

Three Good Reasons to Hire a Child Mental Health Specialist

by

Colleen Holbrook, LICSW, CMHS

Richard and Angela legally divorced three years ago yet they still fought on a weekly basis. They shared custody of an adolescent son and daughter. Due to escalating behavior problems at home and at school of fighting, stealing, lying and truancy, the parents were motivated to seek out a child therapist. When they came to my office, I discovered a major source of contention in the family was the way in which the parenting plan was drawn up. It lacked clarity, consistency and appropriate boundaries. This kept the dueling parents in constant contact. Plus it lacked an understanding that their teenagers would want to spend time with peers and not always with one parent or the other.

Since my encounter with Richard and Angela it has been my mission to encourage mediators and family law attorneys to use professionals like myself, with a background in mediation, psychology and child development, to assist in developing parenting plans that increase the chances of harmonious two household families.

When parents come into my office, I begin with a session without the children present. We talk about their family, their children, how they were first told about the divorce and their reactions. I'm also curious about the parent-child relationship bonds and those of siblings. Sometimes those bonds are fragile and need attention. Children can side with one parent against the other, thus creating a bond with one parent, especially if an affair was involved in the break up of the marriage. We explore their children's temperaments, ages, developmental stages, ability to tolerate change, stress levels and current coping skills as well as the number of transitions in an average day. I can help by offering insight into family dynamics, experience with the challenges families face in divorce and information about how children cope with stress, transitions, grief and loss.

Another important element is the framework, or structure, of the parenting plan that I can help parents create. Without it kids learn to divide and conquer at their own peril. Parents need to work out clear and consistent ways in which to communicate directly with each other, not through their kids. Too often children of divorce are able to take advantage of poor communication between parents to get their way,

I help parents establish rules for making decisions; establishing protocol for drop offs and pick up so there is no open hostility and strategies for finding the time and location to disagree in private. We talk about routines and age appropriate expectations in each household, knowing that each parent will have their own parenting style. However, consistency in expectations around school, grades, manners, chores, curfews and the like can help provide a structure that decreases stress and anxiety.

Finally, as an unbiased third party, I provide a safe place for the children to have a witness to the divorce. When I meet with the kids it can be done individually or as a group of siblings. Because divorce means a loss of the family they once knew, and a change in the way they view their ideas and beliefs about themselves, children need an opportunity to grieve. This process validates the children's thoughts and feelings and allows them to talk openly about their concerns without worrying about hurting their parent's feelings, or feeling guilty about how they feel. A lot of time kids want to protect their parents from their pain so as not to add to their parent's burden. Although therapeutic techniques are used, this is not therapy. This is a short-term process that focuses solely on the divorce and the parenting plan.

Ultimately, my goal is to assist parents in developing a creative, durable and healthy parenting plan that fits their family. All parents are informed from the beginning that what they come up with needs to be reviewed by their attorneys. In creating the plan, we use words like possibility, ideas, and options to keep the process fluid.

I know I have worked well with a family when we have acknowledged the losses involved with their divorce, the kids have been given an opportunity to be involved and perhaps contributed ideas, and when parents are given new ways to view their co-parenting relationship. It is gratifying to help two parents who may not see eye to eye, may have deep pain and anger towards one another but who come together for the benefit of their kids. When the parents take the marital relationship out of it and focus on their shared parental relationship that emphasis the best interest of their kids, parents can create parenting plans that work for everyone and kids can relax in the safety it provides.

Colleen Holbrook is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Child Mental Health Specialist in private practice. She began her working with children and families professionally in 1991. She can be reached at (202) 550-2502, www.colleenholbrook.com.