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## **Psychological Strengths and Emotional Difficulties of Students with Separated Parents: A Basis for Counseling Intervention Program**

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**Sarmiento, J. M.\***

Quirino State University, Philippines.

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**Abstract** The study was conducted primarily to determine the Psychological Strengths and Emotional Difficulties of freshmen students of Quirino State University, Diffun, Quirino for school year 2014-2015. Frequency counts and percentages on the description of the profile of the student-respondents in terms of gender; age; birth order; number of siblings; parents' educational attainment; parents' occupation; and absent parent; means on descriptions of the respondents' psychological strengths and emotional difficulties. The study conducted is a descriptive type of research which enabled the researcher to determine and describe the Psychological Strengths and Emotional Difficulties of the respondents. The findings are used in the pursuit of implementing a counseling intervention program with emphasis on respondents' psychological strengths in resolving the emotional difficulties of the respondents. The respondents' psychological strengths and emotional difficulties were determined using an adopted questionnaires consisting of 35 items for psychological strengths while 20 items for emotional difficulties. The data were subjected to appropriate statistical tools using computer application. It was found out that (1)The respondents of the study are mostly females with the age of 16, are first born children and from big family with 4 and above number of siblings; (2) The parents' educational attainment is mostly high school graduate; (3) The occupations of the fathers are mostly self-employed while the mothers are OFW; (4) Most of the respondents are living with their grandparents and relatives since parents' separation; (5) In general, the respondents' psychological strengths are revealed in all categories. However, the Cognitive and Appraisal Skills has obtained the highest mean followed by Interpersonal Skills and Supports with which the outlook for strength based counseling intervention is seen better to process; and (6) the most common emotional difficulty among the respondents was revealed along peer problems.

**Keywords:** psychological, adolescent, counseling

### **Introduction**

Even the most distressed adolescent has character strengths and capacities that can be operated in the service of growth and recovery (Cox,

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\* **Corresponding author:** Sarmiento, J. M.; **E-mail:** [qsu.rdet.diffuncampus@gmail.com](mailto:qsu.rdet.diffuncampus@gmail.com)

2006). Recent decades, researchers have revealed robust numbers of children with separated parents seen with problematic behaviors, adjustment difficulties and delinquency (Mooney *et al.*, 2009). These findings are clear implications that the toughest flows of parent's separation seem to hit the offspring the hardest. Moreover, the worst consequences on behavior of students with separated parents if not given proper assistance are unending emotional difficulties which may weaken human's capacities to recover-the psychological strengths.

In the counseling arena, positive psychology suggests that practitioners can help people by promoting positive development through counseling services (Park *et al.*, 2004). In addition, the consideration of the client's strengths has impelled the human service providers including counselors to tap humans' psychological strengths in the process of giving assistance to disturbed clients (Cox, 2006). Hence, this study aimed to determine the psychological strengths and emotional difficulties of students with separated parent and come up with a counseling intervention program that underscores psychological strengths in the process of reduction of emotional difficulties among students with separated parents.

Specifically, the study attempted to: (1) describe the profile of the respondents in terms of: sex, age, birth order, number of siblings, parents educational attainment, parents' occupation, absent parent; (2) determine the respondents' perception on their psychological strengths along: Cognitive and Appraisal Skills; Defenses and Coping Mechanisms; Temperamental and Dispositional Factor; Interpersonal Skills and Supports; (3) assess their emotional difficulties along the following scales: Inattention/Hyperactivity; Emotional Symptoms; Conduct Problems; Peer Problems; and (4) propose Counseling Intervention Program to help students with emotional difficulties and enhance their psychological strengths.

### ***Conceptual Framework***

This study was anchored on the basic framework of Input, Process and Output model to shed light to the objectives. The Input variables include the profile of respondents in terms of: sex; age; birth order; number of siblings; parents' educational background; parents' occupation; and absent parent. The psychological strengths and emotional difficulties were assumed existing to respondents with which through the Strengths Questionnaire by McQuaide & Ehrenreich, (1997) and the Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire by Goodman (1997) specific psychological strengths and emotional difficulties of the respondents were determined. The output of this research is strength- based Counseling Intervention Program. The designed activities have emphasis on the

clients' psychological strengths, while concurrently resolving emotional difficulties.

