



# MEET YOUR FAMILY PSYCHOLOGIST: THE ROLES OF A PSYCHOLOGIST IN DIVORCE

BY DANIEL H. SWERDLOW-FREED, PH.D., P.C.

What is a psychologist? A doctoral-level psychologist is a professional who has completed post-graduate university education in the field of psychology and is licensed by the State to diagnose and treat a full range of psychological problems. During their graduate training, psychologists extensively study normal and abnormal human behavior, human development across the life span, and various methods used to diagnose and treat psychological problems.

Clinical psychologists receive specialized training in a variety of “talk therapy” procedures and clinical evaluation. Upon completion of their doctoral studies they can provide individual, marital, group, and/or family therapy. Forensic psychologists apply specialized psychological methods and principles to legal matters, advising courts, attorneys and parents on custody and parenting time issues.

In Michigan, doctoral-level psychologists (i.e., those possessing a Ph.D., Psy.D. or Ed. D.) are licensed to practice independently, while those with a Master’s degree are required to practice under the supervision of a doctoral-level psychologist and are not licensed to independently diagnose or treat people with mental health problems. While doctoral-level psychologists are “doctors,” they function differently from psychiatrists. Psychiatrists initially attend medical school where they are trained to practice general medicine. After receiving their medical degree (i.e., M.D. or D.O.), they complete a residency program in psychiatry, where the primary focus is on using medication to treat psychological problems.

What services does a psychologist provide in divorce and child custody cases? The function of a psychologist in divorce and contested child custody matters varies from case to case, and the remainder of this article discusses the most common roles.

Adults and children experience divorce as a time of great uncertainty and instability, and they can easily feel overwhelmed or immobilized by the upheaval it causes. Emotions run very high, and some people can barely cope with the demands of this situation. Attorneys who are attuned to the psychological difficulties engendered by divorce may refer their client to a psychologist who can help them navigate and survive this transition and get their life back on an even keel.

It is not uncommon for a parent to enter therapy or counseling during a divorce. The terms ‘therapy’ and ‘counseling,’ which are often used interchangeably, refer to the general procedure of examining one’s thoughts, feelings, behavior, or relationships to identify existing problems, and formulate strategies to resolve them. One way to think of therapy is as a discussion between two people, where the psychologist – therapist has specialized knowledge and uses techniques that enable clients to solve problems, improve adjustment, and derive more pleasure and satisfaction from life.

One truism of divorce is that it changes the lives of the entire family. Whether life after divorce will be better or worse depends on many different factors that may be the subject of discussion in therapy. Adults and children involved in divorce may encounter a variety of problems ranging from immediate, intense distress to anxiety about the future. Adults, for example, may feel inordinately vulnerable about the impact of an impending separation and anxious about the future. They may find it useful to have a psychologist help them address these concerns and identify how to best cope with them. Some adults are unexpectedly confronted with divorce and feel their entire world has fallen apart, and these individuals may find useful the support and reassurance a psychologist offers to help them regain their emotional equilibrium.

Regardless of the reason for divorce, each adult must learn to cooperate with their former spouse, especially around issues involving their child, which includes shielding the child from parental conflict. Also, parents must remain focused on their child’s physical, emotional and psychological needs, which is not necessarily easy when the parent is going through this major life change.

Parents worry about the impact of divorce on their children and many are concerned that divorce will ruin their child’s chance of having a happy, normal life. They often find it helpful to discuss the steps they can take to provide their children with the love and support needed to help them navigate this major life change. While the literature on divorce shows that many children survive this ordeal without developing life-long scars, some children do develop emotional or behavior problems in response to the stress of divorce, and these children may benefit from therapy.<sup>1</sup>

Some adults going through divorce may already have a clear idea of what they hope to accomplish through therapy,



while others may need assistance to identify the precise cause of their anxiety and how to address this problem. Some, who are apprehensive about divorce, do perceive their marriage as intolerable and want to terminate it, but worry about whether this will lead to life-long problems for their children. Often, these individuals find it helpful to discuss these concerns with a psychologist and determine what effective steps can be taken to deal with them. Other adults may have already decided to proceed with divorce and find it helpful to explore with a psychologist how to personally manage this stressful experience, provide support to their child while the divorce is pending, and deal with a soon-to-be ex-spouse. Most psychologists that provide therapy have broad training and can provide assistance in stress and anger management, conflict resolution, relaxation training, or other areas of difficulty.

Parenting skill training is another area where psychologists provide valuable service. Parenting is a challenging job, and there is no formal training that prepares us to raise children. Often, parents refer to their own childhood for ideas about how to raise their child, and in some cases this can be an effective strategy. Psychologists who work with children are knowledgeable about various parenting strategies and methods of discipline, and which ones are most or least effective. They will also know how children of different ages respond to divorce and effective steps parents can take to protect their children from being excessively harmed by this experience. Parenting skills can be taught by working with the entire family in family therapy, or by meeting individually with one parent to focus on that person's unique concerns. During divorce one common goal is to identify strategies for providing the child with adequate love and nurturing, while at the same time making sure that the parent is able to get his/her emotional and psychological needs met.



