

AFCC Maryland Chapter of Association of Family and Conciliation Courts



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FROM THE CO-PRESIDENT



Marshall Yaap, JD

Greetings to you all,

As we reach the end of **Mental Health Awareness Month**, it is an ideal time to reflect on our roles as members of the Maryland Chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts.

May was designated as Mental Health Awareness Month in 1949 for the purpose of helping to eliminate the stigmas associated with mental health conditions by raising awareness.

Our Chapter's Mission states that as an interdisciplinary, international association of professionals, we are dedicated "to improving the lives of children and families through the resolution of family conflict" and to promoting "a collaborative approach among those who work in and with family law systems, encouraging education, research, and innovation and identifying best practices."

Fulfilling that mission requires us, as mental health professionals, judges, lawyers, academics, researchers, parenting coordinators, and court administrators, to understand and address mental health conditions daily.

In our various roles, we have a responsibility, not only during the month of May but throughout the year, to raise awareness and combat stigmas associated with mental health.

As a recently appointed Co-President of the Maryland Chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, I have come to know many of our members and can say with full certainty that the members of this organization work tirelessly to fulfill that responsibility of raising awareness and erasing stigmas.

While the work we do is often difficult and stressful, we should all take a moment from time to time to reflect on the good work we are doing in our communities and the invaluable assistance we are providing to others.

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As we move into June, we look forward to seeing members of our chapter at the AFCC 61st Annual Conference in Boston June 5-8, 2024. The theme of the conference is Coping with Transition: Individual, Family, and Beyond, and will cover the following topics:

- AFCC Peace Talks: Depolarizing by Example
- Gender Identity and Transitions
- Revising the Family Mediation Model Standards
- Allegations of Abuse and Alienation in Family Court
- Mediation and Artificial Intelligence
- Litigation Abuse
- Advanced Challenges in Family Mediation
- Protecting Yourself and Your Practice in the Cyber World
- The Truth About Kayden's Law
- In-camera interviews in Hague Abduction Convention Cases
- Screening for Intimate Partner Violence
- Intersection of ACEs and Alcohol Use Disorder
- Applying the Voice of the Child
- Why Won't Some People Retire?
- Child Inclusive Parenting Coordination
- Neurodiverse Parents in Family Court

Registration is still open for anyone who is interested in attending.

After the 61st Annual Conference, the next important event will be our **Chapter's Annual Conference on October 23, 2024**. We will be marking *our 10-year anniversary* since the formation of our chapter and hope to see everyone there!

-Marshall Yaap, JD, Co-President is an attorney with Offit Kurman in Bethesda, MD

2024 MARYLAND CHAPTER ANNUAL CONFERENCE

SAVE THE DATE

October 23, 2024

Save the date and plan to attend this special 10th Anniversary Annual Conference.

Details will be posted on the Chapter website
www.afcc-md.org



Attending the Boston Conference?

All Members are invited to the **Maryland Chapter 10th Anniversary Happy Hour** on Thursday June 6, 2024. Watch your email for an update as to time and place!

10 TIPS TO BEST UTILIZE A PARENTING AND DIVORCE COACH



A parent and divorce coach is a professional with mental health training who provides co-parenting coaching and support to clients and mental health consultation to attorneys. Coaches have unique training in child development, parenting, child access schedules, and how to minimize the impact of divorce on children. Often coaches also are experienced therapists, custody evaluators, mediators, and parent coordinators.

Tips to attorneys for maximizing the benefits of using a coach are as follows:

Gail Bleach, Ph.D.

