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FamilyKind—Help for the separating family

By Lesley Friedland and Barry Gillman

Jasmine is a newly divorced mother of two small children trying to make ends meet on her salary as a teacher in New York’s public school system. “The hardest part wasn’t dealing with the money; it was the screaming matches with my ex and fighting over the kids. It was a terrible situation and I saw the kids really suffering.”

It’s a familiar story. After all, divorce is an epidemic in this country with over 50 percent of new marriages dissolving. This does not take into account families where parents never married and the even higher incidence of divorce among subsequent unions. Divorce is common and many times it is an important stepping stone to a healthier familial situation. However, the process of the separation is often accompanied by vitriol and high conflict, leaving the children as the unwitting and unwilling victims of parental confrontation.

But there is hope! Jasmine and her kids were fortunate; a friend advised her to contact FamilyKind, a New York based non-profit organization that helps parents and their children deal with divorce and separation. FamilyKind provides holistic support of families by offering extensive parent and child education programming, mediation and parent coordination services, all on a sliding fee scale.

Staffed by mediators and mental health professionals who specialize in family issues, FamilyKind staff meet monthly in an office space at the National Minority Business Council headquarters.

FamilyKind offers extensive programming including classes, workshops and Meetups in New York City, Westchester and Long Island; not only for parents, but for their kids too.

“The best thing” explained Jasmine, “was the amount of information I learned as well as the way it was taught. It was taught with a lot of understanding, sensitivity and empathy. There were no preconceived judgments based on religion or ethnicity.”

“We’re open to families in the broadest sense” notes Barry Gillman, FamilyKind’s chairman of the board. “FamilyKind serves the lesbian, gay and transgender communities as well. We are there for any situation when couples want to separate without destroying their former partner and the family in the process.”

The origins of FamilyKind can be traced to the New York City Family Court system. For over two and half decades, Lesley Ann Friedland, the founder and executive director of FamilyKind, worked throughout the five boroughs as a court attorney and referee serving families in custody, visitation and child protective matters. Within the city’s court system she and others, many of whom are part of the FamilyKind organization, developed a children’s education and awareness program to run concurrently with the adult classes that were already in place. This dual programming was the only one of its type available in the city. Unfortunately, in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008-2009, budget cuts eliminated these programs. Friedland believes strongly that people deserve high quality services regardless of their ability to pay. So she founded FamilyKind in 2012 as a non-profit charity with the goal of helping New York families experiencing separation. Leaving the job in the court was a big leap of faith for Friedland. However, with the support of her family and many dedicated professionals, she made the move to help fill the gaping hole in services.

Supported by a team of immensely dedicated mediators, lawyers, mental health professionals, along with her board and advisors, Friedland’s



Left to Right: Brian Zimmerman, Esq., Wendy Wylegala, Esq, Hon. Stella Schindler (ret.) and Carol Bellamy, Esq. during FamilyKind’s 2014 panel discussion: The Children’s Voice in Law.



Left to Right: Kate Bar-Tur, LCSW and mediator, James Grimaldi, Doctoral Student in Child Psychology at Pace University, and Lesley Friedland Esq., Founder and Executive Director of FamilyKind participating in a panel discussion on Parent Education.

launch of FamilyKind has already helped hundreds of families deal more effectively with separation issues.

Sharon Manewitz, the chair of the FamilyKind Advisory Council shared that “Divorce was not common in my family, but when it happened I saw how badly the children fared. In fact, the circumstances were ugly, vindictive and economically wasteful. FamilyKind showed me that it did not have to be that way. Its programs and professional resources lead the way to healthier separations for children and adults alike.”

Research shows that divorce and separation can hurt kids’ motivation and behavior, often resulting in poor academic performance, social isolation and depression. Many readers of this article will know from personal experience that these effects can be long-lasting, even throughout life as the children of separation grow into adults and have families of their own.

FamilyKind’s children’s education workshop focuses on the particular, significant needs of children at different developmental and cognitive stages. This education program aims to de-mystify the legal and psychological processes involved in divorce by teaching youth in an engaging way, including active participation in games and role-play activities.

The programs for children (ages 7-11) and teenagers (ages 12-16) are designed to tackle the six psychological tasks that children of divorce face. These were identified in 1983 by renowned psychologist Dr. Judith Wallerstein.

These tasks are:

1. Resolve self blame and understand what factors do cause family division
2. Overcome the sense of loss
3. Acknowledge the permanence of divorce
4. Alleviate anger
5. Resume developmental agendas at school and playgrounds
6. Develop hope and confidence in the future.

The FamilyKind Board includes John F. Robinson, president and CEO of the NMBC, who emphasizes that “FamilyKind provides critical services to families that are going through separation and divorce by protecting the children from the emotional trauma of what they go through at that time and in a very effective manner.”

It is still the early stages for FamilyKind though. Relying on a network of trained staff and experienced volunteers, FamilyKind has a limited budget and is actively seeking grants from companies, foundations, and city and state agencies, as well as raising money through benefits and other events. Capital One Bank has been an early sponsor, and Michael Piazza of Capital One explains “We support many chari-



Tziporah Pronman, Director of Mediation and Parent Coordination at FamilyKind conducting a mediation session.

table causes, but this one has special meaning for me”.

Friedland notes that one of the big challenges is getting the word out. “In our first two years of operation, we helped a few hundred families, but that’s just the tip of the iceberg. It’s great that Jasmine ... found us, but many others just don’t know there are options available at this time of their lives.” FamilyKind is trying to raise awareness by building a robust mailing list, maintaining a vibrant website, a full FamilyKind profile on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, all of which are monitored and updated regularly. FamilyKind also enjoys partnerships with many local organizations including the YMCA, The Ackerman Institute, Homes for the Homeless, Prep for Prep, Legal Information for Families Today, Goddard Riverside Community Center, the JCC of Manhattan and the Albert Ellis Institute.

“Separation doesn’t have to mean confrontation” states Friedland, “we have to change peoples’ perception that it’s a battle, because in a battle it’s the kids who are certain to lose. When it really comes down to it, parents most want their children to thrive. They want this even more than they want to punish the other parent. This is where we come in – providing education, tools and strategies for families to emerge in a more healthy way.”

For now, FamilyKind relies primarily on networking in the legal and mediation communities as well as word-of-mouth to bring clients to the organization and its website www.familykind.org. “Whether we can help get the laws changed or not, we know there’s an immense need for our services,” Friedland states, “and we aim to help as many people as possible.” ☺

*Names have been changed to protect the privacy of our clients.