

The Roles of the Mental Health Professional in the Collaborative Process
And
How to Choose a Mental Health Professional for the Collaborative Team

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Even when two adults have the best of intentions, communication can be strained and emotions can run high when they are ending their relationship as spouses. A normal and natural part of divorce is the experiencing of uncomfortable and distressing feelings, such as unhappiness, anger, guilt, frustration, blaming and anxiety. If the marriage includes children, they are at risk to suffer the most from a divorce and be least able to understand and express their feelings, and communication with their parents may be difficult if not impossible. In the midst of a divorce, even the most well-meaning parent can experience a clouded perspective on the needs and best interests of their children going forward. Including a Mental Health Professional (such as a Licensed Clinical Psychologist, Social Worker or Marriage and Family Therapist) on the Collaborative Divorce team can help to greatly reduce stress, improve communication among all parties, and-when children are involved-assist to represent their concerns, needs and wishes.

A Mental Health Professional (MHP) may serve on the Collaborative Team in two separate and distinct capacities; as a Divorce Coach or as a Child Specialist. Many, but not all, Collaborative Teams have two Divorce Coaches (one for each spouse) and a Child Specialist (serving both of the parents and the children, i.e., "neutral") in addition to the two attorneys and a Financial Professional (also, "neutral"). While it is beneficial for the MHP to have extensive experience in psychotherapy, his or her role on the Collaborative Divorce Team is significantly different from that of a therapist. Furthermore, by design, the MHP cannot be anyone's therapist before, during or after the Collaborative Divorce process. At the same time, the MHP can help ensure that the process is as respectful, productive, efficient and emotionally healthy as possible and that all parties can move forward with a plan for their separate lives and build a co-parenting relationship that they can feel good about.

The Role of the Divorce Coach

A Divorce Coach is engaged by each spouse for the duration of the process to help identify their respective interests, needs and goals for the present and the future, to help deal with emotions which may block the resolution of issues and to aid in strengthening communication among the spouses and the entire team. They provide skills at understanding nonverbal and verbal communication that can greatly facilitate keeping the process on-task in meetings and during information exchanges outside of meetings. In addition, when there are

children, the Divorce Coaches work with the parties to develop a Parenting Plan and assist them in making the transition from that of an emotionally engaged couple to a business-like problem-solving co-parenting relationship. The Divorce Coach also helps the parties identify and make the most of their strengths in order to be their "best self" during the stressful divorce process and to help them take positive steps to a new life.

The Divorce Coach can also promote valuable "life skills" that can be positively employed in the divorce process and beyond. These include:

- How to Identify "Hot Button" issues and triggers that one might be susceptible to (or that one might set off in a spouse) and develop alternative approaches that promote rather than de-rail the process
- Ways to expand options, creativity and flexibility and make positive and respectful requests and responses to the other party
- Brainstorming what one might do differently to positively change a problematic dynamic or 'log jammed' issue
- How to set short and long-term goals for oneself, any children and regarding healthy co-parenting

It should be noted that there are occasions when a Collaborative Team may effectively and efficiently include one "neutral" Divorce Coach to work with both spouses, individually and together.

The Role of the Child Specialist

The Child Specialist is engaged by both parents in a focused, short-term capacity for the specific purpose of advocating for the child during the divorce process. In addition, in order to aid in developing an appropriate Parenting Plan, the Child Specialist provides direct information from the child to the parents, Coaches, Attorneys and Financial Neutral about the child's needs and concerns. The Child Specialist focuses on the needs and interests of the children, enables the children to have a voice in the development of the Parenting Plan and helps to prevent the children from feeling "caught in the middle" between their parents. In addition, the Child Specialist does not take the side of either parent and focuses instead on communicating to both of them the needs and interests of their children. In brief, the Child Specialist performs three valuable roles:

- 1) Providing the child a safe setting within which to voice his/her concerns, feelings and wishes regarding the divorce and beyond.
- 2) Providing the parents information and guidance to help them assist their children to best deal with the divorce and the establishment of separate households.
- 3) Giving information to the Collaborative Team that will assist all parties to develop an effective Parenting Plan.

