



Jan Faust

# Reunification Family Therapy

A Treatment Manual

# Reunification Family Therapy

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Jan Faust, PhD, ABPP, is Professor at the College of Psychology at Nova Southeastern University (NSU), Fort Lauderdale, FL. While at NSU, Dr. Faust developed the Child and Adolescent Traumatic Stress Program, which is a clinical, training, and research facility serving children exposed to traumatic events, including child abuse, witnessing interpersonal violence, accidental injury, and medical traumas. Furthermore, she has developed a family forensic component to her trauma program wherein her doctoral students conduct forensic evaluations, post-dissolution therapy, reunification therapy, and individual therapy for children and their families experiencing family court issues.

Dr. Faust has conducted various research projects, and currently she is conducting treatment outcome research on treatment efficacy for families in reunification therapy, parent empathy training, and children with post traumatic stress disorder. She has published many articles in peer-reviewed journals and book chapters in the field of child, adolescent, and family psychology. Dr. Faust has served as Associate Editor for the APA trauma journal *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* and was a founding editor of the *Journal of Trauma Practice*.

Finally, Dr. Faust also serves as an academic expert witness and conducts family reunification therapy, forensic evaluations, family mediation, and second opinion reviews in independent practice. She is a Florida Supreme Court Certified Family Mediator. She has also received Board Certification from the American Board of Professional Psychology in Behavioral and Cognitive Psychology.

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# Dedication

*For my family, and the families I have had the privilege of serving.*



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# Preface

The inception of this book originated from observations gleaned and research conducted over the years, revealing that child problems do not occur in isolation and that many children are confronted with a variety of losses during childhood. Irrespective of a child's symptom presentation, its maintenance, exacerbation, and amelioration appears to be contingent on several environmental variables, including those exhibited in the family setting. For example, family conflict has been observed to drive children's adjustment to a myriad of life events, not just to a parent's divorce but also to chronic and life-threatening disease, exposure to various traumas (e.g., fire, terrorism, child sexual abuse, hurricane), and peer relational problems. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the fracturing of the family system due to a host of factors such as military deployment, incarceration, and dissolution of the coparenting relationship (e.g., divorce and separation). The physical and/or emotional separation of a parent from a child can have deleterious emotional consequences for the child as well as the potential to permanently erode the parent-child relationship.

While lawmakers appreciate that children require opportunities to have healthy relationships with both parents, the vehicle employed to provide these affiliations is obscure in many cases. This is particularly true in high-conflict families, where parents are not only embroiled in overt conflict but also have multiple covert agendas from which they are operating, and which, at times, unexpectedly shift. These agendas often include the thwarting of one parent's time-sharing with the child in order to maximize the amount of child support payments, as an example. Frequently this leaves little recourse for officers of the court, who frequently call upon mental health professionals to assist in conflict resolution. For therapists who have been the recipients of these cases, they understand that conducting family therapy to repair intact families, while challenging, is nearly an impossible feat when attempting to repair those families comprising individuals who no longer desire to be together. Given societal mandates, scientific discovery, and the law, it is important for children to

have healthy relationships with both parents irrespective of their parents' marital status, employment status (e.g., military), health status, and legal status (e.g., incarceration). It ultimately becomes incumbent upon the mental health professional to facilitate parent-child relationships, and while treatment outcome research is scant with respect to the best methods to assist these reunifying families, the incorporation of evidence-based treatments obtained from other realms of clinical psychology can be applied in the service of these cases. It is hoped that this treatment guide can serve as a manual to assist professionals in their work with reunifying parent-child relationships.

This book is divided into chapters that include the procedures of reunification therapy from the commencement of therapy to its completion. It incorporates instructional information as the therapist works initially with each member of the family and then when family members are subsequently joined together for family intervention. Additionally, ethical and legal considerations as well as the use of ancillary professionals in the reunification process are addressed. Alternative forms of reunification therapy, as well as special considerations when reunifying families, are also presented. Finally, a step-by-step treatment plan is provided as a reunification therapy template, and additional tools to effectuate change are included in the Appendices.

I would like to express my gratitude to Brandon and Nina for their unremitting unconditional support and faith in their mother. I would like to acknowledge Anita Alexander and Kelly Gibson for their invaluable assistance in preparing this volume and Colby Schepps for the use of her poignant maxims. I would also like to thank the Honorable Susan Greenhawt for her thoughtful feedback regarding this book and her valuable insights over the years from the bench. Finally, I would like to thank the Florida Family Court Bench and the family law attorneys who have entrusted me with serving the needs of their clients.

Jan Faust  
Fort Lauderdale, FL  
October 2017



# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction to Family Structure and Fragmentation of the Family

*And love is love...*

Lin-Manuel Miranda (2016, 70th Tony Awards, New York, NY)

The objective of publishing this book is to provide a blueprint for mental health professionals who are working with fragmented families of all constitutions and structures, to assist in reunifying parents and children. Family structures have changed considerably in the last 100 years, with the advancement of science and social revolution and reformation. The American landscape has been transformed with multigenerational family farming units collapsing into smaller entities and the scattering of family members across the country. Historically, farming parents bore a large number of children to assist with the servicing of the farm; however, with the invention of automated machinery, the need for multiple hands diminished. Scientific discovery, not only within the farming industry but also with respect to mass production of goods and expeditious transportation, has heightened human mobility. These changes have contributed to the dispersion of extended families such that there no longer remains a need for relatives to live in proximity to the nuclear family. Additionally, the women's movement has contributed to increased numbers of women in the work place, affording women greater self-sufficiency, which has had a cascading effect on divorce rates. No longer do women have to remain married for reasons of economic security; in fact, women have chosen to marry less frequently in recent years and to have children out of wedlock in increasing numbers, such that since 1960, the number of live births to unmarried women has increased from 5.3 % to 40.3 % (Child Trends Data Bank, 2015). The impact of the women's movement coupled with the sexual revolution has assisted with the destigmatizing of divorce.

