EX-SPOUSES AND COPARENTING AFTER DIVORCE

WEBINAR HANDOUT

Clinical Context

Many clients bring issues related to ex-spouses and coparenting, and may be acting on strong negative feelings about the ex. It's tempting for the therapist to side with the client in disparaging or demonizing the ex, and minimizing effects of the children.

Ethical Context

- The welfare of the children (minor and adult) and grandchildren
- The basic moral stake of the ex-spouse to fairness and avoiding harm
- Pull towards being punitive and vengeful with an ex
- May be an ethical blind spot for the client

LISTEN

- For the client's sense of effects of their behavior on the children
- Identifying their needs with the children's needs
- Demonization of the ex
- Ambivalence about how they are acting

EXPLORE

- Background on the marriage and how it ended, particularly grievances the client still has
- What the client is trying to accomplish for self in actions related to the ex
- Client's perceptions of effects on the children "What do you think it's like for them when you…?"
- The client's ability to see how what they see as "self-defense" with the ex may be "offense" as well.
- The client's ability to see the ex as a complex person with a backstory
- What the client sees as possible alternatives to their current actions (Example: communicating through a platform like Family Wizard.

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AFFIRM

- Affirm the client for considering the needs of the children and others in a difficult situation

PERSPECTIVE

- Most important: reflections on the sensibilities and needs of the children for good relationships with both parents and for being out of the middle
- Normalize the client's actions as coming from hurt, while also pointing out the damage
- Explain alternative ways to accomplish what the client needs (e.g., better boundaries)
- Offer long term perspectives (e.g., the children will grow up and form their own views)
- Appeal to research and clinical knowledge, not just your personal perspective
- Offer non-demonizing reflections on where the ex may be coming from
- Make observations about how negative actions can affect the children even when they are not immediately involved (e.g., undermining the ex's new relationship)
- Combine this with empathy and affirmation
- Offer thoughts about concrete alternatives to what the client is currently doing

CHALLENGE

- Use when the client continues to have blind spots or when harm to children in imminent
- Affirm the client's intentions and love for the children
- Use I-statements: I am worried, I am concerned, I am afraid that you are having trouble seeing something, etc.
- Speak softly and to show empathy. If you get "yes but," back up and show more empathy, and then return to challenge.
- Never say "but" to the client. Do "and."
- Challenge the client's sense that they have no alternatives: insist that they have agency and choices

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