



Invisible Scars: Exploring Grief Counselling For Children After Parental Separation In India

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Abstract: This study explores how grief counselling can support young children living in urban India who have experienced parental separation. Rather than collecting new data, it draws on published research from India and internationally to understand the problem and propose a culturally adapted response. When parents separate, children go through a form of loss that is real but rarely acknowledged – especially in India, where divorce still carries social stigma and children are often expected to carry on without complaint. This study examines what research tells us about how children are affected, what counselling frameworks exist, what international programs have achieved, and what the cultural and institutional barriers are in the Indian context. Based on this review, the study proposes a Five-Part Layered Support Framework specifically designed for young children in urban India. This framework operates on two simultaneous tracks – one with the child and one with the primary caregiver – at every stage, because the child's healing cannot happen in isolation from the home environment they return to after every session.

Index Terms – grief counselling, parental separation, young children, urban India, non-death loss, ambiguous loss, disenfranchised grief, Worden, layered support framework, parent toolkit, culturally adapted counselling

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In India, the number of families going through separation and divorce has been rising steadily, particularly in cities. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2021) found a measurable increase in the number of women reporting separated or divorced status compared to previous surveys. When parents separate, young children are confronted with a change they did not choose and often do not fully understand. The parent who moves out is no longer part of daily life. Routines change. The family as the child knew it no longer exists. These are real losses. Yet in most Indian homes and schools, these children receive very little acknowledgement of what they are going through, let alone any structured support.

1.2 Why This Topic Matters in India

In many Indian families, divorce is still seen as something shameful. Families often try to hide it. Children pick up on this quickly and learn to keep their feelings inside. At the same time, the Indian school system places enormous pressure on children to perform academically. A child who is grieving and struggling to concentrate is frequently seen as lazy or careless. India also used to rely on the joint family system for emotional support, but as urban families move toward nuclear setups, children going through separation have fewer people to turn to. The NIMHANS (2018) survey on child and adolescent mental health found that 1 in 4 children from homes where parents have separated show signs of emotional or behavioral difficulties, yet the vast majority of these children never access any counselling support.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Research consistently shows that children suffer when their parents separate – through emotional withdrawal, anger, declining school performance, physical complaints, and self-blame that can persist well into adulthood. Yet in urban India, the vast majority of these children receive no structured support. Three specific gaps make the situation worse: there is no grief counselling framework designed specifically for young children in urban India; existing frameworks do not adequately address the role of the primary caregiver; and school counsellors in India are rarely trained in grief counselling for non-death loss. This study addresses all three gaps by proposing a Five-Part Layered Support Framework that works on two simultaneous tracks – one with the child and one with the primary caregiver.

1.4 Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- What does existing research tell us about how parental separation affects young children in urban India?
- Which grief counselling frameworks are most relevant for the Indian context, and what do international programs show us in terms of outcomes?
- What are the key cultural and institutional barriers that prevent young children in urban India from accessing grief support?
- What would a culturally adapted grief counselling framework for young children in urban India look like, and how can the primary caregiver be actively included in that process?

1.5 Objectives of the Study

- **Objective 1:** To understand what existing research tells us about how parental separation affects young children in urban India.
- **Objective 2:** To examine existing grief counselling frameworks and international programs and assess their relevance for the Indian context.
- **Objective 3:** To identify the cultural, systemic, and institutional barriers that prevent young children in urban India from accessing grief support.
- **Objective 4:** To propose a Five-Part Layered Support Framework for young children in urban India.

1.6 Hypotheses

H1: Existing published research provides a sufficient foundation to develop a practical grief counselling framework for young children in urban India who have experienced parental separation.

H2: A grief counselling approach adapted for the Indian cultural context has the potential to meaningfully reduce the emotional difficulties that young children face after parental separation.

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study matters because it focuses on a group of children who are frequently overlooked when it comes to mental health support. By bringing together what research tells us and proposing a practical, culturally grounded framework, this study can be directly useful for school counsellors, mental health professionals, and anyone involved in child welfare in India. The proposed framework does not stop at the child – it recognises that a child cannot heal in a counselling session and then return to a home environment that is unprepared to support that process. The primary caregiver is given an equal role through a corresponding toolkit at every stage of the framework. This reflects what research actually shows: that parent involvement is one of the strongest predictors of better outcomes for children going through family separation (Wolchik et al., 2002).

