

# ANOTHER CHANCE

A Plan for Parents Wishing to Reunite with their Children

PRESENTED BY  
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In the years following a separation and/or divorce, 33-40% of children lose contact with a biological parent. This loss can deeply impact the child developmentally, emotionally, socially, and academically throughout the course of their lifetime. Throughout their life a child can be haunted by lifelong feelings of emptiness and abandonment and may experience any of the following:

- A belief that they are not worth of the absent parent's love and presence.
- Increased risk of being involved with 'state systems- DJJ, DSS, etc
- Poor school performance, including higher rates of dropping out and grade incompleteness
- Increased risk taking behaviors and higher rates of teen pregnancy
- Increased use of drugs and alcohol
- Increased aggression and acting out
- Feelings of shame, rejection, anger, sadness, guilt and confusion
- A desire to know they are missed and thought about by the absent parent
- A need to develop stories that explain the parent's disappearance

### ***Why does a parent drop out?***

Loss of contact can occur for a variety of reasons and sometimes occur for factors outside of the parent's control. Some of these reasons include:

- Ongoing conflict between the parents over parenting and custody issues
- The inability to provide good parenting and caregiving due to mental health issues, alcohol and/or drug abuse
- The child's and/or parent's difficulty adjusting to the separation, divorce or incarceration
- Safety issues, such as domestic violence and/or child abuse
- Relocation of parent more than 60 miles from where the child resides
- Alienating behaviors by the other parent
- Lack of knowledge that a biological parent exists
- The choice of a parent to not be involved due to concerns about child support obligations or immaturity

# WE KNOW YOU ARE READY TO DIVE IN AND GET STARTED BUT THE REUNIFICATION PROCESS NEEDS TO GO SLOW!!!!



A Reunification Plan **MUST** be built around a child-focused timeline. This typically means that the time with the child will not usually start at the level the reunifying parent will like.

The reuniting parent has to be willing to commit to a plan that gradually increases the amount of parenting time as the child is able to manage. Contact may begin with phone calls, cards, emails or letters.

Length of time may vary and is based on many factors

You are laying the foundation for what will hopefully be a lifetime of involvement with the child

## *COMMIT TO THE LONG ROAD AHEAD*

Carrying out a successful plan for reunification can take months to years. If you are the reuniting parents you must be honest with yourself about your ability to keep up the effort. Consistency and predictability between visits is important.

Remember the child has probably spent many days waiting and wondering if you will show up, so has the custodial parent. Although you may be committed, they may not know this. **Earning trust of the child and the other parent depends on being true to your word and keeping promises.** *This takes time to build and can be easily lost.* Don't give the other parent an opportunity to say "here we go again" because you cancel plans for a visit.

# ***Remember your child's point of view***



When a parent and/or caregiver disconnects from their life a child can experience sadness, anger, guilt, shame and/or confusion.

It doesn't matter if you believe you made the 'right' decision that was in your child's best interest, this is a concept that children rarely understand. A child may tell themselves "*if only I was \_\_\_\_\_ (loveable, good, smart, talented, cute) enough you would have stayed*"

Children often blame themselves when a parent leaves and may feel rejected and abandoned. The easiest explanation for a child of a parent's departure is it was themselves.

Your child may lash out in anger or they form an idealized image of the absent parent. They can even create unrealistic fantasies about what they parent will be like when they return.

# Be prepared to demonstrate accountability for past behaviors

A child's sense of safety can be damaged by the loss of a parent. Part of the child's healing process is learning that the absent parent takes responsibility for their part in the absence. It is the only way for the child to see you as a trustworthy and dependable parent.

Even if the custodial parent, you believe, is engaging in alienating behaviors, your child does not want to hear excuses blaming the other parent. Resist the urge to "educate" your child as to "the truth" about what really happened, as that is not really helpful. Become comfortable answering any question about why you left without pointing the finger at the other parent or making the child feel they have to choose sides.

*Expect resistance from the parent who remained and has been taking care of the child.*

They may have developed another routine, gained new partners, predictability, rituals or feel they have had to make excuses for your absence.



**Remember the goal is reconnecting with your child/children- Not trying to gain a battle partner against them**

## ***Be prepared to address questions and concerns from the custodial parent***

MOST CHILDREN FORM SECURE ATTACHMENTS WITH ONE, OR SOMETIMES MORE CAREGIVERS. THEY TRUST THOSE CAREGIVERS WITH THEIR EMOTIONAL, PHYSICAL AND MENTAL SAFETY. THIS BOND IS THE FOUNDATION OF THEIR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT.



It requires more than words to build back relationships. It takes trusts and can only be established by consistently showing up for parenting time and meeting other obligations. Both the child and the custodial parent worry that you may disappear again and the pieces of that action will have to be picked up again from the child

The custodial parent wants to see you demonstrate developmentally appropriate parenting skills and providing appropriate care. Be willing to take parenting skills classes if the other parent requests it.

If you had any unsafe behaviors that caused your absence, then the custodial parent and child need to know you have changed those behaviors. What are your plans for relapse prevention if drugs and alcohol were involved. If there was domestic violence, have you completed an anger management program? Have you learned ways to express anger that do not harm those around you?

Are you going to be here for more than just the good times? Sometimes the custodial parent worries that you want to swoop in and be the "hero". Be willing to take on some less-than-fun parenting responsibilities (homework, driving to/from activities, parent-teacher conference

s.

**Provide economic support for your child, it is crucial to build trust!!!**

I want to develop a plan.....

Things to consider



*How old was your child when you had an active role in their life and how old are they now??*

If you left before the age of three, your child may not have much of a memory of you at all. Did your child not know you existed? If they did, what knowledge do they have of you and where did they get that knowledge? Some experts believe that any separation over three months will require long-term therapeutic work when looking at reunification.

