

ALIENATING AUDIENCES FROM INNOVATION: THE PERILS OF POLEMICS, IDEOLOGY, AND INNUENDO

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When judging innovative programs like Family Bridges™, it is important to balance careful scrutiny with openness to new ideas. Judicial responses to children who reject a parent are best governed by a multifactor individualized approach. A presumption that allows children and one parent to regulate the other parent's access to the children is unsupported by research. A custody decision based solely on the severity of alienation leaves children vulnerable to intensification of efforts to poison their affections toward a parent. Concern with possible short-term distress for some children who are required to repair a damaged relationship should not blind us to the long-term trauma of doing nothing. Professionals are urged to minimize the infusion of polemics, rigid ideology, and rumors when offering opinions with inadequate information, particularly public statements that risk harming children.

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When presenting an innovative approach to helping children caught up in custody disputes, some misunderstanding and resistance to new ideas is to be expected. These problems intensify when the media reports on these issues.

Warshak and Otis (2010) propose the virtue of “humbition” for professionals who deal with issues of divorce and child custody—a combination of ambition of objectives and humility in recognizing the limits of present skill and knowledge. Carl Sagan (1997) cast this virtue in words that express an approach to strive for when considering innovative programs for children, including Family Bridges: A Workshop for Troubled and Alienated Parent-Child Relationships™ (Family Bridges) (Warshak, 2010a) and Overcoming Barriers Family Camp (Sullivan, Ward, & Deutsch, 2010):

It seems to me what is called for is an exquisite balance between two conflicting needs: the most skeptical scrutiny of all hypotheses that are served up to us, and at the same time a great openness to new ideas. If you are only skeptical, then no new ideas make it through to you. You never learn anything new. . . . If you are open to the point of gullibility and have not an ounce of skeptical sense in you, then you cannot distinguish useful ideas from worthless ones (p. vi).

I anticipated that my “Bridges” article (Warshak, 2010a) would stimulate a dialogue on how to help a population of children that has frustrated courts and therapists. Kelly (2010) met and exceeded this expectation. I believe that her response provides an example of humbition—of balance—that sets a standard to which we can all aspire. I recognize, though, that not all commentators will respond in the same way. Feelings run strong in this field. The influence of advocacy groups, attorney-advocates, and the media help to fuel

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misunderstanding, while stirring the appearance of controversy. To interrupt the perpetuation of misunderstanding, I take this opportunity to clarify some points that perhaps were not clear in my Bridges article. As in the Bridges article, all subsequent references to “alienated children” should be understood as applying *only* to children whose rejection of a parent is disproportionate to that parent’s behavior and is inconsistent with the prior history of the parent-child relationship.

RESTORATION DOES NOT PRECLUDE PREVENTION

The Bridges article focuses on solutions for alienated children. It would be a mistake, though, to assume that my attention to remedies distracts from appropriate concern with preventive efforts, or that media accounts of my work reflect the range of my views regarding legal and professional responses to this problem. It is painfully obvious to all who strive to alleviate psychological disturbances that, as with physical problems, prevention offers a far more efficient use of resources. Recognizing the limitations of consulting with families and advising courts on individual cases is what prompted me to write *Divorce Poison* (Warshak, 2002a, 2010b) that deals primarily with preventing alienation and keeping troubled relationships from deteriorating further. Daily email and online reviews by readers have taught me that the book has done more to protect children from alienation than all my lectures, professional articles, custody evaluations, and testimony combined. Parents at risk for either fostering alienation or becoming alienated see themselves in the pages of the book, recognize the harm they are causing, and respond more effectively to their children’s feelings. Parents and counselors have used the book’s advice to overcome incipient alienation and restore normal relationships without the need for expensive and intensive interventions. In addition to my book, my colleagues and I are developing materials for children that will assist them in the early stages of their parents’ separation to avoid getting drawn into the middle of adult conflicts. Further information about these materials is available on request.

