

## Help for children alienated by a parent

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An intensive four-day program for children who've been brainwashed by one parent into hating another is showing signs of success, with more than 80 per cent repairing their relationship with an alienated mother or father, according to new research presented by its lead clinician.

The results, made public yesterday and currently undergoing scientific peer review, show that 17 out of 21 children who have completed the program after being removed from the grip of a "toxic" parent forged good relationships with the other parent that continue more than two years later.

"I think part of it is the children are relieved; they never really wanted to be soldiers in this war between their parents," Richard Warshak, a University of Texas psychologist who runs the program, told lawyers attending the Ontario Bar Association's annual conference yesterday.

Warshak's work was cited last month in a Toronto judge's ruling that stripped a mother of custody of her three daughters after the woman spent more than a decade trying to poison them against their father.

Now in custody of their father, a vascular surgeon, the girls, ages 9 to 14, were expected to fly to Texas to take part in Warshak's program. The mother was ordered to pick up the tab.

Warshak won't say how much the program costs but does call it "expensive" – equal to 1 1/2 to two years of conventional therapy.

The program was established in the early 1990s at the request of the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children.

The goal at first was to reunite abducted children with their families but the program now focuses on helping "severely alienated children" adjust to court orders requiring them to live with a parent they've been taught to reject or fear.

Through videos and workshops, two therapists help children understand how it's possible to develop unrealistically negative views of other people, Warshak said.

Although 130 children have completed the program, Warshak's research looked only at the 11 families he has treated himself. Seven of the alienated parents were mothers; four were fathers.

Warshak said the program gives children a "face-saving" way to reconnect with parents. "We don't require them to apologize for past behaviour or admit they were really mean."

Warshak acknowledged the program has attracted criticism from experts who contend uprooting children from secure, albeit poisoned, home environments will do more harm than good. Among them is Peter Jaffe, a psychologist in London, Ont., who has labelled the program "quackery."

Jaffe said he is concerned that forcing children to participate is a violation of their rights.

But Dr. Sol Goldstein, a Toronto child psychologist who took part in a panel discussion yesterday, said he thinks "a lot" of children "are looking for a chance to have someone say, "You don't have a choice. You've got to do it."



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