- 1) **Refer early.** Ideally the client starts with a coach early in the case. The coach helps set realistic outcomes for the case and assures that the client is parenting and co-parenting in the best possible way. Coaches are well-suited to review co-parenting emails prior to the emails being sent.
- 2) **Work closely with the coach.** Be sure you have formulated a joint plan for the case and divided the responsibilities. Coaches often handle phone calls from clients who need support through the legal process, are worried about their future, and call their attorneys repetitively.
- 3) **Use coaches in all high conflict custody cases.** In these cases, one or both parents will have mental health or personality problems. The coach can offer valuable advice about how to deal with these clients and with the clients' spouses.
- 4) **Use coaches in families with special needs children.** Schedules which vary from the customary 50-50 schedules are best based on information about how the children's issues interact with requested schedules.
- 5) **Use to improve client co-parenting.** Joint, tie-breaker or sole custody determinations are made by how well the parents make decisions together and how they treat each other.
- 6) **Use coaches with highly emotional clients.** Coaches can limit legal costs by handling clients who are upset and needy.
- 7) **Consider using a joint parent coach** where possible so both parents hear the same recommendations regarding possible schedules and expected outcomes in children of divorce. Coaches are especially helpful in giving advice about handling hot button issues like how to tell children about an impending divorce or introducing a new relationship to children.
- 8) **Use coaches to aid** in the preparation of material for custody evaluators.
- 9) **Use coaches to recommend** therapists and other mental health providers who might be helpful in the case.
- 10) **Develop a relationship** with a few coaches who work well as part of your team, are available for your questions and have ideas of how to move cases forward.

-Gail Bleach, Ph.D. is a Mediator and Coach in Silver Spring, MD

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UPCOMING AFCC WEBINARS

The Hats We Wear as Court Experts: Roles, Conflicts, and Helpfulness

Jeffrey P. Wittmann, PhD | June 18, 2024 | 1:00pm-2:00pm Eastern Time

"Toxic," Traumatized, or Neurodivergent? Setting Appropriate Boundaries Without Writing Anyone Off

Dan Berstein, MHS | July 9, 2024 | 1:00pm-2:00pm Eastern Time

Economic Wellbeing of Mothers in Shared Placement: A Cross-National Perspective

Carla Adkison-Mari Haapanen and Trisha Chanda | August 14, 2024 | 1:00pm-2:00pm Eastern Time

Co-Parent Coaching: Inspiring Transformation for Families

Amy Armstrong, MSW | September 11, 2024 | 1:00pm-2:00pm Eastern Time

VISIT THE AFCC WEBSITE AT WWW.AFCCNET.ORG FOR DETAILS AND REGISTRATION INFORMATION FOR THE ABOVE WEBINARS



Maryland Chapter | Celebrating 10 years | 2014-2024

Chapter News & Information available on the Chapter website – www.afcc-md.org

Comments? Questions? Please contact the administrative office at admin@afcc-md.org

Top Ten Tips to Help Clients Decrease Conflict

- *Colleen Bokman, LCSW-C, and Hallie Strauss, Psy.D.*

1. Find the empathy for everyone involved: All parties are going through the stages of grief and may be at different points in their journey of acceptance. Everyone in the family has a loss around the life they thought they were going to have, even if they are the one who initiated the separation.



*Colleen Bokman,
LCSW-C*

2. Help Define the Overall Goals: Help parents look at what they want for their child(ren)'s future experiences. The best outcomes for children of divorce are those where there is continued positive regard for both parents' experience and when the children are able to develop healthy relationships with both primary attachment figures.



Hallie Strauss, Psy.D.

3. Help Maintain Calm: Anger and hostility rarely achieve a desired outcome for any party. Helping your client manage their emotions and decrease stress will ultimately help them communicate without sabotaging their goals due to hostility and anger.

4. Keep them Contained and Focused: When parents fear for their children's wellbeing, it is easy for them to lose focus and allow the anxiety to spill over into unrelated, worst-case scenario outcomes. Parents may start to play chess about issues that may be unrelated to the presenting concern and goal. Refocusing and containing concerns to the issue at hand will help them streamline and structure their worries into more manageable and achievable outcomes.

5. Encourage Clear and Concise Messages: Help your clients limit their communications solely to the issue at hand and their thoughts about how to manage the presenting issues. Criticisms, accusations, blaming, critiques, and bringing up past conflict or suggested behavior all inflame the interaction and prevent clear communication of the actual concern. The negativity may trigger the other parent to shut down and limit their ability to hear the request or concern.

