

Giving Children a Voice during Separation and Divorce: The Role of the Child Therapist

During the life transition of separation and divorce, parents have many people to talk to such as lawyers, mediators, counselors, friends, and family. Children are often left to process their thoughts and feelings of their life change on their own. Parents attempt to talk to them, but children do not always have the language or cognitive development in place to express themselves. Children tend to be highly loyal to both parents, typically because they want to avoid hurting either parent and they want to preserve their relationship with both (regardless of their parents' feelings about the other). Children generally do not talk to their friends about their life circumstances, and if they do, children report that it is not particularly helpful.

Child Therapists working with children of divorce should have expertise in a number of areas in order to be helpful. Training and expertise in divorce and separation including an understanding of the legal issues related to custody and access, specialized training in child development (age and stage responses as related to separation), scheduling and transitional issues, children's temperament, current literature in the area of alienation and play-based and expressive counseling approaches are essential. Parents are consumers of services and therefore are encouraged to establish the therapist has this set of skills.

Child Therapists are highly specialized in working with children experiencing separation and divorce and are trained in child psychotherapy and play therapy. Parents who make a referral for their children can expect the Child Therapist to engage in the following roles:

Initial meeting with each parent: The Child Therapist will meet with each parent (individually or together). During this meeting the therapist will speak with parents about issues related to their family's separation story and ongoing situation post-separation. Parents will be able to provide developmental information about their children and discuss with the therapist issues they feel are important to their children's overall functioning. Parents will be asked about their children's school performance, behaviors at each of their houses, sleep patterns, eating patterns, friendships, play interests and emotional issues, temperament and personality styles. At the end of this session, parents will have an idea of how the child therapist will proceed regarding working with their children. The Child Therapist works with children and adolescents 2-18 years of age. If children are infants, the child therapist may work with the parents only.

Ongoing meetings with each parent: The Child Therapist will meet with parents either separately or together throughout the counseling process. Parents may both come to sessions that the children attend (if conflict is relatively low) or they may take turns bringing their children to sessions. The parents will not be in the sessions unless suggested by the therapist. Parent updates before or after time spent with the children will be arranged either each time the child attends or special parent feedback sessions will be arranged.

Meeting with each child: The Child Therapist will meet with each identified child in the family. Each child will be able to attend his/her own session(s). The therapist will inform the parents of when and how often the children need to be seen. Each child is different in how they approach the therapy process. There may be times the therapist suggests meeting with the children together. The point of meeting with

children is to gain an understanding of the child's point of view, needs, wishes and issues related to their personalities, developmental stage and temperament. The child therapist will establish how the children have come to view their family and their post-divorce situation. Children will have access to art-making, play therapy, projective and expressive activities. Children are not viewed as "small adults", and therefore they do not endure "adult-oriented" cognitive interviews. Children (unlike older teens and adults) express their thoughts and feelings more fully through child oriented therapy approaches that provide distance from overwhelming feelings.

Although the Child Therapist meets with the parents, details of the children's sessions are confidential. Children will be aware of the issues the Child Therapist will share with their parents. They may also choose to be with the therapist when feedback regarding certain issues is shared.

Educator: The Child Therapist will assist parents to understand the needs and wishes of their children based on a developmental perspective. Each child may respond differently to their parent's separation and divorce and the therapist will help parents to identify reasons for the differences. As an educator, the therapist may provide information to parents as to what is typically recommended for circumstances like theirs or their children's. Things to expect from children of various ages will be discussed with each parent. If there are specific issues that relate more to one parent than another, the therapist will address the issues individually.

Consultant: Upon request by both parents, the Child Therapist will consult with Mediators, Parenting Coordinators and/or Lawyers (if one or more of these professionals are involved/assigned). The child therapist will share pertinent information related to the child's needs and wishes during a consultation meeting so that parents and third parties may include the voice of the child and make the best decisions for the child in the parenting plan.

Collateral Contact Information Gathering: The Child Therapist will gather information from other sources (when requested or necessary). The parents will sign a "Consent for the Release of Information" if, for instance, schools or others may be helpful to the therapy of the children.

Referral Agent: During the course of therapy it may become apparent that referrals to other helpers may be necessary. The Child Therapist will make appropriate referrals to other professionals if she views the parents as needing more assistance in order to help their children. The Child Therapist may recommend the parents go to a Separation and Divorce Mediator, a Parenting Coordinator, Legal Counsel or a Custody Access Evaluator if one of these professionals appears to be necessary. Each of these professionals can be involved in the process at the same time as the Child Therapist as they offer different services.

The Child Therapist is the only professional that offers a neutral space for the children to be while other more contentious issues are being sorted out. This being the case, it is important that parents enter into child counseling process on a "Without Prejudice" basis, so that children's voices are protected and their opinions and feelings are not used against them and ultimately against their relationships with their parents.

Lorri Yasenik

from *Child and Family Focus*, April 2007

Lorri Yasenik www.lorriyasenik.com

1316-15 Ave. SW, Calgary, AB phone: 403.228.0011

admin@rmpti.com