1.8 Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on young children living in urban India whose parents have separated or divorced. Literature reviewed covers published research in English from 1969 to 2023, with no year restriction applied to Indian sources given their relative scarcity. Since this is a literature-based study, the proposed framework has not been tested in practice. It is a proposal grounded in existing research and would need to be piloted and evaluated through future studies before any conclusions can be drawn about its effectiveness.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Can Children Grieve Something Other Than Death?

Most people associate grief with death. But researchers have shown that children can grieve many kinds of loss. Worden (1996) argued that children experience grief when they lose a parent, whether through death or separation, describing grief as a natural response to any significant loss. Boss (1999) introduced the concept of ambiguous loss to describe situations where someone is lost but not completely gone – a parent who leaves the family home due to separation is still alive and may even visit, but is no longer part of the child's daily life. Boss (1999) argued this kind of unclear loss is often harder to process than death because there is no definitive ending, no ritual, and no social acknowledgement that tells the child it is acceptable to grieve. Doka (1989) described disenfranchised grief – grief that society does not fully acknowledge or support – which leaves children of separated parents expected to carry on as normal with no social permission to grieve.

2.2 How Parental Separation Affects Children: What the Research Shows

Amato (2000), in a review covering a large number of studies, found that children of separated parents consistently show lower wellbeing across multiple measures – emotional, social, and academic – compared to children from intact families. Hetherington and Kelly (2002) found that around 20 to 25 percent of children of divorced parents showed lasting emotional and behavioural difficulties into adulthood, with the worst outcomes for those who had received the least emotional support during the transition. Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) documented long-term effects, finding that children who had not received adequate support continued to carry the emotional weight of the separation into their adult relationships and sense of self. In the Indian context, Choudhury and Choudhury (2016) found that children from separated families showed high levels of anxiety, low self-esteem, and academic difficulty. NIMHANS (2018) reported that 1 in 4 children from homes with parental separation showed emotional or behavioral problems.

2.3 The Kubler-Ross Grief Model

Kubler-Ross (1969) described five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. When applied to children going through parental separation, these stages look quite different from adults. A child in denial might insist their parents will get back together. A child in the anger stage might fight with siblings or talk back to teachers. In bargaining, a child may believe that if they behave perfectly their parents will reunite. In depression, a child may become very quiet and withdrawn. Acceptance means the child is slowly beginning to adjust to a new normal. Importantly, in Indian families where children are not encouraged to show emotions openly, these stages may be happening internally while the child appears composed on the surface, making it harder to identify when a child is struggling.

2.4 Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning

J. William Worden proposed a task-based model of grief. Rather than seeing grief as something that happens to a person in stages, he described four active tasks: (1) accepting that the loss is real – the child needs to understand the family has changed permanently; (2) working through the pain – the child needs a safe space to express feelings through drawing, storytelling, and play; (3) adjusting to the new normal – building a sense of stability and routine; and (4) staying connected while moving forward – feeling that loving both parents is acceptable. Worden's framework is the primary theoretical foundation for the counselling approach proposed in this study. This study builds on Worden's tasks by adding a corresponding parent toolkit at every stage, making the caregiver an active partner in the child's recovery rather than a passive bystander.

2.5 How Indian Culture Shapes Children's Grief

The cultural context in India significantly shapes why children's grief after parental separation goes unaddressed. Research by Bharat (1997) and Datta (2003) describes several dynamics. In most Indian homes, children are taught not to display emotions publicly – crying or expressing sadness is often seen as weakness, particularly for boys. The stigma around divorce leads many families to keep the separation hidden; children absorb this shame and learn their grief is not something they should talk about. Choudhury and Choudhury (2016) noted that school counsellors found it difficult to engage children on these issues precisely because children had been conditioned to stay silent. Pathak (2020), in research conducted in Indian family courts, found that children who were encouraged to use creative and storytelling-based approaches opened up far more readily than those simply asked to talk.

2.6 International Programs: What They Did and What They Found

2.6.1 The Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CDIP)

Pedro-Carroll and Cowen (1985) developed the Children of Divorce Intervention Program for school-aged children. The program uses structured group sessions combining emotional expression activities with skill-building exercises. Pedro-Carroll and Cowen (1985) found that children who participated showed significant improvements in emotional wellbeing and school adjustment. A follow-up study by Wolchik and colleagues (2002) confirmed these gains were sustained over time.

