

# FAMILY BRIDGES: USING INSIGHTS FROM SOCIAL SCIENCE TO RECONNECT PARENTS AND ALIENATED CHILDREN\*

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This article describes an innovative educational and experiential program, Family Bridges: A Workshop for Troubled and Alienated Parent-Child Relationships™, that draws on social science research to help severely and unreasonably alienated children and adolescents adjust to court orders that place them with a parent they claim to hate or fear. The article examines the benefits and drawbacks of available options for helping alienated children and controversies and ethical issues regarding coercion of children by parents and courts. The program's goals, principles, structure, procedures, syllabus, limitations, and preliminary outcomes are presented. At the workshop's conclusion, 22 of 23 children, all of whom had failed experiences with counseling prior to enrollment, restored a positive relationship with the rejected parent. At follow-up, 18 of the 22 children maintained their gains; those who relapsed had premature contact with the alienating parent.

**Keywords:** *parental alienation; alienated children; Family Bridges; alienation; child custody; estrangement; divorce; reunification; re-integration; pathological alienation*

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Children who reject a parent after divorce, who refuse or resist contact with a parent, or whose contact with a parent is characterized either by extreme withdrawal or gross contempt, represent one of the greatest challenges facing divorced families and the professionals who serve them. Discussions in the social science literature describe few options for

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children who suffer severe and unreasonable alienation from a parent, and highlight the ineffectiveness of available remedies.<sup>1</sup> This article begins with an overview of the most common options when the court finds that the child's best interests are served by repairing the damaged relationship and examines controversial issues regarding coercion of children. Next, it presents an innovative educational and experiential program that assists families in adjusting to situations where children live, against their explicitly stated preferences, with the parent they reject. The course was designed for children who are unreasonably alienated from a parent; it is not for children whose rejection is rationally based. Enrollment prerequisites, goals, principles, procedures, and limitations are described.

The article has four aims. First, to acquaint readers with the program and with its immediate and long term impact. Second, to stimulate a creative interchange of ideas that will help improve the effectiveness of our work and contribute to the dialogue regarding the goals and types of interventions appropriate for this population of children. Third, to articulate principles that my colleagues and I have found important in working with this population that may assist others in helping these families. Fourth, to provide an antidote to the discouragement that permeates discussions about repairing these severely damaged parent-child relationships.<sup>2</sup>

### THE STARK DILEMMA

When courts determine that a child's best interests are served by repairing a damaged relationship with a rejected parent (or that a child will be harmed in the long run remaining in the full-time care of the favored parent), courts often face what British Columbia Justice Bruce Preston termed "a stark dilemma"<sup>3</sup>: The court must weigh the long-term benefits against the risks that the attempt to repair the parent-child relationship will either be unsuccessful or will involve an unacceptable degree of emotional cost, such as creating psychological trauma or provoking the child's destructive behavior. As Justice Preston wrote:

The probable future damage to M. by leaving her in her mother's care must be balanced against the danger to her of forcible removal from the strongest parental connections she has. . . . I conclude that the forcible removal of M. from her mother's and her grandmother's care has a high likelihood of failure, either because M. will psychologically buckle under the enormous strain or because she will successfully resist re-integration with her father.<sup>4</sup>

The Court of Appeals weighed in on the other side of the stark dilemma, finding that, "The obligation of the Court to make the order it determines best represents the child's interests cannot be ousted by the insistence of an intransigent parent who is 'blind' to her child's interests. . . . The status quo is so detrimental to M. that a change must be made in this case."<sup>5</sup>

### OPTIONS FOR FAMILIES WITH SEVERELY ALIENATED CHILDREN

When the court determines that a child's rejection of a parent is unwarranted and not in the child's best interests, one of four options is generally followed by the court and recommended in the professional literature.

- (1) Award or maintain custody with the favored parent<sup>6</sup> with court-ordered psychotherapy and in some cases case management.<sup>7</sup>
- (2) Award or maintain custody with the rejected parent, in some cases with court-ordered, or parent-initiated therapy.
- (3) Place children away from the daily care of either parent.
- (4) Accept the child's refusal of contact with the rejected parent.

Each option has advantages and drawbacks and raises controversial issues regarding the proper reach of the law with respect to the rights of parents and children.

Option One is often called "reunification" or "reintegration" therapy because the damaged parent-child relationship is the stimulus for the court order requiring the parents and children to participate in sessions with a court-appointed psychotherapist.<sup>8</sup> Many children who participate in court-ordered therapy do so with overt resistance and reluctance. Parents who support or accept their children's rejection of the other parent often lack motivation to participate in therapy if a goal is to heal the damaged parent-child relationship.<sup>9</sup> Thus, an element of coercion accompanies court-mandated therapy with sanctions for noncompliance.<sup>10</sup> Children who want no contact with a parent are essentially forced against their will to have such contact in, and sometimes out of, therapy sessions.<sup>11</sup> In some cases, therapy is accompanied by gradual increases in the amount of time the children spend with the rejected parent, with initial contacts sometimes taking place within the therapy or in the presence of another party. A variant of Option One is to maintain custody with the favored parent, but increase time significantly and immediately with the rejected parent, often to a full half-time.

Option One is most likely to be effective in early stages with less severe problems and when the favored parent and child are likely to cooperate.<sup>12</sup> It provides greater continuity of care for the child and may be less acutely stressful than the second and third options. Also, this option is suitable when the court decides that, despite a child's unreasonable alienation, taking into account all the evidence, the favored parent is better suited to manage the responsibilities of custody. It is a mistake to base a custody decision exclusively on the parents' contributions to the child's alienation.<sup>13</sup>

The more chronic and severe the child's alienation, the less desirable Option One becomes. An exceptionally comprehensive and astute analysis of available judicial options concludes:

Qualitative case studies and experienced clinicians supporting recommendations and/or orders to reverse custody maintain that therapy simply does not work in severe and even in some moderate alienation cases. Moreover, therapy may even make matters worse; the alienated child and preferred parent feel the need to dig in their heels and prove their point, thereby further entrenching their distorted views. . . . This is the experience of many seasoned clinicians, including the authors. The reality is that we have many more treatment failures than successes when it comes to our intervention with some moderate and all severe cases.<sup>14</sup>

Unsuccessful treatment may prevent, if not delay, the delivery of effective help because courts are reluctant to order older children, seen as less likely to comply, to have contact against their will with the rejected parent. The financial burden of court-mandated treatment is another drawback. Option One is not recommended when the favored parent sabotages treatment (e.g., repeatedly fails to bring the child to appointments, or repeatedly terminates treatment until locating a therapist who supports his or her positions), is a high

risk for abducting the child, or provides an emotionally toxic environment, such as intimidating the child into rejecting the other parent. Some children are victims of a process described in the literature as a pattern of coercive control and domination.<sup>15</sup> In these families, a parent continues harassing and controlling the ex-partner by manipulating the children to turn against the victim parent.<sup>16</sup> When the favored parent's behavior contributes significantly to the children's negative attitudes, leading authorities in the field label this emotional abuse.<sup>17</sup> Our society's standard of care regarding abused children is to prioritize protecting them from further abuse.

Option Two, sometimes called "environmental modification"<sup>18</sup> or "structural intervention,"<sup>19</sup> places or maintains some or all of the children in the temporary or permanent custody of the rejected parent, while allowing some contact between the children and the favored parent. Therapy may be court-ordered or initiated by a parent against the child's will. Or, a parent may simply count on time healing the relationship. A disturbing and highly visible example of a child placed against his will with the rejected parent is the 2000 case of Elián González, a Cuban child who was seized from maternal relatives in Florida by an armed Border Patrol tactical unit and returned to his father.

A variant of Option Two restricts or suspends contact between the children and the favored parent for an extended period of time until certain conditions are met. This approach is most likely in cases where the court: traces the child's alienation primarily to the influence of the favored parent<sup>20</sup>; determines that the child needs protection from physical or emotional abuse; determines that the favored parent's behavior, while falling short of abuse, sabotages efforts to repair the damaged parent-child relationship; or concludes that a child who has been apart from the rejected parent needs a concentrated period of time with that parent and away from the other parent's influence in order to restore and consolidate a better relationship.

Option Two usually follows prior failed attempts to remedy the problem. This option relieves children of the burden of feeling responsible for determining custody. Spending long blocks of time with the rejected parent motivates some children to overcome their negative attitudes, provides a direct experience of the parent that challenges their distorted views, and builds a foundation of shared experiences which may help rekindle positive feelings.<sup>21</sup>

Option Two, particularly when structured as a final custody order, is appropriate only in cases where the court finds that the rejected parent is better able to provide an environment in the child's best interests. Courts and parents should not assume that custodial transfer is desirable in all cases or that all children will adjust to such court orders. The literature emphasizes the importance of contact between an unreasonably alienated child and the rejected parent,<sup>22</sup> but particularly with older children, mere contact alone may be insufficient to promote healing. Many children reject the parent with whom they spend the most time. If effective assistance is not available to help the family adjust, children removed from the parent with whom they feel most identified may suffer psychological stress, defy the court order, or act out.<sup>23</sup>

If Option Two fails (such as when a child runs away and the court decides to leave the child with the favored parent), this may increase the child's resistance to healing the relationship, and the successful flouting of the court orders may diminish the child's respect for the law. Or, a child may enjoy a "honeymoon" phase while being showered with attention from long-lost relatives, but will have difficulty adjusting when the novelty wears off. Other children may appear to have overcome their alienation, when in fact they may be hopelessly resigned to a situation beyond their control, burying, rather than resolving, unbalanced negative views of the rejected parent. Many, but not all, alienated children

initially are furious when the court overrides their preferences. People who believe that courts should not frustrate strongly expressed desires of children oppose Option Two.

Option Three places alienated children in a third party's home or residential facility as a safe site while gradually increasing the child's contact with the rejected parent.<sup>24</sup> Boarding schools, such as college preparatory schools, military academies, and therapeutic residential schools offer another alternative.<sup>25</sup> This removes children from direct exposure to family tensions and allows them to concentrate on their own development. Psychotherapy conducted with children when they are away from their parents and associated pressures may have greater success assisting them to develop more balanced perceptions of each parent. Sullivan and Kelly see this as possibly the least detrimental alternative for adolescents who are functioning poorly, are subject to parental pressures to align with one against the other, are exposed to chronic conflict between the parents, and have been unable to find relief from prior interventions.<sup>26</sup> A drawback of this option is that the child forgoes regular face-to-face contact with both parents, yet may not be spared alienating influences through other means of communication. Also, the expense of boarding schools is outside the reach of most families.

Option Four, where the court or rejected parent concludes that no resolution is possible or feasible without doing greater damage, occurs only as a last resort. Some parents feel defeated when the favored parent and children succeed in sabotaging contact and treatment efforts. Other parents may be unable or unwilling to invest the time and money in litigation, unable to afford potentially effective interventions, or unwilling to force treatment on resistant children. Even without prior court-ordered intervention, the court may decide that it is beyond the scope of its authority or power to force children of a certain age to undergo treatment or to have contact with a rejected parent.<sup>27</sup> Other times the child is deemed of sufficient maturity and independence of judgment to be competent to make a decision to disown a parent. Sometimes, after years of failed attempts to resolve chronic and severe alienation, professionals advise courts or rejected parents to give up. Or, such advice may come early in the process by professionals who either see "great advantage in letting natural maturation takes its course,"<sup>28</sup> or mistake incipient signs of alienation for short-term reactions to divorce. This leads some professionals to encourage courts and rejected parents to temporarily suspend efforts at parent-child contact, calling this a "cooling-off period" or "giving the child space." Such periods of no contact can give way to renewed contact, or they can become the prelude to prolonged estrangement.

Ending litigation relieves the court of the stark dilemma, may take pressure off children caught in the middle, remove uncertainty about where they will live, and relieve stress associated with being forced to see a parent. Some custody evaluators express the hope that allowing the child, particularly a teen, to prevail, will deflate the child's resistance to eventually resuming the relationship. The literature provides little support for this notion and it is inconsistent with the experience of this author and other clinicians.<sup>29</sup> For some parents, giving up may be the most sensible decision. I provide guidelines to help parents decide when to let go of assertive attempts to recover a positive relationship with their offspring.<sup>30</sup> Some professionals believe the option of giving up makes sense because of reports in the literature that note a dearth of empirical research that identifies long-term harmful effects of severe alienation.<sup>31</sup> But, studies are accumulating that document psychological damage associated with alienation and estrangement.<sup>32</sup>

The drawbacks of giving up are: the child and favored parent may interpret this as parental abandonment; the child is encouraged to avoid rather than manage conflict;<sup>33</sup> the child's irrational beliefs about the rejected parent could be reinforced; and the child receives no help

to better understand the relationship with each parent and to reduce the likelihood of future problems related to a loss of such magnitude.<sup>34</sup> In cases of actual or threatened violence by the child toward a parent and cases where a child has repeatedly flouted court orders for contact, or has run away, there is the risk that the child will develop an inappropriate sense of entitlement to disregard the law in other respects. Another risk is that the child could conclude that violence, disrespect, and demands are an effective means to get one's way. As one boy concluded, "The judge said it's up to me and I can do whatever I want."

