FUNCTIONAL FAMILY THERAPY

WORKING WITH HIGH CONFLICT DIVORCED PARENTS

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PART 1: FFT: MODEL REVIEW

- Core Model Principles
- Therapist Attitude
- Therapist Skill
- Planning
FFT “ATTITUDE”

**Core Philosophy**
- Respectfulness
- Non-judgmental
- Strength-based

**Family-Based**
- Balanced Alliances
- Relational vs. Individual
- Matching to individuals, relationships, family, and environment

**Risk and Protection**
- Altering ratios or odds by reducing risk and enhancing strengths
Matching

Interventions are specific and individualized to the unique challenges, diverse qualities (cultures, personal experiences), and strengths of all families and family members.
We begin with “Family First” to successfully address the Individual and ecosystemic nature of clinical problems.
Goals
• Enhance perception of responsiveness and credibility

Skills
• Superficial qualities
  • Persistence
  • Matching

Focus
• Immediate responsiveness
• Strength-based and relational

Activities
• Availability
  • Phone reach out,
  • Frequency
THERAPIST PLANNING

- Goal: Family is all present in sessions
- Triage: Safety Considerations
  - History of domestic violence between parents
  - Restraining orders
  - Where to meet
  - Dual sessions/one case

OVERALL IMPACT OF CHANGE FOR FAMILY IS DEPENDENT ON EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT OF PARENTS
Who Should Attend?
Who Are The “Major Players?”

1 – Family member(s) seen as part of the “problem” according to referral source(s).

2 – Family members we think (based on referral info and first calls to the family) are likely to “shut the process down” - and who probably can!

3 – Family members we think are necessary to begin change in the referral youth(s)

4 – Important nonfamily members who have play an influential role with the youth / family (e.g., Grandma)
Motivation Phase

- Create context for change
- Decrease conflict
- Increase hope
- Balanced Alliances

Goals

- Interpersonal
  - Clinical
  - Contingent
  - Responsive

Skills

- Change Focus
- Change Meaning

Focus

- Strength-based
- Relational
- Non-judgmental
- Respectful

Activities
Relational Assessment Phase

- Elicit and analyze information about patterns
- Observation

• Perceptiveness
• Understanding systems and relationships

- Formulate relational assessment
- Plan for behavior change

• Within family patterns
• Extra-familial patterns

Goals
Skills
Focus
Activities

• Elicit and analyze information about patterns
• Observation
WORKING WITH CONFLICT BETWEEN DIVORCED PARENTS IN FFT

- Risk to children: parents being on different pages, fighting in front of kids, putting kids in the middle by trashing the other parent to or in front of children

- Protection orders or parents who have no contact may be an exception
  - This is particularly problematic when parents share custody/parenting. Transition kids from house to house.
  - Remember: If one parent is ‘trashing’ the other parent to you that.
    - Being in the middle is a choice
    - Your job in that case is to help facilitate direct communication
    - Meeting individually with a parent who attacks the other is almost an invitation for that parent to complain about the other parent
      - And when they do that it becomes nearly impossible not to be perceived as being on one side or the other.
      - Respond that you are here for the kids; respond that “this (the parent’s complaint) is the reason that parents needs to meet.
WORKING WITH CONFLICT BETWEEN DIVORCED PARENTS IN FFT

- It is easier for the FFT therapist to get divorced parents to meet when it is an overall expectations that families meet.
  - All of the agency literature should state the expectation that family members will meet
  - That if there is conflict amongst caregivers of children that meeting is particularly important...for the welfare of the children
  - From first contact with the referral source, the expectation that the family will meet should be stated and be made clear
  - Other services/systems (example courts, judges) should also reinforce this.
WORKING WITH DIVORCED PARENTS
LONGER TERM GOALS

- The long term goal of meeting is not that parents like each other. They may not even respect each other. And it isn’t to send divorced parents to therapy together, although a parent may need individual counseling to move on or work through their anger/disappointment/etc.

- The long term goal is that a general civility toward the other parent is evident in interactions between parents, especially in front of children, at the most basic level, a peace treaty for the sake of the children they share.

- The long term goal is that parents can communicate with each other well enough to not undermine the other in parenting or decision making, and that ideally, they coordinate and move closer toward co-parenting.
If the first meeting goes poorly it will be more difficult to get parents in the room.

