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Reclaiming Parent–Child Relationships: Outcomes of Family Bridges with Alienated Children

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ABSTRACT

A sample of 83 severely alienated children and adolescents were enrolled with the parents whom they had rejected in a 4-day Family Bridges educational workshop. The program was conducted after court orders had placed the children in the custody of their rejected parent. The parents who participated with the children in the workshop, and the professional workshop leaders, reported large improvements in the children's alienated behavior, changes that reflected statistically significant and large effects. The children's contact refusal with the rejected parent dropped from a pre-workshop rate of 85% to a post-workshop rate of 6%. Depending on the outcome measure, between 75% and 96% of the children overcame their alienation. The parents and children credited the workshop with improving their relationships and teaching them better relationship skills. Despite the children's negative initial expectations, most children felt positively about their workshop experience, regarded the workshop more like education than counseling, and reported that the professionals who led the program treated them with kindness and respect. All the parent participants and two-thirds of the children rated the workshop as excellent or good, but 8% of children retained their initial negative attitudes about the workshop and rated the workshop as poor. In sum, a significant number of intractable and severely alienated children and adolescents who participated in the Family Bridges workshop repaired their damaged relationship with a parent whom they had previously rejected for an average of 3–4 years.

KEYWORDS

alienation; custody reversal;
high-conflict divorce;
parental alienation;
reunification

Children who reject a parent after divorce, who refuse or resist contact with a parent, or whose contacts are characterized by extreme withdrawal or gross contempt are challenges to courts, divorced families, and the professionals who serve them. Extrapolations from various studies conservatively estimate the incidence of alienated children at between 2% and 4% of those whose parents divorce (Warshak, 2015a). When the estranged parent–child relationship results primarily from poor or abusive parenting on the part of the rejected parent, child protection authorities and courts will likely and rightly

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support a child's avoidance of contact with that parent. But when the degree of a child's estrangement and hostility is not warranted by and is disproportionate to the rejected parent's behavior, courts will often determine that it serves the child's best interests to have contact with the rejected parent and to repair the damaged relationship.

Is reunification therapy a remedy?

Many judges appoint therapists to work with the family in an office to alleviate the problems without altering existing legal and physical custody orders. The intended therapy goals are to transform the children's polarized views of their parents into more balanced and realistic views of each parent, with the hope that the child will reconnect with the rejected parent (Johnston, Walters, & Friedlander, 2001; Sauber, 2013).

This therapy, often labeled reunification therapy, may meet with moderate success under several conditions. Reunification therapy is more likely to be effective with mildly alienated children who grudgingly agree to spend time with the parent they disfavor. The therapy is more likely to succeed when the child rejects a parent after discovering behavior that diminishes the child's respect for the parent, such as learning of marital infidelity, and the child's justified disappointment overshadows the child's recognition of the full context, history, and value of the parent-child relationship. Successful therapy is especially more likely when the parent whom the child favors genuinely supports and encourages the repair of the child's relationship with the rejected parent.

Reunification therapy has a poor track record with severely alienated children who refuse all contact with the rejected parent, who repeatedly leave the rejected parent's home during the scheduled time together, and the parent with whom the child is aligned is not genuinely and strongly fostering and supporting the child's reunification with the rejected parent (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013; Fidler & Bala, 2010). Unfortunately, such court-ordered therapy often continues to allow the children to refuse contact with the rejected parent, even as the therapist works to overcome the family's problems.

Children who have been permitted to regulate whether and under what circumstances they will spend time in each parent's care, bring a sense of empowerment into the reunification therapist's office. The children and their favored parent cooperate with treatment as long as the therapist agrees that these children have valid reasons for rejecting a parent, shows empathy for the children's antipathy to repairing the relationship, or never challenges the children's negative views of the rejected parent (Johnston et al., 2001). Such cooperation evaporates, though, when the therapist resolves that the status quo is untenable and believes that the child should resume a positive relationship with the rejected parent.

When reunification therapy fails

Reunification therapy moves at a glacial pace or fails when children are severely alienated and live primarily or exclusively with a parent who does not effectively support and may not value the children's relationship with the other parent (Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Garber, 2015; Lampel, 1986; Lowenstein, 2006; Rand & Rand, 2006; Rand, Rand, & Kopetski, 2005; Sullivan, Ward, & Deutsch, 2010; Warshak, 2003, 2015b; Weir & Sturge, 2006). Unless the rejected parent gives up active efforts to heal the relationship with the children, the failure of court-ordered therapy returns the parents to court. At that point, the court's primary custodial options of the alienated children are as follows: (a) placement with the favored parent (favored by the children) accompanied by another round of court-ordered psychotherapy, (b) placement with the rejected parent, (c) placement with neither parent, or (d) placement with the favored parent with no scheduled contacts with the rejected parent (Warshak, 2010c, 2015a).

When the court awards custody to the rejected parent, this decision usually follows a prolonged period of time in which the favored parent violated court orders with impunity and, with their children, acted as if they were beyond the reach of the court with respect to complying with the court-ordered parenting plan (Kelly, 2010). In most of these cases the court also determines that the alienation reflects the ongoing influence of the favored parent on the children's negative attitudes about the rejected parent. To maximize the chances of the children and rejected parent healing their relationship, the court may temporarily suspend the children's contact with the parent whom they favor (usually for about 90 days), hoping that a no-contact order will shield the children from negative influences that may retard their progress, and will motivate the children to comply with the court's intentions (Warshak, 2015a).

