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## Turning Points for Families

A therapeutic “vacation” with Linda J. Gottlieb, LMFT, LCSW-R

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LINDA GOTTLIEB’S WORK IS GOLD STANDARD in therapeutic reunification of children and families affected by parental alienation. Her Turning Points for Families program offers a unique intervention which is based upon the marriage between family systems therapy and psychological education. What is powerful about this program is the immediate restoration of the family hierarchy and the placing of the child in the rightful place in relationship to the formerly rejected parent.

As in all successful work with alienated children, Turning Points for Families uses the counterintuitive strategy of confronting the psychologically split state of mind at the outset of the intervention. This summer I was fortunate enough to observe Linda at the PASG Conference in Stockholm walking us through the framework of the intervention she uses in Turning Points.

As Linda pointed out to us during her live case study, her first correction of the family hierarchy comes when she validates the formerly rejected parent’s role in the child’s life by handing them the power to make decisions about a child’s requests during therapy sessions. This placing of the child in the correct place in the family hierarchy, rather than overempowering the child by requiring the rejected parent to seek forgiveness or placate the child, is one of the most powerful healing actions a therapist can take in treating parental alienation. Watching Linda and then hearing her speak at length about her work and her training with Salvador Minuchin at the EAPAP Conference in London a few days later underlined to me that her work sets the worldwide standards of intervention to which all practitioners in this field should aspire.

### **Revolutionary restoration**

In light of the recent era of shifting toward empowering children of divorce and separation to greater decision making roles, the idea of restoring the family hierarchy and ensuring that children have their place within that is revolutionary. Yet it is the foundation of what Minuchin taught in his work in family therapy. The principles of family therapy are: experience rather than insight produces change; the here and now rather than the subjective interpretation of the past is what creates dynamic shifts; and the family system rather than the individual is where the problem is located.

Linda's work, however, adapts Family Therapy to fit the way that parental alienation works in a family and uses the counterintuitive approach to create rapid shifts in healing the damaged parent/child relationship. Linda identifies that element of Family Therapy which requires adaptation when she speaks of personality disordered parents and demonstrates that these are parents who require containment and restriction of their damaging behaviors.

All of this comes together to produce an intervention in which the child is swiftly restored to a healthy relationship with the previously rejected parent, using a four-day vacation as the basis to "jump start," as Linda calls it, the restoration of the healthy relationship bonds.

Observing the way that Linda identifies power and control issues and uses herself as therapeutic guide to change the manner in which the child has been used to holding the reins of control in the family is a powerful learning experience. Not many therapists are able to use immediacy and strength of character to bring corrections to the family system in this way. And yet as Linda told us in London "Sal[vador Minuchin] would never have allowed that to happen." (That is, a child being disrespectful to a parent.) "He would always have corrected it."

Listening to this made me realize that the interventions we need in this emerging scientific field are already here, they are already used and they are already making huge changes in children's lives. Learning from the gold standard practitioners in this field is the most urgent task for all of us who do this work. ■