



Co-Parenting in High Conflict Cases

By Dr. John Grbac, Licensed Psychologist and Certified Family Mediator

After hacking and puking in my office the second time since I had known her, a delightful, bright youngster wiped her chin and politely asked to go clean up. I was unclear if her embarrassment stemmed more from her becoming sick in front of me, or from how the two people she loves the most treat each other. She suffers from more than simply "broken heart syndrome" at the loss of her family as she once knew it; her parents seemed to hate each other.

As a child psychologist I am privileged to peek daily into the lives of the innocent children thrust into the middle of divorce. Children have no choice in divorce. Scientific studies only help to validate what I have witnessed first hand; how injurious and damaging parental conflict between divorcing parents can be. Parental conflict, not the divorce itself, places children at the greatest risk for social, emotional, and behavioral problems.

Major research studies and experts agree that if parents cannot control their anger in front of their children, those children will likely experience adjustment problems. Children are 50% Mommy and 50% Daddy. Attacks on a parent overheard or witnessed by the child may be internalized psychologically as an attack on them. When asking children of divorce what they remember most when told of their parents' separation, many have expressed the same sentiment: "I love my Mom and my Dad." It makes so much sense that children have an inherent need to maintain their relationship with both parents. However, that child-parent relationships can easily run the risk of being damaged when parents cannot resolve their past hurts, anger, or communication issues.

Divorce is emotional, and for most parents, and certainly for their children, it is the most emotion they have ever experienced or confronted at once. The process of divorce with its multitude of family changes only adds to the emotional strain, fur-

ther complicating the heartbreak and grieving process. A powerful research outcome concluded that a divorced home is more strongly associated with behavior problems than the experience of losing a parent by death. Continued conflict by a dependent child's caretakers threatens their security in the world, resulting in a myriad of reactions and problems.

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It is at the onset of the divorce, the most raw and troublesome times for our families, that they seek out legal counsel to navigate the legal portion of the process. A prominent family court judge once shared with me that he believes a large majority, roughly 85%, of what was being dealt with in the courtroom was emotional in nature, whereas only 15% or so were true legal issues to be solved.

While family law needs to be greatly sensitive to "the family," the adversarial nature of the legal dynamic and legal system seems to produce tactics and a process which may deteriorate family functioning. It has been suggested that attorneys, in their attempt to be advocates for their clients, often ally with an enraged spouse in a campaign to humiliate, punish, and/or destroy the other spouse. A "fight" mentality, adversarial in nature, is very different from the therapist model. In a quest for "therapeutic justice," a family's interrelated legal and non-legal problems are addressed in a way to prevent personal and family deterioration. A family law attorney's approach to working with divorcing parents and their use

of mental health partners has the opportunity to serve to improve family functioning, and actually enhance the channels of communication and the parents' ability to constructively resolve disputes. When working with divorced clients with children, I urge attorneys to replace the term "client" with "parent."

While surrounded by Winnie the Pooh, a Lego TIE-Fighter, Play-Doh, my Yu-Gi-Oh card collection, and other things kids find interesting, I explain to children and parents that I am a "feelings doctor" or "life doctor," prepared and trained to facilitate healing in the midst of emotional and stress overload. Psychologists are experts in emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and family systems. A psychologist's role as therapist requires strategies to improve communication, assist in managing emotions and anger control, facilitate problem solving and conflict resolution. In working with divorcing families I may serve in many roles: child therapist, parent therapist, family therapist, adult therapist, co-parenting counselor, family mediator, custody evaluator, or parenting class instructor.

Co-parenting counseling is not "couples counseling." It does not attempt to resolve past marital hurts, or to inspire reconciliation. The treatment sessions and process may, however, be the first time whereby the parents have sat down to actually "talk", without lawyers, or without crying and screaming. This ability to "talk through" some built-up issues, not just to start negotiations as in mediation, can be very cathartic, a much needed emotional and mental release to help the ex-spouses move on and into the roles of co-parenting. Being able to work through difficult feelings and parenting issues together, not to just caucus, gives these parents more skills and more hope that they can communicate and raise their child or children more effectively on their own. When initiated voluntarily by

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the parents, recommended to current parents involved already in treatment due to identified child problems, or due to a court order, co-parenting counseling can be a very important component in helping divorcing families heal and progress to a two-home family.

