

## **Reconciliation Therapy**

Reconciliation therapy must be differentiated from traditional psychotherapy for the child. The goals and techniques are very different. In traditional psychotherapy for the child, the child tends to see the therapist as his/her advocate. Sometimes the therapist sees themselves as the advocate for the child, but this author believes that the therapist is an agent of change and not necessarily an advocate for the child. Indeed, some therapists become so enmeshed with advocating for their child client that it interferes with their ability to better effect change.

The individual therapist for child focuses on the child's feelings, and behaviors. They will often reinforce the child's feelings, work on helping the child express those feelings, and legitimize those feelings. While this is helpful in many types of therapy, it is the complete opposite of what is needed in reconciliation therapy.

Reconciliation therapy is specifically goal directed to reconcile an alienated child and parent. Reconciliation therapy should only take place after there has been a thorough determination that the child's feelings and refusal to see a parent are stemming from alienation rather than from issues of physical/psychological abuse or estranging behaviors of the "alienated" parent. Reinforcing and legitimizing the child's feelings in these circumstances only exacerbates the alienation rather than helps to rectify it. It is common in children who are alienated, that the feelings they have are not based on reality, or the reality is distorted. Alienated children often cannot remember a single pleasant memory they had with the alienated parent. Obviously, that is not realistic. The goal of the therapy in reconciliation work is the opposite of traditional individual therapy for the child. The reconciliation therapist must often challenge the feelings and perceptions of the child rather than reinforce them and legitimize them. The individual therapist is usually seen as a figure of trust and alliance by the child. The reconciliation therapist is often seen as an enemy who is trying to force them to reconcile with a parent they are firmly convinced they never want to see or speak to.

In individual therapy with a child the goals are often more open ended. In reconciliation therapy the goals are limited to re-establishing a viable relationship between parent and child.

Many times the Court and/or attorneys may have a child in front of them who is already in individual therapy. Their intuitive judgment is that since the child has a therapist that the child trusts, that therapist should be appointed to take on the role of reconciliation. But, as the goals of individual therapy and reconciliation therapy are inherently in opposition, this intuitive judgment, while well-meaning is wrong!

The individual therapist cannot work toward both goals. Because they are inherently reinforcing of the child's feelings, often their bias is to wait until the child is ready to see the parent before having any parent/child contacts. This leads to the horror stories that we hear of a child in reconciliation therapy for a year and still not having a single session with the alienated parent. One cannot wait until the child is ready to see the parent, because if they are alienated they will never be ready.

Alienation therapy is extremely difficult, challenging and often unsuccessful. It is more successful with younger children than with teenagers. But, it is rarely successful without the strong backing of the Court and attorneys. It is important for the attorney of the alienating parent to try to manage their client in ways that reduce the alienating behaviors. It is important for the Court to provide the parents, child, therapist, and attorneys clear direction in a specific Order as to goals, time limits, and sanctions if the parents do not follow the Court Order.

The parents and child must know that there is accountability to the Court, and the therapist must make regular reports to the Court (and attorneys). If there are violations it is important that the Court take an active role in imposing sanctions on the parent who has violated the Order. Without the strong support of the Court is unlikely that significant change will occur.

Often, the Court and attorneys will craft an order that allows the reconciliation therapist to determine the schedule of visitation. The reasoning for this is the belief that the reconciliation therapist is the one closest to the situation and is the best person to make a judgment about the readiness of parent/child to increase their time with each other. While this sometimes is a successful approach, built into it are the seeds of sabotage for the therapy.

In many families with alienation and high conflict (and all alienated families have high conflict) the child and alienating parent will then expend their energy trying to prove to the therapist why the child is not ready to have more time with the parent, and the alienated parent expends their energy trying to persuade the therapist for an increase in time. This creates a dual role for the therapist, of trying to create reconciliation and of modifying the custody order. And, it interferes with the ability to focus on the end goal—reconciliation.

This author believes that it is much cleaner for the Court to make a determination of when and how visits should resume. The goal is clearer when the court imposes a deadline and it removes the therapist from having to deal with the lobbying in arguing about frequency of visits and a schedule that the therapist might impose. In fact, when the Court creates the deadline it helps the therapist to create an atmosphere of a shared and more unified goal. The therapist is able to address the family and state that **“the Court has imposed a deadline on all of us. We do not have a choice or an option. It is our job between now and then to figure out how to make these visits work in the best way possible because they are going to happen”**. The therapist is then allowed to be seen in a more helpful position, rather than in a quasi-judicial one in which the therapist alters the custody schedule.

A strong and clear Court Order is important to help reconciliation therapy succeed. A vague and general Order imperils the success of reconciliation therapy.

It is important that the Court have knowledge that any therapist appointed has the requisite skills and experience in dealing with this highly specialized area of reconciliation therapy. A general child therapist usually does not have the knowledge and skills regarding reconciliation therapy and the complexities of family law needed to be effective.

**From a therapist’s perspective, I believe that a Court Order for reconciliation therapy should include, but not be limited to, the following:**

- Naming the therapist in the Order.
- The Order should require the cooperation of the parents and the child.
- That neither parent can unilaterally discharge the therapist.
- If both parents are unhappy with the therapy and want to replace the therapist they must seek approval of the Court to change therapists and have the Court approve and specifically appoint the new therapist.
- The Court should specify the minimum frequency of sessions. Too often a parent will claim scheduling difficulties, or other issues that interfere with the appointments. The parents must know that if they do not maintain the court imposed frequency of sessions there will be sanctions placed on them by the Court.

- The Order should clearly specify that the therapy is not confidential and the therapist must make reports to the Court about the progress of treatment and level of cooperation of all parties.
- The Court should impose a timeline of when normal custodial visits will occur. The Court at its discretion, and based on the individual aspects of the case and family, may impose a resumption of normal custodial visits or may impose a gradual increase of visits with a clear timeline rather than relying on the decision-making of the therapist. (As the therapist should be required to make reports to the Court, the Judge's decision may be informed by the therapist, but it is the decision of the Judge rather than the therapist.)
- If the child and/or parents are involved in individual therapy, releases must be provided so the reconciliation therapist can confer with any other therapists involved with the family. It is important that the reconciliation therapist help other therapists understand the goals and procedures of the reconciliation therapy and work so that the other therapists are not undermining the reconciliation therapy as they work with the family members.
- If there is a custody evaluation that has been performed, copies of that evaluation should be provided to all therapists involved in working with the family in order to help them better understand the dynamics of the family situation.