

ETHICS IN ACTION:

Taking a Systems Approach to Therapy With Children



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As divorce rates appear to be declining, so too do rates of marriage, and levels of cohabitation are experiencing a rapid rise, neutralizing expected gains in family stability tied to declining divorce rates (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014). This means, statistically, that social workers who provide therapy to children will encounter parents at various stages of establishing post-separation legal arrangements for their children. Although most parents want positive outcomes for their children, they may at times harshly disagree on how to achieve those outcomes. This is such a well-known and ethically hazardous situation that it is even referenced in the NASW (2017) *Code of Ethics*, in section 1.06 on conflicts of interest:

(d) When social workers provide services to two or more people who have a relationship with each other (for example, couples, family members), social workers should clarify with all parties which individuals will be considered clients and the nature of social workers'

professional obligations to the various individuals who are receiving services. Social workers who anticipate a conflict of interest among the individuals receiving services or who anticipate having to perform in potentially conflicting roles (*for example, when a social worker is asked to testify in a child custody dispute* or divorce proceedings involving clients) should clarify their role with the parties involved and take appropriate action to minimize any conflict of interest. [Emphasis added.]

While a social worker might ask, "But I'm providing therapy only to the child—how am I providing services to multiple people?" the implications should ideally be clear: There are multiple legal responsibilities to both parents of the child, and thus services to a child inherently involve services to the parents. Those obligations are to *both parents*, regardless of which brought the child to therapy. Either parent could place the child—and, by extension, the social worker—in the middle of

protracted litigation, leading to unintended conflicts.

Most litigating parents mean well and seek only to help their children through a difficult family transition. Unfortunately, some parents themselves are hurt or angry over this process and are struggling to deal with their own challenges. A few are outright malicious, seeking to harm their former partner through their children. This reality presents a great difficulty for the treating social worker if only one parent participates with the child in therapy, as without both parents' active participation there are large gaps in how each parent sees the child's situation and the family's struggles. The singular "family" is used here intentionally—parents may cease being spouses, but they will always be parents to the children of their relationship. Those children have one family, spread across multiple households and perhaps complicated by stepparents and new siblings. This approach of having both parents in therapy is key to understanding family systems issues from the child's

perspective and in helping model for parents that children are affected by their internal issues, environmental issues in each parent's home, and the complex interplay of the child between those environments. Systems theory asserts that people are inextricably linked and are influenced by one another. By viewing children holistically, we can begin to see that their problems must be contextualized to create the most appropriate interventions. For example, a child acting out in one home but not the other may feel stifled by the parent with whom they act out; conversely, this behavior may be a sign that the child feels safe to express to that parent issues with which he or she cannot cope and is seeking help in the only way he or she can. The parent who tells a therapist that the child is "just fine" with them and attributes the child's lapses in the classroom as related to struggles with the child's other parent may be right; however, without involvement of that other parent, there is no way to

address that concern. Like everyone, parents are limited in seeing the world through their own lens of perspective and history—so much so that, without the participation of the co-parent, even the most well-meaning parent may miss issues in understanding their child’s behaviors. For those rarer occasions where a parent is acting with malice, involvement of the other parent may provide an early alert that all is not as it seems and that issues for the child may be much more complex than presented.

Not all parents will participate when contacted by a therapist, but at least by having made the attempt, the burden of responsibility shifts from the clinician failing to follow best practices to the parent who may have been wholly ignorant that the child was even involved with a therapist. Certainly, an apathetic or impaired parent may choose to not participate, but even that refusal provides additional systemic data about the child’s environment. Through steps as simple as explaining a systems theory approach to both the parent

seeking treatment and the child’s other parent (and then using that approach in providing services), social workers can begin to help children growing up in multiple homes—by treating them as whole individuals rather than as segmented personalities based on in whose home they have recently resided.

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REFERENCES

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TREATMENT AND MANAGEMENT OF OPIOID ADDICTION

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PRESENTERS: Maurice S. Fisher, Sr., PhD, LCSW, LSATP

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