



Mediating Child Behaviour Problems Between Separated Parents – A Case Scenario

Young Jonathon is acting up at school. His grades are sliding. His parents separated several years earlier. He lives with his mother. She believes his father spoils him and doesn't hold Jonathon accountable for homework. Jonathon sees his father every other weekend and for dinner every Wednesday. Father believes Jonathon misses him and that his behaviour is designed to give his mother a hard time until she relents to his living with him. He believes Jonathon should come to live with him with a total reversal of the access schedule. Their lawyers, wanting to help the parents avoid an expensive trial refer the parents to mediation.

The mediator offers to meet with each parent separately and then twice with their son, once brought by each parent. The process helps the mediator to assess the situation, understand both parents' theory of Jonathon's problems and their proposed solutions. By meeting Jonathon directly, once brought by each parent, the mediator is also able to learn about his relationship to both parents and assess for differences in his story depending on which parent brings him.

In these situations parents are commonly defensive. They worry about how they will be thought of by the mediator. They do not want to be perceived as a *bad* parent. They are both apt to project blame on the other parent while seeking to provide himself or herself and the child as a victim of the other parent's behaviour. The mother seeks to hold onto her son and the father seeks to have more meaningful contact.

The challenge in mediation is helping both parents understand and appreciate they are both right. The difficulty is overcoming resistance from either parent to accept responsibility for their contribution to their child's problems. This is not the same as blaming. Both parents are likely quite loving and appropriately concerned. The process is one of explaining.

Education on the dynamics between the parents, their unique management styles and the need for the child to have meaningful contact with both parents is at the heart of a successful mediation in this case scenario.

Father wants more time with his son, mother is afraid of losing her son and that the father does not manage

him appropriately. The objective is to propose a plan that both parents can accept. Defensive posturing by either parent can scuttle success.

In similar situations proposed plans include counselling for father to help resist spoiling his son whilst also holding his son accountable for school performance. Many fathers experience guilt as a result of limited contact and hence use their time to strengthen the relationship through gifts or special liberties. Unfortunately, this does create behaviour problems for the child who then develops a sense of self-righteousness and then seeks to exploit the difference in expectations between the parents.

Counselling is also indicated for the mother. There is often the fear that if the father cannot set appropriate expectations now, the situation will only worsen with increased parenting time. Counselling for the mother is in the nature of explaining the necessity of the father-child relationship and that only with increased parental time will the father have adequate exposure to diminish his guilt and have opportunity to practice what is learned in his counselling.

Worst-case scenario in these situations is where each parent expects the other to go first. Best-case scenario is where both parents accept the feedback of the mediator and develop a new schedule of access and a counselling plan that both parents agree upon.

Where a new plan is determined and agreed upon, the child tends to settle down. Where the parents remain in conflict, each still blaming the other, child related problems tend to worsen. The goal is to maintain a perspective on the needs of the child and facilitate the parents' adjustment. As they adjust, so too does the child.

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 counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.