Helping Alienated Children with Family Bridges:
Practice, Research, and the Pursuit of “Humbition”

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Working in an emerging area of practice requires a delicate balance of courage and caution – courage to pursue new paths, caution to ensure the well-being of those we serve. This balance is expressed through the virtue of “humbition”: a fusion of humility and ambition (Warshak, 2002, 2007). Applied to the field of healing disrupted parent-child relationships, humbition allows social scientists and practitioners to balance an ambitious application, extrapolation, and expansion of available knowledge, experience, materials, and procedures with an acceptance of realistic limits to our ability to help parents and children manage the dynamics of alienation.

In the field of divorce and custody research, Joan Kelly is a model of humbition. She offers a balanced perspective on her own original empirical contributions (Kelly & Emery, 2003) and assertively draws on the literature and her experience as a clinician and mediator, both to inform current practice and to advocate long-term research that, while ambitious, is feasible and would enhance the quality of services to families undergoing divorce (Kelly, 2005).

In her commentary to Warshak (2010), Kelly has done it again. She accurately captures the essence of the principles, goals, structure, and content of Family Bridges: A Workshop for Troubled and Alienated Parent-Child Relationships™ (Family Bridges); she articulates several essential concerns; and she provides the outline of a blueprint for an ambitious project that would
respond to such concerns to the benefit of the families with alienated children. This article briefly summarizes and replies to Kelly’s concerns, all of which we have spent many hours pondering as *Family Bridges* evolved.

**Kelly’s Concerns and Suggestions**

Kelly’s comments highlight several topics that merit further consideration.

$ Family Bridges should consider developing a parallel program for favored parents to help them support the gains children accomplish in the program.

$ The financial resources required to obtain the legal authority to enroll a child in *Family Bridges* and afford the fees represent a formidable barrier to many families.

$ A modification of *Family Bridges* to a briefer educational intervention for families in which children have mild to moderate degrees of alienation, offered locally and at an early stage of litigation, would serve to prevent the entrenchment of more severe problems.

$ Training additional team leaders to conduct *Family Bridges* presents risks to the quality and integrity of the program.

$ A systematic research program, with thoughtful criteria for determining and measuring success, and using scientifically reliable and valid assessment procedures and instruments, would represent a significant contribution to the fields of family psychology and law.

$ Collaborative discussion among professionals with experience in dealing with alienated children can raise and explore hypotheses for future investigation.
General Observations

Warshak’s (2010) article is the first description of *Family Bridges* offered to a wider audience. Given the strong feelings aroused by any discussions of professional and legal responses to alienated children, we knew that Warshak (2010) was exposing our work to scrutiny in a highly charged professional and public atmosphere, and we were uncertain of the kind of response the article would stimulate. Innovative proposals often meet with criticism, doubt, and dismissal. Kelly’s response is gratifying both for her understanding of *Family Bridges* and for placing our work in a wider context.

Based on our many years of experience working with alienated children, and on our training and knowledge in the field, we are convinced that *Family Bridges* is on the right track, but still evolving. As we continue to work with this population we expect to discover other underlying mechanisms and to modify our syllabus and develop additional materials to address these mechanisms. As Warshak (2010) indicated, one goal of his article is to stimulate suggestions that could help improve the design and materials we use and our overall effectiveness. We eagerly solicit such feedback, and Kelly has met our expectations. In addition, Kelly’s article, and others in this issue of FCR, reveal a gratifying stage of development in our field: We are beginning to see the emergence of a common language that facilitates having a conversation about these issues.

Kelly highlighted several of the important features of *Family Bridges*. For those who are considering programs such as ours, we cannot overemphasize the value of the moratorium for children and parents on discussing grievances, past conflicts, and the current status of the parent-child relationship. This is one of the principles that distinguishes *Family Bridges* from
psychotherapy and counseling, and helps to create an educational atmosphere as opposed to a therapeutic one. Drawing on her experience as a researcher, clinician, and mediator, Kelly expects that the youngsters in our program experience relief when they learn that they can restore a relationship with the rejected parent without forgoing their relationship with the other parent. Kelly is correct. Children reveal that they have all along preferred to keep both parents in their lives. Also, they are relieved when they can save face by not having to rehash all the bad moments and painful scenes in order to reconcile.

