Use of solution-focused and family narrative approaches in working with high conflict families: Strategies and techniques that can be utilized in parenting coordination and co-parenting coaching

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Use of solution-focused and family narrative approaches in working with high conflict families: Strategies and techniques that can be utilized in parenting coordination and co-parenting coaching

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ABSTRACT

This article will outline the basic tenets and potential practical application of both a solution-focused and a family narrative approach in providing alternative and helpful techniques that can be utilized by parenting coordinators and co-parenting coaches working with high conflict families transitioning to a post separation or divorce state. It is suggested that children and parents adapt better to their new family circumstances when they are empowered to find their own solutions to the challenges they face and are given the opportunity to create, for themselves, a positive and desirable family story.

KEYWORDS

Co-parenting coaching; family narrative; high conflict; parenting coordination; solution-focused

In both the United States and Canada, the rate of separation and divorce among married couples with children is estimated to be over 40% with an even higher rate attributed to subsequent marriages (Ambert, 2009; Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014). In addition, these figures are further inflated by a growing number of couples living in common law relationships whose rate of separation is even higher. Over the years, numerous authors (Kelly, 2000; Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1997; Wallerstein, 1991) have written regarding the impact this had on family life and, more importantly, the potential deleterious consequences on the well-being of children. It should be noted, however, that although the majority of parents and children are able to eventually adapt and normalize their life situations with minimal assistance, a growing percentage become entangled in chronic conflict and are constantly in disagreement over the care and support of their children. Intervening with these parents is a daunting task and a challenge for most professionals who often lack the necessary understanding and training as to how to proceed and, consequently, end up becoming part of the problem and entangled in the very conflicts they have hoped to de-escalate. According to Kelly (2002), services should be available that can offer feuding parents with viable means of resolving their disputes and sensitizing them to the needs of their
Interventions might include, divorce education programs, custody evaluations, and mediation and when a more directive input is required, co-parenting coaching and parenting coordination, usually mandated by the court. Do these alternative interventions have ‘something constructive to offer’ (Kelly, 2003) and in what ways can they help keep chronic litigants out of court? The following article will discuss how co-parents caught in high conflict separation and divorce can benefit from these aforementioned services using a unique combination of a solution-focused and narrative approach.

**High conflict families**

The process of separation and divorce generates, in most situations, a certain degree of conflict related to the multitude of stressful events and complex issues that confront most couples before, during, and following the decision to end a marriage or relationship (Garrity & Baris, 1994; McIntosh, 2003). According to many experts, parental conflict can be best understood when considered on a continuum that includes low, medium, and high levels.\(^1\) While estimates vary (between 5 and 15%) as to the number of families that we can label as being high conflict in their post separation and divorce relations (Kelly, 2003), they present, irrespective of their low numbers, an enormous challenge to the court system and professionals working in the legal and mental health field. Not only do they use up an inordinate amount of court time and free legal services, but they also consume the lion’s share of available and scarce psycho-social services (Baris et al., 2000; Saini & Birnbaum, 2007).

What distinguishes high conflict patterns of interaction from those that are considered either low or medium in intensity is the fact that these parents are constantly angry, distrustful, and unable to appropriately communicate their feelings and needs (Coates et al., 2004; Kelly, 2003). Furthermore, they become entrenched in never ending litigation and court battles that promote an escalation of conflict while contributing to an inability to move beyond the hostility, recrimination, and bitter feelings toward the other parent that tend to spiral out of control (Kelly, 2000).

High conflict divorce, especially involving custody disputes, can be characterized by intractable and protracted legal disputes, never ending conflict over parental rights and parenting practices, chronic hostile interactions, false allegations of physical and sexual abuse and emotional, physical and psychological abusive actions (Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, & Bala, 2008). These conflicts are most often fueled by pre-separation, separation, and post separation/divorce factors operating at the individual, interactional, and external level (Johnston, 1994; Eddy, 2005). Furthermore, research indicates that a high level of conflict between parents (verbal and physical disputes, persistent
litigation, mistrust and hostile behavior, parental alienation) place children at risk and destroy the benefits that more positive parental relations can provide (Baris et al., 2000). In the most difficult cases, judges often order or recommend that parents use mediation services, psychosocial evaluation, or consultation, but these resources are ineffective with many couples who are caught in chronic conflict. As well, parents who are separated/divorced and experiencing high conflict tend to overuse available services (child protective services expertise, mediation) and tend to engage in numerous legal proceedings at a very high cost to society and the family. In these circumstances judges have increasingly turned to parenting coordinators as well as co-parenting coaches to provide these parents with much needed guidance, education, and the problem solving skills required in assuming their parental responsibilities.

