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Informed Consent for Reunification Therapy: Professional Services Agreement

Reunification Therapy

Reunification therapy is a specific form of family therapy that addresses contact resistance or refusal, or estrangement between a parent and a child, most often in cases where the parents are living apart. It is most often ordered by court when a child is resisting contact with a parent. At times, concerned parents inquire about re-connection therapy when their child experiences distress over transitioning between two homes. However, a stipulated agreement or court order is necessary to begin the process.

There are many reasons why a child may be reluctant to have contact with a parent. The parent and child may never have had a well-established relationship or the difficulties may be newly emerging. Sometimes events have hurt a parent and child's relationship, including exposure to stormy or violent parent interactions or child mistreatment. In some situations one parent is knowingly or unknowingly undermining or interfering with the child's relationship with the other parent. Many times a child is reacting to the stress of being caught in the middle of parent conflict or to differences in the parents' styles of parenting, and has aligned with one parent to relieve their internal distress. Usually, there is a combination of factors at play.

In reunification therapy, the therapist assesses of the family and implements treatment that is designed to address the issues that are contributing to the child's avoidant reactions. Through the identification and targeting of these contributing factors, the therapist strives to help the child and both parents make changes that will lead to healthier and more satisfying parent-child relationships.

Methods

Reunification therapy varies depending on the particular problems that the child and parents bring forward. There are many different methods that may be employed, including individual sessions with the child or either parent, individual sessions with other family members or significant others, and conjoint sessions with two or more family members present. There are a variety of ways in which the child and the parent who is being avoided may be asked to communicate and engage with one another, including, but not limited to, telephone calls, messaging, hand-written communication, and exchanging artifacts, items, photos and belongings. Parent-child outings and activities, which may last for several hours or involve an overnight, may or may not be part of the process.

Role and Responsibilities of Each Parent

Although the focus and pace of treatment is based on the needs and well-being of the child, both parents are a necessary part of the treatment; hence reunification therapy is considered family therapy.

Reunification calls for a very active effort on the part of both parents. In order for therapy to be productive, both parents must work towards goals designed to help build or re-build the child's comfort level with the non-preferred parent. These goals are identified with the help of the reunification therapist.

Therapeutic work requires genuine effort on the part of each parent. Both parents must deeply to examine their attitudes and behaviors, and work hard on shifting those that contribute to the child's reactions.

Each parent is expected to support and encourage the child in the therapeutic endeavor, refrain from questioning the child about his/her individual sessions or time spent with the other parent, and to be as open-minded as possible about making changes of attitude. Parents are expected to make sessions a priority and to work on helping their child make it a priority.

Continuity of services is crucial to success, especially in the beginning. Frequent or long interruptions in attendance will undermine the effectiveness of the treatment. Generally, you can expect that there will be weekly sessions, tapering to less frequent sessions as soon as it is indicated. It is the responsibility of the parents to ensure that the child is present and on time for sessions. Each parent is expected to cooperate with the therapist's recommendations for how transportation to the sessions will be structured. It is sometimes requested that neither parent brings the child to sessions.

The parent who is aligned with the child will be urged to encourage the child to engage fully in the process. This parent is asked to model cooperation and openness by supporting the child in taking steps that may feel risky to the child. This parent will be urged to keep his or her own fears and resistances in check as the child engages in therapy. This parent often feels that the process is advancing too quickly, especially when the child is observed to be dealing with the discomfort of approaching a previously avoided source of stress.

The parent who is the target of the child's resistance will be urged to be patient with the process, as this parent frequently feels the process is too slow. This parent will be urged to keep his or her needs for a speedy reunification in check, understanding that the therapy will move at a pace that is appropriate to the child's needs and readiness. This parent will be urged to concentrate on restoring the parent-child relationship as opposed to restoring parenting time.

Both parents will be responsible for obtaining help and support for their own reactions to the process, and the reunification therapist will assist with providing that support and will refer you to other therapists or support services as indicated.

Role and Responsibilities of the Child

It is common for children to be reluctant or resistant to participating in reunification therapy, especially if one parent is opposed to it and/or the court has ordered it. The child will receive a high level of support and encouragement by the therapist. Great effort will be made by the therapist to hear the child and understand his or her experience. The pace of the therapy will be in accordance with the needs and readiness of the child, although that does not mean that the child will never experience discomfort or feel some degree of pressure. The child's responsibility, like both parents', will be to make family therapy a priority. The child will be expected to attend sessions and engage in child-centered ways of exploring family relationships, putting forth an effort to try new ways of dealing with problems. In most cases, when both parents are committed to the process, children are likely to engage in it as well.

