

### **Family Professional Support Through the Separation/Divorce Process**

It is almost a given that people enter into co-habiting relationships, particularly marriage expecting it will be long lasting, if not forever-lasting. Thus when a breakdown occurs, there is at least upset, disappointment and disillusionment. In view of same, some might argue that it would be of benefit to the parties, subject to the separation or divorce to obtain at least emotional support to facilitate the separation process.

Now imagine you are child whose parents are in the throws of a separation. Children are not only subject to the same emotional upheaval, but also draw their sense of security, safety, well-being and personal worth at the hands of their parents. Regardless of the quality of parenting, to some degree or other, from one or other parent, their needs are addressed. Separation/divorce interrupts the provision of care and undermines stability, certainty and continuity of relationships at times when the child's cognitive capacity, by virtue of age, may be unable to interpret events reasonable to the situation.

Notwithstanding the issues common to every separation/divorce, there are yet other issues that heighten concern in terms of the outcome for the parties and their children. In the presence of multiple concerns, the risk of poor outcomes increases. Further, the actual concerns themselves must be assessed in the context of their intensity, frequency and duration.

The following concerns represent risk factors to parties subject to divorce. The risks include anything from; contested divorce; to loss of relationships; to the undermined development and success of children; to injury and death of any family member(s). In the presence of any and particularly multiple or severe concerns, the value of family professional support increases:

- Pre-existing mental disorder
- Criminal activity or history
- Overly passive, docile personality disposition
- Overly dominant, aggressive personality disposition
- History of parental domestic violence, child abuse, parental alcoholism (from one's family of origin when a child)
- Domestic violence, child abuse, alcoholism within current family
- Alcohol consumption greater than 6 standard beverages weekly or more than 5 standard beverages per occasion, at least once per month
- Recreational drug use/abuse
- Extra-marital affair
- Cold, uncommunicative behaviour
- Conflicting religious beliefs
- Restrictive beliefs, social or religious practices
- Job loss(es)
- Learning disability (parent or child)
- Physical or developmental disability (parent or child)
- Any other special needs on the part of a child

At the very least, it is in a family's best interest to obtain a consultation from a person trained in assessing concerns in the context of separation and divorce. The family professional consultant must meet with both parties, either together or separately and the children, to interview and obtain data relative to concerns and offer guidance to mitigate risks as assessed. Therein the consultant may also offer guidance in order to meet the children's ongoing needs and relationships between the parents.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.