



Ontario Association for Family Mediation

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Editorial Submission

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“A Marriage Counselor’s Take on Family Mediation”

Toronto, Ontario – “Marriage counseling” – Two words which anyone in a marriage would rather not hear. However, attitudes towards counseling have changed, with more married couples seeking this route when problems arise in the relationship. Despite today’s relatively high divorce rate, marriage counseling is becoming increasingly widespread. Individual results aside, this seems to be the proverbial “silver lining” around an otherwise dark and stormy divorce cloud in modern Western society.

Interestingly enough, with the increasing popularity of family mediation, marriage counseling professionals now have another addition to their toolbox to offer their clients. Donna Hutchins, an Oakville, Ontario-based marriage counselor freely admits that “while marriage counselors are sought to ideally help couples work out their differences and hopefully stay together, it is undeniable that often times this isn’t the end result. Regardless of the marriage counselor’s qualifications and experience, there are those unfortunate situations where separation is inevitable.”

In the past, it was at this moment when couples would have made the decision to abandon their counseling and run to their individual lawyer’s offices. Filing for divorce used to be the only option to staying in an unhappy relationship and all too often, it was undertaken via an adversarial, litigious route. Times have definitely changed.

Marriage counselors are now realizing the benefits to their clients of referring them to an Accredited Family Mediator; “When it becomes obvious that the marriage cannot be repaired, we are still providing a beneficial service to our clients by referring them to a family mediator”, states Hutchins.

By all accounts, family mediation is on the rise in Ontario. Queen’s Park is clearly sold on the idea, especially when it comes to clearing the back-log in the Provincial court system. Legislative changes are rumored to be on the way to include some form of mediation as a mandatory element for divorcing couples in family court.

Hutchins says that this kind of reform can’t come soon enough. “We’ve watched time and time again, couples who really just needed some direction as to “how” to separate, but once they go down the path of litigation, it becomes painful and expensive. The only winners in these situations are the lawyers. Of course it is their job to win.”

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There is another element to this idea of steering couples towards mediation after failing to find any common ground in marriage counseling. Divorce itself takes an incredible emotional toll on both parties involved and this usually, ends up with at least one person requiring some kind of counseling after the dust settles.

“Just when you think a situation is already fragile, once they choose to divorce through the court system, it can become a nightmare. Financial stresses compound the emotional stress and people become extremely irrational which is unhealthy for all parties and particularly for children”, claims Hutchins.

This is in stark contrast to observations made when mediation is offered as an alternative. Hutchins offers further insight; “We know that by referring couples to mediators, we can remove much of the stress involved with a legal separation and divorce. Mediators get couples talking to one another in a non-adversarial manner. Their perspective is harmonious to the work done in counseling. Now the couple is hearing the same message from two different professionals. As counselors, we provide an environment where, without any undue pressure from lawyers and judges, couples end up agreeing on why they disagree and how to ultimately end their marriage in a civilized manner. Then no one has to feel like loser.”

Collaboration amongst many social-services professionals in related fields has become another silver lining. Hutchins notes that “I notice that as we make referrals to family mediators the doors are opening for dialogue with other professionals, such as psychologists, in terms of trying to find what’s best for the couple. This wasn’t happening as often even five years ago.”

There is one aspect which strikes a chord within Hutchins with respect to the benefits of referring to family mediators and this revolves around children.

“When kids are part of the equation, I do my best to urge couples who still feel the need to separate, to do so using the services of a family mediator.” It seems that there is extremely good cause for her to do so, as she further explains; “No matter how hard a couple tries to protect their children from what is happening the emotional effects on children are unavoidable. Either parent may have difficulty in seeing what is best for their child. I always remind the parents that they should not expect the children to become responsible for the parents’ decisions.”

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With it being common knowledge in the social-services profession, it seems to evade the seemingly endless line of divorcing parents that high-conflict divorce rates amongst couples with children are undeniably linked to rates of childhood depression, amongst other unfavorable spin-off issues affecting society as a whole.

With mediation taking a more prominent role in separation and divorce, there seems to be unanimous support for the benefits it provides, from social-service professionals and even government legislators. Just as marriage counseling has become “mainstream” as a viable option for quarreling couples in recent decades, it looks as though family mediation is gaining considerable momentum and similar acceptance.

For more information, please contact Ontario Association for Family Mediation at; 1-800-989-3025, Fax: 1-866-352-1579 or, e-mail; oafm@oafm.on.ca or visit www.oafm.on.ca.

About Ontario Association for Family Mediation

*"Fostering a community in which family mediation
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Founded in 1982, OAFM is a not-for-profit association promoting family mediation as a dispute resolution process for separating couples and for families in conflict. OAFM promotes professionalism within the family mediation community by providing accreditation for family mediators in Ontario and by supporting professionals who practice family mediation. OAFM is run by a volunteer Board of Directors comprised of members from across Ontario.

Media Contact:

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