

Book Review

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Divorce Poison: Protecting the Parent-Child Bond from a Vindictive Ex. by Richard A. Warshak, New York: Regan Books/Harper Collins, 2002, 320 pages, \$26.00.

Divorce Poison is an appropriate title for this short book dealing not so much with the effects of divorce on children as with the effects of conflicts and animosities of the divorced parents as expressed to children. The author, Richard A. Warshak, Ph.D., is well-qualified to write about such things, having researched and written about divorce issues for many years, and consulted with parents and attorneys struggling with the difficult issues of child custody, visitation, and the effects of parental alienation. In *Divorce Poison*, Warshak covers a lot of theoretical ground, but he intersperses concrete examples that succinctly clarify and amplify what he is trying to communicate.

Early on and throughout later chapters, Warshak distinguishes three types of "poison" that divorced parents can inflict on their children. These are "bad-mouthing" or mild slips of the tongue by irritated parents in moments of emotional distress; "bashing" or intentional programmed cultivation of disrespect in the child toward the other parent; and deliberate "brainwashing" where bashing becomes persistent and chronic, undermines and destroys the child's attachment to the other parent, and may involve systematic and intentional distortions that twist a child's memories so that positive experiences with the other parent are effectively negated, or imaginary events are expressed implicating severe misconduct of the other parent. Warshak explains how actions by one parent directed at the other parent, particularly when those actions take the form of bashing or brainwashing, can lead children to become defiant toward the other parent, withdraw from normal family discourse, and make decisions as a result of parental pressure that the child will later come to regret.

To provide a reference point for his theories of "divorce poison," Warshak holds out as a "gold standard" the model of the united parental front, wherein generational boundaries are respected and parents exercise their responsibilities and roles jointly and collaboratively. Warshak does not recommend blanket exclusion of children from participating in issues of inter-parental conflict, but he says that this should occur only to the extent that the child is

emotionally and cognitively prepared to make sense of the conflicts and use the information constructively for the child's own psychological benefit. Here Warshak makes a crucial distinction between criticism of the other parent that is helpful to the child, and criticism that is harmful, keeping in mind that the perspective from which healthy criticism should be made is one that prioritizes the needs of the child. Indeed, *Divorce Poison* steadfastly maintains the reader's focus on the best interests of the child, whose needs, as opposed to the needs of the adults, must remain the overriding concern and motivation of parents when expressing criticism of one another.

In his first chapter, Warshak poses a set of helpful questions that parents should ask themselves before they either criticize the other parent to the child or create a situation where the child will become aware of such criticism. He emphasizes the need for extreme caution and self-examination, to make sure that children receive information they can understand and use to deal with their own feelings, rather than information that merely vents the parent's own frustrations and may lead the child to reject the other parent. Given that parents sometimes find it difficult to separate their own needs and feelings from those of their children, Warshak explains that the psychological touchstone for appropriate inter-parental criticism is the parent's ability to segregate the parent's personal issues vis á vis the other parent, from the issues that are important for the child. Warshak finds it appropriately helpful for a parent to recognize that criticism of the other parent is also criticism of the child, who generally identifies to some extent with both parents.

Warshak gives helpful advice to a parent who is trying to help the child understand and deal with inadvertent bad-mouthing of the other parent, particularly bad-mouthing that is causing distress to the child. Recognizing that even "mild" and inadvertent remarks by parents can have some degree of lasting impact on children, Warshak urges parents to explore openly with their child the child's thoughts and feelings about the things they have said, and encourage the child to recognize that all people, including parents caught up in a stormy divorce or custody dispute, sometimes say things in anger they later regret. Children should appreciate, to the extent they are developmentally able, that such feelings, and the inappropriate statements that can accompany them, do not always reflect deeper feelings that prevail in lasting relationships, where we should always appreciate the good things other people do for us. Parents can also help their children to realize that momentary feelings of anger or disappointment will eventually lessen over time, as they grow accustomed to changes brought about from divorce. And ultimately parents, in helping their children deal with the emotional impact of badmouthing, need to reinforce that the parents' feelings do not have to interfere with the child's feelings, or with the importance to the child of being loved and cherished by two parents and extended families.

Concerning those situations that go beyond the level of occasional bad-

mouth, Warshak takes a bold stance in recommending strategies for parents on the receiving end of such conduct. Warshak recognizes full well that his recommendations may sometimes run afoul of advice given by some well-meaning but unschooled lawyers who, primarily as a litigation strategy, caution silence in the face of such conduct. Warshak believes that first and foremost in the mind of any parent should be the best interests of the child, and that the parent should take child-centered steps to counteract the harmful effects on the child of persistent bashing and brainwashing by the other parent.

