

The FUTURE Series - IV

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Family Unification Techniques: Unique Relationship Enhancement (FUTURE)

ACHIEVING A “NORMAL” DIVORCE-CUSTODY ARRANGEMENT

High conflict divorce often leads to adversarial and angry behavior patterns among the parents and children. Everyone involved suffers high levels of stress. Before spelling out the techniques that will help to restore a degree of comfort to such situations, we want to define what a “normal” divorce actually is. This is necessary so that everyone involved has realistic expectations about what is achievable in divorce/custody situations. Stated briefly, even under the very best of conditions—that is conditions where the parents have been cordial, cooperative and supportive toward each other—things will be far from perfect. To achieve what we call a “normal” divorce/custody situation, each child must understand, AND EMOTIONALLY ACCEPT, all of the following points.

1. Each child must understand that he or she will be expected to spend significant amounts of time in each home.
2. Each child must understand that he or she will be expected to display a huge amount of emotional flexibility in dealing with the tremendous differences (listed below) that usually exist between parental homes that are the product of divorce. After all, the most basic reason people divorce is because of the huge differences between their personalities and/or value systems.
3. The involved Mental Health Professional (MHP) will assess or evaluate whether the required degree of emotional flexibility is being attained by each child by careful observation of their NON-VERBAL behaviors. The MHP will be guided less by the verbal statements made by children, either spontaneously or in response to questioning, but almost exclusively by certain non-verbal signs. We have published this list of non-verbal signs elsewhere; it is only available to MHPs. The MHP will use every psychological tool available to help, teach, encourage and inspire each child involved to attain the degree of emotional flexibility needed to attain *and sustain* a normal divorce/custody situation.

4. Each child will be helped to understand AND TO ACCEPT all of the following differences that may exist between the parental homes. This long list includes differences in:

- parenting styles
- parental “temperament,” for example, seriousness, light-heartedness, humor, and so forth
- bed-times
- available playmates
- the emotional mood of the home. Each parent may face wildly different outside stressors, for example, amount of available money, debts, job satisfaction, sick or dying relatives, and so forth
- homework times (and how long a child is expected to spend on homework)
- the strictness with which child-requested chores are demanded and enforced by each parent
- the degree of religious practice and adherence in each home.

There may be other differences between parental homes specific to some individual case.

5. Each child will need to accept professional help in developing the tool-box of psychological resources needed to deal with these differences, so as to be able to accept them and come to peace with them. These resources include, in addition to emotional flexibility, the psychological skills of patience, courage and negotiation. The MHP will help each child acquire these skills.

6. The main cause of anger and bitterness in divorce/custody families, both between the two parents and also between the children and a particular parent, occurs when the children complain about one parent to the other. Let’s say the children complain to Parent A about Parent B. The typical Parent A in this situation often accepts the complaints against Parent B as totally true. And while sometimes they *are* totally true, it is often the case that they are only partially true or sometimes not true at all. BUT THE FOLLOWING POINT IS THE ONLY THING THAT REALLY MATTERS IN THESE SITUATIONS. Whether the children’s complaints are true, partly true, or not true at all, does not really matter as far as creating a solution is concerned. If Parent A enters into the situation by confronting Parent B *or even just by agreeing with the children or by encouraging the children to be agitated by whatever it is that Parent B is doing (or not doing), the whole situation gets worse.* The solution is this: each child must be taught how to deal directly with whichever parent is upsetting him or her, and taught *not* to discuss these issues with the other parent. (Exceptions to this will be noted by your MHP.) In the example above, each child must be shown how—and given the psychological tools—to deal with Parent B *without involving Parent A.* Once either parent sides with the children against the other parent, the conditions are set for things to get steadily worse.

7. The MHP will be alert to the fact that children caught up in custody disputes do not necessarily gravitate toward the parents who may in fact be better for them in the long run, those parents who are better at teaching organizational skills, the ability to prioritize and plan meaningful sequences of action and are better role-models as “accomplishers.” Such parents may appear to a child as the more “serious” and more strict about enforcing rules than the other parent. The MHP will also be alert to the fact that a parent’s emotional warmth is also crucial to a child’s mental health.

8. Children will be helped to understand what is called the “psychological rule of requisite variety.” This means that the more parenting styles a child has to deal with, even negative ones, the better for the child’s overall development, provided proper guidance by a MHP oversees these interactions. This “rule” and the role it plays in a child’s future, especially for a child who has taken a negative stand against a parent, is critical. As a child grows up and more and more faces the demands of the real world, he or she will have to deal with a huge variety of human behaviors. These behaviors will include all of the very same behaviors the child may dislike about a particular parent (strict enforcement of rules, higher degree of irritability and so forth). The more guided practice a child has in dealing with these behaviors, the more the child will be equipped for life-in-the-real-world. Several of the FUTURE techniques will teach a child how to be able to separate the informational value a parent can offer to her or him from the “emotional package” that may accompany some of the offerings of the information. Stated simply, an otherwise sometimes irritable person may at times offer wonderful information. It is a tremendous asset to be able to separate a message from the package it comes wrapped in.

9. In general, the “best parenting arrangement” is one that makes available to each child every asset each parent feels he and she has to offer each child, and is truly “best” if it is supported by each parent. (This piece is hard to come by in cases requiring reunification.) These assets of which to speak might include organizational skills, emotional warmth, honesty, altruism, religious foundations, consistency, courage, patience, goal-oriented perseverance and so forth. A consequence of this model would be that each child in a custody-dispute family should be blended into, and accept, the potentially positive values and behavioral patterns of each parental home. This means that each child should be helped to come to terms with, and comfortably accept, the rules and expectations in each home. These rules might pertain to homework times, bed-time rule enforcement, religious practices, household chores, personal hygiene expectations and so forth.

The biggest danger arises when a child is somehow empowered (by a particular parent) or led to believe by circumstances, that he or she can control these aspects of family life. Children do this by pitting one household’s values against those maintained in the other home, in a desire to get what they want, as though they, the children, somehow have the right and the real-life experience to choose what values they should be exposed to. This occurs when a child confuses knowing with great clarity what he or she LIKES, with knowing WHAT IS BEST IN THE LONG TERM. Think about food and

eating. People—adults and children—usually know with great awareness what they like. These items are frequently NOT BEST IN THE LONG RUN.

This is the classic tail-that-seeks-to-wag-the-dog: the child who feels entitled to select the values to which he or she should be exposed. The teaching of values is actually the most personal and sacred of parental duties and responsibilities. These choices should not be controlled by children, no matter how smart they are. The wise parent, of course, will use the skills spelled out in the FUTURE series to include each child in the decision-making that goes along with how the family values are to be lived-out in the parental homes. (See the Family Council, in Part XIII.)

10. Each child must gradually accept that he or she may not come to live with a “perfect parent,” but rather with what is called in the research literature a “good-enough parent.” Each child will be helped to understand and accept each parent’s shortcomings and imperfections, and to *not* think that one particular parent has to *match the other parent* in what the child sees as more desirable personality features. Stated in summary form, one of the most subtle ways children, even very bright children, are estranged or alienated from a TP is by their coming to believe that a good-enough (or even better) parent should be what they think of as a “perfect” parent. This false expectation is usually, at least in greatest part, fostered by an AP. The children hence come to harbor some idealized image of a fantasy-perfect parent against which they constantly compare the TP, to the continual detriment of the latter.