

Where Are the Child Specialists On Our Collaborative Divorce Teams? The Case for Value Added

by Bruce Fredenburg, M.S., LMFT, and Carol Hughes Ph.D., LMFT

(Any masculine reference shall also apply to females and any feminine reference shall also apply to males. In addition, for emphasis and easy distinction, we have chosen to capitalize the various professionals' roles.)

Collaborative Divorce is a family focused process. However, we have noticed a pervasive problem. Why is it so common that collaborative divorce teams are without a Child Specialist? Whenever a divorcing couple has children, it is our opinion that the professional team should always include a Child Specialist. However, we have witnessed that many collaborative professionals fail to understand the unique power of the CS and thus overlook a significant team asset by not including this important professional.

We have noticed that many Collaborative Divorce Teams continue to underestimate the necessity of the Child Specialist. We believe this is because many collaborative trainings neglect to explain and demonstrate this role fully. The result is that the legal, financial and even many mental health professionals lack an understanding of what the Child Specialist does. We hope this article will stimulate discussion and effect an understanding of the power of the Child Specialist to facilitate better outcomes.

It is well known that divorce has two tracks and they operate simultaneously: the Business Track and the Emotional Track. The Emotional Track can easily knock the Business Track off course and create enormous damage to the family, as well as cost the clients much more time and money. Although the Business Track is the realm of Lawyers and Financial Professionals, the Emotional Track benefits from the expertise of the Mental Health Professionals (Divorce Coaches and Child Specialists).

Often, the most highly emotionally charged concerns for parents going through divorce are the issues regarding their children. The Child Specialist can be the most effective agent for change on the team when the role is filled by a well trained, skillful Mental Health Professional (MHP), who also has expertise with children and parents experiencing divorce. This is especially so with high conflict couples. And yet, so many teams are formed without a Child Specialist, or at best, the Child Specialist is only brought in as an after thought, much like an extra in a movie brought in for a crowd shot or a minor scene.

Let's examine the value added by the Child Specialist:

- The Child Specialist is a powerful agent for change. We suggest you view a skilled Child Specialist, whether a male or female, as being like the queen of the collaborative divorce chessboard. With the requisite release and professional team agreement, the neutral Child Specialist can move in any direction without limits. Retained by both parents, equally, as the voice of their children, he is free to contact either parent, as appropriate, as well as all of the other professional team members, without fear of having crossed a boundary.
- The Child Specialist is also the only member of the professional team to see all of the family members interacting with each other. An experienced Child Specialist, trained in family systems and developmental issues of children experiencing divorce, can glean a wealth of information about family dynamics, emotional triggers and hidden agendas, such as family secrets and how the family deals with stress. Equipped with information that may otherwise stay hidden, the professional team can more effectively and

efficiently guide the family through the process, which increases the chances of success while also being more cost efficient.

- For high conflict couples, often the only basis for interest based negotiation is their mutual love and concern for their children. Divorce is a painful process. One or both parents might make decisions out of anger, or simply for pain relief. Experience, confirmed by neuroscience, tells us that, when people are angry and/ or afraid, these are the worst times to make decisions. In addition, agreements made under these conditions are rarely durable. Extra time and money is spent trying to maintain troublesome agreements or undo them. The Child Specialist, acting as “the voice of the children” in all meetings, including financial meetings, can bring change into the room by shifting the focus and therefore the emotional climate. A well timed intervention as ‘the voice of their children’ in a non-judgmental, proactive way is a powerful intervention.
- Although the Child Specialist is specifically not an evaluator, many couples don’t fully understand this. Thus, high conflict couples are often better behaved when the Child Specialist is present. This can be very useful during meetings focused on the Business Track of divorce, such as meetings with the neutral FP. Most divorce professionals have experienced such meetings turn unproductive and grind to a halt when excessive anger or tears have overcome one or both parents. Again, the Child Specialist, equipped with pictures of the children and sufficient, first-hand knowledge to voice the children’s real concerns can bring the parents back to what is most important to them. This creates a foundation for interest based negotiations at times when nothing else can bring the couple to consensual agreements.

With these points in mind, when entering into such a challenging endeavor as guiding clients through a peaceful, respectful divorce, we ask, “Why would we want to start the process by leaving our most powerful tool unopened in the box? How many of us would begin a chess match by removing our queen from the board before we start?”

Here are some common rationales for this mistake:

- The couple doesn’t see the need. “The kids are fine or will be fine.”
- The children are older, i.e., adolescents or adult children so, “Why the need?”
- More professionals cost too much. “Why should I pay for another professional?”

Let’s examine each of these rationales and see if they withstand scrutiny.

- The couple doesn’t see the need – This belief is often misleading. Parents want to think that their children are ok or will be ok. In addition, children don’t want to share negative information with their parents, especially a parent who appears to be in pain or with one who appears to be dispassionate about the divorce. Whether the parents are overwhelmed by their pain or comfortably distant, their children are often at risk.



Drawn by a child whom the parents say is “fine”.

This picture conveys volumes about the inner world of this child. In a Collaborative Divorce without a Child Specialist, how would the parents and the professionals know

the actual emotional state of this child? Without such insight, how would the coaches assist the parents to craft the most effective parenting plan?

