

Editorial

Reunification therapy versus family integration therapy: A problem of taxonomy

Alan M. Jaffe^{1*}, Melanie J. Thakkar² and Erin Sivertsen³

¹Department of Psychiatry, Feinberg School of Medicine, Northwestern University, Chicago, Illinois, USA.

²Forensic Psychology Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA.

³Department of Clinical Psychology, Chicago School of Professional Psychology, Chicago, Illinois, USA.

Received 4 April, 2020; Accepted 22 June, 2020

Family courts increasingly order psychotherapy to resolve issues of alienation and estrangement between parents and children. Reunification therapy is a clinical intervention and treatment application intended to unite estranged children and parents. Reunification therapy when used in the legal context implies that a cohesive family unit existed prior to the estrangement. Literature supports the implementation of reunification therapy in various cases; however, it should be utilized within specific parameters. Family integration therapy provides a more accurate representation of the process and describes the complex and comprehensive nature of integrating parent-child relationships. It is the authors' opinion that the term "reunification therapy" is often a misuse of nomenclature that should be more accurately replaced by family integration therapy to facilitate increased options for the court and greater acceptance by custodial parents

Key words: Family courts, parent-child relationship, parental alienation, reunification process, reunification therapy, family integration therapy.

INTRODUCTION

It is the opinion of the authors that the term "family integration therapy" should replace "reunification therapy" as the common term of art and usage. Reunification therapy refers to a clinical intervention and treatment application intended to unite estranged parents and children and has become a frequent recommendation of family court judges as it continues to grow in popularity in mental health literature and practice in general. Courts will order therapy to facilitate relationships between children and alienated parents in the context of active and post-decree family court proceedings. The use of the term "reunification therapy" by judges and attorneys and in the literature addressing the clinical application of reunification therapy is often too capacious. This implies a potentially spurious precondition: that there was at some point in time, a cohesive family unit that existed prior to an occasion of separation. It supports an assertion that the goal is to reunite and reengage a previously united family system. While literature supports the use of reunification therapy in various cases, particularly those where a unified family system once existed, the need for a tightly defined indication and definition of what is commonly referred to as reunification therapy is necessary to ensure the safety of children in a vulnerable position vis a vis potentially ill serving and even destructive parents. Kleinman would argue that

Corresponding author. E-mail: drajaffe@jaffepsych.com.

Author(s) agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

reunification may not have the research-based efficacy to suggest significant benefits to be a reasonable and sound intervention. When one lacks the proper understanding of the process and practice of reunification therapy, it may be ineffective or possibly harmful (Kleinman, 2017).

A significant contribution to the confusion of the term “reunification therapy” is due to the inferences that are drawn from the term. Reunification has been used in order to draw attention to the disruption in the relationship from a once intact family system (Sauber, 2013). In such cases where the family was at one time intact, the term is used accurately and with specificity. The underlying understanding of reunification is that an intact family, even if unstable, at one point existed and can exist again (Sauber, 2013). The very use of the term “reunification therapy” is often paradoxical as it is based on the false premise of a previously established close/intimate parent-child relationship. The inherent contradiction in the use of this term is not simply a semantic problem, but one that has practical and real-life implications. The assumptions often inherent in court-ordered reunification therapy and in literature addressing the clinical application of reunification therapy inherently imply the belief or precondition that there was at some point in time, a cohesive family unit that existed prior to the separation and the assertion that the goal is to reunite and reengage the family system.

Much of the current research discusses reunification therapy within specific parameters, such as after removal from the home (Ainsworth and Maluccio, 1998; La Guardia and Banner, 2012) or after allegations of abuse (Hewitt, 2008; Lindahl and Hunt, 2016; Digiorio-Miller, 2002). Reunification therapy is also discussed in the context of parental alienation, especially when alienation is the byproduct of a custody case or high conflict divorce (Weitzman, 2013; Templer et al., 2017). The implication, then, is that reunification reunites or rehabilitates a family system or a parent-child dynamic that has been separated.

Reunification therapy as a court-ordered requirement or a voluntary process is often misleading for both professionals and the individuals to be involved in treatment. Providing an intervention that will facilitate interaction and intimacy between parents and children is a worthwhile endeavor so long as the intervention is properly represented for what it is and does not inherently misrepresent the previous parent-child relationship.