Another drawback of Option Four is that rejected parents suffer a searing pain described as worse than the grief associated with the death of a child, because it is an ambiguous loss that does not allow the closure of a normal grieving process.<sup>35</sup> One mother, a child psychologist with years of experience treating children and their parents in high-conflict divorces, wrote:

For all my education, friends, close colleagues and personal therapy, I can't seem to find solace for the deep state of mourning I'm in. I'm grief-stricken, heartbroken at the loss of my daughter. My tears are too close to the surface and I've said for some time that for me it is worse than death. It is an unresolved, needless loss but the worst part isn't even about me. I mourn for my daughter who will never again have her sense of delight in the world.

Although they do not realize it, favored parents too miss out on a more normal relationship with their children and risk their children's future enmity if and when the children ultimately come to understand how they have been exploited.<sup>36</sup>

### **CONTROVERSIES AND ETHICAL ISSUES RELATED TO COERCION OF CHILDREN**

The first three options involve an element of coercion, thus raising controversial legal and ethical issues. The proper reach of the law in family matters, the rights and responsibilities of parents with respect to their children, and the rights of children to self-determination, such as the right to refuse treatment or to determine which parent they live with, are difficult issues debated in the literature and worthy of attention. These issues arise when evaluating the various options for dealing with pathologically alienated children, and it may help to place them in a wider context. Professionals who work with these families will have to decide where they stand when it comes to the ethics of recommending or providing services to children who are referred against their will.

In the eyes of the law and society, children occupy a different status from adults. Notwithstanding the importance of seeking children's input, parents and courts are empowered to make decisions in the best interests of children. Courts remove children from abusive homes, often against the children's vociferous protests, and place them in foster homes or with relatives.<sup>37</sup> If the children run away, the police retrieve the children, if necessary by physical force, and enforce the court orders. The law requires children to attend school and, when counseling is ineffective, truancy laws are enforced with punishments such as placement in an alternative school and jail sentences for parents. Children whose behavior cannot be managed by their parents in their home, such as those who are violent toward parents and siblings, psychotic, or chronically run away may be physically apprehended by police and brought to juvenile detention centers or adolescent crisis units.

If one accepts such legally sanctioned coercion, deciding whether or not it should extend to children who defeat court orders for contact with a rejected parent depends in part on

how one conceptualizes the problem of alienation. People who deny the existence of unjustified alienation believe that children reject a parent only if that parent has abused, neglected, or mistreated them, or demonstrated excessively poor parenting skills. That is, they believe that alienated children's fears and hatred are always an objective, proportionate, and rational response to the rejected parent, totally independent and untainted by outside forces. Those people believe that courts are wrong to require any contact with the rejected parent (in therapy or at home) because this exposes children to additional abuse or extreme distress. Others believe that parents pressuring their children to take sides in a parental dispute is an unfortunate byproduct of divorce that does not merit the court's intervention, or that will, in time, sort itself out.

A different perspective is taken by leading scholars who regard a favored parent's alienating behavior as emotional child abuse. In some cases of child abuse, the need to remove children is clear. Who would object to removing a child (even against her will) out of a home where she is severely physically abused? Even if the child is emotionally bonded to her abuser, would suffer great anxiety at being apart from the abuser, and strongly protests removal, few would defend the child's "right" to self-determination, or regard her removal as controversial.

But emotional abuse is different. It leaves no visible scars. In some cases it may be difficult to determine when emotional abuse and toxic parenting rise to a level that requires removal of the child from the home. The same applies to court-ordered treatment: When does emotional abuse rise to a level that justifies the court mandating treatment? Some critics view court-ordered counseling, especially for parents, as an overzealous and inappropriate intrusion of the court into family matters. They may object not to court-ordered intervention in general, but to parent education programs, workshops, co-parenting classes, parenting coordination, and treatment that have not undergone rigorous experimental research. This largely describes all court-ordered counseling as individual counselors have not had their work evaluated by such standards.<sup>38</sup>

Beyond the court's authority in overriding children's stated preferences, helping professionals also should consider the issue of parents' prerogatives. All psychotherapists who treat children and adolescents provide some services to children against their will because the majority of children attend at least the first session at their parents' insistence and not by choice. Typically, the child who resists treatment is brought by a parent with whom the child is generally compliant. Different issues may arise when the parent seeking treatment for the child lacks the child's basic respect.

For some helping professionals, an ethical issue is raised not by the use of coercion but the extent of such coercion. Some therapists and teachers are willing to treat children who attend under duress and under threat of punishment and deprivation of privileges (as normally imposed by parents to obtain compliance with rules), but draw the line at offering services when the coercion becomes physical. These professionals are uncomfortable working with psychotic or drug-addicted children for whom physical force is necessary to get them to a hospital, rehabilitation clinic, or residential treatment center. But these professionals may be willing to work with children who respond to indirect force, such as those who reluctantly comply with authority figures, or comply under threat of force, such as being escorted to a hospital by crisis intervention specialists or uniformed police, or being told that if they do not comply they will be taken to a juvenile facility. Or, professionals may be willing to work with some coerced children after taking into account factors such as the severity of the child's problem and the child's age. Thus, a therapist who believes that the loss of the ability to give and receive affection from a parent is not severe

or tragic enough to warrant forced intervention, or does not believe that children over a certain age should be coerced by courts or parents into treatment, may have ethical conflicts about providing services to children in these circumstances.

If the acceptability of forcing children to have contact with a rejected parent depended on the degree of coercion necessary to elicit compliance, this policy could have an unintended consequence. Favored parents who oppose such contact might instruct their children to stand their ground and refuse contact, knowing that the children will not be physically compelled to see the parent.<sup>39</sup> Essentially, this would empower children to veto court orders that place them with the other parent, and elevate children's preferences to the sole factor determining custody, with all the drawbacks that go along with such empowerment.<sup>40</sup>

The prospect of using physical force evokes media images of children wrested away from the arms of a loving parent to be placed by judicial order with the parent who has a superior custodial claim. Such images may be difficult for some professionals to reconcile with a benevolent approach to children. In reaching decisions regarding this population of children, courts will need to decide whether the harm caused by the child's physical removal from the familiar environment outweighs the benefits of being placed with the parent whom the court otherwise regards as a more suitable custodial parent.

In sum, this area is rife with controversy. In some cases courts respond to the stark dilemma with one of the three options that involve coercion. The issues for professionals who work with these families are: (1) should they accept or decline referrals of children who are compelled by the court or a parent against their will; (2) if accepted, should this apply to children of all ages or should children of a certain age, such as older adolescents, be exempt; and (3) should the degree of coercion necessary to elicit children's compliance be a factor in the professional's decision about whether to provide services? To make this more concrete, suppose Elián González had difficulty adjusting to being with his father after being forcibly removed from his relatives. If the father brought Elián, against his will, to a therapist, can the therapist ethically provide help? If the therapist had a program that would help relieve Elián's suffering, would it be ethical to conduct the program? If Elián were older, or if he was forcibly removed from his mother instead of from her relatives, would that change the ethical equation? Even if the therapist thought it was wrong to place Elián with his father, would it be ethical to help the child adjust to the situation, or would an ethical therapist have to decline such help? These questions should be considered when evaluating the program to which we now turn our attention.

### **ORIGIN OF FAMILY BRIDGES<sup>41</sup>**

Dr. Randy Rand began developing the prototype of Family Bridges: A Workshop for Troubled and Alienated Parent-Child Relationships™ (Family Bridges™) in 1991, honed in response to requests from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, to assist in reuniting recovered missing children with their parents. Whether abducted by strangers or family members, recovered abducted children often struggle with overwhelming fear and hatred toward the parent who, by necessity, will be providing their full-time care. In most cases recovered children instantly lose contact with the abductor with whom they have been living sometimes for many years.<sup>42</sup> The program was developed to provide rapid relief to these children during a stressful transition while helping their parents safely and sensitively manage the children's feelings and behavior. It was natural to extend the



experience gained with this population to nonabducted children who are severely and unreasonably alienated from a parent in the context of divorce.

In 2005 I witnessed the success of this program with a severely alienated and violent adolescent. Shortly thereafter, I trained with Dr. Rand to learn this program. From that time I have participated in leading workshops with him and with Dr. Deirdre Rand and have contributed to the program's evolution and refinement. In addition, we have trained others in the program's procedures.

### ENROLLMENT PREREQUISITES

The workshop is an experience that a rejected parent and children go through together as one family, and not with a group of families. It is one option to consider for a family in which: (1) a child's view of a parent and other relatives is unrealistic, (2) the child refuses contact with a parent or shows extreme reluctance to spend time with that parent, and (3) the family needs help adjusting to court orders that place the child in the care of the rejected parent and suspend contact between the child and the other parent until specified conditions are met.

This program is *not* suitable for all children who reject a parent. It is not for: (1) children whose rejection is a reasonable and proportionate response, warranted by the history of the child's relationship with the rejected parent, such as those harmed by a parent's substance abuse or violent behavior; (2) families in which the court finds that a child's relationship with a rejected parent is severely damaged but that it is in the child's best interests to remain with the favored parent; and (3) families in which children who reject a parent spend most of their time away from that parent, or who will be with the rejected parent only for a short period of time before returning to the home of the favored parent.<sup>43</sup> Often a parent, attorney, or judge hopes that this program can resolve a custody dispute by repairing a damaged parent-child relationship in a situation that fails to meet the enrollment prerequisites or when the favored parent maintains custody and significant residential time with the child or will resume custody upon completion of the workshop. Unfortunately, this program is not designed for such circumstances and thus we usually do not accept these referrals. Also, we exercise the prerogative to turn down referrals when we perceive that the rejected parent or the court prematurely seeks this remedy before sufficient efforts have been made with other approaches, or the children are not at risk for more severe degrees of estrangement, or the family does not meet other selection criteria (e.g., when the child is realistically estranged from the rejected parent).

### HOW FAMILIES ARE REFERRED

More than 130 children in 70 families have attended Family Bridges.<sup>44</sup> My involvement was limited to cases with 23 of these children in 12 families and this article reports the outcomes of the workshops with all 23 children with no omissions.<sup>45</sup> All 12 families had failed experiences with counseling prior to enrolling in the workshop. In three families, parents sought the workshop without need for additional litigation. One of these involved three children who were recovered abducted children, needing help with their fears.<sup>46</sup> Another involved young adult children (ages 18 and 21) who treated their mother with contempt but voluntarily agreed to take the course. And the third involved a family with three adolescents in which a parent had primary custody for five years but the children's

alienation remained unabated. In one family the parents stipulated in a settlement, reached in lieu of a trial, that the rejected parent and child would attend the workshop followed by the favored parent's participation.

The remaining eight families (14 children) came to the program immediately following custody trials in which the court awarded custody to the rejected parent. In each case the court considered prior attempts to remedy family problems and heard the results of a comprehensive court-ordered custody evaluation which concluded that the children's alienation was unjustified and provided information and sometimes recommendations regarding each parent's relative suitability to meet the best interests of the children. In addition, the court either authorized the parent to seek services to ease the transition for the children as he or she deemed appropriate (including Family Bridges if that was the parent's choice) or specifically ordered the workshop to be implemented.<sup>47</sup>

In these 8 families, court orders included the appointment of local professionals to provide aftercare and support to the family, work with the favored parent, monitor the situation, and provide feedback as necessary and as ordered by the court. When an aftercare professional has been designated, one team member works with that professional to educate them about the child's experience in the workshop and to offer some of the workshop materials to be presented to the favored parent. On occasion, subsequent to the workshop with the rejected parent and children, the favored parent goes through a modified version of the workshop. As more course leaders are trained this will allow the option of inviting the favored parent to attend a workshop at the same time as the child, but in a different location. Such an invitation may help assuage the favored parent's anxieties about the program, while reassuring the children that the parent is participating in the process. We are less confident about our effectiveness in helping favored parents modify behaviors that cause unnecessary stress for their children, but when prior therapeutic interventions have proved ineffective, the favored parent may profit from the educational approach of Family Bridges.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the program was not originally designed for this purpose and is less likely to be effective when the favored parent does not voluntarily seek this help. We are open to working with any alternative program that is effective with favored parents of severely alienated children; unfortunately, we are unaware of any such programs but hope that this article will prompt others to communicate with us about successful efforts to modify favored parents' behavior.<sup>49</sup>

Fortunately, unlike the experience of those who attempt therapy with alienated children who live primarily with the favored parent and perhaps see the rejected parent only once per week in a therapist's office,<sup>50</sup> we do not find that a successful reunification is dependent on the favored parent's support of the process. Naturally, this parent's positive involvement helps reduce the child's inner turmoil and facilitates the child's healthy relationship with both parents. But, it is not essential to the repair of the damaged child-parent relationship.

