

# RECONNECTING CHILDREN WITH ABSENT PARENTS

A recent article in *Family & Conciliation Courts Review* examined the delicate question of how best to reunify parents and children who have not, for one reason or another, been in contact with one another for a significant period of time. This complex process is affected by many variables, the authors believe.

Freeman, Abel, Cowper-Smith and Stein<sup>1</sup> stress that above all else, the child's safety must be assured. Once that is established, they suggest that the process be conceptualized as containing seven phases:

- the development of a *paced & child-centered* timeline
- assessment of the reconnection process
- preparatory work with child and both parents
- planning first meeting
- facilitating early parent-child meetings
- creating a structured time-sharing plan
- supporting the child's relationship with the parent and supporting the co-parenting relationship

While acknowledging that most authorities are convinced of the value of a child having a relationship with both parents, the authors nevertheless urge that the needs of the child take precedence and note that an arbitrary timelines might not take those needs into account and may in fact sabotage the entire process as well as increase the probability of more litigation. Both parents and the Court must understand the need for and agree to a timeline that focuses on the child's needs. This timeline must reflect the child's ability to handle the reunification process: "Unless the

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<sup>1</sup> 2004. Freeman, Abel, Cowper-Smith and Stein. Reconnecting Children With Absent Parents: A Model for Intervention. *Family & Conciliation Courts Review*. 42 (3) 439-459.

process reflects the child's needs, the likelihood of a meaningful and ongoing parent-child relationship developing is minimal."

Absences of more than a few months generally require in-depth therapeutic intervention. In some of the cases handled by this program, 2+ years of preparatory work have been required before a reconnection could begin.

The reconnection assessment task consists of several phases:

- obtain a detailed history of each parent's perspective
- understand the nature and history of the child's relationship with the absent parent and the reasons for the separation
- understand the child's perspective about both the absence and reconnection
- understand the specific challenges of reconnection for all concerned
- conduct a thorough safety and risk assessment

Depending on the level of the child's resistance to reunification, there may be no immediate goal to establish reunification. It is possible that this may have to be delayed until some later point, when the child is more mature or when circumstances have changed. But "understanding the child's story of why he or she is not seeing a parent forms the basis for all the work that follows."

The authors found that counsel have "a pivotal role" in the reunification process. Equally important is the role of the residential parent. And the authors have also learned that this is a highly individualized process with no universal solution.