



Family Therapy for Parent-Child Contact Problems: Key Interventions

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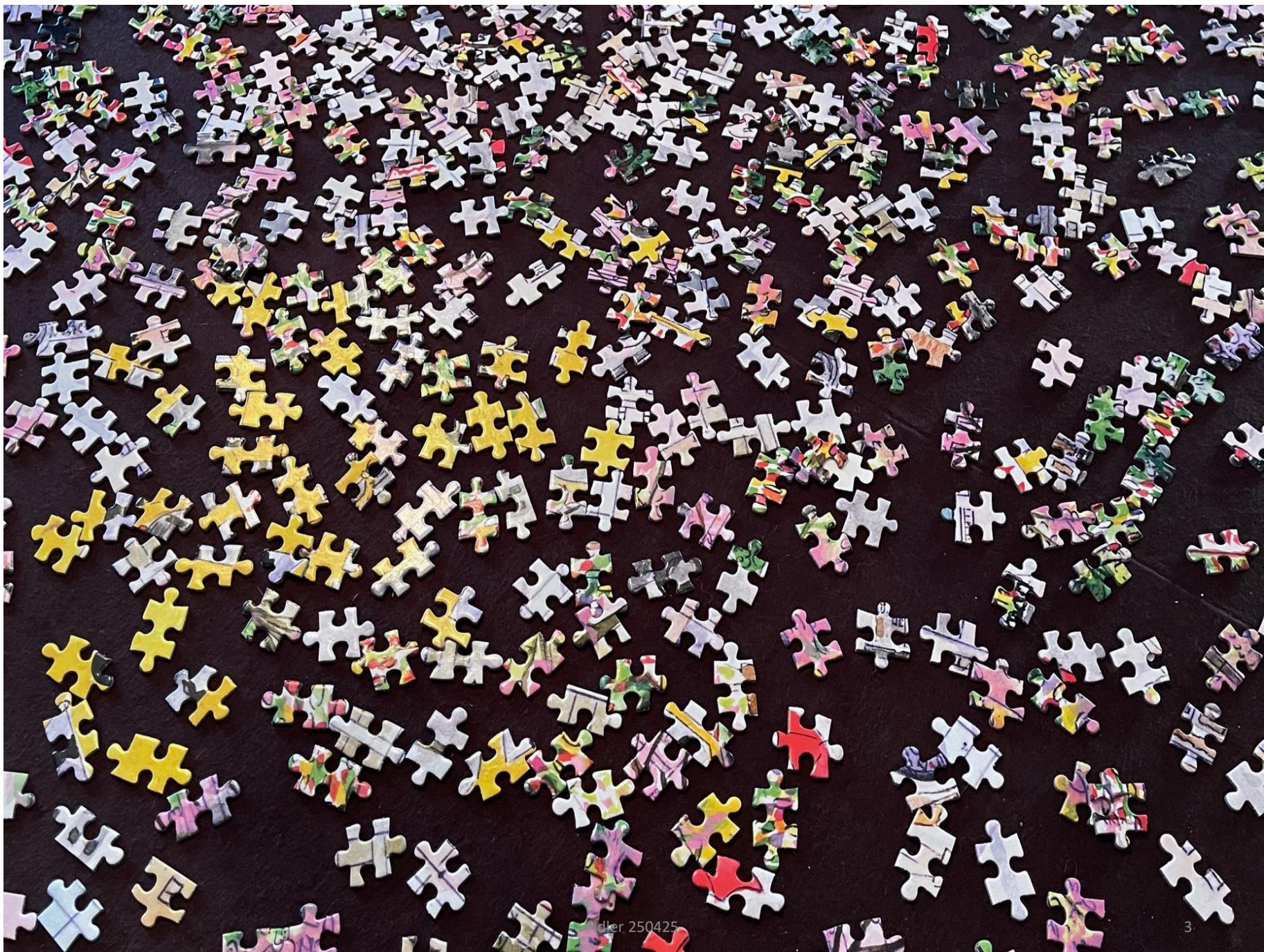
2:45 – 3:30 p.m.

