

REFRAMING TO AVOID COMPLAINTS

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Many complaints to a state licensing board come from a parent of a child to whom the psychologist has provided professional services. When the child's parents are divorced or are divorcing, the risk of the psychologist's becoming a target of a complaint is exacerbated greatly. The foibles of being a divorced parent create a tendency to continue the warfare with the other parent and to seek to find a source (other than oneself) to blame for the negative concomitants of divorce, such as increased personal insecurity, diminished self esteem, financial uncertainty, and so on.

Although well intentioned and competent, the psychologist's becoming part of the child's life is scrutinized by each divorced parent for any potential influence on legal determinations relevant to custody, visitation, and support. Due to the extreme stress under which the divorced parent commonly exists, delusions and other distortions of reality may result. It is not unusual, therefore, for the divorced parent to reach a point when the psychologist is viewed as a threat to the divorced parent's personal preferences and legal interests.

When the psychologist, justly or unjustly, becomes positioned between a divorced parent and the child, the likelihood of a complaint or other negative actions against the psychologist escalates. Consequently, the dire risk associated with providing professional services to a family of divorce necessitates that the prudent psychologist, from the outset and consistently thereafter, be vigilant against a schism developing

between the divorced parents which can result in the psychologist's being pushed into the abyss of divorce warfare.

In keeping with the frailties of human behavior, divorce parents seem prone to deal with guilt, feelings of failure, and discouragement with highly personalized self-explanations. Often the script is fraught with ego-defense mechanisms, such as rationalizations derived from perceived family-of-origin conditions or displacement of responsibility onto others.

The fundamental corrective principle is reframing. That is, the psychologist helps the divorced parent develop an alternative perspective of the conditions, such as those relevant to the divorce and the ex-spouse, that are plaguing the here-and-now.

Reframing requires both knowledge of behavioral science and clinical acumen. A poorly done attempt at reframing can actually result in increased resistance to change and therapy (Patterson & Forgatch, 1985), and might even worsen the relationship between the psychologist and the divorced parent(s).

A potentially powerful strategy for reframing is "motivational interviewing" with both divorced parents. The objective is to create a motivation to change. The first step is to conduct a comprehensive ecological assessment, using interviewing, observational, and psychometric methods.

Following the comprehensive ecological assessment, Dishion and Stormshak (2007) endorse family interventions and offer a pragmatic model for reframing, referred to by the acronym FRAMES:

F refers to providing parents with data-based *feedback* about their behavior and the implications of their behavior for the future. R stands for communicating to

the client their *responsibility* for the behavior-change process. A reflects the need for sound *advice* from an expert about where the efforts should be focused or how to take realistic steps to promote success in the behavior-change process. M stands for a *menu* of behavior-change options provided to the parents rather than a single behavior-change option such as family therapy or inpatient drug abuse treatment. (Taking an active role in deciding on an optimal behavior-change strategy is self-motivating.) E refers to the need to express *empathy* for the parents' situation Finally, the S in FRAMES means that parents should leave the motivational interview with a sense of *self-efficacy*. (p. 112).

As is evident, effective reframing requires: (1) collaboration between the psychologist and the divorced parents; and (2) the psychologist's creating and maintaining an atmosphere of understanding, compassion, acceptance, support, and empathy.

By creating a communications bridge for the divorced parent, all members of the family will benefit. Moreover, the psychologist will lessen the risk of being targeted for a complaint.

References

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- Patterson, G. R., & Forgatch, M. S. (1985). Therapist behavior as a determinant for client resistance: A paradox for the behavior modifier. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 53, 846-851.

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