

MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS ARE ESSENTIAL MEMBERS OF THE
LEGAL TEAM IN HIGH CONFLICT DIVORCES
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There is a growing recognition among legal professionals that divorcing parents need assistance in learning how to constructively communicate during a divorce, information about the developmental needs of their children to design parenting plans that serve their best interests, and training on how to manage their children in separate households. A quiet revolution is taking place as well among divorcing parents who insist on to creating positive parenting alliances after divorce. Mental Health Professionals are essential to the process of educating parents, their attorneys, and the court about how to create positive family dynamics in post divorce households.

In high conflict relationships, where communication is significantly impaired or non-existent, one or both parties are usually emotionally unable to compromise due to a belief that to do so will be detrimental to themselves and/ or their children. Court ordered resolutions are required, and judges, and the party's attorneys, look to mental health professionals to provide insight and unbiased perspectives regarding the best interests of the children. The court upon the request of the parents will appoint a Guardian Ad Litem or a Parent Evaluator to investigate the factual allegations of the parties, report the facts that corroborate or refute the allegations, and make recommendations regarding the residential, decision making, and treatment. Both are required to file a written report.

The primary difference between a Guardian Ad Litem and a Parent Evaluator from a legal perspective is that the Guardian Ad Litem must appear in court for all hearings, at mediation, and at trial. In addition, the Guardian ad Litem must attend a mandatory 40 hour training, and be mentored for a period of time after certification. Parent Evaluator's usually have graduate training in psychological assessments and doctoral degrees in psychology. However, neither is required under Washington State Law, if the therapist is qualified to render an opinion as an expert.

Another essential role that mental health professionals play in helping high conflict divorce litigation is serving as a case manager, or Parent Coordinator. In this capacity the mental health professional assists t in the implementation of court ordered parenting plan. He or she acts as a go-between, mediator and at times arbiter of the disagreements that arise in the implementation of the parenting plan to help high

conflict parents comply with the plan and develop a functional co-parenting relationship. The Parent Coordinator enforces the parenting plan, monitors parenting plan compliance, resolves conflicts that arise quickly and efficiently in order to protect the interests of the children involved and to sustain a safe, healthy, and meaningful parent-child relationships.

Mental health professionals are also appointed to help parents separate develop a post divorce parental alliance, and separate parental issues from their past relationship disappointments. Parental conflict reduction therapy, or co-parent counseling, is essential for couples continuing to experience moderate to high levels of conflict after divorce, or wanting to improve communication in order to jointly participate in child related activities and decision making. The co-parent counselor may help parents reach decisions together about their children's needs and activities, or help parents resolve dysfunctional interaction patterns that create conflict. They also teach positive communication skills, help the couple redefine relationship boundaries and develop tolerance for different parenting styles in their new households.

For therapists who want to help families involved in divorce litigation they must be able to tolerate high conflict personalities and possess a temperament that can tolerate high levels of intense negative emotion and attempts to manipulate the therapist. Yet, the rewards are many, and the work essential to helping children positively adjust to the loss of family cohesion. As a mental health professional committed to helping family's through the difficult process of divorce I hope more therapist will join this quiet revolution and major shift in the legal paradigm. The families involved in the legal process of divorce need you.