**The Lesson**

Mia never really enjoyed her adolescence. By 16, she had given birth to Chelsea, whose teenaged father was quick to shirk his parental duties. Mia and Chelsea lived with Mia’s mother until Mia was able to finish high school, but, in the meantime, she bounced from man to man, subconsciously trying to find someone mature enough to help her manage her very adult responsibilities.

When she met James at the local car wash, he was manning the register. He was three years her senior, and immediately took to Chelsea. Before Mia knew it, the two of them had moved in with him.

But he had bigger aspirations than clerking at the car wash. After they’d lived together for several months, he suggested that they both enroll in junior college to become occupational therapy assistants (OTAs). Mia agreed and they eventually obtained their degrees.

When she became pregnant again at 19, it was a blessing, rather than a curse. He proposed, and she was thrilled to truly create her own family. She thought that they’d be together forever. They were both excited to welcome their son, Sean, into the world.

As time passed, they struggled with the problems that many young families face. But as they matured, they grew apart. Because James made more money than anyone else in his family, and felt it his duty to support his mother and younger brother, they also struggled financially, which added another layer of stress.

Over the course of their eleven-year marriage, both of them behaved in ways that negatively impacted their trust and respect for each other. They had disparate personality types. Initially, their differences had attracted them to one another; they felt that they complemented each other, which they certainly did as far as their parenting styles were concerned. (After all, that’s why kids need two parents, to demonstrate both sides of the coin.) Unfortunately, these differences ultimately drove them apart.

A few years into their marriage, Mia spoke with her pastor about their problems. She asked James to attend couples counseling, but he refused. He knew they needed help, but hadn’t grown up in an environment in which counseling was acceptable.

Eventually, she moved out, taking the kids with her. He often visited both children, and gave Mia money for bills, but only when she asked for it. And she hated to ask.

When she lost her job, her finances grew strained beyond her ability to manage. Although he had a stable, well-paying job, the market for OTAs in Tampa was limited and Mia had difficulty finding a decent position.

He’d recently moved from their old one-bedroom apartment into a three-bedroom house so that his mother, his brother, and his aunt could live with him. Mia understood that none of them contributed to the rent, so he was taking care of all of them, but he wasn’t taking care of his own children! After years of living hand-to-mouth, and with no assurance of how much support she could rely on from James, or when he’d pay it, she’d finally had enough. At the end of an angry diatribe, she told him that she wanted a divorce, but what she really wanted was a reliable amount of financial aid, i.e. child support.

This upset him; after all, he contributed his share whenever she asked him for help. What he didn’t understand was that she didn’t readily admit that she *needed* help, and it was hard for her to come right out and ask him for money.

Pissed off, he petitioned for divorce.

One evening after getting home from work, Mia was making dinner for the kids when the doorbell rang. Curious, she answered the door. A young man she didn’t know handed her a sheaf of papers and stated, mechanically, “You’ve been served. You have 20 days to file your answer.” Then he walked away.

She was startled . . . and frightened. What was this? She glanced at the caption of the top page. It said “James Richard Nation versus Mia Leslie Nation,” in bold capped letters on the left hand side. In the middle of the page, “Petition for Dissolution of Marriage.” What did *that* mean? She returned to the kitchen, where the children were busy doing their homework. She tiredly sat down and read through the first few pages.

In the petition, it looked like James was asking for custody of Sean, but he said nothing about Chelsea. Worse, he requested child support *and* alimony from Mia!

She was floored. What the hell!

I had long before established a relationship with Mia’s church, having met with the pastor there to explain the collaborative divorce concept and all of its positive attributes for the family, as well as for the community. He had already sent us several referrals.

I later enlisted his support when I founded the *Collaborative Divorce Pro Bono Project*. So when she approached him again for advice several days after receiving the petition, her pastor recommended that, if divorce was unavoidable, she should consider using our *pro bono* collaborative services. She gratefully agreed and he referred her to us.

Mia was a sturdy young woman, dressed in the light blue uniform of her employer, with long curly brown hair she habitually clipped to the back of her neck. She had bright green eyes, and, when I asked, I discovered that her parents had relocated to Tampa from Puerto Rico before they were divorced. I was surprised when we first met that she was able to smile at me; I could tell that she was anxious . . . and angry. But my office is very welcoming, as is Hachi, who deserves the “therapy dog” certification for the sensitivity that she brings to her relationship with each of my clients. So I could see her visibly relaxing.

