

Age & Stage Episode 14 Elder Mediation with Margaret Doyle and Tracey Eastman

Family dynamics and care

TRANSCRIPT

Annabel James:

Daisy and I are excited about today's conversation, which is all about siblings and family dynamics. We're joined by Margaret Doyle and Tracey Adamson, both elder mediators. Can you tell us a bit about how you came to this work?

Margaret Doyle:

I came to elder mediation from community mediation after moving to West London. I helped set up services and later worked on disability discrimination and special educational needs disputes. Wanting to work with older people led me to train as an elder mediator. I also research dispute resolution.

Tracey Adamson:

I started mediation around 14 years ago as a volunteer and gradually moved into it full time. I work in family and workplace mediation and still volunteer. I really enjoy how mediation can transform difficult situations and help people learn better communication skills.

Daisy McAndrew:

With our ageing population, is there more demand for elder mediation?

Tracey:

Yes. We often see issues around estrangement, unresolved family tensions, and planning care. Sometimes it's about adult children realising their parents will need support. Other times, it's disagreements after someone dies—like around estates or wills.

Margaret:

Even in families without overt conflict, there's a lot that's unspoken—grief, loss, long-standing sibling dynamics. Mediation isn't therapy, but it can surface these issues so they don't block progress.

Daisy:

How does elder mediation differ from divorce mediation or therapy?

Tracey:

Elder mediation often involves multiple generations. It's very inclusive, person-centred, and practical. We focus on supporting people's wellbeing and making sustainable agreements. While emotions are part of it, we're not offering therapy or legal judgments—we help identify and resolve problems collaboratively.

Margaret:

It's brave to choose mediation. You're committing to being open about your needs and to listening to others. But if someone's struggling with deep personal issues, it can block the process, and we may signpost to other support, like therapy or financial advice.

Daisy:

This all taps into really deep emotional territory—especially parent-child relationships.

Margaret:

Yes, which is why we create a safe space with ground rules. We always meet participants individually

first, to understand concerns and tailor the process. It might be one group session or a series of meetings.

Tracey:

Preparation is key—understanding what pushes someone’s buttons and helping them communicate clearly, not just vent. We help reframe what they’re saying into something constructive and focused on their needs.

Annabel:

How do you balance your duty to the older person with other family members?

Margaret:

We never want to sideline the older person. Even with cognitive issues like dementia, their preferences matter. Sometimes families want to make decisions *for* them, but it won’t work unless the older person’s views are considered.

Tracey:

Our ethos is about respecting *everyone’s* rights. We’re not on anyone’s side—we’re there to make agreements workable. Mediation is based on self-determination and reality-testing options so plans are sustainable.

Daisy:

What are typical scenarios—conflict over care, money?

Margaret:

Yes—where someone’s moving, who’s providing care, finances. But also deeper issues, like resentment over unequal contributions. Mediation helps people recognise *all* types of support—not just who’s doing the hard tasks, but emotional support too.

Tracey:

Before we end a mediation, we always ask: What if this happens again? How will you deal with it next time? It’s about giving families tools to manage future conflict.

Annabel:

Do people ever come in thinking one thing, then realise the real issue is something else?

Tracey:

All the time. People drag up stuff from 30 years ago. Our job is to keep them focused on what matters *now*—to get to solutions, not get stuck in the past.

Daisy:

What can people try before turning to mediation?

Margaret:

Active listening—really listening without forming your next argument. Use “I” statements instead of accusations. Small changes in language—like saying “and” instead of “but”—can help.

Tracey:

Also, choose the right time for tough conversations—not in the heat of the moment. A calm walk or shared activity can help. Approach the conversation with empathy, especially with parents who may be feeling vulnerable.

Margaret:

Dr. Kathryn Mannix writes beautifully about “tender conversations”—not difficult ones. They need time, empathy, and good listening.

Tracey:

And with dementia especially, expect it to be a process. One conversation won’t solve everything, but over time you’ll understand more.

Daisy:

We hear so often from women who feel burdened with caring for parents while their brothers do less. Is that something you see?

Tracey:

It has come up more in other contexts like Ireland. We haven’t seen it as strongly in our UK practice, but gender roles do play a part.

Margaret:

Women often pick up the caring roles by default, even while juggling careers. That inequality can breed resentment, which mediation can help address.

Daisy:

In the workplace we talk about the gender pay gap. Maybe we need to look at the unpaid emotional labour gap at home too.

Tracey:

Exactly. If you're supporting an older person, make your work visible. Ask for help. Don’t assume others know what you’re carrying.

Annabel:

How should someone bring up the idea of mediation with their family?

Tracey:

Ask them to speak with the mediator first, not to agree to mediation straight away. That lowers defensiveness and gives them a chance to have their say privately first.

Daisy:

And what about cost?

Margaret:

It varies. Some mediators offer a free initial call; others charge from the first session. Always ask for a quote, especially if travel or venue hire is involved.

Tracey:

Compared to legal services, it’s far cheaper. One client was quoted £3,000 for legal representation—our whole mediation was less than a third of that.

Annabel:

Do you work with councils or care providers too?

Margaret:

We try to, but awareness is low. Complaints processes are complex and intimidating. Mediation could help—but it’s underused. We’d like to see it offered more in social care and care home disputes.

Tracey:

It helps if people view care relationships as partnerships. Use mediation not to blame, but to explain impact and work collaboratively toward solutions.

Annabel:

Brilliant advice. Any final thoughts?

Margaret:

There's a quote from age activist Ashton Applewhite: "We're all old or future old." If we're lucky, we'll all grow old. So ask yourself—how would I want to be treated?

Daisy:

Such helpful, compassionate advice. Thank you both so much.