Children who have become accustomed to resisting the custodial arrangements expect that their demands, protests, and threats will continue to defeat the court's intentions in the current round of litigation. Some children appear very stressed at the thought of living with the parent they have been rejecting. They may threaten to defy court orders, run away, destroy property, harm themselves, or hurt the parent (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013; Warshak, 2010c).

Children's resistance and the risks of acting out can be reduced when the court conveys its authority and expectation of success (Warshak, 2015a; Warshak & Otis, 2010). Although the social science literature emphasizes the importance of contact between children and the rejected parent to help correct children's distorted negative perceptions, contact alone often is not enough. The judge or the parent receiving custody may consider a specialized program to help the child accept the court orders, and to help the parent and

child heal their relationship. Research on the outcomes of such programs is limited (Saini, Johnston, Fidler, & Bala, 2016; Walters & Friedlander, 2016). Some programs reported effectiveness with families in the earlier and milder stages of alienation, but no success with cases that involved repeated violations of court orders, failure of past specialized interventions, alienating behaviors considered to be emotionally abusive or harmful, inability or unwillingness of the favored parent to modify alienating behavior, parents with severe personality disorders, and risks of child abduction (Ward, Deutsch, & Sullivan, 2017). Thus, courts and professionals need information on programs that can effectively help children in the most severe cases.

Family Bridges: an educational alternative for alienated parent–child relationships

The earliest non-office-based program for troubled and severely alienated parent–child relationships is Family Bridges (Kelly, 2010; Warshak, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Warshak & Otis, 2010). Family Bridges is a structured, 4-day, educational and experiential workshop in which the rejected parent and one or more of his or her alienated children participate together without any other families and without the favored parent whose contact with the children the court has temporarily suspended.

The workshop's primary goals are twofold. One goal is to prepare children to cooperate with court orders that require them to live with a parent whom they have rejected while having no contact for an extended period of time with their other parent. Family Bridges has fulfilled one aim if, by the end of the workshop, the children are perceived as being ready to return home with the rejected parent who has been awarded custody.

The second goal of Family Bridges is to improve the quality of the parent–child relationship. This objective seeks to jump-start the recovery of a positive parent–child relationship and teach better communication and conflict management skills. Family Bridges also teaches children how to think critically; how to maintain balanced, realistic, and compassionate views of both parents; and how to resist outside pressures that can lead them to act against their judgment.

In an initial study, Warshak (2010c) described Family Bridges' goals and procedures and effectiveness with a small sample. The study found that 22 of 23 previously alienated children from 12 families—alienated for an average of more than 2 years—restored a positive relationship with the rejected parent by the end of the workshop, and 18 children maintained those gains 2–4 years after the workshop.

The success of Family Bridges may stem, in part, from the program's novel educational approach, now emulated by other programs (Warshak, 2016). Family Bridges contrasts with traditional approaches in several

respects. The program engages children with a curriculum of entertaining videos and attention-grabbing materials. The workshop, which takes place in a leisure setting rather than a professional office, is concentrated in four full days rather than hourly sessions spread over months and years. As opposed to some forms of psychotherapy, the workshop is designed to contain rather than facilitate expression of strong negative emotions, and to focus on the present and future rather than the past. The activities are also designed so that children can gain insight into their negative attitudes while saving face.

A comprehensive description of the rationale, procedures, and type of materials used in Family Bridges is available in Warshak (2010a, 2010c) and Warshak and Otis (2010). Kelly (2010) reviewed the program and discussed its evidence-based, scientific foundations.

The current study

The current study improves upon the previous one in several respects. First, there are four times as many families as in the previous study. In addition, the current study relies on structured measurement instruments designed for the study that elicit data from parents, children, and workshop leaders (licensed professionals). The current study also includes measures of inter-rater reliability and measures of pre- and post-workshop parent–child relationships. Also, in place of global binary judgments about whether the parent–child relationship was successfully healed, the current study’s measures capture a range of outcomes providing more nuanced and multi-faceted criteria of success or failure. The data are reported with statistical tests of significance, standard error rates, confidence intervals, and measures of effect size.

This article reports children’s and parents’ experiences and evaluations of Family Bridges, ratings made by the workshop leaders, and the extent to which the workshop achieved its main goals. The workshop leaders were not the same for all workshops, but all were trained in the Family Bridges protocol described in detail by Warshak (2010c).

Hypotheses and questions

- (1) It was predicted that at the end of the workshop, parents and the workshop leaders would perceive the children as more ready than before the workshop to cooperate with the court-ordered custody arrangements, exhibit a decrease in their alienation, and evidence improvement in their relationship with the parent who participated in the workshop.

- (2) It was hypothesized that parents and children would perceive the workshop as having helped to improve the children's feelings about the parent, to better the quality of the parent–child relationship, and to enhance their ability to get along with each other, communicate, and manage their conflicts.
- (3) It was anticipated that the children would begin with negative attitudes about the workshop but end with more positive feelings about the experience.
- (4) The study evaluated whether the children and parents described the professionals' behavior toward the children in positive or negative terms. This question was of interest because some children who make no progress in the workshop, or who later relapse into alienation, and the parents with whom they are aligned, complain about how the children were treated during the workshop (Warshak, 2016).
- (5) It was expected that children's ratings of the workshop experience and its benefits, although in a positive direction, would not be as positive as parents' and professionals' ratings because of the high levels of anger and alienation common to children prior to their enrollment in Family Bridges.