Role and Responsibilities of the Therapist

The therapist will either conduct a family assessment, or, if evaluations have already occurred, review previous reports and other relevant documents and records and conduct limited parent and child interviews. The therapist will work primarily with the child, but also with each parent to address how his or her behavior may be contributing to the problem. The therapist strives to work in a time and cost-efficient manner, but paces the process in accordance with the needs of the child. With proper releases, the therapist may issue therapeutic progress reports to both attorneys, both parents or the court in which the following information may be included: descriptions of the cooperation of all parties, including the disclosure of any resistance, alienation, or undermining that is observed or believed to be occurring; the general therapeutic issues that are being addressed, and the progress being made toward goals.

Role of Court (if applicable)

If reunification therapy has been ordered by court, there will most likely be status conferences scheduled to review the progress of the therapy. The court may elect to assign a case manager or parent coordinator to oversee the therapy, especially if there are several therapists involved and services need to be coordinated. The court will decide issues such as parenting time, not the reunification therapist.

Benefits and Risks

Reunification therapy involves potential benefits and risks. The potential benefits for the child include reduction of distress, anxiety, anger and resistance toward a parent, improved critical thinking and conflict management skills, improved insight into family relationships and dynamics, and a greater understanding of how to avoid getting caught in the parents' issues. The potential benefits for the parents include a reduction in parental stress and conflict, improved parenting effectiveness, and healthier and more balanced family relationships.

In terms of risks, reunification therapy involves approaching issues and problems that a child or parent may prefer to avoid or ignore. Approaching and discussing unpleasant issues may lead to uncomfortable feelings such as sadness, anger, guilt, frustration, anxiety and confusion. Children may externalize their feelings through their behaviors. Some children may be unable to engage in or tolerate the demands of therapy, especially if the child's resistance and separation from a parent has been long-standing, the family conflict has been particularly complex and severe or have included traumatic experiences connected with the resisted parent, or issues such as substance abuse, anger management difficulties, or step family difficulties impede progress. While therapy can be beneficial, leading to better relationships and a significant reduction of internal distress for the child, there are no guarantees that these goals will be met. ***If therapy is not benefitting the child within a reasonable length of time, it will be terminated.***

If you have questions about my procedures, please discuss them with me as they arise. If your doubts persist, please let me know so referral options can be discussed.

Confidentiality

It is important to maintain confidentiality concerning the child's and each parent's disclosures in sessions, except when to do so would be in violation of mandatory reporting requirements for child safety. However, when the reunification therapy is part of a court action or possible court action, the parents will be asked to sign Authorization to Release Information forms to allow for the release of progress reports which will include a description of the treatment issues, treatment goals, progress toward goals, and a detailed description of the level of cooperation evidenced by each parent. Additionally, signed releases will be needed to consult with other professionals involved in the case.

Fees

There is an initial retainer for ten hours of my time to help ensure continuity of service. Conference calls with attorneys, sessions with each parent, individual and conjoint sessions are billed at \$200 per hour/ portions thereof. Statements are sent regularly by encrypted email. Distribution of fees between parents is in accordance with court orders or by written agreement.

The parent who is SOLELY responsible for fees is (circle one) FATHER / MOTHER. If costs are to stipulated to be split: Father's percentage of fees: _____, Mother's percentage: _____.

In addition to charges for therapy sessions, I charge at my hourly rate (or portions thereof) for time spent conducting other professional services such as emailing, report writing, telephone calls attendance at meetings (in person or telephonically) or performing other services you may request of me. I will provide a statement after each session, or at agreed upon increments, which can be attached to a claim form and sent to your insurance company. It is the client's responsibility to file the claim. Please carefully read the section in your insurance coverage booklet that describes mental health services, or call your insurance provider. Be sure you understand the coverage of your policy. Insurance benefits are complex and there may be restrictions that are best understood before a claim is filed.

Your signature below indicates:

1. You have read and understand the information in this document and that you consent to you and your child participating in reunification therapy.
2. You agree to abide by the terms of outlined in this document.

Child/ children's names

Signature of father

Signature of mother

Date signed