**Parenting coordination**

Parenting coordination (PC) is a relatively new approach in working with families experiencing high conflict and is defined by the Association of Family & Conciliation Courts (AFCC) (2006) as:

> a child-focused alternative dispute resolution process in which a mental health or legal professional with mediation training and experience assists high conflict parents to implement their parenting plan by facilitating the resolution of their disputes in a timely manner, educating parents about children’s needs, and with prior approval of the parties and/or the court, making decisions within the scope of the court order or appointment contract. (p. 2 of guidelines)

From a historical perspective, PC emerged in the 1990s in response to an ever growing need of the family court system to make more effective use of mental health professionals and experts in helping high conflict couples going through the process of a difficult separation or divorce. Garrity and Baris (1994), in their seminal book entitled, Caught in the Middle: Protecting Children of High Conflict Divorce, identified parenting coordination as an important service that could greatly assist parents to find solutions in very stressful situations in which children become the unwitting victims of their parents’ on-going disputes.

In the past 20 years, PC practice has burgeoned throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe and has become, according to Sullivan (2013), the most intensive intervention that professionals have at their disposal in dealing with highly conflicted and maladaptive parents caught in vicious cycles of mutual recrimination, chronic litigation before the courts, and overuse of limited existing resources. As a process, every effort is made to help parents resolve their disputes in a timely manner with the aim of keeping them out of the court system. The parenting coordinator who is a highly trained professional in child development, family dynamics and crisis management strives, while acting in a multidimensional role, to create boundaries...
and disengagement while re-structuring family ties and bonds in a manner that facilitates more constructive and positive relations and interaction. Focusing on solutions and helping parents and children construct a positive and meaningful family story can become added tools in the PCs arsenal.

PC practice can vary depending on the orientation and limitations created by local legislative laws and the professionals providing the service (Kirkland & Sullivan, 2008; Boyan & Termini, 2005). The model of service that lends itself best to the use of a solution-focused and a family narrative approach is one where the PC does not have any decision making power that is attributed by the court. For obvious reasons, this model allows the coordinator/coach to be less imposing of his expert knowledge and better able to “join” with either parent in offering his knowledge, guidance, and experience to them.

Co-parenting coaching

Co-parenting coaching (CPC) is also a relatively new but widely used approach in working with families experiencing medium to high conflict and can be a useful intervention in those instances when a less coercive and legally binding intervention is required or possible (Bonnel, 2015). Coaching, in its broadest meaning, can be defined as a process involving training and development in which an “expert” provides guidance and support to a ‘learner’ in an effort to reach specific goals and acquiring new skills and techniques on a personal or professional level. Historically, the practice of coaching goes back centuries, but has come into prominence in the 80’s and 90’s as it began to borrow heavily from the fields of human development, education, psychology, neuroscience, and social organization (Davison & Gasiorowski, 2006). In the mental health field, coaching has steadily gained popularity in the last few years as witnessed in its far reaching involvement with individuals suffering from personality disorders (Kets de Vries, 2014), ADHD (Hamilton, 2011), and those experiencing a difficult separation or divorce (Keenan, 2015). The difference between coaching and therapy, fundamentally, has to do less with outcome than approach to intervention. Coaching focuses on the future rather than the past and focuses primarily on helping individuals find solutions to their problems rather than a “cure” in the medical sense of the term. On the other hand, coaching and ‘therapeutic intervention’ both tackle difficult issues and, often, debilitating conditions and place great importance on behavioral change at the personal, family, and organizational level (Brennan & Gortz, 2008; Caspi, 2005; Grant, 2006; Hart, Blattner, & Leipsic, 2001).

In CPC, the coach works with both parents (usually in joint sessions unless otherwise indicated) with the aim of helping them find new skills and behaviors and develop a more functional collaborative parenting style that will bring new insights with regards to how they can exercise their parental
responsibilities in the best interest of their children. There is a strong reliance on dialogue with the parents and having the latter, as much as possible, come up with answers for themselves. At the same time, coaching does include an element of psycho-education and counseling in particular with regards to effective communication, children’s needs, family re-organization, and joint decision-making on issues involving the children.