## Materials and methods

### Research Design

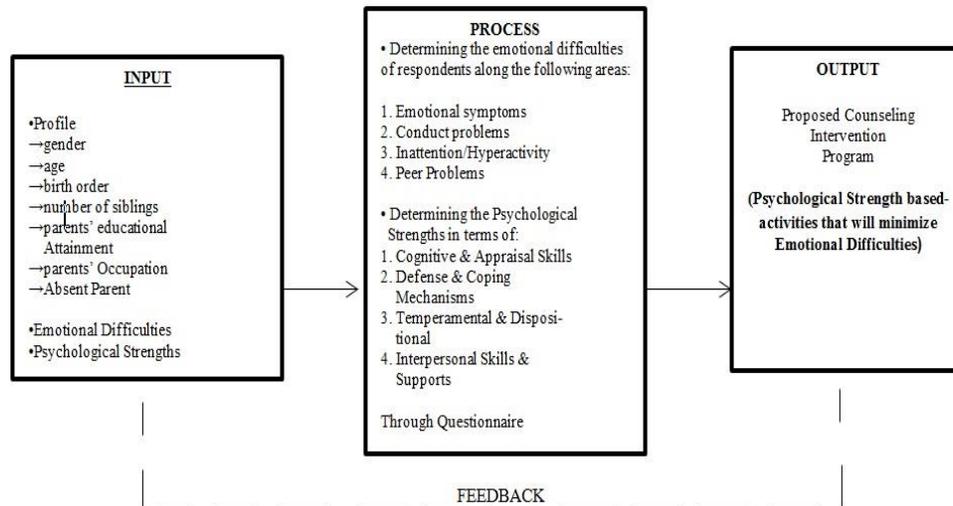


Figure 1. Conceptual Paradigm of the Study

The study is a descriptive type of research which describes the Psychological Strengths and Emotional Difficulties of students with separated parents.

Forty-seven (47) college freshmen students whose parents are separated were chosen purposively as student- respondents through Slovin's formula.

The researcher made use of questionnaires which consist of three parts. The first part was used to gather the respondents' profile in terms of: sex; age; birth order; number of siblings; parents' educational background; the parents' occupation and the absent parent. The second part of the instrument was the strengths questionnaire taken from McQuaide and Ehrenreich (1997). Through a Likert Scale, the respondents' psychological strengths were determined in four categories: Cognitive and Appraisal Skills, Defense and Coping Mechanisms, Temperamental and Dispositional Factors and Interpersonal Skills and Supports. The third part of the instrument was a standardized questionnaire from Goodman (1997) which consists of 20 items dealing with emotional difficulties. The questionnaire was customized in order to assess emotional difficulties along the following: emotional symptoms, conduct problems,

inattention/hyperactivity, and peer problems. The items were assessed through a Likert Scale and the responses were scored with the use of the manual in the instrument.

### ***Data Analysis***

The researcher administered personally the questionnaire to ensure 100% retrieval and at the same time clarified queries of the respondents pertaining to the questionnaire.

The data gathered was subjected to statistical analysis with the following tools: *frequency counts and percentages* were used to describe the profile of the respondents; and *mean* to describe the psychological strengths and emotional difficulties of the respondents.

### **Results and discussion**

The profile shows that most of the student-respondents are females sixteen (16) years of age; first born children; and have four and above number of siblings. Most of the parents are high school graduate while very few of them have finished college. Furthermore, most of the fathers are self-employed, some are jobless and very few works abroad .On the other hand, majority of the mothers are OFW or working abroad, some are self-employed and jobless while very few mothers are employees, and subsequently, most of the respondents have been living with their grandparents since their parents' separation, thus, have both absent parents.

**Table 2.** Psychological Strengths of the Respondents

PROFILE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
<b>SEX</b>		
Male	12	25.53
Female	35	74.47
<b>AGE</b>		
14	1	2.13
15	4	8.51
16	42	89.36
<b>BIRTH ORDER</b>		
Only	2	4.25
First	19	40.42
Middle	17	36.17
Youngest	9	19.15
<b>NUMBER OF SIBLINGS</b>		
None	2	4.26
One	6	12.76
Two	10	21.28
Three	12	25.53
Four & above	17	36.17
<b>PARENTS' EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND</b>		
<b>FATHER</b>		
Elementary	18	38.3
High School	21	44.68
College	8	17.02
<b>MOTHER</b>		
Elementary	14	29.79
High School	27	57.45
College	6	12.76
<b>PARENTS' OCCUPATION</b>		
<b>FATHER</b>		
Employee	6	12.76
Self-employed	34	72.34
OFW	1	2.13
None	6	12.76
<b>MOTHER</b>		
Employee	4	8.51
Self-employed	15	31.92
OFW	17	36.17
None	11	23.4
<b>LIVING WITH</b>		
Father	6	12.76
Mother	10	21.28
Grandparents	23	48.93
Relatives	8	17.02

