

The Globe and Mail (Canada)

February 2, 2009 Monday

Judges sending children to U.S. for quack therapy, expert charges; Centres aim to treat parental alienation

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SECTION: NATIONAL NEWS; JUSTICE: FAMILY COURT; Pg. A4

LENGTH: 630 words

JUSTICE REPORTER

Parental alienation centres in the United States are using unproven "quackery" to deprogram children ordered into their care by well-meaning Canadian judges, a leading Ontario child psychologist has charged.

Peter Jaffe says the programs may even damage children by destroying overnight their primary support bulwark: the alienating parent whose care they have been under.

"It is not a good thing if a child has bonded to an alienating parent, but disrupting that child and pulling them away from whatever sense of security they have may end up being more harmful than good in the long run," said Dr. Jaffe, a professor at the University of Western Ontario in London.

"When you're going to provide a treatment, you have to know what the unattended consequences or side effects are," he said. "You may be solving one problem but creating a whole host of new problems."

The deprogramming issue erupted last week after a Toronto judge forcibly removed three girls from their mother and sent them for treatment to a U.S. centre in an undisclosed location. It was at least the third time that an Ontario judge has taken the extreme measure in the past year.

The parental alienation centres, which operate in relative secrecy, in part to avoid surprise visits by angry parents searching for children who have been seized, is to be debated at an Ontario Bar Association conference today.

Dr. Jaffe said the spate of judicial orders runs counter to a laudable trend of granting children more rights. "It really doesn't matter whether you are sending them to a locked ward of a hospital somewhere in Pennsylvania or you are sending them to Disneyland, I think it's a significant infringement on their rights to take a Canadian child and force them to enter a treatment program in the U.S."

Sol Goldstein, a Toronto child psychiatrist familiar with the U.S. programs, said they typically devote four or five days to intensive discussion, visual presentations and "logic and kindness," to prod alienated children into critical thinking. He said children also have opportunities to spend relaxed, recreational time with the parent from whom they are estranged.

"Nothing can change like that within a week," Dr. Goldstein added. "It's like doing major surgery. The follow-up is crucial."

Donna Wowk, a Toronto family lawyer, agreed that while securing time away from the parent who caused the alienation "is critical" to successfully treating a child, relapses are a major risk. "You can have great counselling sessions, but as soon as they are back with the alienating parent, it's all undone," she said.

Toronto family lawyer Harold Niman, who represented a non-custodial parent whose children were recently sent to a U.S. parental alienation centre, conceded that much remains unknown about the treatment.

"There is no doubt this is uncharted territory," he said. "To a certain extent, we don't know where this is all going to lead, but I think it's like chicken soup. It can't hurt. It is something designed to be therapeutic for the children, and I can't see how it could hurt.

"Part of what is going on is an effort to find a solution to a very difficult problem. We are talking about a very, very narrow group of parents and they are almost invariably dysfunctional. These are parents who are toxic people."

Dr. Jaffe said that if the Ontario family court system were less dysfunctional, children at risk of being alienated from a parent would be identified and treated early.

"I'm not criticizing the judges," he said. "I understand their degree of frustration. But these cases really are a monument to the failure of the system to intervene early.

"There are bits and pieces in place in Ontario, but nobody is really in charge of the system," Dr. Jaffe said.