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Therapist goes from foe to friend; Controversial technique for treating alienated children seems to be gaining acceptance

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As a pioneer of a controversial method of rewiring children whose emotions have been inflamed by an alienating parent, Richard Warshak grew used to being disparaged as a flakey deprogrammer.

He was nonetheless stung last year when there was widespread dismay in the wake of several Canadian judges ordering that alienated children - whose emotions toward one parent have been poisoned by the other - be forcibly taken to the United States to be treated by him.

However, the Texas psychologist now believes that much of the concern has melted away, giving him impetus to bring his Family Bridges therapy to Canada.

Last week, Dr. Warshak helped train three Ontario psychologists in his techniques and held a closed-door educational session in Toronto with 130 judges who preside over family-law cases.

Both developments signal an end to the bad rap he has taken, said Dr. Warshak, author of a book on parental alienation - *Divorce Poison*.

"I think there is demand," he said. "I sure get a lot of e-mails from parents in Canada asking about whether they can get their children into the program. I also get a lot of inquiries from psychologists asking to be trained in the techniques.

Dr. Warshak said that his talk to judges was warmly received. "I'm pleased that the judges are taking the time to learn about this," he said. "It was clear that these judges have seen these cases. Nearly every family court judge says they believe it is a real phenomenon."

The four-day sessions - which cost from \$8,000 to \$22,000 - involve videotaped presentations of family situations, discussions about alienation techniques parents use, and lots of down time to enable children to reacquaint themselves with an estranged parent.

Dr. Warshak said that what critics fail to see is that dramatic action is often essential to prevent an alienating parent from winning the exclusive affection of a child.

"The children we deal with are ones who have felt tremendous pressure to feel certain things, to see the world in a certain way," he said. "What we do is help them liberate themselves from that."

Dr. Warshak conceded that many children resist coming to his sessions, and have to be transported by police or private security officers.

"But once the child gets to us, they have a choice whether to stay or not," he said. "What they find is that it is an enjoyable experience. They feel tremendously relieved that they have now been able to get out of this box they are in."

He said that only one child refused to participate in the 23 sessions he has personally helped conduct. Eighteen children made tangible progress, Dr. Warshak said, while the remaining four "relapsed" after later coming under the influence of the alienating parent.

However, concern about the therapy has not gone away, said Peter Jaffe, a professor at University of Western Ontario who specializes in child offenders and family violence.

"It is a hot debate in the field - and that is not changing," he said. "I think there is a concern about this doing more harm than good."

Dr. Jaffe acknowledged a recent journal article in which Dr. Warshak chronicled the positive results he has achieved, but said it was flawed.

"The problem is, there is no comparison group," Dr. Jaffe said. "He is doing research on cases he has assessed himself. I think there is a major conflict of interest. It's a step in the right direction, but I don't think anyone in their right mind would send a child to treatment based on that article."