

Perspectives is a regular Network column edited by Dr. Clara Gerhardt, CFLE, Professor in Human Development and Family Science at Samford University. In this article, Dr. Mark Roseman, CFLE, shares his perspective on providing information and support to divorcing parents.



One Choice, Two Parents: A Holistic Model Toward Healing Family Heartbreak

by Mark Roseman, Ph.D., CFLE

Divorce is among the most traumatic of family changes. It has a ghostly presence and significant, long-lasting effects on children.

There are ways to help those entwined in the divorce and child-custody process. The Toby Center for Family Transitions is a multiple social service agency with a model that offers court-ordered child custody services, reunification therapy, and educational services to parents in transition. The center also focuses on post-divorce life and how to effectively aid children and parents when parents separate. I founded the Toby Center to provide the services I could not access or appreciate 20 years earlier when I personally went through divorce. The center has been effective in helping clients with the following:

- Therapeutic visitation and family counseling
- Supervised visitation
- Co-parenting education
- Facilitated, peer-led divorce support groups

When parents are unhappy, generally so are their children. But how can one become “happy,” or at least content, when one’s world has collapsed? Pioneer child psychiatrist Dr. Karl Menninger’s adage was: “What children see at home, they will do to society.”

Statistically, most divorces are amicable, and the issues of child custody and visitation are easily resolved, although painful. For another 30% of separated parents, child custody, and visitation issues are highly conflicted. These parents have mixed feelings—disappointment, anger, and hostility. These cases are litigated, managed by the courts (family court and dependency), whether there are allegations of domestic abuse or not. Sadly, the role of each parent becomes defined by

the court, argued by the parties, and, in some states, mediated with some success and without added financial burdens in the court.

The Toby Center was created to offer different services, which may be mandated by the family and dependency courts, to achieve a more natural relationship between children and their parents. It’s the concurrent methods of court-ordered services, therapeutic interventions, and divorce or parenting support groups that will most effectively ensure parents that their family transitions will be successfully navigated.

“What children see at home, they will do to society.”—Karl Menninger

These services can appear to be remedies for dismantling biological and/or nuclear families. CFLEs can provide service options that may mitigate differing levels of parental conflict. The fundamentals of parental conflict may be fueled by avenging domestic violence or abusive behaviors. But most conflict is based on perception, control, communication, and punishment for abandoning the marriage. It is child access (visitation) that is the thorniest of issues and that plague the courts with testimony, forensic evaluations, festering delays, and continuing litigation. When parents become better adjusted and more accepting of their life change, they can become more mindful of their own self-perception and more careful in their personal behaviors and communications. This all makes for a much improved present and future.

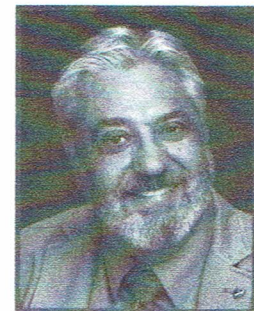
The research of Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner, family ecologist and the originator of the federal government’s Head Start Program, docu-

mented that the child—indeed, all family members—are influenced by personal history, home, community, media, and public policy. These and more are all the fundamental

“gatekeepers” to our own sense of self and well-being. It is also how we perceive social norms that differ from stated social value. In this way, we can create our own myths.

Given the complexity of the healing journey, the Toby Center’s mission is to improve child outcomes when parents separate. For many that journey is similar, and the degree to which services may be provided will depend on the demands for accomplishing therapeutic, legal, and social goals. Because Toby Center treatments are most often couched in court orders, we first review the court orders before case assignment. Then we obtain background information from all involved parties, including referring agencies or courts.

The Toby Center healing modalities include (a) child access services through supervised visitation, (b) agency or court-ordered reunification therapy (for children in foster care or who are otherwise remanded to a biological parent), (c) trauma-based care focused on family structure change (and cause), (d) co-parenting planning and preparation through individual parenting training and consultations and co-parenting education, and (e) co-parenting tools of mediation and



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parent coordination. The center does not formally recommend or conduct forensic evaluations. We do uncover information during formal client intake, and that information may be valuable to the court, the Department of Children and Families, or counsels and/or guardians ad litem. At that point, our work is suspended until further clarification from those parties. Domestic violence and child abuse may be the symptom as well as the cause for divorce and parental separation. But these concerns are the cause in less than a third of divorce cases and the reason for approximately a third of high-conflict cases.

Times have changed. Over the past 20 years, during which I have been a Washington, DC-based national child advocate; a family mediator in three states; and founder of the Toby Center in Florida, I have witnessed the acceptance of the social science supporting joint custody by 30 state legislatures. I have attended ceremonies held by three countries—France, Australia, and Canada—that have adopted national legislation acknowledging the vital roles that both parents have in raising successful children. Yet 20 states still object to such legislation.

In the United States where each state's legislation governs family law, parents are still forced into a vacuum of mystery, not knowing what to expect. It is an expensive vacuum of litigation, psychological evaluations, and limited access to their children. Furthermore, there are court-appointed guardians ad litem, attorneys for minor children, and numerous sudden hearing postponements. These expenses wreak havoc in the life of a parent required to foot the bill for these legal appointments, on top of slashed household income due to the parents' separation. Such financial responsibilities may impede payment of child support and other court-ordered childcare expenses, forcing many to live with friends and family members. This financial fallout is often the result of divorce. Financial frailty in an intact family is not as great a threat as that when a family unit dissolves; breaking apart a family adds the greatest and potentially most destructive stress.