Solution-focused and family narrative approaches

It is not uncommon for professionals working with high conflict families to take a more past-oriented and problem-solving approach that tend to facilitate the re-surfacing of destructive past events and actions. This process all too easily results in parents renewing old bitter feuds and rancorous interactions forcing them in an endless spiral of blame and recrimination. Given the high complexity of most conflicts that have evolved over time and involve many problematic elements that are intricately inter-wound, traditional attempts at ‘single problem’ definition and simple explanations based on past events are usually ineffective in both understanding and finding solutions to current conflictual situations. Furthermore, recurring problems and their escalation is often indicative of the fact that “first order attempts at change” are ineffective and that something different needs to be tried (Swenson & Anstett, 2009; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fish, 1974). Using a solution-focused and family narrative approach, the parenting coordinator or co-parenting coach is in a better position to avoid stalemates and becoming caught in vicious circles that invariably prevent co-parents from moving forward and successfully creating for themselves “a future with a difference” (Banning, 2007).

Solution-focused orientation

A solution-focused orientation in working with high conflict families places a great deal of importance on re-directing the attention that parents put on the problems they face to finding more viable solutions that are beneficial to all concerned. In the process, these parents are encouraged to focus on what impacts them most in the here and now (the present) and what effects any of their actions will have in the future. Past events and actions that have had a significant effect on their couple and family relations are acknowledged but left behind in favor of identifying and creating more constructive and beneficial behaviors. To be sure, this approach is greatly inspired by the theoretical constructs and practical applications found in the Solution Focused Brief Therapy model developed, in the 1980s, by De Shazer (1985) and Berg (2005) and the ADR model of Solution Focused Conflict Management (Banning, 2010) that followed several decades later. Both models of intervention ultimately consider the client to have the ability of defining what
future path and goals to take and the means needed to get there. Clients are encouraged to do more of what has worked for them and to try something different when what is tried does not produce the desired results. Several therapeutic techniques are utilized, notably the miracle question, looking for exemptions and scaling. The miracle questions asks clients to imagine what would change or improve if their problematic situation miraculously improved (e.g., co-parents able to work together with minimal escalation of conflict) while exploring exemptions clients are asked to consider when the conflict was less serious and they were better able to attain their desired goals. It is very useful in situations when clients become stuck in past experiences and are unable to envision a better future. Scaling (from 1 being negative to 10 being positive) is a means to measure improvement and the incremental changes that are needed in order to move forward.

Recent applications of a solution-focused approach in family mediation have advanced the use of “solution-focused conversations” that lead clients to reflect on what they hope for in the future, those actions that already work and should be continued, and what other steps will help to realize desired change (Banning, 2007). These future oriented conversations are not dissimilar to the use of therapeutic questions to explore a person’s personal life story and the need to create an alternative and more desirable personal and family narrative.

Family narrative perspective

Recounting one’s family story and history has been a common practice since the dawn of human existence and the ability of man to record and verbally exchange information. Human beings are, generally speaking, interpretive in their need to make sense of their experience of the world around them, and their life stories that are constructed with others in their social and cultural environment become an essential and indispensable frame of reference. Individuals live, primarily, in families and the latter necessarily become the main conduit through which their members derive meaning and connectedness. Children, in particular, tend to respond well and benefit significantly in terms of developing a strong sense of self when they are exposed and are able to integrate a strong family narrative (Bohanek et al., 2006; Feiler, 2013). In studies conducted by Duke, Lazarus, and Fivush (2008) on the impact of shared family stories on children and adolescent well-being, found that the latter develop a stronger sense of identity, connectedness, and resilience to adversity when they are able to share family stories with other members of their extended families. Children tend to benefit and learn from the accounts of how family members dealt with negative events and adversity as well as from those that are more positive and uplifting. Consequently, it is the manner in which parents discuss past family events, as well as the content of the
accounts, that can profoundly influence how children view themselves and behave.

The family narrative perspective in working with high conflict families also derives a great deal of its clinical usefulness from the emergent use of family narratives as a therapeutic tool in working with problems presented by children and parents. White and Epston (1990) presented a therapeutic model in which it was posited that an individual’s identity is embedded in a personal narrative that is often created and perpetuated at a societal level and by ideas held by “significant others.” The therapist, essentially, attempts to change problematic internalizations by helping the individual to deconstruct negative stories and to see them from different and healthier perspectives. By externalizing the problem (White & Epston, 1990), the parents are separated from the problem that is then identified as the focus of intervention.

In terms of intervention, the use of a family narrative approach can prove to be a powerful tool and its impact on co-parents and children caught in high conflict cannot be underestimated. Through conversation and therapeutic questioning, parents and children are helped to acknowledge the destructive and toxic family narratives in which they are enveloped and are encouraged to create more viable and functional ones based on positive values and actions that will shape future family relations (Cobb, 1994).