## DESCRIPTION OF FAMILIES

Table 1 shows the breakdown of the children by age, sex, and rejected parent. Boys outnumber girls in this sample. Prior to the workshop, 8 children had no contact with the rejected parent for a significant length of time ( $\bar{x} = 24$  months), and 15 had limited or sporadic contact fraught with hostility. For these 15, the average length of time between the onset of alienation and participation in the workshop was 31 months, with a range of 10–60 months. Seven of the rejected parents were mothers, five were fathers.<sup>51</sup>

**Table 1**  
Composition of Sample

Age Range	Rejected Mother		Rejected Father		Total
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
8 and younger	0	0	1	1	2
9–11	0	0	4	0	4
12–13	5	0	3	1	9
14–15	1	1	0	0	2
16 and older	2	0	3	1	6
<b>Total</b>	8	1	11	3	23

### WORKSHOP GOALS

The goals of the program draw from the literature on the harmful impact of parental conflict on children,<sup>52</sup> the importance to the child of maintaining healthy relationships with both parents after divorce,<sup>53</sup> and the importance of the child transforming cognitive distortions and polarized views of parents into ones that are more balanced and grounded in reality.<sup>54</sup>

These goals are to:

- (1) facilitate, repair, and strengthen the children's ability to maintain healthy relationships with both parents;
- (2) help children do what they can to avoid being in the middle of their parents' conflicts;
- (3) strengthen children's critical thinking skills;
- (4) protect children from unreasonably rejecting a parent in the future;
- (5) help children maintain balanced views and a more realistic perspective of each parent as well as themselves;
- (6) help family members develop compassionate views of each other's actions rather than excessively harsh or critical views;
- (7) strengthen the family's ability to communicate effectively with each other and to manage conflicts in a productive manner; and
- (8) strengthen the parents' skills in nurturing their children by setting and enforcing appropriate limits and avoiding psychologically intrusive interactions.<sup>55</sup>

### BASIC PRINCIPLES

Ten basic principles guide the structure and specific procedures of the program:

1. *Containing strong affect.* Children arrive at our workshop anxious, angry, and confused. Most have felt empowered to dictate the nature of their relationships with their parents and are stunned that the court has overturned the status quo. The rejected parent, too, is anxious. In some cases, based on the child's past behavior or threats, the parent fears violence by the child. It is not just negative affect that must be contained. This may be the

first time in several years that the parent has been in the same room with the child. The parent's joy at being reunited with loved ones, if given full expression at the outset, can overwhelm the participants. Given the high level of emotions, a primary guiding principle is to provide a safe envelope to contain any anxiety, anger, and conflict.<sup>56</sup> In addition to our natural desire to alleviate discomfort and suffering, and to prevent dangerous behavior, containing strong affect contributes to an atmosphere that helps diffuse hostility and is more conducive to learning.

2. *Focus on the present and future and not the past.* We emphasize the importance of moving forward with a better relationship, rather than rehashing past grievances and conflicts. This spares participants difficult, shameful, and unproductive confrontations, and fruitless quests to apportion blame.

3. *Education not psychotherapy.* The workshop is based on an educational model and is not psychotherapy or counseling. If psychotherapy is needed, appropriate referrals are given. We avoid discussing the roots of psychological conflicts or the psychodynamics of the family members. Instead, we teach children and parents concepts derived from replicated and peer-reviewed scientific research in cognitive, social, and developmental psychology, sociology, and social neuroscience.<sup>57</sup> In essence, we offer an intensive course on concepts taught in formal classrooms, adapting and tailoring the syllabus, selection of materials, and procedures to the developmental level and circumstances of the children. The specific concepts and research that we teach are discussed in the section below on phases and procedures. The design of the lessons and learning environment is consistent with scientific evidence-based instruction principles grounded in the cognitive theory of multimedia learning.<sup>58</sup> Key instruction principles include reducing extraneous processing (cognitive activity that distracts from learning such as presenting inessential facts and images), and fostering the organization and integration of new material. A unique feature of the program is the vocabulary we teach to help participants think and talk constructively about relationship difficulties.

One mother (a doctoral level mental health professional) contrasted Family Bridges with prior therapy:

It was an educational program consisting of no apparent purpose other than the delivery of information and the children could do with it what they pleased. By Day Two both sons asked if their dad could participate in the intervention. The above is in striking contrast to the tone of the year of family therapy we engaged in. I believe the family therapy did more harm than good in our case.

4. *Emphasis on autonomy.* We rely on an educational principle associated with the Montessori approach: Children learn best when they have control over their learning. Wherever possible we promote the child's autonomy in the learning process. Although 11 of the 12 parents gave children no choice in the initial decision to attend the workshop (as is typical for many other important parental decisions), within limits we invite children to control the pace of the course, including such matters as when to take breaks and when to end for the day. We make it clear that it is up to the participants to decide how and if they want to apply their new knowledge and skills to their own situations. Children experience this as liberating because in the past they have felt pressured to adopt certain attitudes and thoughts about their parents.

5. *Instruction not induction.* One of our goals is to teach critical thinking skills.<sup>59</sup> Thus, we avoid procedures that could bypass critical thinking, such as repetitive lectures,

suggestions, one-sided portraits of parents, and other approaches that attempt to persuade, influence, or program children to accept that their attitudes are irrational or that their rejected parent deserves better treatment. Rather, we teach children how such tactics work and raise their awareness of the many factors that can influence attitudes and behavior.

6. *Saving face.* An extensive body of social science literature describes the personal pressures to maintain a cognitive stance, once this has been articulated and acted upon,<sup>60</sup> as well as the social pressures to remain part of the in-group.<sup>61</sup> Once a child has publicly repudiated and treated a parent with utter contempt, the child is backed into a cognitive corner with no clear exit strategy.<sup>62</sup> The workshop provides a face-saving way to emerge from the alliance with one parent against the other and reestablish a positive relationship with the rejected parent.

One key aspect of saving face is that we do not ask children to revisit their past mistakes, acknowledge wrong-doing, or apologize for mistreating the parent. This principle is counterintuitive to rejected parents. Traditional wisdom holds that acknowledging and taking responsibility for problems are the first steps toward recovery. Often rejected parents expect that the same applies to their children. Demanding such acknowledgment, though, is not only unnecessary, it is usually counterproductive. Acknowledgment and apologies carry more meaning when they emerge naturally and spontaneously. Many children simply recover a positive relationship and act as if nothing unpleasant had occurred in the past. Coming to terms with the recognition that you have unjustly inflicted severe pain on a loving parent is a painful developmental task. It is best managed when people are at a point in their lives when they can understand their behavior in a wider perspective. We regard these children as casualties and encourage rejected parents to do the same. Our hope in Family Bridges is to spare children unnecessary guilt and shame while offering them a face-saving way to reconnect and a milieu that allows them to safely experience and express benevolent feelings toward a parent whom they have treated with contempt.<sup>63</sup>

7. *Benevolent milieu and positive sentiment override.* An abundance of positive experiences furthers the success of relationship repair efforts, in part because it contributes to a tendency to interpret neutral events in a benign light and makes it easier to manage inevitable irritations and disagreements.<sup>64</sup> Family Bridges begins a process of building new positive experiences to counterbalance hurtful memories. Although at times the work is difficult and intense, we conduct the program at a relaxed pace with plenty of breaks, snacks, and opportunities for parents and children to have fun and to create positive shared experiences.

8. *Human fallibility.* Understanding the fallibility of perception and memory is another key to saving face while children relinquish their contemptuous views of the rejected parent.

9. *Multiple perspectives.* We strive to interrupt rather than perpetuate the unhealthy family dynamic of blame and exclusion. We stress the benefits to a relationship and to conflict management that come from understanding and respecting multiple perspectives. For the purposes of our program, it is unnecessary to apportion responsibility for the problem.<sup>65</sup>

10. *Conflict management.* Regardless of the roots of the problem, a disrupted parent-child relationship is a form of social conflict in which the participants have reached an impasse. We draw from the literature on social conflict, so useful to negotiators and mediators, to teach participants to manage conflict efficiently and effectively.

## FROM COURTHOUSE TO WORKSHOP

One aspect of the stark dilemma is concern for the children's reaction when they learn of the court order. In the past, many of these children succeeded in defeating court orders for contact and attempts at reunification therapy, and there is the expectation that they will continue their oppositional defiance, perhaps with dangerous testing of the limits and acting out.

In more than one-third of the cases (9 children in 4 families), in which the workshop did not begin in the immediate aftermath of a custody trial, the children attended the workshop without strong resistance and without need for any special safeguards. In the 8 cases in which the workshop took place immediately following a custody trial, the court took steps to minimize the risk of dangerous acting out. In 6 of these 8 cases, the judge ordered that the children be brought to the courthouse and the judge personally and authoritatively informed the children of the decision and affirmed that it was nonnegotiable. It is not uncommon for children to react by screaming, refusing to go, threatening to run away, sobbing hysterically, and, in one case, hyperventilating. Courts and parents deal with children's resistance in different ways.

To minimize the risk of dangerous acting out, some judges have uniformed police officers and bailiffs in plain sight to emphasize the court's authority. Some judges make it clear to the children that the court expects them to work on repairing their damaged relationship with the rejected parent, that failure is not an option, that refusal to cooperate will not result in a custody award to the favored parent, and that the sooner the children heal their damaged relationship with the rejected parent, the sooner they will have contact with their favored parent. Without direct experience with the outcome of such court orders, and in the face of a headstrong teenager's vehement protests, custody evaluators, therapists, lawyers, judges, and sometimes parents, often underestimate the power of the court to elicit a recalcitrant child's compliance. Repeatedly we have seen children (even those who had been out of contact with a parent for several years) back down from their threats and within 24 hours appear relieved, relaxed, communicative, and sometimes affectionate with the rejected parent.<sup>66</sup> A case worker who observed the workshop said she would not have believed her client could change so rapidly if she had not seen it herself.

Social conflict theory provides one explanation of such movement. From this perspective, the child and parent have reached a stalemate in their conflict. As Pruitt and Kim write,

They may be cognitively entrapped in the conflict—too close to the details to see the unpromising broader picture or committed to continue [conflict] by prior statements. . . . In such circumstances, some sort of *shock* may be needed to bring them to their senses—a striking event that dramatizes the hopelessness of their campaign or the costs and risks involved in pursuing it. . . .<sup>67</sup>

One path to replace escalating conflict with de-escalation is when “a powerful third party (or parties) enters the scene and *imposes a settlement*.”<sup>68</sup> In this case, the court order is the striking event delivered by a third party.

In one of the eight cases in which the workshop took place in the immediate aftermath of a custody trial, a mother followed the court order to bring her 16-year-old boy to the courthouse and the boy returned home with his father without protest. In six of the eight, because of the degree of the children's alienation and the extent to which they felt empowered to override the court's authority, the rejected parent hired a professional

adolescent transportation service to ensure the children's safe custodial transition and transportation to the workshop site. In another case, a mother hired an off-duty police officer who was a friend of the family to travel with her and her child to the workshop. In some cases the court orders acknowledge the parent's intent to use a service and authorize the transport professionals to deliver the children to the workshop. Such services routinely transport resistant adolescents to schools and treatment programs, such as therapeutic boarding schools, residential treatment centers, substance abuse rehabilitation facilities, and Wilderness camps.<sup>69</sup> Typically the professionals employed by such services are former juvenile probation officers, social workers, or law enforcement personnel who have dealt extensively with teens. These bonded and insured professionals are trained in nonviolent crisis intervention techniques, in establishing rapport with teens, and in the use of a respectful, compassionate, yet firm demeanor to win children's cooperation. After explaining their role to the children, they confiscate cell phones. In none of these seven cases did the transport professionals or the off-duty officer use any physical force or physical restraint nor has any child complained of mistreatment. The children reveal, usually the second or third day of the workshop, that when they learned of the court orders, they thought of running away, but the presence of the transport professionals helped them resist this impulse and they are glad they did.

Nevertheless, a parent's use of transportation services is controversial because of the additional level of implied coercion (similar to the effectiveness of a uniformed policeman who elicits compliance with firm direction but no actual physical force) and because of misunderstanding regarding the nature of the services.<sup>70</sup> The prerogative to use a transportation service belongs to the parent and occurs prior to and independent of the work we do. The transport professional's job is done once the workshop begins.

As noted earlier, a therapist or workshop leader faces an ethical decision about whether to work with a child under these circumstances. I faced the same decision when working in a residential treatment center and in a state hospital. The difference is that, unlike in a residential treatment center, the choice to remain in Family Bridges is the child's. We do not restrain children in any manner, and we make it clear to them that this is not our role. It is important to underscore this last point because some journalists have tagged the workshop with the misleading label "deprogramming." As the following description of procedures makes clear, this label is a misnomer.<sup>71</sup>

The term deprogramming was originally used in reference to work with cult victims and came to evoke images of abducting, forcibly restraining, and isolating cult members while wearing them down with lectures in a process that could be described as a form of brainwashing.<sup>72</sup> By contrast, although the court or parent may insist that a child be enrolled in Family Bridges, when we meet the children we make it clear that they are free to withdraw their participation at any time. Throughout the workshop, the leaders repeatedly solicit feedback from the participants, answer questions, correct misimpressions, reinforce the participants' prerogative to have their own opinions after each presentation, and ask the participants whether the workshop is meeting their goals and expectations. Rather than isolate children, we encourage the parent and children to engage in outside activities together in the evenings or at breaks, such as visiting nearby malls, attending movies, hiking, etc. As opposed to brainwashing, which fosters the suspension of critical thinking and inculcates distortions of reality, we teach children to think critically and to correct distorted perceptions. We provide information commonly presented in Psychology and Sociology classes and leave it to the participants to decide if and how they want to apply what they have learned.

Our challenge is to quickly establish rapport with the children and interest them in the program so that they willingly participate. An alternative approach that we have tried three times with success is to conduct the workshop in the home of the rejected parent, thereby obviating the parent's concern about the children acting out in transit to the workshop and the need to hire a transportation service.

## PHASES, SYLLABUS, AND PROCEDURES

This section describes what we do in Family Bridges and the rationale for the selection of these procedures. The procedures evolve as new material is added and refined. The workshop is led by a team of two professionals. Currently all team members are doctoral level psychologists, but we do not view a doctorate as a prerequisite for training as a workshop leader.<sup>73</sup> The course generally takes about four days to complete, comprising four phases and a brief orientation prior to the formal commencement. The team has a general plan of what material and exercises to present, but the final selection of procedures is governed by the needs and reactions of the participants. Before, during, and after the workshop, the rejected parent consults with one team member for guidance on helpful and appropriate behavior.