The Child Specialist should be an expert at understanding children and helping them to express their feelings and concerns. He or she provides a supportive, safe environment in which the child can:

- Feel listened to about their experience of the divorce
- Have an opportunity to ask questions
- Better understand what is happening to their family and seek clarification about and input into the changes in their lives
- Express their concerns, fears, wishes and hopes and have a "voice" in the process
- Receive support and comfort

With the parents (and with communication to the rest of the Team) the Child Specialist provides detailed discussion regarding the children's viewpoint and issues so that the parties can best meet the needs of their children. This information from the child's perspective can provide insight into how the child is coping. In addition, the Specialist may highlight any developmental issues, special needs and any concerns the youngster may manifest. The Child Specialist's input may be especially helpful for some parents in order to shift away from "my time" with the child to the child's time and needs, and away from financial issues regarding the child to their developmental and emotional needs.

It may be important to note that the Child Specialist does not make recommendations regarding custody, provide evaluation regarding mental illness, determine the appropriateness of parental actions, develop the Parenting Plan or provide a written report.

How to Choose a Mental Health Professional for the Collaborative Team

Given all of the important functions that a MHP can perform on a Collaborative Divorce Team, it is important to consider how to best choose a Divorce Coach or Child Specialist. The four key areas about which to gather information are the MHP's experience, education/training, recommendations, and personality 'fit'.

Experience: The MHP must be a licensed therapist with extensive experience working with individuals and couples and be an expert regarding the issues of separation and divorce. In addition, the Child Specialist should have extensive knowledge regarding child development and needs to be well-experienced in techniques that enhance the understanding of and communication with children and adolescents. He or she should also have expertise in understanding families and family systems, along with facility with various methods for assessing child and adult emotional and personality variables and determining a child's special needs. When younger children are involved, knowledge of Play Therapy approaches and projective techniques is essential in order to facilitate communication.

Education and Training: The MHP should have extensive training in psychotherapy, personality development and assessment. He or she should also be well-trained in understanding and dealing with a variety of challenges to communication, mood stability, rational thinking, mutual trust, respect and effective problem-solving. The Child Specialist also needs specific education and training in the expected behaviors, stages, challenges, and

tasks of the developing child. They should also have knowledge of and be able to identify and address the needs of the child as they go through the stages of divorce and the restructuring of the family. In addition to the above, every MHP who is a member of VaCP is required to have a significant amount of training in the Collaborative Process, including interdisciplinary collaborative training, mediation training, training in negotiation and communication skills and annual continuing education.

Recommendations/Referral: The professionals already on the Team (e.g., the attorneys) are in an excellent position to offer recommendations of well-qualified MHPs. They are aware of MHPs who are active in local Collaborative Practice groups and MHPs with whom they have worked effectively. They have also seen "first-hand" the communication skills of the MHP and their ability to relate with divorcing spouses and their skills at productively moving the process forward. An efficient way to gather information about a recommended MHP is to search for the specific professional through this website and/or by visiting the IACP website.

Personality Fit with Spouses and Children: An important consideration in choosing a MHP is the 'fit' between the professional's personality and style and the parties involved. Along with information on the website and recommendations, a telephone call to the MHP may help to gauge the goodness of fit. A key question to ask oneself is: "Is this someone in whom I can trust to help me (and my children) navigate the challenging emotional waters of a divorce and help to reach an agreement that all parties can feel good about as we move forward with our separate lives?" If children are involved, do you feel that this professional will be able to relate to them and enable them to communicate their concerns, feelings, wishes and needs? In addition, do you sense that he/she will help you better understand your children and assist you in formulating a plan to share parenting from different households that fosters good communication and is based on the best interests of the children?

Summary

A divorce is by its nature one of the most stressful experiences that adults can go through. When divorce involves children, how well the children adjust to the changing family depends in large measure on how well their parents interact with and treat each other and how well they co-parent and place their children's needs and concerns as a priority. A Mental Health Professional can be an invaluable resource to divorcing spouses, any children involved and to the entire Collaborative Divorce team by helping to foster a safe, supportive environment, minimizing emotional 'roadblocks', and promoting healthy communication, mutual problem-solving and the honest, respectful exchange of information. He or she can also help all parties on the team to stay on task and effectively and efficiently move forward with the divorcing couple's plan for their separate lives. They can also assist, where applicable, in enabling the fashioning of a Parenting Plan that has the best interests of the children paramount. At the end of a marriage, the building of an effective, respectful co-parenting relationship is one of the greatest gifts that divorcing couples can give their children--and themselves.