

The FUTURE Series - VIII

Family Unification Techniques: Unique Relationship Enhancement

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PREPARING AN ESTRANGED PARENT FOR REUNIFICATION CONTACT WITH A CHILD

1. If there is more than one child involved, try to arrange initial contact with each child separately.
2. It is common to have the estranged parent bring in to the first meeting a whole series of photos, film, and so forth, that depict past positive interactions enjoyed by the parent and child. While this may be useful in that the MHP can observe the child's non-verbal reactions to the usually demonized parent, exposure to these photos usually has little or no therapeutic impact. They do, however, serve somewhat as "ice-breakers" for initial conversational interchanges.
3. The alienated parent must understand what to anticipate and expect as the reunification therapy progresses. Many harbor hugely unrealistic expectations, believing that all that is necessary to create reunification is to set the child down where he or she is a captive audience and "tell the child the truth about what really happened." Nothing could be further from the truth about what actually has to happen. The following points present some critical facts an alienated parent needs to understand in preparing to take part in reunification.

When working with a child who has been bribed, intimidated or fed false and misleading information about the alienated (or "target") parent, and/or where the child has come to believe, based on false information, that it is his/her mission to "save" and/or protect the alienating parent, there are several positive outcomes that may be sought toward the beginning (or mid-point) of treatment.

One potential outcome of visitation with a TP is that the child learns he or she can be in the same room with the target parent and not be "in danger." (However, many children will claim for months to come that this is only because a MHP is present, and that if the MHP were *not* present the target parent would resume his or her demonic behavior either toward the child or the other parent.)

A second is that the child can be shown that the target parent is open to learning new and more effective parenting techniques than were used in the past.

Third, and this is crucial, the child may come to understand and accept that he or she has been maliciously and deliberately misled, or, in popular terms, "brainwashed."

If the child does come to accept that he or she has been misled about the target parent, reunification is much easier than it would be without such a realization. However, this is rarely achieved, even with inpatient treatment.

Hence, the estranged parent must understand that all that can be achieved for quite some time are the first two outcomes: the child can learn he or she can spend time with the target parent, and the target parent can be flexible in parenting approaches.

4. The target parent must come to understand the research and experiential background of providing therapy to estranged children. Such endeavors entered the modern literature during the 1960's and 1970's in the work done with "debriefing" and "deprogramming" persons supposedly "brainwashed" by cults. These people typically renounced their existing families because the family members refused to accept and endorse the cult teaching. The media of the time often presented the deprogrammers as using tough, arrogant and intimidating confrontational techniques, in which they tried to "argue" the brainwashed person out of the thoughts he or she had "swallowed whole" (without critical evaluation) by virtue of contact with the cult. Over the years, the use of argumentative and confrontational techniques has generally been abandoned. When they *seemed* to work, it was only because the cult member (or later, an alienated child) *pretended* to accept the fact that he or she was brainwashed, to escape the anger and threats of the deprogrammers who used such tactics. It is interesting to consider the role of a measure as extreme as torture in its use in establishing "truth." While torture may reliably get someone to reveal a known secret—"We have a bomb planted under Building X"—(even here, the counter-argument is that people will say anything, truthful or not, to stop the pain), it is manifestly obvious that the issue of getting a person to change an inwardly-held belief (about religion, political allegiance, etc.) is an entirely different proposition. Here, it is far more likely that people "confess" to belief-change only outwardly (to stop the pain), but later renounce the "change." We see this regarding witchcraft, political alliances and so forth. (There are exceptions: see research on cognitive dissonance.)

5. The more modern approach usually avoids confrontational approaches, since they rarely work, and if they are tried and fail, which is the usual outcome when they *are* tried, things get worse. When confrontational approaches are used, one of two things usually happen. The child either clams up and withdraws, or will "dig in" and argue interminably, claiming the alienator (and the MHP) are lying. Another serious flaw in using a tough, confrontational or "threatening" approach is what the results will be if such tactics do not work: the MHP will have revealed him- or herself as a paper-tiger, a "pronouncer of commands" who lacks the power to respond to refusals to cooperate on the parts of the AP and child.

Hence the more modern approach is for the MHP to help the target parent respond to any negative allegations in a way that acknowledges the child's feeling without, however, taking a stand on the "truthfulness" issue.

It has been our experience that if a MHP and an alienated parent decide to point out or argue about the truth, they may hit a home-run perhaps one percent of the time but strike-out 99 percent of the time.

The therapeutic response that should be used to respond to a child's allegations can be roughly summarized as: that-was-then-this-is-now; people can grow, learn and change.

If a child (incorrectly) feels he or she was abused in the past, the target parent would be encouraged to listen to the allegations and say something like: "I never realized you felt that way." Nothing else is really required at the moment. The "truth" can be discussed at some later time. (This approach is different than the one recommended for TPs during the initial phases of a situation that will ultimately become a full-fledged PAS case. A more active response to false allegations is to be used. See Richard Warshak's book, *Divorce Poison*.)