Method

Participants

The study sample consists of 83 children (40 boys, 43 girls) in 52 families and their rejected parent. See Table 1 for the sample composition. More than half of the children ($N = 43$) were older than 14 years, with 19 children age 16 and older. Of the 52 parents who participated in the workshop, 37% ($N = 19$) were rejected mothers and 63% ($N = 33$) were rejected fathers. According to the parents, the children had rejected them for an average of 3 to 4 years. Typically the judges, custody evaluators, and guardians *ad litem* said that this was the “worst case of parental alienation” or the “most severely alienated child” they had seen in their career. More than half of the parents first learned about Family

Table 1. Composition of child sample.

Age range	Rejected mother		Rejected father		Total
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
8 and younger	0	0	0	3	3
9–11	4	3	7	2	16
12–13	2	4	8	7	21
14–15	4	6	6	8	24
16 and older	5	4	4	6	19
Total	15	17	25	26	83

Bridges through a professional assigned to their case (mainly court-appointed child custody evaluators and a few therapists and child representatives).

Each child in this study was found by the court to be irrationally alienated from a parent in the sense of rejecting the parent without adequate justification and resisting or refusing to comply with the court-ordered parenting time schedule. Further, each case involved previous unsuccessful attempts to repair the damaged parent–child relationship. In each case the court determined that it was in the child’s best interest to be placed in the custody of the parent whom they were rejecting and to have an extended period of time (typically 90 days) in which all contact with the other parent was temporarily suspended. The reasons why courts issue a no-contact order vary, such as protecting children from psychological abuse in some cases. But two reasons relevant to the children’s participation in a program such as Family Bridges are to shield children from negative influences that may retard their progress, and to motivate the children to comply with the custodial arrangements and to begin healing their relationship with the rejected parent (Warshak, 2015a).

When siblings participate together in a program, researchers can designate one child as the target subject of an outcome study or include all siblings. Choosing only one child from the family would make sense if all siblings in a family were alienated to the same degree and responded in similar ways to the workshop. If that were true, larger families would disproportionately affect the outcome data. In Family Bridges, though, all siblings do not begin the workshop with the same degree of alienation and do not always respond to the workshop in the same manner. Thus, data were elicited and analyzed from all siblings who participated in the workshop except for siblings whose parents rated them as not alienated or only minimally alienated. This yielded a sample size of 83 children.

Given the expenses associated with protracted custody litigation, the participants were predominantly from middle- to upper middle-class families. The sample was predominantly White from various urban, suburban, and rural areas throughout the United States, although it should be noted that the literature provides no evidence that the dynamics of, and effective remedies for, alienated parent–child relationships differ by race, ethnic background, geographic location, or socioeconomic status.

Procedures and materials

Parents completed questionnaires and provided baseline measures prior to the workshop, either emailing the completed document prior to arrival or handing in a hard copy before the workshop began. Parents, children, and

the professionals who led the workshop completed hard-copy questionnaires at the workshop's conclusion. Most of the questionnaire items called for Likert-type ratings. Questions were added to the instrument as the study progressed, thus resulting in more responses for some variables than others. The identity of the respondent does not appear on the questionnaire, and participants were advised that their responses would be tallied confidentially. Upon completing the questionnaire, participants placed it in an envelope and sealed it. The questionnaires for each workshop shared a common ID number to allow for comparisons of ratings.

Contact cooperation versus refusal and resistance

Prior to the workshop parents rated their perception of the extent to which the child cooperated with the court-ordered parenting schedule, and at the end of the workshop parents and workshop leaders rated the same variable. Parents and children also rated the extent to which they believed that the workshop would help the child live with the parent. Each item was rated on a 4-point scale from "not at all" to "a lot."

Alienation

Parents rated aspects of their children's alienation including rejection, withdrawal, and contempt both before and after the workshop on a 4-point scale from "not at all" to "a lot." Professionals rated the same scales at the workshop's conclusion. The contact cooperation and alienation scales were added after the study was under way, with 46 children being rated by parents and workshop leaders on these scales.

Change in quality of parent-child relationship

At the end of the workshop, parents, professionals, and children rated the change in the overall quality of the parent-child relationship on a 5-point scale from "much worse" to "much better."

Relationship changes attributed to the workshop

Conceivably, a parent or child could rate their relationship as better after the workshop, but not attribute the improvement to the workshop itself. So parents and children were asked to rate, on a 4-point scale, the extent to which the workshop helped change the child's feelings about the parent, helped them have a healthier, better relationship, helped them communicate more effectively with each other, and helped them settle their disagreements and conflicts better.

Children's experiences of Family Bridges

Children rated how they felt initially about attending the workshop and how they felt at the end on 4-point scales from "very negative" to "very positive." They also rated the workshop on a 4-point scale from "poor" to "excellent,"

and they indicated whether they believed that other families in similar situations would benefit from the workshop. In addition, children were asked whether the workshop seemed more like therapy and counseling, or more like education. Finally, children assessed the extent to which the workshop leaders treated them with respect and treated them with kindness on 4-point scales from “none” to “a lot.”

Parents' experiences of Family Bridges

Parents rated how the workshop leaders treated the children and whether the workshop was more like education or therapy. Also, parents rated the workshop on a 4-point scale from “poor” to “excellent.”

Miscellaneous

Parents indicated how they first learned of the workshop and how long their relationship with their child had been damaged.