April 25, 2025

WA AFCC, Seattle

Presentation Overview

- Using a Trauma-informed Lens
- Promoting Change Interventions
- Coparenting Interventions
- Resources & Media







Using a Trauma-Informed Lens



Definitions

- Words matter
- "Concept creep" –
 - not all stress is bad or traumatic
 - When stress becomes trauma, stress is extreme, prolonged unsupported, toxic and mirrors the effects of trauma
- When feeling unsafe may become activated and reenact past patterns
- ACES – Adverse Childhood Experiences
- PCE - Positive Childhood Experiences – Resilience



Six Principles of Trauma-Informed Practice in How & What We Do

1. Safety
2. Trust, trustworthiness and transparency
3. Collaboration and and mutuality
4. Empowerment, voice and choice
5. Cultural, historical and gender issues (related to reunification interventions see Harris-Britt, Paces-Wiles & Wax (2021).
6. Self-awareness

RESOURCES/TOOLS ON TRAUMA, RESILIENCE, VISUALS TO SHOW PARENTS

- Center for the Developing Child [developingchild@Harvard.edu](https://developingchild.harvard.edu) (short video clips on toxic stress, resiliency, impacts on parenting)
- SAMHSA - www.samhsa.gov
- Michaelunger.com - resiliency

Amygdala Hijack

Timing is everything

TRAUMA RESPONSES



Hyper-arousal

High energy Anxiety Anger Overwhelm
Hypervigilance Flight/Fight Chaotic

Window of Tolerance

Grounded Flexible Open/Curious Present
Able to Emotionally Self-Regulate

Hypo-arousal

Shut Down Numb Depression Passive
Withdrawn Freeze Shame

Possible misinterpretations:

- Trait vs Reactive
- Hyper-arousal can look like antisocial
- Hypo-arousal can look like callousness, lacking in remorse, apathetic, resistant to engaging
- Poor narrative memory can be taken as lacking in credibility

Calming the Amygdala

EAR -
validation,
"your truth"

Tame it to
Name it

Active
Listening

Breathing
Thinking soothing
thoughts

Movement

Slowing things
down

Lowering your
tone

Shift focus to
"a child"

Psycho-
education

Just Breathe (Saltzman & Saltzman)





The Bear Cards

St. Lukes Innovative Resources (cards and stickers)

Mindfulness / Relaxation - Resources

Just Breathe – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVA2N6tX2cg>

How to Meditate - www.nytimes.com/guides/well/how-to-meditate/
Meditation Apps: Headspace, Calm

Dan Siegel - info@dansiegel.com / mindsightinstitute.com

Tools: Anger Iceberg, Emotion Meters, Metaphorical Stories. Bear Cards

Gina Biegel - www.stressedteens.com (Stress Reduction Workbook For Teens, 2nd Edition, 2017)

<https://kspope.com/memory/mindful.php>

Keep in Mind

- Obtain adequate and sufficient training
- Self awareness - be aware of your own reactions – and how they may be triggering to client, violating principles of TI practice
- Compassion fatigue
- Obtain peer consultation, join a peer consultation group

Promoting Change



"I cannot say whether things will get better if we change; what I can say is that they must change if they are to get better."

G.C. Lichtenberg

"There is nothing permanent except change."

Heraclitus

Motivational Interviewing (MI) **Handout 21**

- *“Client centered directive method for enhancing intrinsic motivation to change by exploring and resolving client ambivalence.”*
- Developed with “resistant populations”, initially for addiction (Miller & Rollnick, 1991)
- Motivation for change arises when person perceives a discrepancy between where they are and where they want to be.

Fundamental Principles:

1. Empathy through reflective listening (EAR-Empathy, Attention, Respect, Eddy; asking permission)
2. Collaboration – no expert role, no direct persuasion, no arguing, roll with resistance
3. Evocation: “change talk” - drawing out perspectives, wishes
4. Autonomy : client’s decision on whether and how to change, support self efficacy and optimism

MI Tools – Examples of “Change Talk”

- **Use of questions:** open-ended – builds empathy, combine with reflection, summarizing
- **Decisional Balancing** - list of pros/cons
 - Highlights benefits of concerning behavior, which is serving a purpose; “symptoms are functional”
 - What are the “costs” of you deciding to change that behavior?
 - To be able to have discussion the client’s ambivalence
- **Columbo Approach (eg of “change talk”, helping discrepancies to surface)**
 - Curious inquiry about discrepant behavior without being judgmental or blaming
 - So, help me understand. On the one hand you are saying you want only what is best for Sarah, while you are continuing to violate the communication protocol rules? What do you think is going on here for you?



