

Mental Health Services for Families
With a History of Abuse, Alleged Abuse,
and High Conflict Divorce Issues
at the Center for Safe and Healthy Families

Brian L. Thorn, Ph.D.
Primary Children's Hospital
Salt Lake City, Utah
brian.thorn@imail.org

Therapeutic vs. Forensic Roles in Mental Health

Ethical Principles for all mental health professionals caution against multiple roles due to the potential for conflict.

- *“Psychologists avoid multiple relationships.”*
- *“Psychologists generally do not conduct psychological evaluations in child protection matters in which they serve in a therapeutic role for the child or the immediate family.”*
- *“This does not, however, preclude psychologists from testifying in cases as fact or expert witnesses concerning therapeutic treatment of the children.”*

(American Psychological Association, Committee on Professional Practice and Standards, 1998)

Therapeutic vs. Forensic Role Differences

- *Goals of the professional; Whose goals are paramount?*
- *Attitude/climate of the professional relationship*
- *Holder of privilege; Who is the client?*
- *Nature of the hypotheses tested in the assessment process*
- *With children, the degree to which one parent may be considered biased varies according to context*

Therapeutic vs. Forensic Role Differences

- *Amount of structure and control*
- *Scrutiny applied to information obtained in the process and the role of historical truth*
- *Impact of critical judgment*
- *Nature and degree of “adversarialness”*
- *Areas of competence vary according to the role*

Role conflict may damage the therapeutic process and bring risks of inaccuracy and bias into the court’s process. Placing a therapist in the position of making visitation decisions creates a role conflict.

Court Ordered Services at Safe and Healthy Families

Medical vs. Mental Health Services at PCH-SHF

- *Medical services at SHF are all forensically focused*
- *Mental health services at SHF are primarily focused on therapeutic/treatment needs*
- *We rely on DCFS/CPS, law enforcement, and the courts to determine if abuse has occurred and teach trainees to avoid trauma-focused or specific abuse-focused treatment in the absence of a supported investigation or court finding.*
- *We have no special ability to determine the accuracy of an allegation.*

Court Ordered Services at Safe and Healthy Families

- *Health insurance cannot be used to pay for court ordered services (One exception: court orders a parent to take a child in distress for treatment and the treatment provider determines the therapeutic goals)*
- *Re-establishing (or “reunifying”) a relationship between an estranged parent and a child is appropriate as a therapeutic goal only if the child desires a closer relationship with that parent. “Reunification” may be a reasonable goal in a forensic situation.*
- *Working with high conflict divorce families requires specialized skills, clearly defined roles from the outset, and clearly defined goals, especially when there are allegations of abuse against one or both of the parents.*

Court Ordered Services at Safe and Healthy Families

Using our template for “Orders Directing Services”

- *Required for eligibility to apply for financial assistance*
- *Clarifies our role and specific objective(s) for the service.*
- *Clarifies limits in terms of time and scope of service.*
- *Always work best if communication with me prior to finalization occurs to make sure the objective is something we can work with and give an estimate of time needed.*
- *Keep in mind we are a small clinic often operating at full capacity; our ability to respond quickly varies across time.*

Effective Trauma Treatment

- *Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT, best empirical support, certification program)*
- *Attachment, Self-regulation, and Competency*
- *Integrated Treatment of Complex Trauma*
- *Child-Parent Psychotherapy (for infants and toddlers)*

Parent-Child Interaction Therapy

- *For ages 2-7, often works well with 8 year-olds*
- *Highly effective at strengthening a parent-child relationship, calming an anxious child*
- *Good for children with difficult behavior problems, possibly due to abuse history; teaches effective positive discipline skills*
- *Live coached practice of the relationship building and discipline skills until the parent demonstrates competence*
- ***Important** No effective with parents who are not motivated to change. Does not teach good judgment.*
- *Requires significant investment of parent time/energy, requires parent to engaged in specialized play with their child several days/week.*

PCH Safe and Healthy Families contact information

Kari Cunningham, intake office, 801-662-3606

Sara Jackson, intake office, 801-662-3606

Brian Thorn, Ph.D., 801-662-3636

Amy Oxman, LCSW, 801-662-3630