
The Beacon

Guiding You Through the Process of Change

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Parent/Child Reunification

Children have a right to a relationship with both parents. Yet, the process of divorce unfortunately can leave children estranged or distanced from one parent. Sometimes this occurs primarily due to behavior of one parent or the other. At other times the child may pick a side in order to avoid the discomfort of being in the middle.

Reconnecting a child with an absent parent is a complex and time consuming process. There are many parental concerns about reunification that range from the anticipated quality of the relationship to the impact the relationship may have on the child. In some cases, after an evaluation, the court may deem reconciliation not to be in the child's best interests. In other cases, if reconciliation is instituted it may not be sustained. This can cause disappointment or difficulty because the child cannot adequately make the adjustment or one or both of the parents is not doing the difficult work needed to help the child feel more comfortable as the relationship is rebuilt. Overall, the process of reunification requires careful assessment to best ensure safety and appropriately paced progress. The pace of the work is gauged by the child's ability to tolerate the interventions.

The process of reunification begins by meeting with the parent requesting the service. We assess the history, impact of the estrangement and any prior reconciliation attempts. We also look to assess the potential impact of the reconciliation process and the estranged parent's openness and sustainability for the long road ahead. We then interview the other parent getting their perspective and assessing that parent's willingness to support the reconciliation process. The child is also seen individually to have an opportunity to build rapport with the counselor and to discuss history, fears, concerns and needs for and about the process of reunification.

Reestablishing communication regarding the child between the parents is essential. The reunification therapist also frequently recommends each person involved has their own psychotherapist and a release is signed to allow for open communication between the professionals to coordinate this effort. Once the process begins, the actual work of reunification must be continuously reevaluated to look for factors that need to be addressed to avoid the land-mines that impede the process.

In some cases, the child's right to a relationship with both parents can be complicated by a myriad of issues (e.g., child refusal, unresolved parental anger, mental illness, substance abuse, etc.). However, as is the case in an intact family, the child should have an opportunity to build a relationship with a parent in a safe and child focused manner.

Parent/child reunification is very demanding work. It is demanding on the child, both parents and the professionals involved. The complexity, intense feelings, and what's at stake can lead to significant emotional upset as the process unfolds. Reunification, if done ethically and safely, with the best interests of the child in mind, can yield positive results, a better adjusted child and the ability for the child to have the gift of two parents (with all of their strengths and weaknesses) to learn from and love.

*By Donald Topor, L.C.S.W., Beacon Behavioral Services, LLC.
860-676-9350 ext. 56*

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Beacon Behavioral Services, LLC
1-888-422-8801

Avon

40 Dale Road
Avon, CT 06001
860-676-9350

Bloomfield

34 Jerome Avenue
Bloomfield, CT 06002
860-243-5024

Glastonbury

200 Oak Street
Glastonbury, CT 06033
860-659-4370

Visit us on the Internet at:

www.beaconbehavioral.com

email@beaconbehavioral.com

**Beacon Behavioral Services,
LLC**

40 Dale Road, Suite 201
Avon, CT 06001