When dealing with high conflict cases, despite parents seeming at war and polarized with personal agendas and the resultant legal strategies, the neutral ground of the child therapy office can serve as a sanctuary. In my experience, there is an added degree of credibility afforded to the child psychologist versus those entangled by their title and role in the legal battle. While trust may still be tenuous for parents on guard, and with a hypersensitive need for maintaining control, seeing a professional who specializes in helping children, taking a child's needs to heart, offers co-parenting counseling a significant opportunity to alleviate the challenges of hostilities and advance towards more effective parenting as divorced spouses.

Co-parent counseling seems to take the benefits of a trained mental health expert and the problem resolution tactics and philosophy of mediators to facilitate improved parenting by reducing conflict and providing skills and a process for more effective problem solving. In many ways, I view co-parenting counseling as "therapeutic mediation." In my opinion, it is a neutral procedure with regards to the parents' agenda, facilitating a resolution of disputes in an informal and non-adversarial process, which serves to advance the interest of the children by assisting conflicted parents to reach common ground on how they will raise their child/children together. While co-parenting counseling is not mediation or therapy in its purest form, the additional benefits of a child/mental health expert and the clinical feedback and support that may come with it, may serve many families who are stuck and not healing.

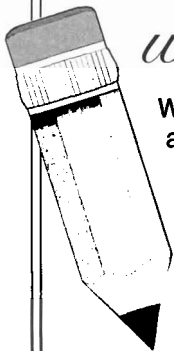
Co-parenting counseling recognizes that while the parents will soon not be or are no longer married, they need a basic relationship and avenue for communication in the interest of their child/children. Co-parenting

counseling allows for more productive and less adversarial conversation. A "bridge" of communication, crossing a deep valley created by marital problems and the ensuing devastation and end of the family as they once knew it. Some rebuilding needs to take place. It is assumed that in high-conflict families, parents lack the resources to simply rebuild on their own. The numerous human variables complicate, aggravate, and further deteriorate an already poor situation. When you add children to the mix, there is almost no way for them NOT to be caught in their parents' crossfire. In high-conflict families especially, the co-parenting therapist may become a "lifeline" to help build their own line of functional communication and/or to disentangle them from non-functional and injurious forms of communication.

At times, the co-parenting therapist will act similarly to a referee. While usually not granted any authority by the court, the parents may need someone to help direct them. As in mediation, the parents may work together with this objective third-party, a child/family expert, to negotiate and to solve parenting problems. When the process has allowed time for the parents to trust the therapist, the doctor's "call" or interpretation can be the needed affirmation to pass through a gridlock. Unlike mediation, the psychologist can give feedback in the interest of the family, similar to appropriate therapeutic confrontation in therapy. This strategy can be of significant assistance to parents conflicted and entrenched in battle over child matters, especially when an impasse seems imminent.

From bedtimes, to having their own bedroom, to which sport they will play and who will take them, to which school they will attend, the proverbial "in the best interest of my child" standard is thrown around, most frequently in an attempt to justify a parent's agenda. While there are some clear distinctions of a preferred path that may be determined between parent choices, in my clinical experience high-conflict parents are entrenched in arguing over personal preferences. The power struggle between ex-spouses for control over

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their new adult life and their children's lives, coupled with their emotional baggage, leads to significant complications in problem solving. So too often do parents get entangled in trying to "split hairs": this day versus that day, this way versus that way, this thing versus that thing, when no way, day or thing is categorically right or wrong.

