

REACH

Family Systems Intervention for Disrupted Parent-Child Relationships

REACH TEAM INTERVENTION OVERVIEW

The REACH Team Intervention Program integrates therapeutic evaluation and in-depth therapeutic treatment services together with various court services to support children and families and create pathways out of the court process to resolution that may include on-going support.

The REACH Team Intervention Program is founded on two distinct yet complimentary objectives:

- providing an in-depth treatment program to the family in accordance with the orders of the court and
- providing information to the judiciary to support the best possible decision-making for the family.

The REACH Team Intervention Program was developed by a group of seven senior practitioners, including six senior psychologists and child therapists and one lawyer. Together, these professionals possess extensive expertise and experience across various domains, such as family court, family law, custody and access assessments, integrated divorce services, Collaborative Divorce, family therapy, child therapy, play therapy, expert witness services, forensic assessment, clinical training, and supervision. The team's collective knowledge is further enhanced by a history of professional publications. The combined experience of all team members amounts to more than 200 years in these interconnected fields.

The development of the REACH Team Intervention model was guided by on-going consultation with Mr. Justice Peter Leask, QC, a British Columbia Supreme Court Justice who served on the bench for eleven years. This collaborative effort culminated in the presentation of the REACH Team Intervention model to the Supreme Court Justices in January 2015.

A central feature of the REACH Team Intervention Model is its emphasis on introducing and sustaining a family system's perspective in its interventions. In alignment with contemporary intervention approaches, the model acknowledges that families function as interconnected systems, comprised of intimate and deeply influential relationships. This perspective guides the inclusion of family systems interventions, ensuring that the therapeutic process addresses the complex interplay within the family unit.

The REACH Team also recognizes that family law is fundamentally built upon individual rights and obligations. However, it also understands that families are intricate networks of relationships that evolve over time. While the legal viewpoint and the family system's perspective may differ

significantly, the REACH Team Intervention Model seeks to harmonize these approaches, appreciating the value each brings to supporting families through challenging circumstances.

The metaphor of the paint-by-number activity illustrates this dynamic well. If the law is represented by the black lines creating the picture, then the family dynamics are represented by the many colors of paint. Sometimes the paint is contained easily by the limits represented by the black lines. At other times the intensity of the emotions and relationships in the family may make it quite challenging to stay within the lines.

At its core, both the family therapy team and the judge share a common goal: to gain a clear understanding of the family's situation and to assist in resolving relationship challenges, ultimately working toward best possible functioning of the family for all family members, especially the children. The REACH Team Model is uniquely designed to facilitate this collaboration. Through its framework, therapeutic work conducted with families can provide valuable information to the judge or other court officers.

This process may be initiated in multiple ways, whether at the direction of the judge, upon request by one or both parents, through counsel, or by the REACH Team itself. By allowing therapeutic insights to inform judicial decision-making, the model supports a more comprehensive approach to addressing family issues within the court system and promotes outcomes that prioritize the well-being and reunification of families.

DEFINING FAMILY

For the purposes of The REACH Team Intervention model, 'family' is defined as a system encompassing all individuals who care for children or hold significance in their lives. The emphasis is on inclusivity and the functional roles fulfilled by the family. This definition extends to birth families, adoptive families, stepfamilies, extended families, and any other committed relationships that provide care and resources to the child/children.

By focusing on the functions performed by the family, this approach considers both the capabilities of individual members and the collective family system in meeting the essential needs of children. It also recognizes all individuals who contribute to the wellbeing of the child/children, irrespective of their legal or biological relationship status. New members such as partners may play significant roles and exert considerable influence within post-divorce family dynamics.

REACH prioritizes the child's perspective when conceptualizing the family system. Children typically form an internal understanding of family that encompasses parents, extended relatives, and key caregivers, regardless of whether these individuals consider themselves family with one another. For instance, children rarely exclude parents from their concept of family following parental separation, and similarly, they may include stepfathers or stepsiblings in their family as these relationships develop, even if their biological father PARENTS does not.



From a family systems standpoint, disrupted parent-child relationships signal that the family system, as defined above, is not operating optimally in providing care and support. Such disruptions often indicate underlying issues within the broader family structure. At minimum, a disrupted parent-child relationship cannot fully meet the functional criteria outlined ABOVE in the preceding definition.

THE REACH TEAM INTERVENTION PROGRAM

REACH delivers comprehensive therapeutic interventions tailored for children and parents in court-involved, separating, and post-divorce families, seamlessly integrating these services with the social justice initiatives of the judicial system to support the best interests of the child/children.

