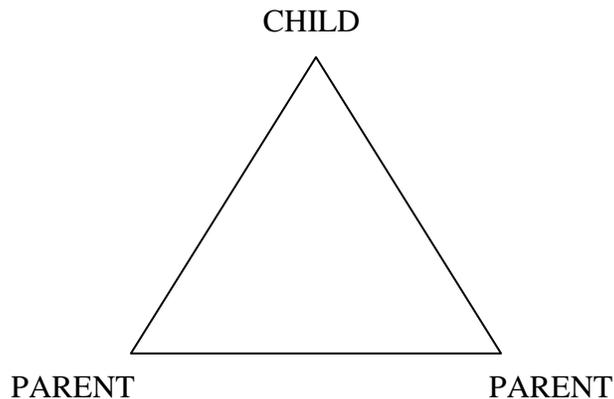


THE FAMILY TRIANGLE:
Using Geometry to Move Families Forward
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Family Mediation is designed to assist people with working out differences, so that they are able to function better as parents while living separately. *The Family Triangle* is an effective tool in helping families shift their focus from the past to the present, and ultimately, to the future. While family relationships are complex, *The Family Triangle* provides a simplistic representation of the child-parent-parent relationship.

The concept of *The Family Triangle* is just that; a simple triangle. One (1) point represents the child, and one (1) point represents each parent. Further, the points are connected. In genealogy, the child would generally be seen at the bottom of the diagram. With *The Family Triangle*, the child is at the top. Visualizing the triangle in this way allows people to view the relationship from a structural perspective. There is a base (a foundation), a distinct top (a purpose), and everyone is connected.

Figure 1:



This makes it easier for people to understand the concept, and helps create change in their parenting relationship. Unlike the typical family hierarchy, this image more closely parallels the dynamics in a family system. There is a strong base at the bottom, with an apex reaching for the sky. If children are told "The Sky Is The Limit," parents have an obligation to help the child reach for that goal. This is accomplished by working cooperatively, and providing the child with the necessary foundation.

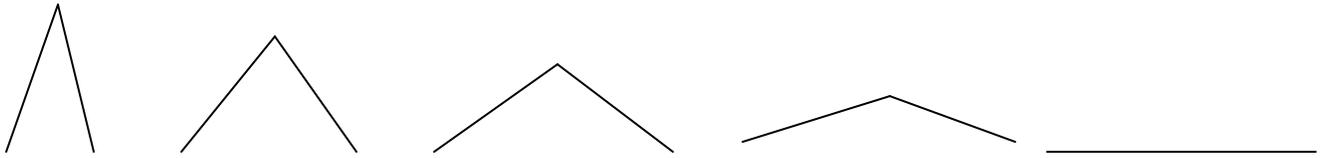
The Family Triangle illustrates basic connections that must exist in a child-parent-parent system. While all of the lines are important, in mediation, special focus is often needed on the connection between the parents. From a functional perspective, it represents communication, understanding of differences, and support of each other. It is also acknowledging that even though the romantic relationship ended, the parental relationship must continue. It is genuinely putting the needs of the child above of the wants and needs of the parents.

Communication:

As shown in Figure 1, *The Family Triangle* has the child at the top with the parents as the base. As children age, they become physically bigger and heavier. Over time, their emotional weight also increases. This is especially true for families engaged in mediation. Think of a child starting their emotional journey with a pencil case and by the time they're a teenager, they may already be carrying a suitcase of emotional baggage. Parents are often left unprepared.

As the base of *The Family Triangle*, the parents remain as the support for the child; constantly trying to prop them up and help them reach their goals. The dilemma is that without functional and productive communication between the parents, there is nothing keeping the child's base points connected and secure. Over time, with lack of communication and lack of understanding, the base points slide further and further apart. Eventually, the base can no longer support the peak, and the child emotionally crashes to the ground.

Figure 2:



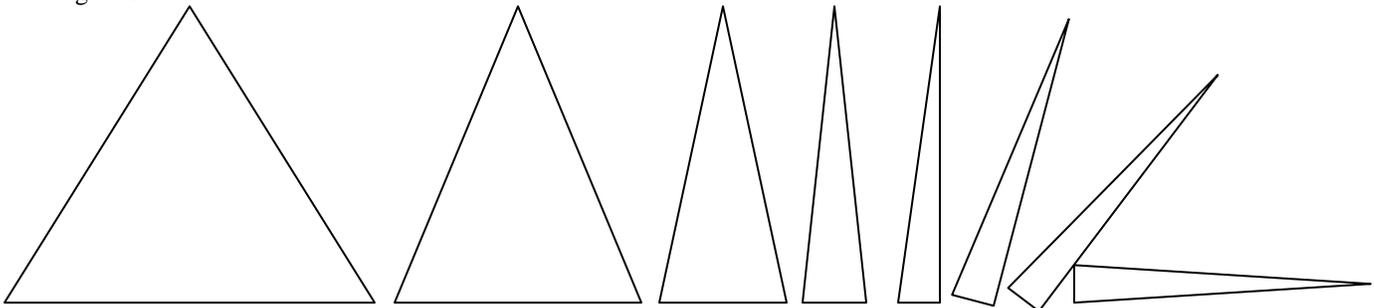
It is through this simple illustration that many parents come to a realization about their family system. To keep the base from sliding apart and the child from crashing, parents need to maintain functional and productive communication with each other. They do not need to be in constant communication, but they need to demonstrate an ability to communicate effectively to show the child they are working together in the child's best interests.

Parenting Styles:

The Family Triangle can also be used to discuss healthy parenting styles, and the need for balance. Many clients express how the other parent has a different parenting style from them, and this causes great stress. The triangle allows clients to visualize the need for similarities and differences in their parenting.

It is important for parents to have some similarities in their parenting style, but they do not need to be identical. In fact, even in-tact families have parents with some differences in parenting styles. Variation is good! The slight variations in dealing with day-to-day issues help the child to adjust to variations they will encounter in the outside world. Using *The Family Triangle* demonstrates that if the styles are too similar, the base is too narrow. The structure is unstable and even though the child's emotional weight may not be as high, it takes less to emotionally knock the child over.

Figure 3:



Conversely, if the parenting styles are too different, this again increases the emotional weight of the child on an unsteady base. The child then lives in a world of chaos, because the differences far outnumber the similarities. As in Figure 2, the base slips out and once again, the child emotionally crumbles to the ground.

Conclusion:

Clinicians are often looking for new, intricate ways of interacting with clients. Far too often however, the processes and strategies become complicated and confusing. Sometimes, the best teaching tools are the simplest teaching tools. Families engaged in the mediation process are often emotionally drained by the time they enter into the process. By using a simple geometric shape, the message gets through without creating further stress or confusion.

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Paul has been a private practice mediator since 2009. He is a Child Protection Mediator and a Family Group Decision-Making Coordinator on the Provincial Rosters in Ontario Canada. He has also completed training to become a Specialist in Openness Adoption. As a former Child Protection Worker, Paul specializes in working with families involved in the Child Welfare system.

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