An emphasis on prevention need not keep us from learning more effective ways to help families for whom preventive efforts are too late. Even with a prevalence of prevention programs, we should not expect the media to attend equally to such programs as to cases where prevention fails. Tragedy makes headlines. The work behind the scenes that helps prevent airplane crashes goes unreported by the media. Similarly, the programs in place to help prevent children from being caught in the middle of their parents’ divorce—the educational programs, co-parenting classes, parent guidance books—tend to operate in the background, while journalists report the tragic cases in which children lose half their family as a result of abduction or alienation, and act panic-stricken at the thought of being returned to their rejected parent. Those who rely too heavily on media headlines face the peril of overlooking the entire range of professional and legal responses to alienated children.

OPTIONS, NOT PANACEAS

Something that was a source of great consternation earlier in my career and that now I look at with some detachment is the tendency for those who disagree with my ideas to recast them in an exaggerated form. This commits the straw man logical fallacy and fosters polarized, black-and-white thinking (Johnston, 2007).

Most of the contributors to this issue of *Family Court Review* recognize the importance of differentiated responses to alienated children. Children arrive at their predicaments through various paths, under the influence of various forces. The remedy that works best for one child may not be best for another. A careful reading of my description of the circumstances in which each of the four main options for responding to alienated children might be most suitable should make it clear that, as in all custody disputes, I favor an individualized approach to such families that relies on the best-interests-of-the-child standard rather than a one-size-fits-all response (Warshak, 2007, 2010a). Offering a program to help children adjust to court orders that place them with a rejected parent (option #2 in Warshak, 2010a) is not equivalent to recommending such dispositions as a presumption for all cases. Family Bridges was never intended to be “the answer” to the problem of severe alienation. It is one potential solution. Certainly it is unrealistic to think that most cases in which the court chooses option #2 will participate in Family Bridges. Most of these cases rely on hope, time, and supportive counseling to help the family’s adjustment.

Similarly, I oppose a presumption that severely alienated children should be empowered to disown a parent and extended family with the hope that some time in the future they will choose to reunite with the family (option #4). Delegating so much authority to children may seem enlightened. But children pay a huge price for the privilege. Their opinions are up for grabs by whichever parent has the most influence on, and the least compunction about, exploiting the children. In some cases this may be the least detrimental resolution, particularly when it is seen as a last resort; in other cases it would be a mistake. Experience shows that environmental changes can be very effective in helping children overcome unreasonable negative attitudes (Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Gardner, 2001; Rand, Rand, & Kopetski, 2005; Warshak, 2010a).

FLAWED FOUNDATIONS

A presumption to allow children and the favored parent to regulate the rejected parent’s access to the children is rooted in an archaic hypothesis advanced by Goldstein, Freud, and Solnit (1973). Drawing on ideas from Sigmund Freud (1940) and John Bowlby (1951, 1969), Goldstein et al. hypothesized that children have one psychological parent, who should retain sole custody in the event of divorce, and that children cannot benefit from court orders for contact with two parents who are in conflict with each other. Their theoretical speculations were the basis for excessive concerns about separating young children from their mothers, even temporary separations such as those occasioned by leaving the child with a father, baby-sitter, or daycare attendant.

Forty years of research, not available when Goldstein et al. first formulated their views (which was prior to their book’s publication), fails to support their hypothesis (Warshak, 2000). A large body of evidence demonstrates that children normally develop close relationships with both of their parents, and that after divorce children do best when they maintain these meaningful relationships (for a review and consensus statement, see Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1997).

The recognition that children usually have more than one loving relationship that provides emotional security has led to a greater appreciation of the importance of facilitating attachments and a corresponding de-emphasis on the trauma of separations (Rutter, 1995a, 1995b). Overlooking the contemporary literature leads to overemphasizing a child’s attachment to one parent while undervaluing the child’s other important relationships

(Levitt, 2005). When this ideology is taken to an extreme, it results in the prediction expressed by some professionals that young children will suffer trauma if required to spend even one overnight away from the parent identified as primary (Warshak, 2000). This ideological position is impervious to logic, empirical research, and common experience.

Another extreme manifestation of a misplaced reliance on Goldstein, Freud, and Solnit is the concern, unsupported by empirical research, that children will suffer trauma if separated from a favored parent, regardless of the quality of the child's tie to the parent, the quality of parenting, the extent to which the parent meets a wide range of the child's needs, including supporting the child's age-appropriate independence and the child's other important relationships, and numerous other factors usually considered under the best interests of the child standard. This position is maintained even when it is clear that the relationship between the child and the favored parent is pathological. Presumably, operating under this assumption, concerns about separation trauma might lead to uncertainty about whether the child who was emotionally attached to a psychotic or physically abusive favored parent would be better off in the primary care of the other parent.