*What were the circumstances that lead to the loss of contact with your child and what memory does your child have of those events?*

If your child witnessed domestic violence or abuse, they may become very frightened, anxious or aggressive at the idea of reunification. They may need extra help by a therapist to address these feelings.

Safety factors have to be considered, which means that supervised visits may occur before unsupervised parenting time.



*It is not unusual for a parent's unresolved feelings about the breakup with their former partner to be behind their absence*

Reunification is a process for you to re-establish your relationship with your child. Be absolutely certain that you are not basing your hopes on the idea of reestablishing an intimate relationship with the other parent. Your child needs to know you are doing it for them.



*It is important to assess the number and types of losses the child experienced, including parental conflict. These factors may impact the length of time it will take your child to complete the reunification process.*

Children can be traumatized by abandonment, abuse, and neglect and witnessing verbal or physical conflict between their parents.

When a child loses contact with a parent they can experience a wide range of emotions. It can take up to two years for them to work through their grief. The more losses a child experiences, the more difficult it becomes for them to bounce back. When a child has a history that includes prior trauma and a high degree of conflict between the parents, supervised visits with the reuniting parent may be needed.

*The amount of access between a child and the absent parent is often influenced by the quality of the relationship with the remaining parent*

The number one risk factor for children is exposure to parental conflict. You do not need to be the best friend of the other parent, but you will have to work together to be able to share information with the other parent without fighting in front of the child.

Be willing to look in the mirror- how have you contributed to the conflict in the past and what can you do differently? What are the trigger points that push your own coping skills to the limit (which makes you have words and behaviors that are not uplifting)? How are you keeping your child away from the parental conflict.

The best approach is to approach the relationship with the other parent as a business relationship!!

The "company goal"? Raising healthy, happy and thriving children.

That means clear lines of communication, respecting each other's privacy, and agreeing to disagree.



# Do's and Don'ts for the custodial parent

## Be supportive of your child's desire for reunification

CHILDREN WILL HAVE CONFLICTING FEELINGS AND MAY WORRY THEY ARE BEING DISLOYAL TO THE PARENT WHO HAS BEEN HERE ALL THE TIME.

SHOW YOUR CHILD THAT YOU SUPPORT THEIR NEED FOR A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OTHER PARENT. THAT LETS THEM OFF THE HOOK OF A LOYALTY CONFLICT!!!

- Don't use visitation as an opportunity to pick an argument
- Don't make visitation difficult by not being home when the other parent comes or make access difficult. Your child may later have problems in their relationship with you if they find out
- Do be aware of your own hostility toward the other parent
- Don't assume your child doesn't need their other parent because you've partnered or remarried. Your child will always need to resolve the relationship with their absent parent.



### ***Why do reunification plans fail??***

- The reuniting parent rushed the process and the child was not ready
- Each parent gave the child different messages
- The parents were continually changing the parenting plan at the first hick-up
- One parent continues to try to interfere in the process by allowing their anger toward the absent parent to affect the process

## *FOCUSED ON SUCCESS*

***"Do I want to win, or do I want a relationship?"***

- Put your ego aside and focus on the child first. Get to know them and understand their world before rushing in to tell them all about yourself.
- Take care of any unfinished business. Be sure you are in a good place to be a safe and capable parent so don't allow your unresolved feelings for the other parent or unsafe behavior to overwhelm you.
- Respect the concerns and needs of the custodial parent.
- Commit to the long haul the process may require.
- Be reliable and consistent and above all keep your promises.
- Focus on the present and future, don't dwell on the past.
- Let your child know you missed and thought about them often.

# Building your plan

*Develop a plan that starts with short, brief amounts of time and builds up trust. At each phase of the plan, evaluate the pace.*

*Focus on getting to know your child for who they are, instead of trying to catch them up on your life*

- **Do** have activities planned that engages your child mentally and physically. By doing those activities together, you will develop your connection.
- **Don't** use electronics to babysit your child(ren). This robs you of learning about your child.
- **Don't** try to "buy" your way into your child's life by lavishing them with gifts. The only gift they truly need and want is your attention.
- **Do** introduce them to new experiences or teach them new skills.
- **Do** encourage them to share their artwork, their school work, hobbies, sporting events and anything they are involved in.

# *How does Outside of the Box Therapy work on reunification?*



At Outside of the Box Therapy we use a team approach to treatment.

- The child is assigned their own therapist to have a safe place to work through feelings and concerns.
- The parents may have an individual therapist to address their past issues that may be influencing the process.
- The biological parents will have a co-parenting therapist to address issues or concerns



# Small Steps, Big Gains

- 1.) Intake therapist meets individually with both parents
- 2.) Therapist meets individually with the child
- 3.) Absent parent and child meet under the direction of the therapist
- 4.) Absent parent and child meet under the Supervised Visitation Supervisor
- 5.) In addition to individual sessions with the child, child will start unsupervised visits with the parent gradually adding time.

**TIMELINES VARY**

# **Are you ready for reunification?**

- **Can I commit to consistency in parenting time?**
- **Am I willing to put aside the past, and my own opinion about my ex, so my child(ren) have the other parent in their life?**
- **Am I prepared to participate in counseling individually, or with my child(ren)?**
- **Have I remedied my past unsafe behaviors?**
- **Am I ready for the financial cost?**

*CALL IT A CLAN, CALL IT A NETWORK,  
CALL IT A TRIBE, CALL IT A FAMILY.  
WHATEVER YOU CALL IT, WHOEVER  
YOU ARE, YOU NEED ONE -*  
JANE HOWARD



Outside of the Box offers  
Individual, Family and Group  
Therapy. It also offers  
Supervised Parenting.

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