



EXPLANATION OF PROVISION FOR HIGH CONFLICT FAMILIES

General Comments

We take on families for different programmes, depending on what work has been done previously, so that families do not necessarily go through all programmes with us. We need to check our availability and resources for each programme, as separate pieces of work. If we take on the family at the early stages, the Court may need to find another suitable provider for subsequent work, as our resources are limited. Under such circumstances, we are happy to act as consultants if required, briefing and supporting other providers.

The work we do is typically undertaken by members of a team of therapists who conduct the work 'on the ground', with an expert consultant who may see the clients for key sessions, but will usually be directing and monitoring the programme, reporting back to the Court in an evaluator role.

We are not typically prepared to take on cases where one or both parents are litigants in person.

There may be a short window of opportunity to restore healthy parent-child relationships in many High Conflict cases which have often gone on for years, so that our approach is intense and swift during the early stage programmes. Later programmes take longer, focussing on creation of a sustainable Parenting Plan with agreed principles, fair, mutually acceptable parameters, with monitoring of communication, using Our Family Wizard, (an app designed to support separated families), until the parents can be self-sustaining.

A letter report will be written at the end of each programme, providing the Court with information on prognosis and any changes in the same, enabling the Court to make decisions on next steps, including variation of Child Arrangements where appropriate.

Some parents in High Conflict cases may feel reluctant to engage in any process potentially altering the nature of their parent-child relationship in a way that may be contrary to their underlying wishes, so that motivation to participate needs to be externally driven. The Court will therefore need to hold the case throughout each of our programmes.

Our approach typically involves individuals, couples and children, in different combinations, to help children develop an emotionally safe relationship with both parents. Sessions will be spaced out or intensified on a variable basis, depending on individual family need and the specific issues in the case.

However, unlike conventional psychotherapy or family therapy, the specialist work required for High Conflict families is more challenging and confrontative, involving interventions which may, at times, seem counter-intuitive. Our work is not suitable for most ordinary families, and we reserve it only for the most extreme cases, where it is clear that the family would not respond to more standard therapeutic approaches. The work can be effective, but involves high risk intervention and distressing intense feelings in both parents and children. There are, of necessity, different conventions on confidentiality, and duty to the Court, not to the parents, remains our priority, with the children's best interests as paramount. Parents will therefore be asked to sign consent forms to participate, and the process will need very tight control by the Court.

We will always do our very best to take the route of least disruption to the children where possible. We do not ourselves undertake transfers of residence, and are strongly oriented to the philosophy that children need a quality relationship with both of their parents. However, this work is typically recommended in the most extreme cases of implacable hostility, so that instructing parties and their clients do need to be prepared, in principle, for recommendations to the Court for temporary or permanent transfer of residence to repair a relationship with a non-resident parent, if successful outcomes are not deemed likely by any other route.

Programme 1: Brief Screening/Viability

This will look at the psychological profiles of the parents and children using psychometrics and a clinical interview. This is because expert reports can be of varying quality and do not necessarily provide us with the kind of psychological profiling and understanding of specific family dynamics we need.

Our assessment normally ascertains a family's capacity to engage with this specialised work and we provide a short letter report on our findings.

In rare cases, after reading the bundle, we may proceed directly to Programme 2, if this is requested by the parties, and we find that psychological screening from the expert reports already undertaken provide sufficient information. We will then include any additional psychological screening we may need as part of Programme 2. This is likely to include some self-report/reflection on childhood family experiences.

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Programme 2: Contact Trial

Ideally, the contact trial programme will consist of a 2 hour clinical interview with the resident parent (RP), 2 hours with the non-resident parent (NRP), and an hour with each child (child interview may not be needed if we have seen them in Programme 1).

The above will typically be followed by two contact sessions between NRP and the children, one for clinical observation and one extended one, with a clinical meeting to follow. In some cases, before the contact sessions, further individual sessions with each parent and/or different family members in combination, or whole family meetings may be deemed necessary. However, an intensive but swift process is preferred, moving to a contact trial as quickly as possible.

The clinical interviews will consist of in vivo exploration of each parent's ability to engage with this challenging process. Their personal resources and limitations in working with the other parent will form a central part of this high intensity clinical trial. Their capacities will be revealed through testing their responses to various psychological strategies employed to evaluate and explore the potential for draining hostility and establishing civil relationships.

In the first session, NRP will be briefed on how to manage reunification contact, and RP on what is needed from them to facilitate that reunification.

The capacity of RP to move towards being a genuinely positive influence on the children in re-establishing contact with NRP will be revealed, *in practice*, by how the children re-engage with NRP at the first and second contact sessions, the trajectory of the dynamic between the first and second sessions and their immediate and delayed response to the extended contact. Provided there has been a good enough previous attachment between NRP and the children, and NRP is seen to have sufficient skills to manage the first and second reunification contacts (see below for what happens if not), the dynamics of RP's difficulty in facilitating contact effectively and likely prognosis of Programme 3 work will be analysed.

