

CHAPTER THREE

For Kids - What Divorce Breaks Apart, Strong Co-Parenting Rebuilds

by Karen Bonnell

“Separation/divorce is the end of an intimate partnership for adults, not the end of a family for children.” — Karen Bonnell

When we embarked on this project, one of the first people who came to mind was best-selling author and relationship coach, Karen Bonnell. I absolutely wanted Karen to participate, because I knew she would be perfect for this book. With over 30 years of experience working with individuals, couples, and families facing transition, loss,

stress and change, Karen embodies the mission of this book—putting kids first.

As a co-parenting coach and author of “The Co-Parents’ Handbook: Raising Well-Adjusted, Resilient, and Resourceful Kids in a Two-Home Family from Little Ones to Young Adults,” Karen has observed that while conflict comes with the territory, loving parents have an opportunity to do what’s best for their children. Every parent has the capacity—and as long as they have the desire—they can commit themselves to develop their co-parenting skills and put aside ill feelings towards their ex in order to put their children first and raise their children to grow into happy and emotionally healthy adults.

In this interview, and through her life’s work, Karen stresses how important it is for parents to work together and use family court only as a last resort. Family court is court; it’s a place that is by nature, win-lose and adversarial, so anything you can do as a parent to stay out of court will be a positive force financially and emotionally—and everyone will be better off for it.

Flexibility, compromise, cooperation. These are recurrent themes through Karen’s work. Karen’s approach has been proven and tested to help parents confidently take on the challenges of raising children in two homes.

During the course of the conversation, Karen addresses many of the most common issues parents face during divorce:

- The importance of creating a parenting plan collaboratively rather than relying on the court
- How to create a roadmap for all members of the family to safely navigate through separation, divorce, and beyond
- How to effectively communicate with your ex in a manner that minimizes conflict and misunderstanding
- How to communicate with your children about the divorce and support them emotionally through their family change
- How to avoid the common mistakes and pitfalls parents often encounter when it comes to co-parenting, planning, decision-making, and conflict management
- How to ensure your children feel loved and secure during and after your divorce

Meet Karen

Jeremy: Hi Karen. Can you share with us a little bit about your background and what inspired you to make it your mission to help parents, co-parent more effectively?

Karen: I was part of creating a two-home family myself, for my children and their father before I had any idea about co-parent coaching or divorce coaching in any way, shape, or form. So, like many parents, I went to a divorce attorney, conflict escalated, and I learned a lot about what that process looks like and in retrospect, what was missing. Of course, we found our way through that difficult, emotional terrain, but I came out of that really wanting things to be different for other families.

You wrote what many people consider the “bible” of co-parenting books—the best-selling, “The Co-Parents’ Handbook”. What inspired you to write it?

“The Co-Parents’ Handbook” is the culmination of the teaching practices and the protocols that came out of the last nine years of co-parent coaching in the Collaborative Law Community. I serve as a divorce and co-parent coach. I work with parents to manage strong emotions, to care for their children through their family change, and to construct a skillful parenting plan.

Walking to my office to meet a couple back in 2013, I said to myself, “I should just write this down. There is no reason why people should have to walk into my office to get this information.” That’s how the book got started; it launched in fall 2014. It is chock full of practical, how-to advice—the skills necessary to co-parent, stay child-centered, and create a secure two-home family.

How to Get Co-Parenting Right

How important is it that parents get their parenting plan right?

Skillfully building a parenting plan is the very first step to building your co-parenting relationship. If you rely on the state and the courts, you're going to get a wider play, a standardized parenting plan that may or may not meet the unique needs of your children, your circumstances or your family.

I really encourage parents that when you approach the parenting planning process, remember that you are the two best people to make these decisions about your children.

Learning to work together, to effectively co-parent, is a life-long gift to them because you will be there at high school graduation. You two will be there, God-willing, for a wedding, a baby naming—all the lifecycle events that are yet to come. They will want you there, stress-free and focused on their joy.

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In your work, you use the term “uncoupling”. What does that mean and how does it impact co-parenting?

Most of the issues between co-parents are actually a result of unresolved marital strife or intimate partner strife. In other words, when we came together, we came together up here, what we would call our “marriage,” our “intimate partnership,” and from that, we had children, and we became parents. Ending our intimate partnership doesn’t change parents’ love for their children.