Results

Data reduction

To simplify substantive analyses, Cronbach's alpha was calculated to assess the internal consistency of the three alienation items—rejection, withdrawal, and contempt—as rated by parents before and after the workshop, and by professionals after the workshop. The three scales demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha = .91, .89, and .92 respectively for ratings by the parents before and after the workshop, and by professionals after the workshop. Thus, the sum of the ratings on the three scales was used as the score for analyses of the child's pre- and post-workshop alienation.

Inter-rater reliability and concurrent validity

Contact cooperation versus refusal and resistance

Inter-rater reliability of the contact cooperation versus resistance score was calculated for 46 pairs of ratings made by two professionals workshop leaders and 46 pairs of ratings made by a professional and the parent. The possible scores ranged from 1 to 4 (corresponding to “not at all or only a little,” “somewhat,” “moderately,” and “a lot”).

The percentage of exact agreement in scores made by the two professionals was 91%, and the percentage of agreement within 1 point was 98%. Only one pair of raters had a 2-point discrepancy. Thus, the rating had high inter-rater reliability. In all cases of a discrepancy, the ratings from the workshop leader previously designated as rater #1 were used for subsequent analyses.

The percentage of exact agreement between parents' and professionals' ratings was 63% and the percentage of agreement within one point was 96%. Given the different perspectives of parents and workshop leaders, it was to be expected that the rate of agreement between the parents and the professionals would be lower than the rate of agreement between pairs of professionals. In the 15 cases with a 1-point discrepancy, most parents had lower expectations for child cooperation than did the professionals. One explanation for the discrepancy is that, having been rejected for so long, parents feel more pessimistic about whether the improvements would last. Another explanation is that workshop leaders are more apt to be optimistic about the results of their work. A third explanation is that professionals' experiences with alienated children position them to predict which children have made sufficient progress during the workshop to be able to maintain those improvements.

Alienation score

Inter-rater reliability of the post-workshop alienation score was calculated for 45 pairs of professionals' ratings and for 47 pairs of ratings made by a professional and the parent. The possible scores ranged from 3 to 12. Eighty percent of the professionals' ratings were identical and 98% of their ratings differed by no more than 2 points.

For the parent and professional pairs, 66% of the ratings were identical, and 85% differed by no more than 2 points. Again, we would expect that the rate of agreement between the parents and the professionals would be lower than the rate of agreement between the pairs of professionals. Nevertheless, whether rated by the professionals or the parents, the total alienation score has high inter-rater reliability. In addition, the high degree of agreement between the professionals' and the parents' ratings of post-workshop alienation suggests that the total alienation score has concurrent validity.

Change in quality of parent-child relationship

Inter-rater reliability of the scale assessing changes in the quality of the parent-child relationship was calculated for 45 pairs of professionals and 52 pairs of a professional and the parent. The possible scores ranged from 1 to 5. Eighty-four percent of the professionals' ratings were identical and 100% were within 1 point of each other. The percentage of exact agreement between ratings made by the parents and the professionals was 75% and the percentage of agreement within 1 point was 98%. Whether rated by the professionals or the parents, the scale assessing the change in the parent-child relationship has high inter-rater reliability. In addition, the high level of agreement between the professionals' and the parents' ratings suggests that this scale has concurrent validity.

Contact cooperation versus refusal and resistance

It was hypothesized that children would be perceived as more likely to accept the court-ordered custodial arrangements after the workshop compared with their behavior before the workshop.

As seen in Table 2, at the outset the parents perceived that only 15% of the children cooperated with the orders a lot or moderately. By the end of the workshop, the percentage of perceived cooperation rose to 94% as rated by parents and 96% as rated by professionals.

A paired-samples *t*-test compared parents’ ratings of their child’s willingness to comply with the custody schedule before and after the workshop. Lower scores indicate less compliance and more resistance. There was a significant difference in ratings before and after the workshop (Mean = 1.61, SD = 1.00 versus Mean = 3.63, SD = 0.68; Standard error of difference = 0.18); *t* = 11.24, *df* = 45, *p* < .001. The confidence interval of the difference was 1.66–2.38. Cohen’s *d* = 1.65 indicates a statistically significant large effect size.

To further assess changes, the parent’s perception of the child’s willingness to comply with the custody schedule before the workshop was compared with the professional’s rating at the end of the workshop. The mean difference between the parent’s pre-workshop rating and the professional’s post-workshop rating was 2.11 (pre-workshop Mean = 1.61, SD = 1.00 versus post-workshop Mean = 3.72, SD = 0.69; Standard error of difference = 0.176); *t* = 11.95, *df* = 45, *p* < 0.001. The confidence interval of the pre- versus post-workshop difference was 1.75–2.46. Cohen’s *d* = 1.77 again yielded a statistically significant large effect size.

Parents and children rated the extent to which the workshop will help the child live with the parent, using a 4-point scale (4 = the workshop helped “a lot”; 3 = “some”; 2 = a little; 1 = “not at all”). The mean parent rating was 3.84 (SD = .37), with 16% rating “some” and 84% “a lot.” The mean child rating was 2.64 (SD = 1.05), with 15% rating “not at all,” 33% “a little,” 24%

Table 2. Contact cooperation versus refusal and resistance.

	Parents pre-workshop		Parents post-workshop		Professionals post-workshop	
		%		%		%
Not at all or only a little	30	65	1	2	2	4
Somewhat	9	20	2	4	0	0
Moderately	2	4	10	22	7	15
A lot	5	11	33	72	37	80
Total positive (a lot + moderately)	7	15	43	94	44	96

Pre-workshop rating by parent: *To what extent is the child living with you cooperatively in compliance with the residential schedule put in place by the court?*

Post-workshop rating by parent and professional: *By the end of the workshop, to what extent was the child prepared to live with you [for observers: the parent] cooperatively in compliance with the residential schedule put in place by the court?*

“some,” and 28% “a lot.” As predicted, the children’s ratings were less positive than the parents’, but were still on the positive end of the scale—a noteworthy outcome for a group of children who had rejected the parent for years prior to the workshop.