Cognitive and Appraisal Skills	Mean	Description
1. I am a creative person.	2.87	Agree
2. I am a curious person.	2.98	Agree
3. I can anticipate a problem and come up with a plan to solve it.	3.04	Agree
4. I have good common sense in most situations.	3.06	Agree
5. My goals for myself are realistic.	3.30	Agree
6. Other people's behavior is usually predictable to me.	2.89	Agree
7. I can usually predict when situations are safe or dangerous.	2.85	Agree
8. I can choose my battles.	2.85	Agree
9. I think about my mistakes and learn from them.	3.26	Agree
10. Even when things are hard for me, I persevere.	3.51	Strongly Agree
11. I have an accurate view of my strengths and weaknesses.	3.15	Agree
12. I am self-aware and like to learn about myself.	3.21	Agree
Mean	3.08	Agree
Defenses and Coping Mechanisms		
1. If I can't control a certain situation, I can turn it over and stop worrying about it.	2.62	Agree
2. I have techniques. I use to calm myself when I am upset.	3.04	Agree
3. I can usually control and regulate my impulses.	2.79	Agree
4. I am usually a flexible person.	2.74	Agree
5. I am easy going.	2.62	Agree
6. I am patient.	2.89	Agree
Mean	2.78	Agree
Temperamental and Dispositional Factor		
1. If something is bothering me, I can make something constructive.	2.68	Agree
2. I believe I am not a victim.	2.66	Agree
3. My sense of humor helps me deal with stressful situations.	2.83	Agree
4. My self-esteem is usually high.	3.09	Agree
5. I am more active than passive person.	2.68	Agree
6. I usually feel I can cope well in new situations.	2.89	Agree
7. I can accept things happened unexpected.	2.98	Agree
8. I take responsibility for my own decisions.	3.23	Agree
9. I am a positive thinker.	2.94	Agree
Mean	2.84	Agree
Interpersonal Skills and Supports		
1. I am able to love other people.	3.09	Agree
2. I do not let other people's opinion control my actions.	3.11	Agree
3. I usually trust other people.	2.83	Agree
4. Other people usually like me.	2.96	Agree
5. I can enjoy being with whom I can share my thoughts.	3.20	Agree
6. I have a confidante.	2.94	Agree
7. I have created a supportive network of friends.	2.70	Agree
8. I can go to others for help, as appropriate (like: relatives, teachers, guidance counselors, social workers and other helping professionals).	3.36	Strongly Agree
Mean	3.02	Agree

Legend: 3.50 – 4.00 Strongly agree

- 2.50 – 3.49 Agree  
 1.50 – 2.49 Disagree  
 1.00 – 1.49 Strongly disagree

The results show the respondents' psychological strengths along the four categories: on *cognitive and appraisal skills*, the respondents strongly agree that even when things are hard for them, they persevere, ( $x = 3.15$ ). On the other hand, the respondents agree that the goals for themselves are realistic; that they think about their mistakes and learn from them; they are self-aware and like to learn more about themselves. In addition, the respondents also agree that they have an accurate view of their strengths and weaknesses; they have good common sense in most situations; and can anticipate a problem and come up with a plan to solve it. These results are in line with the findings of Galdeano (2014) that prior the separation children are seen with well cognitive skills and found consistently aware of life situations until their parents have finally separated but contradicted by the findings of Azaka (2013) citing studies about the harmful effects of parents' separation on children's psychological adjustment and strengths. That adolescent of separated parents is at risk for undesirable outcomes and such outcomes lead to simultaneous psychological and behavioral difficulties.

On *defenses and coping mechanisms*, most of the respondents agree that they have techniques and are used to calm themselves when they are upset, they are patient and can usually control and regulate their impulses. Moreover, the respondents are easy going and flexible persons, and if they can't control a certain situation, they can turn it over and able to stop worrying about it. The findings are consistent with the reports and findings of Pediatric Child Health (2000) and Semurlan (2013) that in the separation process, some children have experienced distress but able to cope constructively and competent to recover and remained psychologically balanced despite of many adversities. Being open-minded about the situation and cognitive restructuring are some of their techniques that influence their coping mechanisms.