As parents, we want to love and care for our kids; we want what’s best for them. I help parents recognize that up here, we’re going to uncouple that intimate partnership. This is your spouse-mind. This is the place where you hear, “I hate you. You betrayed me. I don’t want anything to do with you.” I can’t stand your face.” That’s happening up here.

Down here, on a parent level, because we want what’s best for our children, we hear, “You’re my kid’s dad. You’re my kid’s mom. I want them to be healthy. For that reason and

that reason alone, I am going to co-parent with you in the best way possible. I want that future for our children.”

Avoid Common Mistakes

During a divorce, there are a lot of challenges. What would you say are the common mistakes and pitfalls parents make when it comes to co-parenting, planning, communicating, and managing conflict?

During a divorce, conflict is high, emotions are high, and too often, it's easy to lose our heads. That dinosaur brain, when it gets activated, that tail is swinging around and creating all kinds of damage. Triggered, emotionally flooded, saying and doing things we'd never do under different circumstances. As much as I can, I try to help parents recognize that probably the single most destructive element in a divorce process for children is what can become chronic, toxic conflict.

Now, I'm not talking about healthy conflict. I'm not even talking about disagreements that I might have with you. I'm talking about the things I say and do, and often, with and to my children, that are intended to hurt you. Using our children, getting them caught in the middle, saying ugly things about you when I know that half of their heart belongs to you, right? They love and care about us both, and

I need to protect that, so managing my emotions and that toxic conflict is real important.

Another issue is when we compete. Somehow believing that what's best for kids is what I have to deliver as a parent, not what you have to deliver. We have to find our way to a place where we are both able to parent our children, so they can receive what's best about both of us. I like to say, "What's best for kids is two healthy, capable, engaged parents."

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How to Communicate with Your Children

We know that with children, we need to be sensitive about how we communicate certain things; when and what should we tell our kids about the separation?

When and what to tell your children about the decision to become a two-home family has much to do with their ages. Younger children—under age 8—do better with less than seven to ten day's lead time telling them something is going to change and the beginning of the change. The change doesn't have to be abrupt. The more you think through the transition and ensure it's well paced, the smoother it will be for the kids.

Older children can understand that you've made a decision and it will take a bit longer to implement.

Older children benefit from watching you work together as parents for as long as a month or more prior to one of you actually moving out or making a similar change in the structure of the family. The important issue here is that they are clear that you have made a final decision, that you're taking steps forward, and that they have no role in reversing the course of this important family change.

The key is your ability to work together as parents: managing conflict, solving problems, sharing childcare duties in a planned way, while taking steps to transition the family to a new structure.

Remember: you are changing your adult relationship, ending an intimate partnership. Your children aren't a part of that highly personal adult relationship—and have limited ability to understand intimate partnership—even teens. Although your intimate partnership is completing or ending, parents and children don't divorce. You are building a new co-parenting relationship—and yet there is nothing new about being parents to your children.

What is new, is how you will share them throughout the days, weeks and years ahead and how you integrate their lives across two homes. Your co-parenting relationship directly affects your children and what matters most to them.

“Who will tuck me in and read stories?” “Who will help me with my homework?” “Who will take me to driver’s ed?”

Hold dearly this Co-Parents’ Credo: *I will not let the mistakes and the failures of my marriage become the mistakes and the failures of my co-parenting relationship. This I commit to my co-parent and to my children.*

(Note: For a brief video on “How to Tell Your Children About Divorce/Separation,” please go to www.thecoparentshandbook.com).

There are circumstances in some situations—for example, an affair—that may have caused considerable strife and hurt in our relationship. Clearly, this is an area where we want to tread lightly and insulate our children, yet we also don’t want to lie. When we communicate with our children about the divorce, how do we best handle these types of situations?

That’s a really good question. I have not met a parent today who wants to lie to their children, and this can be a really tricky circumstance. As much as children need to understand what’s happening with their family, they need age-appropriate, accurate information. They don’t necessarily need the truth about our intimate partnership. One of the things I joke with parents about is, if your kids walked in one day, you know, back when you were a one-home family

and said, “So, do you and dad have oral sex?” you probably would say, “Uh, that’s none of your business.” Right?

It’s not the first place you’re going to go to give all the truth about your sex life. Why would we do that now about what’s going on in our intimate partnership?

