

Child Specialist's Role in Collaborative Cases

Beth I. Wilner, Ph.D. & John Palen, Ph.D.

- Primary Goal is to keep the needs of the child(ren) at the center of the process
- Neutral specialist to the parents and the team, who brings expertise on child development and family systems theory to the collaborative process
- Meet with each parent individually, and both jointly to:
 - Help parents identify their children's needs, parenting goals, and co-parenting plan/mission statement for the future
 - Support and educate parents to put aside their conflict to focus on their children's needs
 - Teach and model effective listening and communication skills for co-parenting and between parent-child
 - Work with parents to reach agreements that will become part of their JPA: parenting time schedule (baseline, holidays, vacations), educational goals, significant others, right of first refusal, communication between parents and between parent-child(ren), children's special needs, etc...
 1. CS may communicate this info to the coach(es) who then craft the parenting plan -- OR --
 2. CS may work directly with the parents to craft the parenting plan
 3. In either scenario, the attorneys draft the formal JPA according to the outlined set of agreements the parents have reached through their work with the CS
 - Identify dysfunctional family dynamics (i.e. splitting, triangulation, loyalty binds), and help the parents, and the team, restructure these dynamics
 - Educating about co-parenting and key concepts to benefit the children (i.e. consistency across both homes, eliminate exposure to parental conflict, avoid disparaging remarks about co-parent, common approach to discipline and limit setting, consistent approach to homework completion, consistent sleep routine, shared philosophy and limits regarding exposure to Internet, video games, social media sites, etc.)
 - Offer referrals to other professionals as needed
 - The CS, with agreement from the team and both parents, may remain involved with, and available to the co-parents post-divorce, to help the family with the difficult adjustments they all will make during the first 1-2 years post-divorce.

- Meet with the child(ren) individually and as a sibling group to:
 - Help the children have a voice in the process, and have their needs and preferences heard; may help them feel somewhat empowered in the process
 - Help the child(ren) voice feelings and concerns that the parents may be unaware of, and help translate that to the parents
 - May help the children identify their needs and struggles with the changing family system—different from a therapy process
 - May assess how the child(ren) is adapting to the changes (i.e. trial parenting plan)
 - Talk or meet with other professionals involved with the children to bring other relevant data to the parents' decision-making process (i.e. therapists, psychiatrists, OT, PT, teachers, tutors), and to ensure the CS involvement with the child(ren) does not compromise or conflict with their individual therapy
 - Offer referrals to other professionals as needed

- Confidentiality
 - Stress to the children that the CS will be sharing some of their thoughts to their parents and the team, to inform the decision-making process
 - Determine what issues or concerns the children do not want the CS to disclose
 - Information from child meetings is shared in general terms and not as direct quotes from the children
 - Stress to the parents that discussions that occur during the CL process should not be shared with the children, or discussed within earshot of the children
 - Stress to the parents up front that the CS will not hold “secrets” that could create bad faith negotiations
 - Confidentiality with the CS is not the same as in formal therapy; create the understanding up front that the information gathered is intended to be shared with the team, to assist with problem solving and reaching mutually satisfactory agreements