Each REACH team comprises a Court Designate, one Child Therapist (or multiple, based on the children's ages and needs), and one Parent Therapist for each parent. Additionally, every team includes a Court Designate who manages intake procedures and facilitates communication between the intervention team and the presiding judge or officers of the court. This role may be filled by either a family law attorney with expertise and sensitivity in therapeutic processes involving complex or high-conflict court-involved families, or by a psychologist knowledgeable in family court dynamics.

THE ROLE OF THE CHILD THERAPIST

1. The Child Therapist within the Reach Program will provide on-going therapy to the child/children with the objective of assessing and addressing psychological distress with the following goals to:
 - a) Facilitate disengagement of the child/children from parental conflict,
 - b) understand the child/children's perception of each Parent and work towards an appropriate and best possible relationship with each Parent,
 - c) understand and treat any problems including physical, behavioral, emotional, cognitive or relational including anxiety, depression, estrangement or alienation,
 - d) correct misperceptions and distorted thinking patterns,
 - e) support the child/children through the separation process and provide a reparative experience for the child/children, and
 - f) provide the child with an opportunity to voice his/her concerns regarding the separation/divorce.

- 2) Work with REACH Parent Therapists to offer feedback and support, thereby aiding the development of effective parenting strategies that enhance parent-child relationships and diminish barriers to reunification.

- 3) Work with REACH Parent Therapists to assist Parents with gaining understanding (based on the child's articulations and perceptions) of contributing factors to their child(ren)'s distress including estrangement and barriers to re- unification.
- 4) Work with REACH Parent Therapists to provide feedback and support to the Parent therapist(s) in order to develop competent Parenting strategies, which will facilitate improved parent-child relationships and reduce barriers to reunification.

THE ROLE OF THE PARENT THERAPIST(S)

- 1) Work with each Parent to:
 - a) establish the best possible working relationship,
 - b) work toward best possible quality of relationship of the child(ren) with BOTH Parents,
 - c) maintain the well-being of the children,
 - d) identify concerns, interests and desires,
 - e) improve communication and reduce misunderstandings,
 - f) learn and use conflict resolution skills,
 - g) develop effective co-Parenting skills as is appropriate,
 - h) develop best possible Parenting practices,
 - i) develop best possible co-Parenting practices, and
 - j) develop best possible Parenting plans if necessary.
- 2) Work with the REACH team Child Therapist to:
 - a) understand and integrate the information from the Child Therapist to help create the best possible Parenting and family environment for the child(ren),
 - b) share information with the Child Therapist to help the Child Therapist work most effectively with the child(ren),
 - c) give feedback to the Parents regarding the work of the Child Therapist to support the Parents to achieve their best practices in Parenting, co-parenting and creating the most positive family environment possible for the child(ren).
- 3) Work with the other REACH team Parent Therapist to support the best possible understanding of the family system including:
 - a) the relationship dynamic between the two Parents,
 - b) the impact of the relationship dynamic between the Parents on the child(ren), and

- c) any relevant new partners, members of the extended family, family friends, community members or others who may be effecting the well-being of the child(ren).

THE ROLE OF THE INTERVENTION TEAM

The REACH Intervention Team is guided by two primary, interconnected objectives. The first objective is to systematically assess and comprehend the dynamics within the family relationship system. The second objective is to facilitate progress in parent-child relationships, with a consistent emphasis on prioritizing the best interests of the child or children involved.

Upon completion of intake by the Court Designate, each Parent Therapist meets individually with their respective client. Subsequently, the Parent Therapists confer to develop a comprehensive understanding of both parents' perspectives. The therapists continue to hold sessions with their clients, as well as coordinate with each other, until it is determined that the parties are prepared to initiate direct communication. This communication may occur in person, via telephone, through supervised live email, or through any other mutually acceptable method.

Each member of the therapeutic team has a primary responsibility to their client; one of the parents or one or more of the children and is also generally supportive of the other clients. The therapeutic work progresses in a unified and cohesive process that includes all the observations and understandings of the team members simultaneously.

Once the parents have made some progress, the team works to include the children. Children can often carry the burden of their parents' conflict and seek ways to reduce their anxiety and stress by remaining in the background. REACH seeks to protect the children from having to be the leaders of improvement in the family relational system by giving the parents the opportunity to start the shifts and evolution out of the problematic patterns themselves. Equally, given that children are often not responsive to court orders, especially older children, it may be important for the children to recognize change in the parents before they can safely participate.