This isn’t about parenting. This is about adults. Let’s keep adult information on the adult level, so that when we want to provide parenting information like: How is this family changing, how are mom and dad, or mom and mom, or dad and dad, going to take care of you? Kids need that information, and they need it to be accurate.

Now, caveat there. You don’t always know the answer. So, I encourage parents to say in those moments when they don’t know: “Are we going to keep our house?”

“Sweetie, you know what? Mom and I haven’t figured that out.” or,

“Dad and I don’t know that yet, but as soon as we know, we’ll let you know. What you can be sure of, is there will be a home with each of us, and you will be well cared for.”

We break things down for kids into categories of what we know, what we don’t know, what will change, what will not

change. "...and what will not change is that we will always be your parents."

There are other things, too, that come up, and I imagine we tread on those differently. For example, let's say we have a new romantic partner. How do we introduce our new partner to our children?

We consider those changes—I put those in a category of a significant change. So, we're going through a separation and divorce. In an ideal world, Jeremy, we're going to stabilize those two homes first, whatever those residences look like. We're going to stabilize our rhythms, we're going to find our way into a schedule, kids are going to feel safe and secure again. Now, that's in an ideal world. We don't always have that luxury because love doesn't happen according to legal documents. It just doesn't. Each parent may have someone or one parent may, so what we want to do is remember we want kids to feel secure. When we introduce a new adult, children feel destabilized again. Not necessarily in a bad way, but we want to recognize that it destabilizes and act accordingly, so we pace the introduction, the amount of time spent together—we stay focused on the kids' needs.

Ideally, this person did not suddenly start spending every weekend with our children and us; they're not moving in yet. Let's talk about how to allow children to develop a relationship—like any relationship with a coach, a teacher, the next-door neighbor, our best friend's parents. Give

it some time to mature, so that when it's time for us to become domestic partners, our children aren't destabilized, but rather, they are ready to accept a new person into their lives. Healthy pacing also allows our co-parent, by the way, to feel respected, because one of the frightening things for a co-parent early on when we bring a new person into our lives is, "Does that person think they're going to be my kid's other parent? Whoa, just stop the train because I'm the mom (or I'm the dad)."

There's never any doubt about who are the primary parents, so when a new romantic partner comes into the family system that is separating, new partners need to respect their place. You're not a parent in lieu. You are the partner of one of the parents. Mom and dad are the two adults, the two parents. Those two original parents will always be the co-parent executive officers. Nobody disrupts that. They're the decision makers for those children. I might have a partner; you might have a partner. They're part of our team, but they're not part of the executive team for our kids unless we all agree.

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You make some really good points, Karen. Sometimes, predictably, one parent may feel jealous if there's a new romantic partner who's been introduced into their

children's lives. If you're the parent with the new partner, and you learn that the other parent is disparaging your new romantic partner, do you have any suggestions of how to deal with that?

That's a great time to ask for a meeting with a co-parent coach to talk through how to handle those upset feelings, those competitive feelings, those feelings of being upstaged.

And what about in a situation where perhaps the new romantic partner is misstepping?

Often, when I get co-parents in the office, we have a conversation and we find out that the new—let's just use "girlfriend"—the new girlfriend is putting makeup on our 6-year-old daughter, or buying our 8-year-old skinny jeans, or doing all kinds of cutesy, fun, adult female to younger female things. The mom, who has been responsible for holding boundaries and teaching values is thinking, "Wait a second, I never agreed she could have skinny jeans, and you know what? Makeup is off limits." Those are missteps.

When it comes to "parental intimate behaviors with children," our new romantic partner shouldn't be doing them. It may be fun, but it's a misstep, and so just respecting these boundaries can be really helpful to decrease feelings of competition, jealousy, and violation.

Divorce Does Not Have to Be Destructive

Many people would contend that divorce is always a destructive process on children. Would you agree with that? And, what can parents do to create the best, healthiest outcome for their children? What do kids really need most?

