

“If you love your child more than you hate your ex, you can solve most co-parenting problems.” - Helen Fried

Well done on agreeing to attend Reportable Family Therapy. At this stage of trying to make a new life for yourself after separating from your child/ren’s other parent, it’s understandable that you might feel exhausted, hopeless, frustrated and uncertain. My commitment to you is to work with you to move forward with new insights, skills and hope so that you and your children have the best chance to achieve a brighter future.

In this information sheet the terms ‘parent’ and ‘caregiver’ are interchangeable. I refer to ‘child’ but this can also mean ‘children’ depending on your family.

This information sheet is intended to give you some basic information about working with me in the Reportable Family Therapy context. The contents of this sheet are general and may not always match your unique situation. It is worth reading through so that you can start to prepare for this type of service and complete some of the simple activities in this sheet and others that I may provide you as we progress. All the information and activity sheets that I provide you should be read in conjunction with the Family Therapy Intervention Agreement Form that you will have already read and signed.

**Values and Principles when conducting RFT**

My overall values and guiding principles are:

To treat you with respect and compassion at this extremely difficult time.

To provide you with a professional, reliable and consistent service. This includes using evidence based counselling approaches that are considered best practice in Australia and around the world.

To use trauma informed principles when I interact with you and your family.

To encourage you to explore your own behaviours, beliefs and attitudes which might be keeping you in patterns that don’t serve you or your children and that are holding you back from achieving the goals of RFT.

To provide a report to the Court that both faithfully and succinctly reflects our work together, my assessment and recommendations. Because this therapy is ‘reportable’ anything we discuss can be included in the report so the usual limits of confidentiality do not apply. The report may contain content that you disagree with. This is part of the nature of RFT because it brings to the surface patterns of behaviour and thinking that might have been out of your awareness and that are uncomfortable to confront.

**Goals**

The order prepared by the Family Court of WA which sets out that RFT will take place, usually has some intended goals for our work together. These can include:

* “To assist the parties to avoid including the child/ren in their dispute”
* “Reunification between the child/ren and the father/mother/other relative”
* “To promote/encourage/facilitate the relationship between the child/ren and the father/mother/other relative”
* “To reduce conflict between the parties”
* “To improve the quality of the parenting skills”
* “To address any emotional or behavioural problems of the children”

These goals will guide our work together and we are likely to cover additional ideas and skills. These can include but are not limited to:

* interpersonal skills,
* parenting skills,
* long held beliefs that shape your thinking and behaviour,
* reviewing your child/ren’s developmental stage and their particular needs as they adjust to changes in their family,
* skills in managing strong feelings and
* skills and concepts to help you address the impact of traumatic experiences.

**Individual or Joint therapy sessions?**

Generally speaking I will meet with both parents individually and then each child individually. This will give me some initial information about the presenting issues and how I might best be able to assist. Then I will advise you as to who I would like to see for subsequent sessions.

Reportable Family Therapy does not strictly need to occur with more than one family member at a time.

Often I will work with you on your goals and strategies to support and manage yourself before we conduct a session with you and your ex partner.

**Co-parenting Styles**

Separated parents generally take on certain modes of communication and negotiating regarding their children. Three common styles are described here. They range from Co-operative being the most healthy and functional - for yourself and your children - to High Conflict being the least healthy and functional.

Co-operative

The parents/caregivers work together to raise children so that they grow up in a safe, loving environment. They plan jointly for the child/ren’s medical, educational, recreational, social etc needs. They interact often and with respect. Each parent/caregiver makes allowances for the other parent to make mistakes and have setbacks. Not only does this foster respect and trust between the parents but it also models to the children that it’s ok and safe to get things wrong, that problems can be resolved amicably and mistakes will generate forgiveness, not condemnation. The parents observe appropriate boundaries which means that they respond to requests for help from the other but otherwise don’t comment on the parenting practices of the other.

Parallel

The parents/caregivers have low conflict but also low levels of communication with each other. They are emotionally disengaged and sometimes exhibit some hostility towards the other. They are inflexible when it comes to ‘spend time’ arrangements or dropping off items to the other household that have been left behind by the child/ren. They avoid or delay giving the other parent information about changes or certain needs of the child/ren. They do not attend events at the same time such as school or sporting events or birthday parties. They are unlikely to speak to their child/ren about the positive qualities of the other parent.

High conflict

There is little meaningful or helpful communication. The parents’ attitude regarding the other is angry and frustrated and tends to focus on past problems or issues. Most communication is flavoured with anger, aggression, blame or hostility. Some parents will refer to issues as a means to score points from the other. The parents’ focus is on problems rather than finding solutions or exploring how they can make changes in their own behaviour and mindset.

Studies from around the world corroborate that this style of co-parenting is harmful to children.

It may seem now that reaching the Co-operative style of co-parenting is impossible. That’s understandable. Our work together may involve moving from High Conflict to Parallel or involve achieving some of the aspects of Co-operative rather than all of them.

**Activity**

Which of the 3 co-parenting styles is most accurate for you, currently?

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Do you consider that you and your ex partner have different co-parenting styles? Why?

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What is one thing you (not your ex-partner) can do differently, this week, to move to a more functional co-parenting style?

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**Working towards change**

It is common for humans in conflict to focus on how other people need to change or apologise to resolve problems or atone for past misdemeanours.

If the other person is willing to make changes to their behaviour or give a sincere apology then this can be really gratifying.

However it’s often the case that if others had been willing to make changes or offer apologies then you would not be meeting with me for the purpose of RFT.

We can only be responsible for and make changes to our own behaviours, thoughts, attitudes and mindset. We cannot make others change.

However sometimes other people will change as a result of the changes that we make in our behaviours and attitudes.

Another interesting (and exasperating!) aspect of making changes is that often when we start to do things differently, life will try to pull us back into old patterns. Have you ever decided to save some money or get on top of your budget and suddenly an unexpected bill or expense appears? Or you decide to improve your diet and then get invited to a special meal which will involve the types of food that you want to avoid? Or you pledge to avoid arguments with a certain person and soon afterwards you feel angry or upset over something they have done?

This tendency to be tempted to return to old patterns or habits is unavoidable. However we can choose to keep trying our new ways of behaving and new perspective taking so that over time they become easier and more automatic.

In our work together I will be reminding you to focus on your own habits, thoughts and behaviours that might need to change so that you can achieve your goals. This can be tricky and challenging.

**Previous workshops or training**

If you have attended the Mums and Dads Forever program or other online programs designed to assist you to manage your co-parenting relationship then I encourage you to bring your workbooks, notes and reflections with you to our sessions.

You will have spent time and effort in completing these programs so it will be efficient for us to review those concepts and learnings so that you can build on what you already know.

Activity

If you have completed a workshop or program, what are 3 helpful things you learnt?

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Thanks for taking the time to read this information. I look forward to our next session.

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