

# CHILD INCLUSION PRACTICES

- Lisa Cohen

*"When Daddy called me outside to sit on the blanket on the lawn, he cried as he told me he and Mummy were getting a divorce. I wondered, what does this mean? Mummy and Daddy left me and went to tell Nana and Grandpa. I felt very sad and frightened.*

*Daddy picks me up after Hebrew School every Sunday. He takes me out for lunch, then we go and do something. Sometimes we go back to his place. I can't remember how long before I met the lady Daddy was living with, but I knew her because she worked for us. When Mummy and Daddy went away, I used to stay with her and always had fun. They married and I got a half-sister. Whenever Mummy and "step mother" meet, I ALWAYS feel really sick and nervous because I know Mummy hates this lady, but I don't. I don't have anyone to talk to and now I am in a new school with hardly any friends, I am shy and scared. I get lots of headaches. I am sad and cry a lot alone in my room."*

I was that seven-year-old and that is my story. I can't stress how vital the role of an Inclusion of the Child (IOC) specialist is in the life of a child or young person. I would have loved to have been asked what I wanted, how I felt, and what I thought. While this wasn't part of my story, I am thrilled to now work as an IOC specialist listening to the child's perspective, and working with children through the unfamiliar territory that is parents separating.

As an IOC specialist, I get to listen to children and adolescents whose parents are in the process of separating. We talk about their anxieties, hurts, and what they want to have happen. Worries about a parent feeling left out and lonely are common. Children are deeply concerned about being disloyal to their parents. If they are seen to choose one over the other, the child fears one parent will feel hurt. While children are extremely resilient and able to bounce back, they do not have the skills to deal with separation, and may need some extra support to get through it. Some children somatise their symptoms, as I did. Child inclusion practices provide the opportunity to explore, process and instil a variety of coping strategies to give children and young people active support. Two to three sessions prior to their parents' mediation is generally sufficient, with one post mediation session if the dynamics of the separation are more complex.

As an IOC specialist, I attend the Family Dispute Resolution mediation along with the parents, to present their child's or children's thoughts and feelings throughout the mediation. I can only present what has been agreed to by the child, unless I perceive a degree of risk that parents need to be aware of (which would be talked through with the child/young person).

In my experience of meeting parents along with the mediator, and being the voice of their child, parents are deeply moved. They experience a range of emotions, often disagreeing as they attempt to work through their conflicts, opinions and desires moving forward. Sometimes they forget that child inclusive practice is about focussing on what their child wants, and not what they, as parents, want. As an IOC specialist, we are there to remind parents of their role as parents to their child, not partners to one another. The end result is seen as extremely worthwhile for all involved. Eventually, regardless of the strength of emotion displayed during an IOC specialist's presence and representation of the child's feelings, the parents agree they love, care and want the best for their child, and can use this as a basis for moving towards a mediated agreement which has the best interests of their child at heart.