**Interventions strategies using a solution-focused and family narrative orientation**

PC and CPC share common goals with regards to assisting parents caught in intractable conflict. These parents ultimately value family life and desire, for the most part, less problematic family relations and a family story that is more positive and one in which their children can invest and take pride as they grow up. When co-parents are referred, it is usually because they are caught in a spiral of conflict and have lost their bearing as to how to attain a much more desirable level of functioning in the present and future. Simply put, our aim as coordinators/coaches is to utilize certain intervention strategies and techniques that will help parents and their children find more constructive ways of relating to each other and, in the process, re-fashion their family story or narrative so that it will better correspond to a more “desirable future.”

While there are certain differences that set these two approaches apart, there are, at the same time, far more similarities that permit the parenting coordinator and co-parenting coach to apply some of their complimentary core concepts and strategies concomitantly and with a high degree of effectiveness (Chang & Nylund, 2013; Chang & Phillips, 1993; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Payne, 2006). Both the solution-focused and family narrative
approaches are considered to share a post-modern, client-focused and nonpathological perspective. Through the use of similar techniques such as the miracle question and variation thereof, the use of exceptions/unique outcomes, scaling, externalization of the problem, and strategically crafted written and verbal feedback, the client is encouraged to create a new and more desirable outcome. In recent practices there has been an increasing tendency to combine the two approaches under a “larger umbrella” (Chang & Nylund, 2013), one that might more effectively correspond to the needs and circumstances presented by high conflict parents.

It should be stressed that although the strategies that follow borrow heavily from both the solution-focused and family narrative approaches to therapy, there is no attempt to replicate faithfully the theoretical constructs that characterize and define their clinical application. As the services provided by a coordinator/coach are not therapy per se, the process itself and the interventions made might not exactly resemble what a solution-focused or narrative therapist might do. Necessarily, the coordinator/coach must choose his tools and conduct his work strategically within boundaries and limits already set by the socio-legal context in which the parents find themselves and by the nature of the referral itself. This is particularly evident in PC where the goal of the intervention provided is as much set by the parents themselves as it is already prescribed by a specific judicial mandate or court order (Kirkland & Sullivan, 2008). Keeping these limitations and contextual realities in mind, the professionals involved need to be judicious in how they can use the tools available to them in a manner that best meets the real needs of the parents and their children while making every effort to give adequate space to the clients themselves in determining what is best for their family. The process becomes one whereby they extend and make available their expertise rather than impose it on the parents. As such, interventions tend to be less ‘top-down’ or hierarchical and more lateral in that change and a more desirable future are collaboratively constructed (De Shazer, 1988). PCs, in particular, need to be vigilant in not succumbing to the power of their court mandated role and always ensuring that their primary goal is to help parents ultimately settle their own disputes (Kelly, 2008) and create a more favorable family story for themselves and their children. This process can be less problematic and greatly facilitated when the PC does not have the power to make decision arbitrarily and must, therefore, rely more on a client focused intervention that aims to help parents create a new reality for themselves (Freedman & Combs, 1996). In those instances where that power is extended to the PC, it is imperative that it be used sparingly and as a last-ditch effort to avoid impasse and re-litigation (Coates, Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan, & Sydlik, 2003). Such a problem does not confront a co-parenting coach, as a decision-making role is rarely included in a service mandate.
Interview protocol

The actual use of a solution-focused/family narrative approach in working with high conflict parents can best be demonstrated when interviewing both the parents and their children in the course of service delivery. In both the PC and CPC models of intervention, the parents are, generally, seen individually, at the onset, to help forge a working alliance and ‘bonding’ that can make it easier to establish goals, tasks, and contractual obligations (Gelso & Hayes, 1998; Kelly, 2008). At the same time, the professional is able to obtain more pertinent information about family functioning that might influence future interventions focused on helping these parents and their children to find solutions and create a more desirable and enduring family story. As both PC and CPC are, essentially, focused on the well-being of the children involved, the latter are also interviewed by the parenting coordinator or co-parenting coach early on in the process (Kelly, 2008). Irrespective of the service being provided (PC or CPC), a similar interview protocol can be utilized in which questions are posed using a solution-focused and family narrative approach (see Appendix A).

1. The first contact with the parents and their respective lawyers is normally made on the telephone after receiving a mandate (usually court ordered) to provide PC or CPC services. The lawyers in question are contacted to obtain more detailed information about the problem their respective clients are experiencing and, equally important, to obtain as much information as is possible regarding how they perceive the situation and what they see as possible solutions or a better outcome for the future. Posing the miracle question to them in terms of what they envision as changing or being different can usually provide important feedback to the professional with regards to their expectations and legal positions. Taking into account what the lawyers (and other professionals) are thinking and what they see as possible solutions is an invaluable road map that can be used for setting intervention strategies throughout the process.

