COMMENTARY ON "FAMILY BRIDGES: USING INSIGHTS FROM SOCIAL SCIENCE TO RECONNECT PARENTS AND ALIENATED CHILDREN" (WARSHAK, 2010)

Joan B. Kelly

This commentary reviews the goals, structure, and content of the intensive educational intervention described by Warshak (2010); raises concerns; considers the meaning of "success" in child alienation cases; and makes suggestions for future research. Titled Family Bridges: A Workshop for Troubled and Alienated Parent-Child Relationships, the program is a rigorous and disciplined approach designed to help participants repair severely derailed parent–child relationships. Family Bridges uses evidence-based instruction principles to maximize learning and create a safe atmosphere enabling the alienated child(ren) and rejected parent to be, and work, together. The multimedia materials selected for the 4-day program draw from social science research and focus on multiple and universal processes by which distortions of perception, memory, and thinking occur; negative stereotype formation; the impact of high conflict on children and parent–child relationships; effective communication and dispute resolution; and parenting skills training. Based on a small and diverse sample of families, Family Bridges demonstrates considerable promise as one type of intervention designed for these severely troubled relationships. Concerns include the cost of the intensive intervention, the absence of a parallel program for the favored parent, and whether the program can be replicated effectively. The family psychology and law fields would benefit significantly from research that evaluates Family Bridges and other educational and therapeutic interventions designed to help alienated children repair and strengthen balanced relationships with both parents.

Family Bridges is an intensive educational intervention developed initially for recovered abducted children and later extended and modified to provide a program for families in which an older child or adolescent is severely alienated from one parent and refusing or resisting contact with that parent. The challenges in understanding and providing effective legal, judicial, and psychological assistance to these troublesome and highly conflicted families were first reported in the mid-1970s when Wallerstein and Kelly (1976, 1980) described an unusual constellation of child and adolescent attitudes, feelings, and behaviors not normally seen in families, and which developed, escalated, and consolidated in the months following a difficult separation. Observed primarily among boys and girls 9–12 years old and younger adolescents, these youngsters were described as in strong "alignment with one parent" and who joined with that "embattled" parent in vigorous and demeaning attacks against the other parent with whom the child generally had at least an adequate relationship prior to separation. Many of these youngsters, particularly those aligned with the parent who had primary custody, continued to reject contact with the other parent 18 months later with similar vehemence, and a few continued to be severely alienated 5 years later.

In the intervening years, dozens of articles and books elaborated on this aberrant development in parent–child relationships precipitated or facilitated by a turbulent and high-conflict separation and divorce (for a recent comprehensive review, see Fidler, Bala,

Correspondence: jbkellyphd@mindspring.com

FAMILY COURT REVIEW, Vol. 48 No. 1, January 2010 81–90

Birnbaum, & Kavassalis, 2008a; Warshak, 2003). Legal and judicial case management principles, the painful dilemmas faced by judges with limited available remedies, frequent failures of orders to effect change, and judicial decisions in alienation cases received significant focus (Bala, Fidler, Goldberg, & Houston, 2007; Bala, Hunt, McCarney, 2010; Fidler, Bala, Birnbaum, & Kavassalis, 2008b; Sullivan & Kelly, 2001; Warshak, 2010). Publications suggesting and/or describing reunification therapy and family-oriented therapeutic interventions led custody evaluators and lawyers to recommend, and courts to order, such services (Birnbaum & Radovanovic, 1999; Johnston, Walters, & Friedlander, 2001; Warshak, 2001). However, the lack of follow-up studies with therapists offering these services or outcomes of court orders, coupled with clinicians' discussions and presentations about the difficulties in successfully helping these families and frequent case failures, has led to serious questions about whether the various interventions are effective.

