

Do You Meet with Clients who Bring Children with Them?

Most of my work is criminal defense and family law. Last week, I had a divorce consultation where the PC brought a young child and felt free to bash their spouse in front of the child. I tried to steer the conversation into less negative areas as much as I could.

Yesterday, I had a meeting scheduled with a criminal defense client who is charged with domestic abuse related crimes. The client knew the purpose of the meeting was to review video of the alleged fight between the parties.

Client brought the parties' two-year-old daughter to the meeting. I refused to show the video in the presence of the child, despite the client's claim that she would just focus on her tablet. Client was mad that I would not let the 2-year-old just wait in the common area while we talked. I explained that my assistant was not a baby-sitter.

I suppose it depends on the area of law, but what do other do when clients or potential clients unexpectedly bring children to meetings?

I do primarily estate planning and probate with some real estate

Rarely do my clients bring small children with them; most of my clients are elderly; but occasionally someone does, granddaughter, whatever.

I try to be understanding; but I usually express alarm if the child is doing anything other than simply sitting quietly.

Now, I will say, I was a Welfare caseworker for 4 years; mostly AFDC applications but some Food Stamps and Medicaid.

Clients brought children with them All. The. Time.

I get it; they're poor, they don't have child care, someone has to look after the kids and it's usually mom (not being sexist but that's just the way it turned out).

One thing that I did to chill the little darlings out was, I went to a 'teacher supply store' and bought a bulk bag of Dinosaur toys, like this:

https://store.safariltd.com/products/bulk-bags-dinosaurs-figurines-761404?utm_source=adwords&utm_medium=ppc&utm_campaign=&ref=SFR_237243759&variant=5223841660965&ptcid=18887_4_272492415&utm_term=&hsa_tgt=pla-519934892796&hsa_grp=59471416312&hsa_src=u&hsa_net=adwords&hsa_mt=&hsa_ver=3&hsa_ad=294731366871&hsa_acc=2129352416&hsa_kw=&hsa_cam=1558266935&gclid=CjwKCAiA0ajgBRA4EiwA9gFOR9cWLRyRe1wPq5BZOmnyuaFEOxJLU5NGfUaONBk4PH1IqqeRC0t7MxoCpIIQAvD_BwE

And when a child was there and being disruptive, I'd pull out a toy and say "do you like dinosaurs? Everybody likes Dinosaurs? Do you want a Dinosaur?" and give the kid the dang dinosaur; they'd start playing with it and be quiet.

Doesn't address your question whether they should be bringing the kid there in the first place but at least it keeps them occupied. Any sort of cheap toy would work.

Ronald Jones, Florida

Yes, I practice family law and domestic violence so I've occasionally had clients bring children with them, and pretty much anything we would discuss would be inappropriate for the child to hear (I don't care how young the child/baby is - they hear and understand everything). I absolutely will not discuss anything in front of the children, even if it's a seemingly innocuous topic. And don't believe that a tablet/game will distract them - they can focus on both and absorb it all like the terrifying little sponges they are.

If the child is old enough to be unsupervised then they can wait in the reception area. If not, I usually have to re-schedule. There's no good solution - as others pointed out it can be very hard to find and afford child care, especially when a meeting with their attorney is not part of their regular

schedule. But I still try very hard to avoid having discussions within hearing of the child.

I've also had this problem with phone calls, when I realize the children are in the room or in the car with my client, and I tell them we need to talk another time when the kids aren't present.

Betsy Ehlen, Illinois

I will meet with clients that bring children. Sometimes it cannot be avoided, but there are times (such as your example) where it is not appropriate. The client needs to get a babysitter, bring someone to watch kid, etc.

Phil A. Taylor, Massachusetts

It has been a while since I have been in private practice, but when I was, I did consumer law work. That said, sometimes people do not have resources for babysitting. Sometimes, they have to bring the kids with them. In one case, a client brought her baby to a hearing and the trustee took her first (too bad he didn't take the rest of my cases right after that). Anyway, I have no answers, but we have to consider our clients and the reasons why they may need to bring kids.

Mitchell P. Goldstein, Virginia

As a general rule, I don't mind and I can usually endure/tolerate - I have a 3yo kiddo and so I can empathize with how the struggle can be sometimes. But YEEEEESH there are some times where I am an absolute nervous wreck by the time client & their brood of minions leave. My office is sort of long and narrow, almost like a really long hallway. Kids seem to see it as a running track because I repeatedly have to deal with kids footracing each other up and

down my hallway, stomping, knocking stuff over, shrieking etc. It's also especially taxing when I'm trying to explain/discuss a serious case-issue or what have you but the client simply can't focus on listening to what I am saying because they are too busy talking to their toddler or chasing their toddler down etc.. then they turn around and say "ok, im sorry could you repeat that?" which normally isn't a problem but after 100x it starts to get annoying.

I think the best way to sum it up is that I don't mind kids being present..

I just can't stand bad parents, I guess.

Seth Combs, Kentucky

A lot of clients who bring children to a lawyer's office just aren't thinking. Ask the client if the child accompanied them to work, to a dental appointment, to a Tupperware party, to the bar where they have a few drinks once a week, to the beauty shop, and if the client responds in the negative, explain that an appointment with a lawyer merits just the same consideration. Even clients without resources for a babysitter can generally find someone to watch the child for the duration of a visit to a lawyer's office.