I seated her on the warm leather couch in my office and took the armchair catty-cornered from it, glancing through the petition. First, I answered Mia’s questions about likely timesharing, how child support is computed, and whether James might really get alimony or his attorney’s fees from her. I explained, “The petition is a form that almost everyone uses. It’s unlikely that he really expects to get majority timesharing or alimony from you. In fact, the Florida legislature recently passed a law that suggests that 50/50 timesharing will be the norm from now on. His attorney, not James, probably felt compelled to demand all that stuff, just in case.”

She was adamant about what she’d agree in regard to timesharing. “He isn’t a homework Dad. I won’t let him have Sean school nights; I’ll let him have all the weekends, but I have to make sure that Sean gets his homework done. School is too important.”

I let that go for the time being, and we discussed how the collaborative process works and whether he might be willing to try it. He’d retained an attorney with whom I had worked cooperatively in the past, so I called her right then and there. With Mia’s permission, I suggested that I sit down with both Jackie and James to explain the collaborative divorce concept. Jackie agreed.

I had lunch with Jackie first so that I could pitch her the idea before trying to enlist James. Because I present fairly often on collaborative divorce to both lawyer and lay groups, I was able to summarize the basics in just over ten minutes. My passion about this work is obvious, and I could see the motivating effect on Jackie; she was getting excited.

She’s already heard about the disqualification requirement, but the team construct was foreign to her, so she had some questions. We talked about the roles of the mental health facilitator and the financial neutral at length before Jackie, hesitating, asked me, “How would you feel about working with me on the team?”

She hadn’t been trained collaboratively, nor had she worked any collaborative cases. I hadn’t had any training before my first case either, but that was many years ago, when it wasn’t as available as it is now.

“Jackie, our past cooperative cases convince me that you are perfect collaborative attorney material. I’d be happy to mentor you through your first case, if you’ll agree to attend a basic training as soon as possible. We can agree on two neutrals who’ve had collaborative experience, as well. So they’ll be able to guide you, too.”

I mentioned several volunteers in the *Pro Bono Project* who could work on the Nation team, if James and Jackie agreed to proceed collaboratively.

“What about the fact that we’ve already filed a petition?” she asked. “The judge has already scheduled the first case management conference!”

“If James agrees, we can ‘freeze’ the litigation and proceed collaboratively by filing the appropriate stipulation. Our local judges have already agreed to that procedure in an administrative order.” I thought for a moment. “Wait, I’ll e-mail you a copy. You’ll want it for your records.” I used my cell phone to take care of that.

By the time I met with Jackie and James, it was clear that she had already sold him on the idea. I think he just wanted to see what I was about before signing on the dotted line. I grasped his hand firmly, while saying warmly, “James, it’s so good to meet you. I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity to explain the collaborative divorce concept to you for your consideration. Mia has already agreed to it, but it takes both of you to agree. If one spouse doesn’t agree, the default divorce is the traditional trek through the courtroom and that can get ugly.”

He wasn’t much taller than Mia, perhaps 5’8”, but he wasn’t Hispanic; he was a handsome, well-built black man, about 34 years old. He seemed surprised that I was so friendly. Perhaps he had different expectations? I *was* the “opposing lawyer,” after all.

We talked in Jackie’s conference room. She asked more questions than he did (James turned out to be very reserved), but they were true “softballs,” inquiries designed to allow me to get my points across. She also offered him some true-life examples of the horrible things that had happened in some of her court cases, completely beyond her and her client’s control.

Ultimately, he agreed to collaborate, and Jackie and I assembled the team. We agreed on a facilitator, Gavin, as well as a financial professional, Michelle, who was well known in the divorce community, both in court and out. Jackie had used her in court. I had worked with both on collaborative teams. We decided that our clients would not need any other professionals, at least not initially.

I sent both neutrals my “welcome to the *pro bono* team” e-mail, and received the requisite, “count-me-ins.”

With the team in place, Gavin and the clients scheduled their initial interviews. Soon after, he sent his report to the rest of the professionals, and we discussed it at our first teleconference. Here are the pertinent portions of what Gavin shared with us about James:

Trust Issues: [Level of trust (1) = no problems and (10) = virtually impossible]

* James’ overall level of trust for Mia was a “4” and a “5” related to the children.

