

**Clarification Processes in Sibling Sexual Abuse: Ethical Decision-making and Best Practices**

Amanda L. Pryor, MSW, LCSW, CSAYC, ATSA-F  
Safer Society Foundation Presentation

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**Learning Objectives**

- Describe what clarification processes involve.
- Explain the components necessary for safe and effective clarification processes.
- Describe best practices for conducting clarification sessions.
- Identify solutions to ethical conflicts when they arise within the clarification process.

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**Let's get to know who is here**

- Place name and job title in the chat
- Questions you want to know
- Concerns you have with clarification

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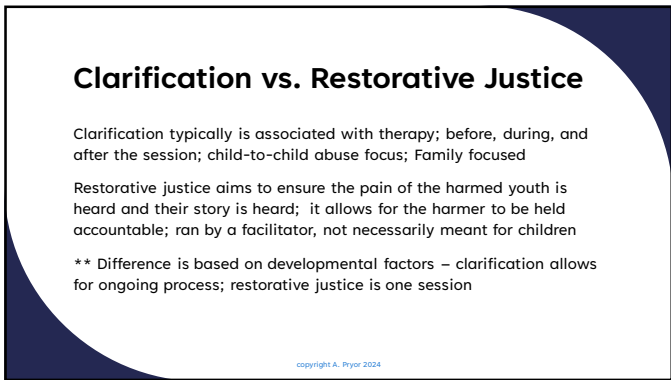
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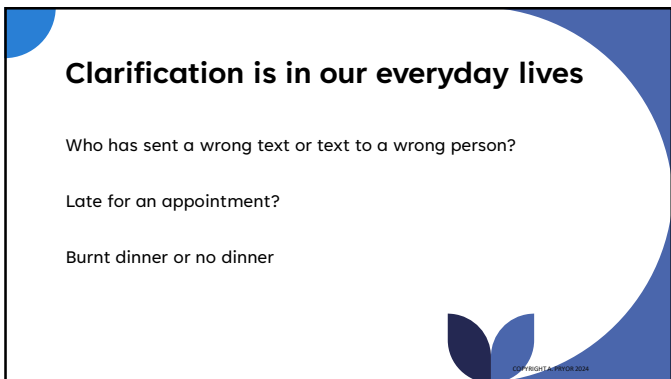
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## Clarification vs. Reunification?

### Clarification Process:

- An ongoing process for family members to talk about the harm caused and the impact on everyone within the family system,
- Face-to-face sessions or other available options
- In a safe environment
- With professionals to assist in the discussions and safety planning needs
- Based on all ages of those involved

### Reunification Process:

- Systematic and therapeutic process of bringing a family back together
- May include one or multiple individuals living outside of the nuclear family
- Usually entails incremental visitation, starting with supervised and working towards extended in home visits, prior to a child returning to the primary residence.

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## Clarification is different for each case

Before we get into what and the how to do clarification, we must -

Acknowledge that each case is different.

Consider as part of the process each participant's culture, religion, and identity.

Be aware that each county, city, state, country, and/or region differ in how sexual abuse cases are handled.

Be considerate to safety for all.

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## Clarification is important because

Typically, the youth who caused harm and the youth who was harmed will reunite on some level at some time.

Clarification and reunification processes increase the chances of success significantly for families reuniting independently when a youth who harmed and the youth who was harmed leave a service system.

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**Clarification is a Process...**

**Assessment** – with each step, making sure that no harm is being caused.

**Case Closure** – arbitrary, but at some point, clinically, the case will close; in real life, this is a lifelong process.

**Pre-clarifying work** – the youth who harmed learns about their harmful behaviors, the impact on others, works towards understanding the harmed child's perspective.

**Identifying those harmed** – Can the youth who harmed clearly identify and recognize those they have harmed and how they were harmed?

**Pre-session work**- talking to the therapist of the child who was harmed; getting family consents; working on logistics of clarification session with the other therapist.

**Introduction to apologies** – practice writing apology letters to the child they harmed; writing a letter to self; working on taking responsibility and accepting the level of harm caused

**Listening to the youth who was harmed** – listening to the needs of the child who was harmed from parents and therapist; working to make sure all therapists involved in case are on same page

**Face-to-face contact** – session(s), important to note that this is not just one session; child who was harmed asks questions and youth who harmed responds appropriately; based on the child's age and needs.

