

Jacqueline Vanbellehem, BSW, MA, RSW, Acc. F.M.

Therapy, Mediation, Custody Assessments, Parenting Coordination, Mediation/Arbitration

Phone: 905-337-8675

Fax: 905-337-8684

E-mail: jvanbetlehem@cogeco.ca

Website: www.vanbetlehem.ca

THERAPEUTIC REUNIFICATION **INFORMATION FOR PARENTS AND LAWYERS**

What is Therapeutic Reunification?

Therapeutic Reunification seeks to reestablish child/parent contact following visit refusal as a result of estrangement or pathological alienation. Contact between the rejected parent and child is facilitated by an experienced mental health professional with and knowledge of separation/divorce, high conflict families, child development, family systems, family violence, conflict resolution, and parent/child contact difficulties.

What does a Reunification Therapist do?

The Reunification Therapist (RT) conducts intensive therapy with all members of the family, including both parents and children. Therapy may be conducted individually or in any combination as recommended by the therapist (should circumstances permit). The purpose of the therapy is to work with each parent and the children toward the goal of reestablishing appropriate child/parent relationships. The Reunification Therapist seeks to educate the parents to fully understand the needs of each of the children and the negative repercussions for the children of a severed relationship with a parent in their young lives and as adults. Treatment includes assisting the parents to develop more appropriate parent-parent and parent-child roles and boundaries, to separate valid concerns from overly negative, rigid, and generalized views of the other parent, and to shield the children from further conflict.

What types of situations are best suited for Therapeutic Reunification?

Therapeutic Reunification will be most successful when intervention begins early and treatment is tied to the authority of the court through a structure court order and treatment agreement. Many, although not all families, have likely participated in a custody and access assessment. Ideally the assessment will include parenting plan recommendations and treatment recommendations. If treatment recommendations are not included, a focused assessment that investigates the origins of the child/parent contact problem and makes treatment recommendations may be undertaken. The goal of intervention is to reinstitute parenting time with the child as determined by an agreed upon parenting plan or court order.

What is involved in the referral and intake process?

Parents must consent to participating in Therapeutic Reunification as well as to the specific Reunification Therapist. This consent must then be formalized into a Court Order. The RT accepts referrals after obtaining preliminary information from the parents and lawyers. A review of the current Parenting Plan, Court Order and custody/access assessment report, if available, is required. A conference call is then undertaken with the lawyers to determine the appropriateness of the case, the mandate, and to discuss the Therapeutic Reunification Agreement. The parents must review the Agreement with their lawyers and provide a Certificate of Independent Legal Advice (ILA) along with the signed the Agreement. The parents attend either together or separately for an information meeting with the RT. At this meeting the Therapeutic Reunification Agreement and process is reviewed and questions are answered. A retainer is accepted in advance for this preliminary work.

What happens during the Parenting Coordination process?

The Reunification Therapist will have full access to any reports and documentation that may be relevant, as well as to any other professionals who have been and/or continue to be involved with the family. Meetings with take place with the parents and the children in various combinations, initially to make an initial assessment and then to help coach and prepare the family for the initial reunification meeting between the child and the rejected parent. The RT will then create various opportunities for the rejected parent to spend time with the child in various settings facilitated by the therapist. The goal of treatment is to assist the child and rejected parent to reestablish their relationship. The RT will remain involved and will facilitate visits until such time that the child and parent are able to resume a comfortable relationship and are spending time free of any dissension. The RT therapist will remain involved to continue to assist in the redevelopment of the relationship, but will not facilitate all parenting time once visits are occurring free of discord. At this point the parent and child should be spending time as determined by the court order. When concerns occur that the parents are unable to resolve on their own, the RT will attempt to assist them by providing support, education, and facilitation. If the parents are continually in disagreement, a Parenting Coordinator may be required to mediator/arbitrator any disputes as they arise.

Once the parents have agreed to a Reunification Therapist, they may be “stuck” with that person for the term that is defined in the Agreement and/or Order. Terms typically range from 12 to 24 months. If both parents find that the Reunification Therapist is unhelpful, they can agree to dismiss the RT. If the RT comes to the conclusion that he/she cannot be helpful to the family, he/she can resign. However, if only one parent is unhappy with the RT, that parent cannot dismiss the RT prior to the previously agreed to term.

Fees are paid by the parents in accordance with the Agreement. Typically, RT requests a retainer when they begin their work with a family.