



Psychosocial Challenges Facing Primary School Children from Divorced Families in Kihesa Ward, Iringa Municipality

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ABSTRACT

Parental divorce is an increasingly common feature of family life in Tanzania, yet its psychosocial consequences for primary school children remain under researched at the community level. This study examined the psychosocial challenges facing primary school children from divorced families in Kihesa Ward, Iringa Municipality. A qualitative approach, using a phenomenological design was adopted, drawing on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with thirty purposively selected participants, comprising twenty children, five teachers and five parents or guardians. Data were analysed thematically. Findings showed that children experienced sustained emotional distress, diminished self-esteem, anxiety about the future, behavioural change and declining academic performance. Socially, children faced peer rejection, stigmatisation, strained family relationships, caregiver-based violence in some households and deprivation of basic material needs. The study concludes that parental divorce affects children across emotional and social domains simultaneously and that families, schools and communities need to recognise and respond to these interconnected challenges through strengthened guidance and counselling services, teacher training in psychosocial recognition and community-level efforts to reduce the stigma directed at children from divorced families.

Keywords: Parental divorce; psychosocial challenges; primary school children; Tanzania

1. INTRODUCTION

The family is the primary social institution through which children acquire emotional security, values and social competence. A stable family environment provides the caregiving foundation on which healthy psychosocial development depends, whereas disruptions such as parental divorce weaken the emotional and social stability that children rely on (Berk, 2021). Globally, divorce has become an increasingly common experience for children. International bodies report that a substantial proportion of children worldwide experience parental separation before adulthood (UNICEF, 2020; World Health Organization, 2021) and meta-analytic evidence indicates that children of divorce tend, on average, to show higher rates of emotional instability, reduced academic motivation and peer relationship difficulties relative to children from intact families, although effect sizes vary considerably across studies and family circumstances (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Family structures across Sub-Saharan Africa are undergoing similar change. Urbanisation, economic pressure and the weakening of extended-family support systems have contributed to gradually rising divorce rates (African Union, 2021), exposing children to sadness, aggression, low self-worth and social stigma, often compounded by the economic hardship that follows marital dissolution. In Tanzania, national data indicate a steady increase in the proportion of divorced or separated adults over the past decade (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024) and increasing number of divorce cases in Iringa Municipality highlights the emerging psychosocial challenges affecting children in this urban context. Court records indicate that 156 divorce cases were documented between 2022 and mid-2023, notably higher than the 106 cases recorded in the surrounding rural district of Iringa Rural over the same period (Resident Magistrate, 2023). Within this municipality, Kihesa Ward is the most populous urban ward and encompasses a wide range of post-divorce household arrangements, making it a relevant setting in which to examine children's lived experiences of family dissolution.

Existing research on divorce and child adjustment originates predominantly from North American, European and Asian contexts and has tended to prioritise adolescents over younger children (Amato & Keith, 1991; Cohen et al., 2017). Consequently, comparatively little is known about how the psychological and social consequences of divorce manifest among primary school-aged children in African and specifically Tanzanian, community settings. A municipal-level study in Iringa (Malema et al., 2023) identified emotional distress and school-adjustment difficulties among affected children but did not examine ward-level variation in how these psychological and social challenges manifest. This gap limits the extent to which locally grounded, evidence-based guidance and counselling services can be designed for schools in high-divorce-rate communities.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Attachment Theory and Social Learning Theory. Attachment Theory, developed by Bowlby (1969) and later expanded by Ainsworth (1978), posits that children form emotional bonds with primary caregivers to obtain security, protection and emotional support and that these attachment relationships serve as the foundation for emotional regulation, social competence and psychological well-being. Disruptions in caregiving relationships, such as those caused by divorce, may result in insecure attachment patterns associated with anxiety, emotional distress, behavioural difficulties and poor social adjustment; children who experience inconsistent care, parental conflict or separation may develop negative expectations about relationships, leading to emotional insecurity and difficulties in social interaction.

Social Learning Theory, developed by Bandura (1977), explains that children learn behaviours, attitudes, emotional responses and social skills through observing and imitating others within their environment, including parents, siblings, teachers and peers. Divorce often exposes children to parental conflict, hostility, inconsistent discipline or reduced parental supervision and children may observe and internalise the behavioural patterns modelled by parents or other family members. Together, the two theories provide a framework for understanding both the emotional and relational consequences of parental divorce and the behavioural and social responses that children develop through observation and interaction with significant others.