Great question. Divorce, in its pure definition, is a family change—and it is a significant one. Like any significant change in a child’s life, it has implications. There’s going to be grief. There’s going to be anger, upset, fear, and worry. There’s going to be a temporary loss of security. As long as we understand that our children are grieving and trying to find their way back into security, we can direct our goals so that we support them emotionally, and repair their sense of loss, and restore that stability and security. Then, while the divorce is a significant family change, it doesn’t need to be destructive. It doesn’t need to be damaging. If we remain good parents, demonstrate our unconditional love and support for our children, manage conflict appropriately and provide positive, inspiring modeling through the change, divorce doesn’t need to disadvantage our children.

These are the key issues, so what we explain to children is, “We’re changing from a one-home to a two-home family. Your sense of family is going to include two homes. You’re going to have a home with mom and a home with dad. We

will take good care of you - you don't need to worry about that."

That's slightly different language than, "Mom's house," "Dad's house," isn't it? Because back in the day, when we'd say, "Mom's house" or "Dad's house," children had no home. It's as if, "I was either at your house or your house, but where is my house?"

Now, we say, "Home with mom and home with dad. Your sense of home goes across two residences, and you're going to be loved and cared for in both."

In that context, we're going to keep our conflict at a minimum. We're not going to let kids get caught in the middle. We're not going to bad mouth and disparage the other parent. We're going to help our family members, and the members of our community, understand that even though they may think they're supporting us [by badmouthing the other parent], this behavior hurts our children. "I don't need it. Please don't support me in that way."

We also need to remember that kids need a strong and engaged relationship with both parents. I'm not going to compete with you and assume that you should just be an every other weekend hamburger-night parent because, after all, I've been home with these kids ever since they were born. No. There are many different parenting schedules that reflect the needs and interests of all members of the family

and the unique circumstances of our jobs and children's lives. Working together to respect how best to maintain our work, how to maximize parent-time for our children, and how to build parenting skills where needed to ensure that both parents provide not just financially, but emotionally in that "hands on" loving way for their children. It's not longer uncommon, that children may go home from school to a home where one parent can be available, while the residential parent swings by after work to pick up the kids to begin his/her residential time. Be international. Respect each other. Know your kids will benefit from an enduring, loving relationship with both of you.

What does a shared relationship look like? It looks like enough time with each parent to have that sense of home, so that they're not visiting with the parent. A parent cares for us. We don't visit with a parent. We visit with an aunt, but we don't visit with a parent. A fully engaged relationship with each parent is what we're after.

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Co-Parent with Compassion and Empathy

You mentioned in one of our previous conversations that sometimes parents get caught up in the letter of the law or the agreement, rather than being empathetic and allowing some flexibility under appropriate circumstances. In fact, by being flexible—within reason—we putting our kids first. Could you expound?

When we have a healthy co-parenting relationship, it's going to be easy to go to each other and say, "Hey, I've got a work conference this weekend. I can't get out of it. It's my residential schedule. Would you like to have the kids, or would you care for the kids for me?" Now, I'm not going to assume that you're available. You might not be, but I want the kids to be with you if they can't be with me. That kind of flexibility, that kind of generosity, is normal when we're parenting well together. We still strive for that in a two-home family, just as we would in a one-home family.

If you and I are not getting along and can't communicate, Jeremy, and we're co-parents, we're going to follow that co-parenting plan, that parenting plan as much as possible in order to diminish conflict. That's its value. A well-written, well-crafted parenting plan helps us when the wheels are off the bus. Because, then, I know exactly what to do on Saturday when I have to be at that work conference—I need to make sure the kids are cared for. Now, what you're doing—whether you'll take the kids for me—is irrelevant.

I don't have to worry about it, and you aren't going to feel intruded on by me. All those other negative connotations that can come up can be dealt with by following our plan.

We look at, “What is the quality of our co-parenting relationship?” Whether we're friends or not, guess what? Friendship is not required for a strong and skillful co-parenting relationship. It's stability. It's respect. It's healthy boundaries. It's strong communication skills. It's the ability to problem solve. That's what we want in a co-parenting relationship.

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If you and I become friends through that process over time again, hallelujah, praise God, that's easy. But if we don't, it doesn't matter. Right? We can still throw a beautiful wedding even if we're not friends—if we can do those other things with enough respect.

Right, those are some great points. Whether there's a friendship there or not, if parents can maintain mutual respect for each other, this will have a huge impact on

what's most important. Ultimately, children want to feel secure, correct?