Parenting Issues/Concerns:

* Parallel parenting style
* Very limited and poor communication between parents
* No routine or consistency in their co-parenting
* Believes their goals for their son are the same

Communication Style:

* James stated his communication with Mia was “horrible.” They currently have very little interaction with each other. Information appears to be conveyed through their son or the occasional text message. According to James, they had a better relationship prior to this summer. He recalled being able to eat dinner together and carpool to his son’s games. He wasn’t sure what happened over the summer, he just knew that it abruptly stopped.
* James stated he often doesn’t show his stress or anger. He works hard to control his emotions because he has a “bad temper” and doesn’t feel others can handle him when he is upset.
* He thinks his lack of emotional expressiveness may bother others and definitely upset Mia when they were together. He feels she wanted him to show more emotion in their relationship.
* When he feels he is getting emotional, he’ll ask for a break or walk away from an argument.

Conflict Resolution:

* James described the following pattern when the clients were together. One of them would bring something up, the other person would state their rebuttal, and then it would lead to a verbal argument. As a result, James found himself frequently trying to avoid arguments.

Expectations of the Collaborative Process:

* James wants the divorce process to be over and is willing to compromise to reach an agreement. He felt they would be able to sit in the same room with each other without incident and was confident they could get through the process successfully.

And here is what Gavin shared with us about Mia:

Trust Issues: [Level of trust (1) = no problems and (10) = virtually impossible]

* Mia trusts James with the safety of their son, but she doesn’t trust him to tell her the truth.

Parenting Issues/Concerns:

* Parallel parenting style
* Mia concurred with James that their relationship changed significantly over the past few months. However, neither verbalized a reason for this dramatic change in their co-parenting.
* Prior to separation they were on same page, but since that time, James rewards Sean and doesn’t support Mia with decisions she makes in her home or with Sean’s behavior outside the home.
* In contrast to James’ observations of his son, Mia described Sean as always being a happy kid prior to their separation. Since that time, he’s been crying more frequently, is less respectful at home and school, and blaming Mia’s friend for the divorce. He’s even been disrespectful to his football coaches, which is out of character for Sean. She believes Sean is attempting to split the parents because they don’t communicate.

Communication Style:

* During the interview, Mia initially presented as guarded. Once rapport was established, she openly shared the difficulties she’s had during and after their marriage, specifically with being able to co-parent with James. The team should be aware that Mia appears to be holding in a great deal of anger and frustration with James. She’s likely to try to keep her emotions contained, but is at risk of becoming upset quickly as we begin to address unresolved issues in the team meeting.
* Mia described her relationship and communication with James as almost non-existent. She tries not to use their son as a messenger. However, Sean goes back and tells his father everything that happens in her home. She wasn’t sure if James was encouraging this behavior, but it’s been causing stress in her home.

Conflict Resolution:

* They are not able to resolve their conflicts. Therefore, they do not talk.

Expectations of the Collaborative Process:

* Mia was confident that they would successfully get through the collaborative divorce process.
* Mia identified the need to improve their co-parenting and communication skills as her greatest hope for this process.
* Mia wants James to “change” for their son.
* She added that her greatest fear, regarding the divorce, was James trying to (legally) take their son away from her.

Communication and trust were both clients’ biggest problems. Because of this, they had never learned to effectively communicate with one another. Mia could be short-tempered and blunt at times. She was very angry and frustrated with James. She tried to keep her emotions contained, but often became upset.

James had trouble trusting other people to be there for him when he needed help. Consequently, he had limited relationships; he identified his mother, aunt, and brother as his primary support system. He believed that he had a bad temper, so he worked hard not to show his stress or anger and to control his emotions. He didn’t feel that Mia could handle him if he allowed himself to become upset. He understood that his lack of expressiveness upset her, but when he felt himself becoming emotional, he’d remove himself from the situation. He often avoided confrontation altogether.

What did the clients agree on? Although they were unaware that they were of the same mind, they both felt that their relationship had changed significantly over the past few months. Neither seemed to know why. She felt that it might have been because he believed she was involved in a new relationship, although she denied it. However, Michelle shed a different light on the issue when she suggested, during our first professionals’ teleconference, that it was because James had recently completed a loan application when purchasing a new car, and Mia happened to see it. She, at least, was upset by the income he was reporting, considering how little child support he was paying her.

Michelle knew this because she, too, had already had her initial meetings with the clients to discuss the marital finances.

Regardless of the cause, this change in their relationship seemed to impact most on their ability to co-parent. James became less willing to support Mia’s parenting and discipline. Their already poor communication skills worsened. They each tried to avoid the other, passing information through Sean or the occasional text message or e-mail.