This study therefore examined the psychosocial challenges facing primary school children from divorced families in Kiheisa Ward, Iringa Municipality, guided by two specific objectives: to examine the psychological challenges facing these children and to describe the social challenges they face.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the psychosocial challenges facing primary school children from divorced families. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to explore complex social and psychological phenomena through rich, detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences, capturing emotions, perceptions and meanings that could not be adequately captured through numerical measurement alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2 Research Design

The study adopted a phenomenological research design, appropriate for research that seeks to understand the subjective meanings individuals attach to significant personal experiences. The design enabled the researcher to access the emotional, behavioural and social dimensions of children's experiences of parental divorce without imposing predetermined categories of interpretation and it supported triangulation of the perspectives of children, teachers and parents or guardians (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.3 Area of the Study

The study was conducted in Kiheisa Ward, Iringa Municipality, Tanzania. Administrative records from the Iringa Magistrate Court indicated that 156 divorce cases were reported between 2022 and 2023, rising to 164 cases between 2024 and 2025 (Iringa Magistrate Court, 2025), reflecting a continuing upward trend in parental divorce in the municipality. Kiheisa Ward is the most populous urban ward in Iringa Municipality, with 22,276 residents recorded in the 2022 national census (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023) and its population encompasses diverse family structures, including nuclear, single-parent and post-divorce household arrangements. Data were collected during May 2026 across four selected primary schools and three streets within the ward.

3.4 Population and Sample Size

The target population comprised primary school children from divorced families, together with teachers and parents or guardians of affected children. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct, lived involvement in the phenomena under investigation. Children were eligible if they were enrolled in a selected primary school in Kiheisa Ward and resided in a household in which parental divorce had occurred. Teachers were eligible if they were currently employed at one of the selected schools and had experience teaching or observing children from divorced families. Parents or guardians were eligible if they had guardianship of a primary school child from a divorced family.

A total of thirty participants took part in the study: twenty primary school children aged between 9 and 15 years, five teachers with between 3 and 15 years of teaching experience and five parents or guardians aged between 25 and 40 years. Sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, the point at which further data collection ceased to generate new themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which was reached across the interviews and focus group discussions conducted in the four participating schools.

3.5 Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, both guided by open-ended questions addressing the study's two specific objectives. Semi-structured interviews, conducted in Swahili with eighteen participants across the ward, comprising eight children, all five teachers and all five parents or guardians, combined a consistent question guide with the flexibility to probe emerging topics in depth. The remaining twelve children participated in two focus group discussions, each comprising six children; the group format was selected for this sub-group because it reduces the power differential between adult researcher and child participant and allows peer validation to ease disclosure of sensitive family experiences. Together, the eight children interviewed individually and the twelve children in focus group discussions accounted for the full sample of twenty child participants. Where consent was given, sessions were audio-recorded; otherwise, detailed handwritten notes were taken. With the consent of school administrators, school performance and behavioural records were reviewed where available to contextualise participants' accounts of academic and behavioural change. Field notes recording non-verbal cues and contextual observations were maintained throughout and secondary data, including court records and national census data, were used to contextualise the setting.

3.6 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-stage process described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the final thematic framework. Manual coding was used throughout to maintain close engagement with the data. The analysis generated two major themes corresponding to the study's objectives, psychological challenges and social challenges, each comprising several subthemes.

3.7 Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility was supported by conducting data collection in natural settings and through prolonged engagement with the research context; transferability was supported through detailed description of the setting, participants and procedures; dependability was supported through a documented audit trail of methodological decisions; and confirmability was supported through a reflective journal in which the researcher recorded assumptions and emerging interpretations.

3.8 Ethical Consideration

This study received formal research clearance from the University of Iringa's Office of the Vice Chancellor (Ref. No. UoI/R.2/1/VOL.III/164, issued 24th March 2026), granted under the government circular empowering university Vice Chancellors to issue research clearance to staff and students on behalf of the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH) (Ref. No. MPEC/R/10/1, 4th July 1980). Because the study involved school-based fieldwork with minors, this clearance was routed through the Regional Administrative Secretary's Office, President's Office - Regional Administration and Local Government, which issued a corresponding permit (Ref. No. FA.255/265/01/221, 20th April 2026) authorising the study within Iringa Municipal Council's jurisdiction; the Director of Iringa Municipal Council and the head teachers of the four participating schools granted written permission on this basis before any child was approached. As a qualitative social-science study involving no clinical intervention or experimental manipulation, ethical oversight was exercised through this university-, regional- and school-level clearance process, which functions as the standard ethics-approval pathway for postgraduate social-science and counselling-psychology research involving minors within the Tanzanian system, rather than through a separate biomedical institutional review board (IRB).