2.6.2 The New Beginnings Program

Wolchik and colleagues (2002) developed the New Beginnings Program, which includes both a component for children and a component for the primary caregiver. In a randomised controlled study, children in the New Beginnings Program showed significantly lower rates of depression and anxiety, and these effects were still measurable six years after the program ended. The inclusion of a caregiver component is especially relevant for India, where the primary caregiver's understanding and response plays a central role in the child's recovery.

2.6.3 The Sandcastles Program

Developed by Neuman (1998), the Sandcastles Program uses art, storytelling, and group sharing to help children process their feelings about family separation. It has been used in more than 30 countries. Neuman (1998) found that children who participated showed reduced anxiety and improved ability to discuss their family situation. The storytelling component is particularly relevant for India given the central role of narrative in Indian culture.

2.7 What the Literature Tells Us: A Summary

The literature makes several things clear. Children who go through parental separation experience real grief that shows up as emotional withdrawal, anger, physical complaints, declining academic performance, and self-blame. In India, cultural norms around emotional expression, social stigma about divorce, and the absence of trained counsellors in schools mean that most of these children receive no support. International programs show that structured counselling works, and programs that include a caregiver component produce the strongest and most sustained outcomes. But these programs were designed for Western contexts; no framework has been adapted for the cultural, familial, and institutional realities of urban India. This study attempts to address that gap.

III. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Definitions of Key Terms

Grief: The emotional, physical, and behavioral response a person has to any significant loss. It is not limited to death.

Parental Separation: A situation where a child's parents are no longer living together, including formal divorce, legal separation, and cases where one parent has permanently left the family home.

Non-Death Loss: A type of loss where the person is still alive but is no longer available in the same way (Boss, 1999; Doka, 1989).

Ambiguous Loss: A term developed by Boss (1999) to describe loss that is not clearly defined or socially recognized.

Disenfranchised Grief: A term introduced by Doka (1989) to describe grief that is not publicly acknowledged or supported by society.

Culturally Adapted Counselling: Counselling designed to suit the values, norms, and everyday realities of a specific cultural group. For young children in urban India, this accounts for family pressure, divorce stigma, emotional suppression norms, and how feelings are communicated in Indian households.

3.2 Core Theoretical Frameworks

3.2.1 Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning (1996)

Worden's framework is the primary theoretical basis for the proposed counselling approach. Unlike stage-based models, Worden's tasks describe active work that a grieving person must engage in. In this study, Worden's tasks form the structural backbone of the Five-Part Layered Support Framework. Each task corresponds to a stage in the child's counselling sessions, and each stage has a directly corresponding parent toolkit – because a child cannot successfully work through Worden's tasks if the home environment is working against them.

3.2.2 Boss's Ambiguous Loss Theory (1999)

Boss's concept helps explain why children's grief after parental separation is so often invisible and unsupported. The parent is still alive, so there is no clear ending, no funeral, and no social permission to grieve. In the Indian context, this ambiguity is compounded by the expectation that children should adjust quickly and not add to the family's difficulties.

3.2.3 Doka's Disenfranchised Grief (1989)

Doka's framework explains why so few children in India receive any acknowledgement of their grief after parental separation. When the loss is not socially recognised, neither the child nor the people around them feel it is appropriate to seek support. This framework is important for understanding the cultural and systemic barriers identified in this study.

3.2.4 Kubler-Ross Grief Stage Model (1969)

The Kubler-Ross model provides a useful descriptive tool for helping parents, teachers, and counsellors recognize what grief can look like in children. It is used here not as a counselling tool in itself but for awareness and psychoeducation purposes.

3.3 Comparison of Grief Counselling Frameworks

Table 3.1 compares the key frameworks reviewed in this study in terms of their main ideas, strengths for the Indian context, and what would need to be adapted for India.