The coordinator/coach will then initiate an initial telephone contact with each parent to introduce himself/herself stating the reason for the call and to set up an appointment at the earliest possible time. The call should be short and to the point explaining to the parent that he/she will have ample opportunity to present their story and obtain more information about the nature of the service and the process.

2. The initial individual interview with each parent is of critical importance as it is during this meeting that an alliance is created (Hilsenroth & Cromer, 2007) and a number of techniques using a solution-focused and narrative approach are utilized in order to set the stage for future interventions. This may be labeled as the deconstruction phase whereby information pertaining to the parents’ perceptions, beliefs, and family story are discovered...
and analyzed through the use of “pre-emptive techniques” (Saposnek, 1998) and specifically crafted questions that elicit ‘a free narrative response’ (Powell, Fisher, & Wright, 2005). According to De Shazer (1994), the first interview is “text focused,” that is, whatever information is collected comes out of what the parents recount about their predicament and life stories. Usually these stories are laden with conflict and discord and the parents need to be prompted with open-ended questions to remain on track. Once the parents recount what has brought them to their present predicament, they are encouraged to talk about how the problem is being experienced by other members of the family (in particular, their children and co-parent) as well as other involved professionals (judges, lawyers, therapists, experts).

Each parent is then requested to think of those times when the situation was not problematic and their family narrative was much more positive. These exceptions or unique outcomes to the problem that are recovered from an otherwise bleak account of their family story provide not only new insights of what went unnoticed, but inject some hope in the possibility that things could be better. This information is utilized in subsequent sessions to remind parents that they have the ability to bring about change and “re-author” their family story, one in which co-parenting relations are more satisfying and functional. By the use of the scaling question, the coordinator/coach is able to create a baseline with regards to establishing how well the parents are presently able to deal with the problems identified. Incremental changes needed in attaining a more desirable outcome can be instituted and monitored more realistically throughout the process.

In what may be termed as the “reconstruction” phase, the “miracle question” or variations of it can be a powerful tool in helping high conflict parents to envision what would be different or change in a future time with regards to their co-parenting relations and other situations that they have identified as problematic. The coordinator/coach might make reference to specific goals that have been already established (particularly important in parenting coordination) or to particular problematic situations involving co-parenting practices. This exercise is undertaken with each parent, their respective lawyers, and the children with the aim of highlighting, in subsequent sessions and written reports, those visions for change that are shared and that are expected to contribute to a more desirable future and family narrative.

3. The children are usually seen at the beginning of the process and normally after the initial interviews with the parents unless otherwise indicated. While some professionals choose to have minimal contact with the children involved, the prevalent practice is that PC (as well as CPC) is a child focused service and, as such, it is important for the coordinator/coach to meet with the children and obtain firsthand knowledge as to their needs.
and wishes (Kelly, 2014; Carter, 2010). The scheduling of interviews can consist of an initial interview with the children alone and/or with their parents unless there is indication that such a joint interview would not be in their best interest.

Subsequent meetings can be scheduled at the coordinator/coach’s discretion to gather more information or in response to a particular situation. Interviews should be held in a comfortable environment with toys, drawing material and a chart on which the children can draw. One parent can be asked to bring the children and the other parent can pick them up at the end of the meeting. This arrangement reinforces the fact that the parents are collaborating and will also allow the coordinator/coach to use the experience to highlight how they continue to be available for their children. In the interview, children are made to feel comfortable and told that what they say will not be disclosed to their parents unless they allow disclosure or that they are considered to be at risk by what is revealed. Children tend to be eager to talk and only need a little prodding:

- Children are asked to relate ‘their family story’ (family narrative) and what brought them to the present situation.
- Questions should be simple, open and posed from the general to the specific.
- Children are encouraged to provide their own ideas as to what needs to happen in order for their situation to improve. A variation of the miracle question is used so that it can be easily understood and answered (see Appendix A).

Following the individual interviews, parents are usually seen together at the office with or without the presence of the children and at predetermined intervals.  

4. In parenting coordination as well as in co-parenting coaching, it is desirable, when possible, to conduct, at some determined point in the future, one or more family meetings that include the parents with their children and, when possible, with other significant family members. These family encounters provide a good occasion for the coordinator/coach to discuss with everyone present the progress being made with regards to the goals (or more accurately, the solutions) that were identified at the onset of the service and re-visit their family story whose script has been evolving and changing, hopefully for the better.