Economic changes have also episodically impacted the family structure, including adult children returning to their parents' home to reside, and adult children caring for their elderly parents in their own homes or those of their parents. Additionally, the notable increase

in substance abuse and addiction in recent decades has contributed to children being raised by grandparents, other relatives, and non-biologically related caregivers. Similarly, there is an observed downward effect of substance abusing parents on child maltreatment; hence, in a cohort of abuse cases, substance use and abuse are factors detected in the family systems of abused children (Barth, Gibbons, & Guo, 2006). In fact, the United States Department of Health and Human Services (1996) identified parents with a substance use disorder were 3 times more likely to engage in child maltreatment than those without a substance use disorder.

Family composition has also been impacted by modern war such that between 2001 and 2013, 2 million children experienced a military deployment of a parent at least once (Clever & Segal, 2013). Other noted changes in the military family structure, in recent history, are observed in the fact that many more women are entering the military than previously, and concomitant with this change, many households are headed by two military parents. In 2014, the Department of Defense stated that 11.7 % of all active duty personnel included both married partners, with 19.3 % of all active duty Air Force personnel in dual military marriages (Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Department of Defense, 2014). Not only have military parents recognized the need to reconfigure family processes, structure, and operations given their impending absence from their children's lives, but courts have also recognized the need for adjudicating guardianships for children in these families when both parents are deployed simultaneously or when deployments overlap with each other. The federal government has sought to protect the child's interests in this regard (Burelli & Miller, 2013), and the majority of states have followed with similar laws as a result of the federal statutes. Currently, the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (2014) is the only

federal statute designed to protect single-parent service members. The parent's military deployment cannot be used as grounds for a change in custody, including time-sharing or modification of an existing parenting plan (e.g., Cal. Family Code § 3047, 2011, Division 8: Custody of Children, Chapter 2: Matters to Be Considered in Granting Custody; Temporary Time-Sharing Modification and Child Support Modification Due to Military Service, 2016; Modification of Order Based on Military Duty, 2009; Definitions, 2009). In fact, in some states, there are provisions for the deploying parent to appoint someone in their absence to stand-in for their time-sharing and parental decision making (e.g., Temporary Time-Sharing Modification and Child Support Modification Due to Military Service, 2016).

With respect to marital or partner dissolution and family court, the judicial climate has changed dramatically over the years regarding coparenting of children. For example, in 1996, researchers discovered that southeastern US judges' preferred time-sharing plan was for children to reside for the school year with one parent and the summer with the other parent, followed by the sole custody of one parent (Stamps, Kunen, & Lawyer, 1996). They also found that for visitation and time-sharing schedules, judges' preferred schedules were every other weekend as the most popular, followed in descending order of popularity by every weekend, more often than every weekend, one weekend per month, and less than one weekend per month. These 20-year-old findings contrast with the more recent statutory abolition of any demarcation of custodial or residential parent, and the current pending legislation in Florida of a presumption of 50/50 time-sharing (FLS SB 668, 2016). These statutory events highlight the dramatic changes in the views of the bench regarding time-sharing.

Despite a more restricted judicial perspective of time-sharing in the past, judges historically rated the parent-child relationship and the family unit as the most important factors in deciding time-sharing and access in divorce cases (Stamps et al., 1996). The focus on the parent-child relationship and the family as essential in considering a variety of parenting plans continues to be primary in judicial determination of parent-child time-sharing. In fact, most states employ "the child's best interests" standard when considering parent access to children. These best interests examine, in part, whether or not the parents can facilitate and encourage a close and continuing parent-child relationship. Some states expand upon this premise adding that the parents are required to honor the time-sharing schedule and to be reasonable when changes are required.

Finally, a more unusual need for reunification therapy can be discerned in the shifting age demographic as baby boomers age and are living longer than in previous decades. This, coupled with young-adult children returning home after college graduation or not leaving home as expeditiously as in earlier years, has created greater frequency of contact between adult children and their parents, as well as heightened reciprocal support-seeking relationships. Ultimately this change in family structure can create problematic interpersonal relationships leading to severed parent and adult-child relationships.

This treatment manual provides the therapist with a guide to assist the dissolving family unit which has been ruptured via several different mechanisms involving unified family law litigation, including marital or partner dissolution, paternity, dependency, domestic violence, and juvenile delinquency, as well as those families involved in military deployment and institutionalization (incarceration or hospitalization) and adult-child-parent relationship difficulties.

It should be emphasized that the content of this manual is based on the available scientific literature, including evidence-based practices and other empirical research, and well-established theories in the psychology literature, as well as observations gleaned in clinical practice. It also should be noted that the information imparted through this book and the example treatment template at the close of this book consider these scientifically derived sources of information, while noting that each individual and specific family is unique. The treatment utilized for each family is likely to vary to some degree from that which is imparted in this book. This treatment variance may be due to individual nuances of the problem areas leading to reunification therapy, individual differences in the family members and the family as an entity, and individual differences of the totality of the situation, including the specific legal issues in those reunification cases with court or other legal involvement.