors. Both Grace and Daniel appeared to gain mastery over their stressors through their developing self-esteem that was formed primarily from their sense of industry. Grace could not rely on her peers for support, as she had not established effective social embeddedness at school (Tisak & Dubow, 1989). Tisak and Dubow described social embeddedness as the quality and identity of the individuals in one’s social network. Grace appeared not to confide in her peers to any great extent, nor did she form close connections with them. Rather, her relationships existed on a very superficial level, which was indicative of the low status she placed on her friendships with peers. Daniel also appeared not to rely on his relationships with his peers because he did not believe he had formed close, trusting relationships with his peers.

Both Brandon and Jason were not coping socially or emotionally well in the classroom at the beginning of the observations. Neither of them had established a close
relationship with their respective teachers, nor had they established positive relationships with their peers. In addition, neither Brandon nor Jason thought highly of their work efforts or abilities and there was evidence that both had poor self-esteem. Brandon’s and Jason’s lack of social and esteem supports could be attributed to the fact that each of their parents had been separated for only approximately one year and both children were still struggling to come to terms with this circumstance. By the end of the observations, however, both Brandon and Jason had become more responsive and generally happier in the classroom. By this time, their parents had separated for nearly two years, and this could have been a factor impacting on their progress, supporting research conducted by Hetherington, Camara & Featherman, (1983); Briggs and Potter (1997) and Berk (2000). This research reports that at around two years the effect of parental divorce on children may begin to diminish.

Level of self-esteem seemed to be an important factor in the success of coping strategies displayed by the four participants. From the outset, Grace and Daniel displayed high self-esteem, and it is not surprising that they were coping better in the classroom in comparison to Brandon and Jason. Over the period of the study, this did not change. However, significant changes were observed in Brandon and Jason’s level of self-esteem due to their gradual acquisition of coping strategies. This could have been due to a number of reasons. In Brandon’s case it appeared that Mrs McCormack’s attention to his work efforts was a contributing factor, while in Jason’s case, his acceptance into his peer’s social group enabled him to feel supported within the classroom.

All four children had established different types and qualities of relationships within their classrooms. It appeared that Grace and Daniel’s social network in their respective
classrooms was set. That is, the people they associated with during early observations were the same people I observed them associating with on the last day of observations. Grace seemed to feel more comfortable with adults (possibly resulting from her being an only child) and - consequently, she had difficulty forming friendships with children of her own age. Daniel, on the other hand, had formed a number of friendships within his classroom, but he did not think he was close to any of them. Both Grace and Daniel, however, commented they had established trusting relationships with their teachers. Although Brandon and Jason had formed positive relationships with their peers, they appeared not to have formed close relationships with their respective teachers. It could be argued that although it is important for young children to form positive relationships with their peers, it is essential for children to also form close relationships with their teachers. It is through sound interpersonal relationships between pupils and teachers that a trusting, safe psychological as well as physical environment can be established.

At various stages throughout the study, it was evident that each of the four participants experienced difficulties in coping socially and emotionally in certain situations. Data analysis also indicated that the children were neither provided with assistance to understand their stressors, nor were shown strategies that would enable them to deal with stress. This type of intervention is referred to as informational support. Informational support is possibly the key to helping children develop as socially and emotionally competent individuals particularly in times of stress and upheaval. It may only be through gaining knowledge of the stressors and knowledge of coping strategies that children will develop resiliency.
Teacher's Role

Resiliency is the term that is used to describe a set of qualities that foster a process of successful adaptation and transformation despite risk and adversity. Some of these qualities that have been identified are: social competence, which includes the ability to establish positive relationships; problem solving skills that involve being able to resourcefully seek help from others; autonomy, which is the ability to maintain one’s sense of identity and a sense of purpose (Benard, 1995).

Is it the teacher’s role to promote resiliency in the school? Bonnie Benard (1995) claims that it is. She maintains that through the focus on three critical factors of resilience, which are “caring relationships”, “high expectations” and “opportunities for participation”, schools have the “power to serve as a protective shield for all students and a beacon of light for youth from troubled homes” (p. 3). To add credence to Benard’s claim, Werner and Smith’s (1989) study of forty years, found that among the most frequently encountered positive role models in the lives of resilient children, other than family, was a favourite teacher who not only taught academic skills, but also acted as a confidant and positive model for personal identification.