TABLE 3.1: COMPARISON OF GRIEF COUNSELLING FRAMEWORKS

Framework	Main Idea	Strengths for Indian Children	What Needs Adaptation for India
Kubler-Ross (1969)	Five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance	Useful for explaining grief to parents and teachers in simple terms	Stages may not be visible in Indian children taught to suppress emotions; counsellors must look for hidden signs
Worden (1996)	Four active tasks of mourning a person works through	Task-focused approach suits Indian families who value action over emotional discussion	Task 2 (expressing pain) needs creative and indirect methods since direct emotional disclosure is uncommon in Indian children
Boss (1999) – Ambiguous Loss	Loss that is unclear and not socially recognized; parent is absent but alive	Explains why children's grief is invisible and unsupported in Indian families	Indian counsellors need specific training in this concept; it is not yet widely known in this field in India
Doka (1989) – Disenfranchised Grief	Grief that society does not acknowledge or support	Directly explains why Indian children rarely receive recognition or support for their grief	Needs to be built into counsellor training and school awareness programs across India
Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990)	Helping people retell their life story in a way that gives them agency and hope	Storytelling is natural in Indian culture; this approach feels accessible to children	Already used informally in many Indian schools; needs to be formalised within a counselling framework
Creative Arts Therapy	Using drawing, craft, and play to express feelings	Especially useful for children who cannot speak	Already used informally in many Indian schools; needs to be formalised within a counselling framework

		directly about their feelings	
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Source: Compiled by the researcher from Kubler-Ross (1969), Worden (1996), Boss (1999), Doka (1989), White & Epston (1990)

3.4 International Programs: Structure and Documented Outcomes

Table 3.2 summarizes the three main international programs reviewed, including their structure, documented outcomes, and relevance for India.

TABLE 3.2: INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN OF SEPARATED PARENTS – STRUCTURE AND OUTCOMES

Program	Developed By	Structure	Documented Outcomes	Relevance for India
Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CDIP)	Pedro-Carroll & Cowen (1985)	School-based group sessions; combines emotional expression with skill-building	Significant improvements in emotional wellbeing and school adjustment; gains sustained over time (Wolchik et al., 2002)	Group format reduces stigma; school setting is accessible; skill-building suits Indian families
New Beginnings Program	Wolchik et al. (2002)	Two-component program: child sessions (feelings and coping) plus sessions for primary caregiver	Randomized controlled study: significantly lower depression and anxiety; effects sustained at six-year follow-up	Caregiver component is highly relevant for India where the caregiver's role is central to child recovery
Sandcastles Program	Neuman (1998)	Art, storytelling, and group sharing; implemented in 30+ countries; non-clinical and creative	Children showed reduced anxiety and improved ability to discuss their family situation (Neuman, 1998)	Storytelling component aligns with Indian cultural traditions; accessible in school settings

Source: Compiled by the researcher from Pedro-Carroll & Cowen (1985), Wolchik et al. (2002), Neuman (1998)

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Type of Research

This is a secondary research study, also referred to as a literature-based or desk-based study. It does not involve collecting data from participants. Instead, it systematically reviews and analyses research that has already been published. This type of study is widely used in psychology and social science when the aim is to synthesize what is already known and use that synthesis to propose a practical framework or direction for practice.

4.2 Psychological Methodology: Qualitative Thematic Synthesis

The methodological approach used in this study is qualitative thematic synthesis – a recognized approach in psychological and social science research for analyzing a body of qualitative literature and identifying themes that cut across multiple studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Themes that emerged were: the effects of parental separation on children emotionally, behaviorally, and academically; how Indian cultural norms shape grief expression; the theoretical frameworks for understanding non-death grief; what international programs have shown; and what barriers exist in the Indian system. This is not a statistical meta-analysis. It is a careful, interpretive synthesis organized around the research questions guiding this study.

4.3 Sources Used in This Study

The following databases and resources were used to gather literature:

- Google Scholar – for broad searches across international and Indian publications
- PubMed / MEDLINE – for peer-reviewed psychological and medical research
- PsycINFO (American Psychological Association) – for psychology-specific literature
- ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) – for school-based intervention research
- NIMHANS Publication Archive – for Indian child mental health data
- Indian Journal of Psychiatry and Indian Journal of Clinical Psychology – online archives

4.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they were published between 1969 and 2023 for international sources (no year restriction for Indian sources), written in English, and relevant to children, grief, non-death loss, parental separation, or counselling theory. Sources were excluded if they focused exclusively on death bereavement with no connection to non-death or ambiguous loss, were not accessible in full text, or focused on adult populations only with no relevance to children. Approximately 40 sources were reviewed, of which 18 are directly cited in this study.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Since this study does not involve real participants, there are no ethical concerns related to consent, confidentiality, or risk to individuals. All sources used have been properly referenced and credited. The researcher has no conflict of interest in relation to any of the sources reviewed.