Important and additional distinctions have been made over the past four decades regarding children who resist or reject a parent following separation or divorce. For example, many experts in the field have agreed that when children refuse contact with a parent because of realistic fears, trauma, or loathing of a parent who was violent and/or abusive toward the other parent and sometimes the child, this response is based on a realistic experience with that parent and generally should not be categorized as child alienation. Clinical and empirical support has also emerged for a family-systems conceptual framework that considers children's alienation as jointly determined by a range of alienating behaviors of favored parents, grossly inept and uncaring parenting and sometimes abusive behaviors of rejected parents, and the preexisting psychological vulnerabilities of the alienated youngsters. As in earlier formulations, the children's strident and hostile response to the rejected parent was viewed as disproportionate to their actual experience with that parent in the pre-separation family (Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Fidler et al., 2008a; Johnston & Kelly, 2004; Johnston, Roseby, & Kuehnle, 2009a; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Warshak, 2002, 2003). Although still limited, empirical research has provided insights into the psychological and parenting characteristics of both parents and the vulnerabilities and symptoms of these children (Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c). More recent research has provided valuable information about alienated children as young adults, their current psychological adjustment, attitudes toward their parents, and reflections about their alienation (Baker, 2007; Johnston & Goldman, 2010; Johnston, Roseby, & Kuehnle, 2009b). As case analyses, clinical experience, and research have improved our understanding, frustration has increased about the surprisingly little progress made in successfully dealing with these cases in the past 30 years, particularly in families where children's alienation from a parent is severe and prolonged. A few feminists and legal scholars continue to contest the very existence of child alienation; minimize its severity, impact, and duration; and strongly object to any court-ordered educational or therapeutic interventions. However, there is broad consensus among the mental health and family law community that some older children and adolescents do become pathologically alienated from a parent following separation (see Fidler & Bala, 2010) and that the risk of child alienation is increased in highly conflicted separations accompanied by protracted adversarial child custody disputes. The angry defiance, contempt for the rejected parent, enmeshed and overly dependent relationships with the favored parent in some cases, black/white thinking, and aggressive behaviors seen in these youngsters pose seemingly insoluble problems for the courts, as well as bleak prospects for the children's own future psychosocial well-being including balanced and healthy intimate relationships.

This commentary provides a research and clinical psychologist's reactions to the goals, structure, and content of the Family Bridges workshop; raises some concerns about the intervention; considers the meaning of success in alienation cases; and suggests future directions for research.

GOALS, STRUCTURE, AND CONTENT OF THE FAMILY BRIDGES WORKSHOP

Despite initial skepticism regarding aspects of the Family Bridges workshop, a careful reading of the detailed description provided by Warshak led this author to an overall favorable impression 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 4-day educational program. The lessons and materials were drawn from universally accepted research in social, cognitive, and child developmental psychology, sociology, and social neuroscience. Although this body of research was not specifically developed nor tested with populations of high-conflict parents and children, materials more commonly used in college classrooms were adapted for the developmental and cognitive abilities of children and their circumstances in high-conflict families. The content of Family Bridges is intended to directly address underlying mechanisms and processes that are most likely to contribute to the child's alienation from, and rejection of, a parent. These materials, lessons, exercises, and discussions focused on (a) how distortions in memory, perception, and thinking occur, the role of suggestibility and negative stereotype formation, and the ease with which this happens; (b) influences of authoritarian and authority figures on thinking and relationships; (c) the development of better critical thinking skills; (d) research on divorce and children, including how high conflict in particular impacts children and the beneficial effects of the continued involvement of two parents for the majority of children; (e) materials and exercises organized around applications of the learning to their own situation; and (f) acquiring and practicing communication and conflict resolution skills.

In focusing on these particular areas, Family Bridges addresses multiple processes by which the characteristic distortions of perception, memory, and thinking occur in alienated children rather than fact of the child's alienation itself. It is presented to the child as a workshop for "seriously damaged relationships" between a child and a parent, and the child learns that the goal is to "facilitate, repair, and strengthen" the ability to have a balanced and healthy relationship with *both* parents. Having talked with alienated children as a researcher, clinician, and mediator, I would expect that many of these youngsters experience significant relief when they learn that repairing a relationship with the rejected parent will not require that they deny or destroy their relationship with the favored parent.

