

Divorce POISON

AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD WARSHAK, Ph.D.
by JANIE RUSSELL

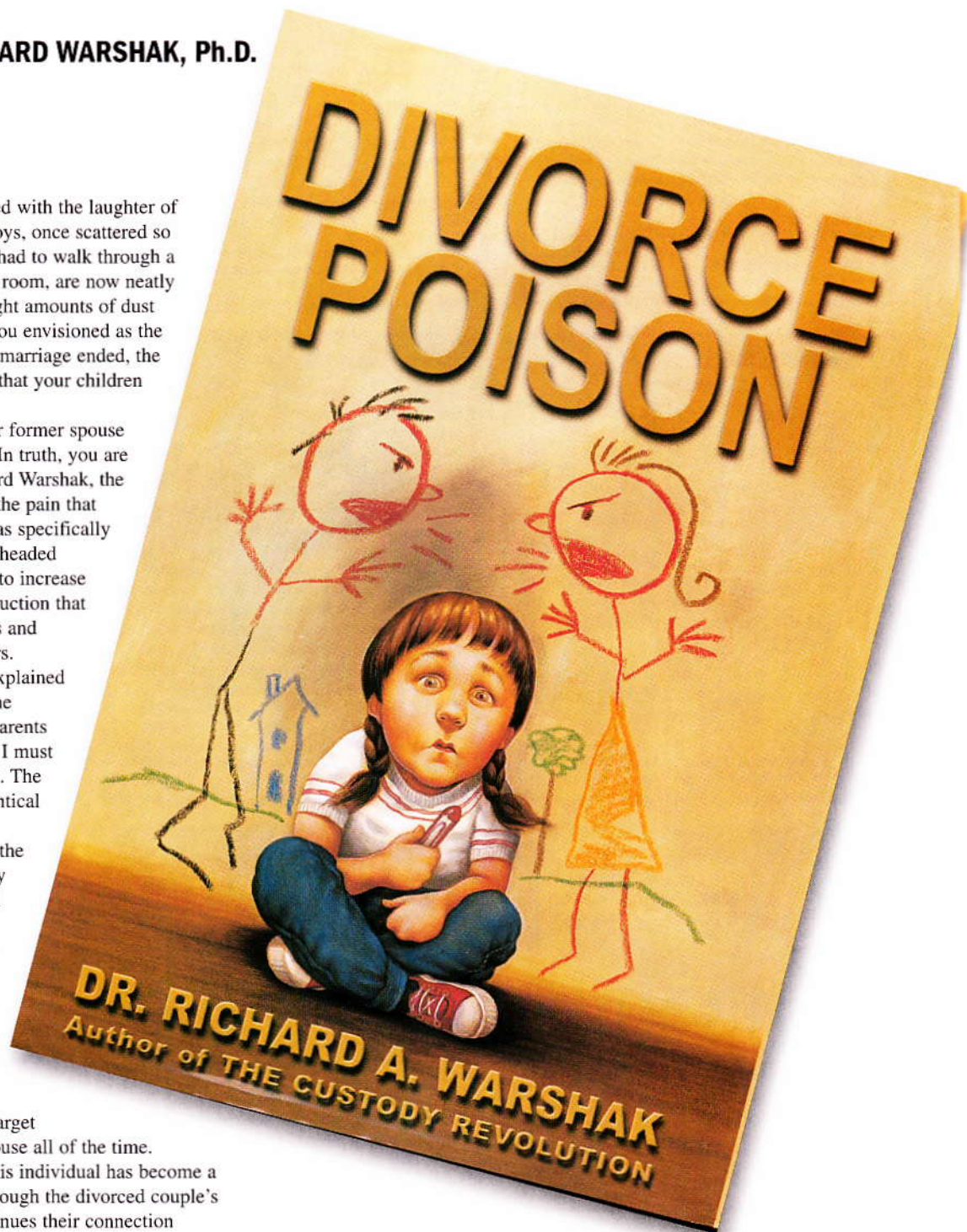
Your home, in the past a haven filled with the laughter of children, now stands silent. The toys, once scattered so deeply all over the floor that you had to walk through a maze just to get to the other side of the room, are now neatly stacked on shelves in the toy closet. Light amounts of dust surround each toy. This was not what you envisioned as the outcome of your divorce. Though your marriage ended, the last thought that would occur to you is that your children would also divorce you.