Developing Goals

- **Miracle question** – during intake
- **Mutually developed hopes dreams and aspirations for their children** – during first coparenting meeting
- **Thorough review of informed consent agreement** – includes preset goals and the goals identified by parents

Handout 22 & 23

- Goals can interface in practical terms with CRDC **Handout 19**



Goals – Go Beyond Reunification

With individual family members, dyads and family as a group:

- Effective parenting skills by each parent
- Functional coparenting
 - communication skills, setting up protocols for communication and sharing of child-related information
 - correct and strengthen coparenting messaging to children
 - healthy family functioning – conflict resolution, problem solving
- Develop and/or repair strained parent-child relationship while addressing gaps in child's relationship with preferred parent (eg., boundaries, role corruptions)

Across the board, working on:

- Coping skills – emotional regulation, managing ambivalent feelings
- Perspective taking skills, cognitive biases, cognitive distortions, all/nothing thinking
- Increase self reflection

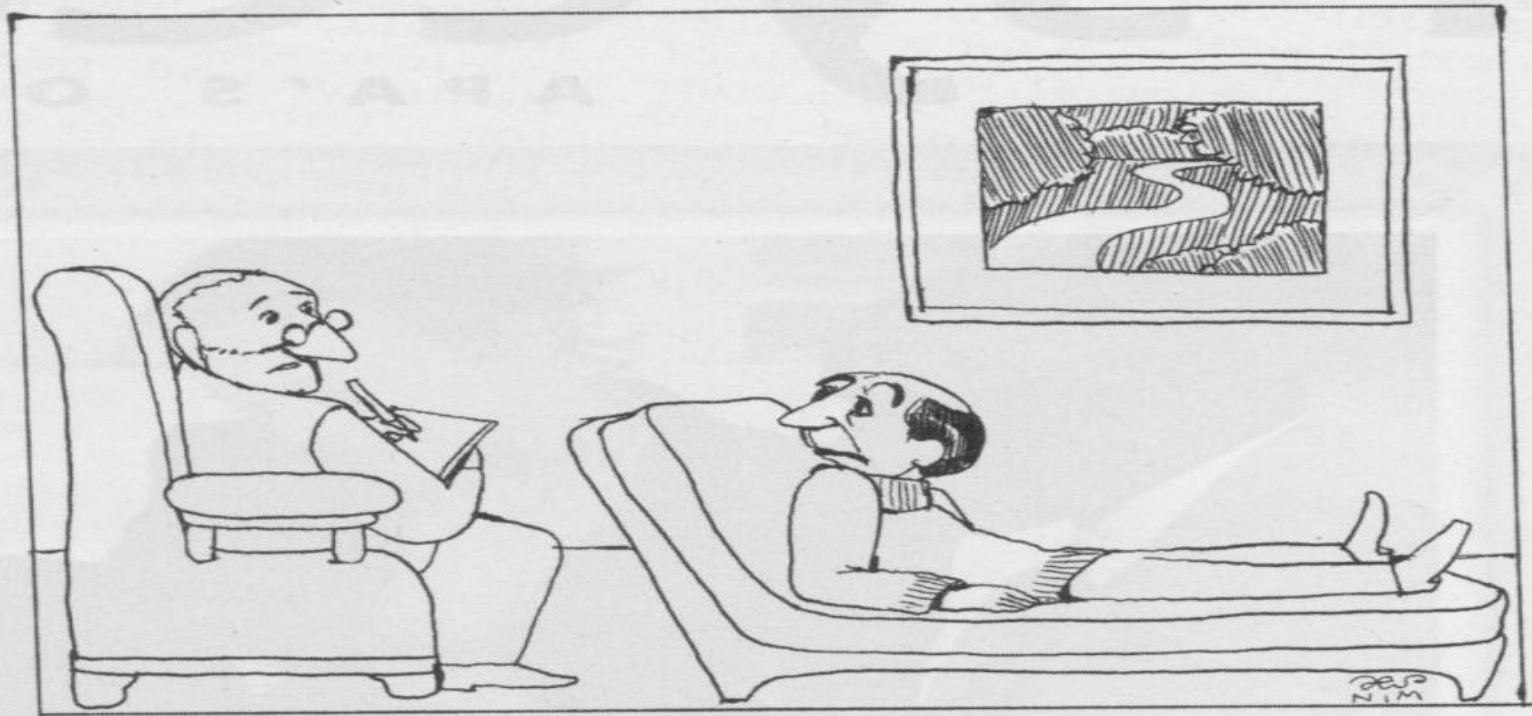
Instill HOPE & Self Confidence – Essential Ingredients to Change



- Exception seeking questions
- Scaling questions



Managing Expectations



"Are we there yet?"

