



Columbine Counseling Center

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Divorce and Emotional Impasse: Can We Resolve or Contain Conflict ?

Since the beginning of no fault divorce, judges, lawyers and mental health professionals have struggled with how to assist divorcing families. A variety of service options evolved, including Custody Evaluations, Mediation and Divorce Therapy. All three attempt to disentangle the emotional impasse of many divorce family systems.

In recent years, an array of services seeking to compliment the aforementioned has emerged. When there was a divorce related disruption in a relationship between a child and parent, we provided Therapeutic Visitation services. Divorce specific seminars, designed to prevent parents from developing emotional impasse, were implemented. More recently, the courts have used Special Advocates and Special Masters to provide additional information about families undergoing the pressures of a divorce.

On the reverse side of this page, I have organized these approaches along three dimensions: time frame, degree of conflict, and reasonable option. A parenting rights and responsibilities act (H.B. 98 -1183) is likely to become law in 1999. We will enter a period in which residential schedules, parenting plan specifications and delineation of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, rather than residential, sole and joint custody are viewed as critical issues in our attempts to prevent, contain or resolve divorce related conflict.

Lest we become overly optimistic, I believe emotional impasse will continue to be a difficulty with this population. Targeting services at different phases in the divorce process, coupled with increased precision in our early understanding of the form of conflict occurring in a family, will provide people with the most efficient help. Our task is to understand which family to provide which service and at which time.

Special Advocates can provide the courts with an early understanding of a family's emotional process, giving us the opportunity to minimize the corrosive effects of Parental Alienation, for example. In cases where there are entrenched emotional difficulties, however, the use of Special Advocates as a replacement for Custody Evaluations, while a cost saving measure, may be harmful to children and/or escalate conflict, if recommendations are not well informed. Reunification Therapy (or Therapeutic Parenting Time) must be understood as a

process with no guarantee of a particular outcome. Mediation and Parenting Plan Consultation services can help those with some cooperative ability. Parent Coordinators should be used with families where the prospects of reduced conflict are doubtful. Finally, The title Custody Evaluation will go by the board, but in it's place will be Parenting Plan Evaluations, necessary in many cases for a full understanding of what is in the best interest of children.

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