### ORIENTATION AND RISK ASSESSMENT

At the outset the program leaders explain their role, and they evaluate the risk of dangerous behavior by the child that may require immediate attention. All but one of the 23 children cooperated during the orientation and were judged ready to begin. The exception was an adolescent who, during the litigation, physically assaulted his mother during a supervised contact, a premeditated act that he rationalized as the only way to get the adults in the case to take him seriously. In a quintessential example of the stark dilemma, subsequent to the court decision he made clear his intention to assault his mother if placed in the same room with her. As a result of his threats, he was brought before a juvenile court judge, repeated his threats, and was sent to a residential facility. Eventually, he agreed to refrain from violence at which point he was ready to proceed with the orientation and he and his mother successfully completed the workshop. This case differs from the rest in that this boy was the only child who had contact with the juvenile justice system.

Next, we describe our credentials and experience which helps instill confidence and optimism in the workshop and contributes to the child's sense of security in the setting.<sup>74</sup> We explain that our assignment is to conduct a workshop for seriously damaged relationships between a parent and a child and we introduce the labels *rejected* and *favored* parent. This is the beginning of providing a vocabulary with which to understand the family's problems. Next we describe our understanding of the court's findings and orders with attention to the fact that the decision about where to live has been taken out of the child's hands. We clarify the order suspending contact with the other parent, including any conditions imposed by the court that must be met before renewing contact with the favored parent. We empathize with their view of the court orders and with how difficult it is to understand and accept such fundamental changes, and we assure them that we will help them with this process.

We believe that understanding the court orders and the court's resolve to reunite child and parent helps motivate the child to participate meaningfully in the workshop. Optimism about



a successful outcome also contributes to motivation.<sup>75</sup> We explain in general terms that the family will acquire the tools and skills to support the child's good relationship with both parents, and that we have confidence that they will succeed. We define the ground rules, such as the participant's control of the pace of the workshop, the importance of honesty, a prohibition against verbal or physical abuse,<sup>76</sup> and a moratorium on discussing past grievances between child and parent (which alleviates anxiety that conflict will escalate out of control). We invite questions, answer these as best as we can, and then we begin the program.

### **PHASE ONE: BASIC CONCEPTS AND INFORMATION**

Naturally, the orientation does not change the child's negative feelings about the parent or about the court orders. It does, though, ensure enough cooperation to get started. The program begins with video material that is immediately engaging, entertaining, evocative, and educational. The videos demand little from participants and watching them minimizes direct interaction between parent and child. Discussion is discouraged during the morning of Day One. This begins the program with low anxiety activities that minimize opportunities for conflict and confirm that the program is benign as promised. In stories far removed from parent-child relationships, the videos depict the ease with which allegiance to an authority figure can result in the suspension of critical thinking and the rupture of relationships, and how a social structure and group pressure creates in-groups and out-groups that can rapidly develop negative stereotypes and rejecting attitudes toward others who have done nothing to merit negative attitudes.

The video material creates a common experience to draw on subsequently when illustrating concepts relevant to the child's alienation. For instance, we discuss how the children in a video developed negative stereotypes; this bypasses the anxiety and defensiveness that could be expected if the child's own behavior was the topic of discussion. We find that children learn the essential concepts and recognize privately, while saving face, the relevance to their own situation.

Following the presentation of the morning videos, we break for lunch. Most children, by this point in time, are communicating directly with the parent who may have been rejected for years. The act of taking meals together is a component of the program. It evokes earlier pleasant and nurturing experiences and contributes to the recovery of a positively tinged relationship.

The afternoon begins with exercises in perception that children tell us are the most compelling and enjoyable part of the workshop and are most useful in teaching the importance of critical thinking and in helping them reassess beliefs and recover a balanced view of their parents. Our procedures follow an empirically validated model for enhancing critical thinking, which includes the disposition to think critically, the skills by which to do so, and metacognitive monitoring of thinking processes.<sup>77</sup> Considerable time is spent working with materials that teach how easy it is to misperceive reality. One teen said, "I learned that you can't always be right, you think you are and you're not."

Using tools such as perceptual illusions, we teach how people and situations can be perceived from different, often equally valid, perspectives. We show how certain perceptual and cognitive biases are ubiquitous, and we use award-winning studies to demonstrate how suggestion exerts a powerful influence on perception and memory in children and adults.<sup>78</sup> The knowledge that misperception is a natural human phenomenon contributes to saving face and gives children permission to entertain the notion that they may have misjudged the rejected parent. Using material such as *Candid Camera* segments that are used in college

Psychology courses, we teach how the pressure of group dynamics can lead us to act against our better judgment—a great lesson for teens.<sup>79</sup>

When Day One ends, the participants are usually relaxed and in an upbeat mood. They are relieved that the process is easier than anticipated and the parents often are overjoyed at having contact and regaining some semblance of a relationship with a once lost child. The evening's assignment is for the parent and child to engage in a mutually enjoyable activity. The workshop can take place in different types of locations, including an office or the family's home, but we prefer a relatively low-cost, vacation location that offers opportunities for family fun and relaxation. In addition to the content of the program, the process of working together toward a common goal with shared experiences in a pleasurable environment creates a beneficial milieu that enhances healing.<sup>80</sup>

### **PHASE TWO: DIVORCE-RELATED CONCEPTS AND INTEGRATION OF LEARNING**

Day Two organizes the general psychological concepts from the previous day around the specific topic of children and divorce. Vignettes from popular television programs and news shows are used to illustrate common dilemmas following divorce, especially the problem of children who feel caught in the middle between their divorced parents. Next we teach concepts denoting behaviors and attitudes that have been illustrated in the earlier presentations. In addition, we present specific information, tailored to the circumstances of the family and the developmental level of the children, such as common dilemmas faced by recovered missing children.

### **PHASE THREE: APPLICATION OF LEARNING**

By this phase in the program, the parent and child have been involved in a joint learning enterprise, have enjoyed each other's company, and have become optimistic about the potential for healing. Nevertheless, the children must learn how to apply the new concepts to their own situation. We teach such application through the use of various exercises that make it easy for children, in a face-saving manner, to better evaluate the presence or absence of the forces they have learned about in the preceding work that shape attitudes and behaviors. Although by this point in the program the children may understand, on an abstract level, that their rejection of a parent reflects errors in judgment and the influence of processes that polarized their attitudes about their parents, they are not directly aware of the manner in which their own cognitive processes maintain their overly negative view of the rejected parent. The moment in which the child first experiences—not in a general, abstract, or intellectual manner, but with direct and immediate awareness—that she has been seeing the rejected parent through a distorted lens is the climax of the workshop.

Most children long for a good relationship with both parents.<sup>81</sup> The tools they acquire in Family Bridges enable them to avoid polarizing their feelings toward their parents so that they can recover a positive relationship with the rejected parent without turning against the other. Day Three in one family saw the children presenting their father with Fathers' Day cards that they made on their computer. It was the first time in five years that he had received such acknowledgment. Children differ in the timing of what we call the "aha moment," but at some point during the experience, the children achieve this milestone, signaling their readiness for the workshop's final phase.

## **PHASE FOUR: ACQUISITION AND PRACTICE OF COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT-RESOLUTION SKILLS**

Social psychology research finds that social exclusion leads to more self-defeating behavior<sup>82</sup> and aggression even toward innocent targets.<sup>83</sup> This is true of rejected parents, who commonly overreact to their children's hostility and ostracism by responding in kind.<sup>84</sup> To help parents respond in sophisticated and helpful ways rather than react thoughtlessly, we present a formal parenting skills program via video material, practice sessions, and role playing. We find it helpful to include the children in the parenting skills program. The skills taught, such as active listening, are equally valuable for children. Including the children also reassures them that the rejected parent is learning the skills necessary to deal with future disruptions in non-punitive, constructive ways and it reassures them that the workshop leaders recognize that the rejected parent also has things to learn. An additional benefit is that the program helps children empathize with the struggles parents face when trying to raise children in psychologically healthy ways; this contributes to the goal of helping children develop compassionate views of both parents. By this time in the program nearly every child expresses the wish for their other parent to learn the same information, see the same video materials, and learn the same skills.

Following the parenting program, we teach the family methods to address important decisions and resolve conflict. The skills taught earlier are practiced as the parent and child negotiate and clarify each other's expectations, house rules, and plans for the return home. We encourage children to apply these skills in the future when dealing with relatives on either side of their family who communicate negative thoughts and feelings about either parent. One exercise involves expressing appreciation for specific behaviors of family members.<sup>85</sup> The Workshop ends when it is evident that the parent and child can apply what they have learned to manage their relationship, including difficult conflicts, without the team's presence, but with aftercare help if needed.

## **CONCLUSION AND AFTERCARE PLANNING**

Before parting we review the aftercare plans. We encourage the participants to enjoy a few days of vacation together prior to returning home. This helps nurture the newly restored relationship, solidify the positive feelings that have developed during the workshop, and allow the child to experience the pleasure of receiving and giving love to the formerly rejected parent. During this time, a team member is available by telephone to monitor the family's progress and provide transitional support and assistance as needed.

## **EVALUATING FAMILY BRIDGES**

The structure and content of Family Bridges are rooted in peer-reviewed scientific research, such as (but not limited to) the efficacy of multimedia instruction, techniques for teaching critical thinking, factors affecting misperception, negative stereotype formation, suggestibility, the influence of authority figures and groups on an individual's attitudes and behavior, and the impact on children of exposure to parental conflict. However, as with any emerging area of practice, no controlled studies with quantitative measures have assessed the outcome of the workshop or the specific factors in the program that contribute to its success.<sup>86</sup> For comparative purposes it is worth noting that family courts routinely order,

and parents routinely seek, counseling, educational programs, parenting coordination, and workshops that similarly lack large-scale, long-term, well-controlled outcome data proving their effectiveness.

At the time the workshops were conducted, we had not included a research component. Thus, to determine the degree of the child's alienation at the outset of the workshop for purposes of comparison with the child's relationship at the close of the workshop and currently, we rely on the comprehensive custody evaluation in 9 of the 12 cases and court's findings in 9 of these, the parent's report, the duration of alienation and estrangement, the failure of prior attempts to repair the damaged relationships, and our own observations. We base our evaluation of the child's relationship with the (formerly) rejected parent at the conclusion of the workshop on our observations, discussions, and interactions with the family. Regarding follow-up information, 10 of the 12 rejected parents keep in touch with the workshop leaders, sending updates about their children and documents such as report cards, award certificates, and photographs. Local mental health professionals who provide aftercare services have supplemented the parents' feedback, and, for the two families whose parents have not contacted us directly, are the sole source of follow-up information.<sup>87</sup>

We are well aware that it is desirable to supplement this data with a larger sample that includes systematic ratings of a child's relationship with the parents pre- and post-workshop, made by independent raters whose ratings are subjected to reliability checks and based on multiple sources of information, such as questionnaires, interviews with parents, children, and aftercare professionals, and direct observations. Pending such an investigation (which of necessity would be a few years from publication); considering that the current literature includes only a few articles with suggestions for managing cases with alienated children, most of which include no outcome data, and relatively few reports of interventions that effectively reunite severely alienated children and parents; and considering the pessimistic tone of clinical reports with this population, we reasoned that the following results were better than no data.<sup>88</sup>

For 19 of the children, the follow-up information covers a span between 2 and 4 years since the completion of the workshop. The remaining four children attended more recently. When evaluating outcomes of programs designed to help alienated children, it is important to distinguish between children's cooperation and enjoyment of a program in its early stages, their understanding of concepts that may facilitate reconciliation, their successful repair of damaged relationships upon completion of a program, and their maintenance of the gains over the long term.<sup>89</sup> By the conclusion of the workshop, 22 of the 23 children, all of whom were severely alienated at the outset, and had prior failed experiences with counseling, had restored a positive relationship with the rejected parent as evidenced by the children's own statements, by the observations of the parent and workshop leaders, and by the observations of the aftercare specialist. The child who did not modify her negative attitudes, just shy of her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, knew at the time of the workshop that she would be having extensive contact with her favored parent in just a few days. We thought she would be less motivated to participate meaningfully in the program and were concerned that she might sabotage the program for her younger siblings, but we wanted to provide her the opportunity to repair her damaged relationship. At the outset she told us that she would not be receptive, but she remained and agreed (and honored the agreement) to not actively interfere with her siblings' participation (who did profit from the experience).

Among the 22 children who ended the workshop on a positive note, four children—two boys and one girl in one family and one boy (but not his brother) in another family—regressed after the court renewed their contact with the favored parent. We believe the

timing of such contact was premature, but regret that our efforts were insufficient to prepare and protect these children against this possibility. The three children in one family see their rejected father under protest and their severe alienation is manifested in belligerent and physically provocative behavior, destruction of property, and repeated taunts and insults. The boy in the other family refuses all contact with his rejected mother. Taking into account these non-maintainers brings the number of children who successfully restored and maintained a positive relationship with the formerly rejected parent to 18 (78%).<sup>90</sup> One teen, age 18, following an extended contact with his father one week after the workshop, became re-alienated from his mother and threatened violence as had occurred in the past. As a result he moved out of her home, but has since moved back and renewed an affectionate relationship. The circumstances of the children who did not achieve or maintain a positive relationship suggest that the workshop is most likely to be effective in the situation for which it was designed: families in which the court has placed children with the rejected parent and interrupted contact for an extended period of time with the favored parent.

