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# Parental Alienation, Traditional Therapy, and Family Bridges: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why: Part II of II

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*Part I provided background information and a bibliography.*

*Part II will cover Family Bridges.*

## HISTORY OF FAMILY BRIDGES

**D**r. Randy Rand developed Family Bridges in the early 1990s after the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the Department of State Office of Children's Affairs

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asked for his assistance in reuniting recovered missing children with their parents (Warshak, 2010b). As some of these children had been living with their abductors for many years, the children had become emotionally attached to their alienators. When they were suddenly deprived of contact with their former "caregivers," some children experienced "overwhelming fear and hatred toward the parent who, by necessity, will be providing their full-time care." (Warshak, 2010b, p. 55). From its inception, the program "provide[d] rapid relief to ... children during a stressful transition," and helped "parents safely and sensitively manage ... children's feelings and behavior." (Warshak, 2010b, p.55).

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Erratum: In Part I an incorrect reference was listed for the *Family Court Review*. The article to be published in the *Family Court Review Special Issue* is: Lorandos, D. (in press April 2020) Parental Alienation in U.S. Courts, 1985 to 2018. *Family Court Review - Special Issue: 20/20 on Parent-Child Contact Problems: Concepts, Controversies & Conundrums*. Nicholas Bala and Barbara Fidler, Editors.

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In developing the educational program, Rand drew from the work of his mentor, psychologist Margaret Singer, as well as psychologist Robert Jay Lifton, two world-renown “cult” experts. Together with “universally accepted research in social, cognitive, and child developmental psychology, sociology, and social neuroscience,” Rand created a curriculum, guided by a set of principles, that truly remediated the alienation suffered by these abducted children.

Realizing these techniques could be extended to help other alienated populations, Rand opened Family Bridges, a modified form of the program tailored to address the needs of “nonabducted children who are severely and unreasonably alienated from a parent in the context of divorce.” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 55–56).

## WHAT IS FAMILY BRIDGES?

Family Bridges has been designed to deal with children “whom courts and therapists have traditionally viewed as beyond help.” These include three main types of severely alienated children, those who (1) reject the TP after divorce, (2) refuse and/or resist contact with a TP and (3) have a seriously strained relationship with a TP, which manifests as either “extreme withdrawal or gross contempt.” Using “evidence-based instruction principles to maximize learning and create a safe atmosphere,” in Family Bridges, alienated “children develop skills to resist outside pressures,” while TPs “learn how to sensitively manage their children’s behavior, and the family learns tools to effectively communicate and manage conflicts.”

### Basic Principles

As the program is “dedicated to educational intervention rather than a therapeutic one,” its 10 guiding principles, the result of evidence discerned from multiple peer-reviewed studies, reflect this unique method for treating alienated children:

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*The program is dedicated to educational intervention.*

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**Keep a lid on strong emotions.** Families participating in the program often arrive with very strong

emotions: anxious, confused and angry kids and equally anxious, but often overwhelmingly joyful (at the prospect of being reunited) parents. In order to create a sufficiently calm and safe atmosphere that is more conducive to learning, these strong emotions on both sides must be monitored and contained (Warshak, 2010b).

**“Focus on the present and future and not the past.”** In order to “spare[] participants difficult, shameful, and unproductive confrontations, and fruitless quests to apportion blame,” Family Bridges focuses on “moving forward with a better relationship.” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 59). From the initial orientation, “[c]hildren and parents are told that there will be no blaming and airing of grievances.”

**Focus on educational techniques.** The key here is that the program is education—not treatment—based. Using “concepts derived from replicated and peer-reviewed scientific research in cognitive, social, and developmental psychology, sociology, and social neuroscience,” the program offers “an intensive course on concepts taught in formal classrooms, adapting and tailoring ... materials, and procedures to the developmental level and circumstances of the children.” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 59).