Rather than focusing at the workshop on the child's *individual* behaviors, feelings, and perceptions, or the child's own distorted relationship with the rejected parent, these materials described universal and common reactions. This process allowed participants to link

the materials and applications to their own situations as they were able to, at their own pace and in their own way, while allowing them to save face. Another important component of the program was the inclusion of a parenting skills training including video materials, practice sessions, and role playing during which children participated with their parent. The need for appropriate parenting skills and interactions with children is openly acknowledged with parents and children during the workshop. Because clinical and empirical research indicates that high-conflict parents are likely to have significant parenting deficits and that rejected parents often behave and parent in ways which contribute to their children's alienation and rejection (Johnston et al., 2005a, 2005b; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; for a review of research comparing the parenting of high- and low-conflict parents, see Kelly, 2000; Kelly & Emery, 2003), this segment seems critical in facilitating the repair of ruptured relationships.

A second important feature of the Family Bridges workshop is the safe atmosphere created by the program leaders from the beginning, an essential feature that promotes more willing participation and active learning. Limits are immediately set in the orientation phase prohibiting physical or verbal abuse. Children and parents are told that there will be no blaming and airing of grievances and that the focus will be on the present and future, not the past. These two principles help to reduce high anxiety and wariness, which normally interfere with openness to listening. In stark contrast to the involuntary process by which children arrive at the Family Bridges workshop, children hear that they have some autonomy during the 4 days to decide their level of participation and responsiveness, to set the pace, to decide when to take breaks or when to end the day. This is helpful as these children have felt coerced or under pressure from both parents to respond and behave in certain ways. Discussion between parent and child is discouraged on the first morning, and engaging video materials minimize interaction and increase a sense of safety. The fact that the workshop is usually held in a casual, resort-like setting helps create a sense of ease, with opportunities to play and "hang out" with the rejected parent if the child so chooses.

The Family Bridges workshop is a rigorous and disciplined approach designed to help participants repair parent–child relationships that have been severely derailed as a result of the dynamics of the separation and additionally fueled in some instances by the parenting and parent–child relationships prior to the separation. The learning environment established from the beginning, and the various materials and their application in the Family Bridges workshop, clearly confirms that this is a dedicated educational intervention rather than a therapeutic one. Although this is a small sample of a rather diverse group of alienation cases with a wide age range, an informal post hoc review of the outcomes of 23 children in 12 families indicates that the Family Bridges workshop has considerable promise as a specific intervention for families where children or adolescents are severely alienated. Although no formal measures were used pre- or postintervention, a majority of the participants were able to repair their relationship and reconnect with their rejected parents in a way that was generally sustainable. This is hopeful for a field in which the enormous difficulties of effectively helping these families are widely acknowledged.

SOME CONCERNS AND SUGGESTIONS

The Family Bridges workshop makes efforts to get court orders for interventions for the favored parent to supplement and enhance the workshop efforts, but these appear to be more sporadic and less successful. Part of the difficulty is that some of these parents do not

really want the status quo changed. Another is that most therapists do not have a well thought-out strategy for working with them. A surprising number of favored parents in this sample did not comply with court orders to get individual therapy. In my experience, a significant number of these parents have come to believe during prolonged litigation that noncompliance with court orders, whether for facilitating contact between child and rejected parent or attending divorce education classes or therapy, brings no negative consequences. It was discouraging to read that some of the noncompliant parents in this sample had their contact with the child restored by judges—a powerful and destructive message to provide for children (and parent) about respecting law and authority.

The absence of an organized parallel or integrated educational program for the parent encouraging the child's alignment undoubtedly undermines the lasting effectiveness of the program in some cases, particularly when contact is resumed within weeks of the intervention. The fact that a number of children wished their favored parent could have heard the same materials indicates their acute awareness of that parent's influence on their behavior, a sense of vulnerability upon returning, and a desire for that behavior to be modified. Typically, the favored parent in the child's perception (and in reality) is a very powerful figure whose message is that continued fidelity is a core requirement for ongoing love and nurturance. This is particularly the case when the child is psychologically enmeshed with that parent, has other psychological vulnerabilities and relationship insecurities, or the favored parent has a personality disorder or mental illness. Once alienated children have burned their bridges with the rejected parent as a result of their contemptuous, hostile attitudes and behaviors, they may feel that they have no option left but continued strong loyalty to the favored parent and his or her agenda.

