



When Not To See Kids In Counselling

Seeing children in the midst of a parental custody and/or access dispute is tricky business. It must be understood that seeing children on the basis of a one-sided request, particularly if unknown to the other parent, can actually cause more harm than good.

The referral may come from the physician or lawyer. It may be one parent looking for help. Sinisterly, it may be a parent looking to bolster their claim that the children should live with him/her alone.

In these instances, the children may be coached directly or inadvertently to tell the counselor that parent's version of events. Even when a parent reminds their child to "tell the truth", what is really meant is that parent's truth. This intensifies the distress to which the children are subject.

Counselors meeting with these children on a one sided basis, often see a distraught or anxious parent with the kids in tow, urging them to speak. The child prattles off a litany of complaints, often gazing back to the parent to make sure the key points have been covered and meet with parent approval.

To the uninitiated counselor, the scenario is taken at face value. The counselor will dutifully report on observations and the expressed issues of the child. The parent will look relieved, as well the child. It is a moment to be short lived. With the one parent satisfied, the heat is momentarily off the child.

However, once the other parent learns what has transpired, that parent will look to set their version of the record straight. This will also be through the mouths of the children to a new counselor and the children will again be "reminded" to tell the truth; this other parent's truth. The child will then live another short moment of peace, until the first parent learns of the actions of this other parent.

The conflict intensifies as the children are thus dragged counselor to counselor. They are caught between the ever-escalating struggles, seeking to meet the demands of each parent as ally. In the midst of such conflict, children's distress escalates and mood, behaviour and concentration deteriorate.

Although well intentioned, it is imperative for both parents and referral sources to appreciate that in order to be truly helpful, children must be emancipated from parental conflict, not further embedded in it.

Meeting with the children alone may inadvertently reinforce a misplaced view of the problem and/or intensify the conflict and/or give the illusion of help when at the same time the child is subject to increasingly toxic parental conflict.

To use a medical analogy, x-ray before surgery to be assured you are cutting in the right place. A child in distress does not equate to the child seeing the counselor first. In fact, it could be quite harmful. To this end, and by the truly initiated counselor, there might actually be a refusal to meet with the children in favour of first meeting with both parents. In the midst of allegations of domestic violence, meetings can take place with both parents together assuming appropriate safeguards or serially, by seeing each parent on separate occasions. The benefit of meeting with the parents is to actually address the underlying cause of the child's distress; the parental conflict. If thereafter children are to be seen, it is often advantageous to meet with the children on separate occasions, brought by one then other parent. This brings balance to the understanding of the problems befalling them by way of the parental conflict and separation. Thereafter help can be more finely attuned which at that point may include individual counselling for the children.

If you are unsure how to proceed, consult a counselor whose experience includes matters related to parental separation and divorce as well as expertise in domestic violence, alcoholism and addictions. Making the wrong cut, regardless of the distress, will not bring the relief sought. Children need to be helped, not harmed and their immediate counselling may not be the answer.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
<http://www.yoursocialworker.com>

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.