

## Workshop has scientific support



By Richard Warshak | Publication Date: Tuesday, 18 May 2010

Family Bridges: A Workshop for Troubled and Alienated Parent-Child Relationships has been the subject of recent controversy over its track record and concern about its general acceptance in the scientific community and the family justice system.

Family Bridges helps ease children's adjustment to court orders that place them with a parent they claim to hate or fear. Courts issue such orders when the evidence demonstrates that the rejected parent is better suited to meet the child's best interests.

Parents may then respond in one of three ways. The parent who objects to the court orders can try to flout the law, as occurs when a parent abducts the children.

Alternatively, the rejected parent can receive the children without any professional assistance to help the family adjust to the situation while hoping that time will heal their wounds. In addition, the rejected parent can enlist help to ease the transition for the children.



Family Bridges is an effective option to facilitate the family's adjustment when children are severely alienated and a court has decided to transfer custody to the rejected parent.

Though in one sentence questioning whether this program should exist, in another lawyer Jan Weir seems to call for its wider availability (see "Does the Warshak workshop work?" Law Times, April 19).

He asks me to publicize my techniques to the health profession, provide indications of general acceptance in the scientific community, and document the scientific basis of the workshop. All of this has been done.

In January, after passing a rigorous peer review, a comprehensive article I authored titled "Family Bridges: Using Insights From Social Science to Reconnect Parents and Alienated Children" was published in Family Court Review, an international scholarly journal guest edited by two Canadians, professor Nicholas Bala and Barbara Jo Fidler.

Describing in great detail the procedures, syllabus, and scientific basis of Family Bridges, the article provides far more information than courts typically consider before appointing psychotherapists, co-parenting instructors or parent co-ordinators. Two additional published articles in that issue clarify various details about the program.

Three published articles, numerous referrals from custody assessors and courts, and an invitation to present our techniques to the forthcoming annual conference of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts are testament to the general acceptance of Family Bridges procedures in the relevant scientific community as well as peer review of them.

My testimony on the psychology and remediation of alienation has been accepted in courts in Canada and the United States. It has never been excluded and has been held to meet the Daubert test of scientific reliability, which is similar to Mohan in Canada.

My article documents the well-established scientific foundations of Family Bridges. In addition, Joan Kelly, a well-known contributor to the scientific literature and continuing legal education programs on child custody, has underscored the scientific basis of the program.

"In the overall development of Family Bridges, its goals and principles, and particularly the varied and relevant materials selected for use with parents and children, the incorporation of relevant social science research was evident.

Further, the daily structure and manner of presentation of the Family Bridges workshop were guided by well-established evidence-based instruction principles and incorporated multimedia learning, a positive learning environment, focused lessons addressing relevant concepts, and learning materials providing assistance with integration of materials.

“The most striking feature of the Family Bridges workshop was the empirical research foundation underlying the specific content of the four-day educational program. The lessons and materials were drawn from universally accepted research in social, cognitive, and child developmental psychology, sociology, and social neuroscience.”

Weir suggests that any success of the program may be due to children being intimidated. No peer-reviewed literature has suggested that Family Bridges is intimidating. Rather, we offer a benign process that brings welcome relief by restoring the child’s capacity to give and receive love.

As documented in my article, a substantial majority of children who go through our program spontaneously express the wish for their other parent to learn the same material, which the children find enjoyable and instructive.

While in a few cases the program wasn’t effective in the long term where the children rejected the parent with custody, we believe this was due to the continued strong influence of the alienating parent.

Significantly, there have been no reports of children suffering ill effects from attending the program. Some skeptics will refuse to accept any evidence of the program’s value.

The same critics who claim that children are the only people whose attitudes towards others are immune to outside influence may be quick to ascribe any improvement in children’s perspectives as a result of brainwashing rather than learning how to think critically.

Children who lose half of their family as a result of alienation suffer a tragic loss that compromises their present and future happiness and well-being along with that of their parents. People who understand these concerns will want parents to have the option to enrol their children in programs such as Family Bridges.

---

*Richard Warshak is a clinical professor of psychology at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Centre in Dallas; author of *Divorce Poison: How to Protect Your Family From Bad-mouthing and Brainwashing*; and co-author of *Welcome Back, Pluto*, a DVD to help understand, prevent, and overcome parental alienation.*