© David Stein/The New Yorker Collection/www.cartoonbank.com

Normalizing Ambivalence, Change & Setbacks

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- Honeymoon phase
 - Predict setbacks which are common: often associated with court dates, anniversaries, other family events, inadequate parenting plan
 - Reframe: “stumbling blocks” to be “stepping stones”

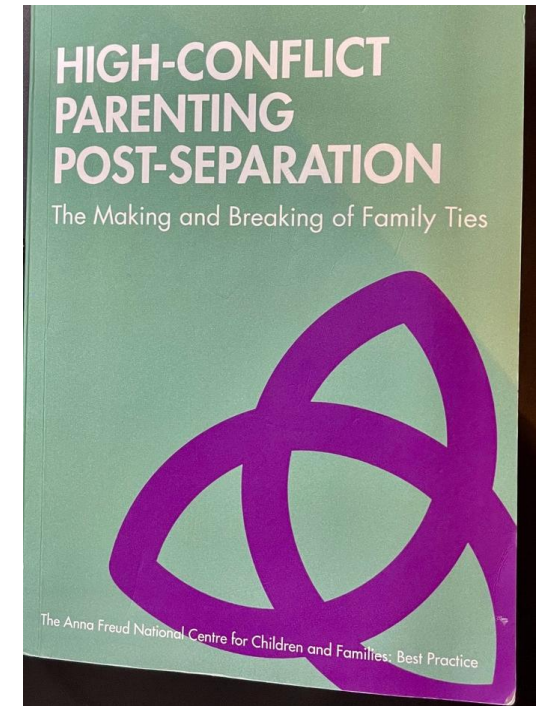


“I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot...and missed. I've failed over again in my life. And that is why I and over and over succeed.”

Michael Jordan

Mentalizing, Perspective Taking

- MBT-F: Work of Asen, Morris, Fonagy – Family Ties, Anna Freud National Centre for Children & Families
- Enhance the client's ability to mentalize intentions, feelings and perspectives of self, the child and the other parent
- Generate curiosity - check it out with the other – do I have it correctly?
- Notice aloud interactions and sequences



Asen & Morris (2020).
*High Conflict Parenting
Post Separation: The
Making and Break of
Family Ties*

Enhancing Relationship with Therapist



- Impact of therapist's emotional reactions
 - vicarious trauma
 - “forensic empathy”
- Relationship with therapist is the most important factor in successful therapy:
 - build rapport immediately – informed consent process, transparency
 - support all members of the family system
 - show you understand each person's perspective
 - listen without agreeing (and other management strategies for high conflict personalities and parenting); work of Bill Eddy, www.highconflictinstitute.com
 - ask permission...
 - disclose something in common
 - mirroring of posture and movements: not exact, second or two off

The Importance of Empathy



Coparenting Interventions

Establishing Goals

Psychoeducation

Set up rules of engagement protocols, communication & info sharing protocols (BIFF, App)

- Encourage and support disengaged or cooperative coparenting

Interrupt existing sequence of interactions (e.g., around blame, transitions, etc.)

Develop (corrective) jointly constructed narrative to deliver to children

Psycho-Education: Evidence - Informed Topics

- Weave this into initial hopes/dream (i.e., goals) exercise
- Impact of parental conflict, toxic stress, **ACES PAIRED** with PCE, resilience
- Importance of good relationship with both parents
- Multiple causes of RRD, PCCPs – use circle diagram during intake and therapy
- Models of coparenting – conflictual, disengaged, cooperative
 - futility of blame
 - court and legal system not the answer to family systems problems
- Cognitive bias, perspective taking, flexible thinking

Media and Other Resources on Effects of Conflict, Trauma, ACES, PCE, Resilience, VOC

- Afifi (20 min) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKcNyfXbQzQ>
- Tears – De Breuklign (5 min)
<http://www.tearstheshortfilm.com><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VyduHQ6yxw>
- Nadine Burke on ACES (Ted talk)
- Center For Developing Child (Harvard...)
- ACES Primer – Paper Tiger (3 min)
- 6 year old girl's plea (3 min) -
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vm0UNn7tJ5o>
- Split: A Film For Kids of Divorce (& Parents) (30 min film) -
www.splitfilm.org (and new one on same kids, now teens)
- *Don't Divorce Me* (2012, HBO) - www.hbo.com (30 min)

