

CO-PARENT PROJECT

A group of experienced co-parent counselors have implemented a new approach to working with high conflict families. They are working in pairs, as co-counselors. One of the counselors is assigned to work more closely with one of the parents, conducting an individual intake session with that parent as well as individual de-briefing sessions following the four way sessions. The other counselor works in the same fashion with the other parent. The heart of the co-parenting work, however, involves both parents and both counselors in the room together (conjoint sessions) to work toward reducing the conflict in the family, improving the communication, and improving their parenting. A primary purpose of these counseling sessions is to provide a forum where the parents can work to establish a cooperative parenting plan. We believe it is essential to the success of this process that it not be a part of an adversarial court process. (See “Contact Information” below for information on the counselors involved in this project.)

The Process

New clients are referred into this program by attorneys, the Court, Mediation or by self referral. The process is initiated by a telephone call to one of the program’s seven counselors.

1. The first counselor contacted will then take the lead in determining the co-parent counselor team. Requests for specific counselors are honored whenever possible.
2. This first contacted counselor will have the other counselor to be involved make contact with the parent with whom he/she will be working.
3. Individual intake appointments are then scheduled. These intake sessions are necessary and essential to the success of the succeeding conjoint sessions and are structured to gather specific information for use by the counselors in the conjoint sessions.
4. Following the intake sessions, the two counselors meet to discuss the information gained and develop their approach for the co-parenting, four-way sessions
5. The next step in the process is the four-way meeting. Typically, these are one and a half hour sessions held every two weeks (or more frequently if necessary) with both parents and both counselors present. It is in these meetings that the co-parenting counseling work takes place. The counselors have the option to tailor the length and frequency of sessions to the needs of the particular family.
6. An opportunity for debriefing is made available for each parent following these four-way meetings. In the debriefings, the parent meets alone with the counselor assigned to him/her.
7. Following the debriefings, the counselors meet to discuss the process, their respective parent’s reactions to it, and to plan for the next four-way meeting.

Use of Child Consultant

When there is a question regarding the needs of the children that cannot be resolved between the parents in the four-way meetings, it is sometimes necessary to engage a “child specialist,” or consultant. This is a professional who has expertise working with children in the middle of a highly contentious divorce. This counselor meets with the child(ren) separately and makes an assessment of what is in the child(ren)’s best interest regarding the issues at hand. The consultant then presents the findings in one of the four-way meetings after which the counselors help the parents to understand, come to agreement, and implement the recommendations. Each parent pays half of the child consultant’s fee at the time of service.

Communication of Therapists with the Attorneys for the Parties

Once the process has begun, any discussion of the work being done may only take place with the written consent of both parents. All communication with the attorneys must include both attorneys and both therapists.

Practical Considerations

This approach typically requires a two hour time commitment every two weeks although variations as to the length and frequency of sessions can and do occur. Each parent is responsible for one half of the cost of these meetings. Additional individual sessions between a parent and his/her counselor may be scheduled by mutual agreement of all parties. Cost of these individual sessions is the responsibility of the parent involved in the session. The cost of conference calls, generation of reports, and other contacts or work outside of the scheduled co-parenting format will be billed separately.

Unless other arrangements have been made with the participating therapist, each parent prior to commencing the process is responsible to pay their respective counselor an eight hundred dollar (\$800) retainer. We anticipate that the average number of conjoint co-parenting sessions to be six to ten sessions. This will likely be a variable number, however, depending upon the amount of work that needs to be done, the level of functioning of the parents, the level of the conflict, the types of issues being addressed and so forth. Each therapist works at the rate of \$150 per hour of work.

Potential Advantages

We believe that this approach to working with high conflict parents holds promise in the following areas:

- It provides an “ally” within the sessions to help each parent stay focused, on track, and moving toward their stated goals.

- Reduces the likelihood of feeling alone or ganged up on in the session, since each parent has his/her counselor to help represent their side.
- Permits interventions in-vivo that are difficult for a facilitator working alone with high conflict clients.
- Encourages feedback after each session from the parents to the facilitators thus enabling the facilitators to refocus the sessions as needed.
- It is expected that it will be much more efficient at reaching the goals of co-parent counseling, thus saving money for the couple and time for the Courts.

Unanswered Questions

We are anticipating there will need to be some refinement of this approach. For this reason the counselors involved will be meeting periodically to share their experiences, identify problem areas, solicit input from attorneys involved in the process and gain input from clients regarding their experience of the process once the work with them has been completed.

Contact Information

The following is a list of the professionals who are involved in the cooperative co-parenting project.

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