

Reunification in Parental Alienation Cases

Moderate to severe cases of parental alienation can benefit from intensive workshops, comprehensive court orders, and detailed aftercare plans.

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Parental alienation presents on a continuum of mild, moderate, and severe. Traditional therapy may be more effective with mild alienation. In cases of moderate to severe alienation, however, specialized reunification therapy is often required, in concert with judicial interventions.

Reunification therapy is one outpatient approach to parental alienation but some families require more intensive intervention. For cases of moderate to severe parental alienation, time-limited, family-based reunification workshops may be required to jumpstart effective outpatient reintegration. There are several entities that offer such workshops to families around the country. The Stable Paths approach uses the treatment model created by Transitioning Families, a California program that has successfully offered reunification workshops since 2006. Stable Paths integrates equine therapy to help families transition from crisis to connection and provides a comprehensive aftercare component to ensure that progress continues after the workshop ends.

The goal of workshops such as those provided by Stable Paths is to provide parents and children with the tools they need to positively reconnect with one another in a tranquil and private yet beautiful setting. By engaging in experiential activities such as horse exercises, swimming with dolphins, recreational sports and games, and cooking meals together, families create new memories and reestablish existing bonds and attachments. In doing so, families develop deeper compassion and the communication skills necessary to facilitate the discovery of a common ground to therapeutically reunify and rediscover joy after they have experienced a devastating separation.

Parental Alienation Cases: How Children Benefit from Reunification Workshops

While participating in a reunification workshop, children are spared the trauma of the continuous prompting and programming of the favored parent. The child does not have the chore of reporting to the favored parent the details relating to their interaction with the target parent, especially in situations of no-contact or supervised contact. Participation in a reunification workshop also limits the favored parent's access to obstruct the process of reunification. Allowing the program to supervise contact between the favored parent and the child may also provide the program with an opportunity to help the child build the skillset required to cope with alienating behavior in the future. Moreover, an approach that focuses on the alienated child's reunification with the target parent concentrates the parties' resources and efforts on rebuilding the damaged relationship instead of "getting through" to the parent exhibiting alienating behavior.

Reunification workshops are most effective when combined with periods of no-contact or suspended contact, "no-maligning" orders, orders that specifically prohibit any interference with the workshop, and orders that build in sanctions. Because of the case-specific nature of the intervention, each family will have a different treatment plan. As such, orders that specify a specific number of days at the program often lead to unrealistic expectations. In addition, orders that require all family members to participate, if requested to do so, may be appropriate. In some situations, this may include extended family members. It is important to note that reunification programs are unable to directly communicate progress updates to the judiciary and, therefore, appointing a guardian ad litem facilitates the court's collaboration with the therapeutic process.



The Importance of a Detailed Aftercare Plan

Reunification workshops are more effective in the long run when combined with individual therapy for the favored parent and a detailed aftercare plan. Aftercare is essential for every family that participates in a reunification workshop. Ideally, families who participate depart with a detailed and individualized aftercare plan. For optimal success after departure from a reunification workshop, working with an aftercare clinician specifically trained in the program's protocol ensures the transition is seamless, cohesive, and consistent for the family – thereby enabling all members of the family to build on the skills they've learned in the workshop and continue to connect in positive ways.

When specialized clinicians are not available in your area, various programs embrace collaborating with clinicians in your community and will assist families in the transition from the workshop to their office. Clinicians from all over have the option to be trained in aftercare protocols if they are unfamiliar with the reunification process after an intensive family workshop. In some cases, aftercare may consist of returning to the workshop after a year for a one- to two-day workshop or working with the clinicians on a once-a-week basis through a secure videoconferencing system.

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