Caution should be exercised when interpreting percentages because with more cases, more comprehensive and sophisticated data collection, and the passage of time, the percentages may well change. Also, it is well known in treatment outcome research that innovative approaches have higher rates of success when conducted by those who developed the innovation than by second and third generation trained professionals. Without controlling for the numerous variables that might influence outcome, it is not possible to determine the degree to which different aspects of the children's experiences contributed to the changes. For instance, it is reasonable to ask whether the children would have been able to recover and maintain a positive relationship with the rejected parent merely by being placed with that parent and allowing time to take its course. In my experience, this would be likely for the two children in this sample under the age of 9 if they had been placed with the alienated parent apart from their siblings or if their siblings healed their relationship with the rejected parent, because in this respect young children often, but not always, take their cues from their older siblings.<sup>91</sup> These two children rapidly adjusted to being with the rejected parent and participated in some, but not all phases, of the workshop primarily to help consolidate their comfort with the rejected parent and include them in family meetings.

Some older children who are placed with the rejected parent, with no special assistance to correct their predominantly negative perception of the parent, adjust their *behavior* to peacefully coexist with the rejected parent, yet they continue to harbor *attitudes* that impair efforts to heal the relationship. Over the course of time, some children are able to heal the relationship merely by living with a rejected parent and without special assistance. In such cases, though, the family suffers in the interim, whereas Family Bridges could promote a more rapid restoration of a normal positively tinged relationship.<sup>92</sup>

The positive outcomes achieved and maintained by many teens, including 16-year-olds, with firm court orders accompanied by Family Bridges demonstrate that teenagers' overt resistance to firm authority is not insurmountable. These outcomes suggest that their best interests and unrevealed wishes may be served by requiring adolescents to work on repairing a damaged relationship, and that such a requirement can be effective under certain conditions.<sup>93</sup> This should give courts and evaluators pause before assuming that stated preferences of minor adolescents should outweigh other best-interests factors.

Even the one teen whose behavior before the workshop landed him a court-imposed stay in a juvenile facility, has expressed his pleasure that the legal system set firm limits and forced him to repair his relationship with his mother. He believes that it would have been a huge mistake for the court to appease his demands. He recently told his mother that,

despite his explicit statements, he believed all along during the litigation that he would be better off living with her and he expected that the court would place him with her. Depending on one's view of the case, it provides a compelling argument either for or against affirmative action to repair a severely damaged parent-child relationship in spite of a child's stated wishes. His stated preferences during the litigation did not reflect the true history of his relationship with his mother, reflected external influences, and did not express his best interests as understood by the court or by the teen.<sup>94</sup> People who identify themselves as children's rights advocates, though, might dispute the legitimacy of this resolution of the stark dilemma. If the boy's threats had succeeded in persuading the court to place him with his father and allow him to disown his mother, it is likely that he would have avoided the consequences imposed upon him by the juvenile court. This case highlights the need for dialogue about what constitutes "success" with these situations.

### THE FAVORED PARENT

In general, court orders either specify a time in the future when the court will review the case to determine the suitability of restoring contact with the favored parent, or the court will take guidance from the local mental health professional who is working with the family.<sup>95</sup> When the favored parent works with such a professional, contacts resume first during sessions with the professional who can monitor their impact.

The courts in the cases reported here dealt with the favored parent in different ways making it difficult to draw generalizations based on a small sample. The parent who abducted the children is a fugitive and would be arrested upon entering the country. Eight favored parents were ordered by the court to work with a counselor to support their children's progress and as a precondition of restoring contact with the children. Only two of these favored parents complied, and contact resumed after 5 weeks for one family and 12 weeks for the other. Of the remaining six parents under court order to attend counseling, the court restored contact to one after 8 weeks and the three children rapidly became re-alienated. The court restored contact for another after 6 months and the three children maintained their gains. A third parent went 20 months without seeing his children or working toward meeting conditions for renewal of contact, but then brought a motion before a new court and was awarded extended holiday and summer contacts. The mother reports that over the course of the 20 months when the children did not see their father, they did well in their relationship with her and in other respects. One month into the summer, contact with the father resumed and the elder of the two children reverted to his old behaviors, refused to return to his mother, and is now alienated from her, but the younger boy relates well to his mother. A fourth parent refused to cooperate with the court order and has not seen the child for 10 months, but based on the child's progress, the aftercare specialist believes that beneficial contact can soon be restored. A fifth parent also refused to cooperate with the court order and wants no contact with his children because he takes their reconciliation with their mother as a personal rejection. The sixth parent chose to cut off all contact with his son and said that when the boy turns 18 he could choose to renew contact. In one of the cases that involved litigation, the court suspended contact between the child and favored parent for 2 months, after which time the contact was renewed and the child maintained his gains.

Of the two cases which did not involve litigation, in the first case the children resumed regular contact with their favored mother 2 weeks after the workshop. A year later the

father, who had been rejected for 5 years, reported, “There has been a slow steady shift in the boys. It has not been a straight line progression but the positive results are not in question. My relationship with all three boys is as good as it has been since before the divorce.” A 3-year follow-up was even more positive. The second case that did not involve litigation was the 18-year-old who resumed contact with his father approximately 1 week after the workshop, became re-alienated from his mother, but subsequently reunited with her. His 21-year-old brother consistently maintained the gains despite some contact with his father.

### LIMITATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

In addition to limitations already noted, the following should be considered when evaluating Family Bridges:

1. Workshop leaders spend an average 3–4 hours each day debriefing and planning in addition to the 6–7 hours each day of contact with the family. Rather than charge by the hour, we charge a flat fee comparable to the cost of court-mandated twice-weekly sessions for 32 weeks with a psychotherapist in private practice—equivalent to about 64 hours of professional time (2 leaders  $\times$  8 hours  $\times$  4 days). Depending on the fee structure, the typical cost of such a program ranges from about \$7,500 to \$20,000, not including reduced fees to needy clients. Until more people are trained to conduct the workshop locally, travel and lodging add to the expense. Recently we conducted an abbreviated workshop over one weekend with a total cost of \$5,000. This was accomplished by moving some parenting materials from the formal presentation to independent study Saturday night, and by eliminating some material that we deemed was less relevant to this family’s difficulties. A 16-year-old who had been severely alienated for 1 year restored a very positive relationship with his father and stepmother, and maintained his progress at the three-month follow-up. The workshop leaders live close by so there were no additional travel expenses for them or the family. We continue to explore various means of reducing the cost and increasing our efficiency.

2. The workshop originated to help recovered abducted children who would be having no contact with the abducting parent. The absence of contact with the favored parent was not originally a criterion for enrollment in the workshop; it was simply the reality in those families, and the workshop was designed with those circumstances in mind. Thus, the workshop is applicable to a limited range of cases. We have enjoyed success with some families that did not meet the regular entrance criteria, and we continue to explore ways to use the workshop under other conditions. But, as discussed earlier, in those cases where children failed to maintain the gains they made in the workshop, a common factor was the child’s premature contact (sometimes clandestine) with the favored parent.

3. Future research will need to look at larger samples, perhaps in a more restricted age range, with one child in each family selected as a target subject. Comparing children pre- and post-interventions is helpful. Even if the children attribute changes to what they learned in the Workshop, and participants express high levels of satisfaction, without controlling for other variables, definitive conclusions are difficult. For instance, to what extent is improvement attributable to court orders rather than Family Bridges? Because the court cannot base its decision on the needs of a proposed study, children under similar court orders cannot be randomly assigned to a workshop experience versus some other interven-

tion. One possibility is to compare satisfaction levels between participants in the workshop and those in other interventions. We invite creative contributions to the dilemmas posed by research in this emerging field.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Family Bridges is one promising option for children who are severely and irrationally alienated. Given the paucity of effective help for these families<sup>96</sup> and the prevalence of iatrogenic ineffective treatments,<sup>97</sup> we hope our experiences will encourage others to take on the challenge of helping this population. Working with child custody litigants brings professional risks, often in a hostile climate.<sup>98</sup> Offering help in an emerging area of practice brings added burdens associated with work that is novel and not yet part of the experience of many colleagues.<sup>99</sup> The challenges and risks, though, are balanced by the gratification of helping children recover lost identities and lost relationships—as a grateful mother put it, “reversing years of heartache and suffering for us all.” My hope is that this article presents an opportunity for dialogue about how best to help these families, how to choose among the various options, and how to evaluate the effectiveness of our efforts.

## NOTES

1. BARBARA J. FIDLER ET AL., *CHALLENGING ISSUES IN CHILD CUSTODY ASSESSMENTS: A GUIDE FOR LEGAL AND MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS* (Thomson Carswell 2008); Janet R. Johnston, Marjorie Gans Walters, & Steven Friedlander, *Therapeutic Work With Alienated Children and Their Families*, 39 *FAM. CT. REV.* 316 (2001); Deirdre Conway Rand et al., *The Spectrum of Parental Alienation Syndrome Part III: The Kopetski Follow-up Study*, 23 *AM. J. FORENSIC PSYCHOL.* 15, 15–43 (2005); Matthew J. Sullivan & Joan B. Kelly, *Legal and Psychological Management of Cases With An Alienated Child*, 39 *FAM. CT. REV.* 299 (2001).

2. A note on terminology: The literature uses the terms *rejected* and *target* to denote the parent whose children are pathologically alienated. I find the former term most useful, although it is somewhat confusing when we reach a point in our program in which the child no longer rejects this parent. The term *target parent* can be understood as denoting the target of the child’s enmity. But it has also been used in the literature to denote the target of the favored parent’s negative behavior that contributes to the child’s problem. Since alienation and estrangement can arise from several sources, this article avoids a term that implies that the rejected parent is merely the passive target of the other parent’s attacks.

The study of alienated children could benefit from a fresh look at nomenclature. To prevent confusion this article uses the term *alienation* in the sense in which it is defined by Kelly and Johnston. Joan B. Kelly & Janet R. Johnston, *The Alienated Child: A reformulation of Parental Alienation Syndrome*, 39 *FAM. CT. REV.* 249 (2001). In some cases the modifier *unjustified*, *unreasonable*, *irrational*, or *pathological* is included to remind the reader that the cases discussed in this article are not ones in which a child’s rejection is a proportionate response to the rejected parent’s behavior. In Richard A. Warshak, *Bringing Sense to Parental Alienation: A Look at the Disputes and the Evidence*, 37 *FAM. L.Q.* 273, 292 (2003), I introduced the term *pathological alienation* to distinguish unreasonable from reasonable rejection of a parent. Kelly & Johnston, reserve the word *estranged* for realistic aversion to a parent that is regarded as a healthy response, and the word *alienation* for persistent unreasonable aversion regarded as a pathological response. Kelly & Johnston, *supra*. I have reservations about both proposals. The drawback of the term *pathological alienation* is that it casts a family problem in a medical model, whereas a psychological model may better accommodate the various ways to understand and conceptualize this problem. The conceptual distinction between realistic and unrealistic aversion is useful, but the terms *alienated* and *estranged* to denote this distinction create confusion when communicating with the legal profession and the general public, for whom these terms carry different meanings. In standard usage, both terms refer to a distance in relationships, but neither term connotes whether or not the distance is rationally based. To clarify important distinctions among children who harbor aversions to their parents, and in working with these children, I suggest a nomenclature proposed by Dr. Mark Otis (personal communication April 1, 2007) which conceptualizes disrupted relationships



as either *disillusioned*, *alienated*, or *estranged*, with these terms used in their conventional meaning according to their dictionary definitions. Merriam-Webster Online, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/home.htm> (last visited Sept. 7, 2009). Disillusioned children have misgivings about one or both parents, remain involved with parents, do not join in a campaign of denigration, and interact cooperatively in many contexts, but remain discontented, resentful, aloof or reserved. Alienated children show contempt and withdraw affection while still in contact with the parent (often not by choice). Estranged children are physically apart from a parent in addition to the emotional separation that characterizes alienation. Within each category children vary in the degree to which the child's aversion toward the parent is realistic/reasonable versus unrealistic/unreasonable.

Again, to avoid confusion, the text of this article does not use this nomenclature. It is presented here for consideration and to open a dialogue on vocabulary that may prove useful both to those in the field and to those with whom we communicate.

3. A.A. v. S.N.A., [2007] BCSC 594 (Can.), available at <http://www.canlii.org/en/bc/bcsc/doc/2007/2007bcsc594/2007bcsc594.html>.

4. *Id.* at ¶84–87.

5. A.A. v. S.N.A., [2007] B.C.J. No. 1475; 2007 B.C.C.A. 364; 40 R.F.L. (6th) 248; 160 A.C.W.S. (3d) 500; 2007 CarswellBC 1591; Vancouver Registry No. CA035026, at ¶8.

6. The literature primarily discusses cases in which children become alienated from the parent with whom they spend less time (sometimes labeled the non-primary custodial parent) and discusses the importance of maintaining contact between the child and parent in order to prevent the child's resistance from becoming more entrenched, and my experience supports this principle. *See, e.g.*, Sullivan & Kelly, *supra* note 1, at 300. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to assume that all instances in which children unreasonably reject a parent fit this pattern. I have worked on many cases in which children reject the parent with whom they spend the most time.