4.6 Variables

Independent Variable: The body of published research on grief, parental separation, and counselling for children.

Dependent Variable: The Five-Part Layered Support Framework – its dual-track design, stage-by-stage structure, and the recommendations that emerge from the overall review.

Moderating Variables: Urban setting in India, cultural norms around emotional expression, access to school counselling, family structure, and age of the child.

V. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

5.1 How Parental Separation Affects Young Children: Key Findings

Across the studies reviewed, five consistent patterns emerge in how young children are affected when parents separate.

5.1.1 Emotional Withdrawal

Many children become very quiet and withdrawn after parental separation. Amato (2000) identified this pattern across a large body of studies. In India, this quietness is frequently interpreted as the child being fine – using the term 'will adjust' – when in reality the child is suppressing feelings they have been taught not to show.

5.1.2 Anger and Behavioral Difficulties

Many children, especially boys, express their grief through anger. Hetherington and Kelly (2002) found that acting out is one of the most frequent responses in children who do not receive emotional support after separation. In India, where boys especially are taught not to cry, anger often becomes the only socially acceptable outlet for emotional pain. Questions about the separation are rarely answered with clarity, and the shame closely associated with the situation creates deep confusion that can further amplify behavioural difficulties over time.

5.1.3 Drop in Academic Performance

Declining school performance is one of the most consistently reported effects across multiple studies. Choudhury and Choudhury (2016) found this to be one of the most common concerns raised by Indian parents and teachers. In a country where academic results are closely tied to family pride, this creates a double burden: the child is grieving while simultaneously facing shame and pressure for falling behind. Parental separation also affects a child's social functioning at school, as neither children nor their peers have the language or social scripts to navigate questions about their family situation, leading to social withdrawal and school avoidance.

5.1.4 Physical Complaints

Stomachaches, headaches, and sleep problems are widely reported in children going through family separation (NIMHANS, 2018). These complaints have no medical explanation but are genuine expressions

of emotional pain. Understanding somatic complaints as a manifestation of grief is an important part of training both counsellors and parents.

5.1.5 Self-Blame

Younger children often believe they caused the separation. Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) found that self-blame, when not addressed, can persist well into adulthood and affect self-worth and adult relationships. This makes early counselling intervention particularly important.

5.2 How Indian Culture Shapes Children's Grief

Table 5.1 summarizes the key cultural factors and their impact on children's grief expression and access to support in urban India.

TABLE 5.1: CULTURAL FACTORS AFFECTING GRIEF EXPRESSION AND ACCESS TO SUPPORT IN URBAN INDIA

Cultural Factor	How It Affects the Child	How It Affects Access to Support	What Needs to Change
Emotional suppression norms	Child hides grief and internalizes the situation	Child does not ask for help; adults often do not know how to respond	Counsellors must use indirect methods; psychoeducation for parents and teachers is essential
Stigma around divorce	Child feels shame; learns the family situation must be hidden	Parents avoid seeking counselling to avoid attention and judgement	Normalize help-seeking; reduce shame language around counselling in communities and schools
Academic pressure	Grief hidden under pressure to perform; child cannot be seen to struggle	Declining grades seen as laziness, not grief; child expected to perform well even when home situation has changed	Train teachers to recognize academic decline as a possible grief response, not a discipline problem
Nuclear family isolation	Fewer extended family members available for informal support	Child has no one to turn to at home except the primary caregiver	Professional counselling support becomes more critical in urban nuclear family settings
Indirect communication style	Child cannot easily express feelings through direct conversation	Standard talk-based counselling is less effective	Use storytelling, art, and metaphor as primary counselling methods rather than verbal processing

Source: Compiled by the researcher from Bharat (1997), Datta (2003), Choudhury & Choudhury (2016), Pathak (2020), NIMHANS (2018)

5.3 Barriers to Grief Support for Young Children in Urban India

Family-Level Barriers: Social stigma around divorce leads families to avoid seeking professional support. Parents are often dealing with their own emotional difficulties and do not recognize the child's grief as something that needs attention. Many believe the child will just adjust over time.

School-Level Barriers: School counsellors, where they exist, are rarely trained in grief counselling for non-death loss. Choudhury and Choudhury (2016) found that most Indian school counsellors lacked the tools and training to support children in this situation.

Policy-Level Barriers: There is no national policy in India that requires grief support for children going through parental separation. While the National Education Policy (2020) mentions school counsellors, implementation is inconsistent and the specific need for non-death grief counselling is not addressed.