Asking the client how he or she would feel if the child were subpoenaed to testify about everything discussed during that session in which the child was present usually makes a parent think twice.

jennifer j. rose, Mexico

Obviously, it's extremely inconvenient. But back in the day when I did contingency fee cases, and thus represented generally poorer folks, it happened. Inadequate access to affordable child care seriously hampers economic development for so many people. Almost as much as inadequate access to healthcare. Frustrating though. One client of mine, who'd lost her job (doing employment cases, many of my clients had zero income at the

time), had to bring her toddler to a deposition. The Opposing Counsel was really upset over this and made a point about it during the deposition several times. But frankly I think he was just trying to be a jerk as that was his way of intimidating witnesses and other attorneys. But it was a bit over the top, admittedly. The child kept doing and interrupting us several times.

Sterling L. DeRamus, Alabama

I collect happy meal toys and keep drawing materials. Some people don't plan for child care.

Reta McKannan, Alabama

Yes, parents bring their kids to everything from initial consults to trustee meetings. The trustee meeting part is rare, but especially with infants, the kid goes wherever mom and dad are.

If your office has the space, set up a separate kid-friendly area in the waiting room. I grabbed a bunch of stuff from Target's \$1 section, old stocking stuffers, etc. I have 2 ball in a cup thing that the kids have a love/hate relationship with. Anyway, kids are entertained in the main room and generally ignoring mom and dad in my office. The older kids often have tablets or phones with headphones. The headphone part is key here, because then we're not as concerned with what Junior might hear.

My old office was great for that. My new office is a lot smaller, so I'm not sure where the kids are going to go, since it's a single room. I suppose older kids could wait in the small conference area, but I'm not sure if my work neighbors would appreciate that.

Corrine Bielejeski, California

Because I generally deal with older clients, I don't have small children in the office very often. I occasionally have teenage kids come in with their parents or guardians, but, for the most part, they understand how they're supposed to behave in a law office. To help them pass the time, I have my office router configured to provide an open "guest" network for people who may be waiting, and a small Wi-Fi sign stating such on the reception area end table. They seem to appreciate that.

Andrew C. McDannold, Florida

It's not only children the bring along. Some bring their parents friend, Parents and friends get the confidentiality lecture and send them down the hall. I generally haven't had too many kids show up.

It seems to me the younger generations haven't grasped the concept of babysitters. I understand a client who need to sign a document having their kids along but the are places where kids should not be. out to dinner. Why anyone thinks a child in a carrier should be at Texas Road House you can explain it to me. The worst is at a crowded criminal cattle call. It's not unusual to see have a dozen moms with their kids in strollers. Seriously, that is one thing I would come down on as a judge.

John Davidson, Pennsylvania

I only practice criminal law. I actually forbid my clients from bringing children. The subject matter is never appropriate for children, nor do I want the distraction.

Eric C. Davis, Alabama

I have 3 kids myself and I have had many clients bring children to the office without warning. You can complain about it if you prefer, but speaking as a

parent, sometimes things just happen. Sometimes it isn't appropriate; I don't allow it when the kids are disruptive or are slowing things down for flat fee clients. But if I can accommodate it and if it isn't a pattern, I'll just let them stay.

The trick is to have a few things which are fairly universal, which are fairly quiet (no matchbox cars!!), and which are entertaining enough for a 15-minute meeting. In my experience that often means "visual or tactile"--conveniently this also works well when kids or clients are not great with English. I just have a "kid box" that I bring out. A simple investment of \$50-100 in some kid entertainment will last for years and will save your bacon when someone shows up with kids.

A few good choices are

a) drawing gear (best to have different things for different age groups, though. Small kids go through a lot of paper but are fine with cheap printer paper--crayons only for little ones. Older kids can use coloring books or drawing pads, together with markers or pencils. Color-by-numbers and draw-the-dots are always a hit, and you can always copy a few pages if it comes to that)

b) colored pattern blocks (squares, triangles, diamonds, and hexagons) are surprisingly popular: Most kids who are above the "eat everything" age like to play with them. The little ones make shapes and the older ones make complicated mandalas

c) a Soma cube(older kids), peg puzzles (older kids); metal "get the two nails apart" toys (varies); Q-bitz pattern matching game or similar; and those ball mazes (roll a tiny metal ball through a maze inside a clear sphere)

Erik Hammarlund, Massachusetts

Thanks for the replies. It is not that I am unsympathetic to the cost/unavailability of child care or babysitting services. I understand that these things happen. I guess my "rant" was more directed at the fact that the client did not understand why it would be inappropriate for the child to be in

the room while viewing a video of a domestic violence incident between her parents, even after explanation.

Brian C. Hagner, Wisconsin

I can definitely see the rub of the problem, and I do not think kids should ever be exposed to domestic violence in any way, even if its second or third hand at the lawyer's office. That being said, I can very much understand how it could come about.

1. Babysitters ain't cheap anymore. I suspect if we did a survey, rates would not be lower than 10 bucks an hour.
2. The younger generations (of which I am a part) are not raking in the dough. One job for a typical family is simply not possible anymore. Hell, often two jobs aren't enough.

And having a meeting during the day? Makes it trebly difficult to get a babysitter or friend to watch your kid -- they have work too.

Anyway, I don't have an answer beyond what others have said. I just needed to comment about us younger generations.

Andrew Wentzell, Florida