Along *temperamental and dispositional factor*, most of the respondents agree that they take responsibility for their own decisions, which constituted a mean of 3.23. In addition, the respondents' self-esteem is usually high, they are positive thinkers, and that they can accept things happened unexpected. Consequently, the respondents usually feel that they can cope well in new situations and their sense of humor helps them deal with stressful situations; and

Along *interpersonal skills and supports*, the respondents strongly agree that they can go to their relatives, teachers, guidance counselors, social workers and other helping professionals for help as appropriate. On the other hand, the

respondents agree that they can enjoy being with whom they can share their thoughts; and do not let other people's opinion control their actions. Furthermore, they can able to love other people while other people usually like them; they have confidante and usually trust other people; and that they have created a supportive network of friends

**Table 3.** Emotional Difficulties of the Respondents

	Mean	Description
<b>Hyperactivity/Inattention Scale</b>		
1. I get restless; I cannot sit still for long.	0.64	Somewhat true
2. I am constantly fidgeting or squirming.	0.64	Somewhat true
3. I am easily distracted; I find it difficult to concentrate.	1.19	Somewhat true
4. I think before I do things.	0.53	Somewhat true
5. I finish the things I'm doing. My attention is good.	.70	Somewhat true
Mean	.74	Somewhat true
<b>Emotional Symptoms Scale</b>		
1. I get a lot of headaches, stomach-aches or sickness.	0.81	Somewhat true
2. I worry a lot.	0.91	Somewhat true
3. I am often unhappy, downhearted or tearful.	0.77	Somewhat true
4. I am nervous in new situations, I easily lose	0.91	Somewhat true
5. I have many fears, I am easily scared.	0.81	Somewhat true
Mean	0.84	Somewhat true
<b>Conduct Problems Scale</b>		
1. I get very angry and often lose my temper.	0.81	Somewhat true
2. I usually do as I am told.	0.85	Somewhat true
3. I fight a lot. I can make other people do what I want.	0.32	Not true
4. I am often accused of cheating or lying.	0.28	Not true
5. I take things that are not mine from home, school or	0.19	Not true
Mean	0.55	Somewhat true
<b>Peer Problems Scale</b>		
1. I am usually on my own. I generally play alone or keep	0.85	Somewhat true
2. I have one good friend or more.	0.49	Not true
3. Other people my age generally like me.	0.83	Somewhat true
4. Other children or young people pick on or bully me.	0.47	Not true
5. I get on better with adults than with people my own	0.91	Somewhat true
Mean	1.01	Somewhat true
Legend: 1.50 – 2.00 Certainly true		
0.50 – 1.49 Somewhat true		
0.00 – 0.49 Not true		

As was found in studies by Hogan (2002), children of separated parents have found formal services very helpful in their recovery. The detachment from general peers has emerged because of fear that they might be treated differently. Subsequently, talking about parental separation is considered a private issue preferring group of people they believed can understand their situation and for them not to stand out different.

The table presents how the respondents assessed their emotional difficulties along the four (4) scales.

As shown in hyperactivity/inattention scale, it is somewhat true to the respondents' that they think before they do things; their attention is good and can finish the things they are doing. However, whenever distracted, they found themselves difficult to concentrate; they constantly fidget and squirm; and they get restless and cannot sit still for long. Generally, it is somewhat true that the respondents react with difficulty on focusing attention.

The emotional symptom scale shows that it is somewhat true to the respondents that they worry a lot; they feel nervous in new situations and that they easily lose their confidence. In addition, they also have many fears and they get a lot of headaches or sickness while being unhappy often, downhearted or tearful. In general, the emotional symptoms are somewhat true to the respondents as indicated by the overall mean of 0.84. The result confirms the findings of Hogan (2002) that most common feelings of children of separated couples were sadness, worries about their life and family, and unhappiness with their lives and about them being unwell.

As gleaned from the conduct problem scale, it is somewhat true to the respondents that they usually do as they are told but they get very angry and often lose their temper. On the other hand, it is not true that the respondents fight a lot and can make other people do what they want. Moreover, it is not also true to the respondents that they are often accused of cheating or lying and take things that are not theirs from home, school or elsewhere.