A perspective that minimizes the importance of the second parent in a child's life allows the conclusion that children who have lost the capacity to give and accept love from a parent (and in many cases all the parent's relatives) are well adjusted as long as they behave well with the other parent, attend school, and have friends. When one recognizes the damage associated with intrusive parenting that "constrains, invalidates, and manipulates children's psychological and emotional experience and expression" (Barber, 1996, p. 3296), and one acknowledges the life-long harm caused by disrupted parent-child relationships (see Warshak, 2010a, endnote 34), it becomes a priority to protect and rescue children from parental alienation, no matter how well they function in other spheres.

Those who advocate for a presumption against enforcing an alienated child's contact with the rejected parent should explain how they justify their position in light of the available research. It is inappropriate to simply ignore or dismiss research that fails to support one's ideology. Also, we need to pay attention to how these issues are framed. Anchoring the conversation with dire predictions of lasting trauma and suicide can make it seem inhumane to enforce a child's contact with the rejected parent. Such provocative language parallels the drama of children who threaten defiant and destructive behavior if they do not get their way—that is, if the court does not comply with their demands—yet who rapidly benefit from the imposition of appropriate adult authority (Clawar & Rivlin, 1991). Qualifying pessimistic predictions by asserting that negative reactions "may" occur is insufficient. It is epistemologically untenable to arbitrarily posit the "possibility" of trauma when no evidence exists to support this claim. Even a hypothesis requires some justification.

One concern about a presumption to leave children with the favored parent based on the single factor of the severity of alienation is that such a rule could motivate some parents to intensify efforts to poison children's affections as a means of prevailing in a custody dispute. Courts owe it to children to consider the merits of each case individually, rather than impose a single template on all cases.

IS THE ALIENATION NET TOO WIDE?

Related to the concern about judging cases individually is the fear that, with growing awareness of and attention to parental alienation, mental health professionals, children's

attorneys, and courts will indiscriminately judge many children to be pathologically alienated and that this will provide a basis for a rash of custody decisions that violate children's best interests, perhaps even placing children with abusive parents. Such misidentifications are known as false positives, an issue for any classification or diagnostic judgment. In my previous work I detail the various diagnostic errors that can occur with respect to parental alienation (Warshak, 2002a, 2002b). For instance, two of the errors discussed are mistakenly identifying children as alienated who do not in fact reject a parent, and mistakenly classifying a child's rejection as pathological, when it is a proportionate response to the rejected parent's behavior.

A further concern with false positives is that parents, when granted custody, will use their authority to enroll children in programs designed for irrationally alienated children when the children are poor candidates for such interventions. For any educational or health care program, screening prospective participants is essential. This initial step involves matching the individual with the intervention, and referring those who are inappropriate for the intervention to other resources. As Warshak (2010a) and Warshak and Otis (2010) emphasized, Family Bridges is especially sensitive to such concerns. The enrollment criteria of Family Bridges are explicit, and, "we exercise the prerogative to turn down referrals when we perceive that the rejected parent or the court prematurely seeks this remedy before sufficient efforts have been made with other approaches, or the children are not at risk for more severe degrees of estrangement, or the family does not meet other selection criteria (e.g., when the child is realistically estranged from the rejected parent)" (Warshak, 2010a, p. 56). Additional enrollment criteria are stated in Warshak (2010a) including the need for the child to pass a risk assessment prior to participation in the program.

The incidence of false positives can be reduced through skilled assessment of children's past and present relationships with parents, knowledge of the various factors that contribute to children's negative attitudes toward parents, and attention to alternative explanations of children's behavior, attitudes, and thoughts such as those identified in Warshak (2002b). Rather than leave children to languish in harmful parental relationships because of a legitimate concern with false positives, we should try to ensure that these children, accurately and appropriately classified, have the opportunity to participate in a program that may change their lives.