Although Chelsea was not legally involved in the divorce, both parents understood that she was part of their family system and had been negatively impacted by their separation. Mia was especially upset because James’ family had cut off all contact with Chelsea, hurting the teen badly. However, James considered Chelsea his daughter and promised he would be there for her whenever she needed him.

During their separation, James had maintained a good relationship with Sean, seeing him every week and Face Timing with him often. Sean expressed concern to both parents that James wasn’t visiting with Chelsea. He also indicated that he believed he was the cause for their divorce. Although Sean had always been a happy kid, in the last few months, he had been crying and acting out more frequently. He was behaving less respectfully at home and at school, and even at football practice, which was very out of character. And he used the parents against one another, although they were unaware of it, for the most part, because they were not communicating well.

We knew restructuring this family wasn’t going to be easy. Jackie and I had lunch again before the first full team meeting to discuss how we would interact in front of the clients.

“My biggest concern is that James will need to see you being his advocate,” I started the conversation. “Otherwise, he’ll lose faith in the process right away. He can’t see you deferring to me because I’m your mentor. By the same token, remember that this isn’t the same type of advocacy as in court. We simply need to communicate our clients’ interests well with each other, so that they can see how people can disagree but still communicate respectfully and without losing their tempers. And in doing so, we may find common ground.”

“I’m not worried about that,” Jackie said. “I’m more concerned about James’ need for control. He’s the hero in his family, and he’s used to being in the driver’s seat.” She cocked her head, quizzically. “So how do we tell him he’s going to pay child support, it’s going to be in this amount and he’ll pay it on the first of the month, without fail, etc. etc. etc.?”

“Let’s play that by ear. But you should mention it to Gavin before our first full team meeting.” I didn’t know how accurate Jackie’s prediction would be; after all, she’s not a psychologist. But then again, neither am I. And how often do I give emotional advice to my clients? It seems like I say “I’m not a psychologist but…” at least three times a week.

James hardly uttered a word during the first full team meeting. That concerned me. He stared at his hands, folded in his lap. Sitting across from him, all I could see was the crown of his head. The longer this went on, the more upset and vocal Mia, sitting next to me, became. At one point, she couldn’t express her frustration so she stormed out of the meeting. This was at the end of the two hours scheduled, so we adjourned.

When Gavin raised the timesharing issue at the second full team meeting, Mia immediately took the position that she wanted a vast majority of it. After all, this was how the clients had been operating since their separation, and she would not budge on that issue. But James had already conveyed his desire for more time to his lawyer, and Jackie did a good job making that clear to the team. She and I went back and forth for a short time.

According to Jackie, “Both parents are equally capable of parenting their child.”

I pointed out, “But these parents have established a routine that’s working for them and their child.” (We hadn’t yet raised the Chelsea issue.)

Jackie replied, “That’s just because Mia has controlled the timesharing and James didn’t want to fight with her over it.”

At this point, Mia exclaimed, “How can you say that?! I told him he could visit with the kids whenever he wanted. He’s the one who hasn’t followed through! He’s the one who’s ignoring Chelsea! He’s the one who hasn’t paid me any support!”

During her tirade, I reached out and put my hand on her arm. She was working herself up and, when we’d met, just before the full team meeting, she’d asked me to keep an eye on her anger level. I wanted to remind her of that, without actually saying anything. But when she finished, she just seemed to run out of words.

Instead, shaking her head angrily, she leapt out of her seat and ran out of the conference room, out of the office, out into the 95° heat in the parking lot outside. I asked the team to excuse us and followed her out, without stopping for my keys.

“Why doesn’t he understand?” she cried, already in tears. “I need help; I can’t do it all myself anymore! Why doesn’t he know that?”

I put my arms around her. I am not usually a demonstrative person, even in my private life. But Mia needed to know that someone understood who she was and how it felt to be her. “He doesn’t understand because you don’t explain. You need to explain.”

“He won’t listen to me!”

“How do you know,” I asked, still holding her tightly, “if you haven’t given him the opportunity to listen? If you let him speak his piece, then it’s your turn. Don’t shout; just talk. We’ll all listen.”

She was silent, her body stiff, but she was thinking. Then she surrendered, “Ok, I’ll try.”

So I waited a beat and then I asked her for a favor. “Next time you run out of the conference room, can you head into my office instead? It’s a lot cooler in there.”

She laughed.