These results support the hypothesis that children’s contact refusal and resistance would be reduced by the Family Bridges workshop and they would be more willing to accept the court-ordered custodial arrangements.

Alienation

Child alienation scores were derived from parents’ pre- and post-workshop ratings and from professionals’ post-workshop ratings. A paired-samples *t*-test compared the total alienation score derived from parents’ ratings before and after the workshop. The range of possible scores was 3 for least alienated to 12 for most alienated. The most frequent pre-workshop rating was 12 and post-workshop was 3. The average change in ratings was -6.85 , indicating a substantial reduction in alienation (pre-workshop Mean = 10.96, SD = 1.80 versus post-workshop Mean = 4.11, SD = 1.69; Standard Error of difference = 0.37); $t = -18.62$, $df = 45$, $p < 0.01$. The confidence interval was -6.11 to -7.59 . Cohen’s $d = -2.75$, which is classified as a statistically significant large effect.

To reduce concerns about shared method variance, the parents’ rating of alienation at the outset was compared to the professionals’ rating after the workshop. The mean difference between the parent’s pre-workshop rating and the professional’s post-workshop rating was -7.24 (pre-workshop Mean = 10.96, SD = 1.80 versus post-workshop Mean = 3.72, SD = 1.83; Standard error of difference = 0.344); $t = -21.07$, $df = 45$, $p < 0.001$. The confidence interval was -6.55 to -7.93 . Cohen’s $d = -3.10$, which is classified as a statistically significant large effect. Thus, whether assessed exclusively with parents’ ratings before and after the workshop, or with post-workshop ratings by the professionals compared with parents’ pre-workshop ratings, the children’s alienated behavior declined significantly and the effect was large, just as it was for the increase in the children’s cooperation with the custody arrangements (see [Figure 1](#) for a graphical depiction of the parents’ pre- and post-workshop ratings).

Another way to consider the impact of the program is to consider the proportion of post-workshop alienation scores that remained high, above the mid-range of the scale (scores of 8–12) versus scores below the mid-range (3–7). By this criterion, 4% of the children rated by parents and by workshop leaders remained alienated. In sum, the analyses supported the hypothesis that children were less alienated by the end of the workshop.

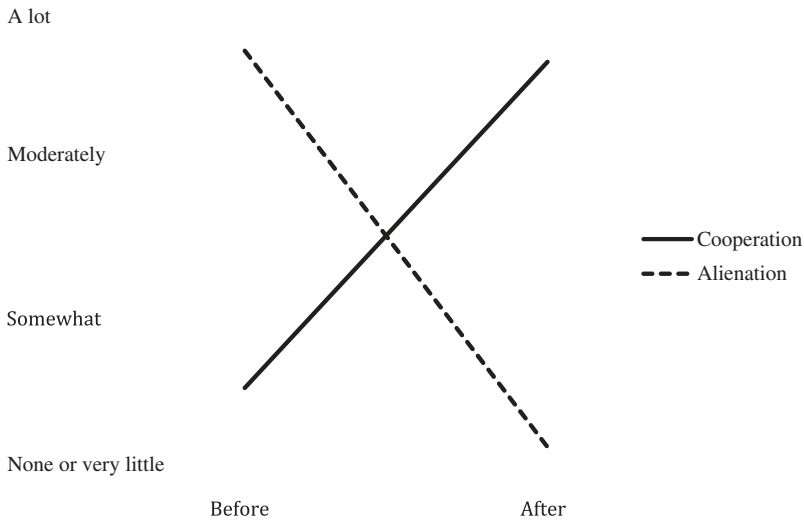


Figure 1. Improvement in cooperation with court orders, and reduction in alienation, comparing parents' mean ratings before and after the workshop.

Note: The range of scores is 1–4 for the cooperation scale and 3–12 for the alienation scale. The results were plotted proportionately.

Change in quality of parent–child relationship

At the end of the workshop, parents, professionals, and children rated the change in the overall quality of the parent–child relationship on a 5-point scale from much worse to much better. Parents and professionals most frequently rated the parent–child relationships as “much better” after the workshop, and children most frequently rated the relationships as “somewhat better.” Combining the “much better” and “somewhat better” ratings revealed that parents rated 99% of the relationships as improved (75% “much better”; 24% “somewhat better”), professionals rated 94% of the relationships as improved (89% “much better”; 5% “somewhat better”), and children rated 74% of the relationships as improved (31% “much better”; 43% “somewhat better”). No parent or professional, but 7% of the children, rated the parent–child relationships as worse after the workshop. In sum, the parents and professionals were more likely than the children to report improvement in the parent–child relationships, and the adults reported higher levels of improvement. But three-quarters of the children rated the relationship with their parent as improved. See [Table 3](#).

Relationship changes attributed to the workshop

Parents and children rated on a 4-point scale the extent to which the workshop helped improve various aspects of their relationship. As seen in [Table 4](#), parents gave the workshop very high ratings on achieving all its goals. As

Table 3. Change in overall quality of parent–child relationship by the end of the workshop.