When the court determines that an alienated child’s best interests are served by resuming contact with the rejected parent, the court’s authority and expectation of success can contribute powerfully to reducing the risks of such a transition. Repeatedly we have seen a phenomenon documented in the largest study of alienated children (Clawar & Rivlin, 1991): the unexpected ease with which children adapt to firm court orders. As Warshak (in press) observes, “Despite their vehement protests, children and teens welcome the sense of protection and control that comes when adults exert appropriate authority to keep children on the right track. Children who have been drafted in a war against a parent welcome the relief that comes when the court rescues them from the burden of choosing one parent over the other. Just as rapidly as children seem to abandon their love for a parent, they reclaim that heritage under the proper circumstances when it is safe to do so and when we offer them a face-saving way to do it. We do not build a relationship from scratch. We uncover what has always been there.” Nevertheless, in some cases the transition can be extremely difficult. *Family Bridges* offers these families a softer landing.

Kelly (2010) points out that in some cases the favored parent requires the child’s fidelity as a condition for expressions of love and nurturing. A sad outcome of some cases occurs when
the formerly aligned parent enforces this requirement by voluntarily cutting off contact with the child, often in retaliation for what is perceived as the child’s disloyalty in restoring an affectionate relationship with the formerly rejected parent. In such cases, the court and mental health professionals generally believe that the child is now being raised by the healthier of the two parents, and that if a choice had to be made between homes, this situation better meets the child’s best interests. Nevertheless, this represents a loss for the children, some of whom anguish about the formerly aligned parent’s rejection (while others are relieved at being shielded from what they now have the freedom to report was a distressing environment). We have found that formerly rejected parents, even in the few cases where the other parent, at least temporarily, abandons the child, uses information from our program to support the child’s differentiated view of both parents. They continue to value the now absent parent for his or her past contributions and personality assets, rather than identifying that parent only with mistakes and flaws.

**Working with Favored Parents**

The power of the favored parent to sabotage or punish a child’s progress is a source of concern to Kelly as it is to us. As Warshak (2010) pointed out, we offer a parallel program for favored parents. Despite this, we are aware that one limitation of *Family Bridges* is its very limited capacity to reach and teach favored parents, who often deny they have a problem, are unmotivated to change, and successfully resist treatment even by skilled therapists. This has been a topic of much discussion among our team. Working with a parent under a court mandate brings added complications and risks, and it raises legal issues regarding the proper reach of judicial power and intrusion into private matters (O’Connell, 2009). Our preference is to work with
adults who desire our services. The risks are fewer and the potential for success is greater with a motivated client.

As Kelly recommends, in our work with favored parents, we include modules that focus on the drawbacks to children’s own development when they feel the need to align with one parent against the other. We also include a segment on the potential negative outcome for parent-child relationships when children are older and come to appreciate the manner in which they were used to further the parent’s wishes and agenda. Where possible we concretize these potential outcomes by sharing feedback from adults who were alienated as children (for an example see Warshak, 2010b). At this point in time, we have experienced mixed results in working with favored parents and have a way to go before developing an effective approach. Kelly makes excellent suggestions for additional components that teach parents about negative outcomes of parent-child role reversal, child-parent enmeshment, and separation anxieties and these suggestions will inform our future work with favored parents.

**Economic Considerations**

The cost to parents of the 4-day *Family Bridges* program equals the fee for approximately 64 hours of professional time – not including aftercare services when needed. This is comparable to a course of twice-weekly counseling sessions for 7 months. The cost of counseling may exceed the fees for *Family Bridges* if counseling involves individual sessions for each parent and each child, along with family therapy sessions, case conferences when more than one therapist provides services, and a parenting coordinator. Nevertheless, as Kelly notes, *Family Bridges* involves a one-time payment rather than payments distributed over time, and has added travel costs. When considering the goals, including rescuing a child from a tragic position and restoring
a lost relationship with one’s child, and the amount of money that might have been spent on future litigation, parents have told us that they regard the fee as quite reasonable and money well spent. Nevertheless, *Family Bridges*, like extended counseling, is beyond the reach of many families. Currently the family that receives the benefits of our workshop pays for it, and in some cases we offer reduced fees to those who cannot afford the full fee. We expect that in the future a non-profit foundation will provide scholarships to *Family Bridges* for families who need financial assistance.