7. Courts may delegate authority to a parenting coordinator, special master, or co-parenting arbitrator. *See* Christine A. Coates et al., *Parenting Coordination for High-Conflict Families*, 42 FAM. CT. REV. 246, 251 (2004); Sullivan & Kelly, *supra* note 1, at 314. But *cf.* Carol S. Bruch, *Parental Alienation Syndrome and Parental Alienation: Getting It Wrong in Child Custody Cases*, 35 FAM. L.Q. 527, 533, 564 (arguing that court-ordered counseling may be an overzealous and inappropriate intrusion of the court into family matters, and that delegated judicial management of such cases may violate due process protections or civil liberties).

8. Despite the term, the goals of such therapy go beyond healing the ruptured relationships. *See* Johnston et al., *supra* note 1, and RICHARD A. WARSHAK, *DIVORCE POISON: HOW TO PROTECT YOUR FAMILY FROM BAD-MOUTHING AND BRAINWASHING* (Harper Paperbacks 2010) at 242–253. Additional goals include: encouraging more realistic thinking, helping members of the family understand the needs and feelings that are being expressed through problematic behavior, helping them find healthier ways to adapt, and facilitating communication between parents and between parents and children.

9. *See* Robin Deutsch et al., *Breaking Barriers: An Innovative Program for Alienated and Estranged Children*, 27 AFCC NEWS 8–9 (2008) (reporting the difficulty in obtaining commitments for attendance at an innovative summer camp program for alienated children when families did not have a court order to attend).

10. Sullivan & Kelly, *supra* note 1, at 301 (call for “A clear mandate for support, with a threat of court sanctions if alienating behavior persists, is essential to the intervention process. These sanctions may include financial payments or enforcement of an order that the aligned parent's primary legal or physical custody is conditional on supporting therapy and facilitating reasonable access.”)

11. Despite initial opposition, eventually children may find therapy helpful. *See* STANLEY S. CLAWAR & BRYNNE V. RIVLIN, *CHILDREN HELD HOSTAGE: DEALING WITH PROGRAMMED AND BRAINWASHED CHILDREN* (American Bar Association 1991). *See also* Sullivan & Kelly, *supra* note 1, at 300, (who, based on clinical observations report: “In many cases, despite initial vehement opposition to visiting, the child then has a benign or positive experience of visiting with the rejected parent.”).

12. *See* Rachel Birnbaum & Helen Radovanovic, *Brief Intervention Model for Access-Based Postseparation Disputes: Family and Court Outcomes*, 37 FAM. & CONCILIATION CT. REV. 504 (1999).

13. The existence of pathological alienation in a child does not necessarily mean that the child's best interests are served by transferring custody to the rejected parent. *See* Sullivan & Kelly, *supra* note 1, at 312 (“Changes in custody should not be based solely on the child's alienation but, rather, by those customary factors that would lead to recommending removal from or supervision of contact with residential parents, including the child's alienation.”). *See also, e.g.*, WARSHAK, *supra* note 8, at 275 (“If efforts to reduce divorce poison are unsuccessful, the alienating parent will continue to do a poor job of supporting the children's relationship with the target. In other respects, though, the alienating parent may be better situated to manage the children. For example, a mother who influences her children to turn against their father may be more available during the school week to supervise the children. Or the father may have limited skills in dealing with the routines of the school week and easily lose his

patience. Ultimately the custody decision must rest on a careful consideration of all the factors that influence children's welfare and of each parent's capacity to provide a healthy growth-promoting environment." See also Richard A. Warshak, *The Approximation Rule, Child Development Research, and Children's Best Interests After Divorce*, 1 CHILD DEV. PERSPECTIVES 119 (2007) (on the importance of a multi-factored best-interests inquiry).

14. FIDLER ET AL., *supra* note 11, at 271–72 (citing 11 studies).

15. Peter G. Jaffe et al., *Custody Disputes Involving Allegations of Domestic Violence: Toward a Differentiated Approach to Parenting Plans*, 46 FAM. CT. REV. 500, 504 (2008).

16. *Id.* at 503 ("Abusive ex-partners are likely to attempt to alienate the children from the other parent's affection (by asserting blame for the dissolution of the family and telling negative stories), sabotage family plans (by continuing criticism or competitive bribes), and undermine parental authority (by explicitly instructing the children not to listen or obey).") See also Sandra S. Berns, *Parents Behaving Badly: Parental Alienation Syndrome in The Family Court—Magic Bullet or Poisoned Chalice*, 15 (3) AUSTRALIAN J. FAM. L. 191 (2001) (reporting on a group of alienating fathers with a history of domestic violence or stalking.) See also Marisa L. Beeble et al., *Abusive Men's Use of Children to Control Their Partners and Ex-Partners*, 12 EUROPEAN PSYCHOLOGIST 54 (2007); Leslie M. Drozd & Nancy W. Olesen, *Is It Abuse, Alienation, And/Or Estrangement? A Decision Tree*, 1(3) J. CHILD CUSTODY 65 (2004) (label alienating behavior by spousal abusers as "sabotage.").

17. CLAWAR & RIVLIN, *supra* note 11 at 172 ("The legal system in most states is not currently adequate to protect children from this form of abuse."); *Accord* RICHARD A. GARDNER, *THE PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Creative Therapeutics 1998), at xxi; Kelly Johnston, *supra* note 2 at 257 ("Whether such parents are aware of the negative impact on the child, these behaviors of the aligned parent (and his or her supporters) constitute emotional abuse of the child."); Janet R. Johnston & Joan B. Kelly, *Rejoinder to Gardner's 'Commentary on Kelly and Johnston's 'The Alienated Child: A Reformulation of Parental Alienation Syndrome''*, 42 FAM CT. REV. 622, 626 (2004) (referring to parental alienation as "an insidious form of emotional abuse of children that can be inflicted by divorced parents.").

18. CLAWAR & RIVLIN, *supra* note 11, at 150.

19. Sullivan & Kelly, *supra* note 1, at 312.

20. Rather than assessing relative blame of each parent for the children's difficulties, when courts suspend children's contact with a favored parent, the court could simply determine that such contact, for whatever reason, is likely to interfere with the children's improvement. In part this may be due to the negative influence of the favored parent, but it may also be due in part to the children's own difficulties in repairing the relationship with one parent while spending time with the other. The relative contributions of various factors to the children's problems differ from family to family.

21. See Sullivan & Kelly, *supra* note 1, at 305 ("Single days or weekend visits often do not provide sufficient time for rejected parents and children to have a productive experience free of the influence of aligned parents. Children most often arrive emotionally shut down and suspicious and generally become more guarded and hostile as they anticipate going back to the aligned parents at the end of the visit."). See also WARSHAK, *supra* note 8, at 273 ("When these children arrive at the home of the alienated parent, if they are not loudly and rudely expressing their hatred, they are acting sullen, withdrawn, and emotionally frozen. Over time the icy barrier of their negative attitude melts under the warmth of the parent's love and attention. Generally, the older the children the longer they maintain their angry withdrawal and the more time is needed for the thawing process.").

22. Mary Lund, *A Therapist's View of Parental Alienation Syndrome*, 33 FAM. & CONCIL. CTS. REV. 308, 309. (1995); PHILIP M. STAHL, *COMPLEX ISSUES IN CHILD CUSTODY EVALUATIONS* (Sage Publications 1999), at 6. For a review of treatment outcome studies emphasizing the importance of the child's contact with the alienated parent in cases where the court determines that such contact is in the child's best interests, see FIDLER ET AL., *supra* note 1, at 277; Warshak, *supra* note 2.

23. Johnston et al., *supra* note 1, at 327 & 329 (underscore the propensity for alienated young adolescents to refuse and physically resist court-ordered contact with a rejected parent.) See also Sullivan & Kelly, *supra* note 1, at 313. See also Peggie Ward & J. Campbell Harvey, *Family Wars: The Alienation of Children*, 34 NH BAR J. 30 (1993) (who opine that when a child becomes "fully 'enmeshed' with the alienating parent" forcing contact with the target parent is impossible and could induce devastating trauma."). *But see* Deutsch et al., *supra* note 9 (where more recently Ward has been involved in a project to create an environment where such children can have brief contact with the rejected parent without suffering such trauma).

24. RICHARD A. GARDNER, *THE PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME* (2d ed. Creative Therapeutics 1998).

25. See Elizabeth M. Ellis, *Help for the Alienated Parent*, 33 AM. J. FAM. THERAPY 415, 419 (2005); Sullivan & Kelly, *supra* note 1, at 313.

26. Sullivan & Kelly, *supra* note 1, at 313.

27. See, e.g., *Korwin v. Potworowski* [2006], 2006 CarswellOnt 3436, ¶ 145 (S.C.J.): “There is no means of forcing this 13-year-old boy to remain in his father’s home, short of locking him up. He is now of an age where, even if he may be too immature to appreciate what is best for him, he cannot be physically forced to remain where he does not want to be.” See also *Corkhum v. Corkhum*, [2005] 2005 CarswellNS 235, ¶ 19 (S.C.): “I cannot find that it is in Michelle’s best interest to take her from a place she feels safe and put her with someone which will cause her great fear and anxiety. She is fourteen years old and I doubt she would go or stay if I made such an order.”

28. JUDITH S. WALLERSTEIN ET AL., *THE UNEXPECTED LEGACY OF DIVORCE: A 25 YEAR LANDMARK STUDY* 116 (2000).

29. See FIDLER ET AL., *supra* note 1. An exception to this literature is found in WALLERSTEIN ET AL., *supra* note 28 at 116, who, based on a sample of approximately 26 children (in a study of families in Marin County who responded to an offer for free counseling in the early 1970s), described as “aligned” with one parent, caution against “overzealous intervention to break these alliances, which are usually strengthened by efforts to separate the allies.” Similarly, Bruch, *supra* note 7, at 533 n.20, who, citing a 2001 telephone conversation with Dr. Judith Wallerstein, reports that every case of alienation in the study resolved itself before the children reached eighteen, most within 1 or 2 years. It is not clear to what extent the counseling offered in that study contributed to this outcome. Also, it should be noted that, although most cases of alienation were seen as resolving in 1–2 years (still a formidable amount of time in the life of a child), given that children between the ages of 9 and 12 were most likely to suffer this problem, some cases of alienation could have lasted as long as 6 to 9 years before the children reached 18. Also, this 2001 telephone report from Wallerstein contrasts with her earlier publication in which she introduces the term “Medea syndrome” to refer to parents who use their child to exact revenge on their former spouse, and reports, “I have seen a great deal of evidence that Medea-like anger severely injures children at every age.” Wallerstein adds, “When one or both parents act the Medea role, children are affected for years to come. Some grow up with warped consciences, having learned how to manipulate people as the result of their parents’ behavior. Some grow up with enormous rage, having understood that they were used as weapons. Some grow up guilty, with low self-esteem and recurrent depression. . . .” JUDITH S. WALLERSTEIN & SANDRA BLAKESLEE, *SECOND CHANCES: MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN A DECADE AFTER DIVORCE* 196 (1989). Very similar long-term outcomes are reported in Amy J.L. Baker, *The Long-term Effects of Parental Alienation on Adult Children: A Qualitative Research Study*, 33 AM. J. FAM. THERAPY 289 (2005), and AMY J.L. BAKER, *ADULT CHILDREN OF PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME: BREAKING THE TIES THAT BIND* (2007).

30. WARSHAK, *supra* note 8, at 280–292.

31. See Vivienne Roseby, Address at The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts Symposium on Child Custody Evaluations (1997) and Sullivan & Kelly, *supra* note 1, at 313: “There is no empirical data that indicates whether entrenched alienation and total permanent rejection of a biological parent has long-term deleterious effects on children’s psychological development.”

32. See Baker, *supra* note 29; Janet R. Johnston, *Children of Divorce Who Reject a Parent and Refuse Visitation: Recent Research and Social Policy Implications for the Alienated Child*, 38 FAM. L.Q. 757 (2005); Janet R. Johnston et al., *The Psychological Functioning of Alienated Children in Custody Disputing Families: An Exploratory Study*, 23 AM. J. FORENSIC PSYCHOL. 39 (2005); WALLERSTEIN & BLAKESLEE *supra* note 29. See also Brian K. Barber, *Parental Psychological Control: Revisiting a Neglected Construct*, 67 CHILD DEV. 3296–3319, 3296 (1996), reporting on the link between parental control that “constrains, invalidates, and manipulates children’s psychological and emotional experience and expression” and problems such as depression and delinquency in pre-adolescents and adolescents. It is important to note that the above studies are not equivalent in methodology or in scientific rigor. Studies that rely primarily on qualitative analyses and clinical samples, while important contributions to the literature, are generally seen as precursors to more systematic research with larger samples, standardized measures, comparison groups, and statistical analyses.

33. There are reports of alienated children reconciling with rejected parents without intervention by the court or therapists. See Douglas Darnall & Barbara F. Steinberg, *Motivational Models for Spontaneous Reunification With the Alienated Child: Part I*, 36 AM. J. FAM. THERAPY 107 (2008); Douglas Darnall & Barbara F. Steinberg, *Motivational Models for Spontaneous Reunification With the Alienated Child: Part II*, 36 AM. J. FAM. THERAPY 253 (2008); Gardner, *supra* note 24; Rand et al., *supra* note 1. Nevertheless, other writers have cautioned therapists against offering false reassurance to rejected parents. See, e.g., Warshak, *supra* note 8. Even when children eventually reconcile, nothing compensates for what some parents label “the lost years.” Also, some children who reconcile retain a legacy of negative attitudes that taints the relationship. In the study reported in this article, the passage of time clearly was insufficient to heal damaged relationships: the average length of time a child was alienated was 2.5 years with some as long as 5 years, and prior to Family Bridges there was no indication that the alienation would abate.

