

Professional Profile
Written by Liz Vaz, Esq.

Divorce is never easy. As I counsel clients on what they should expect throughout the divorce process, I remind them that there is no way to avoid the reality of how hard it may be. And while getting a divorce or separation is never an easy choice to make, it does not mean the process has to be disastrous for your family. As a divorce attorney, I take the issue of divorce seriously but I also remind each client that there is light at the end of the tunnel. As a child of divorce myself, I know there is light. I understand the lasting impact divorce can have on each member of the family, especially the children.

Children have no control over how the adults in their lives behave or over how they manage conflict. I was a young child when my parents were divorced. Then, the process was to file in court and let the battles begin. And, let me tell you, those battles began. I still remember hearing the loud fights with no one explaining to me what was happening, having to move from our house because my father didn't pay child support and, mostly, just the fear of the unknown. Without any feeling of certainty, children internalize trauma- and make no mistake, divorce can be quite traumatic. Children often blame themselves for the failings of their parents. But this is not the way it has to be.

Couples have options when it comes to choosing how to move their divorce or separation forward. When I was in law school and attended my first family law class, I knew that this area of law was my calling. I also knew that there had to be a better way than the traditional court-driven process. Once I learned about divorce mediation and the formal Collaborative process, that's where my "aha" moment came in. I truly believe these two methods are the foundations upon which all divorce matters should be based. There are very few cases that would not benefit from participating in mediation or Collaborative. I feel very strongly that litigation should always be the last option available to divorcing couples because the reality is that being in court will never get you what you're looking for. It isn't helpful to the couple, to the

family and certainly not to the children. While there are times when court intervention is needed, that is the very rare exception and not the norm.

When I think back to my parents' divorce and the destruction it left behind, I often wonder if court was needed. While my father had some capacity issues and my mother lacked a large support system, as a fairly recent immigrant to the United States, I still wish that they had the options back then like Collaborative Divorce. With the support and structure that Collaborative provides, maybe they could have learned about how to set aside their differences in order to effectively co-parent; my father may have learned about the true necessity (and benefits) of paying child support and maybe we children would have been the center of the process as opposed to afterthoughts.

Divorce sucks. I know it does. My family was quite literally destroyed by divorce. After my parents split, I barely saw my father again. What did I get to see instead as a young girl? I got to see my mother's constant financial struggles. I witnessed her legitimate fear of not being able to provide for us. I saw her guilt about us kids not having any extended family here in the United States to help us through the tough times. I heard her cry at night when life got too stressful. I got to experience my own confusion and guilt associated with my father walking out on us. I learned how to be a mother to my younger sister, at the tender age of 8, when she was only 5. I overcompensated and overachieved when I should have been experiencing my childhood. This is not how it should have been. This is not how it has to be for other families. I have dedicated my adult life and professional career to being an advocate for process options in the divorce arena. The Collaborative process and mediation can save families from the devastation that I experienced. It is my sincere hope that everyone will consider these alternatives when it comes to conflict resolution. Your family deserves better.