Informed consent was obtained in writing from all adult participants (teachers and parents or guardians) prior to their involvement, covering the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, right to withdraw at any time without consequence and the intended academic use of the data, including its dissemination through the author's dissertation and any subsequent peer-reviewed publication drawn from it. For child participants, a two-step procedure was followed: written parental or guardian consent was obtained first, after which each child was separately given an age-appropriate explanation of the study and asked for their own assent before taking part; a child's assent could be withdrawn at any time even where parental consent stood and no child was included on the basis of parental consent alone. Interviews and focus group discussions with children took place on school premises during the school day, in a private but supervised space with a teacher or school counsellor known to the children present nearby, consistent with standard child-safeguarding practice for research with minors. Children were not asked to disclose graphic or specific details of family conflict, violence or abuse; where a child's account nonetheless indicated possible ongoing harm, the researcher acknowledged the disclosure supportively without probing further and referred the matter, with the school's knowledge, to the head teacher or a designated child-welfare contact for appropriate follow-up, consistent with professional expectations for responding to child-safeguarding concerns encountered during research.

Confidentiality was protected through the use of pseudonyms and alphanumeric codes in place of participants' real names and school names in all data records and written outputs; audio recordings were deleted upon completion of transcription and digital and paper records were kept in secured, access-restricted storage accessible only to the researcher and academic supervisors. Disclosures concerning caregiver-based violence are reported at the level of theme and illustrative quotation only, with all identifying detail removed and are presented as individual participants' reported experiences rather than as verified incidents.

Participation was voluntary throughout and participants retained the right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

4. RESULTS

Findings are presented below according to the two study objectives: psychological challenges and social challenges facing primary school children from divorced families.

4.1 Psychological Challenges

Thematic analysis of children's, teachers' and parents' or guardians' accounts generated five subthemes describing children's psychological experiences following parental divorce: emotional distress, low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority, anxiety and fear about the future, behavioural changes and academic difficulties with poor concentration.

Emotional distress, characterised by sadness, loneliness, grief and a pervasive sense of loss, was the most consistently reported challenge across all three participant groups, most often linked to reduced contact with an absent parent, typically the father. One child explained:

I have been feeling sad since my father left. My mother does not treat me the same as before. When I ask for things, she sometimes refuses and says she has nothing (Child 1, School A, 11th May 2026).

A teacher corroborated this pattern of withdrawal, describing affected children as "often lonely and emotionally withdrawn," noting that they frequently cried when reflecting on their home circumstances.

Children also described low self-esteem and feelings of inferiority relative to peers from intact families, frequently expressed through social comparison and voluntary withdrawal from peers. One child explained:

I have only one parent, unlike other children who have both parents. They get everything they need. I distance myself from them because I feel sad when I see them receiving things I cannot get (Child 3, School A, 11th May 2026).

Teachers and parents corroborated these observations, describing children who isolated themselves during group activities and who compared themselves unfavourably with peers from intact families.

Anxiety and fear about the future emerged around concerns for family stability, access to basic resources and continuity of care. One child described worrying about what would happen if the parent raising him fell ill:

I worry that this one parent who is raising me, if they face a problem like falling sick, where will I get money to sustain myself? Who will provide for the family? I am afraid I might even get involved in bad behavior like stealing in order to get what I need (Child 7, School B, 15th May 2026).

A teacher linked such anxiety to harsh home environments, observing that children who had experienced punitive discipline at home appeared to anticipate punishment even for minor classroom questions.

Behavioural changes included school lateness, emotional outbursts and increased irritability, frequently linked to children's assumption of household responsibilities. One child described how domestic responsibilities disrupted his schooling:

I often arrive late at school because I have responsibilities at home before leaving. When I reach school, I feel very tired and I sometimes lose interest in lessons. I also tend to stay quiet and avoid talking to other pupils (Child 5, School A, 12th May 2026).

A teacher observed that anger and emotional reactivity were more pronounced among boys, attributing this to accumulated stress and unmet material needs. Not all reported changes were negative: one parent described her child's improved disposition following separation from a conflictual household.

Academic difficulties, including poor concentration, reduced classroom participation and declining performance, were widely reported. A teacher described affected children as mentally preoccupied during lessons:

They cannot comprehend and their concentration in class is very low. First they do not have the materials needed for use in class such as exercise books or pens and they also lack food. Most of the time you find that while you are teaching, he is mentally absent, thinking about the challenges he is going through (Teacher 1, School A, 13th May 2026).