Options for Therapy Plan Recommendations - On-line Parent Ed For High Conflict Coparenting

- www.highconflictinstitute.co (Bill Eddy)
 - BIFF, New Ways for Families
- Children in Between www.divorce-education.com
 - formerly CIM - on National Reg. of Evidence-Based Programs
 - alienation specific program
- www.onlineparentingprograms.com

Models of Coparenting





Emotions Are Contagious

Videos for Parents and Children:

- On Mirror Neurons
- The Importance of Empathy
- Toddler Regulating – speaks about mirror neurons

Toddler Regulating

Interrupt Sequence of Interactions

- Replace avoidance with approach
- Exposure: gradual or all at once?
- Replace perceived incompetence or lack of mastery with mastery or self-efficacy
- Failure experiences shifted into success
- Parental overprotection replaced with encouragement of mastery
- See Garber (2015). Cognitive-behavioral methods in high conflict divorce: Systematic desensitization adapted to parent-child reunification intervention. *Family Court Review*, 53(1), 96-112.
- For parents: Garber (2016). *Holding Tight and Letting Go*. Unhooked books: www.highconflictinstitute.com

Shifting Sequences of Interaction Around Blame

- Preoccupation with blame, externalizing onto someone else
- Name the problem as a pattern between coparents vs behavior exhibited by one or both parents
- Dance metaphor (or balloon or others)
- Goal to change sequence of interactions as mechanism of change

The Futility of Blaming

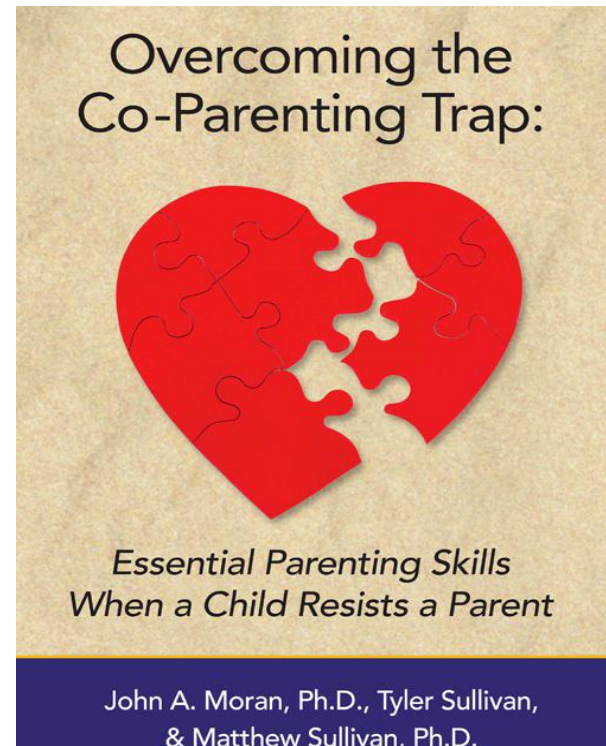
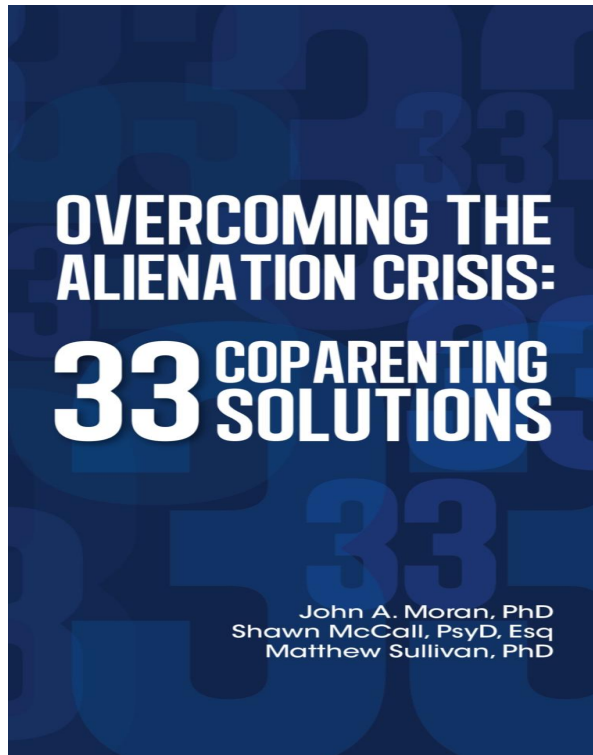
- Brene Brown on Blame

