

What To Expect When Working With A Collaborative Child Specialist

A premise of Collaborative Practice is that clients are best served by working with people who are trained experts in their field. A divorce involves “uncoupling” in three areas:

Emotional / Family Restructuring

Financial

Legal

Rather than having one professional who may or may not have competence in all aspects of a divorce, the Collaborative Process works better, is more efficient, and can be less costly in the long term by adding specialists in each area to the Collaborative Team.

This handout explains the role of the Collaborative Child Specialist and what clients should expect when working with a Child Specialist in a Collaborative Case.

While the Child Specialist may be a mental health professional, the Child Specialist’s role in a Collaborative Case is NOT that of a child therapist and is not providing child therapy. In the Collaborative Process the Child Specialist is retained for a very limited purpose, focused solely on the needs of parents and children specific to the divorce or separation process.

The Child Specialist in collaboration with the Divorce Coach might offer the following: child development education, a neutral assessment of children’s coping abilities, suggestions for supporting children in their transition to two home families, and co-parenting skills education.

Your First Meeting With the Child Specialist

Any of the following scenarios for choosing or engaging with a Child Specialist is possible and may depend on your situation:

1. You find a Collaboratively trained Child Specialist online or by referral and you arrange to meet with the Child Specialist before your Collaborative Process starts. The Child Specialist is fully versed in the different divorce options available to you and if you request will make referrals to Collaboratively trained Attorneys.
2. You meet with a Collaborative Attorney who discusses the role of the Child Specialist and what this can offer your family in the Collaborative Process. If you choose to have a Child Specialist on the Team, you may choose to meet the Child Specialist before the Collaborative Case begins, or more likely at a time later in the process selected to take into account all the factors of your situation.
3. You are referred to a Child Specialist after the Collaborative Process begins. This referral may be based on your work with the Collaborative Divorce Coach or with the Collaborative Attorneys in the Collaborative Process.

How A Child Specialist Will Help You Through The Collaborative Process

You and each professional stand on equal footing and each person brings necessary information to the Collaborative Process. All professionals have appropriate training and while there is some crossover in what is brought to the table, everyone on the Collaborative Team wears a main “hat.” The Child Specialist’s role relates primarily to the needs of children, including their relationship to their parents and their family as a whole. Here are some of the ways a Child Specialist may assist you in your Collaborative Case:

1. In any situation which involves children, especially when children are undergoing a transition with the potential to impact them for their entire lives, many parents want to minimize the impact on their children. The Child Specialist may assist the parents in this goal by providing objective information to the parents. While they work closely together with your family, the Child Specialist and the Divorce Coach have defined roles that do not overlap. The Child Specialist may be referred to in the Collaborative Process as the “voice of the children.”
2. While in the Collaborative Process the Divorce Coach has the primary relationship with the parents and is entrusted to help you put together your Parenting Plan Worksheet, the Child Specialist brings information from the children to the Coach and the parents. This information is then incorporated into your agreement. These two professional members of the Team work closely together, offering their skills and gathering all of the information needed to support parents’ decision making.
3. The Child Specialist first meets with both parents to hear about their family history, to learn about their children, and to hear possible parenting issues or concerns. This information helps the Child Specialist prepare for the next step which is meeting with each of the children. While practices may vary according to each professional, typically the Child Specialist meets with each child individually and then possibly the children together. Occasionally, but not always, the Child Specialist may need to observe each parent with the child (or children) not to “evaluate” parenting but to gather more information to bring back to the Coach and the parents.
4. The next and last step in this process is a four-way meeting with the parents, the Coach, and the Child Specialist. In this meeting, the Child Specialist shares the information gathered from the children. With the support of the Coach and the Child Specialist, the parents may then brainstorm about ways to use this information for their family.
5. Once this four-way meeting has been completed, the work of the Child Specialist is probably finished. However, if a specific need is identified and agreed upon by the parents and the Collaborative Team, the Child Specialist may be asked to continue. Such specific needs might include continued support with parenting or co-parenting skills, or follow up after a major transition such as a move or family blending. The services of the Child Specialist during and post dissolution are always conducted with a neutral, transparent approach based on the agreement of both parents.
6. The Child Specialist rarely attends full Team meetings, with the exception of a possible invitation to the meeting in which the Parenting Plan is being finalized.