ANATOMY OF A RUMOR

Some journalists, with the unfortunate cooperation of some mental health professionals, have inaccurately portrayed Family Bridges as a locked residential facility where children are forcibly "deprogrammed." I dealt with the deprogramming misnomer in Warshak (2010a). Here I address the mistaken notion that Family Bridges is a residential treatment program.

Mental health professionals generally use the term "residential programs" for placements where children live apart from their parents, such as hospitals, drug rehabilitation, or residential treatment centers, often with controls to prevent runaways. As opposed to the image of children being snatched and whisked away to a residential facility, Family Bridges is an educational workshop. It is conducted in the relaxed setting either of a hotel resort suite or the family's home, and brings rapid relief to children overcome by irrational fears. If a child was at sufficient risk the team might conceivably conduct the program in a

residential setting; most likely, though, we would wait until the child was ready to be discharged. Aside from the parent's or the court's initial directive that the children attend, the children are in no way coerced and their cooperation is voluntary and self-paced once the course begins. In this regard, Family Bridges resembles parent and child education programs conducted by court-affiliated counselors (often by court order) during the parents' divorce. As reported in Warshak (2010a), 22 out of 23 children found the program entertaining and rewarding. The program is residential only in the sense that the learning takes place in the family's residence or in a hotel suite.

What could account for the gap in such a draconian image cited by some professionals and reality? The answer is found in the anatomy of a rumor. This rumor generally begins when a favored parent and his or her attorney attempt to discredit the program in arguments to the court. The attorney tries to influence the court by stirring up negative publicity through a journalist who publishes inflammatory innuendos without diligent investigation. The final ingredient is the spread of the rumor by mental health professionals who, by virtue of their academic credentials, command greater credibility.

Inflammatory distortions about Family Bridges fit rumor expert Ralph Rosnow's (1991) description of dread rumors as "those that invoke feared or disappointing consequences. Such rumors in the general population seem especially deadly because they can emerge like hobgoblins to spook people into believing the most horrific claims" (p. 488). Rosnow and Foster (2005) explain that "people have a tendency to spread rumors that they perceive as credible (even the most ridiculous stories), although when anxieties are intense, rumormongers are less likely to monitor the logic or plausibility of what they pass on to others." People who find a dread rumor untrustworthy ordinarily will not pass it "unless perhaps motivated by some ulterior or devious personal objective" (Rosnow, 1991, p. 488).

It is expected that some segments of the media will promote controversy in the interests of selling their product. But I urge my colleagues to refrain from perpetuating myths through polemics. Rather than repeating rumors, I encourage professionals to exercise a degree of humility when discussing programs or cases that they are not familiar with, coupled with the ambition to build their knowledge before speaking publicly. In addition to the ethical imperative of making every effort to report information accurately, there is the additional concern of avoiding unnecessary harm to children through thoughtless public statements. Children are naive about the extent to which the media can get things wrong. In one case, a psychologist's mistaken impressions, quoted by a reporter, were shown by the favored parent to children who were candidates for Family Bridges. This caused the children unnecessary anxiety and resistance to getting help. Though the psychologist intended no harm, when publicly expressing ill-conceived opinions, potential damaging consequences should be anticipated. This concern applies not just to Family Bridges, but to any program developed to help relieve a child's suffering. For instance, suppose that a family has been ordered by the court to attend Overcoming Barriers Family Camp (Sullivan, Ward, & Deutsch, 2010). Imagine the difference in a child's emotional status and motivation believing that he was going to attend an enjoyable summer camp with his family that will help the family, versus believing, based on misinformation, that he was going to be shipped off to a deprogramming internment camp that would detain him against his will. Mental health professionals who perpetuate false information without checking the facts may unwittingly contribute to, rather than alleviate, a family's distress. In so doing, they become part of the problem (Greenberg, Gould, Gould-Saltman, & Stahl, 2003).

CHARACTERIZING FAMILY BRIDGES AS EXTREME, CONTROVERSIAL, AND COERCIVE

Laboring under mistaken impressions about Family Bridges, such as believing it to be a residential facility, may contribute to labeling the program as “extreme,” “controversial,” and “more coercive” than alternative approaches. Certainly the structure, procedures, and content of the program—grounded in social science and in material commonly taught in college classes—could not reasonably be characterized as extreme or controversial.