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**Remember.....**

**Assessment** at each step and that **Case Closure** is arbitrary as this is a lifelong process

Ultimate goal is for the family to begin to heal, begin to rejoin, begin to talk about the abuse as a family.

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**Before we Meet Face-to-Face**

Is there a court order?  
Is there a no-contact order?

If so, can you petition via a letter to ask for a few clinical sessions to complete initial clarification sessions, then report back to the courts?

NEVER can we override a court order

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**Clarification – Prompting Questions**

We know workbooks do not equal treatment, yet there are pieces that assist with treatment: *Pathways* by Timothy Kahn (2011) has a great chapter for parents, family, and client


Utilize this tool for common language on team of clarification

Prep with the 27 questions from the Pathway chapter, for example

- Why did you pick me?
- Have you done those things to anyone else?
- How has counseling helped you?
- How will I know you won't hurt me again?
- Why should I trust you?
- How will things be different when you come home?

Different ways to prepare, this is one option

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**Initial Clarification Session Looks Like?**

This may not be clinical; it might be more family focused

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### Who does what?

All parties are communicating to reach same goal – at least bi-weekly

Therapist for the youth who was harmed - determines when the youth who was harmed is ready to initially begin clarification  
 Trauma symptoms are stabilized  
 Safety is addressed

Therapist for the client who caused the harm - determines when youth who caused harm is ready to initially begin clarification  
 Acknowledgement of harm  
 Understanding of requirements for safety

Family - support, answers questions, follows safety plans, completes own clarification if needed

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### How do we prepare for the initial session when the focus is clinical

What the child who was harmed needs!  
 At the child who was harmed age and developmental level  
 All therapists are in an agreement of the session process

Structured:  
 Decreases anxiety  
 Roles are known  
 Safety is addressed

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### Safety first for all stages of clarification process

Where the child who was harmed chooses  
 Code words to step out of session – take a time out as needed  
 End on safety plan for all involved  
 Close out with positives for the family

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## Therapy next steps

Participating in clarification allows for all family members to be involved in family sessions

How can this help the family heal?  
Specific things to focus on regarding reunification?

All while the youth who was harmed and the youth who caused the harm continue with their own individual therapy

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## Empowerment for all in the future home


All participate in creating safety plan

All children have the ability to tell when harmful youth is not following safety plan – time limited

Focus on what the youth who was harmed needs in order to feel safe in the home

Dynamic, dynamic, dynamic

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## So this means what?

- Clarification does not equal reunification
- Reunification does not equal clarification
- It is a process- clarify, update safety plan, reunify, update safety plan, clarify, reunify more, update safety plan, reunify more, clarify more, and on and on and on... and on and on throughout life stages

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## Nonnegotiable

- Clarification (on some level) must happen prior to reunification
- Why?



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## Clarification Clinical Best Practices



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## Clarification in Treatment

Youth with harmful behaviors clarifies in many forms:

- Parents from day of allegation – what did you do?
- Courts – admitting in court what happened
- On admit paperwork – questions asked of what happened to bring them to treatment
- Parents asking more questions once treatment starts
- Providers asking for details as preparation for clarification
- Youth clarifying with self on beliefs and attitudes
- Siblings who are not directly harmed

Youth who was harmed is seeking clarification in many forms:

- Parents from day of allegation – why did this happen to me?
- Courts – Why are you not charging him?
- On admit paperwork – questions asked of what happened to bring them to treatment
- Parents asking more questions once treatment starts
- Providers asking for details as preparation for clarification
- Youth clarifying with self on beliefs and attitudes

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## Clarification – Prompting Questions

We know workbooks do not equal treatment, there are pieces that assist with treatment: *Pathways* by Timothy Kahn (2011) has a great chapter for parents, family, and client

Utilize this tool for common language on team of clarification

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- How will I know you won't hurt me again?
- Why should I trust you?
- How will things be different when you come home?

