Co-Parent Coaching: The Next Page in the Collaborative Playbook
By Karen Bonnell, ARNP, MS

It all started with a conflict over half-day or full-day kindergarten for a spirited five-year-old boy whose parents had successfully completed their Collaborative divorce nine months prior, but now were in a full-on battle over a school choice. I received the call, “Can you help us?”

Until this call, I often referred post-decree Collaborative clients to other mental health or legal professionals, which reflected our local protocols — maintaining a bright line between the Collaborative divorce coaching and post-decree counseling. Somehow, on this day, the referral struck me as an unnecessary compromise of an existing professional relationship away from a process they could return to with confidence.

Under IACP Ethical Standards, practitioners who serve as coaches should remain available to continue to help the clients/family address specific divorce issues after the divorce is final, with the limitation that coaches may not function as a therapist⁴. Post-divorce co-parent coaching is not counseling or therapy, but rather targeted mediation to resolve conflict and coaching interventions to strengthen two-home stability and provide strategies for a more functional post-divorce future.*

Communities that do not already offer co-parent coaching may wish to consider the potential benefits for post-divorce families.

Four years later, the parents call again, as their two-home family was experiencing two significant changes: 1) Mom was having a baby, planning a family-leave from work of four months and requesting that their son be at home with her every day after school regardless of their 50/50 residential share, and 2) Dad was getting married. They came to my office to consider the impact of these impending changes, make agreements on child-care (Dad was reluctant to allow the change in after-school care), and talk through how to collectively support their son. One appointment and the issues were resolved.

In both instances, coach notes were sent to the attorneys regarding the conflicts and resolutions. By returning to their Collaborative coach, they could rely on the trust and safety established during their divorce for confidence that they would find their way through a conflict that they weren’t capable of resolving on their own—and count on sound guidance for next steps.

The co-parents reestablished confidence in their co-parent relationship and conflict-resolution skills. They each found ways to support their son through their respective transitions.

The ideal divorce process assists distressed spouses to separate as intimate partners with integrity and prepares them for the next phases of life. When they have children, this includes helping them emerge as strong post-divorce co-parents. Effective post-divorce co-parenting requires a different skill set and awareness from pre-divorce parenting; even excellent parents need to establish new boundaries, formalize effective communication protocols, and intentionally work together across two homes to maintain an integrated sense of family for their children.

Building the necessary skills for a strong post-divorce co-parenting relationship — which provides for long-term two-home stability, and physical and emotional health for children² — can often take much longer than the duration of the divorce itself.

The practical limitations on what can be accomplished within the narrow time frame of the divorce often necessitate ongoing post-divorce work to develop fully competent co-parenting skills. And, certainly, each co-parent’s ability to learn the breadth of new skills while simultaneously working through grief and facing enormous change, is compromised for some period of time. Co-parent coaching post-divorce offers a powerful option through the Collaborative process.
Learning from the Research

The complexity of distinguishing between the impacts of divorce itself from those elements of the divorce process and post-divorce adjustment that contribute to poor outcomes complicates conclusions from research about children's post-divorce and long term adjustment. Research tends to conflate the impact of divorce (a significant restructuring of the family) with other destructive factors such as:

- A seriously diminished post-divorce relationship between children and one or both parents;
- Toxic stress to children related to on-going bitterness, acrimony, and battling between parents;
- Chaotic parenting styles and home-life instability due to parents’ struggles with their own emotional states; and
- Children stepping into inappropriate parenting and adult caretaking functions, derailing their own healthy development.

Many parents enter a Collaborative process knowing they want to protect their children from the negative impacts of divorce, but may not have skills to mitigate or counteract them. Collaborative practitioners support families in their capacity to examine and work toward choices for their children that research suggests may be generally in the best interest of children with two capable parents.

Another major benefit of co-parent coaching in the Collaborative Practice model is that we can provide the necessary ongoing skill-building to ameliorate destructive factors, which otherwise can become intractable as the result of a long and adversarial divorce process or an unstable, conflict-filled post-divorce course or chronic destabilization due to a significant change of circumstances.

One Size Fits None

Co-parent coaching may take many forms and involve different team members at different times, while focusing on building skills, resolving disputes, and healthy divorce-related outcomes. During the Collaborative process, the parents invest effort, time, and resources to build a solid foundation for a positive post-divorce future. Co-parent coaching provides them on-going options for guidance to continue their long-term, healthy post-divorce family — whether initially in the first year or two post-decree, or for periodic conflicts or changes in family circumstances. Other team members, particularly the child specialist, may be critical to the conversation, as you’ll see in the next example:

Lise and Chad were co-parenting well-enough. They had clear boundaries between their two homes and managed to respect each other’s differences without expecting much coordination. This more distant co-parenting relationship worked for them.

Missy, now age seven, had started complaining to her mom about having to go to soccer. The complaining escalated to crying and ultimately became complaints of stomachaches and occasional vomiting. Lise was furious with Chad for applying “too much pressure” on Missy to play soccer just because he loved soccer.

Chad was baffled. Every time he talked with Missy about playing any sport at all, she confidently told him that she wanted to play soccer! She went to her practices and games easily, and played enthusiastically. She did get upset when someone stole the ball from her or if she got elbowed, but, then, she was only seven years old — and her feelings would get hurt. Chad believed Lise was babying Missy and creating drama for her own needs to disrupt his relationship with Missy. None of that tummy-ache-stuff was happening on his time. The tension and fighting escalated between the parents. Lise was unwilling to continue to agree to allow Missy to participate in soccer.