In courtroom settings, a judge is frequently petitioned by an alienated parent to order counseling with an estranged child. In such cases, the custodial parent will often object to a therapeutic intervention based solely on the fact that the alienated parent never historically enjoyed a close or meaningful relationship with the child. For that reason, the custodial parent feels correctly that the agreement to permit reunification represents an implied stipulation that a former parent-child relationship was at one time closer than the true reality of the relationship. Even before the desirability of parent-child therapy is considered, custodial parents are inclined to be resistant to such treatment because it is based on an inaccurate premise and insidiously seeks to establish a false reality. The custodial parent refuses to sanction a misrepresentation of the true reality of the parent-child relationship, by participating in an upfront empathic failure toward the child, even before the proposed treatment is to commence. In order to ameliorate this misconception, the term used to describe the process of integrating parent-child relationships should be more accurately represented as “family integration therapy”.

For at least the last twenty years, varying therapeutic techniques and procedures have been used in attempts to reunify families (Sauber, 2013). However, the reason behind the separation between family members may not be fully appreciated and considered when reunification therapy is recommended. Children who have been removed from the home, abused, or alienated from one parent may be afraid of renewed interaction or may have never had a healthy or unified relationship prior to the initiation of reunification therapy. The family courts are largely responsible for determining the structure of the reunification intervention processes, which emphasize the need for further research associated with standardizing the reunification process, including protocols and efficacy which measures are necessary to ensure the safety and health of children involved in this process (Weitzman, 2013).

The current state of reunification therapy, including the intake and assessment procedures, therapeutic techniques, and termination, are still largely without significant literature and understanding in the mental health field, leaving clinicians with the task of determining the appropriateness of services and how to engage clients in these services. The literature that is available on this topic may be specific to particular indications, but not all current nor future literature will always apply to families ordered for reunification services. In particular, Ainsworth and Maluccio (1998) suggest that for children involved in out-of-home care, immediate and consistent contact between the child and family would allow for the most effective reunification process. In cases involving parental alienation, the degree of alienation can indicate difficulty for a family's engagement in family integration and the therapeutic approach that should be taken (Sauber, 2013). It is also imperative that the presence of parental alienation be identified through proper assessment of the child(ren) (Jaffe et al., 2017). Hewitt (2008) suggests that the reunification approach should focus the pace on the comfort and needs of the child. In particular, the use of reunification therapy is more complicated when abuse allegations are unsupported (Lindahl and Hunt, 2016). There are many social variables and family circumstances that offer the occasion for family integration therapy to be of benefit to parents and children.

As the academic and clinical practice considerations of the integration of families evolve, it is imperative that the full

scope of the discipline be properly represented in the nomenclature that represents it. Therefore, we advocate for the more descriptive and accurately representative term of family integration therapy, which, if re-stated, is more likely to encourage family courts to recommend and order treatment to facilitate this important clinical endeavor.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES

- Ainsworth F, Maluccio AN (1998). The policy and practice of family reunification. *Australian Social Work* 51(1):3-7.
- Digiorgio-Miller J (2002). A comprehensive approach to family reunification following incest in an era of legislatively mandated community notification. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 35(2):83-91.
- Hewitt SK (2008). Therapeutically managing reunification after abuse allegations. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 17(1):17-19.
- Jaffe AM, Thakkar MJ, Piron P (2017). Denial of ambivalence as a hallmark of parental alienation. *Journal of Cogent Psychology* 4(1):1327144.
- Kleinman T (2017). Family court ordered "reunification therapy:" Junk science in the guise of helping parent/child relationships? *Journal of Child Custody* 14(4):295-300.
- La Guardia AC, Banner AT (2012). The goal of reunification: An Adlerian approach to working for therapeutic change within the foster care system. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families* 20(4):361-368.
- Lindahl MW, Hunt LA (2016). Reunification in intrafamilial child abuse cases: A model for intervention. *Family Court Review* 54(2):288-299.
- Sauber SR (2013). Reunification planning and therapy. In D. Lorandos, W. Bernet, & S. R. Sauber (Eds.), *Parental alienation: The handbook for mental health and legal professionals*. Charles C. Thomas.
- Templer K, Matthewson M, Haines J, Cox G (2017). Recommendations for best practice in response to parental alienation: Findings from a systematic review. *Journal of Family Therapy* 39:103-122.
- Weitzman J (2013). Reunification and the one-way mirror. In: A. J. L. Baker, & S. R. Sauber (Eds.), *Working with alienated children and families: A clinical guidebook*. Routledge.