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Divorce: Co-parenting that works

By **Gail Rosenblum**, Star Tribune

July 30, 2007

Third of three parts

Want to trash your ex-spouse's parenting skills? Point out that he lets the kids watch "CSI," or that she dresses the first-grader like a Bratz doll? Want to explain again why you should have custody of the kids full-time?

Go on then. But don't expect Terri Romanoff-Newman to bite her tongue. Romanoff-Newman is a licensed psychologist whose clientele is primarily divorcing couples. In other words, she's seen and heard pretty much everything. Yet she's never abandoned her belief that divorcing parents are capable of surprising selflessness on behalf of their children even if, right now, they really do hate each other.

"It's so good to see people grow, from feeling raw to creating a new chance to do everything right," said Romanoff-Newman, who has offices in Minnetonka.

Nearly half of all marriages end in divorce; most involve children. For decades, those children didn't have much of a chance to experience cordial co-parenting, caught as they were in the verbal crossfire between two people they loved. Ugly scenarios still play out regularly, but no longer exclusively. Instead of twisting in a win-lose court system, a growing number of parents are turning to a win-win world inhabited by a new breed of largely non-legal professionals.

Romanoff-Newman, for example, also works in the growing fields of "divorce coaching," and "parenting consulting." Some parents find her through word of mouth, through their attorneys or by court order.

As a divorce coach, she guides parents through the often devastating early phases of a split, advising them on how to talk to children of different ages, how to communicate with one another to prevent a bad situation from becoming worse, and how to keep kids out of the middle. As a parenting consultant, she helps with post-divorce parenting problems, being careful not to take sides.

Romanoff-Newman frequently teams up "child specialists," who focus on children to get a handle on where they are emotionally and developmentally, and what they need to thrive. "Financial neutrals" might also play a role, giving parents a nonjudgmental review of what they do and don't have in the bank now and moving forward.

Businesses, too, are springing up in support of successful post-divorce parenting. Edina-based Ourfamilywizard.com, for example, is a scheduling website designed to help families manage the chaos of daily activities from different addresses. On a recent episode of "All of Us," on the CW

Network, divorced Mom and Dad do a "nesting" scenario, in which they move in and out of the family home so their son doesn't have to.

And last fall, Ford aired a controversial TV commercial as part of its "Bold Moves" campaign, in which a family spends a delightful weekend shopping, driving and hanging out at the beach. At the end of the day, though, Dad is dropped off at his apartment. "Thanks for inviting me this weekend," he says as he hugs his kids and mom throws him a bittersweet smile.

Bloggers had plenty to say about the ad, some chiding Ford for putting Daddy in a "sad, recent-divorce condo complex." But one viewer wrote: "I thought the ad was bold and innovative. It portrays a post-divorce husband and wife who are working together to provide a normal life for their children." (To see the ad at YouTube, go to www.startribune.com/a2511.)

Some families have developed that goal on their own. Julie Rappaport, 43, and Lee Liberman, 47, parents of 14-year-old Tasha, were married for 17 years before divorcing in 2000. They still take family vacations, have weekly "family nights" and live six blocks apart. Their new website features a divorce e-zine and a self-published "relational shifts" book with the motto, "a family doesn't have to end just because a marriage does." "In spite of all evidence of high conflict everywhere, there's a thread of a better way to do this," said Deborah Clemmensen, a licensed psychologist and child specialist. "There's a belief that there can be more respectful and dignified ways to relieve conflict. The minute you start on that path, you keep going."

That path includes these three ideals:

Keep families out of court. The legal system, it turns out, is a terrible place for children and their divorcing parents, not only according to psychologists, but judges and lawyers, too. Divorce cases aren't like fine wines, improving with age. They turn uglier and more expensive, until any chance for kindness or reconciliation is crushed.

The goal: Get families in and out as quickly as possible, using mental health professionals and mediators to uncover emotional landmines and detonate them quickly.

Minimize custody evaluations. These evaluations are generally brutal on kids. They take up to four months and include interviews with both parents, the children, teachers, observations at school and the opening of school and medical records.

The goal: Avoid evaluations in all but the most complicated cases. Give parents options and encourage them to decide what's best for their children with parenting time and other issues.

Emphasize that divorcing parents can still be excellent co-parents. Divorced couples are often much better at being good co-parents living separately than being in a marriage that made them unhappy, Romanoff-Newman said. A sample parenting plan from the St. Paul-based education program, "Parents Forever," shares that sentiment. One worksheet question, for example, asks parents to put a check mark beside "Things the other parent does well."

The goal: Give couples a chance to feel proud and successful as co-parents and build on that success.

Romanoff-Newman gives parents all the time they need to get there. "[I tell them:] 'You're going to be the best co-parents in the world,' she said. 'Just give it a chance.' "

Gail Rosenblum • 612-673-7350 • grosenblum@startribune.com

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