One child, holding a position near the bottom of his class, attributed his decline directly to the loss of parental support and the need to work to pay for supplementary tuition. Parents acknowledged that the demands of sole responsibility for the household limited their capacity to supervise schoolwork or provide consistent academic support.

4.2 Social Challenges

A second set of five subthemes captured children's social experiences: peer rejection, stigmatisation, strained family relationships, caregiver-based violence and deprivation of basic needs.

Peer rejection was expressed through exclusion from play and verbal labelling related to family structure. One child described being excluded by classmates:

My friends exclude me. When we are playing they say I have no father and tell me to play alone. I feel very bad (Child 4, School A, 11th May 2026).

This pattern produced a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion followed by voluntary withdrawal. Teachers observed that some children responded to rejection with aggression while others withdrew and isolated themselves.

Stigmatisation extended beyond exclusion to active verbal insults, gossip and unequal treatment, occurring in both school and household settings. One child described concealing her family circumstances from classmates for fear of gossip:

I feel bad telling people in class. I am not at ease, I just think. Life without a father is difficult, but I cannot tell my classmates. They gossip too much. By end of day everyone, including people in the neighbourhood, will know about my family situation (Child 11, School C, 20th May 2026).

Within some stepfamily households, children described differential treatment, including being assigned heavy domestic chores while denied resources such as food and school support that were freely given to a stepparent's own children.

Strained family relationships were common, marked by restricted contact with a non-custodial parent, inconsistent co-parenting and children being drawn into unresolved parental disputes. One child described being denied contact with her mother:

I love my mother very much, but during holidays I am not allowed to visit her. When I ask to talk to her, my father says he does not have her number (Child 15, School C, 20th May 2026).

Teachers observed that some parents used the school as a communication channel because they did not speak with each other directly and that children were sometimes moved between households in ways that disrupted their schooling.

Caregiver-based violence, including physical punishment and verbal abuse, was reported in both stepfamily and single-parent households. A teacher described a severe case:

Some children experience gender-based violence and are told not to speak about it. In one case, a child stayed away from school for four days due to abuse at home and was later found to have fled because of violence from a stepfather (Teacher 4, School D, 26th May 2026)

This and the following accounts of caregiver-based violence are drawn from individual teachers', parents' and children's reports of specific remembered incidents rather than from school disciplinary or child-protection case records and are presented as illustrations of the forms such violence was described as taking rather than as an estimate of its prevalence within the ward.

Other children described being beaten by a stepmother who told their father they were "a burden," or being beaten and insulted by a biological parent even for minor mistakes.

Deprivation of basic needs, including food insecurity, inadequate school materials and lack of clothing, was widely reported and linked directly to the transition from a dual-income household to a single-parent arrangement. One parent described the resulting financial strain:

Since the divorce, I am the only one responsible for everything: school fees, food, clothes and medical care. Sometimes I have to choose between buying food and paying school fees (Parent 1, Street A, 14th May 2026).

Children described eating only once a day in households of several children and covering torn clothing with a sweater rather than disclosing the family's hardship, while teachers reported that incomplete uniforms and missing materials were visible indicators of the economic strain facing many affected households.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that, within this Kiheisa Ward sample, parental divorce was associated with challenges across interconnected psychological and social domains, consistent with the broader international literature on child adjustment to divorce. The emotional distress, low self-esteem and anxiety reported by children align closely with Amato and Keith's (1991) meta-analytic finding that children of divorced parents show, on average, higher levels of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem than children from intact families and with Kelly and Emery's (2019) conclusion that disrupted parental availability is among the strongest predictors of reduced self-esteem in school-aged children. The specific pattern of anticipatory anxiety concerning caregiving continuity and economic survival documented among children in this study mirrors findings from longitudinal Western research (Hetherington & Kelly, 2020) and from African contexts, where economically strained single-parent households have been linked to chronic worry about material survival (Cluver et al., 2019).

The behavioural and academic difficulties identified, particularly school lateness linked to premature income-generating responsibilities, illustrate a form of role reversal in which children absorb adult survival responsibilities that disrupt normative developmental and schooling patterns, consistent with McLanahan and Percheski's (2020) account of the economic consequences of family dissolution. That anger was reported as more prevalent among boys while withdrawal was more common among girls is broadly consistent with patterns of gendered externalising and internalising responses to family stress documented elsewhere (El-Sheikh et al., 2016).

