Meeting with Children

A Child-Centred Approach

Information for Parents, Legal Guardians and Lawyers

What Is a Child-Centred Approach?

Meeting with Children: A Child-Centred Approach is a structured process that gives children an opportunity to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings about their family's separation or divorce. Developed by Lorri Yasenik and Jon Graham through the International Centre for Children and Family Law (ICCFL), the model is grounded in the belief that children over the age of five should have an opportunity to participate in Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) processes that affect them.

The guiding question
The question is not whether children should be heard, but how their voices can be safely and effectively included.

What Does the Process Look Like?

The meetings with the child are child-led, non-directive and play-based. Expressive and experiential activities, such as drawing, storytelling, role play and games, may help the child communicate in a way that feels natural and safe.

The overall process is structured and non-evaluative. It does not assess a parent or legal guardian, determine what parenting arrangement is in the child's best interests, or provide parenting recommendations. Its purpose is to communicate the child's lived experience in their own words.

1. **Intake forms:** Each participating parent or legal guardian completes the required intake form independently.

2. **Separate intake meetings:** Each participating parent or legal guardian meets separately with the practitioner to discuss the process, prepare for the child's participation and consider how to receive the child's feedback.

3. **Meetings with the child:** The child typically attends two meetings and chooses what, if anything, they are comfortable sharing with their parents or legal guardians.

4. **Written summary:** A child-centred summary is prepared using the information the child has agreed may be shared.

5. **Optional feedback meetings - additional fee:** Parents or legal guardians may request separate feedback meetings. Joint meetings require everyone's agreement and the practitioner's approval. All feedback meetings are optional and billed separately from the base fee.

Scope of information reviewed
This non-evaluative process does not review affidavits, expert reports, counselling records or other evidentiary material. Only relevant portions of current legal documents are reviewed to verify decision-making authority, consent and applicable participation, safety or information-sharing restrictions. Unrelated background and allegations should be redacted.

Why Meet with Children Separately?

Children are deeply affected by family separation but are often excluded from conversations and decisions that affect their lives. This approach:

- Recognizes the child as central to the family system
- Provides a safe space for the child to express their experience
- Supports understanding between the child and their parents or legal guardians, and child-informed parenting discussions

The process also supports parents or legal guardians in preparing to hear the child's concerns without becoming defensive, understanding the child's experience without judgment or blame, and responding in emotionally attuned and child-focused ways.

Is This Therapy?

No. This is not a therapy session and does not involve clinical assessment or treatment. It is a communication-based process designed to include the child's voice in ADR settings such as mediation or collaborative law.

When Is This Approach Appropriate?

This approach may be appropriate when:

- A parenting plan is being developed or updated
- Parents or legal guardians, or professionals, want to include the child's experience in decision-making
- The matter does not involve complex clinical issues that would make participation inappropriate, such as active trauma concerns, abuse allegations or significant mental health concerns

All parents or legal guardians whose consent is required must provide informed consent, and the child must voluntarily agree to participate. Consent and participation requirements are confirmed before proceeding, taking account of legal authority and the service requirements. If safety concerns, legal barriers or clinical concerns arise, the process may be delayed, modified or discontinued.

What to Tell Your Child

Keep the explanation simple and focused on your child's voice. Avoid pressuring, rehearsing with or coaching your child. Let your child know you support them sharing what they genuinely think and feel.

> "We've asked someone who works with children to meet with you so we can better understand how things have been for you. It isn't about picking sides. It is a chance for you to share what is on your mind, and you can decide what you are comfortable sharing with us."

What Is Included in the Written Summary?

Following completion of the meetings, parents or legal guardians authorized to receive the summary receive a written child-centred summary that may include:

- The child's verbatim statements, using the child's own words
- General themes the child chose to discuss
- A factual description of how the child communicated during the meetings, where relevant

Only information the child agrees may be shared is included. The summary does not provide clinical conclusions, credibility findings, parenting assessments or recommendations.

Communication Boundaries

Unsolicited communication to the practitioner is limited to scheduling, process, timing and costs. This applies to emails, texts, calls, voicemails and documents sent by a parent or legal guardian or on their behalf.

Unsolicited opinions, concerns about the other parent or legal guardian, allegations, accounts of the dispute, arguments about parenting arrangements, and attempts to influence the child's feedback or written summary are prohibited. Do not send evidence, screenshots, recordings or reports unless specifically requested.

This limit does not prevent completion of requested intake forms, answers to questions the practitioner asks, or brief notification of a new safety concern or legal restriction affecting participation. Such notification is for determining whether the process can safely proceed, not for investigating allegations. This service is not an emergency response service.

Messages outside these boundaries will not receive a substantive response. The practitioner may restate the boundaries, pause or discontinue the process. Any information received remains subject to applicable recordkeeping, safety and reporting obligations.

Consent and Participation

A Letter of Understanding and Consent Form must be completed and signed by all parents or legal guardians whose consent is required before the child's meetings are scheduled. Required parent or legal guardian intake forms and separate intake meetings must also be completed before the child participates. Who must consent and participate will be clarified before services begin.

Feedback meetings are optional. No parent or legal guardian is required to attend a joint meeting.

Professional Fees

The base fee is $2,100 for one child. This includes up to 12 hours of professional time for:

- Review of the completed parent or legal guardian intake forms
- Separate intake meetings with each participating parent or legal guardian
- Preparation for and two meetings with the child
- Preparation of the written child-centred summary
- Routine scheduling, permitted administrative communication and administration associated with the process

Optional feedback meetings are not included in the base fee or its 12-hour allowance. Separate or joint feedback meetings are billed additionally at **$175 per hour in 15-minute increments**, even if fewer than 12 hours of base-service time have been used. The anticipated duration and cost will be confirmed before booking. Declining a feedback meeting does not prevent release of the written summary once the other release requirements are met.

If the base process requires more than 12 hours, additional professional time is billed at $175 per hour in 15-minute increments. Further meetings with the child or additional permitted coordination may require additional time. Parents or legal guardians will be advised before significant additional fees are incurred whenever reasonably possible.

A non-refundable deposit of $1,000 is required before the process begins and is applied toward the $2,100 base fee. The remaining balance for the completed process, including any additional professional fees already incurred, must be paid before the written summary is released. Payment arrangements for optional feedback meetings are confirmed when booked.

Unless otherwise agreed in writing or directed by a court order, base-process fees are divided equally between the participating parents or legal guardians. Each is responsible for their agreed share so the process can proceed. An optional separate feedback meeting is charged to the parent or legal guardian requesting it; the cost of a joint meeting is shared equally by its participants unless otherwise agreed in writing or directed by a court order.

Questions or Referrals

306-550-4118
melanie@journeyforwardcounselling.ca
www.journeyforwardcounselling.ca

Journey Forward Counselling
Supporting families through separation and beyond