

## Preserving the Nest

### For Children Whose Parents Divorce

Janet Miller Wiseman, LICSW, Certified Family and Divorce Mediator

At age 18, I read an article in the New York Times Magazine, describing a divorced family, a mother and father, both whom had remarried, and who were vacationing on the French Riviera with their adult children, and their grandchildren. Their second spouses were nearby, waiting to begin their summer vacations.

The story resonated. All marriages cannot and should not be preserved. The three big A's: raging alcoholism, abuse, hidden adultery; plus dastardly illness, both physical and mental, long-distance moves, people falling in love with their childhood sweethearts, or "soul mates", or a lack of connection, make beginning or maintaining some marriages untenable. The children of these couples do not need their parents married. They need their parents to restrain their hostility and negativity towards one another and to be able to be present as a union for the sake of their children, even observing rituals and celebrations together.

In my many years of practice as family and divorce mediator, and as psychotherapist, I have seen soon-to-be-ex-spouses tuck their children into bed every night in their home with their mother, each parent reading the bedtime story every other night. Those children have shabat dinner on Friday evenings with their parents, alternating the observance in both of their homes. In another family, I have witnessed a father going across town to pick up his older three children from the school bus, doing their homework with them five days per week. He prepares their dinner the one night per week at their mother's home when she arrives home later. The children are with their father at least every other weekend. They haven't lost either of their parents. These parents don't believe that the divorce gives them a ticket to spend only half of their time parenting their children. They don't believe that divorce ends family.

If a mature second spouse, partner, or "side-kick" can tolerate his or her partner spending time together with his or her children and ex-spouse, those children will have a sense of being an integral part of their whole families. The parents are divorcing each other, not their children, or their family unit.

### Alternative Dispute Resolution Is Critical for Preserving the Nest

The process of "adversarial divorce," where attorneys are retained to obtain the maximum in assets and time with children, has made couples afraid of the divorce process and often afraid of attorneys. They express the thought that they need their financial resources for their own children's college educations and their own retirements; not giving them instead to their attorneys.

Often, couples without knowledge of options, are sucked into the vortex of becoming enemies in the process of distributing their assets and making decisions about their children. Only one of them is seen as a potential "winner" in the zero-sum game of litigation. The bitter taste of the divorce process remains for years and does not portend that couples reach an understanding to continue their commitments to their children and grandchildren.

*Changing the ritual by which couples divorce, changes what kinds of restructured families are possible after divorce.*

Every day in my office couples make reasonable, sane, creative decisions about their separations or divorces and the restructuring of their families. They are helped to generate creative options for dividing time with their children and their worldly goods without hostility, often enjoying more humor together than they have experienced for years.

Divorce Mediation and Collaborative Process Negotiation are the two processes that we professionals in the Alternative Dispute Resolution field recommend for those who separate and divorce. These processes, in contrast to litigation, help families maintain the important focus on the children of their union. Divorce mediation is almost always more cost and time effective and collaborative negotiation brings all of the couples' professional helpers together under the same roof at the same time. \*

Hostility between divorcing couples always hurts their children. Divorce and hostility are not synonymous. Couples need to know that there are options for "preserving the family nest". Small, medium-sized and adult children often heave a sigh a relief and express "I feel so peaceful when my whole family is together."

*Footnote: See [www.mcfm.org](http://www.mcfm.org) and [www.mclc.org](http://www.mclc.org) for descriptions of mediation and collaborative process negotiation in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.*

Janet can be reached at [www.mediationboston.com](http://www.mediationboston.com), email her at [mediationboston@gmail.com](mailto:mediationboston@gmail.com) or call 781-861-9847.