Forensic psychologists are used in the court system to provide comprehensive studies, called child custody evaluations, of families when the parents cannot resolve the important decision of where a child should live after the divorce. These evaluations provide detailed information about each parent's personality and parenting style, the child's personality and special needs, each parent's ability to meet their child's needs,

and the family's unique circumstance. Psychologists who provide child custody evaluations perform a very different function than those who therapy to a child, adult or family, and it is important for parents to understand this difference.<sup>2</sup> If a parent is ordered to undergo a child custody evaluation, it is imperative to discuss with the attorney how to prepare for this meeting to assist the examiner in obtaining the most useful and relevant information.<sup>3</sup>

While a parent has a legal right to be involved in his/her child's life, it is sometimes alleged in child custody disputes that a parent is unfit or that the child is unsafe under that parent's care. When this specific claim is raised, the court may direct the accused parent to undergo a "risk assessment" to determine the veracity of the allegation. In this circumstance the psychologist conducts a comprehensive evaluation to determine if a parent has a psychological, drug or substance abuse problem, a personality disorder or pattern of behavior that places the child at risk of harm, or if there are other factors in the parent-child relationship that create a risk of harm. Harm may result from direct or indirect actions such as physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse, or from neglect and inattention.

Psychologists can also help parents resolve disagreements about custody and parenting time through informal mediation. This can be a cost-effective alternative to a child custody evaluation, particularly where parents are reasonably cooperative and there are no serious allegations of parental unfitness. A psychologist-mediator typically meets with the parents, together and/or separately, and perhaps with the child, depending on the circumstances. In this setting, the psychologist can provide information about divorce and its effect on children, potential custody and parenting time arrangements and the importance of parents working together around issues involving their child. The goal is to help the parents develop a living arrangement that is appropriate to their child's age and developmental needs, while enabling the child to maintain a positive, healthy emotional bond with both the mother and father.

For parents who have chronic difficulty with each other after divorce, such as extensive litigation or serious verbal altercations or physical struggles in the presence of their children, the court may order them to work with a psychologist who is designated as "Parenting Coordinator." Parenting coordination is an alternative dispute resolution intervention specifically designed for high-conflict, post-divorce families who repeatedly engage in litigation over parenting issues which the court system is not equipped to resolve. While some lawyers may serve as Parenting Coordinators, most are psychologists because this role usually requires specialized skills and knowledge that falls into the mental health domain. The main functions of Parenting Coordinators are to assist divorced parents to effectively communicate and cooperate with one another, to follow the court's directives regarding parenting time and

joint decision-making and to manage and resolve disputes as they arise so they do not harm the child.

A Parenting Coordinator is often authorized by the Court to make recommendations and/or final decisions regarding prescribed issues, when parents are unable to resolve disagreements on their own. Some disputed issues that a Parenting Coordinator commonly deals with include drop off and pick up times, vacation schedules, extracurricular activities, whether or not a child should be enrolled in therapy or the nature and frequency of contact with each parent when the child is residing with the other parent. While each family's circumstance may differ, the disputes that most commonly lead to appointment of a Parenting Coordinator include allegations that a parent is blocking the child's contact with the other parent; that a parent is trying to alienate the child from the other parent; that a parent is verbally or emotionally abusing the other parent or engaging in inappropriate behavior in front of the child. Additionally, if either parent is exercising impaired judgment or poor impulse control, or is displaying a pattern of not cooperating with the other parent, a Parenting Coordinator may be appointed to monitor the situation and intervene as needed.

Psychologists offer a variety of services to parents and children that experience divorce. They provide individual and family therapy, educate parents about a child's

developmental and post-divorce needs, help parents develop or improve their parenting skills, provide court-ordered evaluations, and serve as mediators or Parenting Coordinators. Each of these roles requires a great deal of training, skill and specialized knowledge and by working with their attorney, parents should be able to identify if the services of a psychologist are required and, if so, for what purpose.

*Daniel H. Swerdlow-Freed, Ph.D. is a clinical and forensic psychologist. His forensic practice is devoted to conducting child custody evaluations and evaluations in criminal and other civil matters, serving as Parenting Coordinator, and providing therapy to adolescents and adults, particularly those who have experienced divorce.*

## Endnotes

1. See, "When Your Child Needs Therapy," at [drswerdlow-freed.com](http://drswerdlow-freed.com). Click the "Therapy Articles" link to access this article.
2. See, "Clinical and Forensic Role Conflicts," at [drswerdlow-freed.com](http://drswerdlow-freed.com). Click the "Forensic Articles" link to access this article.
3. See, Swerdlow-Freed, Daniel H. (2006). *How to Prepare Your Client for a Child Custody Evaluation*. Michigan Family Law Journal, Special Issue, 55-57.