**Encourage children’s autonomy.** Guided by the Montessori educational principle “children learn best when they have control over their learning”, Family Bridges invites children “to set the pace, to decide when to take breaks or when to end the day.” Children especially “experience this as liberating because in the past they have felt pressured to adopt certain attitudes and thoughts about their parents.” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 59).

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*The program is usually held in a casual, resort-like setting.*

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**Focus on critical thinking, as opposed to rote learning.** The Family Bridges educational workshop rejects procedures that “bypass critical thinking, such as repetitive lectures, suggestions, one-sided portraits of parents ... that attempt to persuade, influence, or program children.” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 59–60). Instead, using multi-media presentations, children learn how those strategies, which their APs have been using on them for years, work, and also “raise their awareness of the many factors that can influence attitudes and behavior.” (Warshak,

2010b, p. 60). After studying the program, Kelly (2010) noted that the children, themselves, are taught to develop “better critical thinking skills.” (p. 83).

**Help the child “save face.”** Because an alienated child has taken a previously strong position against the target parent, s/he often has no way to repudiate that position without suffering extreme embarrassment. For this reason, the Family Bridges program believes attempting to elicit an apology or retraction will cause the child participants to reject reconciliation efforts (Warshak, 2010b). To avoid this problem, Family Bridges *never* asks a child “to revisit their past mistakes, acknowledge wrong-doing, or apologize for mistreating” the TP (Warshak, 2010b, p. 60). And, to help TPs, who often harbor hurt feelings and want an apology, the program encourages these parents to view their children in these circumstances as casualties, as opposed to independent actors. In this way, children are spared “unnecessary guilt and shame” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 60), but instead are allowed to save face, while at the same time “safely experience and express benevolent feelings” for the TP (Warshak, 2010b, p. 60).

**Recognize human fallibility.** Hand-in-glove with the focus on face-saving for the children, the program helps all participants understand “how distortions in memory, perception, and thinking occur, the role of suggestibility and negative stereotype formation, and the ease with which this happens.” (Warshak, 2010b; Kelley, 2010, p 83; Rand, 2018).

**Foster positive experiences.** Contributing to “a tendency to interpret neutral events in a benign light,” and helping to ease the management of “inevitable irritations and disagreements,” the program fosters an “abundance of positive experiences.” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 60). To aid in this work, the program “is usually held in a casual, resort-like setting [that] helps create a sense of ease, with opportunities to ‘hang out’ with the rejected parent if the child so chooses.” (Kelly, 2010, p. 84; Rand, 2018).

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*The program lasts four days.*

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**Understand there are multiple perspectives.** In order to “interrupt rather than perpetuate the unhealthy family dynamic of blame and exclusion,” Family Bridges stresses “relationship and conflict

management ... [by] understanding and respecting multiple perspectives.” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 60).

**Conflict management.** The Family Bridges workshop draws on “the body of research ... more commonly used in college classrooms,” to teach conflict management. The materials have been “adapted for the developmental and cognitive abilities of children and their circumstances in high-conflict families.”

### Safe Atmosphere

In order to have an atmosphere that is conducive to “willing participation and active learning,” the alienating parent has been excluded from the process by the family court. In addition, from the very beginning of orientation, limits are set, including the prohibitions against re-hashing the past, blaming and the airing of grievances. And of course, any form of physical and verbal abuse (whether by the parent or the child) is also forbidden. Likewise, in keeping with its commitment to empowering the children, the workshop’s leaders continually identify and support the children’s autonomy to participate and respond (or not) and to set the pace.

### Tailored to Meet Individual Needs

While the workshop’s leaders begin their four-day programs with “a general plan of what material and exercises to present ... the final selection of procedures is governed by the needs and reaction of the participants. The procedures evolve as new material is added and refined.” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 63)

### What the Program Teaches

The program’s primary educational goal is to teach children “how to think critically and how to maintain balanced, realistic, and compassionate views of both parents.”