The REACH Intervention Team collaborates to address the complexities of family dynamics. The team engages with family members in various configurations and utilizes therapeutic modalities deemed most suitable for their needs. Committed to maintaining creativity and innovation, the REACH Intervention Team operates within the context of court involvement while aiming to complement, rather than be directed by judicial processes.

The Team considers multiple avenues through which families may foster more constructive dynamics during their participation. These include, but are not limited to, the complete restoration of relationships with the previously rejected parent. Frequently, such improvements continue to progress following the intervention. REACH outlines at least three distinct levels of success:

- a. Minimal success – There has been little to no improvement in family relationships. REACH will provide the court with a comprehensive report outlining the family's relationship dynamics, identifying barriers to progress, and detailing each family

member's contributions during our involvement that either facilitated or impeded appropriate family development.

- b. Moderate success - This reflects a moderate change in certain relationships and capacities. The REACH program supports learning and communication that facilitates the gradual easing of entrenched family dynamics, allowing new developments to occur even if full reunification is not achieved. For example, this may involve participation from extended family members, strategies for engaging with children displaying resistance, or enhancement of parental communication. Such transitions contribute to healthier family evolution. Notably, improved relationships and successful reunifications have often been observed within a year following the completion of the program.
- c. Maximum success – The program aims to restore parent-child contact, resulting in a significant role for the previously rejected parent in the child's life. REACH facilitates interactions between the parent and child beginning within sessions, extending into the community, and ultimately progressing to independent contact.

THE ROLE OF THE COURT DESIGNATE

The Court Designate (CD) serves a dual purpose within the process. The CD functions as the primary intake contact for the family and may also coordinate with the parents to complete contractual agreements. Subsequently, the CD is responsible for ensuring parental compliance with court orders by monitoring attendance at scheduled REACH team appointments and overseeing adherence to all established agreements and recommendations.

The second role of the Court Designate is to provide information from the REACH team to legal counsel or to the court. The Court Designate provides a bridge to the court system in any way necessary including giving feedback to the court process and holding parents accountable to court orders. Feedback from the Court Designate to counsel or to the court may be initiated by either parent or by the REACH team.

The REACH Report

When requested by the judge, initiated by counsel or by the REACH team itself, a REACH report is created. The entire team participates in the creation of the report. Together with the Court Designate, the REACH Therapeutic Team create a report that provides cost effective, relevant and timely feedback to the judge and officers of the court.

Each therapeutic team member has observations and experience with their designated family members as well as general observations of the relationships between family members. Together the team has a 360 degree view of the family dynamics.

In family systems, all family members contribute although their contributions may be very different. It is the nature of families that just by our very being, we contribute. Our height, birth order, capacity to play the piano – or not, to make Dad laugh....or not.

Family systems, even at termination of the marriage, are intimate relational environments where only the insiders know the rules – and many of them are unspoken. The REACH therapeutic team, consisting of senior practitioners, can identify the general dynamics of the family system quite easily.

In addition, the REACH Team Intervention Program unfolds over time, generally 3 months at minimum to 1 ½ - 2 years maximum. Most cases complete in less than one year. This allows the REACH Intervention Team to create therapeutic relationships with family members that reveal the capacity and willingness of each family member to engage, to learn, to reflect, and to take responsibility for their contribution to the family dynamics.

Unlike the s.211 reports, which are more limited in time, the REACH Team Intervention model has the luxury of time to allow family members to learn, grow and shift in their ways of relating with each other.

The REACH report includes the therapeutic process to date as implemented by the intervention team. The Court Designate is aware of the work of the intervention team and the response of the family members. When a report is required, each team member is involved in contributing their observations of the work with their client, the family system relationships and the therapeutic movement or lack thereof to date. Recommendations can also be made by the REACH team. All team members sign off before the report is released.

To date, REACH reports have been requested by the judge, by counsel and by the REACH team itself. Reports can be written as the therapeutic work unfolds over time as directed by the judge or requested by counsel or the team.

THE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

The REACH Team Intervention model has been well received by the legal community. The REACH reports have been appreciated as a new and useful addition to possibilities for families in the lower mainland of BC. The therapeutic work of REACH has helped many families move forward.

In addition, the REACH Intervention Team model has been presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts in June 2016 (Seattle) and June 2018 (Washington, DC).