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DELIVERED AT 'CELEBRATING PROFESSOR NICK BALA'

Family Law Panel

MAY 8, 2009 QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY

Question #2:

One intervention that may accompany a custody reversal is the Family Workshop developed by psychologists Randy Rand and Richard Warshak. It has been referred to as "deprogramming"? Is this an accurate characterization? What is it exactly? Do we know that it works?

The Family Workshop was initially developed by Dr. Rand in 1991 to assist recovered abducted children. Later expanded by Dr. Warshak and Dr Deidre Rand and others, it is designed to assist families to adjust once the court has determined there is an irrational or unjustified alienation and child's interests will be best served by being placed in the rejected parent's custody while contact with the favoured parent is temporarily suspended.

One of the goals of the workshop is for the child to have a healthy relationship with **both** parents; thus, the program seeks to subsequently re-involve the favoured parent. Unfortunately, this is not always possible because alienating parents often are unwilling to comply with orders to participate in the program. Feeling wronged or abandoned by their children, some choose to walk away from their children.

The term "deprogramming" is not only a misnomer, but also appears to be reinforcing an unwarranted hysteria about the Family Workshop. The term has become associated with coercion, isolation and brainwashing. Incidentally, the term is no longer used in the context of cults either; they refer to "exit counselling". The Workshop promotes the opposite of deprogramming: the child's autonomy, multiple perspective-taking and critical thinking. While the court or parent may insist the child begins the program, after some participation, they may choose to opt out.

The Family Workshop is not counselling or psychotherapy either. It involves a 4-day educational and experiential program. It begins with a risk assessment to ensure the family is suitable. After this and an orientation there are four phases

followed by the aftercare planning, which usually includes a vacation component to solidify progress in workshop, have experience of giving and receiving love.

In addition to facilitating, repairing and strengthening the child's ability to maintain healthy relationships with both parents, the Workshop goals are to:

1. help the child avoid being in the middle of the parent's conflict;
2. strengthen the child's critical thinking skills;
3. protect the child from unreasonably rejecting a parent in the future;
4. help the child maintain balanced and a more realistic perspective of each parent as well as themselves;
5. help the family members develop compassionate views of each other and their actions rather than being excessively harsh and critical;
6. strengthen the family's communication and conflict resolution skills; and
7. strengthen the parents' parenting skills.

These goals are accomplished through the use of multi-media demonstrations and exercises relating to developmental and social psychology that teach children:

1. how easy it is to misperceive reality (perceptual illusions)
2. the power of suggestion on perception and memory
3. how group pressure can create in-groups and out-groups, leading to negative stereotypes and prejudice
4. how allegiance to authority can impact our judgment and rupture relationships
5. about the impact of parental conflict on them and how multiple and divergent perspectives can exist

These concepts are then applied by way of exercises to the children's own situation, in a way that allows them to save face, which is a primary objective. No one is blamed, not the child or either parent.

More than 130 children in 70 families have attended the Family Workshop. Dr. Warshak has just reported preliminary findings, in a peer-reviewed paper that will be published in January in the FCR, on 22 children from 11 families. All had had failed counselling experiences. 21 of the 22 children restored a positive relationship with the rejected parent; 17 of these 22 maintained their positive relationships.

We do not have well-controlled outcome studies on the Family Workshop or, for that matter the other alternatives commonly ordered or recommended, such as reintegration therapy, parenting coordination and most educational programs. There is consensus that reintegration therapy does not work with the severe cases of irrational alienation. Reports indicate that custody reversal and forcing parenting time in combination, have corrected an irrational alienation, however, only when there is an interruption in the contact with the favoured parent. While we could of course benefit from more and better research, decisions still have to be made. These decisions can take into account both social science literature and our clinical experience, in an attempt to help children we know are suffering in these circumstances. Even with good research, every family requires an individualized risk/benefit analysis of the alternatives.

References available upon request.