### What the Program Believes Proper Parental Alienation Intervention Entails

In order to protect children from the harm of PA, researchers have determined that the intervention must include: (1) education about PA and its consequences; (2) challenges to the child’s distorted thinking; (3) instruction in critical thinking skills; (4) a focus on improving the relationship between the child and the target parent; (5) preparation of

the alienating parent for the improved relationship between the child and the target parent; (6) conflict resolution strategies for all; and (7) the establishment of “healthy boundaries and communication within the family.” (Templer, Matthewson, Haines, & Cox, 2017, p. 118–19).

## COMPONENTS OF FOUR DAYS OF FAMILY BRIDGES

### Intro

Set in an easy, safe, resort-like environment, Family Bridges relies on “engaging, entertaining, evocative, and educational audio–visual materials and exercises to teach how distortions in memory, perception, and thinking occur.” (Warshak, 2014, p. 37–38).

The instruction provided addresses every aspect of parental alienation. Thus, children are taught how negative stereotypes can be formed by the influence and suggestion of any type of authority figure. They are then instructed on how to combat this with critical thinking skills that are also taught.

Specific instruction is given on how parent conflict can harm children, as well as how children can stay out of that conflict. In addition, children and parents develop better communication skills, and children learn to maintain a compassionate view of, and value, both parents (Warshak, 2014; Kelly, 2010).

In keeping with the commitment to helping the child “save face,” one key aspect of the instruction is the focus on alienation as a universal and common reaction to manipulation, not the child’s “individual behaviors, feelings and perceptions.” As a result of these efforts, children are able to “recreate their identity as persons who can give and receive love from two parents,” as they have been shown “how to move beyond the past to more rewarding relationships with both parents.”

### Risk Assessment and Orientation

Because the “risk of dangerous acting out” by alienated children is common, before entering the program in many cases the TP has obtained a court order that “make[s] it clear to the children that the *court* expects them to work on repairing their damaged relationship with the rejected

parent” and “that failure is not an option.” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 61).

Armed with the authority of the court, program leaders find that within 24 hours the children have “back[ed] down from their threats and ... appear relieved, relaxed, communicative, and sometimes affectionate with the rejected parent.” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 61). One of the first orders of business for the workshop leaders is to “evaluate the risk of dangerous behavior by the child that may require immediate attention.” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 61).

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*The primary educational goal is to teach children to think critically.*

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With the risk assessment complete, leaders explain their roles and relate their qualifications, and then begin to provide participants with “a vocabulary with which to understand the family’s problems.” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 63). Next, the leaders empathetically explain to the children the court’s order “suspending contact with the other parent, including any conditions imposed by the court that must be met before renewing contact with the favored parent.” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 63). The goal here is to “help children adjust to court orders that require them to live with a parent whom they have rejected.” Finally, an overview of the skills taught and ground rules provided (Warshak, 2010b; Rand, 2018).

### Phase One

To help diffuse strong feelings, communication between the child and the TP is actually “discouraged on the first morning, and engaging videos minimize interaction and increase a sense of safety.” These videos are absorbing and captivating, but rather than directly address the parent–child situation, the videos illustrate how the bond with any authority figure can interfere with the individual’s critical thinking and destroy his or her important relationships (Warshak, 2010b). The stories also reflect on how being a part of one group can result in an individual rejecting those who are not within it (Warshak, 2010b). After creating this shared experience with its introduction to ideas and theories relevant to (but not focusing on) parental alienation, the morning videos are followed by a lunch break, where the simple act of sharing a meal



provides an opportunity to remember better, earlier times together and build new bonds (Warshak, 2010b).

The afternoon of the first day has a series of exercises where the children learn how easy it is to believe true is false and false is true (Warshak, 2010b). This specifically includes distortions in memory, perception, and thinking that can occur when an authority figure influences a suggestible person and encourages his/her negative stereotypes. Most children report that this is their favorite part of the workshop, as well as the most useful. This is because it helps them apply their newly acquired critical thinking skills, reevaluate what they have been told by the AP, and recover a fairer conception of both parents (Warshak, 2010b). Thus, the children are provided with the opportunity to consider that their earlier view of the TP was misguided while still saving face (Warshak, 2010b; Rand, 2018).

