

Children and Divorce



“It’s the **high levels of conflict** that many parents experience during litigation that **negatively impacts** how kids cope during this transition.”

- (Rheinstein, 1972, as cited in Saposnek, 1998)



Studies show that “parents who use **divorce mediation** have **better relationships with their children** than parents who litigate”. - (Emery, 2004)

Divorce mediation helps parents “**better transition** to their new co-parenting roles in a healthy way, which **helps kids adjust**”. -

(Saposnek, 1998)



Research shows that **when parents fight** out their divorce in court, “litigation **increases trauma and escalates conflict**”. - (Saccuzzo, 2003)

“A central cause of children’s poor adjustment post-divorce at five years after the divorce was the **failure of the divorce to provide the intended relief**”.

- (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, as cited in Saposnek, 1998)



“When parents **continued fighting** after the divorce ... children had a great deal of **difficulty accepting and integrating** the divorce”. - (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, as cited in Saposnek, 1998)

Conflict is “**harmful only if the child never experiences the parents resolving it**. When parents ‘compromise,’ children avoid the ‘poorer adjustment’ that comes from continuous ‘verbal attacking’”. - (Camara & Resnick, 1989, as cited in Saposnek, 1998)



The American Psychological Association ([APA](#)) endorses mediation, stating that it “can be an effective way of addressing child-related concerns, particularly custody and parenting plans.” It highlights mediation’s capacity to “**empower families** to create their own solutions”.

Divorce can be a traumatic experience for children, but research suggests that **most children adjust well within two years** following the divorce; on the other hand, children often experience **more problems** when parents remain in high-conflict marriages instead of splitting up. - Kelly, J. B. (2005).



Research shows that mediation can be **beneficial** for emotional satisfaction, spousal relationships, and **children’s needs**. - Kelly, J.B. (2012)

Ongoing parental **conflict** increases kids’ risk of psychological and social **problems**. - Velez, C.E., Wolchick, S.A., Tein, J.Y., and Sandler, I. (2011)

“Children who experience **intense parental conflict** are at higher risk for a host of **mental health problems**, including depression”. - Harold & Sellers, (2018)



“Research shows that **high-conflict divorces** have an adverse effect on children’s mental health, academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and self-esteem”.
- Christina Iglesia, Psy.D. (2023)



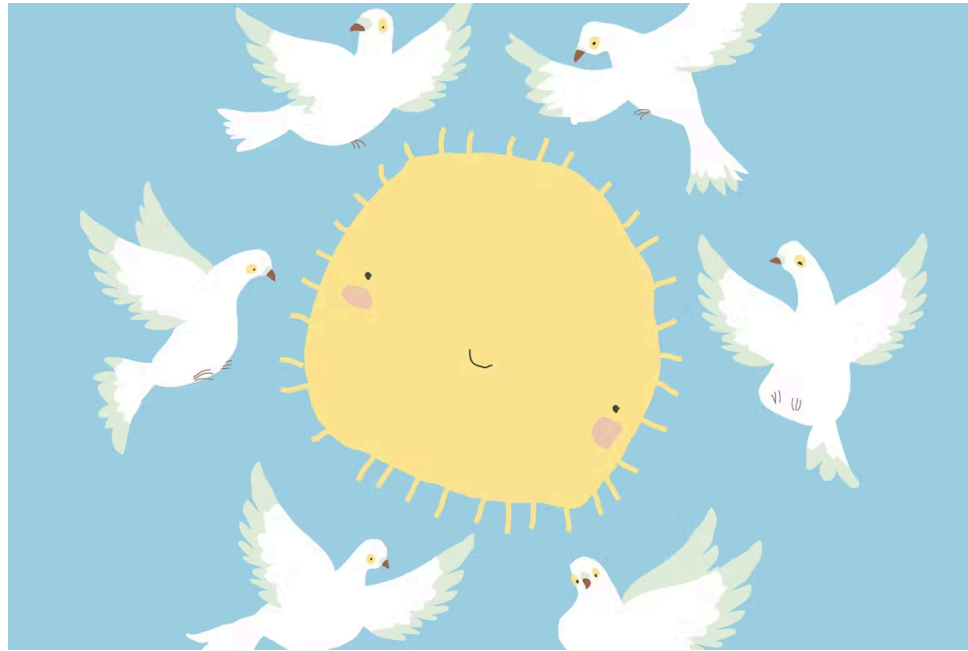
“When children are frequently coerced or cajoled into taking sides in parental battles, [this] creates a terrible conflict in them of **divided loyalties**. Such a tug-of-war greatly compounds children’s difficulties”. - Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, as cited in Saposnek, (1998)