	Parent <i>N</i> = 68	%	Child <i>N</i> = 83	%	Workshop leader <i>N</i> = 56	%
Much better	51	75	26	31	50	89
Somewhat better	16	24	36	43	3	5
About the same	1	1	15	18	3	5
Somewhat worse	0	0	4	5	0	0
Much worse	0	0	2	2	0	0
Positive change	67	99	61	74	53	95
No change or decline	1	1	21	25	3	5

Note: The *N* varies for the three groups because at the study's outset parents were asked to rate this variable only for the child who was most alienated prior to the workshop (or oldest if children were equally alienated), and questionnaires for workshop leaders were added after the study was under way. For this reason, the percentages are the most useful for comparative purposes.

Table 4. Relationship changes attributed to the workshop.

Workshop goals	Parents		Children	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Changed child's feelings about parent	3.47	0.73	2.49	1.17
Better, healthier parent–child relationship	3.86	0.35	2.76	1.00
Get along with each other better	3.84	0.37	2.88	1.06
Improved parent–child communication	3.94	0.24	3.09	0.94
Improved ability to manage parent–child conflicts	3.84	0.37	3.01	1.02

Note: Success in achieving workshop goals was rated 1 = Not at all, 2 = A little, 3 = Some, or 4 = A lot.

predicted, children's ratings were lower than parents' ratings, but still on the positive end of the scale. Children gave the workshop the most credit for improving their ability to communicate and manage conflict with their parent. But it is noteworthy that most children also credited the workshop for improving their feelings about the parent, making the relationship better, and helping them get along with each other better.

Children's experiences of Family Bridges

It was expected that children would prejudge the workshop as very negative, but would improve their attitude about the workshop after having experienced it. Children who did not benefit from the workshop would be inclined to report no change in attitude or a change in the negative direction.

Table 5 shows that, as predicted, most of the children (83%) began the workshop with negative feelings about it ($\chi^2(3, N = 83) = 53.92, p < .001$), Cramer's *V* = .81 which is classified as a statistically significant large effect. But most (78%) ended with positive feelings ($\chi^2(3, N = 83) = 31.27, p < .001$), Cramer's *V* = .62, which is classified as a statistically significant large effect. Even among the 15 children who reported "somewhat negative" feelings about their experience, 12 began with "very negative" feelings and thus the experience was not as bad as they had anticipated. In all, 74 of the 83 children (89%) felt better about the workshop than they had expected to feel.

Table 5. Children's attitudes about the workshop before and after the experience.

	Pre-workshop		Post-workshop	
	N = 83	%	N = 83	%
Very negative	47	57	3	4
Somewhat negative	22	27	15	18
Somewhat positive	12	14	36	43
Very positive	2	2	29	35
Total negative (very negative + somewhat negative)	69	83	18	22
Total positive (very positive + somewhat positive)	14	17	65	78

Pre-workshop rating: *When you first heard about this program, how did you feel about having to attend the workshop?*

Post-workshop rating: *Now that you have been through the workshop, how do you feel about your experience?*

Two-thirds of the 83 children rated the workshop as either “good” (the most frequent response) or “excellent” and only seven children (8% of the sample) gave a “poor” rating, $\chi^2(3, N = 83) = 31.84, p < .001$. Cramer's $V = .62$, which is classified as a statistically significant large effect.

Another way to tap children's genuine feelings is to ask them whether they think other families in a similar situation would benefit from the workshop. Some children might be reluctant to admit that they liked or benefited from the workshop. But they might be willing to indirectly endorse the experience by reporting that other children could benefit. More than half (53%) answered, “Yes,” the workshop would help others, and another third (34%) answered, “Maybe.” Only 13% answered, “No.”

When asked if the workshop seemed more like therapy and counseling or more like education, 82% thought it was more like education. This may account for why so many children were satisfied with the experience. Some children (15%) reported that it was more like counseling, and three children did not admit that they had ever received counseling.

A majority of children felt that they were treated with “a lot” of respect (57%) and with “a lot” of kindness (66%). Nearly every child reported being treated with “some” or “a lot” of respect (95%) and kindness (96%). None reported that they were treated with no respect or kindness.

In sum, all five measures affirmed that the children's feelings and attitudes about the program moved in a positive direction.

Parents' experiences of Family Bridges

Parents were with their children at all times during the workshop. Thus, the parent was able to witness all interactions between the professionals and the children. Without exception every parent rated the workshop leaders as treating their children with “a lot” of kindness, and all but one parent rated the workshop leaders as treating their children with “a lot” of respect. Only one parent felt the child was treated with “some” respect and only one

thought the workshop was more like therapy than education. Parents rated the workshop even higher than did their children. No parent rated the workshop less than “good” and 75% rated it as “excellent.”

Discussion

A colleague recently bemoaned a court’s custody decision. The evidence was clear that an adolescent was living with an alienating parent who could not support or accept her having a loving relationship with the other parent. Despite noting parental behavior that constituted psychological abuse, the court left the child in a toxic environment because of fears that this teenager would run away or harm herself if the court did not rule as the child demanded.

Had this teen been living with a parent who had sexually or physically abused her, the court would not have hesitated to remove the child from the abusive home regardless of the child’s desire to stay. Instead, the court would have prioritized protecting the child from further abuse. But faced with an alienated child’s or teen’s threats to defy a custody decision determined by the court to best serve the child’s interests, many judges, child custody evaluators, and guardians *ad litem* feel stymied about how to resolve the impasse. A viable solution is a program that can motivate children to comply with the custodial arrangements, avoid acting out, and restore a positive relationship with their rejected parent. This study shows that the Family Bridges program was an effective option to meet these goals in this sample.