Correct, and our problems are going to get solved, and my activities are going to move forward. “Now, you’re going to show up at my soccer game because...guess what? I want you both on the sidelines of my soccer game.” That’s one of the most important things. “When I look up from blowing out my birthday candles, I see you both there. You don’t have to be standing next to each other. Just please both be there.

It’s in those moments, my tank is filled, and my heart is filled with the fact that I’m still the most important person to you. And whatever is going on between the two of you is not going to disrupt my getting to have you both.”

A couple terms that you use a lot are a “spouse mind” and “parent mind.” What do those terms mean exactly?

Let’s go back to the uncoupling process for a moment. When I’m having those rageful thoughts or I want to disparage you, because I feel like you’ve done things that are deceitful, untrustworthy, betraying, and I actually think you’ve ruined our family, that’s in my “spouse-mind”. That is how I see it as an intimate partner or as an adult who had hopes and dreams that your decision to leave our relationship has changed. Okay?

That's "spouse mind", but in "parent-mind", I'm thinking to myself, "My kids are so lucky. You are an incredible dad. I know they need you, and I want them to have the experiences and the influences that you have to offer." That's "parent-mind". Learning to discern between the two is really helpful to guide our actions, parenting planning, and our co-parenting relationship.

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The term "children's best interest" is thrown around a lot in family court. In legalese, the term is ambiguous, so in the context of parenting, how do parents figure what is in the best interest of their children?

Let's go back to the model that we've used when we were married. We would pay attention: What makes our children unique? What's their temperament? What are their needs? How do they handle the transition? What kind of homework support do they need? How much sleep do they need? What skills do we want our children to build, so that they get launched into a healthy adulthood? Right?

We're going to look at "what's in their best interest" through that lens. We're going to ask ourselves the question, "How best can the two of us together, in separate homes, together,

but apart, make sure that those skills, that those experiences, and that love and security is best maintained?”

The other thing we’re going to look at is their development. “Where are our kids developmentally?” What an infant needs and what a three-year-old needs will be different from what a 12-year-old needs. We may have different capacities to provide those needs. While considering circumstances and availability to parent, we need to match (or build) our parenting skills by sustaining a strong and engaged relationship with our children and provide to their needs.

Parents acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses and either build capacities/skills or allow one of us to meet those needs because that makes the most sense. What we might do for a 3-year-old can look different when that child reaches age seven, right? We have all of those ways of looking at what’s best for kids, the sibling group as a whole, and how to map that to a skillful plan so that our co-parenting matches who our children actually are and what they need.

Two other terms you use are: “guest parent” and “duty parent.” What do those mean?

I use “guest parent” and “duty parent” to help parents stay out of competition and conflict. We have a residential schedule, and let’s just say I am on duty this weekend. The kids are with me. They’re in residence with me, but we’re at a soccer game. Okay? We’re both there, and one of our

kidlets is on the field, and two of our *kidlets* are in the stands. Of course, I say to the two of them with me in the stands, “Hey, there’s your dad. Go say ‘hi’.” They greet him, cuddle him, and all that good stuff. Then, they say, “Dad, can we go to the snack shack? Will you give us money for ice cream?” Can you picture the scene? Right?

Now, there are couple ways you could respond to that. You could say, “I give your mother child support for that. You go ask your mother. It’s her job to be buying that.” That would be one response. By the way, not the right one! Here’s a different one. You say, “Hey, you know what? Mom’s on duty, so you need to go check with mom. I have no idea what her plans are for lunch with you guys, so go over and ask mom. If she says it’s okay, if she wants me to take you, I’m happy to.”

I am going to respect the residential parent. They’re the decision-maker. It minimizes conflict. It’s now the end of the game. Makenzie comes off the soccer field. You go over, high-five her. Tell her what a great game she had, and then you say, “Mom is waiting for you,” so that there’s no disruption to the transition. Again, we’re not competing. We are coordinating. I’m on duty. You are the guest. That’s how it works.

That’s a great way to handle it, Karen, and it brings up another question. Sometimes a child—often at the encouragement of the other parent—may ask the parent

for money to pay for something beyond what is covered by child support. The parents haven't discussed this or agreed on anything, but the parent feels pressured and doesn't want to come across like the "mean" parent. How should the parent handle this situation?