Rodd (1999) identifies emotional literacy as the basis of emotional resilience. Not unlike the resilience definition provided earlier, emotional resiliency refers to an individual’s ability to take the knocks but still keep going. Steiner (1997) claims that through emotional literacy individuals gain personal power. This power is derived from satisfying personal relationships and productive work, just as individuals gain power when they draw upon their social and esteem supports (Dubow & Tisak, 1989). Those who
efficacy and personal responsibility. Consequently, environmental factors are important in fostering children's social and emotional development, enabling them to develop appropriate social and cultural behaviour.

Although there has been some research (Taylor, 1999, cited in Rodd 1999) on how to help children to thrive emotionally, it would appear that further research into effective intervention strategies for children experiencing the separation of parents would benefit teachers when faced with this kind of situation. Furthermore, research on the impact of teacher support on childhood stress would illuminate the importance of teacher intervention.

**Summary**

What emerged throughout this study is that this topic is an extremely sensitive one and therefore, observations and interviews had to be treated with extreme caution and sensitivity by the researcher. In addition, the study was not able to investigate the children's social and emotional state before the separation of their parents or if the children's school situation was a contributing stressor impacting on the children's adjustment to school.

What was particularly evident from the findings was that the development of only one or two of the three support systems was insufficient. Children need to develop each of the three support systems, namely, social, esteem and informational, in order to cope effectively when confronted with stressful and traumatic situations in their lives. If a child is demonstrating symptoms of stress in a classroom situation, then it is ultimately the
References


Katoomba: Social Science Press.


APPENDICES
Dear Parents,

My name is Gillian Kirk, and I am currently studying for my Bachelor of Education with Honours through Edith Cowan University. The nature of my study involves the social and emotional adjustment of young children after the permanent separation of their parents.

Did you know that there are approximately one million children in Australia who have experienced the permanent separation of their parents? One would think, seeing as there are so many children in the same position, that society has the know-how to help them adjust. However, they don't. Although the amount of research in this field is growing, we still need more information to be able to effectively help these children.

As a major component of my research, I would like to talk to young children who have experienced the permanent separation of their parents in the last twelve months, and make observations of them in the classroom setting. I will also be interviewing the children's teachers, asking them how they perceive the children are coping.

The talk with the children will be informal, and all observations made will not be obviously directed at one particular child. The confidentiality of the child will be guarded at all times, and for this reason, their names and the name of their school will remain anonymous.

Please consider this carefully as a lot of children will benefit from this research. If you would like your child to participate in this study, please contact me on 9250 8803 for more detailed information.

Yours sincerely,

Gillian Kirk.
## APPENDIX 2

### Itinerary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Record</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27 July 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31 August 1999</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6 September 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14 September 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Two Week School</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Holidays</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>Four Week Practicum</strong></td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Two Week School</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Holidays</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30 November</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27 July 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30 July 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10 September 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14 September 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17 September 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27 September 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Two Week School</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Holidays</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Four Week Practicum</strong></td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30 November 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3 December 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6 December 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10 December 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14 December 1999</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28 July 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 September 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6 September 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Two Week School</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Holidays</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Four Week Practicum</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1 December 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8 December 1999</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30 July 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27 August 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3 September 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10 September 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17 September 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Two Week School</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Holidays</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Four Week Practicum</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3 December 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10 December 1999</td>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17 December 1999</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 3

Sample from field notes entry

Daniel
3 December 1999

8:58 a.m.
Daniel comes into the classroom a little later than the other children. He puts away a bat and a ball and goes to collect his chair. The children are told to line up outside as they are going to the undercover area to practice their assembly item. They are told to do it again. Daniel sits on his chair and rubs his face. The children are told to go outside again. Daniel walks outside, his face remains devoid of any sign of emotion.

9:05 a.m.
Daniel chats to the boy on his left briefly. The line to Daniel’s left edges forward. Daniel remains with three other boys. Daniel sits with his head in his hand. The children are told to stand up. Daniel is asked to go and stand up behind the truck prop. Daniel stands at the back on the end. He is quiet until two boys walk past him. Daniel looks at them and then says something to them whilst pointing in the opposite direction. The boys walk in the direction that Daniel pointed to.

9:07 a.m.
Daniel stands quietly rubbing his face with his hand.

9:08 a.m.
The line in front of Daniel moves. A girl stands in front of Daniel. Daniel puts his hand on top of his head comparing his height with hers. The boy next to him joins in and indicates to Daniel to stand more to his left. Daniel smiles and checks his height with the other girl in front. He then moves back to where he was initially.