

REACH

RE-unification **A**nd **Co**-Parenting in **H**igh conflict and complexity.

REACH Team Treatment Program Description

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

The REACH Team Treatment Program is founded on two distinct yet complimentary objectives; to provide an in-depth treatment program to the family in accordance with the orders of the court and to provide information to the judiciary to support the best possible decision-making for the family.

The REACH Team Treatment Program was designed by 7 senior practitioners; 6 senior psychologists and child therapists with high levels of expertise and experience in family court, family law, custody and access assessments, integrated divorce services, Collaborative Divorce, family therapy, child therapy, play therapy, expert witness, forensic assessment, clinical training and supervision and 1 lawyer with experience with family court, litigation, mediation, Integrative Mediation, Collaborative Law, Parenting Coordination and Arbitration. Many also have professional publications. The model was also shaped by on-going consultation with Mr. Justice Peter Leask, QC. a BC Supreme Court Justice with 11 years on the bench. Collectively this group had well over 200 years of experience in these overlapping areas. The REACH Team Treatment model was presented to the Supreme Court Justices in January of 2015.

Our goal was to create a model that could provide in-depth therapeutic intervention for families in which parent-child relationships had been disrupted and/or there is high conflict or high complexity. The intervention team maintains its role while a team member acts as an intermediary with the court.

Within these goals, the REACH Team Treatment model also seeks to introduce and maintain a family systems perspective as is consistent with current models of intervention. Specifically, this means maintaining the awareness that the family is a system of intimate and profound, mutually influencing relationships and to include family systems interventions. REACH recognizes that family law is premised on individual rights and obligations. At the same time, families are intricate systems of interwoven relationships that have been created over time. While these two perspectives are very different, they can also be complimentary.

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 keep the paint within the lines.

Fundamentally, the family therapy team and the judge have a similar objective. One, to figure out what is going on, and two, to help resolve relationship problems to facilitate reunification. The REACH Team model allows the therapeutic work to inform the judge or the officers of the court as directed by the judge or initiated by one or both parents, or one or both counsel, or by the REACH team itself.

Defining Family

For the purposes of The REACH Team model, 'family' is defined as a family system including all those who care for the children or are important figures in their lives. The focus is inclusive and on what the family does. This includes the birth family, adoptive family, stepfamily, extended family, and any other type of committed relationship that provides care and resources to the children.

This focus on what the family 'does' allows us to consider the ability of the family members and the family system to provide the basic functions of the family. This definition also allows those who share the care and love for children to be considered part of the 'family' no matter what their relationship status with each other. In fact, in many circumstances, new family members such as new partners, make substantial contributions to children and equally have substantial influence in the post divorce family system.

REACH uses an understanding of the family system that gives the child's experience priority. Most children create an inner experience of their family that includes their parents, extended family and important caregivers and is not limited by whether or not these people consider themselves to be family with each other. For example, children do not exclude their parents from their family even if their parents have let go of one another as 'family', post divorce. Equally, a child who has developed a caring relationship with a stepfather and stepsiblings will include this person in their family as the relationships develop over time, even if their biological father does not.

Disrupted parent-child relationships, from a family systems perspective, are an indicator that the family system, as defined above, is not functioning optimally in the care and support of the children. The disruption of a parent-child relationship is often a symptom of other problems in the family system. At the very least, a disrupted parent-child relationship cannot fulfill the 'function' described in the definition above.

The REACH Team Treatment Program

REACH provides in-depth therapeutic interventions for the children and parents of court involved separating and post divorce families and integrates this work with the social justice interventions of the court system as they relate to children's best interests.

REACH teams consist of a Court Designate, a Child Therapist(s) and a Parent Therapist for each Parent.

The REACH Treatment Team is made up of one Parent Therapist for each of the parents, and one or more Child Therapists for the children, depending on ages and capacities. Each team also includes one Court Designate who acts as both the point of intake for the family into the REACH Team Treatment Program and as a conduit of information from the treatment team to the judge or officers of the court. The Court Designate can be either a family law lawyer with experience and sensitivities to the therapeutic process with court involved families experiencing disrupted parent-child relationships and/or high conflict or complexity, or a psychologist experienced in family court matters.

THE ROLE OF THE CHILD THERAPIST

1. The Child Therapist within the Reach Program will provide on-going therapy to the child(ren) in order to assess and address the psychological distress with the goals to:
 - a. disengage the child(ren) from Parental conflict
 - b. understand the child(ren)'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
 - c. correct misperceptions and distorted thinking
 - d. support the child(ren) through the separation process and provide a reparative experience for the child(ren).
 - e. provide the child with an opportunity to voice his/her concerns regarding the separation/divorce.
2. Work with REACH Parent Therapists to provide Parents with information and guidance to help their children through this process.
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 reunification.
5. 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
 - c. identify concerns, interests and desires
 - d. improve communication and reduce misunderstandings
 - e. learn and use conflict resolution skills
 - f. develop effective co-Parenting skills as is appropriate
 - g. develop best possible Parenting practices
 - h. develop best possible co-Parenting practices
 - i. 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).
 - 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 THERAPEUTIC TEAM

The REACH Therapeutic Treatment Team has two interrelated goals. The first is to explore and understand what is going on in the family relationship system. The second is to help the parent-child relationships to move forward, keeping the best interests of the children at the forefront.

Once the Court Designate has completed the intake, the Parent Therapists meet with their respective client. The Parent Therapists then debrief so that they create an overview of both perspectives of both parents. The Parent Therapists will then meet with their respective clients and each other until the parties are ready to begin communicating with each other, either in person, over the phone, through live supervised email or any other method that is satisfactory.

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 Therapeutic Treatment Team works together in response to the family dynamics. The team may work with family members in constellations and through any therapeutic modality as we feel is appropriate. The REACH Therapeutic Treatment Team seeks to remain creative and innovative, even though families are court involved. We seek to compliment the court process, not to be subsumed by it.

THE ROLE OF THE COURT DESIGNATE

The role of the Court Designate (CD) is two-fold. First, the CD is the point of intake for the family. The CD organizes with the parents to sign the contract, provide payment and schedule the first meetings with the Parent Therapists. The CD is then well positioned to hold the parents accountable to court orders including attending scheduled appointments with the REACH team and following through on 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 Court Designate Report

When requested by the judge, initiated by counsel or by the REACH team itself, a CD 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 Treatment 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 Treatment Team to create therapeutic relationships with family members that reveal the capacity and willingness of each family member to engage, to learn, to reflect, to take responsibility for their contribution to the family dynamics.

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

The Court Designate report includes the therapeutic process to date as implemented by the treatment team. The Court Designate is aware of the work of the treatment 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, CD 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 Therapeutic Treatment Team model has been well received by the legal community. The CD 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 Therapeutic Treatment 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).