Coparenting Agreement – Communication & Information Sharing Protocols

- Augment or develop protocols that are functional and neutral
 - review existing Parenting Plan
 - Works towards building trust and respect
 - Do what you commit to doing
- **Handout 24: CPA (example)**
- Communication App – set up use.
 - OFW
 - Appclose
 - Proper Communication



Jointly Constructed (Corrective) Coparenting Narrative – Setting up the Task



Handout 25:
Detailed Table of Contents

Jointly Constructed Coparenting Narrative

Handout 26

- Script tailored to needs, themes, circumstances of family
- Parents' reframing and messaging, may include:
 1. Parents' mutual aspirations for children
 2. Reasons for separation – corrective information
 3. Commitment to new family paradigm – despite disagreements now jointly taking steps to move forward together as coparents (e.g., refer to CPA, show Backwards Bicycle)
 4. Benefits of good relationship with both parents
 5. Parenting time schedule parents have agreed to or to support
 6. Apologies: **EACH** parent takes some responsibility for their part in how they got to where they are AND where family is going (serves as modelling for children)

Overcoming the Co-Parenting Trap

Moran, Sullivan & Sullivan, 2014

Chapter 5: Skills for the “Rejected” Parent

- Resisted affection; resisted communication; discipline; challenges; apologies, activity planning, challenging scenarios

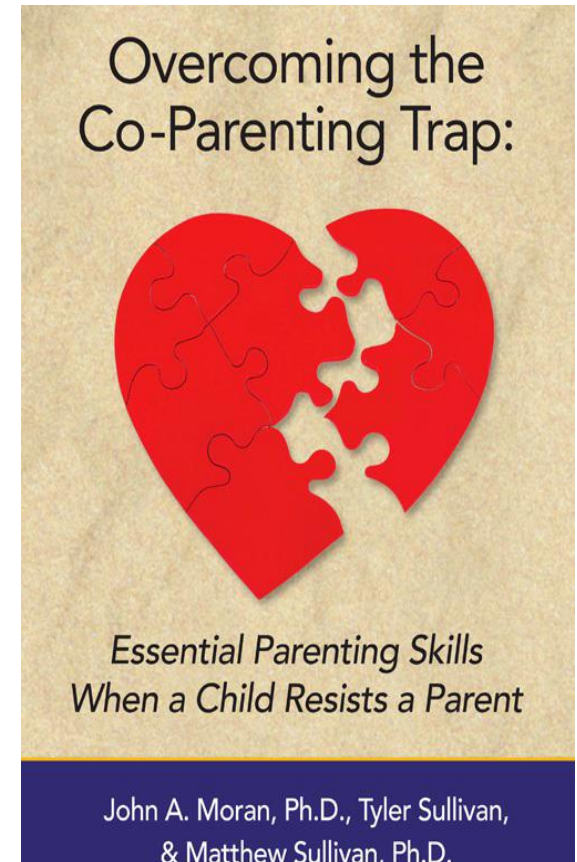
Chapter 6: Skills for the “Preferred” Parent

- What to say/do when a child complains about RP, refuses contact, taking responsibility & apologies, scenarios & suggested language

Chp 7: Understanding the Co-Parenting Trap

Chp 8: Overcoming the Coparenting Trap

Chp 9: Anger, Resentment & Forgiveness



OVERCOMING THE ALIENATION CRISIS:

33 COPARENTING SOLUTIONS

John A. Moran, PhD
Shawn McCall, PsyD, Esq
Matthew Sullivan, PhD

Part One: The Alienation Crisis

Introduction:

Chapter 1: Types of Resist Refuse Problems

Chapter 2: Alienation

Chapter 3: What Causes Resist/Refuse Prob.

Chapter 4: Malignant Divorce Conflict

Chapter 5: Intractable Resist/Refuse Prob.