They called for help to resolve the extra-curricular issues. As their co-parent coach, I talked with them about many of the possible issues in their dynamic and attempted to help them find middle ground. However, Missy wasn’t settling and neither was Mom.

“Let’s have Kris, the child specialist from the divorce team, talk with Missy.” Both parents thought that was a great solution — they recognized they were getting nowhere.

Kris met with Missy and learned that she looked forward to and enjoyed so many aspects of playing soccer, but she hated the competition. She was too young to know how to label her distress. Kris shared with the parents Missy’s real concern and talked through how to better support Missy through the difficult impact of competition, while allowing her to participate in the aspects of soccer she loved. Both left
with insight, understanding, and agreement to allow Missy to continue her soccer and other activities.

Tailoring co-parent coaching to each family’s needs is important. Many parents will conclude their Collaborative divorce without any need for future support or intervention. Others will not see a need until they experience a significant challenge or changed circumstance. Yet others will immediately find benefit from on-going assistance to reach a basic level of stability and good co-parenting skills.

Adri and Sharon twisted and turned, struggled and fought their way through their Collaborative divorce. At multiple points they individually considered leaving the process. The strength of their Collaborative team and process management was a testimony to the fact that high-conflict, complex families can utilize non-litigation methods to complete their divorce.

Like many couples, Adri and Sharon arrived in our offices with a long history of relationship trauma and loss. Two special needs children were only the beginning of a list of acute issues that were complicated by unusual work schedules and cultural differences. By the end of their divorce, they were still struggling with joint decision-making regarding their children’s complex educational and health care needs.

Out of sheer frustration, both parents requested that the Collaborative coach remain available to them post-divorce until they found their way into two-home stability. The Collaborative team built the agreement to meet for co-parent coaching into their parenting plan.

For co-parent coaching to be most effective, it is helpful if coaches not only meet IACP Minimum Standards for coaches (which include mental health licensure), but also have a rigorous academic background in child development, the short and long-term impact of divorce on family systems including step-parent/step-family considerations, and strong conflict-resolution skills.

Legal Considerations

Because issues can arise in the future that will require formally re-constituting the Collaborative team and the Collaborative process, it is important that the integrity of the Collaborative process be maintained for post-divorce co-parent coaching. Additionally, it is important that

*STRONG CO-PARENTING SKILLS:

**Develop “Parent Mind”**
- Uncoupling
- Resolving grief
- Valuing two parents caring for and engaged with kids

**Healthy Boundaries**
- Respecting day-to-day decision-making
- Accepting that “good enough” parenting is in your child’s best interest — not competing with your co-parent for who is “best”
- Honoring the responsibilities of the residential schedule
- Transitioning children with calm, respectful demeanor

**Communication Protocols that Work**
- Maintaining “business decorum” in all forms of communication
- Avoiding opportunities to initiate or fuel conflict
- Staying child-centered
- Providing adequate information regarding kids in a timely manner

**Effective Co-Parent Executive Officers (CEO’s)**
- Solving problems effectively, constructively, and in a timely manner for children
- Protecting children from being caught in the middle between parents or developing split loyalties
- Preventing older children from filling a parental-void, allowing them to step into care-taking functions
- Aligning effectively on the important decisions affecting children’s lives

**Responsible Co-Parent Financial Officers (CFO’s)**
- Planning for, coordinating, and following through on all the financial needs of raising your children
- Following through on agreed upon record keeping and payments protecting children from adult financial matters

**Parenting First – Dating Second**
- Respecting children’s adjustment needs post-divorce
- Strengthening household team — building stability/security
- Introducing new romantic partners: timing and progression
- Integrating new family members (step-parenting/family considerations)
Co-parent coaching is consistent with the expectations of the parties and the (now former) Collaborative team. Because some terms of the Participation Agreement likely no longer apply after the divorce is concluded, the parameters for the coaching may be set out in the parties’ settlement agreement.

Considerations include transparency of information, confidentiality, and information to be shared with former Collaborative professionals. It is just as important that IACP Ethical Standards be followed during post-divorce co-parent coaching as it is during coaching that occurs during the Collaborative process, including the prohibition on serving as therapist to a parent or their children, and not engaging in any activity that can compromise the neutral role for neutral coaches and child specialists.

Depending on applicable laws, there may be a variety of legal repercussions for which client-informed consent will be needed to proceed after the Collaborative process ends. For example, under the Uniform Collaborative Law Act, the evidentiary privilege for “collaborative communications” ceases to apply as soon as the matter is concluded, which is usually defined as the settlement agreements being signed. Different privileges may (or may not) apply depending on the parameters of the coaching, the persons present, and the licensure under which the coaching is offered.

Conclusion
Adding co-parent coaching to the Collaborative playbook provides the after-caring, consideration, and skill-building integral to Collaborative Practice. The principle of handling family and legal disputes with non-adversarial dispute resolution options carries forward beyond the decree. Clients benefit; kids and parents thrive!

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Notes
1 See IACP Ethical Standards 10 and 11
2 Malin Bergström, Fifty moves a year: is there an association between joint physical custody and psychosomatic problems in children? J Epidemiol Community Health doi:10.1136/jech-2014-205058
3 AFCC, Family Court Review: An Interdisciplinary Journal. Special Issue: AFCC Think Tank on Shared Parenting — Closing the Gap: Research, Policy, Practice, and Shared Parenting. April 2014