Since the children find that the workshop is far easier than they had anticipated, and the parents are simply tickled at having relatively conflict-free contact with their children, the first day usually ends on a happy note (Warshak, 2010b). That evening, the only direction given to participants is that parent and child should do something fun together (Warshak, 2010b; Rand, 2018).

### Phase Two

Drawing on the previous day's teaching, Phase Two begins to apply the lessons learned to the problems of divorcing families and placing children in the middle of parental conflict via clips from popular programs and news shows (Warshak, 2010b). Various behaviors and attitudes are addressed with materials that have been adapted to the children's age and developmental level and the specific family situation (Warshak, 2010b; Rand, 2018).

### Phase Three

According to Warshak (2010), by the third day, the dynamics of the family are much more positive as they have "been involved in a joint learning enterprise, have enjoyed each other's company, and have become optimistic about the potential for healing." (p. 65).

While staying true to the guiding principle of allowing the children to save face, children are led to explore how the manipulation, and their own lack of critical thinking, created their unjustified

and unfair view of the target parent (Warshak, 2010b). After having achieved this "Aha!" moment, the children, now armed with tools to avoid divisive feelings about their parents, are ready for the final phase of the workshop (Warshak, 2010b).

### Phase Four

As it is quite common for rejected parents to react in kind to their children's unjustified rejection and hostility, the last day of the workshop addresses parenting skills in which the entire family is included (Warshak, 2010b). Parents are taught to respond more thoughtfully rather than to simply react (Warshak, 2010b). As children are shown that their parent will no longer behave in such a reactive manner, while also being reassured that their parent has as much room for improvement as they do, Phase Four is a two-for-one bonanza (Warshak, 2010b). Next, all participants are provided instruction on how to resolve conflict, communicate expectations clearly, negotiate, address any rules and prohibitions and plan for their lives at home (Warshak, 2010b).

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*The court expects repair of the damaged relationship.*

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Once the workshop has been completed, participants are encouraged to spend several days of vacation time together before returning home (Warshak, 2010b). Continuing to facilitate the reunification, Family Bridges' team members will work and share information with the participant's local mental health professional, who will be the primary point person for the family's aftercare.

## EFFICACY OF FAMILY BRIDGES

Empirical evidence demonstrates that Family Bridges has been remarkably effective with this very difficult population.

In an initial study, Warshak examined 12 families (and 23 children), where the children had been alienated for an average of more than two years. Of those 23 children, 22 had restored a positive relationship with the target parent by the end of the Family Bridges workshop, and 18 of those children still maintained a positive relationship with the

previously alienated parent 2 to 4 years afterward. Of the four who “regressed,” contact with the alienating parent had been restored prematurely or even “clandestinely.” (Warshak, 2010b, p. 67–68, 70).

In a much larger and more in-depth follow-up study of 52 families, described by evaluators, guardians ad litem and judges as either the “most severely alienated child” or “worst case of parental alienation,” they had ever seen in their careers, Warshak reported similarly positive results.

This second study examined 83 children who had been rejecting their parents for an average of 3 to 4 years. Forty-three of the children were older than 14 years, and 19 were older than 16 years. Forty-three of the children in this latest study were girls and 40 were boys (Warshak, 2018). Thirty-three of the rejected parents were fathers and 19 were mothers (Warshak, 2018).

At the beginning of the workshop, fully 85% of the children had significantly refused to cooperate with the parenting schedule (with 65% cooperating “not at all or only a little” and 20% cooperating only “somewhat”) (Warshak, 2018, p. 11). However, by the end of the workshop, according to the parents and professionals surveyed, between 94% (parents) and 96% (workshop professionals) reported that these 83 previously severely alienating children were participating either “moderately” (15–22 children) or “a lot” (72–80 children) (Warshak, 2018, p. 11).