Contact cooperation versus refusal

The percentage of children perceived as resisting compliance with the court-ordered contact with their alienated parent dropped from 85% before the workshop to 6% after the workshop according to the parents and 4% according to the workshop leaders. In statistical and practical terms, the improvement was large. Although the exact percentage of such improvement may vary with other samples, these results suggest favorable odds that severely alienated children and adolescents will cooperate with the custodial arrangement after attending the 4-day Family Bridges workshop. Concerns about outright defiance are more prevalent with adolescents than with younger children. Thus, it is noteworthy that more than half of the children in this study were over the age of 14 and nearly a quarter were over the age of 16.

Gaining children’s acceptance of court-ordered custody arrangements is an important goal. But if the children continue to wage a cold or hostile war against the rejected parent, the damaged relationships have not been adequately repaired.

Alienation

To determine whether children comply or resist spending time in a parent's home is fairly straightforward. Evaluating whether the children have made progress in overcoming their rejection of a parent, and repairing that relationship, is more complicated.

The parents' pre-workshop ratings confirm that their children were severely alienated. The most frequent rating was at the top of the alienation scale and the average rating was very close to the top. But after the workshop, parents' and the professionals' ratings of alienation were at the low end of the scale. If the criterion for "success" is a post-workshop alienation score in the bottom half of the scale, then 96% of the children had significantly overcome their alienation. The success rate with this sample is comparable to results reported for the smaller sample in Warshak (2010c).

The workshop's effectiveness in ameliorating alienation was also assessed by ratings of perceived changes in the quality of the parent-child relationship. The ratings of parents, professionals, and children revealed that the extent of improvement is in the eye of the beholder. Parents rated 75% of the relationships as "much better" and another 24% as "somewhat better." The professionals' perceptions resembled those of the parents.

In contrast, only 31% of the children reported that their relationship was "much better," and 43% reported "somewhat better." These results are encouraging, considering that the children were described as the most severely alienated children by the professionals with whom they were previously involved, that previous attempts to help them reconnect with their rejected parent had failed, and that most admitted experiencing very negative feelings about Family Bridges at the outset.

One possible explanation for the discrepancy between adult and child ratings is that the adults were mistaken. But the high level of agreement in the ratings of the parents and professionals points to the validity of those ratings. A more plausible explanation is that the children may not consider having warmer feelings for their parent as a sign that the relationship is "much better." Or, because these children have not felt free to express positive thoughts about the rejected parent, they may have felt obliged to report less enthusiasm about the improvement in the relationship, even though their outward behavior as rated by their parent and the professional revealed substantial change. Also, although the children were told that their questionnaire responses would be confidential, they may have feared that their other parent might learn of their responses.

Parents' experiences of Family Bridges

The results suggest a high level of parent satisfaction with the workshop. Even those parents whose children did not all sufficiently overcome their alienation rated the experience as good and beneficial. In no case did parents report that the workshop harmed their relationship with their child.

Children's experiences of Family Bridges

As predicted, most children (83%) began the workshop with predominantly negative expectations. Also as predicted, most of the children (nearly 90%) felt better about the workshop after having experienced it. Two-thirds of the children rated the workshop as "good" or "excellent," and only 8% rated it as "poor." Even among those who did not rate the workshop positively, most rated the workshop leaders as having treated them with kindness and respect. The average rating by children was positive for the workshop helping to improve their relationship with their parent, and they were most apt to perceive that the workshop helped improve their ability to communicate and manage conflict with their parent.

Based on the reports of the children, the parents, and the workshop leaders, this study does not support allegations that participating in the Family Bridges workshop traumatizes children or is coercive and punitive (Dallam & Silberg, 2016). To the contrary, five different measures affirmed that most of the children had positive feelings about the experience and about the workshop leaders.

Implications for courts, evaluators, and child representatives

The data from this study predict that a Family Bridges workshop will help most severely alienated children and adolescents adjust to a custody disposition that places them with a parent whom they have rejected. While a few children did not overcome their alienation, were not satisfied with the workshop, and would be prone to complain about the experience, this study shows that, overall, Family Bridges is a resource that judges and lawyers should consider for alienated children.

Evidence indicated that the workshop itself did not harm children and, according to the parents, was helpful even when a child did not appear to respond positively. Learning about other children's views of the workshop, such as the perception that it was more like school than therapy, may help reduce anxiety in children who are informed that they will be participating in Family Bridges. Some advocates, based on unsubstantiated anecdotes and theoretical speculations, have criticized the Family Bridges program (Dallam & Silberg, 2016). Courts should note that such opinions lack an adequate

basis in professional knowledge and are refuted by the empirical data from this study.

Although the current outcome data reveal a high level of effectiveness, the program was not successful with every child. Children who remain alienated after the workshop are prone to complain about the experience, especially when aligned with the parent who opposed their participation in the workshop (Warshak, 2016). Such complaints should be considered in the context of this study's data. In addition to the children's positive ratings, every parent reported that the professionals treated their children benevolently, and no parent perceived any mistreatment of any child. These data suggest that anecdotal reports to the contrary are best regarded as manifestations of a few children's continued alienation and condemnation of anyone who fails to endorse their rejection of a parent.