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## ATSA Guidelines (2017)

Treatment Targets

10.28 Practitioners working with adolescents who have sexually offended within the family collaborate with caregivers and other professionals involved in the case, including the treatment provider for the victim, in assessing and making determinations about when and if contact, clarification, and family reunification is appropriate.

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- Gain insight into how engaging in treatment can help them lead a positive, prosocial life
- Treatment is developmentally appropriate to youth's intellectual capacities
- Understand the circumstances that led to the harmful behaviour and the risk factors that contributed to it
- Understand the protective factors that can reduce the risk of future harm.
- Take responsibility for their actions.
- Recognize the emotional and functional impact of the harmful behaviour on the harmed child and family members
- Create a safety plan to reduce risk of future harm that identifies protective factors and risk factors
- Restorative justice work - make amends for the harm caused to the victimized family member(s) and others.

## Therapeutic goals for the youth who harmed

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**Therapeutic goals for the child that was harmed**

- Feel safe and protected in the home.
- Practice self-care and resiliency skills.
- Understand and trust that they can inform their caregiver of any discomfort caused by the offending adolescent or other family member(s).
- Process and understand the impact and effects of the abuse.
- Receive individualized treatment and care based on their specific needs.

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- Engage in self-care and seek support as needed.
- Receive psychoeducation and training in supervision, safety, and chaperoning.
- Understand and support the safety plan.
- Help the victimized family member(s) feel safe and protected in the home.
- Remain attuned to the needs, behaviors, and safety of the victimized family member(s) throughout the reunification process.
- If appropriate, participate in the treatment of the offending adolescent and/or the victimized family member(s).

**Therapeutic goals for the caregivers**

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**Risk – does it change the Clarification Plan?**

NO

High risk of recidivism does not eliminate the need for clarification. High-risk youth and the youth who was harmed benefit from clarification even if this is the only contact they the youth have with each other.

Clarification is centered on the youth who was harmed – what do they need?

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## Denial – does it change the Clarification Process?

No – Maybe – Should it?  
 Each case is different!  
 Youth who caused harm may need to hear the youth who was harmed questions or comments  
 Utilization of Motivational Interviewing Skills – helps youth with harmful behaviors  
 Letter from the youth who was harmed may help get over denial  
 Denial is FLUID – Denial is Safety – asking the question of what is the purpose of denial  
 Denial can be present if safety is addressed and youth who was harmed understands that denial will be present

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## Letters: How to

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## What Should a Letter Include?

- Empathy for the child who was harmed.
- Remorse for the harmful sexual behaviours.
- Recognition of the support by all family members for the child who was harmed.
- Apologies to the harmed child by other family members who may have intentionally or unintentionally allowed the abuse to occur or continue.
- A statement of how the youth who harmed will engage in restitution and safe behaviour toward the child and family.
- Clear statements that the harmed child was not responsible in any way for the sexual abuse.

The opportunity for the child who was harmed to forgive the youth who harmed, if the child chooses to do so.

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## Clarification Letters


Letters are tricky,

- If not written correctly, then wrong message is sent
- Therapist CANNOT write them
- Empathy for an adolescent is hard
- Writing a letter is hard for an adolescent
- Thinking errors grow here
- Not be focused on forgiveness, but on identifiable impacts of the abuse

Letters can

- Allow for communication on nonsexual issues prior to clarification to help reduce anxiety
- Allow young people who cannot do an in-person clarification to "share" their story
- Prompt someone in the family to feel safe to talk about the abuse

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## With a little ChatGPT help

prompt "write a sexual offense apology letter:"

Dear [name of youth who was harmed],

I am writing this letter to offer my sincerest apologies for my actions that caused you immense pain and discomfort. I am deeply ashamed of my behavior and the harm that I have caused you. I know that words alone cannot take away the trauma and pain that I have caused you, but I hope that this letter can be a small step in the right direction.


I know that what I did was completely unacceptable and violated your trust and your boundaries. I understand that my behavior was not only illegal, but also morally wrong. I have no excuse for my actions, and I take full responsibility for the harm that I have caused.

I want you to know that I am committed to making things right. I am willing to do whatever it takes to make amends and to prevent this from happening again in the future. I am willing to undergo therapy, counseling, or any other program that can help me understand and address my problematic behavior.