34. There is a vast literature covering theories, research, and experience in the fields of child development and psychotherapy that demonstrates the handicapping effects of damaged, conflicted, and absent parent-child relationships on future psychological adjustment. The principle that family of origin relationships influence our future relationships and life adjustment is not only the foundation of many different schools of psychotherapy and developmental psychology, it has reached the status of a truism in contemporary culture. The loss is multiplied when the child is unable to receive and share love with an entire extended family. See Mary J. Levitt, *Social Relations in Childhood and Adolescence*, 48 HUM. DEV. 28–47, 28 (2005), indicating that a convergence of research demonstrates that “children benefit from the presence of multiple relations that play diverse roles in their lives. . . .” and that “A broader conceptualization of social relations is needed to address the place of attachment figures within a larger network of developmentally significant relations.”

35. PAULINE BOSS, *LOSS, TRAUMA, AND RESILIENCE: THERAPEUTIC WORK WITH AMBIGUOUS LOSS* (W. W. Norton & Co. 2006).

36. A video program produced by the Arizona Supreme Court includes an interview with a young man who describes his anger and current estrangement from his mother whom he blames for turning him against his father and stepmother. Videotape: Family Ties & Knots: Children of Divorce (Arizona Supreme Court 2003) (available at: <http://www.familysupportcenter.com/tiesandknots/videos/FamilyTiesKnotsOrderForm.pdf>). Note, though, that reconciliations between the rejected parent and child are not universal. I have worked and corresponded with many mothers and fathers whose children appear to be permanently alienated.

37. Douglas F. Goldsmith et al., *Separation and Reunification: Using Attachment Theory and Research To Inform Decisions Affecting the Placements of Children in Foster Care*, JUV. & FAM. CT. J., Spring 2004, at 1 (“[C]hildren find themselves torn between forming an attachment to their foster parents while simultaneously longing to return to their parents. It may be surprising to some that this longing develops even when there has been a documented history of maltreatment.”).

38. If courts and parents were prohibited from involving children in interventions that have not passed this standard, this would effectively eliminate the development of programs such as the one described in this paper and Overcoming Barriers, Deutsch et al., *supra* note 9, since the effectiveness of a program cannot be studied without first being used.

39. At the time of this writing, U. S. President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and the House of Representatives have become involved in an international custody battle. See, <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2009/03/14/washington/AP-Obama-Brazil.html?partner=rss&emc=rss>. At the age of 4 a boy was taken to Brazil by his mother. The father won custody in a New Jersey court, but a year later a Brazil court ruled that too much time has elapsed to return the child to his father. The mother subsequently died and the boy’s stepfather is fighting to retain custody. The boy celebrated his 9<sup>th</sup> birthday in May 2009. If the case is resolved in the father’s favor, there is a good chance that the boy will resist leaving his familiar environment, and that his stepfather could make the transfer even more emotionally difficult for the boy. If the boy stands his ground and refuses to voluntarily go with his father, should the court ruling be overturned to allow the boy to reject his father? And, if this were the standard, would this not serve as an incentive to the stepfather to encourage the boy to physically stand his ground as the means to victory in court?

40. Richard A. Warshak, *Payoffs and Pitfalls of Listening to Children*. 54 FAM. RELATIONS 373 (2003).

41. The following description of the origins, goals, principles, phases, syllabus, and procedures of Family Bridges (originally called the Family Workshop for Alienated Children) would not be possible without Dr. Randy Rand’s pioneering work in developing and conceptualizing this program and Dr. Deirdre Rand’s work collaborating in its development and refinement. Most of the description draws heavily from their work and, although I alone bear responsibility for this article and its flaws, I welcome the opportunity to credit Dr. Rand with the central concepts and formulations contained herein. Dr. Mark Otis contributed essential perspectives on the workshop’s goals, principles, and procedures, tying these closely to the scientific literature on conflict management and positive sentiment override. The analysis of the different phases of the workshop reflects primarily Dr. Otis’s formulations. Dr. Otis, Dr. Deirdre Rand, Dr. Sandra Warshak, and Dr. John Zervopoulos, provided very helpful feedback on earlier drafts and helped shepherd the article to its final form. More generally, this article has benefitted from the cross-fertilization of ideas among the above-mentioned psychologists who, along with me, comprise the North Texas-Northern California Study Group on Disrupted Parent-Child Relationships, an informal group formed to explore possibilities for understanding and assisting families with alienated children. Privately I refer to us as the Pluto Project, a useful metaphor because of Pluto’s long distance from our home planet, signifying the distance between alienated children and the rejected parent, and Pluto’s loss of status as part of the family to which it previously belonged. In a more playful mood, I extend the metaphor to refer to disrupted parent-child relationships as “plutonic relationships” in which a parent is downgraded or disowned.

42. This occurs either because the abducting parent is incarcerated, the court prohibits contact, the parent rejects the child, or the parent remains underground in order to evade criminal prosecution.

43. The existence of pathological alienation in a child does not necessarily mean that the child's best interests are served by transferring custody to the rejected parent. *See, e.g.,* Warshak, *supra* note 8; *See also* Richard A. Warshak, *Punching the Parenting Time clock: The Approximation Rule, Social Science, and the Baseball Bat Kids*, 45 FAM. CT. REV. 600 (2007), and Richard A. Warshak, *The Approximation Rule, Child Development Research, and Children's Best Interests After Divorce*, 1 CHILD DEV. PERSPECTIVES 119 (2007), on the importance of a multi-factored best interests inquiry. Identifying criteria to guide courts in deciding which approach to follow in dealing with alienated children, such as when and if to place children with the rejected parent and whether or not to impose no-contact orders, is an important project. But, beyond the earlier description of benefits and drawbacks of various alternatives for dealing with the stark dilemma, it is outside this article's scope to attempt a more detailed analysis of the criteria courts use in making best interest determinations, including the characteristics of parents that bear on the optimal custody decision.

44. Personal communication with Dr. Randy Rand, December 5, 2008.

45. I consulted in three cases and co-led the workshop in nine cases.

46. Although this Workshop was not conducted in the immediate aftermath of a trial, there had been a comprehensive custody evaluation and trial in the past prior to the abduction.

47. Ordering parents to attend classes, workshops, and counseling may be seen as controversial, whereas the option of authorizing parents to seek assistance they determine best for their child conforms to conventional custody orders that delegate decision-making authority to a parent.

48. *See* Michael B. Donner, *Tearing the Child Apart: The Contributions of Narcissism, Envy, and Perverse Modes of Thought to Child Custody Wars*, 23 PSYCHOANAL. PSYCHOL. 542, 551 (2006), explaining that family therapy, coparenting counseling, parent education, and cognitive-behavioral therapy are insufficient to modify the complex behavior of alienating parents who are unable to think beyond their own needs and harbor unconscious desires to hurt their children. Donner argues persuasively that long-term psychoanalytically oriented treatment is best-suited to help these parents. Unfortunately, by the time such treatment results in behavioral improvement and better parenting, the children are grown up and have endured years of psychic suffering.

49. Although not designed for families with the level of severity of alienation that we usually deal with in Family Bridges, one promising option is Overcoming Barriers, Deutsch et al., *supra* note 9. This new program is experimenting with creative ways to help favored parents gain insight into the plight of their children, modify harmful behaviors, and help favored parents support their children's need for positive relationships with both parents. Although it is too early to assess the impact of such efforts, Overcoming Barriers, if successful, will offer an avenue that should be considered for favored parents who have not responded to previous therapeutic efforts.

50. Nancy Olesen, *Alienation Issues: Assessment & Intervention*, address at the Reconceptualizing Child Custody Conference, (May 3, 2008).

51. Naturally, no assumptions are possible about the degree to which the sex and age of this group represents the general population of alienated children or the population of other families who participated in the workshop and with whom I did not work. But, the present data clearly refutes the claim made by radical advocates that only fathers raise concerns about alienating behavior during litigation: six of the seven mothers in this sample gained custody after claiming that the fathers promulgated the children's rejection of their mother. For earlier reports that this problem is not gender-specific, *see* Warshak, *supra* note 8; Warshak, *supra* note 22; Beeble, *supra* note 16, and Berns, *supra* note 16, finding approximately equal numbers of male and female alienators in an analysis of unreported judgments in Australia over a five-year period. *See also* Rand et al., *supra* note 1, reporting a sample in which one-third of the alienating parents were men. Also, although this source lacks independent verification of the authenticity of the parents' claim about alienation, it is worth noting that 38 out of 76 amazon.com reviews of Warshak, *supra* note 8, clearly identify the reviewer as either an alienated mother or alienated father, and 27 of this group of 38 (71%) identify themselves as alienated mothers.

52. Robert E. Emery, *Interparental Conflict and the Children of Discord and Divorce*, 92 PSYCHOL. BULL. 310 (1982).

53. Joan B. Kelly & Robert E. Emery, *Children's Adjustment Following Divorce: Risk and Resilience Perspectives*, 52 FAM. REL. 352 (2003).

54. CLAWAR & RIVLIN, *supra* note 11; Johnston et al., *supra* note 1, at 316.

55. For the importance of reducing psychologically intrusive parenting, *see* Barber, *supra* note 32.

56. The concept of a protective "envelope" was formulated by Donald W. Winnicott, *The Child and the Family: First Relationships* (Tavistock, 1957).

57. *See, e.g.,* Sarah Jayne Blackmore, *How Does the Brain Deal with the Social World?*, 314 SCIENCE 60–61 (2006).

58. For an excellent overview of these principles and theory, see Richard E. Mayer, *Applying the Science of Learning: Evidence-Based Principles for the Design of Multimedia Instruction*, 63 AM. PSYCHOL. 760 (2008).

59. Diane F. Halpern, *Teaching Critical Thinking for Transfer Across Domains*, 53 AM. PSYCHOL. 449–455 (1998).

60. Leon Festinger & J. M. Carlsmith, *Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance*, 58 J. ABNORMAL AND SOCIAL PSYCHOL. 203 (1959); E. Jelalian & A. G. Miller, *The Perseverance of Beliefs: Conceptual Perspectives and Research Developments*, 2 J. SOCIAL CLIN. PSYCHOL. 25 (1984); L. Ross et al., *Perseverance in Self-perception and Social Perception: Biased Attribution Processes in the Debriefing Paradigm*, 32 J. PERSONALITY SOCIAL PSYCHOL. 880 (1975); S. L. Schauss et al., *Environment-behavior Relations, Behavior Therapy, and the Process of Persuasion and Attitude Change*, 28 J. BEHAV. THERAPY AND EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHIAT. 31 (1997).

61. Cynthia L. Pickett & Marilynn B. Brewer, *The Role of Exclusion in Maintaining Ingroup Inclusion*, in *THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION*, 89 (Dominic Abrams et al., eds., Psychology Press 2005); MUZAFER SHERIF ET AL., *THE ROBBERS CAVE EXPERIMENT* (Wesleyan U. Press 1988).

62. Warshak, *supra* note 40.

63. This approach is consistent with the general principal of good parenting that we do not lead children to better behavior by convincing them that they are bad.

64. This concept was formulated by JOHN M. GOTTMAN, *THE MARRIAGE CLINIC* (W. W. Norton & Company 1999) at 123.

65. We apply the same principle when conceptualizing the roots of disrupted parent-child relationships. Our work is informed by multiple perspectives and models of this problem, we draw on a wide body of empirical research, and we believe there are multiple roots and pathways to these problems as there are for nearly all behavior. A multifactor model of understanding the roots of a child's unwarranted rejection of a parent is evident in the formulations of the major writers in the field, including RICHARD GARDNER, *THE PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME* (Creative Therapeutics 1992) at 63, who, in his initial description of factors he considered "operative in bringing about the disorder" wrote: "I divide such contributing factors into three categories: (1) the child's contributions, (2) the mother's contributions (again with some discussion of the father's contributions), and (3) situational factors." See also CLAWAR & RIVLIN, *supra* note 11; Kelly & Johnston, *supra* note 2, in a seminal article presenting a multifactor model, and Warshak, *supra* note 8 at 66.

66. Cf. CLAWAR & RIVLIN, *supra* note 11, at 144, who, discussing the effectiveness of changes in living arrangements, report, "Children may say, 'I hate her. I'll never speak with her if you make me go see her,' 'I'll run away,' or 'I'll kill myself if he comes to see me.' However, in some cases, children were told to say these things by the programming and brainwashing parent. . . . It is not uncommon to see these threats disintegrate after court orders change."

67. DEAN G. PRUITT & SUNG HEE KIM, *SOCIAL CONFLICT: ESCALATION, STALEMATE, AND SETTLEMENT* (McGraw Hill 2004) at 175.

68. *Id.* at 172.

69. A quick Google search revealed 24 companies that specialize in providing this service.

70. It was rumored that children are handcuffed and brought to the workshop site in physical restraints. This has never occurred, it has never been necessary, and I would never agree to work with a child under such circumstances. Such rumors reflect in part the disbelief and underestimation of the power of the court's authority to elicit compliance and the failure to adequately appreciate the extent to which an alienated child remains attached to the rejected parent and wishes to escape from the middle of parental conflicts to resume a more normal life.

