

Neutral Child Specialist Protocol

There are two separate hourlong meetings with children:

1. The ***Get to Know You Meeting*** with siblings altogether
2. The ***Get to Work Meeting*** with each child individually

The ***Get to Know You Meeting*** is unstructured and may include play depending on the ages of the children. It has the following goals:

- Help children begin to feel less anxious and more at ease;
- Build a positive working relationship with children;
- Explain my role and what to expect in the process, including how the information they share will be used in the process. In typical Collaborative divorce work, children are told that the information will be shared with their parents to help them make the best possible decisions for the future. In Hague Convention cases, there will need to be a team process to determine the most appropriate and safest ways for children's voices to be heard and understood in the process.
- Answer children's questions and follow their conversational leads;
- Ask children if they are comfortable and willing to participate in a follow-up

meeting that will include structured activities to help them tell their stories about their families. Children's *voluntary participation* in the process is extremely important.

The ***Get to Work Meeting*** enables me to get a detailed snapshot of each child's perspective on their family situation. The following activities are included in the protocol:

- A paper and post-it note activity called ***Mom's House, Dad's House, Both Houses and Nobody's House*** (easily adapted for LGBTQ families, e.g., Mom's House, Mama's House or Dad's House, Papa's House). This activity is explained in detail below.
- A brief interview activity called ***My Three Wishes for How Family Could Work Best for Me***
- On a 1 to 5 scale asking the child to rate how hard it was when the family change *first* happened, and how hard it is *now*. This is followed by questions like, "What has been the hardest part for you?" and "What has helped you adjust/move from a 5 to a 2/ feel a bit better about what's happened?"

- Asking the child these questions: How do you think you can get enough time with each of your parents? What are your ideas about how that could happen? How long can you be apart from one of your parents before it starts to feel really hard?
- Asking the child about their favorite holidays, or those that are the most meaningful to them, including their birthday. Why is this holiday important? Who celebrates it with you? Who do you want to be there when you celebrate?
- Do you have any advice for your parents?

Mom's House, Dad's House, Both Houses and Nobody's House

This activity is designed to help children describe their relationships with each parent without having to verbally answer potentially difficult questions. In advance, a list of about 75 attributions (descriptions and statements about a parent's behavior, affect, or role in the life of the child) is prepared. Depending on the age of the child, some or all of the attributions on the list will be used. Some examples of attributions are:

- This parent wants what's best for me.
- This parent comforts me when I feel bad.
- This parent helps me solve life problems.
- I trust this parent.
- This parent is fun to play sports with.
- This parent is a good cook.
- This parent is good at homework help.
- I like this parent to tuck me in at night.
- This parent has a problem I wish I could fix.
- I wish I had a better relationship with this parent.
- This parent sometimes puts me in the middle.
- This parent can get mad kind of easily/ this parent seems sad sometimes/ this parent is easily stressed.
- I would change something about this parent if I could.
- I feel mad/sad/worried here sometimes.
- I would like more time here.
- I can tell this parent just about anything.

Four pieces of paper are laid out, one each with Mom's House, Dad's House (or same-gender equivalents), Both Houses or Nobody's House written at the top. The instructions to the child are:

"I have a list of things that can describe the relationship between a child and his/her/their parent. I will read each one out loud and write it on a sticky note. I will hand the note to you. If what I said reminds you of your Mom or your relationship with her, put the sticky

note on the piece of paper that says Mom's House. If what I say reminds you of your Dad or your relationship with him, put the sticky note in Dad's House. If what I said is true about both your parents and your relationships with both of them, put the sticky note in Both Houses. But if what I said does not describe either parent, put the sticky note in Nobody's House. At the end, there are usually a different number of sticky notes in each house."

I ask the child if it would be okay at the end if I ask questions about where they put particular sticky notes to help me better understand their perspective. At the end, I also ask the child if he/she/they can think of any attributions to add that I didn't think of. If so, I add a sticky note using their words.

Young children may need a bit of practice at the beginning. I often use "This parent is a boy," "This parent is a girl," "This parent loves me," and "This parent is Spongebob SquarePants" (a cartoon character) as practice items.

It is very important to not attempt to influence a child's decision-making during this process. I refrain from commenting on the placement of a sticky note until the end when the child has given me permission to ask questions.

Follow-up questions can yield a great deal of valuable information, but this requires considerable skill and developmental expertise. Questions should be open-ended and never leading, and not based on assumptions, e.g., "You put 'This parent has a problem I wish I could fix' in Mom's House. Can you tell me more about that?"

It is essential to thank children at the end of the process for sharing their thoughts, feelings and perspectives. This will help remind them of the importance and value of their voices, especially during a difficult family time.

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