

Why Have an Adult Child Specialist During A Collaborative Divorce?

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When a divorcing couple has adult children, either living with them or out of the house, parents may often rely on their kids emotionally and share more than even adult kids can or want to handle. Just because kids are legal adults doesn't mean they aren't strongly and adversely impacted by their parents' divorce. How parents tell adult kids they're divorcing, and interact with them throughout the divorce can have multiple detrimental effects, including their views of their parents, their relationships with siblings, and even how the adult children select partners and parent their own kids in the future.

Parents are never at their best when they're in a divorce, and they can easily engage adult children in ways that put them in the middle of disputes. Parents in crisis are more vulnerable to putting their own needs and concerns first, without fully considering the short or long-term impact on their adult children. This is typical – not the exception – so parents and kids need extra help.

In one case I was involved with, the adult children were used as mediators, to determine who should get what. One parent would say: "Well, Susie thinks I should get X." The other replied: "Well, Johnny says I should get X." This type of interaction between co-parents and kids can tear apart a family, and infuse it with a tension that is likely to go unchecked, and increase over time. This kind of dynamic also establishes the kids as having some kind of legitimate role and responsibility for the parents' divorce discourse, when they don't!

You can imagine how this kind of tension and undue responsibility placed on adult kids can spill over onto college graduations, weddings, baby showers – any future family event. Imagine what it will be like for these adult kids when they need to figure out seating arrangements and guest lists for their weddings. We didn't have an Adult Child Specialist on this case, and I will always regret it. Divorce is typically a traumatic life crisis, and divorcing parents may not fully register how extremely taxing it is, even for adult children, to be included in their parents' divorce discourse.

Collaborative Divorce IS Getting Better at Considering the Needs of Children

It used to be that in a Collaborative Divorce, attorneys were often opposed to including, or even seeing the need for a Child Specialist (CS) – much less an Adult Child Specialist (ACS) -- given the added expense. Without attorney buy-in, it is very difficult to get parents in crisis to understand the critical need for a Child Specialist or an Adult Child Specialist.

One of the biggest challenges for Coaches (Licensed Mental Health Professionals) in a Collaborative Case occurs when a Child Specialist (CS) or Adult Child Specialist (ACS) is *not* brought on board *at the very beginning* of a Collaborative Divorce. Without a CS or ACS, the Coaches for each spouse are extremely limited in terms of what they can do to protect or consider the kids. Why? Parents going through a divorce may be more vulnerable than they have ever been, and given the intense upheaval of divorce, they are naturally prone to wanting the Coaches' attention on *them*.

For example, when the Collaborative Coach for a spouse attempts to raise parenting issues about adult or even young children, this attention to parenting is often experienced as an unsolicited intrusion – "My life as I knew it is on the line right now. I'm losing my house, I have to move, my finances are cut by more than half and parenting isn't my primary concern this minute - so why are you making it *yours*? I need you to be here for *me*." Parents are in the midst of an overwhelming and all-absorbing life crisis.

Consequently, young, as well as adult children need a neutral advocate to help bring parental attention to the impact of parents on their kids *during* the divorce. The CS and the ACS are “the voice of the children,” regardless of age, in a Collaborative Divorce. The two Coaches *must* rely on the neutral, Child/Adult Child Specialist to *raise* the issues of concern to the children, *before* the Coaches can address parenting and co-parenting concerns.

Even one or two sessions with a CS or ACS can give legitimacy to the children’s concerns, and redirect parents to consider their impact and how to secure the wellbeing of their children going forward, regardless of age.

The Value of an Adult Child Specialist (ACS)

In another case I was involved with, the adult children were in their early 30s and were both having major substance abuse issues. The onset of the substance abuse coincided with the onset of the parents’ talk of divorce. One adult child was abusing painkillers, and the other got a DUI and only didn’t die from alcohol intoxication because he was also using cocaine. Even so, the Coaches had to fight to get an Adult Child Specialist on board. Given the recent substance abuse issues, the entire team and the parents agreed in the first full-team meeting to the need for an Adult Child Specialist. Between meetings, the parents became concerned about the additional cost of an ACS, and the attorneys retracted their support because the kids were adults and they were already in therapy for substance abuse.

The problem with this reasoning was that the kids’ therapists were focused on treatment and recovery for substance abuse - not the adverse impact of each parent on the adult children regarding divorce. Furthermore, when adult kids experience their parents suffering in a divorce, it’s hard for even adult kids to speak up about what it’s like for them to carry the burden of that parental suffering.

Mental health professionals in a Collaborative Divorce do not provide therapy – their job is to facilitate effective communication and help couples manage their emotions enough to get to the divorce finish line. So, understandably, on the surface it appeared reasonable to the attorneys on this case to eliminate the ACS option to save the parents some money. Yet, without the ACS, the Coaches’ hands were tied – we could not address how each parent was: using the adult children as a weapon against the other parent (i.e. “weaponizing” them), sharing their own detailed concerns in ways that distressed their kids, and competing for each adult child’s favor. After both Coaches insisted strongly, the parents eventually agreed, but only allowed for literally a 1-hour session of the ACS with each child.

That one hour was priceless. Afterwards, the two Coaches met together with the ACS and parents for one meeting, and the parents were able to acknowledge how they had been hurting their kids’ from the kids’ perspectives. Once the adult kids’ concerns were voiced by the ACS, the parents were able to allow the Coaches to address co-parenting and parenting issues to ensure the kids were more effectively shielded from their parents’ divorce trauma/drama going forward. This helped free the kids from trying to absorb and help manage their parents’ divorce-related distress, while also managing their own recovery. Both parents ended up wanting more sessions for their children with the ACS, once they saw the benefit to their relationships with their children, and to their children.

None of this kind of support and consideration is available, even remotely, in any divorce process other than Collaborative Divorce.

Why Collaborative?

I started thinking how there had to be a better way to divorce in 2006, when my own divorce occurred. I had heard about Collaborative Divorce, and my then-husband was steered towards traditional litigation. At that time, there were no local “Divorce Options Workshops” available so that he might hear about different ways to divorce from someone other than me (Please see CollaborativeDivorceCalifornia.com website for a workshop near you! <https://collaborativedivorcecalifornia.com/divorce-options/>).

One of my favorite mottos is “When in deep water, become a diver.” So I got trained in Mediation as well as in Collaborative Divorce, hoping I might help steer families away from how my own family experienced divorce, and the long-term lingering effects of that. My hope was to help couples and families divorce in a way that was kinder and more respectful than court litigation, when mediation isn’t enough to get a distressed couple to the divorce finish line.

Everything I aspire to protect and provide as a Divorce Coach or Child/Adult Child Specialist in a Collaborative Divorce is what cannot be protected or provided in any other kind of divorce process. The adversarial context of a litigated divorce typically blocks effective communication between co-parents, raises distrust and fails to provide specialized support for children, such that a family’s future interactions are at serious risk for being forever colored by an ancient discord. Collaborative Divorce is all about increasing trust, facilitating respectful communication, and considering the wellbeing of all family members.

LACFLA not only provides training for professionals in Collaborative Practice (Lacfla.org), but also advocates for collaborative practice in the community. Families of modest means can seek a Collaborative Divorce through Loyola Law School’s Center for Conflict Resolution, where volunteer professionals (financial specialists, family law attorneys and mental health professionals like me) help provide for a family’s future wellbeing.

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