



## **Key practices for social workers**

### *Mediation services*

#### **Lesley Ann Cull**

The 1980's and 1990's saw the growth of mediation services to provide an option for parents who are divorcing or separating, to negotiate agreements about their children. You are now going to hear from an experienced mediator.

#### **Len Cripps**

My name is Len Cripps and I am the supervisor for the mediators, for professional practice here at the family and divorce centre. The family and divorce centre is a kind of umbrella organisation and if you were looking for an overall aim for what's provided here, it's about minimising the emotional damage brought about to both parents and children through separation and divorce. So the threads of different services here are all focused on that.

The mediation over children, which is to do with where will children live, how will they see the non-resident parent, as well as sorting finance and property issues, those are things that we do as well as providing a service for children themselves who need an independent adult to talk about difficulties that have arisen following separation and divorce. Amongst the mediator group there is a mix of people, there's a group of lawyers, some with a counselling background and some from both family court welfare and the personal social services generally. In the children's service, of the two child counsellors, one is from education and one is from social services but both have, in addition, a counselling skill as well.

#### **Lesley Ann Cull**

I asked when children were likely to be offered the support Len referred to and what kind of work would be undertaken with them.

#### **Len Cripps**

When children have started school and are able to communicate verbally, then they would be considered for the children's service. A lot of the work I have to say is done through play, and through drawings and art, so that does bridge some of the linguistic problems for the younger age band.

One other way which is often used quite well is a pair of telephones, which are not really linked in the normal sense of the word, but the child standing say at one end of the room talking to a parent and the counsellor perhaps at the other end of the room answering. So all sorts of techniques that have been developed to help children say what they want to say. When children come for their first appointment they have a meeting, accompanied by one or both parents, where the ground rules for the process are laid out, and one of those is that the issue of confidentiality and that there won't be feedback to the parents about what the child has said. There is clearly a standard caveat there which is to do with harm. And both to the adult in adult language, that will be made clear.

But then when the child is alone the language will be slightly different, probably along the lines of, what you say here is for this room and this room alone, but if you say something to me that makes me feel concerned about anybody, I may have to speak to someone else about that. Sometimes parents really genuinely don't know what their children think, because the children want to please them both, and don't want to take sides, and so for instance might be, it's very common nowadays for people to say 'we would like joint residence orders', and others 'we'd like children to share their time with us, on almost an equal basis'. If that arose and the parents genuinely didn't know or wanted to be sure that their children wanted to go with that, because it effectively means from the child's point of view, having two bedrooms, two homes, all those things, they may ask the mediator to consult with the child. And we

would only do that in very controlled circumstances where both the question to be asked and the parent's worst fears about the answers had been carefully explored beforehand. We would never do it on the basis of a fishing expedition with children. And so that's one way in which we would involve children in mediation. They might if they chose and if the circumstances were right, join their parents for the outcome of that. They might also join parents in mediation where parents had reached some decisions and wanted to use the mediation room to share that information with the children; because that's the safest place they feel they can do it. Those are a couple of examples. We wouldn't normally, though, have the children in the room during process.