Some Canadian journalists have appealed to nationalist sentiments by objecting to Family Bridges as an extreme or drastic intervention because the program was not offered in their country. Litigants and some mental health professionals lodge the similar complaint that the program may necessitate the family’s travel to another state. This argument lacks currency. Who would blame a parent for securing the most appropriate help for their child’s suffering, regardless of where the help was administered? Would observers criticize parents for taking their child to an out-of-state surgeon for the best possible medical care to treat a serious illness?

The view of Family Bridges as controversial represents a conflating of the program with the court’s ordering a child be delivered to the rejected parent. That order is clearly controversial, as reflected in the phrase “stark dilemma.” Whichever side of the dilemma is embodied by a trial’s outcome, the result will be controversial in some quarters. If the children defy the court’s authority and refuse to return to the rejected parent, the use of coercion to enforce the orders will raise additional controversy. But it is a mistake to treat Family Bridges as a package deal with the court’s decision about what living arrangement best fulfills the children’s best interests. Our program offers to help a family when the court, based on evidence, temporarily removes the child from one home and places the child with a parent that the child hates or fears. Family Bridges helps the family adjust to a transition, after the court’s decision.

Consider the case in which a rejected parent is awarded custody and the favored parent abducts the children. Over the next few months the children become more pre-occupied with fears of the left-behind parent. When the children are eventually located, they are panic stricken at the prospect of being returned to the rejected parent, whom they now view as a demon. The rejected parent has several options including: (1) Trust that time will heal the wounds. Although for a while the children will suffer needless fears, we can hope that they will eventually correct their mistaken beliefs, emerge from their panic, and learn to behave normally around the parent. (2) Invite a relative whom the children trust to live with the family during a transition period. (3) Enroll the children in a program such as Family Bridges that can provide rapid relief, either in the comfort of their own home or at a resort. (4) Respect the children’s wish to avoid the rejected parent, and allow them to remain with the abducting parent, or allow the abducting parent to designate another caregiver. If, as is likely, the court places the children with the rejected parent (which may be controversial, even in the above abduction scenario), will caring professionals regard Family Bridges as controversial? Placing children against their will with a rejected parent is controversial. But helping children adjust to the situation should not be. Even those who favor a presumption against placing alienated children with the rejected parent might endorse a program that helps these children reintegrate into the rejected parent’s home. Even those more concerned about the potential trauma to children of being temporarily separated from the favored parent than about the trauma of losing the rejected parent might welcome a program with demonstrated

results in reducing stress associated with the separation from one parent and the return to the other. It is important not to confuse a temporary separation from a parent with the *termination* of that relationship. In none of the cases reported in Warshak (2010a) did the court terminate the child's relationship with the favored parent. In fact, in most cases the court orders keep the children apart from their favored parent no longer than would be occasioned by attendance at a summer camp.

For these reasons, it seems inappropriate to label Family Bridges, separate and distinct from the court's enforcing of its custody orders, as controversial. Warshak (2010a) offers the first peer-reviewed article on this program for the professional community. It remains to be seen how colleagues will respond. Any intervention with alienated children will find adherents and opponents among litigants and advocacy groups, and in the media. Many aligned parents do not want their children to overcome alienation. Some advocates object to any attempts to reverse a child's negative attitudes toward a parent because they believe that all rejected parents deserve such attitudes. But we should not assume that advocates who oppose Family Bridges or label it as "extreme" or "controversial" speak for the entire community of mental health professionals and family law scholars.

Some professionals have ethical concerns about rendering any evaluative, educational, or psychotherapeutic services to a child against the child's will. There is no reason, though, to regard Family Bridges as "more coercive" than traditional forms of court-ordered interventions. The coercion employed by the courts and parents to implement court orders that place children with the rejected parent occurs prior to the children's enrollment in Family Bridges. Certainly some (but not all) children in this situation protest the court's orders. But the protest is in response to the custody decision, not to the intervention that might follow in its wake (except for children who develop a distorted image of Family Bridges based on misleading descriptions). Children who do not participate in Family Bridges register the same degree of protest when placed with the rejected parent, and when forced to participate in outpatient therapy under these circumstances. Also, despite rumors to the contrary, there are no reports of children being harmed by this four-day educational program, even among those who did not sustain their gains. It is a mistake to blame interventions for problems that existed before the intervention, or problems that occur in response to events subsequent to the intervention.

