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Family therapy with separated families experiencing child contact difficulties

Goals of the family therapy with separated families

I provide family therapy to separated families with contact difficulties.

1. **Improve the communication between parents** and support them in developing strategies for positive co-parenting. Evidence shows that often child contact issues are resolved, if both parents work together and support the child's relationship with the non-resident parent.
2. **Address difficulties in the child contact** and develop understanding in what makes children reluctant to have a relationship with the non-resident parent. This work is done *together* with the parents taking responsibility for this process and their active participation is essential.
3. **Support parents in responding to children's feelings and behaviours** in a constructive and age-appropriate way. For the resident parent, this could be exploring strategies of how they could address the children's reluctance towards the non-resident parent. For the non-resident parent, this could be exploring how they could respond to what they may perceive as rejection from the children.
4. **Work on strategies of both parents meeting their own emotional needs** and coping with what is usually a very emotionally taxing process. If needed, further referral could be made for professional help for other needs: supporting parents to deal with feelings related to separation, etc.

Families are diverse and people have different needs. Therefore, specific goals will be negotiated collaboratively between family members (parents and children), and the therapist.

Please note that restoring good quality contact between children and the non-resident parent is the direction of travel but is not guaranteed as an outcome of family therapy. Family therapy strives to facilitate this process but, in many cases, this could only happen if both parents actively participate and take their responsibility, and the process is supported by the decision made in court, parties' legal representatives and others. This is also a process that takes time; some families may see the outcomes only after family therapy is finished, as is normal for therapy in all situations.

The process of family therapy is aimed to supporting children in meeting their long-term emotional needs.

Specific outcomes that we will work towards

- Parents will have improved knowledge of the long-term effects of high-level parental conflict and the lack of appropriate relationship with one of the parents on children.
- Parents will be equipped with strategies of how to support children in relation to issues of contact: before, during and after contact.
- Parents will have a joint plan of how to communicate in relation to contact and resolve issues related to it. They will also have a plan for how to deal with contingencies, as well as how to prevent or respond to relapse in the relationship or the contact.
- Parents will have personalised strategies of managing their emotional needs related to the co-parenting communication and any issues arising from the child contact.

Components of family therapy with separated families

Evidence shows that family therapy with separated families that experience issues with child contact needs to be multi-faceted and include a range of elements:

- A process of individual coaching, including helping parents in developing coping strategies in their parental communication, communication with children and meeting their own emotional needs.
- Conjoint therapy with both parents in supporting them to collaborate in their parenting role; developing and trying out processes of effective communication.
- Conjoint therapy with children and the non-resident parent. Please note that this is not supervising/ facilitating of contact but family therapy sessions.
- Conversations with the children and exploring their feelings in relation to contact. Please note that this is not 'therapy' of the children. One of the best ways to address children's emotional needs is for both parents to work together. These conversations will assure that the children's voices and wishes regarding the process are heard. *If children have developed a traumatic reaction to the process of separation and/ or high conflict, the goals of our work is not to 'unpack' that trauma but for parents to maintain boundaries and develop a sense of stability and safety for the children.*

Duration of the family therapy

This model of family therapy is an intervention that is planned to last for 12-16 weeks. During this time, approximately ten sessions are planned to take place. Parents will also be asked to work on certain tasks and to familiarise themselves with a range of materials between the sessions.

Here is a generic example that would normally be tailored, depending on the specific needs of the family:

- 2 x one-to-one sessions with each parent: at the beginning and at a mid-term review
- 2 x sessions with children and resident parent
- 2 x sessions with children and non-resident parent (this is not contact supervision)
- 3 or 4 x sessions jointly with parents

These sessions do not necessarily have to take place in the given order.