Generally, it is somewhat true to the respondents that they have emotional difficulties on proper behaving. This result refutes the findings of Ngale (2009) that children from dysfunctional homes through parents' separation are delinquents. He found a range of behavioral problems including delinquency to children of intact families than children from dysfunctional homes. However, the respondents' temperament as revealed, confirms the study of Lengua, (2000) with his conclusion that adolescents' temperament from broken homes is quite difficult to control especially when exposed to distressing events like parental separation.

Finally, the respondents' characteristics in dealing with their peers and other group of people revealed that it is somewhat true that the respondents are

usually on their own and that they generally play alone or keep to themselves because it is not true to the respondents that they have one good friend or more. Moreover, it is somewhat true to the respondents that other people their age generally like them but they get on better with adults than with people their own age; consequently, it is not true to the respondents that other children or young people pick on or bully them.

In general, it is somewhat true that the respondents manifest emotional difficulties in getting along with peers as indicated by the overall mean of 1.01. This result confirms the findings of previous researches as cited by Demo *et al.* (1998) that adolescents in disrupted families are less sociable; have fewer close friends and spend less time with friends. Consistent with the findings of Green (2002), the difficulty on getting along with peers was due to indifferent feeling about family situations. Consequently, talking with peers who have similar experience are the ones preferred to talk with about life situations and those they believed can understand like school counselors and other formal support services

The researcher's momentous encounters with the clients she served with diverse concerns, the problems encountered in the attempts to provide responsive counseling services appropriate in giving assistance of adolescents' psychological strengths and emotional difficulties, the anticipations that behavioral difficulties could impair or weaken the given psychological strengths- all these have impelled the researcher to propose counseling interventions program to provide practical or hands-on strategies that will tap the psychological strengths of students' with separated parents in the adjustment with emotional difficulties. In other words, an emphasis on strengths will likewise orient other helping professionals with an outlook for interventions toward resolutions that tap the students' psychological strengths, while concurrently getting adjusted with problematic behaviors or conditions.

The contents of this program are composed of activities that are being addressed to both components of emotional difficulties and psychological strengths that underscore strengths as springboard for the reduction of difficulties. The following are the general objectives of the program:

1. To provide opportunities for the students with separated parents for the realization that despite of the presence of emotional difficulties, human being have capacities to recover;
2. To assist the students with separated parents in the adjustment from emotional difficulties;
3. To encourage the students with separated parents to operate their psychological strengths in their recovery from difficulties;

4. To guide the students with separated parents in the attempt to enhance their psychological strengths as they recover from their emotional difficulties.

The program is illustrated in tabulated format as presented below:

**Table 4.** Proposed Counseling Intervention Program

SESSI ON # & TARG ET DATE	COMPONENTS OF Emotiona l Difficulti es	Psycholog ical Strengths	OBJEC- TIVES	ACTIVI- TIES & VENUE	PER- SONS INVOL- VED	MATE- RIALS NEEDE D	BUD- GET	SUC-CESS INDI- CATOR
1	Presentati on of the research results on emotional difficultie s	Presentatio n of the research results on psychologi cal strengths	Describe a plan of activities for the enhanceme nt psychologi cal strengths and how it will be utilized in the reduction and resolution of emotional difficulties	Conduct orientation session for counseling interventio ns to participants focusing its importance to their life  ● LRC,JAA bldg.	Counselor and the students with separated parents	Handout s and pens	P200.0 0	●The students are acquainted with the activities that will be undertaken for their adjustment  ● 100 % attendance of the subject- students.
2	Gets on better with adults than with people their age	Determine d and comfortabl e to seek help from profession als and relatives as appropriat e	Provide informatio n and resources to enable students identify who to approach when in need of help.	Group discussion on specific concerns, functions and services of the different helping professiona ls including relatives and other family members  ●LRC, JAA	Counselor , students with their parent/s or family connectio ns, and some other invited helping profession als	Noteboo k	P 200.00	Acquainted of the different services they may secure from helping professiona s