Kelly (2010) notes that in addition to fees for interventions, rejected parents incur extensive fees and expenses in the process of litigating to obtain access to their children, whether they eventually obtain therapy for children or *Family Bridges*. Significant reduction in costs associated with litigation can be accomplished by streamlining the process in a manner that remains compatible with due process considerations. We endorse Kelly’s suggestions, such as early identification of at-risk families and ongoing case management by one judge. Also, as more courts become familiar with the benefits and hazards of each option for dealing with alienated children, and with programs that parents may use to assist children, there will be less need for expert testimony to educate the court about such matters and this will reduce the cost of litigation.

**Modifying Family Bridges for Prevention and Milder Cases of Alienation**

Local attorneys and judges who are familiar with our work refer parents whose children appear at risk for rejecting a parent, informally implementing a variant of the early identification approach envisioned by Kelly. In working with these parents and children, we draw on aspects of *Family Bridges*. We use material from popular media as well as multimedia material that we
continue to develop for this purpose. These materials can be used independently to prevent and soften children’s negative attitudes, behavior, and cognitions.

Some of this material is suitable for use by legal and mental health professionals with their clients and for courts to assign to parents who file for divorce. More information about such material is available on request. We distinguish between material that is suitable for parents to use with their children, versus material that we reserve for use by professionals. We do not publicize the exact nature of Family Bridges’ content, not only because of concerns that some favored parents might use this information to attempt to remove their novelty and undermine their effectiveness, but because eager rejected parents and others may attempt to use these materials on their own without proper training.

We continue to explore ways to shorten Family Bridges and apply its principles to less severely alienated children, but we have yet to evaluate its effectiveness with this population. With severely alienated children, it is relatively easy to note significant change, notwithstanding the need to document case information with systematic research procedures such as Kelly (2010) and Warshak (2010) discuss. With mildly alienated children, though, the changes are not as dramatic and thus more in need of nuanced and validated research tools to measure progress and change.

We have reservations about using briefer interventions with severely alienated children. Important material would have to be omitted. Also, we risk losing the relaxed pace of Family Bridges, which allows participants to control the process, such as determining the frequency and timing of breaks. Clearly this is an area that warrants additional work and research.
Training Additional Team Leaders

The key to making Family Bridges more widely available is the training of additional team leaders. Kelly (2010) identified several hazards in undertaking this task, such as the possibility that neophytes will conduct the workshop in cases where it is not suitable, or depart from the prescribed syllabus and revert to familiar practices. We are aware of these hazards, known in the literature as “drift,” and have taken steps to guard against them. We are especially careful to ensure that Family Bridges is not inappropriately attempted with children whose estrangement is a proportionate response to the rejected parent’s behavior or where issues of realistic estrangement are prominent or, in some cases, subtle. For this reason, the senior team leaders screen all referrals before assigning the case to those we have trained. To ensure the quality and integrity of workshops, we provide ongoing monitoring, oversight, and consultation. Finally, a willingness to participate in ongoing evaluation and research of Family Bridges is a precondition of training.

Systematic Research Program

Kelly responds to Warshak’s (2010) brief suggestions for future research by calling for a large scale research project with a consortium of researchers using common methods and research instruments. Some of Kelly’s suggestions we have already implemented, such as using established reliable outcome measures of alienation pre and post intervention (Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2005). In light of her wise counsel, we want to implement the others as soon as possible. We second Kelly’s call for a research consortium and take this opportunity to expand on this idea by inviting the participation of a collaboration of researchers with different points of view and different hypotheses about the likely outcome of the research. A collaborative
approach, such as the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development Early Child Care Research Network (1997), can produce professional consensus that the courts and the public receive more favorably, and thus has a greater impact on public policy.

Kelly raises the possibility of different dynamics and personalities operating when children reject mothers versus fathers. We believe this is a hypothesis worth exploring. We have not observed any systematic difference in the success of Family Bridges when the rejected parent is the mother versus the father. But we have noted more formerly favored fathers than mothers withdraw from children who have successfully restored a positive relationship with the rejected parent.

Conclusion

We believe that, for the most part in our profession, there is agreement about what has to happen next to advance understanding of how best to help families whose children are alienated or at risk for becoming alienated. We hope others will join with us to implement the research agenda proposed by Kelly. We look forward to a period of fertile exchange of ideas and the accretion of knowledge that will contribute to the resolution of differences among professionals and a developing consensus.
References


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