



FAMILY SYSTEMS THERAPY

If you have been directed to our agency, it means that your attorney, the Guardian ad Litem, the Commissioner, and/or Judge have collectively recognized the urgent requirement for therapeutic intervention within your family dynamics. This recognition stems from your involvement in entrenched, high-conflict situations, where your child(ren) may be transitioning into a state of refusal or resistance towards one of their parents, or where such a state has already manifested.

Family Systems Therapy (FST) is a form of psychotherapy that focuses on understanding the dynamics within a family unit and how these dynamics influence individual members' thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. This approach views the family as a complex system with its own patterns of interaction, roles, and rules, rather than solely focusing on individual members in isolation.

In Family Systems Therapy, therapists work with the entire family rather than just one individual. They aim to identify and address relational patterns, communication styles, and power dynamics that may contribute to issues within the family. By exploring and understanding these dynamics, therapists help family members develop healthier ways of relating to each other and resolving conflicts.

In the realm of family law, discussions surrounding parent-child contact issues often devolve into polarized, heavily gendered narratives. While these narratives may contain elements of truth, they are inherently limited and offer little practical guidance for improving the well-being of children and their parents. The reality is that cases involving parent-child contact problems are intricate and influenced by multiple factors. It is crucial for courts, family law professionals, and parents alike to move beyond simplistic, black-and-white analyses that not only fail to capture the complexity and nuances of these situations but also perpetuate rigid, "all or nothing" attitudes.

Prior to embarking on Family Systems Therapy, it is imperative to grasp certain prerequisites to fully engage in this intensive therapeutic approach. For optimal outcomes, all involved parties (parents, children, spouses/significant others) must commit to collaborative problem-solving rather than fixating solely on issues.

Before considering your family for our therapy program, you must meet several criteria:

- There must be an active Guardian ad Litem to oversee your case.
- There should be no ongoing investigations by Child Protective Services or law enforcement regarding your situation.
- You must disclose any instances of supported findings of child abuse and/or neglect involving you, your co-parent, and/or your children prior to commencing therapy.

- We require a court order or signed stipulation indicating full participation in the therapy program by you and your comparative.
- You and your child(ren) must have the ability to attend all sessions in person. This is not telehealth therapy.
- All fees must be promptly and completely settled as they come due.

Listed below are the goals and expectations for our program. If you find yourself unable to fully commit to these objectives, we recommend seeking assistance from another agency. Your child(ren) requires support, validation, and understanding, alongside clear boundaries and expectations. It is important to note that effective therapy often involves moments of stress. Your therapist will challenge both you and your compartment, as well as your child(ren). While this process may be uncomfortable, awkward, emotional, and occasionally stressful, it will also provide opportunities for growth and learning to thrive in the face of adversity for both you and your child.

Our primary goals for Family Systems Therapy are:

1. Enable the child to freely relate to both parents and eliminate their need to form an alliance.
2. Create a “neutral middle space.”
3. Develop, restore, and support parent-child relationships.
4. Reduce the use of avoidance to resolve problems.
5. Develop new and more effective coping strategies: effective communication, expression of feelings, conflict resolution, and tolerance for frustration and ambivalence.
6. Modify cognitive distortions and black-and-white thinking; replace overly rigid views with more realistic ones.
7. Teach critical thinking and multiple perspective taking.
8. Teach how to manage emotions and moderate behavior.
9. Enhance parenting skills: Teach parents about child development, behavioral management, the impact of conflict on children, improve communication and conflict resolution abilities, develop family communication skills, restore appropriate co-parenting and parent-child roles and boundaries.
10. Enhance coparenting skills where possible, disengagement may be the preferred outcome in most but not necessarily all cases.

Objectives of therapy or intervention.

Objectives for the Child

- a) Lessen anxiety. (through exposure, repair, and acceptance)
- b) Correct errors or fixed distortions.
- c) Improve global functioning.
- d) Develop realistic views of resisted/rejected parent rooted in actual experiences.
- e) Disentangle the child from parents’ difficulties and ongoing conflict.
- f) Differentiate the child’s experience of the resisted/rejected parent from the aligned parent’s experience.
- g) Help the child develop coping skills and understand multiple perspectives.
- h) Assess and address other mental health concerns.
- i) Work through intense emotions associated with the resisted/rejected parent and parental conflict.

Objectives for the Resisted/Rejected Parent

- a) Help the resisted/rejected parent relate to the child in a loving, noncoercive, and nonintrusive manner, without counter-rejection.
- b) Change behavior and deconstruct beliefs.
- c) Help the resisted/rejected parent develop insight into their contribution to the problem.

- d) Get the resisted/rejected parent to acknowledge or admit real culpability, make apologies when appropriate.
- e) Address distorted or simplistic view that the aligned parent is entirely to blame.
- f) Correct misperceptions.
- g) Provide a more complex understanding of the situation to help the resisted/rejected parent become more CHILD FOCUSED and develop empathy for the child.

