

Tips for Working with Children of Divorce

Excerpted from **Cory Helps Kids Cope with Divorce**

By Liana Lowenstein

It is not uncommon for children to be referred to mental health services to help them cope with separation and divorce. In this free excerpt from **Cory Helps Kids Cope with Divorce**, author Liana Lowenstein provides helpful tips to guide your clinical work with challenging divorce cases:

Be clear about your role.

Understand the role you play: Are you the child's therapist or an evaluator? You cannot be both. Remember that it is not the role of the child's therapist to make decisions about visitation schedules or co-parenting issues. The central role of the child's therapist is to assess the impact of the divorce and to help the child adjust to the divorce.

Meet with both parents.

Gathering information from both parents prior to seeing the child is an important step in the intervention process. If possible, meet with both parents together, unless there are safety concerns that prohibit the parties from coming into contact. It can still be beneficial to conduct a joint session when there is a high level of conflict between the parents, as this can provide valuable assessment information and set the tone for working collaboratively with both parents. It can be helpful as well to meet with parents separately so they can be candid and not edit their remarks in the presence of the other parent.

Remain neutral.

In divorce cases, parents may strive to win your allegiance. In order to be most effective, you must not become aligned with one parent or get drawn into the conflict. Take a neutral stance with the parents and remain focused on the needs of the child. You can maintain neutrality with the parents while still conveying empathy for their pain and respect for their points of view.

Confirm custody and obtain consent to treatment from both parents.

Although the focus of the first session with the parents is on rapport building and information gathering, there are a number of important administrative tasks that need to be accomplished. A copy of the divorce papers should be obtained in order to confirm custody. Written consent to treatment must be obtained from both custodial parents. In cases of sole custody, it is clinically beneficial to obtain consent to treatment from the non-custodial parent, to encourage this parent's involvement in therapy and secure support for the child's therapy.

Do not underestimate the importance of the therapeutic relationship.

The therapist-client relationship is central to the client's realization of treatment goals. The rapport that develops between therapist and child forms the foundation for therapeutic success. In building a therapeutic alliance, the practitioner must create an atmosphere of safety in which the child is made to feel accepted, understood, and respected. Similarly, the therapist must use sensitivity when processing the child's activities so that he does not feel his work is being judged.

Assess parent-child interaction.

As part of the assessment, it is important to observe each parent separately with the child. Play-based activities can assess the family's ability to work together, their boundaries and structure, their communication style, and their patterns of attachment. Examples of play-based family assessment activities include The Family Gift (Lowenstein, 2006); Boat Storm Lighthouse (Post-Sprunk, 2010); Colored Candy Go Around (Arkell, 2010); and Family Puppet Interviews (Gil, 1994).

Utilize directive activities as tools to facilitate the therapy.

When utilizing directive therapeutic activities such as those in **Cory Helps Kids Cope with Divorce**, always keep in mind that the effectiveness of any activity lies in your ability to use it as a tool to facilitate meaningful dialogue. Thus, the activities are not the therapy, they are merely tools to facilitate the therapeutic process. Directive activities must be implemented carefully, thoroughly and sensitively, always keeping in mind the child's treatment objectives.

References

Arkell, K. (2010). *Colored candy go around*. In L. Lowenstein, (Ed.), *Assessment and treatment activities for children, adolescents and families volume two: Practitioners share their most effective techniques* (pp. 11-12). Toronto, ON: Champion Press.

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