If, however, NRP does not have the skills to manage, the preparation stage for NRP may need to be extended, until NRP is deemed ready to do so. In cases where NRP is seen as unlikely to develop the capacity to respond effectively enough to produce a successful re-unification in any sensible timescales, the contact trial will not go ahead at this point.

A brief letter report will then be written commenting on the family's capacity to engage and likely prognosis, along with implications, if any, to vary Child Arrangements.

If, during Programme 2, the prognosis appears especially poor for either RP or NRP, we may stop the process sooner rather than later (at worst, before the contact itself) if we deem it highly unlikely to be successful in light of the family dynamics we see. In such cases, we will provide reasons for our decision and we will, to the best of our ability, provide recommendations of other possible ways forward for the family, in the best interests of the children.

If prognosis looks good enough after the contact trial, depending on the specific needs of the family, there may be further supported contact or the Court may Order Programme 3 (or a trial of Parenting Co-ordination from another provider).

Programme 3: Parenting Co-ordination Trial

We would normally need to have done *either* Programme 1, 2 or both to undertake Programme 3 with a family.

A very short term trial of up to 12 weeks is usually advised, with a report on progress at the end of this programme and a return to Court for Directions on Child Arrangements. It is usually helpful for the Court to Order a temporary shared care arrangement for the duration of this trial or temporary primary care to NRP depending on the particular family dynamics.

The parents will be asked to create a Parenting Plan and use an app called 'Our Family Wizard' (OFW) for communication, monitored either directly by the Consultant or one of our therapists/co-parenting counsellors (PC), with interventions, evaluating the parents' capacity to develop more sensible co-parenting communication.

Sessions will take place with the Consultant, as needed, with the parents, individually or together, so that, mindful of the children's specific needs and what is manageable in practice, the starting point of the family dynamics and potential leverage points (from Programme 1 or 2) can be further explored and utilised to develop better communication and behaviour.

In this programme, the 'road map' and foundation of optimum therapeutic strategies for moving matters forward will be developed, often, but not necessarily, including the following:

1. Analysis of texts, communications and emails to identify not only overt, but *covert* communications leading to distress for either parent or rejection/distress in the children.
2. Development of new communication styles which are completely overt with a positive tone, solution focussed.
3. Analysis of what constitutes other unhelpful communication (length frequency, tone, style etc) with development of highly specified guidelines on new styles, which are monitored by PC on OFW. Simplified, possibly even just bullet points, positive tone etc.
4. Provided no real problem at previous NRP's home, the priority will be to stop any triangulation which may exist, prevent distress communication escalating from children to previous RP. The parents and PC will need to choose from not having access to mobile phone, or having messages through OFW on higher alert during visits to NRP, with PC immediately informed, letting NRP know, how to resolve/support sensitively with agreed strategies, NRP letting PC know how the children, and PC letting RP know what has happened, and how it was resolved, so RP can feel reassured.
5. Emails on OFW by each parent initially to go through PC before being put up on OFW, whilst training in new approaches. Once trained and settled, emails may be sent freely between parents via OFW, with any really sensitive or problematic issues raised to be drafted and sent to PC before sending to other parent, to avoid setbacks.

6. Skype or telephone calls between children and previous NRP to be recorded for PC to view, but not to be monitored in any way by RP, with children given privacy in room.
7. Any extreme differences in parenting style to be managed by training both parents with the same Parental Control Strategies (using logical consequences), possibly with both separately attending a recommended provider. Intention to move towards a more similar approach, simultaneously developing greater tolerance of parental style differences in each home.
8. PC to monitor and liaise with the provider of above parenting skills input to ensure both parents engaging appropriately and getting through the material.
9. PC to task the parents with 'homework' to develop key scenarios which may apply in practice from parenting skills course, using it to agree on potential ways forward in core applied problem areas specific to their own children.
10. Agreed sanctions for lack of follow through on Parenting Plan by either parent, or where problematic behaviour seen by one or other of the parents, with worst case scenario of returning to Court to vary child arrangements, whether primary care with previous RP or a change of residence to NRP

Another short letter report will be produced at the end of this 12 week programme, providing a longer view of likely prognosis of capacity to sustain change, having seen how the family are engaging and working.

If prognosis looks positive enough, based on the parents' response to this phase, they will need to move to longer term less intense therapeutic work to sustain any changes made.

If prognosis based on Programme 3 responses looks poor, we will make recommendations on other ways forward, in light of our experiences with the family, providing guidelines, if appropriate, on any critical steps or personal developmental milestones required to achieve an improved prognosis. We will also let the Court know whether we consider it at all feasible for us to take the family on again at a later stage after any such work is completed.

Programme 4: Sustaining Change

Provision of consultancy and supervision for another provider of Co-Parenting counselling OR

Monitoring and management of day to day parenting issues by therapist on Our Family Wizard for 12-18 months, with reducing involvement over time, depending on response. Intermittent meetings as needed, with Consultant, with quarterly letter reports to Court, on trajectory of the family's progress, likelihood of sustained change and long term arrangements.