

## **Critical Issues in Divorce Professional Services to Ease the Process**

by Joan E. Schiff MA, LMHC, OTR/L

*The* decision to divorce sets in motion a series of transitions requiring psychological, physical, and financial adaptations on the part of all the family members. Over the last 20 years it has become apparent that the special needs of children and adults of divorce do not end with the finalization of the divorce. It is no longer considered acceptable for the rights of the children to be ignored, fathers to receive minimal visitation time, or mothers to struggle with inadequate financial and emotional support in raising their children. More fathers are being granted primary custody and stipulations are being put into place to secure safe living environments for children. Family members and professionals rely on the use of counseling and evaluations to determine visitation schedules, and adjunct health and educational services to promote the best interests of the children, maximize each parent's skill level, and set guidelines to diminish conflict, and encourage cooperation between the parents. Even in situations where children are not involved, the emotional and financial toll of divorce impacts the individual's work performance and social adeptness; thus warranting intervention. The following outlines the range of services available to you and your family by a trained mental health counselor.

***Counseling:*** Counseling during the divorce process focuses on strategies and support to reduce stress, education to prepare families or individuals for the legal process, anticipated grief, emotional reactions, and practical concerns. Initially, there may be a sense of relief that an untenable situation is being brought to a close but over time; lost hopes and dreams, decreased contact with former loved ones, and the disruption daily routines can elicit anxiety and despair. Documentation required by the courts becomes a full time job within itself. Professional help can assist in maintaining the focus of the objective and reestablishing priorities at any given time. Your children may even request a neutral party to talk with. Many groups are available to children and adults, as well as, family therapy and individual counseling

Counseling post divorce may occur anytime over the childrearing years as the needs and demands of parents and children change. The emphasis in counseling is placed on developing coping mechanisms, and parenting skills in keeping with the developmental needs of the children. The framework for a new family unit or single life takes time to establish. Many people experience a realignment of priorities and values. It is certainly not out of keeping to find venturing out into the world once again a foreign and isolating process that can be eased within an accepting therapeutic environment.

There are situations that require special intervention. For example, when a parent has been absent from a child's life for an extended period of time, professionals provide education to both parents supporting an emotionally safe re-entry of that adult into the child's life. Sometimes the court will require that visitation with a parent be supervised until the response and the aptitude of the parent can be assessed and the well-being of the child is not in jeopardy.

**Consultation:** Before contacting an attorney, finalizing an agreement, or considering a modification of a current parenting plan it is often wise to consult with a professional who can help you comprehend the language and determine the best course of action for your family. This may include reviewing the clinical and practical meaning of reports, documents, and parenting evaluations. The counselor may help you arrive at alternative options for visitation schedules and adjunct professional services. At times collaboration with other professionals is warranted on your behalf.

**Mediation:** The role of the mediator is to preside as a neutral agent between two parties. Mediators are being employed on a greater scale than ever as a dispute resolution option and to keep the cost of legal fees down. The mediator helps the two parties establish priorities, negotiate, and compromise to arrive at decisions agreeable to both sides. The mediation model is an excellent tool that individuals can learn to utilize on their own to cope with the ongoing issues inherent with divorce. Mediation sets a tone of cooperation and alleviates the anxiety of entering into an adversarial legal process.

**Parenting Evaluations:** Parenting evaluations can be requested by the parents, suggested by the attorneys, or court mandated in cases involving serious allegations. These allegations may include: domestic violence, physical or sexual abuse of the children, or mental illness of the parents. The findings and recommendations cover the residential placement of the child, visitation schedule, decision-making allocation, dispute resolution options, counseling and educational needs and services. The format of the evaluation may include: an interview with each parent, observation of the child or children with each parent, interviews with individuals who have information regarding each parent's parenting abilities, investigation of allegations, psychological testing if necessary, and review of legal documents or prior evaluations or treatment notes. The findings and recommendations are reviewed with both attorneys and presented in written format for legal purposes.

**Co-Parent Counseling:** The degree of parental conflict following divorce appears to be primary factor in determining the emotional well-being, social, and academic adeptness of children post divorce. The objective of co-parent counseling, which differs greatly from couples or family counseling, is to diminish conflict, improve cooperation between the parents, and reduce post divorce litigation. Mental health counselors specifically trained as co-parent counselors are aware of the degree of distress, anxiety, and fear that surrounds and fuels conflict. They encourage both parents to focus on the best interests of the children and put their personal strife aside. The goals of co-parent counseling include: enhancing communication skills, teaching negotiation and problem solving skills, education regarding child development and thereby arriving at realistic expectations, facilitating consistency across households, fostering an atmosphere of respect, and establishing healthy boundaries between the parents. Co-parent counseling is a relatively new treatment modality that is being rapidly sanctioned by the court system.

**In Summary:** Tremendous progress has been made over the last two decades in the number of services available to families and individuals going through or post divorce.

Before deciding upon the avenue of professional help you would like to pursue it is wise to research your options, ask many questions, and take the time to assess your family's needs. It is no longer necessary to feel blindsided or intimidated by what at one time was the mystique and power of the legal system.

***Joan Elyse Schiff*** is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor, Licensed Occupational Therapist, and Certified Parenting Evaluator,. She received her Masters degree from New York University in 1979 and has an extensive background in psychiatry, with additional training in chemical dependency counseling and domestic mediation.