

Collaborative Family Law

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Welcome to the spring edition of our newsletter, featuring the role of divorce coaching in the collaborative separation process. By supporting people to address the emotional issues involved in their separation, divorce coaches pave the way for respectful negotiation of their separation agreement, potentially limiting legal costs. Divorce coaches are also invaluable in assisting people to create effective communications and structures which best support their children. In the articles which follow, Robert Blank discusses how divorce coaches help people create healthy post-separation families, and Charlotte Sutker offers guidance for parents to help their children manage transitions between their parents. Collaborative process recognizes that while divorce ends a marriage, it doesn't end a family, and divorce coaches are there to help people achieve the best possible outcomes for their unique situations.

Divorce Coaching – How Does it Help Me and My Family?

“My son tells me that his father ‘drinks beers’ while in his care and tells our son he does not have to wear his seat belt in the car. I want my son to spend time with his father but I am concerned about his safety.”

“I want equal parenting time with our two young daughters. Their mother says that she is uncomfortable with me having the children on an equal basis, that I lack parenting skills, and that she is the primary care giver. Why do I have to prove that I am a caring loving father to get equal time with my children?”

These are typical issues that divorce coaching helps parents resolve. Family separation and restructuring forces parents to deal with these and many other emotionally charged issues and concerns. Without professional support these discussions can easily escalate to increasing negative interactions between the parents. This on-going conflict emotionally harms the children. The inability to communicate about parenting concerns, the heightened negative emotional climate in which the family lives, and the consequential dysfunctional behaviors, affect the financial, emotional, mental, and physical health of all family members. There may also be a tendency to create “negative alliances” where one or both parents reach out for allies to support the one-sided, destructive view of the other parent. This can affect the friendship circle that the family has created as well as negatively affect future generations.

Divorce coaching supports the parents and the family through the separation process by giving the parents information and skills to more effectively communicate parenting issues and to better manage the strong emotions that are generated in family separation. The skills that the coaches teach include: how to listen fully, as well as how to state individual concerns in a respectful manner, owning one's own perceptions, observations, and opinions. Coaches also support the process of making and responding to proposals and keeping agreements. The information and skills learned through this process supports the parents in moving from a personal, marital relationship to a respectful co-parenting partnership. The prime directive in the Family Law Act in B.C. is that the separation agreement supports the best interests of the children. A strong parental alliance promotes a supportive environment for the children. While family separation is a crisis for both the parents and the children it is also an opportunity to develop effective communication skills to improve the quality of life and the life of the children. Divorce coaching is an integral part of this process.

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Robert Blank is a registered psychologist and a divorce coach with the Collaborative Family Separation Professionals.

Transitions: The Transferring of Children from One Parent or Caregiver to Another

When parents are sharing the care of children there are times when they are directly transferring the children from one parent to another. This can be avoided when the transfer happens at daycare or school and the other parent is not present. However, even when transfers usually occur at a neutral place, there are times when it isn't possible due to daycare or school closings or when the a special event takes precedence, such as a family member's birthday.

Here are a few guidelines to help transitions go smoothly for both your children and you.

1. Remember that your children love both of you. When there is conflict or tension between you, your children are caught in the middle between you. Directly or indirectly, they are being asked to choose sides. This is emotionally traumatic for them and can create insecurity in them. It is very important that they are not put in this position.
2. Therefore, treat the other parent (and their family and friends) with courtesy and respect. This may be the most important thing you can do. At transitions smile and say something like: "Have a good time," or "See you in --- days."
3. Do not discuss any issues or bring up anything that needs to be decided between the two of you at transitions. Talk about what you did with the children. Report anything that the other parent needs to know such as the child seems to be getting a cold or the child fell and cut a knee. Anything that is of greater concern needs to be done when the children are not nearby.
4. When transfers are not at daycare or school, it is easier for the children if they are taken by the parent they are leaving to the parent they will be with next. It is more difficult for the children if they are in the home of a parent and the other parent comes there to pick them up.
5. Have positive override toward the other parent. That is, give them the benefit of the doubt. For example, if they are late in bringing the children, think of them as being human, just like you, and not always getting it right, even if they are always late. It may be the quirk that irritated you when you were together and it still does, but being irritated about it now only makes life difficult for your children.
6. Say goodbye in a matter of fact, yet loving, manner. Don't cling to the children. Don't tell them to call you if they are scared or worried. Don't imply that they are not going to have a safe and pleasant time with the other parent. However, if you are truly worried about your children's safety, talk to your coach, the child specialist, or your lawyer. With their help you can clarify the nature of your concern and what action to take. In some cases, this may require a report to child protection services.
7. Children automatically bond with the parent they are with. This is hardwired into them for their survival. When children are going to leave a parent and go to the other parent, they sometimes protest. A parent can read into this protest that the other parent is not doing a good job parenting, rather than it is the children's natural reluctance to let go of what is familiar at that moment, you, and go to the other parent. Trusting that the children love the other parent and are fine, in spite of this momentary protest, is important. Again, if you are truly worried about the children's well-being while in the care of the other parent, talk to professionals to get a reality check.

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