5.4 The Proposed Five-Part Layered Support Framework

Based on the literature reviewed, this study proposes a Five-Part Layered Support Framework for young children in urban India who have experienced parental separation. This is the original contribution of this study. No such framework currently exists specifically for this population in the Indian context. The framework draws primarily on Worden's (1996) Four Tasks of Mourning and incorporates narrative and creative arts approaches informed by Pathak (2020) and the Sandcastles Program (Neuman, 1998).

The framework is called Layered Support because it operates on two simultaneous tracks – one with the child and one with the parent – at every stage. A child cannot be expected to process grief in a counselling session and then return home to an environment that is not equipped to support that process. The New Beginnings Program (Wolchik et al., 2002) demonstrated measurably that including a parent component leads to significantly better outcomes for children, with effects lasting up to six years post-intervention. This framework takes that finding seriously and builds the parent component into every stage – not as an add-on, but as an equal track.

TABLE 5.2: THE FIVE-PART LAYERED SUPPORT FRAMEWORK – CHILD SESSIONS AND PARENT TOOLKIT

Stage	Worden's Task	Child Component (with counsellor)	Parent Toolkit (take home)
1. Safe Space	Foundation for all tasks	Build trust before any emotional work begins. No pressure to talk. Child chooses the activity – free drawing, a warm-up game, or simply sitting. Goal: child experiences the counsellor as safe and non-pressuring.	Parent orientation: what the child is going through, phrases to avoid at home, what to expect after each session, and how to create emotional safety at home without interrogating the child about session content.
2. Understanding the Loss	Task 1: Accepting the reality of the loss	Help child understand what has changed using age-appropriate language. The Two-Homes Story activity – child and counsellor create a narrative together about a child who now lives between two homes. Directly and repeatedly address self-blame: this is not your fault.	Script guide for answering hard questions: 'Why did you separate?', 'Is it because of me?', 'Will you get back together?'. Framework: acknowledge, validate, answer honestly at child's level, reassure.
3. Expressing Feelings	Task 2: Working through the pain	Indirect creative expression only – never forced disclosure. Drawing feelings as weather or colours; creating a fictional character in the same situation; storytelling. The child is never pushed to name emotions directly.	How to respond when the child opens up unexpectedly at home. How to listen without fixing. Creating low-pressure moments where feelings can surface naturally. Questions that close children down versus questions that open them up.
4. Building Coping Skills	Task 3: Adjusting to the new normal	Practical self-regulation tools framed as skills: a worry box, a feelings diary, simple breathing exercises, a grounding technique, the Anger Ladder, the Safe Person Drawing. Child chooses which tools feel useful.	Co-regulation at home: how to calm alongside the child rather than instructing them to calm down. Building a new predictable daily routine. Managing the parent's own emotional state – a regulated parent is the foundation.
5. Staying Connected to Both Parents	Task 4: Moving forward	Address loyalty conflict directly: loving both parents is healthy. Writing a letter to the parent seen less often; drawing	How to speak about the other parent without blame. How to respond when the child asks to see the other parent more.

		what the child appreciates about each parent; revisiting the Two-Homes Story. Closing joint session with primary caregiver.	Building small connection rituals with the absent parent. Never – directly or indirectly – asking the child to choose sides or carry messages.
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Source: Compiled by the researcher, drawing on Worden (1996), Wolchik et al. (2002), Neuman (1998), Pathak (2020), White & Epston (1990), Wallerstein & Blakeslee (1989)

5.5 Discussion

The literature reviewed in this study paints a consistent picture. Young children going through parental separation in urban India are experiencing real emotional pain. They show this through anger, silence, physical complaints, or a drop in academic performance. Because Indian culture does not openly recognize this as grief, and because schools and mental health systems are not set up to support these children, most of them go without any help at all. International programs show clearly that structured counselling makes a difference. The Five-Part Layered Support Framework proposed in this study is a starting point – grounded in the research, designed to be practical, and built specifically for the urban Indian context. Crucially, it does not treat the child in isolation; the parent is an equal and active participant at every stage.

VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Summary of the Study

This study explored how grief counselling can support young children in urban India who have experienced parental separation. Rather than collecting new data, it reviewed published research from India and internationally to understand the problem and propose a culturally adapted response. The study was guided by four objectives: understanding how parental separation affects young children; examining relevant counselling frameworks; identifying cultural and institutional barriers to support in India; and proposing a Five-Part Layered Support Framework that does not currently exist in the Indian context.

