



Blended family/Kids in distress: What to do?

Things were going well. Then one parent remarries, a new family emerges and the kids are in distress. The other parent determines the child needs counseling or that a change in access is necessary to limit the child's exposure to the new family, viewed as the source of distress. The fight is on again. Or need it be?

It is safe to assume that most parents will enter into a new relationship post separation/divorce, many resulting in a combination of children. The issue then becomes how to manage the new relationship in view of the kids and how to manage the adjustment process.

When children appear significantly distressed in a newly blended family, the other natural parent may take them to counseling as a means to investigate the distress or help them cope. Unfortunately however while this provides a sense that something is being done, often little is accomplished. In fact, counseling only for the child with difficulty adjusting to new blended family can do more harm than good. The issue is akin to arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. While the chairs may look nicely arranged, the ship continues to sink. While chatting with a counselor may help the child feel better in the short run, if the larger issues of parental adjustment, child management, communications and boundaries within and between families are not addressed, the child can fall back to distress shortly after a brief upturn from counseling. A failed counseling experience will cause future counseling efforts to be viewed skeptically and the parent may now rush to the change in access.

For children in distress in the context of adjustment to a new blended family, rather than just sending the kids off to counseling, the parents and their partners should enter counseling or "parent education" or mediation themselves.

While it is preferred for both natural parents and new partners to attend counseling together, it is understood that this may not be possible. What matters though is that all the adults see the same counselor (or educator, or mediator) so the counselor gets a full view of the situation as opposed to a one-sided or biased view. With an unbiased view, the counselor can then help in the adjustment process knowing issues on both sides.

Adjustment doesn't necessarily mean restructuring the access regime. It may mean identifying and sorting out feelings between former spouses regarding any number of issues as well as issues within the newly blended family. All pertinent matters as assessed by the counselor should be addressed in the interest of the children.

Children can be very sensitive to their parents' feelings and this alone can be a great source of their distress over and above their own adjustment. However, by meeting with the parents, even more can be achieved. In addition to identifying emotional issues for resolution, issues such as the children's homework, activities, routines and matters of discipline can be discussed. The view is to attain some consistency and stabilize the children's life within the entire family system consisting of both parents and new family.

As the parental issues of adjustment, management, communications and boundaries are addressed the children's distress often fades. They can go back to concentrating on school and the like. So if a child is in distress after a parent establishes a new relationship or family, the parent is advised to take a deep breath and attend counseling or parent education or mediation with the other parent and do this before changing the access regime. Rushing to change the access regime only adds another layer for adjustment and given the child will still go back and forth, the original adjustment issues would remain. Nothing may be solved by a quick change in access and problems can actually be compounded. It may sound scary to the parents to deal with each other in counseling, but the children will likely be better off for it and the children's interest was the goal in the first place.

Kids in distress? Parents go to counseling first.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
www.yoursocialworker.com

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 counseling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.