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Reunification Therapy: A balance of four roles

We are glad we have the chance to work with you and your family using reunification therapy. Reunification therapy is one of the most challenging and difficult therapies for a number of reasons. Many times both parents are angry with each other, and many times both want the therapy to go “their way.” Because of common problems that occur in every reunification therapy cases we’ve had, we decided to write up a description of the role of each party, and have each party sign in agreement of following certain “rules” and recommendations.

Role of custodial parent: This is the parent who currently lives with the child(ren) and typically has a good relationship with the children. This parent is often wary of the reunification therapy process and unsure if he or she even wants the kids to see the other parent again. For therapy to work, this parent needs to FULLY support the therapy process by:

- 1) Scheduling the child(ren)’s appointments in a timely manner and at the frequency recommended by the therapist, and/or as ordered by the court.
- 2) Not engaging in discussions with the children about therapy (children often misconstrue or paint exaggerated pictures of what occurs in therapy, because they usually don’t want to be going). If your child initiates a discussion about therapy, it’s advised you remind them that therapy is for them and best if they keep it private. If your child is resistant to attending sessions, we’ll work with you to brainstorm solutions. Your therapist will update you as needed about progress of the therapy and what you can do to help.
- 3) If you have concerns about RT, please schedule an appointment to discuss with your RT therapist versus discussing the concerns with your children.
- 4) Telling the child(ren) they need to follow all recommendations of the therapist, and trust that the therapist is going to ensure their emotional well being, safety, and happiness.
- 5) Follow all of the therapist’s recommendations and allow for the therapist to follow the RT process as directed, without interference.

Role of estranged parent: This is the parent who has often not seen his or her child(ren) in some time and is using reunification therapy as a tool to rebuild the relationship (and resume visitation in most cases). This parent is usually very eager for therapy to begin and sometimes wants to pressure the therapist to move faster and ‘tell the other parent’ what they should or shouldn’t do. This parent also sometimes struggles to accept feedback from the child(ren) and apologize or make amends when needed. For therapy to succeed this parent needs to:

- 1) Understand the problems took a long time to occur, and therapy cannot change things overnight. The parent has to be patient and trust the therapist will move things along at a pace appropriate given the specific circumstances of the case. This parent should not tell the therapist what to do with respect to “making” the other parent do certain things.
- 2) Accept feedback from the child(ren) about what the parent has done to contribute to problems or hurt the children. Don’t be defensive and blame the child or the other parent. Apologize sincerely and reassure the child(ren) he or she wants to make amends and earn back their trust.

- 3) Follow therapist's recommendations about when to send written communication or be available for phone, Skype, or in-person sessions.

Role of the child(ren): 99% of children do not want to attend reunification therapy. They have often been hurt by the other parent, and sometimes have been told negative things about the other parent (or misleading things). They often do not have the "full picture" of what has happened between their parents, and are often adamant that they do not want or need a relationship with the other parent. In order for therapy to succeed children need to:

- 1) Attend therapy when their parent tells them they have a session.
- 2) Come to therapy with an open mind, ready to consider that the other parent is not "all bad" in the same way that their custodial parent is not "all good." Be open to thinking about the situation from a new perspective, and be open-minded about therapy helping to heal past hurts.
- 3) Trust that the therapist has their best interest at heart, and will only make recommendations when the therapist thinks they are ready (the child may not feel that way, but that's where the trust comes in). Follow all therapist's recommendations, knowing it will be "baby steps" of monitoring the progress, and no drastic changes.
- 4) Respect the confidentiality and privacy of your therapy sessions. Your parents have been advised not to discuss the therapy with you, because this often leads to problems for a number of reasons. It's best if you focus on your individual relationship with your other parent.

Therapist's role: The therapist is not on "team mom" or "team dad." The therapist is also not going to only empathize with and validate the child's feelings. While the therapist will do that at times, the therapist's role is to challenge the child(ren) to think and behave differently, and to gently move the process forward while taking note of: the estranged parent's behavior, the custodial parent's support, and the child(ren)'s well being. As Ordered and/or applicable, therapist will provide updates to the Court or attorneys about the progress of therapy and each individual's adherence to these guidelines and recommendations.