In most states, the family court system requires parents to participate in classroom or online courses that address parenting after separation and divorce. Additionally, such courses focus how both parents can co-parent and communicate toward the best interests of the child. When parents are in crisis, they are not in the mental space to fully concentrate on these courses, as they are struggling to survive the havoc and trauma of marital change. They are preoccupied with finding the mental strength to cope, meeting court orders in a timely manner, and finding the money to adjust to new legal and related expenses.

The Toby Center has found that parents are able to adjust more constructively as residential or nonresidential parents with hands-on and directly applied education in the form of

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therapeutic support, child access, and divorce support groups. Each modality is educational and addresses topics such as "why me?" "what do I tell my children?" and "when will I find love?" When they are composed, emotionally grounded, and spiritually settled, parents can adapt and move forward toward becoming more capable and loving in their parental roles. Greater access to their children will provide reasons to adapt to the horrors of an ended relationship. With counseling or family therapy, a parent will find a guide toward personal self-understanding and an improved relationship with the other parent.

Wrestling for time-sharing of the children is difficult and expensive. Agreeing to supervised visitation services that will monitor and document the nature of the interactions with their children can demonstrate parents' ability to parent with responsibility and affection. In the past three decades, the number of mothers who have become the nonresidential parent has increased, and nearly half of our clients are nonresidential mothers. Sometimes it is due to aggressive litigation

by the father's attorney, but it may also result from drug or alcohol abuse by the mother. The courts feel, as with temporary restraining orders, that they should err on the side of caution and therefore order supervised visitation until they receive clarifying reports.

Supervised Visitation

Supervised visitation has emerged as the largest of the center's services and can confirm to the court that a parent (a) is demonstrating appropriate behavior with his or her child, (b) is not a threat to the other parent, and (c) is complying with court orders with respect to time, frequency, and rules of the visitation provider.

Supervised visitation is the most frequent intervention for a parent otherwise prohibited from seeing his or her child because it is an immediate court order based on the judge's perception of the case. It allows a parent to show compliance with court orders and gives the children access to their otherwise "absent" parent. Many different experiences are provided to the child through this parenting time, which occur mostly off site and in the community. The design of the program is to allow the parent and child age- and context-appropriate interactions. The input of both parents is required for this service.

In 25% of our cases, the center's family monitors are subpoenaed to testify in court hearings about the nature of the visitations.

Therapeutic Supervised Visitation

This is unofficial or de facto family therapy and is designed to help parents and children understand improve their dynamic through understanding their behaviors and feelings within the context of supervised visitation. This is especially helpful when clinical staff members are preparing a parent for greater immersion in the child's life and restoring the parent-child bond.

Family and Reunification Therapy

When an agency or a court determines that a child in temporary foster care may return to a biological parent or that a child will be moved between family homes, it is important that children are prepared for this reestablished relationship. Child custody

transfers from agencies and temporary foster care require emotional preparation. Family and reunification therapy is a unique means of bridging the fears and anxieties that individuals in the dyad (or triad) may have. Parental alienation is recognized by many courts as child abuse and is highly damaging to children. It requires slow and deliberate interventions to help a child through the mental hurdles of fear and mistrust.

Co-Parenting Education and Consultations

Co-parenting education and consultation provides parents with guidance in how they can better raise their children, often on a part-time or shared-custody basis. When divorce and child custody litigation loom, we are faced with the reality of how we parent. Parents will find that the potential for conflict and confrontation is significant, especially when a teen lashes out verbally or physically. There needs to be forethought, patience, and mindfulness when helping a child through this traumatic process of divorce and child custody. Co-parenting reduces acrimony in divorce or child-custody cases and fosters

more rapid agreement between the parents, with fewer returns to the court hearing room.

Mediation and Parent Education

As an experienced family court mediator, I find that many parents and even the courts will look to the mediated parenting agreement as a mechanical roadmap for scheduling child visitations and arranging for the physical child transfer and exchange between the parents. But in many agreements, parents fail to understand the emotional upheavals and sometimes the traumatic "whirl of change" when actual transitions occur. Case managers can help a family be more relaxed when encountering new, challenging family conditions. Consider that these children may not have the same "idyllic" childhood we wish for all children.

All of us, as CFLEs and family scientists, run the risk of bringing our own family histories into our work as we counsel families in distress. With this understanding, we can, through programs such as the Toby Center, help parents move forward and adapt to new marital and

family circumstances while they demonstrate authentic concern, regard, assurance, and support for their children. This will enable children to be happier because their parents have become more accepting and content.

Regardless of where they live, children need to know that that Mom and Dad are driven by love for them. Parents need to know that they can access the help of others to protect the best interests of their children. It is through field-applied education that CFLEs will have immediate effects on improving child outcomes. ✨

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30 years as a CFLE!

Each year at the CFLE Reception we play a little game as a way to recognize the commitment of CFLEs to the program. We start by recognizing our newest CFLEs by having those certified within the past year stand. We then ask all other CFLEs to stand. Those certified less than 5 years are asked to sit. Then those certified 5+, 10+, 15+, etc. up through 30+ years. By the end, only those certified 30+ years remain standing. At the 2017 conference CFLEs **Carol Darling** and **Deborah Gentry** were the last CFLEs standing. Both were first certified in 1987 and have maintained their support of the CFLE program for over 30 years! Thank you Carol and Deb!



CFLE 30+ YEARS

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