Study limitations and confounding variables

Children were not randomly assigned to different custody arrangements and different programs. Thus, we do not know whether the children and parents who participated in Family Bridges had certain characteristics that contributed to the positive outcomes. It would be difficult to partial out the impact of the court's custody decision, and the way in which it was announced to the children, from the impact of the workshop itself. The therapy prior to Family Bridges had been conducted while the children remained in regular contact with the favored parent. Professionals have observed that alienated children's favored parents can undermine the treatment process, particularly if they do not share the court's opinion that the children's estrangement is irrational and that repairing the damaged parent-child relationship is in the children's best interests (Kelly, 2010; Warshak, 2015a, 2015b). Having children participate only with their rejected parent may be one reason for the good results of Family Bridges workshops when compared with the lack of success of a "whole family intervention" (Ward et al., 2017). Family Bridges deals with children whose contact with their favored parent has been temporarily suspended. This not only provides an environment that may be more conducive to relationship repair, but it may also increase the children's motivation to cooperate with the custodial arrangements (Warshak, 2015a).

The children who did not respond positively to the workshop are too few to draw any meaningful conclusions about why they were less satisfied with the workshop. A larger sample of children who remain alienated after the workshop would allow investigation of factors that might mediate the effectiveness of the program for any individual child. This would allow courts, evaluators, and parents to do a better job of matching children to a particular approach.

The study used responses to Likert-type scales to tap children's attitudes about the workshop and its leaders. Although data such as the children's report that they were treated with respect and kindness during the workshop provide a valuable context for understanding unsubstantiated anecdotal complaints, it would be desirable to supplement these data with scores on multi-item standard scales to assess children's attitudes.

Questions for further study

This study was concerned only with the participants' experiences and the immediate outcomes of the workshop. Future work should examine the crucial and complex questions about the longevity and stability of the children's progress and about how long-term outcomes compare with a matched group of alienated children who did not participate in Family Bridges. Children's progress may be undermined if they prematurely resume contact with the parent who opposed their participation in Family Bridges and who continues to undermine their regard for the parent whom the children rejected prior to the workshop (Warshak, 2010c). If children's alienation returns shortly after they complete the Family Bridges workshop, the program may not be worth the investment of time, energy, and money.

Warshak (2010c) found that some children relapsed but the majority maintained their gains up to 4 years after completing Family Bridges. Anecdotal feedback from the parents in the current sample thus far reveals a similar pattern. But this needs to be documented and analyzed with research instruments. Gains are more likely to be sustained when the lessons and insights from the workshop are reinforced. For families that attend Family Bridges, this usually means working with a local aftercare professional. Future studies should assess the impact of aftercare.

Ratings from participants and leaders of the workshop are important data points, but future studies could supplement these data with ratings by independent observers who rate the parent-child relationship without knowing whether the family participated in Family Bridges and without the potential bias of having provided the workshop. Nevertheless, in a workshop designed to reduce the child's alienation from the parent, the combined perspectives of the parent and child are highly relevant variables. Also useful would be pre-workshop measures from the children about their attitudes toward their parents, toward the court-ordered custody arrangements, and toward the workshop. It is preferable to obtain such data prior to the children's arrival at the workshop.

In addition to documenting the outcome of the workshop, it is important to identify the elements of the experience that are most conducive to its effectiveness. The parents and the children confirmed that the workshop was more like education than therapy. The educational framework may account

in large measure for the workshop's positive outcomes with a population that had not responded to traditional forms of treatment.

Other questions remain to be explored. To what extent is the effectiveness of the program related to the less formal atmosphere in which the workshop takes place compared with treatment that takes place in an office? Would a comparison group of children who engaged in leisure activities with the rejected parent, or accompanied them on vacation, do as well as children who participated in the workshop? The author's experience with such planned vacations is that the children often refuse to participate, and when they do, the experience has not alleviated the children's alienation. Nevertheless, a research design that included such a comparison group would provide useful data. Another question to explore is which of the materials and procedures have the most beneficial impact. Future research may also shed light on which children, under which circumstances, are the best candidates for a Family Bridges workshop, and which children might benefit from an alternative approach.

Conclusion

The 83 children who participated in this study began the Family Bridges workshop with negative expectations. But by the workshop's end, most of the children felt positively about their experience, regarded the workshop as more like school than counseling, and felt that the professionals who led the workshop treated them with kindness and respect. Compared with their behavior before the workshop, by the end of it the children were perceived as significantly more willing to cooperate with custody orders and significantly less alienated, as indicated in ratings by the parents, children, and professional workshop leaders. The parents and children perceived the workshop as helping to improve their relationship skills and the quality of the parent-child relationship.

In sum, the results of this study document that a significant number of intractable and severely alienated children and adolescents who participated in the Family Bridges workshop repaired their damaged relationship with a parent whom they had rejected for many years.

Disclosure statement

Dr. Warshak previously conducted Family Bridges workshops. But for more than six years ago from the date of this paper, he has not conducted any Family Bridges workshops, nor has he had any business or legal affiliation with professionals who conduct Family Bridges workshops, nor has he had any financial interest in any Family Bridges workshops.

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Notes on contributor

Dr. Richard A. Warshak is a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center and consults internationally in child custody proceedings. This study was conducted in the author's independent practice and not under the auspices of the university. Dr. Warshak studies the psychology of alienated children; children's involvement in custody disputes; and outcomes of divorce, child custody decisions, stepfamilies, relocations, and parenting plans for young children. His studies appear in 13 books, more than 75 articles, and more than 100 presentations. Dr. Warshak's paper on parenting plans, published in a journal of the American Psychological Association, was endorsed by 110 researchers and practitioners.

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