

Child Centered Mediation: A Narrative Approach

Author: Dermot Hurley MSW, RSW
School of Social Work, King's University College
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario N6A 2M3
Canada

Abstract

Child centered mediation from a narrative perspective, privileges the voice of the child in family dissolution, and empowers children to be active in a process that has significant implications for their emotional development. The goal of narrative mediation is to open up space for the emergence of subjugated child stories to counterbalance the dominant parental narratives of divorce. The voice of the child provides an alternative to the "totalizing descriptions of conflict" that have become embedded in the relational stories of the parents (Monk & Winslade, 2000). Child centered narrative mediation is informed by constructivist theory which recognizes that there are multiple versions of reality, and that "established truths" of events are primarily narrative constructions, which have a particular emotional intensity in separation and divorce. Child centered narrative mediation encourages the telling of stories in which vital lived experience is embedded. Narrative structure organizes experience and gives meaning to events. It is the container for lived experience and provides a structure by which disparate pieces of children's experience can be connected logically and sequentially (Brunner, 1991).

Experiences are filtered through language into verbalized events which are self defining narratives of family life. Authors have highlighted the importance of narrative expression and emotional meaning making throughout childhood (Angus and Bouffard, in press). In child and adolescent development a sense of meaning and continuity is related to the storying and re telling of lived experience. Parental separation is a significant disruption in the family narrative and violates a child's sense of predictability and the unfolding of self identity. Separation and divorce makes it more difficult for children to create a sense of narrative coherence, which is essential in resolving emotional issues surrounding divorce. There are many conflicting stories in separation and divorce, and children may find themselves caught in the competing and irreconcilable narratives of the parents. These narratives can be powerfully prescriptive of children's behaviour and can result in the construction (or co-construction) of "toxic narratives" which can damage children's relationships with parents. For example highly distorted narratives that are constructed to accommodate and justify strong negative emotions, or revised narratives that damage a previously loving and supportive child-parent relationship. Likewise highly charged narratives of betrayal can ignite the already inflamed passions of a child and overwhelm their cognitive processes, so that autobiographical memory and narrative understanding are replaced by personal fables and compensatory stories.

Children are continually collecting and processing experiences both good and bad to create a sense of "biographical coherence" which is the basis of the development of self-identity (Habermas and Bluck, 2000). The dominant narrative of family life in which children have been storying their experience of the world is truncated by unexpected

events such as separation and divorce. This has resulted in the disempowering of children and the loss of information about vital lived experience, often unnoticed by the parents in the painful process of separation and divorce.

Separation and divorce makes it difficult for children to create a sense of narrative coherence which is essential in resolving emotional issues surrounding divorce. White (2006) talks about the importance of developing a “double storied account” of children’s experiences following a trauma in order to bring forth the child’s unique skills and knowledge which are often unrecognized by parents and counsellors. Child centered narrative mediation provides a child with a context for “narrative repair” and the creation of new meaning in a world that has undergone significant change.

This approach provides a child with a context for narrative repair and the creation of new meaning in a world that has become strange and unpredictable. While child centred narrative mediation focuses primarily on the narratives of younger children, it can be adapted to include early and middle teens, by adjusting the process and narrative content to a more appropriate developmental level. This paper explores a range of narrative constructions by children in separation and divorce and outlines 3 stages of child-centered narrative interviewing that engages children in conversations towards preferred futures and solution orientated outcomes. A cornerstone of this approach is the ability of the mediator to engage children in conversations that bring forth their lived experience, as well as their natural inclination to be helpful to their parents. The obvious interest and natural curiosity of the mediator in the lived experience of the child brings forth many unique stories both past and present. By introducing the idea of a “preferred future” the mediator invites children to think beyond the present, which is usually problematic, to a possible future of peace and resolution. Three stage process of child-centred interviewing includes; Identifying dominant divorce narratives, constructing alternative child narratives and defining preferred narratives

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