Chapter 6: Three Stages of Resist/Refuse Problems

Chapter 7: Three Dementors of Resist/Refuse Problems

Chapter 8: Moving from Coparenting Paralysis to Coordination: Hurting Stalemates and Court Interventions

OVERCOMING THE ALIENATION CRISIS: 33 COPARENTING SOLUTIONS

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Part Two: 33 Solutions for Frequently Encountered Coparenting Problems

**Chapter 9: Coparenting Solutions:
Improving Communication**

**Chapter 10: Coparenting Solutions:
Responding to Your Child's Complaints**

**Chapter 11: Coparenting Solutions:
Responding to Your Child's Resistance**

**Chapter 12: Coparenting Solutions: Talking
to Your Child About Their Other Parent**

**Chapter 13: Coparenting Solutions:
Supporting Your Anxious Child**

Part Three: Coparenting Tools & Strategies

**Chapter 14: Parallel Coparenting to De-
Escalate Conflict**

**Chapter 15: Five Shifts to Becoming a
Neutral Coparent**

**Chapter 16: From Resentment to
Reconciliation**

**Chapter 17: What Makes Family Therapy
More or Less Likely to Succeed**

Apologies By the Closer Parent

- Near start of therapy, closer parent must “release” child ie., give explicit permission during early sessions with closer parent & child
 - necessary before joint session with distanced parent & child
- In advance, prepare closer parent for this session; develop script and role play
- Parent must proactively act to support child’s relationship with distance parent and therapy
- Examples of taking responsibility for their part, for, eg.,
 1. allowing child to make final decisions
 2. speaking negatively about other parent
 3. not enforcing basic politeness and manners
 4. oversharing

Apologies by Distanced Parent

- Avoid long letters – in most circumstances
- Reflect and validate child's feelings
- Say what you are doing to ensure change in future
- When parent maintains the act did not happen as stated:
 - Avoid arguing about what is true
 - Identify impasse: we have different memories about what happened.
 - I know you feel I betrayed your trust in me.
 - We don't see it the same way...it seems we need to put that aside for now with the hope that in the future we will be able to talk about it."
 - We'll have to agree to disagree.

Family Activity: Marbles Are Like Mistakes

-
- Perspective taking
 - Cognitive distortions
 - Apology
 - Empathy
 - Exploring forgiveness



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gettyimages
Photo by Getty Images

New Paradigm

- Backward Bicycle



Resources & Media Links

Resources – Motivational Interviewing & Apologies

- Deborah Gilman (2019, AFCC webinar)
- Miller & Rollnick 2013 Motivational Interviewing: Helping people Change (3rd ed.) NY: Guilford Press
- Matulich, B. (2013). How to do Motivational Interviewing: A guidebook, 2nd ed
- AFCC Webinar (Deutsch, Jan 12, 2021)
- Lerner-Goldhar (2017). *Why Won't You Apologize*
- Hidden Brain Podcast: *The Power of Apologies*
- Desmond Tutu & Mpho Tuto. *The Book of Forgiving*
- See Moran et al. 2015:
 - Chapter 9 (pp. 75-78)
 - Skills for Preferred Parent (pp. 39-41)
- Numerous apology websites: e.g., Everett Worthington

Media Resources

- Paradigm Shift, Cognitive Bias, Impact of Language
- Mindset, Benefits of Learning to Delay Gratification
- Backwards Brain Bicycle (5 min)
youtu.be/MFzDaBzBIL0
- Power of Words (2 min)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYcXTIGLUgE>
- Carol Dweck – Ted Talk
- Alia Crum – Ted Talk (placebo effect)
- The Power of Belief - Ted Talk
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN34FNbOKXc>
- Marshmallow Test (3:5 min)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QX_oy9614HQ&spfreload=10

Media Resources

- Futility of Blame
 - Brene Brown on blame - (3.25 min) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2LXnTQh-3s>
- Selective Attention
 - Awareness Test (5 min) - www.theinvisiblegorilla.com
- Perspective Taking
 - Why is Yawning Contagious? (4:50 min) - www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqG4G5Z02YQ
 - <https://youtu.be/Xmx1qPyo8Ks>
- Emotions Are Contagious/ Mirror Neurons
 - Parenting Teens: www.ourkidsnetwork.com (Jean Clinton, Positive Parenting videos & 2 manuals)
 - The mysterious workings of the adolescent mind (15 minutes) Sara-Jayne Blakemore [youtube/6zVS8HIPUng](https://youtube.com/6zVS8HIPUng)
- Teenage Brain & Parenting