A worthy goal for the Family Bridges workshop would be to develop a dedicated program for the aligned or favored parent incorporating some of the same materials on distortions of memory and perceptions, negative stereotype formation, susceptibility to authority, psychological impact, and vulnerabilities of children living in high-conflict postseparation situations, and parenting skills training. Important additions might include segments focusing on mechanisms and negative outcomes of parent–child role reversal, child–parent enmeshment, separation anxieties and difficulties, and research on the developmental and psychological advantages to children of maintaining relationships with both (adequate) parents following separation and divorce.

Despite the absence of a core program for alienating or favored parents, the workshop, as currently offered, provides a unique opportunity for parents and children to repair severely ruptured relationships. To participate, however, these parents must (a) be sufficiently affluent to afford the psychologists' fees for the 4-day intervention, associated travel, lodging and meal expenses, and any follow-up contacts or consultation with the workshop parent and a "team" therapist identified to treat the aligned parent; (b) be able to afford all of the legal fees associated with preparing and getting the necessary court orders; and (c) persuade a judge to make the necessary orders, including transferring the child from the primary custody of the favored parent and restricting contact with that parent for an (unknown) appropriate period of time. These are formidable barriers for many, if not most, parents, particularly because many have severely depleted their financial reserves and assets during protracted litigation. Warshak points out that obtaining typical court orders for "reunification," family therapy, individual therapy for the child and parent(s), and/or Parenting Coordinating and utilizing some or all of these services is costly as well. While these postworkshop therapeutic and Parenting Coordination costs are typically distributed over a number of months or years, rather than a large one-time payment for the Family

Bridges workshop, even these layered or sequential therapeutic costs are not affordable for many, if not most, parents. In addition, the Family Bridges workshop and complex family therapy interventions benefit from very specific court orders, which are quite challenging, if not impossible, for most parents to obtain without legal representation.

To address these economic issues, it would be helpful to determine if the Family Bridges workshop could be modified to a briefer educational intervention for families in which children have mild to moderate degrees of alienation, offered locally, and still remain effective in repairing relationships. The favored parent would attend a coordinated educational (not therapeutic) program at the same time. Such an approach would require early identification of strong resistance to parent contact by lawyers and judges, brief evaluation to rule out families in which violence and/or abuse are underlying causes of the child's resistance, appropriate court or consent orders, and ongoing case management by the same judge. It would serve an important preventive function if such an abbreviated program was effective and would be affordable for many more families.

Another issue is the current limited availability of the program. While the author and his colleagues intend to train more mental health professionals who can offer the Family Bridges workshop, maintaining the high quality of the focused educational intervention may be a challenge. As is often the case in the proliferation of unique interventions or highly structured programs taught to eager mental health professionals, the focus, talent, and dedication of the originators are diluted over time. Here, some risks include training participants who (a) do not have the background, discipline, or interest to continue the use of the empirically based materials and program structure; (b) lack sufficient experience dealing with high-conflict separating/divorcing families and forensic situations; (c) decide to insert psychotherapy or counseling into the program because that is what they know and are most comfortable with; and (d) may not adequately screen out inappropriate cases in their zeal to provide a new and potentially remunerative intervention. If Warshak and his colleagues add a research component to the Family Bridges workshop program, future workshop leaders will also need the discipline and interest to participate in a research project that extends over time.

WHAT IS SUCCESS IN ALIENATION CASES?

Warshak raises an important question of how to define success in alienation cases following an intervention. This is not simply whether the child agrees to spend some time with the rejected parent or attends therapeutic sessions (often under duress) but continues to resist contact outside of the office. Success in these families is a complex matter involving the child's psychological and behavioral response to both parents and positive changes in the attitudes and behavior of both parents. Measures of success would assess the stability of the improved or repaired relationship in both the short and longer term between the child and both parents as well as extended family and new partners. To demonstrate positive change associated with any focused intervention such as the Family Bridges workshop, one would want pre- and post-Likert-type measures for parents and children incorporated into the design. While the matter of success deserves much more in-depth consideration, some suggestions are offered.

