As a clinical psychologist, I have worked with many children whose parents are divorced. Understandably, working with these children requires the cooperation of both parents. In some cases, I have reviewed a custody evaluation and have thought that there must be a kinder way to help parents negotiate custody. I believe that if the parents had had a less adversarial divorce they would have had a different and perhaps better parenting relationship.

In 2006, I became trained in Collaborative Practice or Collaborative Divorce because it promised to provide a way to help parents undergo a less adversarial divorce. I believe that Collaborative Practice can have a positive effect on divorcing couples and on their future co-parenting relationship.

One of the significant roles in Collaborative Practice is that of a divorce coach. In their book *Collaborative Divorce*, Pauline Tesler and Peggy Thompson defined the role of the divorce coach as a mental health professional who helps couples to become aware of and manage their strong emotions; learn how to separate their thoughts from their feelings; think through highly charged issues; and practice ways to talk to each other about difficult problems in a business like manner.

Each spouse is able to work with his or her own individual divorce coach or with one neutral coach who works with both spouses and each of their attorneys on the collaborative team. In individual and/or joint meetings (with or without attorneys present), divorce coaches try to help spouses move peacefully and amicably through the divorce process while managing the challenges that arise from developing a parenting plan and finalizing a settlement agreement.

Divorce Coaching is different from therapy; coaching is specifically focused on divorce related issues and concerns. The focus is less about who is right and who is wrong, less about shame and blame, and more about focusing on the business of letting go of the past and moving forward towards a durable agreement that everyone can support. A durable agreement will help keep the family from returning to court in an attempt to change a perceived biased settlement agreement.

Divorce coaches are specially trained to teach couples how to resolve conflicts by helping each of them to define and articulate their interest rather than arguing from their often entrenched emotional positions. By using a model based on the book written by Fisher and Ury, *Getting to YES*, divorce coaches are able to help couples recognize their positions and better articulate their underlying interests that support those positions.

When focused on interests, the discussion can move towards developing workable options that can lead to workable solutions. For example, one spouse may state the position that she wants to live in the house. The interests for that position might be due to the house’s location to her work, for the children’s stability during the divorce, and/or because the house was the spouse’s childhood home. The interests for wanting to live in the house help to define the position of “I want the house.”

Divorce coaches are licensed mental health professionals who have training in child development and family systems theory and who have experience working with couples, children and families. The standards set by the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals (IACP) requires, at minimum, a three-day multidisciplinary training in collaborative law and forty hours of divorce mediation. The IACP suggests best practice protocols for their members.

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their parents to answer, e.g., are they going to have to move or will they have to change schools. Children are most sensitive to issues where they feel they may have to choose between parents. The most delicate part of the conversation with children is to enable them to speak freely about their feelings regarding each parent while being able to reassure the child that you will be able to share this information in a fair and impartial way.

After the child specialist gathers all the data needed, s/he discusses the findings with the coaches to assess how best to share the information with the parents. Training in child development and family dynamics is often critical in determining what information should be transmitted to parents and how they will best be able to receive the feedback. The coaches’ relationship with the parents is also crucial to strategizing what and how to share with parents.

The child specialist never makes any recommendations regarding how to implement what children have revealed. Rather, the goal is for parents to keep the needs/wants of their children in the forefront of discussions regarding access and co-parenting. As a part of the process, the child specialist may address the need for additional services for the child(ren), such as psychotherapy. Most critically, by providing information about the developmentally appropriate needs/wants of children, parents may be better able to move on with a parent access plan and create an enduring agreement. Ψ

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References

The objective of divorce coaching is not to repair the marriage relationship; the objective is to find a method or means to have substantive conversations about the needs of the client, and their children, now and for the future. This work basically helps to define the new norm for the family.

Sometimes a spouse may have difficulty letting go of the pain they have experienced. In this case, the spouse can be referred to another mental health professional for individual therapy. Divorce coaching requires the ability to see and attend to the needs of all of participants including the children, to encourage the development of workable options for moving forward. Coaches help the divorcing couple change the former narrative or “story of us” into a new cooperative narrative based on the best interests of all. Ψ

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References