6. Look for Creative Solutions: Look for the 'whys' behind the impasse! Both parents are likely presenting valid concerns about their child(ren), they may be prioritizing them differently. Are there unique paths forward that accommodate the child's needs and both sides' concerns?

7. Refocus on the Child's Experience: Remind parents that their children are the ones going back and forth. Is this issue more about the parents' ideas of fairness or about the best experience for the child? Example: demanding transition at the regular 3 pm dismissal time on a school half-day instead of allowing the child to transition homes at the end of the half-day.

8. Encourage the Pause: Bill Eddy, JD, LCSW-C, notes that the validating elation after sending a "nastygram" email only last for 20 minutes. The damage to the co-parenting dynamic can last much much longer and detract from the parent's true goals. Encourage clients to imagine a judge is reading every communication, and pause before hitting send.

9. Continue to Refocus on the Overall Goals: It is very easy when we passionately care about our children to become emotional, triggered, and reactive. Nothing is more important in the world to most parents, and they interact with each other with that heightened emotionality. The high stakes emotional reactions can trigger the other parent and create the negative communication cycle that was present in the marriage/relationship. Help remind parents that the fighting, justification and conflict are impeding success. The goals for children to have a healthy childhood with positive attachments as a foundation in life are not possible when parents are stuck in their relationship conflict.

10.Resources: BIFF for CoParent Communication, by Bill Eddy, JD, LCSW-C and The Co-Parenting Handbook, by Karen Bonnell, co-parent coach are both extremely helpful books to guide parents' communication and evolution from 'spouse' to 'co-parent.'

-Colleen Bokman, LCSW-C, is a family counselor in Bethesda, MD. Hallie Strauss, Psy.D. is a licensed Psychologist also in Bethesda, MD

Guest Column | Top Ten Tips for Judges and Attorneys in Cases Involving Parents with Substance Use Disorder



**Stephanie Tabashneck,
PsyD, JD**

President-Elect
Massachusetts Chapter,
AFCC
Boston, MA

1. Treat people with substance use disorder (SUD) with kindness and respect – it may not seem like it but they are suffering. Find at least one positive thing to say about the parent and praise positive steps even if they are small.
2. Diatribes and lectures are unlikely to work with this population.
3. Understand that SUD is a medical condition and a brain disease.
4. Relapse is a part of recovery. Expecting someone to be sober after one drug detox or a 30-day rehab is unreasonable. On average, people enter into sustained sobriety after 4 – 5 iterations of treatment.
5. Not all relapses are the same. Single day resumption of use often does not require a change to the parenting plan.
6. Use drug and alcohol testing to better understand what is going on with the parent. Remember: a test is not positive unless there is a second test that is also positive (a “confirmation test”). Avoid games of “cat and mouse” to find drug use, instead view testing as one part of collecting data to support the family. Expect some positive or missed tests. In the event of a single positive test during non-parenting time, there is generally not a need to change the parenting plan. Instead, parenting time for the next week can, for example, take place in public following a negative test prior to each parenting time period. Three or fewer missed or late tests per month should generally not result in a change to the parenting plan provided the parent is able to test negative prior to and during the visit.
7. Focus on the nexus between the substance use and harm to the child.
8. Focus on non-use during parenting time. Moderation can be an acceptable treatment goal. For some substances such as alcohol, many people continue to use alcohol but are able to sufficiently reduce or “cut back” to the point that they no longer meet criteria for an alcohol use disorder.
9. Build awareness of resources. There are free SUD meetings going on virtually at all times of the day. There are also in-person meetings in many towns. Virtual meeting resources include Smart Recovery, Mindfulness Based Recovery, Women in Recovery, Recovery Dharma, Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and many more.
10. Poorly thought-out conditions can do more harm than good. When drafting conditions treat the person as an individual. Consider transportation and time barriers, childcare barriers, and what the parent thinks will be most useful. Are there any conditions you are considering that may actually increase relapse risk (e.g., in-person Alcoholics Anonymous for a parent with significant social anxiety)? While the parent needs do select some form of treatment, find out what treatment they are interested in, and empower them in making treatment decisions.

-Stephanie Tabashneck, PsyD, JD

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