Moving Families Forward

A Reunification and Containment Response for Parental Alienation, Estrangement and High Conflict Family Situations

The Long and Winding Road

Clinical Director: Alyson Jones, MA, RCC
Family Forward Therapeutic Team Members
• Shelley Hardy, MA, RCC
• Saba Golchin, MCP, RCC
• Robert Croezen, MSW, RSW
• Rebecca Smyth, MCP

Contact
113-2419 Bellevue Avenue,
West Vancouver, BC, V7V 4T4
(604)926-6665
info@alysonjones.ca
www.alysonjones.ca
Objectives

1. Participants will review a communication protocol that creates containment and movement in highly challenging cases.
2. Participants will become familiar with a non-residential re-integration model for parental alienation, estrangement and high conflict.
3. Participants will gain practical tools on how to respond to all family members within a family system that is experiencing an attachment disruption.

To navigate the long and winding road and move towards a more positive destination

Complex cases need experienced team of therapists who align approaches and practice coordinate services and adapt to ease time and cost burdens

Overview

Who? (needs the Program, is the team)
What? (is the Family Forward Program)
Where? (is the Program located)
When? (is it needed)
Why? (is it needed)
How? (does the Program work)
Who is most vulnerable in a complex divorce?

The Children
- Very few conflict resolution models have any advocacy for children.
- Our legal system has been set up to protect the rights of the adults, but little attention is actually given to the developmental needs of the children.

Under most circumstances, children need and deserve a relationship with both parents.
Facts about Parental Conflict

• Conflict which is frequent, intense, and poorly resolved can be profoundly harmful to children.
• Exposure to parental conflict can affect children of all ages (including babies).

In High Conflict Situations we see a Significant Increase in

• Anxiety
• Self harm
• Depression
• Aggression
• Hostility
• Anti-social behaviors
• Health issues
• Criminality
• Academic deficits
• Suicide risk
• Drug and alcohol use
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• Suicide risk
• Drug and alcohol use

The focus of an effective treatment program needs to always be the best interest of the child.
Children Need to be Released

- Feelings of abandonment
- Feelings of self-blame
- Feelings of guilt
- Fear
- Loyalty conflict
- Acting as a “Protector” or confidante of a parent
- Rejection of part of themselves in order to secure the relationship with the FP

What is the solution?

Once Parental Alienation or Conflict Fallout is suspected, or identified, what do we do next?

First of all we need to accept that there is no guarantee of success when it comes to intervention.
When is a Specialized Program like this Needed?

- prolonged absences
- disruption in the parent-child relationship
- parental alienation (PA) is suspected or has been identified
- fallout from high conflict

Why are there disruptions or rejections in the parent-child relationship?

- Geographical distance
- Substance abuse
- Serious mental health issues
- Absence for treatment
- Personality disorders
- Highly conflicted divorce
- Violence and/or abuse
- Incarceration
- Alienation

Parental Alienation (PA)

- Although it is controversial, it exists!
- We need to distinguish between the justified rejection of a parent by a child, and parental alienation. Although both issues require therapeutic intervention, the treatment required for each is different.
- When a child is resistant to maintaining a relationship with one parent, this is a signal of much deeper family issues.
PA and Professionals

Without coordinated treatment well-intentioned professionals (both therapists and lawyers) can do more harm than good, and the whole case can become chaotic and highly stressful.

Time is of the essence.

There may have been multiple attempts and multiple professionals involved.

Repeated attempts at treatment can be detrimental to the mental health of the child.

The longer the child is able to successfully reject the parent the more difficult it is to turn this situation around.
The Family Forward Reunification Program is a Community (Non-Residential) based Treatment Program.

Reunification and relationship repair
Team Leader oversees the intervention, and manages the communication channels and protocols.

There is support for the therapists in place through the Program, this is exhausting and difficult work and the therapists need support and assistance in the process.

The therapists involved are a Team working together under the umbrella of the Program.

What does the Family Forward Program do (Goals)?

1) Builds resiliency skills
2) Creates accountability for both parents involved
3) Healing and building attachment
4) Education on the costs of conflict
5) Education on developmental needs of the children
6) Explores parenting strategies for healthy maturation for their children.

Goals Cont’d...

6) Re-establishes relationships
7) Develops healthy coping skills.
8) Advocate for the best interests of the children.
Curves and Rough Terrain
Expect the Unexpected!

Evolving Goals
Goals continue to evolve through:
• Ongoing communication between members
• Psycho-education sessions with both parents
• Individual session with child and primary child therapist
• Other sessions that may involve a variety of family members as directed and facilitated by the therapeutic team

How Do We Accomplish the Goals?
What are the mechanics that fuel the Family Forward Vehicle?
Working with the Whole System

1) The child
2) The parents individually
3) The parents collectively
4) The family

Communication Challenges

Due to confidentiality parents can easily block communication, and keep an independent therapist in the dark.