Prior to each session, the parents are asked about “pre-session changes” (Beyebach, Rodriguez, Palenzuela, & Rodriguez-Arias, 1996) that have occurred since the last time they were seen. It is surprising how parents can often become engaged in between-session activities that can bring about real change (De Shazer, 1985). The emphasis here is on having them relate what has changed (spontaneously or by design) that is considered positive
and “going in the right direction.” These events are inscribed in the session summary that is subsequently sent to both parents as part of the written feedback (see Appendix B) that figures so prominently in both a solution-focused and narrative approach.

**Session summaries**

Providing written feedback to clients whether in the form of letters, synopsis, or summaries of sessions is frequently utilized by therapist with the aim of clarifying, motivating and reinforcing the work done in session. In family narrative and solution-focused therapy, this technique is often used to help externalize the problem and re-author the clients’ experience leading to more desirable change (Berg, 2005; De Shazer, 1985; White & Epston, 1990).

In working with high conflict families, the coordinator/coach can make use of carefully worded summaries of conjoint meetings between the parents to highlight the progress being made as well as maintain a focus on the identified solutions and desired outcomes of the work being undertaken. These summaries can also provide an excellent way of ensuring continuity with regards to the content and process from session to session over a lengthy period of time. As demonstrated in Appendix B, the manner in which it is structured is consonant with a solution oriented and future directed approach that reinforces progress toward a more desirable outcome. Of equal importance is the fact that it highlights collaboration and mutual decision-making as opposed to the problems and disagreements that have given rise to previous high conflict behavior. In a very concrete way, these summaries contribute to the coordinator/coach’s goal of helping parents focus on solutions and envision and create a more positive script for themselves and their children.

**Conclusion**

Working with high conflict families in a post separation and divorce situation poses certain challenges to professionals that do not necessarily present themselves when conflict is low or negligible between parents (Coates et al., 2003; Garrity & Baris, 1994) and when proceedings before the courts are not hotly contested. In most instances, these parents are not customers or even visitors in solution focus terms (De Shazer, 1985), but reluctant participants who are generally not eager or willing to engage in resolving their fight. For many, it is a process that is imposed on them either by a judge who has reached his/her wits end or as a last alternative to continued litigation exacting an unbearable financial and emotional cost. As well, issues related to mental health and psychological functioning and well-being can compound the difficulties and present further challenges to the coordinator/coach. At the same time, these parents, generally, are looking for a better way of doing things and a better
future for themselves and their children. While they often have not adequately taken stock of how their actions have impacted their family story, it is rare for any of these parents caught in high conflict to not envision a more positive script and outcome or be indifferent to the family legacy that they will leave to their children. It is generally assumed that most would not relish the thought that their progeny might feel shame or resentment in what they did or did not do in their parenting roles. Helping co-parents find more constructive and viable ways of relating to each other, of searching for solutions and a better way of doing things, of creating a family legacy that they and their children can be proud of are, after all, primary goals of parenting coordination and co-parenting coaching.

The use of techniques inspired from interventions predicated on finding solutions or creating a more positive family narrative seem, therefore, a good fit in any effort to help high conflict parents improve relations between themselves and with their children and embark on a more positive post separation and divorce path. To be sure, many who practice solution-focused or family narrative therapy will tend to see our efforts as perhaps ‘cherry picking’ those techniques that are most useful and that we can integrate in our model of practice. As Chang and Nyland (2013) have argued, however, most practitioners tend to broaden their theoretical influences and incorporate ideas from many sources that are outside of their field of expertise. Theoretical purity is often eschewed in favor of innovation and a desire to use those techniques that can best respond to the needs of the clients being served. Furthermore, it should be stressed that interventions made in PC and CPC are technically not considered to be therapy but rather, as we have previously mentioned, consist more of a multi-modal approach that can make use of a therapeutic approach as well as many other modalities of practice (Hayes, Grady, & Brantley, 2012).

As we have attempted to demonstrate, the use of solution-focused and family narrative approaches can be effective interventions that can complement many other techniques used in working with high conflict families. Furthermore, it should be emphasized that while both solution-focused and narrative family therapy are widely accepted and validated therapeutic approaches in working with individuals and families, the same cannot be said with regards to using these same techniques in high conflict post separation situations. As such, further research needs to be undertaken that will not only fine tune the techniques utilized, but also provide more practice based evidence that using such an orientation will greatly enhance our work in helping parents and children transition to more normal and less conflicted family relations. Refining those techniques that the coordinator/coach can effectively use to empower high conflict parents to find their own solutions and re-author their own family narrative while respecting a court mandate that might require a PC to be more directive and even assume the role of an arbitrator continues to be a challenge to practitioners and a focus for further research.
Notes

1. Baris et al. (2000) created five levels of conflict from minimal to severe.
2. Although there are some fundamental differences between PC and CPC with regard to the mandate and length of service, contractual obligations and issues related to confidentiality and disclosure, they, nevertheless share many common goals and modalities of intervention as well as circumstances leading to the referral for service as previously outlined.
3. Other information is also obtained by consulting the legal file or reports submitted.
4. The miracle question can be posed differently especially when there might be objections to its formulations based on religious convictions or when it is too confusing (e.g., with young children).
5. All children 14 years or older must give their consent before they are seen. Very young children are not interviewed but seen in a family context with their siblings and parents.