“When children ‘suffer heightened levels of anxiety’ resulting from their parents’ divorce conflict, they develop a **shrunk sense of self-worth**, act more aggressively, and are terrified of their parents’ aggressiveness while oppositely imitating it”. - Bricklin & Elliot, (2000)



Many families find it helpful to use a **Children’s Bill of Rights in Divorce**, which states that every child has the right:

- ★ To love and be loved by both of your parents without feeling guilt or disapproval.
- ★ To be protected from your parents’ anger with each other.
- ★ To be kept out of the middle of your parents’ conflict, including the right not to pick sides, carry messages, or hear complaints about the other parent.
- ★ Not to have to choose one of your parents over the other.
- ★ Not to have to be responsible for the burden of either of your parent’s emotional problems.
- ★ To know well in advance about important changes that will affect your life; such as when one of your parents is going to move or get remarried.
- ★ To have reasonable financial support during your childhood and through your college years.
- ★ The right to have feelings, to express your emotions, and to have both parents listen to how you feel.
- ★ The right to have a life as close as possible to what it would have been if your parents stayed together.
- ★ The right to be a kid.



How Play Therapists' Work Aligns with Divorce Mediation:

1. Supporting Children's Emotional Well-being

- **Emotional Regulation Techniques:** Both play therapists and divorce mediators use techniques to help children manage and express their emotions in healthy ways.
- **Active Listening and Empathy:** Play therapists and mediators prioritize listening to children's feelings and perspectives, fostering a supportive environment.

2. Facilitating Effective Communication

- **Communication Strategies for Children and Parents:** Play therapists and mediators teach and encourage effective communication between children and their parents, helping to reduce misunderstandings and conflicts.
- **Encouraging Open Dialogue:** Both professionals create safe spaces where children and parents can openly discuss their thoughts and concerns.

3. Addressing and Resolving Conflicts

- **Conflict Resolution Skills:** Play therapists and mediators employ conflict resolution strategies to help families navigate disputes and reach mutually acceptable agreements.

- **Techniques for Managing High-Conflict Situations:** Both use specific techniques to de-escalate high-conflict situations, ensuring a calmer and more productive discussion.
4. **Promoting Healthy Co-Parenting**
 - **Co-Parenting Strategies:** Play therapists and mediators provide guidance on effective co-parenting practices that support the child's stability and development.
 - **Ensuring Consistency and Stability for Children:** Both professionals emphasize the importance of consistent parenting approaches and stable environments for children's well-being.
 5. **Building Trust and Rapport**
 - **Establishing a Safe and Trusting Environment:** Play therapists and mediators work to build trust and rapport with families, creating a foundation for open and honest communication.
 - **Empathy and Non-Judgmental Support:** Both offer empathetic and non-judgmental support, helping families feel understood and respected.
 6. **Creating Structured Agreements**
 - **Clear and Fair Parenting Plans:** Both play therapists and mediators assist in developing structured parenting plans that address the child's needs and interests.
 - **Agreements that Minimize Future Conflicts:** They focus on creating agreements that are clear, fair, and designed to prevent future disputes.
 7. **Managing Emotional Reactions**
 - **Techniques to Handle Strong Emotions:** Play therapists and mediators teach techniques to manage strong emotional reactions, helping family members stay calm and focused.
 - **Mindfulness and Relaxation Practices:** Both may incorporate mindfulness and relaxation practices to help family members cope with stress and maintain emotional balance.
 8. **Addressing Children's Specific Needs**
 - **Tailored Interventions:** Play therapists and mediators work together to understand and address the specific needs of each child, ensuring their unique concerns are considered.
 - **Developmental Appropriateness:** Both professionals ensure that interventions and communication are appropriate for the child's developmental stage.
 9. **Promoting Resilience and Empowerment**
 - **Building Emotional Resilience:** Play therapists and mediators focus on building children's emotional resilience, helping them adapt to changes and challenges.
 - **Empowering Families to Make Informed Decisions:** Both professionals empower families to make informed decisions that support their long-term well-being.
 10. **Holistic Approach to Family Well-being**

- **Integrating Emotional, Psychological, and Practical Support:** Play therapists and mediators take a holistic approach, addressing the emotional, psychological, and practical aspects of family well-being.
- **Collaborative Efforts for Comprehensive Care:** They work collaboratively to provide comprehensive care that supports the entire family through the transition of divorce.