Moreover, their levels of actual alienation from the target parent declined precipitously, as well. Ninety-nine percent (99%) of parents reported a significant positive change in their relationship, with 75% reporting “much better” and 24% reporting “somewhat better” (24%) (Warshak, 2018, p. 13). Perhaps even more significantly 74% of the severely alienated children also reported a significant improvement in their relationship with the previously targeted parent (Warshak, 2018, p. 13).

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*Empirical evidence demonstrates the program’s effectiveness.*

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As for the workshop itself, for the pre-workshop assessment, 83% of the children reported either a “very negative” or “somewhat negative” attitude regarding attendance, while post-workshop, 78% reported that it had been either a “somewhat positive” (43%) or “very positive” (35%) experience

(Warshak, 2018, p. 15). This may be due to Family Bridges’ unique focus on education, as opposed to therapy, and looking forward, as opposed to rehashing the past.

As the two studies indicate, for at least eight years Family Bridges has helped the vast majority of its “intractable and severely alienated” child and adolescent participants overcome their alienation and “repair their damaged relationships with parents whom they had rejected for many years.” (Warshak, 2018, p. 21; Warshak, 2010b). And contrary to the “unsubstantiated anecdotes and theoretical speculation” of those who claim that participation in the Family Bridges workshop somehow traumatizes children, the empirical evidence fully counters this. In large part taken directly from reports of the child-participants themselves, the empirical evidence shows that any such negative anecdotes are the “manifestations of a few children’s continued alienation and condemnation of anyone who fails to endorse their rejection of a parent.” (Warshak, 2018, p. 19).

## TEMPORARILY EXCLUDING THE ALIENATING PARENT WITH A NO-CONTACT ORDER

### Why It Is Necessary

Any set of strategies to remediate the harm from past child abuse, and to lower the risk of future child abuse, will only be as effective “as the level of family participation.” But severely alienating parents often “dispute the contention that they are abusive” in any way. Rather, recalcitrant alienating parents are “other blamers” who “virtually never see any relationship between what they are doing or not doing and its effects on their children.” (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013, p. 189–90).

Compounding the problem is the fact that alienating parents have often successfully defied court-ordered parenting plans for years with no adverse consequences, which only emboldens them to continue their manipulation campaigns. Thus, absent a no-contact order between the alienating parent and the child, the AP’s unpunished defiance of the court often influences the child to similarly defy the court-ordered custody arrangement, and undermine efforts at reunification (Warshak, 2018).

In addition, as alienators despise the idea of a “process that is likely to alter the nature of the parent–child relationships in a way that is contrary to their wishes,” (Templer, et al., 2017, p.

119) alienating parents actively and avidly work to undermine it with “constant cues, communications, attitudes, and influence.” Examples of this kind of overwhelming influence can be seen in the lack of critical thinking common in participants in organizations like Scientology and Boko Haram. Accordingly, children must be shielded from these “negative influences that may retard their progress.” (Warshak, 2018, p. 6).

In many of these high-conflict families, the alienating parent has had the upper hand for years in terms of power within the relationship. Leveraging his/her manipulation of courts and agencies, teachers and medical providers, as well as the child, these AP’s have tight control over the child’s relationship with the target parent (Harman, et al., 2018). Absent time completely away from such an overbearing AP, it is far less likely that a relatively powerless TP will be able to successfully exert any influence over his/her severely alienated child.

Also, as any intervention effort is likely to increase the ire and manipulation of an AP, temporary exclusion helps to “insulate[] the children at a time when their aligned parent’s hostility peaks.” It has been well-documented in the peer-reviewed literature that, absent temporary exclusion of a severely alienating parent from the child’s life, the child will be unable “to see the reality of the ‘negative messaging’ about the rejected parent.” (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013, p. 189–90).

