

Working with a Child Specialist in Collaborative Law
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What has made collaborative law so appealing to parents in the process of family transitions and professionals who work with the parents and their children?

After many years of being involved with legal battles and research confirming the devastating impact that an adversarial process has on children, many lawyers, mental health professionals, mediators, financial planners and others have been trained to provide a process for parents to end their adult relationship in a way that meets each adult's best interests and also fosters an ongoing, constructive co parent relationship which meets the best interests of each child in the family.

When couples initially make a commitment to each other, there is no roadmap to handle what to do when their relationship ends and there are children involved. Rated as the #2 stressor, second only to death, the impact that separation and divorce has on parents often reinforces the fear of losing their children, the end of the dream of their relationship and fears about the future. Without intervention, parents often cover their anxiety with anger and the "mud" starts slinging back and forth. The collaborative process prevents this and clearly helps parents address the needs of their children.

A child specialist is a trained, experienced mental health professional who is part of the collaborative team. The child specialist works with parents to develop a road map-- a way of working together to meet the best interests of their children. Mental health professionals meet with both parents together to discuss their relationships with their children, learn about how their children are doing psychologically, educationally, interpersonally. Parents discuss with the child specialist how they discipline children, how they address age appropriate issues such as day care for younger children, peer relationships, bed time rituals and long term issues such as driving, college and activities. When parents are experiencing tremendous stress and may not have communicated as co parents before, the child specialist uses tools to assist them in reaching decisions about all aspects of their children's lives, their time with them and communication between parents. Developed by the National Family Resiliency Center, *Family Connex*, is an on line program that provides tools for parents to help them focus on their children's needs. Parents work on this program on their own, outside of the counseling session and bring their responses to discuss with the child specialist. Through discussion about each child, with photos of their children on the table, parents begin to reach agreement about how they will parent their children in the present and future.

A child specialist meets with the children, reassures them and lets them know that that the purpose of the meeting is to get to know them and see what can help them through their family's transition in the best way possible. It is very important that child specialist explains to children that he/she is not their therapist and may see them only once or a few times. child specialists inform children that they will be their "voice." They will bring back to their parents what the children want their parents to know to make the best

decisions possible. Children are reassured that children do not make decisions but their parents do. Sometimes if children are in the middle of conflict and are unhappy about a particular situation, a child specialist can address these issues with the parents. Parents who complete this process and craft parent plans attach them to their legal document for review by each attorney. The parent plan then becomes part of their legal agreement.

The advantage of the collaborative process for children is enormous. There is no court structure that has the time or expertise to teach parents how to communicate, to take each child and thoroughly discuss all aspects of development in the present and future. As some parents have stated, they think that all parents should have the opportunity that they have had, when their children are born, to construct a road map that provides a constructive path for parenting and co parenting. A child specialist cannot do this alone. When parents attend team meetings with their attorneys, coaches and child specialists, all professionals help parents understand the importance of what is included in the parent agreement. While some parents may “argue” for a 50-50 schedule with their child and the child has a very difficult time handling change, a different kind of arrangement may be suggested by the team for the parents to consider. The benefit of the collaborative team is that everyone is supporting the parents to do the best job possible in the most challenging role of all!