

Legal Model for Reintegration Therapy

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In domestic relations and custody cases, courts may order that a therapist assist in reuniting a child and parent, when the parent has been absent for an extended period of time from the child's life.

After meeting with parents and the child it may be an appropriate judgment on the part of a therapist to identify only the child as the client, and to identify the parent as a collateral in the reintegration treatment process. When the child is the client and the parent involved in reintegration therapy is a collateral, provide a written disclosure to the parent, which informs the individual that no therapist-client relationship is being established with the parent, only with the child; that the parent's statements and the therapist's observations concerning the parent's behaviors will not be confidential to the extent that they may be shared with the court, other professionals, and the other parent. When, for example, the child's father is a collateral in the child's treatment, you do not need to assess the father's need for treatment since he is not a client. Instead, you will provide your client's father with information concerning how to be more mindful of his child's needs, how to be more loving and caring, how to improve his parenting style, and how to be a better parent. Thus, while you are providing clinical services to the child, you will be providing psycho-educational information to your client's father. Experience has shown that parents involved in reintegration therapy can become contentious, adversarial, and non-compliant with the treatment process. In situations where no therapist-client relationship is being established with the parent, that individual cannot sue the therapist for malpractice, because of the fact that a therapist-client relationship is a requirement for filing a malpractice action.

Under appropriate circumstances, family therapy can be used in this treatment process, at the discretion of the therapist, in order to achieve the basic goals of creating a better relationship between the parent and child. However, a therapist must carefully assess the child's prior experience with the parent, the history of any child abuse or other offensive conduct committed by the parent toward the child. If the assessment conducted by a therapist concludes that a child will probably be harmed by being required to have contact with the parent, then an appropriate clinical recommendation should be made indicating that it may not be safe for reintegration therapy to be initiated.

Ethical Considerations

Make certain that you receive informed consent in writing from the parent who has decision-making authority for the child or from the child's legal representative, before commencing treatment. Obtain authorization in writing from the client or clients involved in the reintegration therapy process for any disclosure of treatment information.

If this treatment is done as a family therapy process, in which both the child and parent(s) are clients,

then informed consent from all of the members involved in family therapy must be obtained before writing reports to the court, and before testifying in court. Therapists should follow a clinical model for this treatment, and it may be necessary to obtain clinical supervision from someone who is familiar with reintegration therapy, its risks and procedures, before engaging in this type of treatment.