So many of the issues that seem to plague high conflict families do not necessarily have an exact right or wrong answer. Not all will have glaring recommended truth supported by empirical evidence. It is a family value and parent choice, so fighting over who is "most" right can be most destructive. Especially with feuding spouses, truly lost in their pain and needing to find some semblance of control. A tactic I occasionally use with parents when I have determined through the co-parenting process that both parents have value to their position and no clear recommendation can be made on behalf of the children: we flip a coin.

When all discussion and negotiating has failed, and since neither has been declared to be "entirely correct," rather than continuing with nasty emails, snide remarks, threatening posturing with attorneys and the dread of going to court, we simply do what they taught their children to do, play fair and flip a coin. Some readers may be taken aback by this, but when considering the dynamics of the power struggle: the fact that both "good enough" parents have "good enough" ideas on how to raise their child; and that ongoing conflict will hurt their children, this reasonable tactic to end the destructive and perpetual cycle has a curative effect, at that moment, and for that issue. Keep in mind that the emotional and mental build-up prior might help the parents to solve the problem. All the better, they are developing skills to handle issues more appropriately without fighting or court. If not, at the very least our co-parenting treatment process has empowered the parents to reach an accord, minimized the degree of damage done to the parents' relationship, and more importantly the children are no longer exposed to the festering conflict.

It is important to recognize that

co-parenting counseling may not be appropriate for all parents. Families with significant histories of domestic violence may not provide a conducive dynamic for this type of work. Both parents need to be willing to sit in the same room for the sake of their children and not feel threatened. Most times with a previously violent spouse, this approach is neither suitable nor effective.

When referred for this intervention, high-conflict families now have another very effective resource to help minimize parental conflict. Rather than threatening letters between legal camps being sent back and forth, both

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sit together and utilize the therapist and co-parenting process as a bridge. A conduit to allow for basic communication, and the building blocks for future parenting to allow the child to grow without the downfalls of their parents' choice to divorce. We work to make the bridge as strong as possible. Much of the bridge-building is left up to each parent's participation, each spouse's emotional baggage, and how effectively the process is used by each parent.

I frequently have the parents bring in a picture of them and their child. This simple assignment at the onset of the referral helps to remind them that they were happy at one point in their marriage, and although their marriage was damaged beyond repair, no matter what the reason, they must now work together for their child/children.

As I sat with a 50-year old parent while he gasped to catch his breath and his tears, he recounted to me his parents' divorce. It had been 35-years

prior, yet to see him sob made it seem as though he had just heard the news. Divorce had taken a toll on his soul, and, again, I was reminded of the sensitivity of the human condition, how childhood issues affect our adult lives, and how the profound effects of losing your family to divorce can shape a lifespan. As legal counsel, whether you accept it or not, you play a critical role in helping children and families heal. By navigating "parents" through the process of divorce and recognizing if they need therapeutic intervention from a mental health provider, you help innocent children and their shattered family work to recover, strengthen, and rebuild a new, albeit different, and happy family.

Dr. John Grbac is a Licensed Psychologist and Certified Family Mediator specializing in the assessment and treatment of children, adolescents, and families. Dr. Grbac has been practicing in Central Florida for over ten years and currently operates his own child-friendly office in downtown Orlando. "Dr. John" has extensive professional experience with divorce issues and helps children and teens daily in dealing with the loss and changes of divorce. At his practice, he facilitates co-parenting counseling and is available to serve as a family mediator. As a psychologist, he is able to conduct psychological testing, to assess parenting ability or to perform custody evaluations. Dr. Grbac has served as a court-approved instructor of parenting workshops since 1997 and holds classes regularly.

In addition to his work in the area of divorce, Dr. John assists with the most common psychological conditions, such as depression, anxiety, and ADHD. He has expertise in the areas of child abuse and sexual abuse intervention. Dr. Grbac has served as instructor at both the undergraduate and graduate level for many years. He has appeared on the NBC Today Show and the Golf Channel, and enjoys the opportunity to share his passion and knowledge on a multitude of topics related to children, families, and psychology.