References


Appendix A. PC/CPC process and interview strategies that focus on a solution and family narrative approach.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PC/CPC phases</th>
<th>Goals and strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Referral process and data collection</td>
<td>- A file is opened and an initial screening of the referral is made.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Become familiar with family composition and dynamics in preparation for initial contact with clients.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>- Gather information from court files, client assessments, reports, and administered parent questionnaires (if any).</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Interview legal representatives and solicit their input as to what has and is creating difficulties for the family and what they consider needs to change. Questions are solution focused and are aimed to elicit their perceptions of the family story.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- An initial assessment is made with regards to family dynamics and interaction as well as the level and nature of the conflict from documents received and discussion with attorneys.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Initial contact and interview with each parent</td>
<td>- Lawyers should be contacted (optional for CPC) prior to the first meeting with parents. In exceptional situations, they may also be invited to accompany their clients.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The PC/CPC will set the first appointment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Lawyers establish rapport with parents as well as goals to be attained.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- PC/CPC clarifies ground rules, complaint and termination procedures as well as decision-making process.</td>
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<td>- The PC establishes rapport with the parents and makes them feel at ease and welcomed. He asks about their life situation and shares information about himself and the service.</td>
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Interviews with parents, children and other professionals involved:

- Interviews with lawyers representing the parents and children are held. It is important to establish a good working relationship with these legal representatives and to have a good sense of what they consider to be possible solutions, knowing their clients best.
- Legal representatives are asked to give their opinion. Tell me, from your perspective, what has happened so far (in our case), and what do you consider to be the best course of action?
- Knowing your client, what are the best chances of moving forward and what would we need to take into consideration?
- Lawyers are asked to provide their opinion:
  1. "Tell me, from your perspective, what has happened so far to require (or judge to have mandated) our services?"
  2. "If our PC/CPC services were to be successful in helping your client cope more effectively with his/her situation, what changes would you consider important to the present situation?"
  3. "Knowing your client, what are your best chances of moving forward and what would we need to take into consideration?"
- Call and set the time and agenda for the first individual face-to-face interview with each parent.

(Continued)
Appendix A.  Continued.

