

Start with formulation—not a label

A contact problem may reflect overlapping relational, developmental, safety, trauma, parenting-capacity, and family-system factors.

SIX PREDICTABLE FAILURE POINTS

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| 1 Misformulation — Treating every refusal as the same phenomenon. | 2 Safety blind spots — Minimizing coercion, violence, abuse, substance use, or trauma. |
| 3 Premature contact — Seeking engagement before adults create conditions for safety. | 4 Parent non-readiness — Expecting repair without behavior change, accountability, or skills. |
| 5 System fragmentation — Competing professionals, unclear authority, and inconsistent messages. | 6 Outcome rigidity — Defining success only as immediate, unrestricted contact. |

Better referral question: What conditions and interventions are necessary for safe, durable relationship repair?

Before referral or renewed contact

- What is known—and what remains unresolved?
- Are safety concerns, trauma triggers, or acute instability addressed?
- Can the child participate without undue emotional or physical risk?
- Can each parent listen, regulate, acknowledge impact, and avoid pressuring the child?
- Are professional roles, authority, and communications clearly defined?
- Does the order provide for early review, exceptions, and course correction?

A workable order makes the intervention possible

Specificity reduces role confusion, litigation spillover, treatment drift, and avoidable delay.

REFERRAL / ORDER CHECKLIST

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| <p>1 Purpose: Define assessment, stabilization, contact restoration, relationship repair, or another purpose.</p> | <p>5 Information protocol: Define releases, permissible records, ex parte limits, and status-report content.</p> |
| <p>2 Provider qualifications: Require court-involved family work plus relevant safety and trauma competence.</p> | <p>6 Contact plan: State the starting point, progression criteria, supervision, logistics, and contingencies.</p> |
| <p>3 Participants: Identify the child, each parent, and others only as clinically indicated.</p> | <p>7 Review mechanism: Set early review and a procedure for impasse, missed sessions, or material safety concerns.</p> |
| <p>4 Parallel obligations: Specify coaching, individual treatment, education, or substance services when appropriate.</p> | <p>8 Fees and access: Allocate fees and address payment timing, insurance, and continuity of care.</p> |

COUNSEL CAN IMPROVE THE ODDS

- Provide accurate, organized, proportionate information focused on the barriers.
- Prepare clients for accountability and behavior change.
- Explain that treatment disclosures have limits and are not trial preparation.
- Seek focused support or enforcement rather than reflexive escalation.

COUNSEL SHOULD AVOID

- Using the provider as a back-door expert or fact finder.
- Calling a missed milestone bad faith without context.
- Using a child's statement—or the intervention—as proof of a favored legal narrative.

Track incremental progress—and correct drift early

Success is not binary. Monitor safety, adult behavior, the child’s experience, contact, and system functioning.

DOMAIN	EARLY INDICATORS	LATER INDICATORS
Safety & regulation	Reduced escalation; reliable safety plan; the child can participate.	Sustained emotional and physical safety across settings.
Parent behavior	Greater reliability and less defensiveness.	Consistent repair, accountability, and child-focused responses.
Child experience	More predictability; reduced anticipatory distress.	Greater comfort, agency within safe boundaries, and flexibility.
Contact	Tolerates indirect or structured contact.	Progresses at a clinically appropriate pace toward the ordered plan.
System functioning	Professionals give consistent messages.	Durable routines, fewer crisis filings, and workable communication.
IF PROGRESS STALLS	Clarify the barrier → establish protective, predictable interim conditions → initiate the matched intervention → monitor observable progress → adjust promptly	

Ask: What does this family need—legally, clinically, and structurally—to make safe and durable relationship repair possible?