Objectives for the Aligned Parent

- a) Get the aligned parent to allow the child to have reciprocal relationships with both parents, free of interference and exposure to restrictive gatekeeping behaviors.
- b) Gain aligned parent's cooperation and support in the reunification process.
- c) Educate the aligned parent on the importance of the child's sustaining good continuing relationships with both parents.
- d) Address allegations and concerns about the resisted/rejected parent and the child's physical safety when with resisted/rejected parent.
- e) Differentiate the aligned parent's experience from the realities of the child's experience.
- f) Inform the aligned parent about legal consequences for not complying with the court order or stipulation allowing contact between the child and resisted/rejected parent.

Objectives for Spouses/Significant Others

- a) Educate spouses/significant others about their contribution to the problem.
- b) Restore co-parental and parent-child roles within the family.
- c) Help co-parents develop new patterns of communicating with and responding to each other.
- d) Address realistic, legitimate parenting concerns.
- e) Reduce the child's exposure to hostility.

Identify each family member that will participate in the Family Systems Therapy program.**Clarify limits of confidentiality, if any, including reporting requirements to the Court.**

- a) Confidentiality is not passed on to the parents or spouses/significant others participating in the Family Systems Therapy program.
- b) The child is given confidentiality and will be encouraged to communicate their feelings and experiences with their parents in the therapeutic environment.

The parents will cooperate with the therapist.

- a) Both parents and their spouses/significant others agree they are each responsible for actively participating in the therapy and the solution, even if they disagree on the extent of their respective contributions to the problem.
- b) Both parents and their spouses/significant others will cooperate with all appropriate requests made by the Guardian ad Litem and/or therapist related to this treatment intervention (e.g. attendance at therapy, homework assignments, communication with the child, acceptance of direction and feedback even when there is disagreement).

The minimum duration of Family Systems Therapy is 8 hours of treatment. However, this intervention can take up to 6 months, with weekly therapy sessions for full completion. A new retainer for therapy will be requested prior to reaching a zero balance in your account.

Parents may withdraw from the intervention only as agreed to by the therapist, Guardian ad Litem, AND Counsel for the Parents, otherwise the parent wanting to withdraw will need to file a motion with the Court. Expectations for therapy will continue until the Court otherwise orders.

Professionals are entitled to communicate with one another as deemed necessary by the therapist and the parents will execute any necessary authorizations to allow exchange of information. The therapist may choose to speak regularly with the Guardian ad Litem. There is no ex parte communication with the parents' attorneys. The therapist will call a professional meeting with the attorneys and GAL if necessary.

Both parents are required to purchase and read *Overcoming the Alienation Crisis: 33 Coparenting Solutions*. Write a book report identifying five new tools, ideas, and/or understandings that they have gained from reading the book. They are to give examples of how these five items will help them to meet some of the treatment goals expected of them. A book report must be turned in to the therapist within four weeks of their first appointment.

Any communication between the parents shall follow these expectations:

- Use a business relationship model. This is related to the welfare of the child. The business that needs to be transacted is information sharing, coordination of schedules, activities, and requests for changes. The tone is formal, polite, and respectful without personal commentary.
- No parenting over one another's doorstep. This means, we will not tell each other how to parent unless we ask for support in the parenting and discipline of the child.
- We will limit the number of messages sent daily. There shall be no more than two new messages a week, each with one topic per message. No messages shall be sent on the weekend unless it is urgent and marked urgent.
- We will respond to messages within 48 hours for routine matters, and as soon as possible for messages marked "urgent" in the subject line. If the receiver needs more time to respond, they should indicate this need, together with a specific time frame for responding.
- Communication should be either: 1) future-focused regarding an emerging problem, or 2) informative, such as providing information from a medical appointment.
- The content of the message must pertain to the child.
- If the message involves some transaction (a requested change in the schedule, etc.), the requesting parent shall include a specific proposal to address the issue.
- If a parent wishes to make a proposal, include WHO does WHAT, WHEN, and WHERE. The response to the proposal shall be a clear "Yes" or "No" or a counterproposal.
- Each item shall be said only once (no repeating what was said in the past).
- Keep communication factual and neutral using a Business Model. NO CAPITAL LETTERS FOR EMPHASIS!
- Unless otherwise agreed upon, messages shall be between parents rather than a proxy.
- Email/Text Retention Notice: Administrative messages are deleted after 30 days. Clinical content is added to your chart and then deleted from devices. Email and text are not fully secure; please use it for scheduling or billing only.

FST Required Retainer:

Payment for the two initial evaluations and the first 8 hours of therapy is due prior to starting FST. The full retainer is \$1600, which is split evenly between parents. \$800 each. If part of the retainer is unused, the unused portion will be refunded.

Professional Fees

See "Consent for Services" for full fee disclosure.

Billing and Payments

See "Consent for Services" for billing and payment expectations.

Grievance procedures.

- a) The parent, therapist, and Guardian ad Litem will meet face to face, allowing an opportunity for all parties and professionals to work through concerns.
- b) Unresolved grievances shall be taken before the Commissioner.

I acknowledge and consent to the goals and expectations delineated above. I commit to adopting a solution focused approach rather than dwelling solely on problems. It is my responsibility to communicate to my child my unwavering support for the goals and objectives of the program. I will uphold boundaries and adhere to the expectations set forth by the program.

Parent

Date

Spouse/Significant Other Participant

Date