3	Lonesome and isolated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•can share and trust confidante; have supportive network of friends</li> </ul>	Provide an ample time for students to interact and develop attachment on others	<p>Candle Blowing Relay game and group discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•QSU, COC</li> </ul>	Counselor and the students	Blindfolds (2) candles and match	P300.00	Developed interpersonal skills
4	Aloofness with peers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•able to love; and feels being liked by others</li> </ul>	Provide opportunities on socialization with peers whom they do not know yet	<p>Reflective small group discussion with the theme song “Pananagutan”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•QSU, COC</li> </ul>	Counselor and the students	DVD player; paper and pens	P1400.00	Realization, Appreciation and internalization of the essence on concern with others and interconnections with peers
5	Worries, fears, sickness and easily angered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Calms himself when upset</li> <li>Can control and regulate impulses</li> <li>Turns uncontrolled situations over to stop worries</li> </ul>	<p>Review and Identify students’ psychological Strengths along temperamental and dispositional category required to overcome negative emotions</p>	<p>Group counseling session on “Self-Imposed Feelings”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•QSU, COC</li> </ul>	Counselor and the students	Handouts, paper and pens	P200.00	<p>Increased control of emotions when upset</p> <p>Realization of detrimental future outcomes of emotional difficulties</p>
6	Unhappiness, downhearted and tearful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accepts things happened unexpectedly</li> <li>Uses sense of humor in dealing with stressful situations</li> <li>Believes himself not a victim of circumstances</li> </ul>	Provide assistance in carrying out psychological strengths required to get adjusted with realities of life	<p>Sentence Completion with the theme “My Family”</p> <p>Group Discussion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•QSU, Guidance Office</li> </ul>	Counselor and the students	<p>Voice Recorder</p> <p>Paper and pens</p>	P300.00	<p>Full acceptance of realities and circumstances in life</p> <p>Better outlook about the future</p>

7	Nervousness in new situations; easily lose confidence	Can predict when situations are safe and dangerous  Perseveres even when things are hard; self-esteem is usually high	Assist students to ascertain sources of life's pleasure for familiarization with the feelings associated with succeeding moments experiences	Self-description through Sentence Completion Activity with the theme:  "Who Am I with My Ambitions in Life?"	Counselor and the students	Paper and pens	P200.00	Developed realistic instrumental behaviors towards realistic goals
8	Hardly concentrate when distracted	Can anticipate a problem and come up with a plan to solve it	Describe a plan of action for increasing basic problem solving skills;	Self-expression essay with the theme: "Steps & Considerations in Problem Solving"; and group discussions	Counselor and students	Handouts and pens	P200.00	Demonstrate knowledge of appropriate decision making skills
9		Can make something constructive when bothered	and  strengthening concentration	Imagery activity "the relaxing place" and group discussion  ●COC		DVD player; paper and pen	P100.00	Demonstrate improved concentration
10	Restlessness, fidgeting and squirming	Creative, curious and patient	Describe factors that determine creativity, curiosity and patience or endurance	"LETTERS" (@COC) Presentation of guidelines in writing. Writing letters to parents (by students); and Sending letters to parents (the counselor) Listening	Counselor, students and their parents	Paper, pen, mail envelope	P500.00	Developed creativity in writing  Minimized recurrent thoughts about parents' separation  Strengthened endurance on parental separation outcomes

letters  
solicited  
from  
family  
members  
especially  
from  
parents  
prior the  
activity

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## **Conclusions**

Based on the foregoing findings, the following conclusions are drawn: the respondents of the study are mostly females with the age of 16, are first born children and from big family with 4 and above number of siblings; the parents' educational attainment is mostly high school graduate; the occupations of the fathers are mostly self-employed while the mothers are OFW; most of the respondents are living with their grandparents and relatives since parents' separation, thus, both parents have been absent;

Generally, the respondents' psychological strengths are revealed in all categories. However, the Cognitive and Appraisal Skills has obtained the highest mean followed by Interpersonal Skills and Supports with which the outlook for strength based counseling intervention is seen better to process. The most common emotional difficulty among the respondents was revealed along peer problems.

## **Recommendations**

Based from the conclusions drawn, the following are recommended: full coordination and cooperation of the university administrator and faculty members in the implementation of counseling intervention program of the counseling services; significant people to the life of the respondents should be encouraged to cooperate with the guidance counselors, faculty members and administrators in the outlook for re-organization of family life after parents' separation to enhance the respondents' psychological strengths while resolving problematic behaviors; the respondents should be more submissive in the implementation of the counseling interventions program to realize that their capacities as drawn in the conclusion can be utilized for their growth; that guidance counselor should be engaged in consistent trainings and seminars to retool themselves with the counseling skills; and other researcher who would like to replicate this study is appreciated by the researcher of this study. However, such study may be conducted with a bigger sample size and more

statistical tools for a more comprehensive evaluation of results that will establish a more comprehensive counseling interventions program as well.

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