Warshak takes another bold step in confronting the truths and misconceptions of parental alienation, and the so-called Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) that has provoked strongly mixed reactions among parents and the professional community. Warshak recognizes that the scientific underpinnings for a clinical "diagnosis" of PAS are weak. At the same time, he clearly acknowledges and elaborates at length on observable patterns of parent misconduct that have the undeniable effect of unjustifiably alienating children from parents toward whom they had positive attachments prior to a divorce, particularly one that is followed by bashing or brainwashing from an alienating parent. Warshak empathically portrays the anguish felt by both parents and children who are caught up in alienating environments, and recommends detailed strategies for parents who feel that the child's other parent is deliberately acting in an alienating fashion. Warshak wisely suggests "inoculation" strategies for parents who believe that alienation is beginning to appear. These strategies reflect his extensive experience and knowledge about children caught up in alienating situations. While these strategies are too detailed to explore in this review, it is worth noting that Warshak reinforces the idea that parents should maintain a realistic, accepting, and child-centered posture that builds on the parent-child bonds existing before the divorce and before the other parent began engaging in alienating behaviors. Warshak's approach is particularly sensitive to the needs of the child, recognizing as he does that alienation can have many different causes as a function of the child's age, developmental needs, and quality of pre-divorce relationships with both parents.

In confronting the issue of alienation, Warshak distinguishes between the often trivial and non-reality based excuses children raise for rejecting a parent, which sometimes are provoked by the actions of the other parent, and the gravely serious issue of alienation that involves charges of child abuse by the alienating parent. Although *Divorce Poison* does not probe deeply into the complex issues of child abuse investigation and treatment, Warshak does seriously discuss the issue of false accusation. He explores its different causes and he highlights the toxic effects of such accusations when they are provoked by the alienating parent in a child who, for individual reasons, may be vulnerable to such provocation. Warshak explores some of the extensive body of psychological research dealing with false accusations

in order to emphasize how alienating parents can provoke such accusations with surprising ease from some children, and how this particularly severe form of alienation may cause lasting psychological damage to the child. Warshak also acknowledges the many ways in which actual incidents of abuse or parental misconduct toward, or in the presence of, children, can be exploited by an alienating parent to extract revenge on the other parent for the purpose of satisfy the alienating parent's own needs. Warshak wisely counsels immediate and intense involvement of experienced and well-trained professionals in handling such difficult and complex situations. Warshak's professionally seasoned recommendations for the alienated parent in dealing with abuse accusations should be read by every concerned parent, and by professionals as well.

Divorce Poison devotes much time to discussing the varied motives of parents who alienate children, both from the perspectives of the consciously alienating parent and of the parent who may be unconsciously engaging in alienating behaviors. Warshak recognizes that motives for alienation spring from many different psychological forces within the alienating parent and that parent's environment, forces such as inadequate interpersonal boundaries, guilt, insecurity, paranoia, the quest for personal validation, the pressures of litigation, the need for revenge against the other parent, and even hostility toward the children. Here Warshak wisely steps back from blaming, finger-pointing, and inflammatory rhetoric to emphasize that alienating behaviors stem from real parental needs that are, if not always sympathetic, at least understandable and potentially susceptible of being dealt with. It makes sense, as Warshak explains, that each type of alienating motive requires a different response from the alienated parent, and Warshak offers practical coping strategies that are tailored to the circumstances of these different types of motives and situational factors. Along the same lines, Warshak identifies strategies that are consciously or unconsciously used by alienating parents to modify vulnerable children's thinking, attitudes, and pattern of relating to the other parent. In Warshak's terminology these include behaviors, such as manipulating use of names to disrupt the child's identification, repeating false ideas until they are assumed to be true, exaggerating negative behaviors, revising history to eliminate positive memories, cloaking denunciations in religious dogma, overindulging the children to buy allegiance, encouraging the keeping of secrets, and encroaching on the child's time to sabotage enjoyment of time with the other parent, among others. Again, Warshak suggests specific and generally helpful ways for alienated parents to deal with such strategies in the ways they relate to their children.

While not being an advocate for the "diagnosis" of PAS, Warshak suggests a way of evaluating child behaviors that superficially appear to reflect the effects of parental alienation, to determine if those reflect misconduct by the child's other parent or significant others, or if they reflect other influ-

ences. He also emphasizes the importance of careful evaluation by stressing that children become alienated from parents for many reasons, not all of which involve misconduct of the child's other parent. *Divorce Poison* recognizes that alienation provoked by issues within the child, or that results from situational stresses or justifiable circumstances, requires the same kind of sensitive and effective parental response as does alienation caused by parental misconduct. Warshak suggests many helpful strategies for parents in dealing with this type of alienation as well.

Overall, *Divorce Poison* is a professionally informed guidebook meant primarily for non-mental health professionals who have to deal in general with the effects of divorce poison on a child, and in particular, with alienating behaviors on the part of one or both of the child's parents. The book probably will have to be read in its entirety, because it is not particularly well-organized for selective reading; but this should not be much of a problem, as the book is not lengthy nor is it clouded by technical jargon. The book also will be helpful and interesting for mental health professionals interested in the issues of parental alienation, who are either not well-schooled in the literature concerning the effects of divorce and parental alienation on children and parents, or who want an exceptionally informative overview of professional thinking in this area. While the professional reader could obtain more detailed presentations of the material contained in *Divorce Poison* elsewhere, most readers will find this book to be accessible, sensitive, informative, and highly practical. Professional readers may be somewhat disappointed by the lack of an extensive bibliography, although Warshak does cite a number of secondary sources that may be useful for mental health professionals and attorneys. He also provides separate lists of helpful bibliographical resources for children and parents. I have elsewhere referred to this book as a "must read," and reiterate that characterization here—particularly for parents dealing with divorce issues and for the attorneys who work so diligently to assist them through difficult times.

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