- The children are older - Older children are more likely able to notice when one parent is too upset to hear about more problems and may tell their parents whatever they think they need to hear. Parents dealing with their own emotional issues are less available as parents. Adolescents going into the high risk years may be left without an effective parental support system. The result is that they are left to process their own grief and loss by themselves or with nothing more than a committee of other teenagers. Minor children need to be reassured that they still have their family, albeit restructuring. The Child Specialist can enroll the adult children to stay connected with their minor siblings. In addition, most parents are surprised to find out how much adult children are impacted by the divorce. The impact reaches far beyond the obvious worry and guilt about which parents to visit on holidays and how to connect the grandchildren with each grandparent.
- More professionals cost too much – Whenever someone asks, “Why should I pay for another professional?” they are actually asking two different questions with two different answers. The first is, “What value do I get for my money?” and the second is, “How much will it cost me if I don’t make the investment?” Here, we must examine the value added in exchange for the cost and the damage done if the investment isn’t made. Couples make these decisions all the time, “How much will it cost us to repair the brakes on the car? And, what could it cost if we don’t?”

Including the Child Specialist from the beginning of the Collaborative Divorce process is more cost effective in dollars and cents. As stated above, divorce involves two tracks: the Business Track – the Lawyers and the Financial Professionals have the skill set for this track, and the Emotional Track – the Coaches and the Child Specialist have the skill set for this track. Much of the co-parenting plan involves dealing with the rocky areas of the emotional track. Experienced Coaches know that without the Child Specialist they and the parents are likely lacking some of the most important information. The financial savings of resolving these emotional problems with a team of Coaches and Child Specialist can be significant. Sensible MHPs know that they cannot handle the legal track. Sensible lawyers know that they cannot handle the emotional track as effectively as an MHP.

Including the Child Specialist from the beginning of the Collaborative Divorce process, delivers to the clients a better and more cost effective work product. Whether the professional team consists of two Coaches or one Coach, not all Coaches are trained and experienced in working with children. Therefore, it is a mistake to assume that the Coach(es) can assist the parents to create an effective co-parenting plan without the input of a Child Specialist. Even when the coaches are also experienced Child Specialists, unless they are freed to be solely the voice of the children, their input can be compromised. Without the input of the Child Specialist, the professional team risks assisting the clients to develop an inferior work product. Who wants that? Their children’s welfare is probably the most important interest in their lives.

Omitting the Child Specialist is usually an expensive mistake in terms of money and emotional costs. A similar mistake is bringing the Child Specialist into the process late. This sends a message to the parents that their professional team considers the Child Specialist as a less important member of the team, therefore, the Clients will as well. In either case, the professional team has unwittingly disarmed the Child Specialist by underestimating the importance of the role. The Child Specialist could be the only team member who might get the Clients to agree. Bringing the Child Specialist into the process at the beginning acknowledges her as a coequal member of the professional team. This elevates the clients’ perception of the Child Specialist, which increases her influence and thus her likelihood for success.

Bringing in the proper professionals at the beginning, delivers better services for value added. Collaborative Divorce differentiates from other dissolution of marriage processes in that it's family-centric. Since children are part of the family and since the divorce affects them as well, the job of the Child Specialist is to keep the children in the center and out of the middle of the divorce.

In summation, it seems that the professionals' reluctance to include the Child Specialist as a co-equal member of the professional team by either omitting the position or failing to have the Child Specialist present at the beginning of the case, stems from the same mistake: Underestimating the power and value of this position.

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Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., is a licensed marriage, family and child therapist, a board-certified clinical hypnotherapist, an EMDR therapist and a former professor of Human Services at Saddleback College. In private practice in Laguna Hills, CA, since 1983, Dr. Hughes is a respected expert and sought-after speaker on the effects of divorce on children. In 2003 she became one of the founding members of Collaborative Divorce Solutions of Orange County, and is also a co-founder of and trainer for the Collaborative Divorce Education Institute in Orange County, CA, a non-profit organization, whose mission is to educate the public about peaceful options for divorce, as well as to provide quality training for collaborative divorce professionals. She frequently trains and mentors collaborative practitioners and has appeared on the Time Warner Public television series "How to Get a Divorce". Carol has been a presenter at conferences of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals and at California's annual statewide conferences for collaborative professionals. In 2011 Carol was honored with the Eureka Award, which recognizes those who have made significant contributions and demonstrated an abiding dedication to establishing and sustaining Collaborative Practice in California. For a complete listing of her collaborative practice training and teaching workshops please visit www.CollaborativePractice.com, the website of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals, and click on the "Locate a Collaborative Professional near you" link. In addition, please visit her website at www.DivorcePeacemaking.com and www.CDEI.info.

Bruce Fredenburg, M.S., LMFT, with Board Certification in Clinical Hypnosis has been a licensed therapist since 1982. He has extensive training in mediation and in the interdisciplinary team model of collaborative practice, and has also trained in the one coach model. He also is trained and experienced in the management of chronic pain, dealing with trauma, chemical dependency and addictions. As one of the founding members of Collaborative Divorce Solutions of Orange County (CDSOC) in 2003, he serves as a Divorce Coach, Child Specialist and Case Manager. Bruce has held the position of Chair of CDSOC's Training and Education Committee, which provides monthly training for the practice group, Vice-President, which provides monthly training and President-Elect. Bruce has twice been a presenter at California's annual statewide conference for collaborative professionals and has appeared on the Time Warner Public television series "How to Get a Divorce". He is the author of Two Audio Learning Programs: "Men and Women: How to Understand Each Other", and "Take the Pain Out of Change", and a compact disc recording Anti-anxiety Tool: "Profound Relaxation." Bruce was recruited to create and teach parenting classes for Adoptive and Foster Parents for County of Orange Social Services Agency. He has published articles on Male-Female Communication for "Sharing Ideas" a national magazine dedicated to professional speakers, trainers and meeting planners. An award winning speaker, he has presented training programs for corporations, government agencies, schools, and professional associations since 1989. Bruce is also a trainer for the Collaborative Divorce Education Institute (CDEI), a non-profit organization, whose mission is to educate the public about Collaborative Divorce, as well as provide quality training for collaborative divorce professionals in the Southern California area.