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<th>PC/CPC phases</th>
<th>Goals and strategies</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Interventions with parents, children and other professionals involved</th>
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<td>• Obtain consent from parents and have them sign the PC/CPC contract and other appropriate forms.</td>
<td>• Parents sign the PC/CPC contract and any necessary authorizations so that the PC/CPC has access to any relevant documents (e.g., psychological reports, psychosocial evaluation, restraining orders, etc.)</td>
<td>• Situate the parent’s circumstances and concerns: Allow each parent to briefly relate their story and perception of the problem as well as the needs of their children. Look for exceptions to the problems presented and help them re-focus on when things were better, even if slightly.</td>
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<td>• PC/CPC attempts to get a better understanding of the family history and family dynamics (relations between the parents and those involving the parent and their children), level of conflict, and the needs and goals of each member of the family.</td>
<td>• The parents are asked to talk about their family history by posing specific questions that will help to highlight their perceptions and understanding of what has and is happening in their family.</td>
<td>“I’m curious to know what are the circumstances that brought you here? Was there a time when things were better between you?”</td>
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<td>• Determine the modality of interventions, scheduling and frequency of appointments. For CP services, long term intervention is suggested (typically 1 1/2 years) taking into account the court mandate, challenges and needs presented.</td>
<td>• PC/CPC asks the parent specific questions that focus on what changes are needed to attain the desired goals and improve family functioning (e.g., miracle question, searching for exceptions, and scaling).</td>
<td>• Focus on future course of action and possible solutions: PC/CPC encourages parents to project how their situation as co-parents can be better. List these items highlighting those that they hold in common. “If our work together were to be successful, what would change or be different with regard to your relations with your co-parent and children? What would the parenting plan look like? How would you be making decisions about your children?”</td>
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<td>• Conduct a domestic violence screening with each parent to determine if special measures are needed to ensure safety and to comply with any restraining order issued by the court.</td>
<td>• Conduct domestic violence screening using appropriate tools designed for that purpose.</td>
<td>• Establish a starting point to bring about these changes: Quite often these parents are used to being in a conflict mode and are skeptical or mistrustful of any proposed change. It is important to start small and at the speed that they are willing and able to move forward. “What would indicate to you that we are making progress? What small step do you think is possible to take that would push us toward a more hopeful future?”</td>
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<td>• The PC schedules future meetings with both parents as well as with their children.</td>
<td>• They are also asked to measure on a scale of one to ten (ten being the highest) the extent to which they are able to function as co-parents (collaboration, implementing parenting plan and ability to make decisions together). “On a scale from one to ten (ten being the highest) where would you place the effectiveness of your co-parenting relationship with regards to collaborating together; making joint decisions about your children; able to implement your parenting plan.”</td>
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<td>PC/CPC phases</td>
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| Interview with the children | ● Give children an opportunity to voice their views about the family transition and offer their own solutions to make things better.  
● Have children recount their family story. | ● The children are seen after obtaining consent from both parents.  
● Utilize open questions and the “free-narrative” recounting of their family story by using: (a) simple language, (b) absence of specific details or coercive techniques, (c) flexibility on the part of the interviewee to choose what details will be reported, and (d) encouragement of an elaborate response (Powell & Snow, 2007).  
● Pose the miracle question and have them note on a poster board what they feel would be different.  
● Engage the children in a conversation about their experience: “Tell me how you have experienced family life since your parents separated?” “Were things different or better before that?”  
● The children are then asked to consider re-scripting their family story. “How would things be like if the relationship between your parents improved?” “What would be different? What would change?” “How will you know that a change has taken place?” | ● Pre-emptive statements are meant to engage the parents in a difficult process: “I appreciate the fact that both of you are together here in my office; I guess this must be stressful for you as the last time you met was probably at court.”  
● Parameters are also set for the work ahead: The last time we met individually, we discussed coordination parenting (or coaching) service that I can provide as coordinator.” Go over basic rules and sign the contract.  
● Explore their willingness to look at possible solutions – “I am very happy that you have both agreed to work together to find solutions to problems that have persisted for a long time in your co-parenting relationship. In our last individual meetings, I asked you to envision a future where your co-parenting relationship would be better and more functional: Here is a list of what you mentioned could be different or change:…..”  
● The parents are asked if there have been any changes since the last individual meetings; if any, they are recorded.  
● Scaling exercise is repeated and compared to previous answers. Discussion on what needs to be done for them to attain the next step.  
● The family story is re-visited and possible new and more positive scripts discussed. |
| Joint interview with parents | ● The parents are seen together usually after they are seen individually. It can also be decided that they are initially seen together, in which case the individual interview protocol is used.  
● The aim is to connect with both parents to make them feel comfortable and secure.  
● The parents sign the PC/CPC contract and all necessary consent forms such that the coordinator/coach has access to relevant documents (e.g., psychological reports, psychosocial assessments, restraining orders, etc.).  
● Focus attention on the family story the parents presented. | ● The coordinator/coach acknowledges how difficult it is to meet together and thanks parents for coming.  
● The responses to the miracle question that were submitted by both parents are presented to them for discussion. This exercise is important because it will combine all of the changes that the co-parents feel need to be made. The new list becomes a plan for change. | |
Appendix B

Session summary in parenting coordination and co-parenting coaching Practice

Summary of Parent Coordination/Co-Parenting Coaching Session

Held on ______________________
Between ______________________

In a meeting held with _____________________, parenting coordinator/co-parenting coach, they have discussed the following issues and concerns and have tentatively agreed on several points which they will make every effort to implement in the best interest of the minor children:

Progress and change taking place in their children’s best interest since the last meeting:

Issues and concerns discussed:
Both parents expressed agreement on the following points:

Items left for future discussion:
Changes identified by both parents to help normalize family relations:

When both parents were asked, in previous meetings, what would change or be different if their co-parenting relationship would normalize and would better respond to their children’s needs, Father and, Mother stated that:

Next meeting will take place on ______________________

Submitted by ______________________
Date ______________

N.B.

Appendix B is not intended as a verbatim account of the meeting held between the two parents, but rather it is a summary made by the PC of proceedings and decisions taken by the parents in the best interest of their minor child and to be of use by the co-parents and the PCCPC. It is agreed by both parties that this document while it may be shared with their respective lawyers, is not to be used in any future court proceeding or litigation.