I know that I cannot expect forgiveness, but I sincerely hope that one day you can find it in your heart to forgive me. I am truly sorry for what I have done, and I promise to do everything in my power to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again.

Sincerely,  
[Your Name]

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## With a little ChatGPT help from a sibling

I'm sorry to hear that you've caused harm to your sister through a sexual offense. It's important to take responsibility for your actions and make a sincere apology to your sister.

Here's a template for an apology:

Dear [sister's name],

I want to start by saying how sorry I am for my behavior towards you. I know that I have caused you a lot of pain and discomfort, and for that, I am deeply sorry.


I understand that my actions were completely inappropriate and unacceptable. There is no excuse for what I did, and I take full responsibility for my actions. I want to assure you that it will never happen again.

I know that it will take time for you to forgive me, if ever. I want you to know that I am committed to doing whatever it takes to make things right between us. I am willing to go to therapy or counseling if that's what you need.

I hope that one day you can find it in your heart to forgive me. Until then, please know that I will do everything in my power to make amends.

Sincerely,  
[Your Name]

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# Technology Applications for Clarification Sessions

Zoom

Virtual reality – projecting others into the room for a session

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# What barriers are there for reunification?

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# Reunification Details

- Who is involved?
  - Youth with sexually harmful behaviors
  - Parents/guardian/ caregiver
  - Informed supervisors
  - Step-by-step process
- When does it happen?
  - Youth with harmful behaviors should begin reunification upon all parties agreeing and safety is addressed
  - With the youth who were harmed- AFTER clarification and only with youth who was harmed and when they are ready
- How is safety addressed?
  - Questions to consider:
    - What is the youth who was harmed level of physical safety?
    - What is the youth who was harmed level of emotional safety?
    - What is the youth who was harmed level of sexual safety?
    - Can the youth who was harmed identify cues that would suggest to them the youth with harmful behaviors may be beginning their abuse chain?
    - Does the youth who was harmed have a "safe" person to report abuse or behave moving to abuse?
    - Is the youth who was harmed able to regulate themselves emotionally?
- Remember - It is a process- clarify, update safety plan, reunify, update safety plan, clarify, reunify more, update safety plan, reunify more, clarify more, and on and on and on...

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## Safety Planning within Clarification and Reunification

- For sessions, after sessions, and for visits
  - Safety may be in back of mind as parties are excited about the family together
- Dynamic – fluid- adaptive
- Reviewed -- updated -- always changing
- Normal – healthy expectations
- All parties must be in agreement that safety is a necessity
- Community safety is a client
- Informed supervisors
  - Who can help the family?



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## Ethical Standards: Clarification



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## Ethical Decision Making Framework

1. Identify the ethical issues, including the social work values and ethics that conflict.
2. Identify the individuals, groups, and organizations that are likely to be affected by the ethical decision.
3. Rank the values that are most relevant to the issue or dilemma
4. Consult with colleagues and appropriate experts (such as agency staff, supervisors, agency administrators, attorneys, ethics scholars, and ethics committees).
5. Make the decision and document the decision-making process.
6. Monitor, evaluate, and document the decision.



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## Essential Steps for Ethical Problem-Solving

1. DETERMINE whether there is an ethical issue or/and dilemma.
2. IDENTIFY the key values and people involved.
3. RANK the values or ethical principles which - in your professional judgment - are most relevant to the issue or dilemma.
4. DEVELOP an action plan that is consistent with the ethical priorities that have been determined as central to the dilemma. Consult?
5. IMPLEMENT your plan, utilizing the most appropriate practice skills and competencies.
6. REFLECT on the outcome of this ethical decision making process.

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## Ethics – NASW Ethical Principle

**Value:** Dignity and Worth of the Person  
**Ethical Principle:** Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.

Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers promote clients' socially responsible self-determination.

Who is our client? How do we manage when parents want their family back yet youth who were harmed do not want to see their sibling who harmed them?

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## Ethics – NASW Ethical Principle


**Value:** Importance of Human Relationships  
**Ethical Principle:** Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships.

Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change. Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process. Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities.

