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MITCHELL KARPf says one of the secrets of a strong marriage is communication. "You have to talk about how you are feeling, be considerate of your spouse and be willing to compromise," he says. "A couple that never argues may be keeping their feelings bottled up until they explode."

Unfortunately, most of Karpf's clients are already headed for divorce when they contact him. A board certified marital and family law lawyer, Karpf is a partner at Young, Berman, Karpf & Gonzalez, P.A., which has offices in Weston and Miami. He is also a certified family law mediator.

"Today, the courts have much less tolerance for parental fighting about the children in divorce cases," he says. "Several years ago, a Miami judge told me that as attorneys we need to restructure the family, rather than destroy it, and her words really resonated with me."

In keeping with that philosophy, Karpf strives, whenever possible, to take a cooperative approach where both sides' attorneys get together for discovery and try to settle the case in mediation before

50 percent divorce work. One of his early clients was Miguel Recarey, the CEO of International Medical Centers (IMC), who later fled the country to avoid criminal prosecution.

Deciding to focus on marital and family law, Karpf joined Burton Young, one of Miami's most seasoned lawyers in the field. "We hit it off and have worked together ever since then," he says. "Burton gave me great training, as I would prepare cases for him. He was lead counsel at first, and in later years, I became first chair."

Today, Karpf's practice includes drafting prenuptial agreements, handling complex family law matters as well as alimony, child support and other child-related issues. In recent years, prenuptials have become more common for second and third marriages, he adds. "Someone who has been through the storms of a difficult divorce just doesn't want to deal with that again," he says. However, prenuptials can be a touchy subject. "Most couples get through it, forget about the prenup and move on with their lives," he says. "But there were a couple of relationships that did not survive the prenup discussions."

Mitchell Karpf: HELPING TO RESTRUCTURE LIVES

going to court. "I enjoy the trial work, but these days most cases settle," he says. "In many cases, good attorneys can work out creative solutions to even the toughest problems."

For example, Karpf served as a mediator for a divorcing couple who agreed to move in and out of the family house, while the kids stayed there, a concept called "bird nesting." He adds, "That approach won't work for everyone, but it can be a very good solution in some cases."

BECOMING A LAWYER

Growing up in Miami, Karpf thought about becoming a doctor, but after taking several science classes he decided to take another direction. He studied accounting and business, earning a bachelor's degree from Florida Atlantic University in 1979, and getting married.

Karpf then went to work for Burroughs, selling mini-computers. He became one of the company's top sales people, but decided to go to law school at the University of Miami. "My grandfather was a bailiff and law was a career I had thought about for some time," he says. "I took classes at night while working in sales with my father-in-law."

Karpf and his wife Cheryl were also starting a family. "Our son Brian was born three weeks after I started law school, and our daughter Melissa was born just a few hours before I took my last test," he says. A few years later, twins Brittany and Erica rounded out the Karpf family.

After joining the Bar in 1985, Karpf joined a small law firm and began building a practice that was about 50 percent litigation and

In divorce cases, Karpf encourages his clients to see a therapist for professional emotional support. "Next to a death, divorce is one of the most traumatic experiences for adults and children," he says. "I tell my clients that they need to love their children more than they are angry with each other. In addition, my clients need to talk through their emotional issues in order to get their self-confidence back."

When spouses in their 50s or 60s divorce, there can be a host of new worries, including health, dating and financial security in retirement. "I try to project what things will look like in the future, so they can make good decisions," he says.

Karpf says digital, social and mobile technology has raised new issues in marital relationships, such as "sexting" comments to another person or posting photos in Facebook or other social media. "It's the new digital 'lipstick on the collar' and it's evidence that winds up in court if the couples divorce," Karpf adds.

While Karpf believes strongly in mediation, he also goes to court to litigate more complex and difficult cases. He says one of the hardest issues to resolve amicably is when one of the parents is relocating to a new city or state. "There's almost no way you do equal time sharing in that situation," he says. "In many cases, you have to present the issues to the judge, who will make the decision."

PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP

Several years ago, Karpf was named secretary of the Family Law Section of the American Bar Association. In that role he started a

multi-year initiative called “Families Matter,” to look at how family law attorneys could make the dissolution of marriage process better for parents and children. That led to an ongoing discussion, including an ABA symposium in Baltimore. After serving as chair of the section, Karpf was honored in August 2012 with the “Friend of the Family Award” for his creation and devotion to the “Families Matter” platform.

Karpf also served as president of the

First Family Law American Inn of Court. He is also a fellow of the American Academy Matrimonial Lawyers, and a fellow of the International Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers. A frequent speaker on a variety of family law topics, Karpf will chair the national continuing legal education (CLE) committee for the Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers in 2015-16.

On the personal side, the Karpfs will be celebrating their 35th anniversary this year.

They enjoy traveling, and spending time in their second home in the North Carolina mountains. Their son Brian is now an attorney and partner in Karpf’s firm.

Reflecting on his career, Karpf says. “To be a good family law attorney, you have to care about other people,” he says. “It’s a difficult area of the law, and we see good people at their worst. But I get a lot of satisfaction from knowing that I’ve helped my clients restructure and rebuild their lives.”