Right from the beginning there needs to be a clear communication protocol that eliminates these roadblocks.

To treat this issue effectively we need to have our GPS on and Navigate the conflicting agendas associated with high conflict and complex family issues.
Competing Agendas

- Mom's agenda
- Parenting coordinator's agenda
- Dad's agenda
- Extended family's agenda
- Dad's lawyer's agenda
- Child and Family Therapist
- Mediator's agenda
- School

Triangulation is the name of the game!

- The chances of being pulled into the parent's agenda are huge so there needs to be clear communication protocols.

Communication Protocol

The Treatment Agreement can act as the GPS (or at least a good map)

One Treatment Agreement:

- limits triangulation
- creates accountability
Accountability
Both parents need to sign the Treatment Agreement and both parents are involved in the Treatment. Allows us to report to the Court.

Communication is Transparent and Directed

Communication Protocol
The Therapeutic Team communicates with the PC and the lawyers. Communication between the professionals and the involvement of the entire family system is the most effective treatment path.
Team Treatment Program

Brings the pieces together and the picture begins to take shape

Information is shared

• Access to relevant documents
• Orders
• Custody and Access Assessments
• The Process in NOT CONFIDENTIAL in the traditional sense of therapy. Information gained by the team can be shared.

Time for the Tough Reality Checks

"I want you to put me in touch with reality, but be ready to break the connection fast."
Custody and Access Reports

• It takes a lot of effort to get the cooperation and participation of both parents.
• Often the Custody and Access Report can be a reality check that motivates the parents into a Program.
• If the C & A Report has a strong and specific recommendation for coordinated treatment programs the better the chances of success.

The lawyers make a difference

The chances of success are much better when there is clear support of the Program by both lawyers, and strong Orders in place.

Parents and Their Lawyers

• The more aware and supportive the lawyers are of the Team approach, the higher the chances of success.
• Difficult clients (i.e. an alienating parent) often go through several lawyers and therapists shopping around to find the professionals who will “toe the party line” and will not challenge them.
• An alienating parent will want a lawyer who follows direction and sees the FP as the victim, but this only embeds the problems deeper and in the end harms the child.
• Often, a parent will end up self-representing and the chances of success of this program become greatly diminished without legal professionals to direct/contain them.
Reality of Costs

- This therapy costs money! There will need to be a financial commitment to the process and clarification on how the fees will be paid and who will be paying (which percentage, etc.).
- This process needs to be worked out prior to therapy commencing.
- There are often financial issues regarding payment in these cases.

Alienating parents need enablers in the legal and social services community in order to continue the alienation.

Alienating parents do not naturally compromise and they may have to experience some harsh reality checks before they get on board.

(Some may need to understand the consequence could be a loss of parenting time).
Team Work

Who makes up the Team?

The Family Forward Therapeutic Team

1) Team Leader
2) Parenting Therapist (either one or two therapists depending on the case)
3) The Child Therapist (may be 1 therapist for the children, or 1 for each child, depending on the case)

The Team Leader

- The Visionary/Big Picture
- The Strategist
- The Project Manager
The Parenting Therapist

- The Mediator
- The Task Master
- The Coach
- The Educator
- The Guide
- The Parenting Resource

- Works directly with the parents
- Reviews parenting strategies
- Psycho-education instruction
- Creates and reviews the rules of engagement with the parents
- Therapeutic support
- Mediates conflict

The Child Therapist

- The Protector
- The Advocate/Voice
- The Supporter
- The Listener
Child at the Centre: Child Therapy

The Family Forward Program is set up to protect the individual work with the child

Child Therapist Only Meets with Parents within the Context of the Team

The Child Therapist updates the parents and the Team on the progress of the child

Protects from Conflicting Agendas

4 Distinct Steps

• Step 1) Identification and Contracting
• Step 2) Assessment and Intake
• Step 3) Treatment Implementation
• Step 4) Follow-up and Maintenance

Step 1) Contracting

The Team Leader

– Gathers information
– Oversees the administrative procedures
– Brings together the Team
– Leads communication
– Gets the Treatment Agreement in Place
Step 2) Intake
The Team Leader
• Reviews documentation
• Meets parents separately for an intake session
• Shares relevant information with the Team
• The level of resistance and cooperation will be assessed
• Some education with parents will begin around the issues that are impeding the child from having positive parental relationships

Step 3) Therapeutic Implementation
Parent - Parenting Therapist(s)
Child – Child Therapist
• Multiple sessions with multiple family members
• Full team meetings
• The majority of the direct clinical hours occur during this phase
• Intensives as needed

4) Maintenance
Often these case require ongoing maintenance to keep things on track.
The Family Forward Program provides a vehicle that can navigate complex territory. There are no guarantees but coordinated team treatment is the best bet for families in this heartbreaking circumstance.