You may have to meet with parents individually first to set the stage: to reduce anxiety, assure them you’ll be in charge, set any expectations for the meeting. An often pertinent ground rule is that we are not meeting to fix the past.

Meeting individually, however, is short term and very time limited. Be clear about this with each parent.

The past can be a black hole since what’s happened before is not something you’ll resolve and will likely serve to increase negativity. It’s more a place for an individual counselor who’d meet with the individual parent.

You may have to reassure that you’re not on a parent’s side as much as you want their behavior to help the child. You’re on the side, then, of helping the parents work together.
Script it. Rehearse. Script it again. Anticipate what they’ll say and identify responses ahead of time. Talk with your Senior and Team manager. Use the basis team.

You may need to provide tremendous structure to keep things going well in the meeting. It may be you do much of the talking. Prepare for that.

Anticipate negativity and rehearse how you’ll change focus and reinforce that you’re hear for the kids. Reframe in advance.

Set clear and do-able goals. It may be with some parents the act of meeting and not having things blow up is significant in and of itself. And once that first goal is met end the meeting AND set the time for the next meeting.

Praise their courage and willingness to meet and willingness to put their children first.
HIGH CONFLICT DIVORCED PARENTS

- A first meeting can be quick. It can serve simply to show that they can meet without having it blow up

- Should kids be present? IF you’re able to have a meeting where the kids see their parents acting appropriately that can be powerful. The presence of children can be a powerful reminder. Remember the kids have likely seen their parents at their worse, so anything they see in a meeting won’t likely be new. That said, much of the decision making here may well center on your personal confidence. Do what you think YOU can handle.
The types of things you’ll ultimately want to be made clear is

- Clarity about how transition between homes occurs. Civility is the expectation.
- Expectation around when and how communication occurs. Mutual expectations that neither parent will be negative about the other parent in front of the child.
- Written and shared expectation around communication and decision making helps. Don’t’ leave it to interpretation.
- It may be that you have to monitor that communication until you’re satisfied how parents are conducting themselves. Monitor and support the change.
- Anticipate with parents how it might go wrong and help them come to agreement how they’ll respond when it does.
- Find other family members/friends who may be able to help, but it will have to be a mutually agreeable to both parents.
BEHAVIOR CHANGE PLANNING

- Always identify the referred behavior
- Skill development should benefit all
- Overall all goals for what skills will be learned and by whom
- Step the skill sets across the phase…..PLAN for each session
- Contingent/Responsive to family
THERAPEUTIC CONSIDERATIONS

- Focus must be FAMILY FIRST
- Therapist must address the underlying meanings of the referred behavior
- Review of the patterns of behavior. Remember patterns play out differently between houses and relationships
- Therapist anchor are the principles of the Model:
  - Respect
  - Relational
  - Non-judgmental
SKILL SETS

- FAMILY FOCUSED
  - Communication Training
  - Problem Solving
  - Parenting Styles

- INDIVIDUAL SKILL SETS
  - Parenting
  - Anger Management
  - Substance Abuse
GENERALIZATION GOALS

- Identify and Reinforce positive changes — what is the change and how will it be sustained?
- Help generalize change
- Relapse Prevention
- Identify additional community or family resources
GENERALIZATION SKILLS

Still (always) matching to...

Recognize progress and identify successes.
  - Help the family own the changes they have made.
  - Reinforce their confidence/success in navigating systems and making changes
  - Identify how to continue their success
PREVENTION--SAFETY PLANS

- ADDRESS THE RISK → WORK WITH CHANGE TO SUSTAIN IT
  - Remember the children—families make changes to help keep children safe or not acting out
- Specific, Concrete
- Doable
- Remember that it may have to be enacted in times of high stress and difficulty
- How can we help make the whole family responsible? How might everyone be included?
- Consider relational functions
- Can you use themes or reframes to help keep them on track when it gets tough
PREVENTION PLANNING

- Remember that plans will have to be accessed at times of higher stress. They’ll need to intervene. Anticipate that ahead of time and determine in a way that everyone agrees and understands.

- How and when they’ll know to intervene. Be specific. What will be the indications/behaviors that will signal them that they have to pull out their plan.

- Identify someone in the family or someone near to the family to pull them together to identify that things are becoming problematic again. Have everyone agree on this person and write it down and make it clear.

- WHAT the plan is should be able to be done at moments of high stress. It will likely need to be very concrete with very clear steps. It should be written. It should be kept available.