We headed back into the office. Once someone opened the door (I had locked us out) and we reconvened the team, I mentioned that the reason Mia wanted all school nights was because “James is not a homework Dad.”

He just slowly shook his head, and Gavin suggested that we table the discussion and talk about their failure to communicate.

James looked up. I think it was the first time I’d seen his face since shaking his hand when he arrived. Mia first voiced her concern about both children dreaming of a reunion between James and her. “This is why I don’t talk to James anymore. Sean has told me that he wants us to get back together and I don’t want him to have false hope.”

I put my hand on her arm. “Mia, don’t you realize it’s not healthy for Sean to be your messenger?”

It was at this point that Gavin took over the conversation. He discussed with the clients their shared belief that they should not act friendly towards each other because then their children might hope for reconciliation. He explained, “While every kid of divorced parents fantasizes about reconciliation, far more damage is done by parents acting coldly and refusing to communicate with one another. The parents should model the behavior that they want for their children, and this absolutely includes how they treat one another.”

It was clear that this comment hit home with both them; they both loved Sean passionately.

Gavin suggested that they might not be aware that, if they didn’t communicate, Sean would play them against each other. “So tell me about problems with Sean’s homework,” he requested.

“I’m a stickler for homework,” Mia chimed in. “I refuse to allow him to turn in a shoddy assignment.” She continued, “James is too lax about Sean’s homework.” She showed us pictures on her cell phone of an assignment that James had helped Sean prepare. Although she was disappointed by it, after passing her cell phone around the table, the team agreed that it looked fine. We gently suggested that she was being overly critical.

When James realized that he had the team’s support, he suddenly leaned forward and defended himself, “I grew up with parents, aunts, and uncles who were all school teachers. I understand the importance of school. I do Sean’s homework with him, when I know he hasn’t done it.”

He reminded me of an anecdote I had often shared with my friends. “I know what that feels like. I’ll never forget when I was in eleventh grade. My mother shredded my book report on *Silent Spring*. And not just once. She made me re-write it again and again until she was satisfied with it.” The room was quiet, listening. “I ended up hating that book, but I got an A on the paper.” I smiled ruefully.

In response, he told the most amazing tale.

“When I was in the fifth grade, I got this writing assignment. It was during the spring that year, when I was living with my aunt because my mother was working too hard to be really hands on with my brother and me. So we were living with my aunt, but she was a public school teacher, too, so she was just as hard on us as my mother was. Anyway, I wrote this paper and my aunt tore it to pieces. She made me re-write it over and over. I thought she’d never be happy with it. Eventually, though, I guess it was good enough and she let me turn it in and I got an “A” on it.” But that wasn’t the end of his story.

“So when I got to the eleventh grade,” he recalled, “I got an assignment that was identical to the assignment that I’d been given in the fifth grade. So I took my old paper (yes, I still had it), and I rewrote it (with more grown up words, of course), and I turned it in. It was written so well the first time that I received another “A” for it in eleventh grade!”

Her mouth fell open. She’s never heard this story.

He then divulged the story of the assignment Mia had criticized. It turns out that Sean had been telling him that he was completing the assignment after school with a partner. Mia was stricken by that information. “Sean assured me that you and he were getting the assignment done.”

You could tell from the look on his face that this also dismayed him. His failure to communicate with Mia (and hers with him) had caused the problem! But when they spoke about Sean, both clients lit up and were equally engaged. And, with the entire team advising them that it was still important for them to display a united front to Sean, they finally seemed to understand.

When Gavin gently brought up his 50/50 recommendation for the timesharing schedule, the team was shocked that Mia easily agreed to an equal split, after confirming that James was aware of the school’s website, where he could check on Sean’s homework assignments and he promised her that he would do so.

We moved on to child support. Mia was too proud to ask for more money, but she desperately needed it. She wanted to be independent, but she was resentful that James did not realize their need. Nevertheless, she remained quiet. I had asked her to bite her tongue and see what the team could do for her. Michelle put it out there, “Mia simply isn’t bringing in enough to pay all of her bills. And she’s not living above her means, at all.”

I clarified “James hasn’t given Mia any money for the last six months and she needs his help.” No one said anything at first.

James did not point out that Chelsea wasn’t his child . . . but he *was* contemplating his hands again.

Michelle saw her opportunity to help and remarked, “I’ve computed the child support, assuming that the Nations would share time equally with Sean. Because Mia hasn’t been able to get a job that pays as well as him, James would owe her $346 per month.”