6.2 Key Findings

- Young children who experience parental separation face consistent and significant emotional, behavioural, and academic difficulties, supported by studies across multiple countries and by Indian research from Choudhury & Choudhury (2016), NIMHANS (2018), and Datta (2003).
- Cultural factors unique to urban India – emotional suppression, stigma around divorce, academic pressure, and the decline of the joint family system – make this grief harder to express and far less likely to be addressed.
- Worden's (1996) Four Tasks of Mourning is the most practically useful framework for counselling in this context because it is action-focused and can be delivered through indirect and creative methods.
- International programs – CDIP, New Beginnings, and Sandcastles – show that structured counselling works. Children who participated showed measurably lower levels of anxiety and depression, and better school adjustment, with effects sustained over time (Wolchik et al., 2002).
- The biggest barriers to support in India are family-level stigma, the lack of trained counsellors in schools on grief, and the absence of any national policy requiring grief support for children going through parental separation.
- A Five-Part Layered Support Framework – covering safe space, understanding the loss, expressing feelings, building coping skills, and staying connected to both parents – is proposed as the original contribution of this study.

6.3 Conclusions

The most important conclusion from this study is that young children going through parental separation in urban India need and deserve proper grief support, and current systems are not providing it. The grief they experience is real, even when it is not visible. It shows up as anger, silence, physical complaints, poor grades, and self-blame. If left unaddressed, these effects can persist well into adulthood (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). The research is clear that counselling can help. India does not need to start from scratch – good international models exist. What is needed is a version of those models adapted for how Indian children communicate, what Indian families value, and what Indian schools and clinics can realistically

deliver. Critically, the parent must be part of that process – not a passive observer, but an informed, active participant at every stage.

6.4 Recommendations

For School Counsellors

- Learn to identify grief signs that are not obvious: a quiet child, a sudden drop in grades, or unexplained physical complaints are all potential indicators worth investigating.
- Use creative and narrative methods rather than relying on direct talk-based approaches. Pathak (2020) found these methods to be significantly more effective with Indian children.
- Run group support sessions for children going through similar family situations to reduce the sense of isolation and shame.
- Include a structured conversation with the primary caregiver as part of any counselling support, not just the child.

For Mental Health Professionals

- Recognize somatic complaints – stomachaches, headaches, sleep problems – as possible expressions of emotional grief. Do not dismiss them as purely physical.
- Include psychoeducation for the primary caregiver as part of the counselling package. The New Beginnings Program (Wolchik et al., 2002) showed that this measurably improves outcomes for the child.
- Seek training in grief counselling for non-death loss and in culturally adapted approaches for Indian children.

For Teachers

- Understand that a child whose academic performance drops after a family change is not being lazy. The decline is often grief in disguise. Responding with patience and a private check-in rather than pressure can make a significant difference.
- Be aware that children of separated parents may struggle to answer peer questions about their family situation. A teacher who normalizes different family structures in the classroom creates a safer environment for all children.

For Parents

- Seeking counselling for your child is not a sign of family failure. It is one of the most caring things you can do during one of the hardest transitions your child will face.
- Your child's healing does not only happen in the counselling session. What happens at home matters just as much. How you respond when your child asks a difficult question, and whether your child feels they have permission to love both parents without guilt, directly shapes how well your child recovers.
- Never – directly or indirectly – ask your child to choose sides, carry messages to the other parent, or act as your emotional support. These are adult roles. Your child needs to be free to simply be a child.
- Build small rituals of connection with the parent your child sees less often – a weekly call, a shared book, a photograph kept somewhere the child can access easily.

6.5 Suggestions for Future Research

The Five-Part Layered Support Framework proposed in this study needs to be piloted and evaluated with real children, real counsellors, and real primary caregivers before any conclusions can be drawn about its effectiveness. Future researchers could implement the full framework and measure changes in children's emotional wellbeing, behavioural functioning, and academic performance over time. The effectiveness of the parent toolkit component should be evaluated independently to understand whether caregiver involvement produces measurably different outcomes compared to child-only intervention. Developing and testing a simple grief assessment tool adapted for Indian children, ideally available in regional languages, would also be a practical and important contribution to this field.

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