

Building a full spectrum divorce services niche practice

By Lauren Behrman, Ph.D.

The epidemic of divorce offers significant opportunities for psychologists looking to expand their practices. In addition to traditional roles of custody evaluator and therapist, new roles have evolved in the last two decades including parent coordinator, mediator, co-parent counselor and collaborative divorce neutral coach, divorce coach and child specialist.

These roles have emerged out of the recognition that adversarial processes inflame conflict, negatively impact children and damage parents' ability to co-parent children post divorce. Additionally, many of these roles typically do not involve court appearances by the psychologist.

As psychologists, our skills and knowledge of children's developmental issues are crucial in this work, as many parents are looking for a neutral expert to help them make decisions when they are at an impasse. In addition, our knowledge in systems thinking, life cycle transitions and conflict resolution creates a strong foundation of skills that can be applied to this clinical role. Our training in dealing with people in crisis and with different personality styles comes



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into play. Many families present with special needs children and our knowledge of these conditions, resources and interventions is germane.

This author discovered this niche practice in 2000 at a workshop at an APA convention. The idea of working directly with divorced parents together to focus their energies on communicating more effectively and collaborating in an effort to protect their children from toxic conflict was intriguing.

Working with divorced parents in co-parent counseling proved to be a powerful intervention. In a relatively short period of time, there were significant behavioral

changes as parents were taught to reinvent their post-divorce parenting relationships into business partnerships focusing on how they could best meet the needs of their children.

For many parents, particularly those who were battle-weary following prolonged court battles, this approach was a welcome relief. Having a structure, container and neutral presence to help them work on communication, conflict resolution, problem solving and anger management skills and address their children's needs in real time without judges, courts and attorneys quickly provided a way out of a deep dark hole. Psychologists can train in co-parent counseling through various private organizations.

In the early 2000s, the role of "Parent Coordinator" began to emerge. This role involves facilitating decision-making in post-divorced parent dyads and may or may not include tie-breaking authority, depending on how the order or agreement is written. Specialized training to become a parent coordinator is offered through national organizations such as AFCC (Association of Family and Conciliation Courts) and APA as well as through private entities. Mentoring and peer supervision groups are excellent for skill building and dealing with challenges that arise in this work.

Mediation has long been around as a legal process for resolving disputes in a non-adversarial manner. Mediation training is required for the role of Collaborative Divorce practitioner, and with these skills, psychologists can also practice mediation of parenting plans, parenting issues and other disputes. There are numerous mediation trainings available.

Collaborative divorce team practice is a relatively new field, which has grown out of the collaborative law movement. Simply put, the Collaborative Divorce model is a paradigm shift in the culture of divorce, a shift away from seeing divorce as a battle to be fought and toward looking at it as a problem to be solved.

In this process, each divorcing spouse is represented by his or her own collaboratively trained attorney. The attorneys sign an agreement stating that they will not go to court, and both must leave the case if either of the clients seeks litigation. This process recognizes that the transition of divorce is not simply a legal problem, but a complex multifaceted challenge for all members of the family.

An interdisciplinary professional team is formed that consists of mental health professional(s), a neutral financial specialist and a neutral child specialist. The team functions to assist the couple in creating their divorce agreement and a smooth (not adversarial) transition for their family. As a psychologist on a collaborative team, one can function either as a neutral process facilitator, divorce coach or a neutral child specialist.

In order to learn how to do this work, there are a number of additional professional trainings that are required. There is a parent organization, International Association of Collaborative Professionals (IACP), that offers introductory and advanced training for psychologists along with attorneys and financial professionals. Chapters of IACP at the state level offer training and networking opportunities. There are also private institutes and training centers.

In summary, there is a great deal of opportunity for psychologists to develop a niche specialty practice in divorce services. Our skill sets in child development, systems thinking, communication and conflict resolution, augmented by training in parent coordination, mediation and interdisciplinary collaborative practice position us to develop thriving practices that are free from managed care.

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