Furthermore, “[r]esearch findings indicate that removing the targeted child from the care of their preferred parent does not harm them, even if transient distress is experienced.” (Templer, et al., 2017, p. 118; Warshak, 2018). Rather, “[o]nce children are removed from the favored parent ... they begin to feel emotionally safe and steadfastly reconnect with the rejected parent.”

### Why a Temporary Exclusion Works

For those severely alienating parents who are simply unwilling to stop their harmful and emotionally abusive behavior or who have severe personality disorders that prevent them from changing their ways, a strong court-order with sanctions will effectively intervene (Templer, et al., 2017).

Surveying the literature, Templer, et al. (2017) argue that such an order can provide the external motivation necessary to force a recalcitrant AP (or child) to comply, or will at least keep the unrepentant AP away from the child long enough for an intervention to work.

In addition, the temporary exclusion also conveys “the court’s view of the gravity of the problem and the court’s strong conviction that the children’s best interests are served by repairing the damaged relationship with their rejected parent.” At the same time, the temporary exclusion demonstrates the court’s resolve to “to go to great lengths to create an environment that accomplishes the goal of relationship repair.”

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*Alienating parents have often defied court-ordered parenting plans.*

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Finally, as opposed to the, generally speaking, failure of traditional reunification therapy to ameliorate severe parental alienation, as the two studies of Family Bridges show (Warshak, 2010b, 2018), temporary exclusion of the alienating parent not only works but has a lasting, positive effect.

Detractors of Family Bridges often, falsely, claim that the program “recommends” temporary exclusion to courts, but this is not the case. Rather, when courts are crafting their orders for addressing parental alienation and solicit information about Family Bridges, they are simply informed that only those families where temporary exclusion has been ordered are suitable for the workshop. Although this distinction is subtle, it is also important—Family Bridges is not the business of advising courts; rather it is a *post-litigation* program that focuses all of its efforts on helping families heal.

Other reunification efforts also incorporate no-contact orders into their programs, including Family Reflections Reunification Program (FRRP) and TurningPoints for Families. FRRP states that exclusion should last “until the child’s resilience to any negative messaging or to an enmeshed relationship can be rebuilt and the child’s attachment to the rejected parent rebuilt.” TurningPoints suggests a “90 day no-contact period between the child and the favored parent.” (Gottlieb, 2017, p. 9–10).

### How Long Does a Temporary Exclusions Last?

As the goal of Family Bridges is to help the child have good and fair relationships with both parents, the child’s exclusion from the AP lasts only as long as it is needed, which is typically at least 90 days. Ideally, “the court conveys that the duration of the

no-contact order is in part tied to the quality and rate of progress in repairing the damaged relationship with the rejected parent." This provides both the AP and "the children incentive to invest in the process of healing." As the contact with the favored parent has been ordered, "the court lifts the burden on the children of having to demonstrate loyalty to the favored parent by rejecting the other." Ironically, the court's order makes it possible for the children to "fulfill the favored parent's desire for renewed contact with them," **only** "by overcoming their alienation rather than remaining mired in it." As with the Family Bridges workshop (Harman, et al., 2018), employing a court order to achieve reunification also provides the children with a "face-saving way to renew a positive relationship with the rejected parent without appearing disloyal to their other parent."

## CONCLUSION

In order to overcome the remarkable hostility of a severely alienated child toward his/her target parent, a vigorous, rigorous, disciplined and focused intervention is required.

As most severely alienated children have held staunch positions against any relationship with their target parent for years, traditional therapies, where the parties are asked to examine the past and discern "the truth," end up failing as the children balk at accepting responsibility and "losing face." The problem of traditional therapies with this population is compounded by the continued presence of the alienating parent in the child's life, whose own disrespect of court orders and unremitting manipulation of the child sabotages efforts at reunification. Rather, effective reunification of families suffering from severe parental alienation requires a different approach.

Family Bridges' unique focus on education in critical thinking and conflict resolution, combined with a temporary separation from the alienating parent, has proven staggeringly successful in repairing these relationships—with immediate significant improvements that last for years.

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