



## The Unique Benefits of the Child Specialist in Separation & Divorce

The issues in divorce can be many for people with children. The role of the child specialist is to help the parents with the vast array of child-centered issues, and to help the children to be heard in a healthy way.

### Helping the Parents with Their Child Questions and Issues

**When preparing to tell the children of the divorce:** Child psychologists work with parents to prepare for this important conversation. Based on our expertise in child development and in divorce, we assist parents in making decisions about timing, messages that project the reality of the situation yet protect the child's emotions, and how to handle reactions and questions.

**When developing a parenting plan:** Child psychologists who are experts in child development, family relationships, and custody arrangements can assist parents as they create a parenting plan for their child. *Consulting with someone who is an expert in these areas can help parents make a decision in which they have confidence. A consult to assist in creating a parenting plan is not a lengthy or adversarial process.* Parents describe the child, their family, their parenting styles, and explain their practical concerns about the parenting plan arrangement. They also discuss any uncertainties they are having and their initial thoughts. We ask questions to gather additional relevant information, and then answer any questions the parents have raised and share our thoughts. We do not make the decision, but rather provide a wealth of information that parents utilize as they wish in making their final decision.

**When working to develop an amicable co-parenting relationship:** Newly divorced parents are also learning to co-parent anew, with a transition to two households and adapting to new roles and responsibilities. These practical changes, combined with difficult emotions from the divorce, can make co-parenting challenging at times, especially if the two parents have different parenting styles. With our expertise in parenting, families, divorce, and conflict resolution, we help people develop a positive, low-conflict co-parenting relationship that recognizes the importance of each parent and benefits the adults and children.

**When parents have questions about recognizing and meeting the child's needs during this time:** Divorce is a difficult time for children. Regardless of how time with parents will be split, transitioning from a family who lives in one home to a family with parents in two homes has certain stresses for children. Our child specialists help parents learn how to recognize signs that a child is struggling with the divorce, and how to implement positive coping strategies during this difficult life transition.

### Including the Children's Voices in a Healthy Way

Children are usually aware that mom and dad have a team of people working with them to aid in the divorce, such as attorneys, financial analysts, mediators, and other professionals. Yet a child rarely meets with anyone on this helping team, even though the divorce will have such a large impact on the child's life. Our child specialists can provide the child a voice in the divorce process by meeting with the child to assess the child's needs and concerns. *Children are often hesitant to be completely open with parents during separation and divorce, and child psychologists are trained in talking with children and teenagers during difficult times, thus we may be able to elicit more information than parents regarding the child's true thoughts and feelings.* In this manner we can be used to give the child a personal, comfortable means of expression in the process.

Part of the benefit of this is that the child feels listened to and respected as an important member in the process by also meeting with one of the many people who are helping mom and dad with the divorce. In addition, it is amazing how hearing what the child has to say can change and *improve* the process for everyone; on the reverse (or on a 2<sup>nd</sup> page) are some poignant examples.

## THE VOICE OF THE CHILDREN

**Scenario/Problem:** Dad was staying in the family home and mom had moved to an apartment. The 14-year-old daughter regularly asked to skip her time with mom and go back to dad. Mom was very angry about this, worrying that dad was sabotaging her, and that the daughter was siding with dad and growing closer to him, thus she was feeling disconnected from her daughter and angry at her spouse. **Time with the child specialist revealed...** that the teenager got bored easily at mom's apartment since mom was very social and went out regularly, and mom's new apartment was not in her old neighborhood so she couldn't walk to friends' homes. The daughter, like the mom, was very social and wanted to go out too whenever mom wasn't home. Mom could completely identify with this since she was so social herself, and now instead of feeling estranged from her daughter she felt closer to her upon realizing they were the same in this personality trait. Also, mom now had real information on which to make decisions: she could simply let the daughter stay at dad's more, or she could stay in with the daughter or find shared outside interests, or when her lease was up she could move into the old neighborhood. After the meeting with the child specialist, the mom learned that her daughter's motivations were socially motivated, and she was no longer angry with her spouse or upset over the situation.

**Scenario/Problem:** Four-year old child was becoming increasingly resistant to going to spend time with his father, whether for a day or an overnight. He would cry and beg not to go. Dad was feeling frustrated and saddened by his son's outbursts and seeming diminished interest in spending time with him. Mom thought the father-son bond was important, yet she was uncertain as to whether the son should have to go given his level of distress around the visits. The son would never tell them why he didn't want to go, other than that he didn't like his time with his dad. The parents had talked to specialists and guesses were that perhaps the overnight schedule needed to be adjusted, or that the child was angry at the father for moving out. No specialist had talked to the child. **Time with the child specialist revealed...** that the father took a lot of work calls on his cell phone, and that was upsetting the child. The child was very frustrated that in the middle of an activity they would have to stop while the father took a call; at the age of four he was unable to easily shift to a solitary new activity and wait for his father's return. The boy was also angry and sad that the father would put work before him, given that they now had less time together than when they lived in the same house. After the meeting with the child specialist, the father decided to turn off his cell phone when he had his son. Each time he picked him up he showed him he was turning it off, to the delight of the son who was now excited for their time together. The father reported back that months later, his son started giving him "permission" at times to use his cell phone, for example at times telling him, "Dad, I'm going to be coloring for a while if you want to turn your cell phone on." A side note: This father deciding to turn off his cell was but one solution. Had he truly needed it on for work, another solution could have been to help the son understand why his father had to take some calls during their time together, and help the child develop strategies to deal with those times.

**Scenario/Problem:** Two sisters, ages six and eight, were asking to live with their mother and to see their father for occasional visits. It seemed odd that they were requesting such little time with him as they were also very excited to spend time with him, and cried when they left. The father was very angry at the mother, believing she must be influencing them. The mother was very angry with the father, believing he must have said or done something to make them want such little time with him. Both parents agreed that prior to the recent separation they had each enjoyed close attachments with both girls. **Time with the child specialist revealed...** that the girls believed that mom had no friends, only was happy when with them, and would be sad and lonely whenever they left to spend time with dad. They based this belief on two things: mom went to work and to church and church-related activities but didn't socialize otherwise, and whenever they would leave her, even pre-divorce such as to spend a weekend with grandparents, she would kiss them and tell them that she would miss them "every second" they were gone. They contrasted this to dad, who was very social and engaged in a variety of non work and non church activities, and who said his goodbyes with, "love you, love you, love you." In their estimation then, dad was just fine away from them, but their mother was sad without them. Interestingly the children's perception was skewed in an important way – while "work" and "church" were non-fun in their minds, their mother had friends in both places, lunched daily with friends, and thoroughly enjoyed her Bible study, women's group evenings, etc. She in fact was social and happy with friends, but they didn't know it. After the meeting with the child specialist, the mother started talking with the girls about her lunches with her friends at work, sharing fun times she was having with her church friends, and telling them things she was looking forward to doing while they were with their father. This took the pressure off them that they had been feeling in terms of worrying about their mom, and they could relax and enjoy their time with their dad.

*... But a few examples of how using a child specialist to listen to the voice of the children can benefit everyone ...*