Should these guidelines not be followed, then your case will be subject for review to determine appropriate course of action, including but not limited to, progress update to the Court and/or referral to an alternative provider.

FAQ's

1. How often do we meet?

The typical structure is:

Phase 1: One meeting with custodial parent, one with noncustodial parent, 2-4 individual meetings with the child(ren), and review of materials

Phase 2: Begin sessions with the child and parent together to improve communication, heal past hurts, establish goals for healthy relationship, and re-establish a positive and fun connection. These sessions can vary from 6-20+ all depending on how severe the problems are and how supportive the other parent is of the process.

Phase 3: Sessions are spaced out or are scheduled "off site" at fun locations so the parent and child can have more natural interactions (at parks, museums, restaurants etc)

Phase 4: The RT therapist can help provide feedback to parents, attorneys, or judges regarding visitation and custody, and whether RT is needed anymore.

2. How much does it cost and will insurance cover it?

RT is \$225 hour. Collateral time (reviewing documents, reading emails, phone calls to parents or collaterals is also billable time). Insurance coverage depends on your benefits. We are considered out of network for all plans, but many plans have reimbursement for out of network providers. We can help explain more how to submit claims or verify your benefits.

3. What if my child refuses to attend sessions?

While it's common for children to have some anxiety, anger, and mixed feelings about therapy, it's important the child is told attendance at RT is mandatory. Any misbehavior or refusals to come should be disciplined as any other noncompliant behavior is in your home (grounding, losing privileges, etc).

4. Does it work? Our situation seems hopeless

If RT has been ordered or recommended, it's typically because there are some significant problems between parents, and between the parent and child. Although challenging therapy, we have had many successful outcomes with very complex cases. We've found the key to success is the custodial parent's encouragement and insistence on attendance in therapy, as well as the estranged parent's willingness to "start over" and make amends.

5. If I have concerns, what do I do?

Because of the nature of RT, your psychologist will not engage in email discussions with you. If you have concerns, you may email your psychologist to request a time to meet or to schedule a phone call. (Note: Even if your agreement is that one parent pays for RT services, we typically bill each individual parent for their own time spent in responding to emails, phone calls or check in sessions).

6. Who decides when RT is not working and we can quit?

Although both parents and children have valued opinions, RT only works if the RT psychologist makes decisions about treatment (how often meetings occur, when they progress to out of office, when other visitation is appropriate). In many cases, there is also a court order which has ordered RT and designated the RT therapist as the one to direct the sessions and recommend further contact. If one parent unilaterally decides to quit RT before it has been recommended by the therapist, the RT therapist will write a summary letter to the court and attorneys explaining the circumstances causing the RT to cease.

Custodial parent:

I have read the above and agree to follow the RT guidelines of Wynns Family Psychology. I understand session notes will not be released, so that confidentiality can be ensured and the details of the reunification therapy are protected. *Treatment summaries may be provided on a regular basis (fee is based on the time it takes to write).

I agree to follow the recommended steps listed above in order to help therapy succeed:

Name

Date

Non-Custodial/Estranged parent:

I have read the above and agree to follow the RT guidelines of Wynns Family Psychology. I understand session notes will not be released, so that confidentiality can be ensured and the details of the reunification therapy are protected. *Treatment summaries may be provided on a regular basis (fee is based on the time it takes to write).

I agree to follow the recommended steps listed above in order to help therapy succeed:

Name

Date

Child 1:

I agree to follow the recommended steps listed above in order to help therapy succeed:

Name

Date

Child 2:

I agree to follow the recommended steps listed above in order to help therapy succeed:

Name

Date

Wynns Family Psychology is a specialty child/adolescent psychology practice in Cary, NC specializing in therapy, evaluations, and custody services for children, teens, parents, and families. We also provide phone and Skype consultations for No Wimpy Parenting coaching sessions.