

Process for Reunification

This material is adapted from Michael A. O'Connell, (1994) concerning recommendations on a procedure for reuniting offenders with their families.

1. The victim and his/her family and the juvenile sex offender prepare to meet with one another through individual work with their respective therapists. Before the meeting is scheduled, the therapists must concur that all parties are prepared and willing to meet with one another.
2. Initial visits between the family members, victim and the juvenile sex offender are held with therapist supervision in a therapist's office. The victim and the offender must be able to discuss the sexual abuse, the patterns of abuse, the betrayal of trust, and other issues before moving to the next stage.
3. Visits outside the therapist's office are arranged with family members who can and will assure that the juvenile sex offender behaves appropriately. The visits should be structured to include interactive activities (such as going out to dinner, or shopping at the mall), should be conducted in a public place, should include activities that interest everyone, and should gradually increase in length, with the first visit being about two hours long. These visits should not occur until the offender agrees to rules he/she will observe during the visits. These rules should be established in the safety plan. The offender should understand that his offending behavior, and nothing the child or family did, necessitated these rules. He should accept full responsibility for assuring that the rules are followed. The visit should be terminated if the victim becomes uncomfortable. Typical rules for these visits include:
 - ✓ The offender will never be alone without adult supervision.
 - ✓ The offender will refrain from any physical affection towards the victim and other children in the family.
 - ✓ The offender will have no secrets with the victim.
 - ✓ The offender will not be involved in any physical hygiene (i.e. taking the child to the rest room).
 - ✓ Discussions of the sexual abuse will occur only in the therapist's office.
 - ✓ Any other rules necessary to help the child feel safe and comfortable.

4. When several visits have been successfully completed, when issues arising during the visits have been resolved, and when all family members are comfortable with the idea, the juvenile sex offender may visit the home. He/she should enter the home as a visitor and must be supervised at all times. The first visit home should be fairly brief, and should include a specific activity, such as a family meal. The visits can then increase in length and frequency, and the young offender must adapt to family dynamics and routines which may have changed in his/her absence. The safety plan should be updated and include the previously mentioned rules and the following:

- ✓ The juvenile sex offender should not enter any bedroom.
- ✓ The offender should use the bathroom alone.
- ✓ The offender and all family members should be appropriately dressed at all times.
- ✓ The offender must be supervised at all times.
- ✓ The juvenile will not buy any presents or gifts or do anything that could be construed as grooming the child.
- ✓ The juvenile sex offender will not have any authority over the victim.

5. Overnight visits occur only after several extended visits have gone well. Individual therapy continues between these home visits so that any problems with the visits can be identified. Usually the first overnight visit is a natural extension of extended visits. The safety plan should be updated with the following rules and everyone should be aware of the rules:

- ✓ Locks should be placed on bedroom and bathroom doors to assure feelings of privacy. Locks should not be put on the doors when quick entry is needed with small children.
- ✓ The offender should be fully clothed at all times, except when he is in his bedroom or bathroom.
- ✓ The offender should not be outside of his bedroom after his parents or caregivers have retired to the bedroom, or before they come out of their bedroom in the morning, except to use the bathroom.
- ✓ Everyone, especially the parents or caregivers will need to be hyper-vigilant in order to assure the safety of the children and the continued progress of the young offender.

6. Overnight visits should be gradually increased in frequency, until finally, a weekend visit is held. Several successful weekend visits should precede reunification with therapeutic sessions in between these visits to identify problems.