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ABSTRACT

After divorce, one parent may attempt to diminish or eliminate the relationship between the other parent and his or her child(ren) (Reay, 2015). As a result, the target parent is often forced to bring the matter to the court's attention, and the judge may order reunification therapy to help re-establish and maintain the parent-child relationship and to help the alienating parent understand the associated implications of his or her behavior (Templer, Matthewson, Haines, & Cox, 2017).

CHILD CHARACTERISTICS

- ❖ Certain characteristics are often observed by mental health professionals who work with children in reunification therapy (Reay, 2015).
- ❖ Characteristics include:
 - ❖ vilification of the target parent
 - ❖ ridiculous rationalization for the vilification
 - ❖ absence of ambivalence
 - ❖ automatic and strong support from the alienating parent
 - ❖ ruthlessness toward the target parent without guilt
 - ❖ independent thinker phenomenon
 - ❖ hostility toward the target parent's family
 - ❖ borrowed scenarios
 - ❖ child had a decent prior relationship with the target parent, and the sudden change in that relationship appears parallel to the conflict between alienating and target parents

DEFINITIONS:

- ❖ Reunification therapy: therapy with the goal to re-establish a parent-child relationship in a safe, monitored, and therapeutic manner (Reay, 2015).
- ❖ Parental alienation: result of broken and dysfunctional family relationships, whereby one parent attempts to extinguish the other parent from their child's life (Reay, 2015).
- ❖ Estrangement: valid reasons for contact refusal such as neglect, abuse, or poor parenting (Reay, 2015).

COURT SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT

- ❖ Court orders are often necessary to begin participation in reunification therapy and the target parent is often forced to involve the courts to enforce the parent-child contact.
- ❖ Judges usually receive reports from therapists working with the families regarding progress updates and recommendations for parenting time.
- ❖ Courts may order that families participate in custody evaluations, psychological evaluations, or other programs necessary to better understand the family dynamics and cause of conflict (Templer et al., 2017).
- ❖ Courts may order swift and unanticipated separation of the child from the alienating parent (Reay, 2015).
- ❖ Temporary suspension of contact and change of custody from the alienating parent may be necessary when he or she refuses to comply with court orders for reunification.
- ❖ Judges often enforce firm visitation boundaries and plans, threaten parents with penalties in case of non-compliance, or change custody arrangements.
- ❖ Judicial interventions vary based on the severity of the parental alienation (Templer et al., 2017).

REUNIFICATION THERAPY

- ❖ Three goals underlie reunification therapy (Templer et al., 2017)
 - ❖ redirect the needs of the alienating parent
 - ❖ re-establish child's healthy functioning in the family domain
 - ❖ prevent blaming of one another
- ❖ Successful reunification programs have several characteristics in common:
 - ❖ Strive to guard children from additional harm produced from parental alienation
 - ❖ Make effort to improve the child's overall well-being
 - ❖ Attempt to confront the child's cognitive distortions
 - ❖ Promote independent thinking
 - ❖ Parent who engages in parental alienation works on understanding the need for improvement in the relationship between the child and target parent and ways to support it
 - ❖ Work to re-establish the child's relationship with the target parent
 - ❖ Co-parenting is a major component so that parents could learn to work together and strengthen their communication
 - ❖ Psychoeducation is provided for parents to gain greater awareness of what parental alienation is and how to be mindful of their behavior in the future to prevent it and preserve familial relationships (Templer et al., 2017).
- ❖ Absence of appropriate structure and explanation of treatment can eventually challenge and weaken the progress (Smith, 2016).
- ❖ The most effective treatment outcomes are generated using the family-systems approach, which involves all immediate family members, including step-parents, step-siblings, and sometimes extended family (Smith, 2016).

- ❖ If family members demonstrate resistance to participating in the process, the therapist often works with them one on one to prepare them for their involvement (Smith, 2016).
- ❖ The main goals of involving family members include encouraging of healthy adjustment, enhancing of critical thinking skills, and assisting the child and alienating parent in recognizing why parental alienation occurred (Smith, 2016).

OPPOSITION TO REUNIFICATION

- ❖ Some believe that the use of reunification therapy is inappropriate and may cause lasting psychological impairment in children (Dallam & Silberg, 2016).
- ❖ Specifically, opponents believe that when reunification therapy is forced without accounting for the child's perspective and emotional welfare, it can cause great damage and trauma (Dallam & Silberg, 2016).
- ❖ Some believe that parents falsely argue that parental alienation is occurring when they are in custody battles and litigation, or to question or dispute abuse or neglect allegations (Dallam & Silberg, 2016).

CONCLUSION

- ❖ Reunification therapists need to be adequately trained and able to assess family dynamics and history of trauma to collaborate with the court system to provide appropriate treatment (Templer et al., 2017).

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