I could feel the resistance radiating off of him. I could practically hear him thinking, “Don’t you dare hold my feet to the fire. You can’t tell me what to do. Don’t try to force me to do anything. I’ll take care of my kids my own way.”

So I asked, “James, I know you’ve got some serious financial obligations already. You’re taking care of your mom, your aunt, and you’re providing your brother with free room, as well. Chelsea’s not your daughter, so you aren’t obligated to pay for Chelsea. How much support do you think is reasonable to help her out?”

“Why does it have to be in the agreement?”

Michelle interjected before I could. “Once you are in the court system, you’re required to file the child support guidelines worksheet. And the final judgment is required by law to include statutory child support, unless you provide good enough reasons for the support to be different than the statute specifies.”

You could see James chewing on that. Michelle was neutral; he had no reason to distrust what she was telling him. And Jackie was nodding her head in agreement.

“How about $500 a month?”

Although it had begun as a heated conversation because she felt that he wasn’t giving her enough money, her mood quickly changed when it became clear that he was more than willing to do his fair share, in fact, even more than the child support guidelines required.

When I asked how he wanted to handle the six months when he’d not paid her anything, James spoke for himself, cutting Jackie off.

“How much can you afford to pay, over and above the support itself,” I asked, discretely reminding him that he’d be paying the support, too.

“I’ll pay her an extra $200 a month,” he suggested. “But I only owe her for five months, not six.”

Mia was busy on her cell phone, checking her bank records, so I asked, “Do you know when you’d like to have the total paid back by?”

“I’ll have Mia paid by Mother’s Day.” The symbolism of that date was not lost on her or the rest of the team. It was a lovely gesture.

In the meantime, she confirmed that he had only missed five months, not the six I had mistakenly thought.

That brought us to the conclusion of our second full team meeting. Because the clients had separated years earlier, neither of them expressed a need to discuss personal property or alimony, or any other issue, for that matter.

We scheduled one last meeting to sign their settlement documents. Afterwards, I interviewed Mia for her opinion on collaborative practice and her divorce. I asked what she had feared most, walking into the process.

“My biggest fear was that we wouldn’t be able to agree to anything.” She paused and then continued, wonderingly. “I was surprised that we were able to listen to each other as well as we did.” She smiled and shrugged. “I really credit the team for being so active in helping us *hear* each other. It certainly sounds different when someone else says it, even when it’s the same thing my husband just said. Especially when the someone who repeats it is someone I respect.”

“But it was not the battle I expected; it wasn’t at all hostile,” she went on. “That was so weird!”

“Part of that is the safety of the team,” I commented. “We’re all listening and being part of your conversation. So, not only do things sound different when someone else says them. But they also sound different when all of us are listening. You suddenly hear things differently through someone else’s ears.”

“Absolutely. It made it easier for him to hear me out, and for me to hear him out. To really ‘hear’ each other. I was able to say what I needed to say about how I really felt and he ‘heard’ me.”

She continued, “That first meeting especially was a roller coaster, not knowing what to expect. I still remember what you said, when I stormed out the second time, so angry and so frustrated. ‘Just come back and talk; say what you have to say. We will listen to you.’ I trusted you and, even as unsure as I was, because I trusted you, we still accomplished something at that meeting.”

“I learned how to communicate with him, to wait it out, to calm down, and to think about the words I could say that would make our discussion better, instead of worse. What you say sounds a whole lot different when your whole team is listening.”

“You know, when we started the process, we didn’t talk at all anymore. I would only text and e-mail him. I was so angry at him, and I didn’t want to fight. And I knew that we would. But now I think we can work these things out.”

I changed the subject. “What surprised you about the process, if anything?” I was careful not to suggest an answer.

“I was amazed that I got what *I* wanted and he got what *he* wanted.”

I laughed out loud; I couldn’t help it. “What are you talking about? You were so adamant about not letting him have school nights! Remember? ‘He’s not a homework Dad’ and all that?” I imitated her.

“Well, ok, what I wanted changed during the process. So I did get what I wanted in the end,” she conceded.

I waited.

“I was also amazed by the atmosphere in the room. We were all on the same team, all of the neutrals, the lawyers, and us, just working hard to get the issues resolved.”

She was so right! It is not often that a client learns valuable life lessons, especially when it comes to co-parenting and communication. But when clients choose to collaborate, rather than to litigate, this is often the pleasing result.