That's a really great question. Parents need to get very comfortable saying, "Your mom and I," "Your dad and I," and it goes just like this, "You know what? I hear you. You want to ... yeah. I hear you want to do the ski bus again this year, but you know what? Mom and I have not had a chance to talk about that, so, when we have our meeting, we'll talk about the ski bus, and we'll both get back to you."

Again, we keep executive team information where it belongs. We keep kids where they belong. I'm not going to compete with you by telling them that I think being on the ski bus is great before I know whether you can support that on your time, number one, or if you can afford it, number two. Why would I throw you under the bus? To look like the good parent? How is that good for kids? Right?

Our ability to decide things together and hold back our enthusiasm—I always use that spring break trip, junior year, Washington, DC trip, that whole thing that kids get to do in high school, [as an example]. They come running to the door and say, "Hey, this is going to happen. Can I do it? Can I do it?" You say, "Wow, that's exciting, but you know what? Your mom and I (your dad and I), we'll need to talk

about it, and we'll get back to you." There you go. Those extraordinary expenses, no matter what they are, we're going to have those planning meetings. We're going to plan. We're going to talk. We'll decide. We'll follow through. Keep a good credit rating with your co-parent.

That's perfect. A simple response is: "Your mom and I, or your dad and I, have to talk about it."

Which is exactly what we would've said before the divorce. Why are we not saying it now?

Thank you, Karen, for sharing your amazing wisdom and insights. In closing, I have one last question: Communication issues will always arise between co-parents; do you have any final words of advice for parents to help them maintain healthy lines of communication?

Absolutely. I encourage parents to use a business or a colleague-style communication style with one another. I also rely on Bill Eddy's BIFF—brief, informative, friendly and firm—which helps ensure your communication is always polite and, most importantly, child-centered.

There's no reason for you to comment on your co-parent's individual life. You are no longer connected as adults, so let that part go. That being said, if we're child-centered, we're respectful and we've established healthy boundaries, we're

going to be brief. Don't go on and on, and on, and on, and on. Brief.

We're going to be informative. "Here's the situation. Here is my question. Here is my thought. Can you help me with that?"

We're going to be firm, so in other words, "Hey, I need to have child care on the weekend, because I'm going to be in a conference. I'm wondering if you're available." I'm going to be clear, direct, firm, but I'm also going to be friendly, so I might close with, "Hey, thanks for considering this. I look forward to hearing back."

The other thing I ask if you are the receiving parent, please respond within 24 hours. If at all possible, you should create a designated co-parent email that you look at once a day—not that you should be getting emails every day, because you shouldn't. However, there are those occasional times where there is something that your co-parent actually needs you to respond to. Diminish the number of texts. We diminish the phone calls because guess what? Your lives, you're trying to separate, but if we have a way to make sure that kids' lives can move forward with clear communication, colleague-style, like you were going to talk to your own boss, we're going to be in really good territory.

To learn more about Karen Bonnell's training, services, books and other resources, visit the Coach Mediate

Consult (CMC) website — www.coachmediateconsult.com — and “like” her Facebook page, www.facebook.com/karenbonnellcmc. You may also reach Karen by phone at her office in the greater Seattle area by calling (425) 454-4510.

ABOUT KAREN BONNELL ARNP, MS



Karen Bonnell has over 25 years of experience working with individuals, couples, and families facing transition, loss, stress and change. Karen is the author of the Amazon #1 best-selling book “The Co-Parents’ Handbook: Raising Well-Adjusted, Resilient and Resourceful Kids in a Two-Home Family from Little Ones to Young Adults” and “The Parenting Plan Handbook: Four Coaching Seminars devoted

to Skillfully Building a Strong, Child-Centered Parenting Plan”.

A graduate of the University of Michigan, Karen has been Board certified and licensed as an Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner since 1982. She served on the faculty of the University of Michigan, Eastern Michigan University & Seattle Pacific University before beginning full-time private practice in 1984. She continues to be a provider of professional continuing education to both healthcare and legal professionals.

Karen played an instrumental role in developing the year-long facilitator training program for the Compassionate Listening Project. As a certified Compassionate Listening trainer, Karen utilizes this heart-centered approach to authentic speaking and capable listening used around the world in high-conflict situations such as Israel/Palestine.

Karen served on the Board of King County Collaborative Law and Collaborative Professionals of Washington. She is a member of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals and Academy of Professional Family Mediators.

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