

### **Reunification Therapy for Child Estrangement and Alienation**

It is estimated that 10 to 20% of separating parents are classified as “High Conflict” meaning that they engage in unhealthy and destructive communication practices that have a negative impact on the children. Parents will use a variety of negative communication methods such as disrespectful and abusive phone calls, e-mails, and text messages or alternatively will refuse to communicate or share information necessary to the child’s well being. Visitation exchanges can be problematic as the children are exposed to the negative interactions of their parents. Sometimes one or both parents will negatively influence the child against the other parent by making negative comments, restricting or denying access for frivolous reasons or communicating to the child that it is not acceptable for them to have a relationship with the other parent. However, in some cases, children resist visitation for reasons other than alienating behavior by one parent. For example, a child may have had a distant relationship with one of the parents prior to separation and the child finds it difficult to feel comfortable in the presence of the distant parent during visitation. Regardless of the cause, the child experiences painful loyalty conflicts, where the child feels like they have to choose which parent they will have a relationship with.

In Child Estrangement cases, the child resists having contact with the estranged parent, and often will complain both before and after the visits. In Child Alienation cases, the child will refuse to have any contact with the alienated parent and will give irrational reasons and justifications for not seeing the alienated parent. Research suggests that children who become estranged and /or alienated are at higher risk of developing psychological and relationship issues as adults.

It is important that a professional trained in Reunification Therapy be retained as early as possible once the child begins to display symptoms of estrangement and alienation. Clinical experience demonstrates that as time passes without intervention, the more difficult it is to reverse the estrangement and alienation process. It may be necessary for the Court to order the child and parents to attend therapy in the event that the level of parental conflict is so high that they are unable to cooperate in attending to the child's symptoms. If a Parenting Coordinator has been appointed, the PC may direct the parents to seek therapy.

Reunification therapy involves several stages or phases. The first stage involves the assessment of the child's symptoms and a determination is made as to the severity of symptoms and the underlying factors which are contributing to the child’s behavior. The assessment phase involves individual interviews with each of the parents, and if possible joint interviews with the parents in order to assess the level of conflict and the co– parenting dynamics. Extended family members as well as other significant people in the child's life may also be interviewed. The assessment phase is completed with the development of goals and a treatment plan for assisting the child to reunite with the parent who has become estranged or alienated.

The second stage involves the implementation of the treatment plan. Individual sessions with the child

and ongoing contact with the parents and significant others in the child's life usually results in a reduction in symptoms. The parents and family are encouraged to focus on the child's best interests, which is to have a healthy relationship with both parents and with both sides of the family. Typically, recommendations are made regarding the reduction of conflict between the parents and the implementation of these recommendations are monitored by the Reunification Therapist. For example, a plan can be developed to reduce conflict during exchanges. The parents and family are educated about the negative impact of parental conflict on the child's development.

The third stage involves the use of strategies to maintain the progress made in Stage 2. Typically, the Reunification Therapist may not see the child as often, however regular contact with the parents is maintained and the child's comfort during visitation continues to be monitored. In the event that Reunification Therapy has been ordered by the Court, a summary report of the therapy may be submitted to the parent's Counsel as well as the Court.

This article by Bob Finlay is named, *Kids in the Middle - Reunification Therapy for Child Estrangement and Alienation Cases*.