71. The media has quoted some mental health professionals who, with no knowledge of our procedures, mischaracterize the workshop as "deprogramming" (an attention-getting, sensationalist label that appeals to certain journalists and media outlets). Whether or not they retract their earlier misrepresentations, anyone who reads this article and continues to promulgate such misinformation clearly is engaging in polemics rather than rational analysis, the former an unfortunately frequent phenomenon in commentary on issues related to alienated children.

72. MARGARET THALER SINGER, *CULTS IN OUR MIDST: THE CONTINUING FIGHT AGAINST THEIR HIDDEN MENACE* (Jossey-Bass 2003) at 276–283.

73. Deusch et al., *supra* note 9, found that camp counselors were able to provide valuable services to families with alienated children. Interventions that can be conducted or assisted by sub-doctoral level professionals will bring the costs within reach of more families.

74. Also, we hope the lesson is not lost for the child that the rejected parent wants so much to restore a good relationship that a high level of expertise was sought to help with the process.

75. PRUITT & KIM, *supra* note 67, at 172: "For Party to become involved in negotiation requires not only a perception of stalemate-based interdependence, but also some *optimism* about the chances of success."

76. In several of our cases children had been allowed by therapists to verbally assault, physically threaten, and in one case spit on a parent with impunity during “treatment” sessions. We regard the expression of unmodulated aggression as having significant liabilities and no therapeutic benefit; both the child and the parent feel unprotected from the child’s destructive impulses.

77. Halpern, *supra* note 59.

78. See, e.g., STEPHEN J. CECI & MAGGIE BRUCK, *JEOPARDY IN THE COURTROOM: A SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN’S TESTIMONY* (1995); Elizabeth F. Loftus, *Make-Believe Memories*, 58 AMER. PSYCHOL. 867 (2003).

79. This article provides a high level of detail of the procedures of our program (much more detail than courts typically have before ordering therapy, counseling, workshops, and parent education and co-parenting classes) and numerous citations to the research from which we draw. But, for the most part this article describes the program materials and does not give exact titles. Some of these materials are used in psychology and sociology courses and are readily available to professionals. We do not publicize the titles of all the exact materials we use or the way in which we use them for reasons similar to why psychological test distributors do not publish test questions to the general public and do not reveal the algorithms used to program computers to generate test results and interpretations. See, e.g., Andrew W. Kane, *Setting and Guarding the Boundaries of the Assessment Process*, J. CHILD CUST. (in press). Much of the educational value of the materials we use depends on their novelty. The effectiveness of our program could be severely compromised and undermined should the parents and children with whom we work become familiar beforehand with the materials we select and the procedures we use. Also, the effectiveness of the materials we select and the procedures used in Family Bridges depend heavily on the skill and training of the workshop leaders. If these materials are used by persons untrained in our program, their impact could be negative and their value to the families we serve could be diminished. This concern is not merely speculative. Already one group has publicly expressed the intention of basing a program on our work in the absence of having had any specific training regarding the workshop. Despite the need to protect aspects of the workshop from dissemination to the general public and the populations we serve, we welcome the chance to share details with qualified mental health professionals who choose to learn our program.

80. See SHERIF ET AL., *supra* note 61 (on the contributions of superordinate goals to reducing conflict and unfavorable stereotypes, and facilitating cooperation). Deutsch et al., *supra* note 9, describe Overcoming Barriers, which is another milieu-based program, a 5½ day summer camp designed for less severe alienation cases in which the court has not ordered the changes in family structure that participants in Family Bridges face, but does order unwilling parents and children to attend the camp. We shared our experience and a detailed overview of the workshop with our colleagues as they were developing this camp program and we are watching it closely with the hope that it will offer an additional option for these families. The program is new and has been tried once with five families in an abbreviated form (due to lack of funding). Early indications are that children had contact with their alienated parent at the camp, but did not agree, nor did the leaders expect them, to resume normal contact after camp. Aftercare plans were developed for each family, and the program’s leaders hope the camp experience planted seeds that will some day bear fruit. But no information is available yet on whether any children successfully restored a positive relationship with the rejected parent.

81. Lisa Laumann-Billings & Robert E. Emery, *Distress Among Young Adults from Divorced Families*, 14 J. FAM. PSYCHOL. 671 (2000); William V. Fabricius & Jeff A. Hall, *Young Adults’ Perspectives on Divorce: Living Arrangements*, 38 FAM. & CONCIL. CTS. REV. 446 (2000); Patrick Parkinson et al., *Adolescents’ Views on the Fairness of Parenting and Financial Arrangements After Separation*, 43 FAM. CT. REV. 429 (2005); Patrick Parkinson & Bruce Smyth, *Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction with Father-Child Contact Arrangements in Australia*, 16 CHILD & FAM. L.Q. 289 (2004); Seth J. Schwartz & Gordon E. Finley, *Mothering, Fathering, and Divorce: The Influence of Divorce on Reports of and Desires For Maternal and Paternal Involvement*, 47 FAM. CT. REV. 506 (2009); JUDITH S. WALLERSTEIN & JOAN BERLIN KELLY, *SURVIVING THE BREAKUP* (1980); Richard A. Warshak & John W. Santrock, *The Impact of Divorce in Father-Custody and Mother-Custody Homes: The Child’s Perspective*, in CHILDREN AND DIVORCE 29 (Lawrence A. Kurdek ed., 1983).

82. Jean W. Twenge et al., *Social Exclusion Causes Self-Defeating Behavior*, 83 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 606–615 (2002).

83. Jean W. Twenge et al., *If You Can’t Join Them, Beat Them: Effects of Social Exclusion on Aggressive Behavior*, 81 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 1058–1069 (2001); Kipling D. Williams, *Ostracism: A Temporal Need-Threat Model*, in ADVANCES IN EXPERIMENTAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, 279–314 (Mark P. Zanna ed., 2009).

84. See WARSHAK, *supra* note 8, at 38 and 239–243 for a list of the most common self-defeating behaviors exhibited by rejected parents.

85. This exercise is supported by research reported in GOTTMAN, *supra* note 64, on the importance of attending to and expressing positives about the other person as an antidote to contempt.

86. Although the guidance of systematic empirical research on techniques and outcomes is always welcome, our attitude about conducting the workshop while waiting for research to “catch up” is best expressed by the theoretician and clinician Nathaniel Branden: “It is unrealistic to demand that we ought to use only those interventions that have been proven effective in controlled studies. A clinician cannot provide “data” for every move he or she makes. Practice is always ahead of research, and not only in psychology. But we can do our conscientious best to pay attention to outcome.” Nathaniel Branden, *The Importance of Definitions*, available at <http://blog.nathanielbranden.com>.

87. An earlier draft of this article included case descriptions of the 12 families, but limitations of space required this section to be deleted and placed in an article that is currently in preparation. Although only aggregate data are reported in this article, all parents gave permission for their specific feedback to be included in the case descriptions. Typically in social science studies, some subjects decline to participate. The unanimous consent here is probably attributed to the fact that these parents have all suffered greatly prior to the workshop, express great gratitude for the experience, and most say they want to do what they can to contribute to raising awareness of these issues to help families in similar circumstances avoid the prolonged pain they endured.

88. The case descriptions mentioned in FN87 will also help those who must evaluate the suitability of Family Bridges for a given family.

89. Contributions to the literature on remedies for alienated children should clearly identify the criteria by which success is measured. See Rhonda Freeman et al., *Reconnecting Children With Absent Parents: A Model for Intervention*, 42 FAM. CT. REV. 439, 456 (2004). Some therapists believe they are making progress when they succeed in arranging for a resistant child to have some contact with a rejected parent. If such contact is restricted to the therapy or intervention program, and the children regress to an alienated stance upon returning home, or the intervention concludes before bringing the children closer to a positive relationship with the rejected parent, such a program may not hold much hope for these injured families unless the contacts during the intervention facilitate subsequent therapeutic efforts.

90. The sample is too small, and non-random, to draw firm conclusions about percentages of success when the workshop is, versus is not, undertaken in the aftermath of litigation. In the sample of 23 children reported here, 18 children were involved in custody disputes preceding the workshop and 5 were not. Of the 18 children, 12 (72%) reconnected with the rejected parent and maintained their progress, 4 reconnected with the rejected parent at the conclusion of the workshop but did not maintain progress, and 1 failed to reconnect. Of the 5 children whose workshop participation did not follow litigation (and who did not have prolonged periods of no-contact with the favored parent), all 5 (100%) successfully completed the workshop and maintained their gains. It must be noted that all 5 children lived with the rejected parent (and thus would be considered alienated but not estranged using the nomenclature proposed in FN2), and the workshop team agreed to their enrollment despite not meeting the formal prerequisites because the team had other reasons to believe that these children could benefit from the experience. We cannot generalize these results to other families who do not meet the entrance criteria, and to families in which children live with a favored parent, refuse contact with the rejected parent, and participate in the workshop in the shadow of litigation. Dr. Rand’s impressions (personal communication May 25, 2009), based on experience over the past 18 years with the workshop, are that non-maintainers either had clandestine and premature contact with their favored parent in violation of court orders, or the court, against professional recommendations, formally renewed contact with a favored parent who continued efforts to alienate the children and undermined the progress of the children during the workshop.

91. The exceptions to this observation are young children who are so thoroughly traumatized that they cannot experience the parent in anything but a malignant light. In such cases, elements of Family Bridges may help when tailored to earlier developmental stages. These can be presented within a regular structure of psychotherapy, but the shorter time frame of a workshop may bring relief much sooner. Also, it is a mistake to assume that children always follow their older sibling’s lead. In some families the oldest sibling resists alienation while the younger ones succumb and vice versa.

92. A survey of 5,500 Canadian teenagers found that “close to 80% say they are receiving high level of enjoyment from their mothers,” while 75% said the same about their fathers. Even greater percentages of the teens reported that their parents have a high influence on their lives (89% for moms, 82% for dads). See Press Release, Reginald W. Bibby, Project Teen Canada, *Teens’ Enjoyment of Moms . . . and Dads* (May 12, 2009), available at [http://www.reginaldbibby.com/images/PTC\\_1\\_TEENS\\_ENJOYMENT\\_OF\\_PARENTS\\_May\\_12\\_09.pdf](http://www.reginaldbibby.com/images/PTC_1_TEENS_ENJOYMENT_OF_PARENTS_May_12_09.pdf) (last visited May 15, 2009). See also REGINALD BIBBY, *THE EMERGING MILLENNIALS: HOW CANADA’S NEWEST GENERATION IS RESPONDING TO CHANGE AND CHOICE*, Project Canada Books (2009).

93. This finding contradicts the claim that courts lack power to effect improvements in adolescent-parent relationships with structural changes, and demonstrates that successful intervention is possible. But, this does not



address the debates about whether coercive judicial interventions are desirable and about whether they serve children's best interests.

94. Research with adults who were alienated as children shows that, despite their surface rejection of a parent, many children secretly longed for reconciliation and did not want the relationship to remain ruptured. At the same time, though, they acknowledged that their deeper feelings were unexpressed and effectively concealed from adult interviewers. *See* BAKER, *supra* note 29.

95. I am often asked about the optimal length of time before contact is restored with the favored parent. Naturally, I make no recommendations in specific cases unless I conduct a comprehensive evaluation. Ideally, the resumption of contact is tailored to each family based on an evaluation of the child's progress and an evaluation of the formerly favored parent's willingness and ability to modify behaviors that would make it difficult for the child to maintain the gains. Optimal timing depends on a number of factors, such as the favored parent's ability to modify behaviors that create difficulties for the children, the children's vulnerability to feeling pressured to realign with a parent, the duration of the alienation or estrangement prior to the Workshop, and the favored parent's past conduct and compliance with court orders. If a time period had to be stated in advance, based on my clinical experience, in general I suggest considering a period of 3–6 months before regular contacts resume, to allow a child to consolidate gains and work through the numerous issues that arise in living with the rejected parent free from the influence of the favored parent. But, contacts in a therapeutically monitored situation may optimally occur sooner. Three months is about the length of time that children in therapeutic boarding schools and residential treatment centers initially go without seeing a parent. This has not been subjected to systematic empirical research, and it would be difficult to conceive of a study that could do so, given all the variables that must be controlled, such as the Workshop leaders, the site of the Workshop, the age and gender of the children and of the rejected parent, the extent to which the favored parent and the rejected parent have contributed to the problem, the exact nature of the court orders, etc. Similarly, no empirical studies compare different parenting time schedules for different age children, other than gross comparisons of sole versus joint custody arrangements. In the case of alienated children reunited with the rejected parent, it would be difficult to put together a sufficient sample size to allow for control of significant variables.

96. A recent request to a group of professionals for information about programs other than Family Bridges to help this population of children failed to yield a single suggestion.

97. *See* Rand et al., *supra* note 1; Lyn R. Greenberg et al., *Is The Child's Therapist Part of the Problem?*, 37 FAM. L.Q. 39–69 (2003); FIDLER ET AL., *supra* note 1.

98. *See* Janet R. Johnston, *Perspectives on Family Law & Social Science: Introducing Perspectives In Family Law and Social Science Research*, 45 FAM. CT. REV. 15–21 (2007).

99. Unfortunately, some professionals react to our program in the manner of advocates who substitute preconceived judgments in place of educated opinions. They render public judgments in the absence of any knowledge about the workshop. Their use of automatic uncritical judgments and smears to alienate colleagues, courts, and potential participants from our program, resembles what some parents do when they attempt to alienate their children by maligning the other parent.

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