Regardless of whether a program is educational or therapeutic in orientation, measures of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions that go beyond whether the child is spending time with the previously rejected parent need to be considered. Examples of

behavioral indices of success range from the obvious (the child can sit in the same room as the parent without an intense hostile response, violence is not threatened against the rejected parent or other family members, no destruction of property, engagements in sports or outings together, child no longer resists contact) to the more nuanced (neutral/friendly greeting of rejected parent, cooperation with daily household tasks, accepts reasonable limit setting of parent, socializes with extended family of rejected parent). *Emotional* indices might include expressions of love, displays of affection (sitting close by, hugging); engagements in reciprocal conversation, avoidance or indifference to rejected parent, accepting offers of help with homework, and seeking out parent's assistance with a problem. *Cognitive* indices of success might include the following: sees each parent in a realistic balanced way, understands how distorted memories or perceptions can occur and can acknowledge prior distortions regarding the rejected parent, and demonstrates an age-appropriate capacity for critical thinking as new situations arise.

For the rejected parent, measures of success might include questions that assess the ability to understand and accept without blame the child's prior hostility and rejection, use of authoritative parenting skills, capacity for warmth and empathy, and attitude toward and extent of hostile comments toward the previously favored parent. With the favored parent, questions might focus on the degree of acceptance of the repair or restoration of the child's relationship with the previously rejected parent, capacity for warmth and empathy with child, degree of enmeshment with the child, acceptance of previously rejected parent's interest in and love of child, use of authoritative parenting, hostility toward or rejection of child for restoring relationship with the other parent.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Warshak has been criticized for the lack of research on the Family Bridges workshop and the small sample that constitutes the basis for the statistics provided in the article (this issue). As he indicates, most new and innovative therapeutic interventions that show promise are not evaluated for effectiveness prior to being used. If research is conducted at all, it often takes many years to establish efficacy. A well-conceived research program that builds on the limited but valuable clinical studies about alienated children and their parents would be a significant contribution to the family psychology and family law fields.

One can envision a research program that would develop criteria for measuring success as discussed above; incorporate existing reliable scales assessing aspects of alienation and parent behaviors and attitudes[1]; include standardized measures of child adjustment; and develop additional valid measures as needed to collect information about the length and severity of the alienation, the parents' positive and negative behaviors and attitudes, and the child's behaviors, attitudes, feelings, and vulnerabilities. It would be beneficial to revisit the categories of mild–moderate–severe alienation to establish their utility and links to other individual, family, and external variables. A satisfaction scale would measure various dimensions of satisfaction with the program, the leaders, and parents' and children's ratings of the value of specific elements of the content. This would be particularly useful if briefer versions of this workshop were contemplated. Pre- and postintervention data collected from multiple sources would include self-report of family members and workshop leaders, independent ratings of specified information in prior custody evaluations, and input from any postworkshop professionals working with family members.

Follow-up interviews with all participants at 6 months, 1 year, and 2 years postprogram would assess how well the goals of the program were met in "facilitating, repairing, and strengthening" healthy relationships with both parents, and what circumstances and internal and external barriers interfered with the goals. Reliable outcome measures that assess the impacts of voluntary and court-ordered therapies and other programs would significantly advance the field and, once established, could be widely used by a consortium of researchers and clinicians in the field (for examples, see Johnston & Goldman, 2010; Rand, Rand, & Kopetski, 2005).

Uniform descriptive data identifying just what is being done in alienation cases and with what frequency in the United States and Canada are an essential first step (Bala et al., 2010). Data are needed regarding the range of court orders in these cases; restrictions of the favored parent's contacts; increased time-share with the rejected parent; temporary or permanent changes of custody; judicial case management efforts; compliance with orders; extent and cost of prior litigation; numbers and duration of prior therapeutic interventions including individual therapy, "reunification" therapy, or residential treatment settings; and overall costs.