The social challenges identified, peer rejection, stigmatisation, strained family relationships, caregiver-based violence and material deprivation, were similarly consistent with and in some respects extended, existing evidence. Peer rejection linked to family structure, rather than individual conduct, is consistent with Lansford et al.'s (2021) multi-country finding that family instability is associated with increased peer exclusion. The stigmatisation

reported within stepfamily households, in which children from a prior relationship were assigned heavier domestic responsibilities and denied resources given freely to a stepparent's own children, corresponds to Hetherington and Kelly's (2020) identification of stepfamily arrangements as a particularly acute site of stigma, one that is difficult for children to escape precisely because it occurs within the home. The material deprivation documented in this study, including reports of children concealing torn clothing or eating only once a day, is consistent with evidence that family dissolution produces sustained reductions in household income, particularly in mother-headed single-parent households (McLanahan & Percheski, 2020) and that such deprivation predicts reduced school participation and engagement in African contexts (Cluver et al., 2019).

Consistent with prior research in South Africa (Kovacs & Brody, 2019) and Ghana (Nyarko, 2011), the present findings confirm that the psychosocial consequences of divorce documented in Western literature are broadly applicable, though not identical, within Sub-Saharan African settings, where extended family and community stigma add dimensions of social disadvantage that are less prominent in higher-income contexts. The Iringa-specific findings extend Malema et al.'s (2023) municipal-level study by identifying ward-specific patterns, including stepfamily-based stigma and premature economic responsibility, that would not be visible in aggregated municipal data.

Taken together, the findings are well explained by the two theoretical perspectives that guided the study. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) accounts for the psychological vulnerability created when divorce disrupts the parent-child bond, generating insecurity that extends into children's social relationships, while social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) explains how children's behavioural adaptations and the exclusionary attitudes of peers and adults toward them, are acquired through observation and reinforcement within family, school and community environments. The peer rejection, stigmatisation and caregiver-based violence documented here are not separate from the psychological difficulties identified alongside them; rather, they are the social expressions of the same underlying relational rupture, through which children who have lost a secure attachment at home encounter peer and family environments that confirm, rather than challenge, their sense of being undervalued and different. This indicates that the social environment functions as a continuous moderator of the psychological vulnerability created by family disruption, either compounding it through exclusion and stigma or, where a supportive relationship is available, softening its impact.

These findings should be read in light of the study's phenomenological, single-ward design and its small, purposively selected sample, which was suited to generating rich, contextually grounded insight but does not support statistical generalisation to primary school children from divorced families elsewhere in Iringa Municipality or beyond. The design is also cross-sectional and relies on retrospective, self- and other-reported accounts rather than longitudinal measurement, so the direction and durability of the associations described here, particularly between divorce and the specific psychological and social outcomes reported, cannot be established causally from this data. The most sensitive findings, concerning caregiver-based violence in particular, rest on individual participants' accounts rather than independently verified school, medical or child-protection records and should be read as evidence of how these experiences were described and perceived by participants rather than as confirmed incident data. Future research using longitudinal or comparative designs across multiple wards would help clarify how far these patterns generalise.

6. CONCLUSION

This study found that primary school children from divorced families in Kihesa Ward experience significant and interconnected psychological and social challenges. Psychologically, children experienced emotional distress, low self-esteem, anxiety about the future, behavioural change and academic difficulty. Socially, they faced peer rejection, stigmatisation, strained family relationships, caregiver-based violence in some households and deprivation of basic material needs. These two dimensions of children's experience were not separate but mutually reinforcing: social exclusion and stigma compounded children's emotional distress, while emotional distress in turn shaped how children behaved and were perceived by peers, teachers and family members. This interconnection suggests that interventions addressing only the psychological or only the social dimension of children's experience are unlikely to be sufficient on their own.

7. RECOMENDATIONS

Schools should strengthen guidance and counselling provision and train teachers to recognise signs of psychological distress and social withdrawal among children from divorced families. Parents and guardians should be supported to remain consistently emotionally available to their children and, where safe and appropriate, to shield them from interparental conflict. Community and religious leaders have a role in reducing the stigma directed at children from divorced families, particularly within stepfamily and extended-family settings. Government and child-welfare bodies should consider incorporating structured psychosocial support for these children into national primary education guidance and counselling frameworks, particularly in communities with high divorce rates. Future research should track children's psychosocial trajectories longitudinally, examine the strategies families, schools and communities use to support affected children and extend comparative investigation to other wards and municipalities to establish the broader applicability of these findings.

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DISCLOSURE

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