RESEARCH AND EXPERIENCE

It is important to underscore that over a span of 18 years, more than 130 children have participated in Family Bridges. The observations of the team leaders, the children's expressed attitudes before and after the workshop, and correspondence over the years from grateful parents and children, reveal that the rates of relationship repair at the conclusion of the workshop, and the maintenance of these gains, parallel the statistics reported in Warshak (2010a). I did not include this larger sample in my report because I did not work with these families and thus had no direct access to their files, which precluded me from calculating statistics such as the length of alienation prior to the onset of the workshop and the exact proportion of children who maintained their gains.

As Fidler and Bala (2010), Kelly (2010), Warshak (2010a), and Warshak and Otis (2010) point out, science advances by documenting observations and experience with systematic measures whose reliability has been established. The results and observations with the smaller sample analyzed in Warshak (2010a) and the larger group of Family Bridges

participants need such documentation. Nevertheless, pending the results of such studies, it would be unfortunate to fail to listen and profit from the voices of these children and parents. Practicing humbition by noting the limitations of this type of information and recognizing that my outcome study is preliminary research should not obscure a wealth of experience accumulated since the program's inception that contributes to our understanding of its value.

As noted in Warshak (2010a), the requirement of relying on the evidence in each individual case to formulate judicial decisions obviates the possibility of randomly assigning families to alternative programs or no intervention. Nevertheless, as with most outcome studies of educational or treatment programs, the pre-workshop status of the children provides some basis for assessing changes between the child's status pre and post intervention. In most cases, the children had been severely alienated for several years prior to their participation in Family Bridges and had failed experiences with alternative interventions. The time in between the rejected parent's first inquiry about the workshop and the time of its onset is commensurate to the waiting list time typically used to define a matched comparison group in outcome studies.

CONCLUSION

The voices of adults who were alienated as children, revealed in the literature summarized by Fidler and Bala (2010) and observed in my research and experience over three decades with more than a thousand families, make it clear that in some cases, we may think we are hearing a child's voice when, in fact, we may be receiving a distorted broadcast laced with the static of a charged emotional atmosphere. Or, the voice may be delivering a script written by another. Or, it may reflect the desire to placate, take care of, or pledge loyalty to a parent. Or it may be the trembling voice of a child cowering in the shadow of an abusive parent, who, no longer having a spouse to intimidate, control, and beat, now uses the children to fulfill the same pathological aims. All the while the child may secretly harbor the hope that those entrusted with her welfare will see through her charade. When we have good reason to suspect that children speak in a voice that is not their own or that does not advance their best interests, we might take a clue from adults who look back on their childhood and judge the decisions made on their behalf.

The letters I receive reveal the human tragedy behind the statistics and polemics about respecting children's autonomy, and serve as a wake-up call to those who think they are helping children when they allow them to make life-altering decisions under extreme emotional duress and without the benefit of adult perspective and maturity. Interested readers can find some of these letters at www.warshak.com and in Warshak (2010b). These letters provide moving accounts of children who belatedly recognize that they have been used by one parent to further a vindictive agenda against the other. In some cases the rejected parent dies before the child has had a chance to say, "I love you." The resulting agonizing remorse would bring tears to a statue. When these children discuss their grief with the alienating parent, the parent reveals a complete self-absorption and lack of empathy for their offspring's distress. The children then experience what one adult called, "betrayal trauma."

Courts and legal and mental health professionals see convincing and compelling evidence of such callous disregard of a child's needs by one or both parents intent on hurting the ex-spouse at the expense of the children. Being open to the voices of these children,

when freed from the shackles of obeisance to a parent who fosters and supports alienation, may help more people see the wisdom of judges who interpret the law as offering children rescue and protection from such pressures, as well as encourage people to bring an open mind to new ideas about how to help relieve children's suffering. Concern with the potential short-term distress for some (but not all) children who are required to repair a damaged relationship should not blind us to the long-term trauma, often hidden, of doing nothing. If we want to make quantum leaps in reducing trauma, we need to promote an atmosphere that encourages innovation. Skeptical scrutiny has its place. But, as Carl Sagan advises, it must not keep us from learning something new.

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