There is still much to be learned about characteristics of parents in families in which children become alienated following separation and divorce. In particular, the ability to more accurately identify different subsets or patterns among families where children resist or refuse parent contact might lead to more effective interventions. Friedlander and Walters (2010) suggest that "pure" forms of child alienation caused primarily by an alienating parent, and estrangement caused by the rejected parent's abuse and neglect, are rather rare. Analysis of their clinical cases leads them to conclude that hybrid cases involving combinations of alienation, enmeshment, and estrangement are more prevalent. Additional research and case analysis to explore these subtypes of alienation would be fruitful in collaboration with other clinicians who have recently written about child–parent enmeshment and its relationship to alienation.

My research and clinical experience with families with child alienation suggest another area where collaborative discussion among professionals and continued clinical research would be helpful. When children reject mothers, are the dynamics and parental personalities really similar to families in which children reject fathers? Some cases in which fathers have fostered an alignment that excludes mothers have a different clinical "feel" and features compared with those in which youngsters align with mothers and reject fathers. Is this a function of the personality disorders more characteristic of men who encourage alienation compared with those seen more often in women? When children align with the father and reject the mother, are we more likely to see severe narcissistic and antisocial personality disorders at work in these fathers? When children reject fathers and align with mothers, are borderline personality disorders or pronounced borderline and narcissistic features in the mothers more prominent? Are the children responding to different aspects and influences of particular personality disorders? How does their vulnerability integrate with parental needs? What specific attitudes and parenting behaviors are most potent in contributing to children's rejection of parents? To the extent that different patterns associated with child alienation can be identified and then substantiated (or not) in research, mental health professionals may be better able to make recommendations for interventions that focus on the underlying dynamics and personalities, as well as more attuned recommendations about controversial issues such as changing custody, expanding contact substantially between a parent and a child, or curtaining or limiting contacts with the favored parent where there is evidence of a deepening alienation.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The Family Bridges workshop has stimulated renewed interest and spirited conversation about what to do with families when a child has become severely alienated following separation. Other interventions with an intensely therapeutic orientation and family systems approach show promise as well (Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Sullivan, Ward, & Deutsch, 2010). Hopefully, these efforts will stimulate a broader effort to further refine our understanding of these families, and develop and evaluate additional educational and specialized therapeutic interventions. The family law and mental health fields would benefit significantly from collaborative efforts to develop and evaluate a number of approaches and programs that address the complexities and variations in families where child alienation occurs after separation or divorce. An important feature of such programs would be the ability to articulate educational and therapeutic programs in sufficient detail so that they can be implemented elsewhere, in conjunction with additional training. There is a need for interventions for families with less severe forms of child alienation, for programs that are briefer, less costly, yet remain effective. Exploration of whether the most effective learning components of the Family Bridges workshop could be merged in a structured manner with the specific goals and clinical techniques of family systems-oriented therapeutic models designed for child alienation cases would be welcome. Process and outcome evaluation research is essential. Coordinated and collaborative efforts between the legal and mental health fields and family courts to work toward the early identification of alienation and provision of brief early interventions are also necessary, particularly in view of the significant and negative contribution of highly conflicted litigation to more severe alienation.

NOTE

1. For the description of research instruments developed to quantify various aspects of child and parent behaviors, feelings, and attitudes associated with alienation, see Johnston et al. (2005a, 2005b, 2005c).

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Joan B. Kelly, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and former Executive Director of the Northern California Mediation Center in Corte Madera, CA. Her research, writing, practice and teaching over 39 years has focused on children's adjustment to divorce, custody and access issues, using child development and divorce research to develop parenting plans, divorce mediation, and Parenting Coordination. She has published more than 85 articles and chapters, and a classic book, Surviving the Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope with Divorce*. Joan is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, received the Stanley Cohen Distinguished Research and the Meyer Elkin Awards from AFCC, was a member of the AFCC Task Force on Parenting Coordination, and is currently on the American Psychological Association Task Force to develop practice guidelines for Parenting Coordination.*