What do you do when the courts will not allow contact?

What if clarification brings up more family issues?

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**Ethics – NASW Ethical Principle**

**Value:** Competence  
**Ethical Principle:** Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.

Social workers continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice. Social workers should aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.

Seeking resources when clarification is needed for the family.

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**Ethics – NASW Ethical Standard**

**1.02 Self-Determination**

Social workers respect and promote the right of clients to self-determination and assist clients in their efforts to identify and clarify their goals. Social workers may limit clients' right to self-determination when, in the social workers' professional judgment, clients' actions or potential actions pose a serious, foreseeable, and imminent risk to themselves or others.

How do you handle denial of the harm by the individual who did the harm?  
 What if youth who was harmed wants clarification, but the one who harmed does not?

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**Ethics – NASW Ethical Standard**

**1.04 Competence**

Social workers should provide services and represent themselves as competent only within the boundaries of their education, training, license, certification, consultation received, supervised experience, or other relevant professional experience.

How do you handle empathy? Or parties expecting empathy from a teenager – who is not yet fully brain developed.  
 \*\*Understanding adolescent brain development is key

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## The take-away

Each case is different  
 Safety safety safety cannot be addressed enough  
 Repeat, repeat, repeat.....  
 The youth who was harmed – they are always first thought.

Process, it is a process, and cannot be compromised  
 Clinical adherence necessary – no matter how human we are

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## Clinical adherence necessary – no matter how human we are

- As we stated at the beginning, not all are able to do this, even those that do it need support and guidance.
- Our personal worlds cannot collide with our professional worlds.
- Keeping a focus on the clinical needs of all involved will help guide and keep us on the proper track.

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What are we doing in Indiana?



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**State of Indiana Standards**

Service Standard for Community Based Services for Sexually Harmful Youth  
[https://www.in.gov/dcs/files/Effective\\_6\\_1\\_18\\_Community\\_Based\\_Service\\_Standard.pdf](https://www.in.gov/dcs/files/Effective_6_1_18_Community_Based_Service_Standard.pdf)

Service Standard for Residential Services for Sexually Harmful Youth  
 Effective January 2020 <https://www.in.gov/dcs/3320.htm>



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**Where/who/ when to call when behaviors are more than expertise**

Indiana Department of Child Service Standards (Sexually Harmful/Abusive Youth) state:

Service providers will only utilize professionals who are specifically trained and are licensed practitioners. 1. Training can occur through the Indiana Association for Juvenile Sex Offender Practitioners (IN-AJSOP), or an equivalent recognized credentialed authority.

If a provider is in active status of CSAYC field instruction and under clinical supervision of an individual who possess CSAYC, a service provider is eligible to provide services.

Staff members shall be knowledgeable of the dynamics surrounding child abuse/neglect, child and adult development, family dynamics, and community resources.



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**Indiana Department of Child Services added in June 2018 Standard update**

“If reunification is the permanency plan, the team must have a CSAYC or practicum CSAYC working on the case to ensure the victim clarification process is handled within best practices. Victim clarification must be completed prior to reunification. Best practices will ensure safety throughout the clarification process, as well as how safety will be addressed during and after reunification.

(1) Reunification and clarification steps/goals should be discussed in all team meetings.”



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**Indiana Department of Child Services  
added in January 2020 Standard  
update – Residential**

"If reunification is the permanency plan, the team must have a CSAYC or practicum CSAYC (or equivalent as approved by DCS) working on the case to ensure the victim clarification process is handled within best practices.

Victim clarification must be completed prior to reunification.

Best practices will ensure safety throughout the clarification process, as well as how safety will be addressed during and after reunification.

When the victim(s) is in the reunification plan, the residential provider is responsible for initiating and coordinating clarification with available victim(s) from day of admission.

This to include consent of information and obtaining releases of information to communicate with victim's therapist. If unable to contact the victim(s) therapist or family unwilling to sign for release of information, the court must be notified immediately.

Reunification and clarification steps/goals should be discussed in all team meetings. Clarification does not equate to reunification."

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**Summary**

Each case is different and pose different ethical issues.

Staffing is important to know that you have a plan and actions in place that are ethical for cases.

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