The irony of the situation is that your former spouse has skillfully stolen your child's heart. In truth, you are the victim of parental alienation. Richard Warshak, the author of *Divorce Poison*, understands the pain that parental alienation creates. His book was specifically written to assist families whose path is headed toward parental alienation. His hope is to increase an awareness that will prevent the destruction that becomes a reality in the lives of parents and children when parental alienation occurs.

"Divorce poison is very common," explained Dr. Warshak. "You would not believe the amount of e-mails that I receive from parents who have read my book and claim that I must have secretly been observing their lives. The examples that I use in my book are identical to situations that these individuals live through. This is a horrible problem for the parents that are victims and emotionally experience the devastation that parental alienation creates."

"Parental alienation is one way of holding on to a former spouse," explained Dr. Warshak. "In this manner, a parent holds on to an old relationship by manipulating their child or children through hate. When parents find their lives tangled in long-term legal battles, the target parent is on the mind of her former spouse all of the time. Though the thoughts are not healthy, this individual has become a focus of the other person's life. It is through the divorced couple's children that the unhealthy parent continues their connection through negative behavior."

"Ten years ago, I wrote a book on child custody called *The Custody Revolution*. This book described situations where divorced



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parents literally walked out on their children following their divorce. When this occurred, the children experienced severe emotional pain due to the loss of their relationship with the abandoning parent," said Dr. Warshak. "As my research continued, I began to see more and more cases where children stated that they hated a parent and had no interest in seeing them. As the counseling continued, I realized that there was no valid reason for this to occur in the parent/child relationship. In addition, there was no history in the child's relationship with the parent that would justify these feelings either. Out of the blue, the parent's relationship with their child was abruptly terminated in the child's mind."

"As I began to study these cases, I increasingly became aware of the tremendous role that the favored parent was playing in the ruination of the non-favored parent's relationship with the child," continued Dr. Warshak. "In some of the cases, the child would make allegations that the parent would mistreat them. In other cases, children would make claims that the target parent was controlling or did not discipline them. Words or phrases that children would not normally use clearly detected the child parroting words used by the favored parent. There were also cases where allegations of abuse were made. Some of these were clear-cut cases of collusion between the favored parent and the child. Both would lie about an abuse that never occurred. However, other situations where abuse was alleged did not involve outright deliberate lies but suspicion. The favored parent suspected abuse and due to the way that the parent spoke with their child, the child either convinced themselves that they were abused or became totally confused."

"Under these circumstances, the target parent loses their authority to parent their child," said Dr. Warshak. "The child is given permission by the favored parent to disrespect the target parent. This empowers the child, and in many situations, the children lose their recognition of the target parent's authority and importance. As the alienation deepens, the favored parent often advises the child to call them when an action transpires in the target parent's home that displeases them. There is a microscope placed on the target parent's home and normal parent/child interactions become exaggerated and selectively attended to. Normal forms of discipline are then viewed in an extreme light. The target parent can be mistakenly viewed as physically forcing the child to do normal activities like going to bed on time. The parent is then painted to look like a horrible person."

"One of the saddest aspects of parental alienation is that the target parent often encourages and facilitates visitation and phone calls from the alienating parent because they feel that this is in the best interest of the child," stated Dr. Warshak. "However, the alienating parent uses this contact to turn the child against the target parent. The target parent is behaving in a manner that they consider normal, and taking actions that 'good' parents take. Certain situations involve secret conversations between the alienating parent and the child. Normal parent and child relationships forbid secrets; however, the alienating parent encourages secrets and secret conversations with their child. In cases such as these, I encourage the target parent to keep reminding their children that they are not to keep secrets from them. This can be effective especially when the child is young. The older the child becomes, the more difficult parental alienation is to reverse."

"The remarkable aspect of parental alienation is that it can transform the relationship between the parent and the child in a very short amount of time. For instance, favored parents use phone calls and e-mail to interrogate the child about the target parent's home and its activities or to remind the child of their loyalty to them," continued Dr. Warshak. "It is during this time that the court and its appointed representatives need to evaluate the true motive and relationship of each parent with their child. If they fail to see the signs of parental alienation, the sanctions that are placed on each home could further the alienation and ultimately destroy the relationship between the target parent and the child."

"Children who are victims of parental alienation are often treated as though they are a comrade-in-arms to the alienating parent. This creates an element of excitement for the child," said Dr. Warshak. "This also undermines the target parent's authority and their respect."

"The most unfortunate aspect of parental alienation is the family court's failure to recognize the signs of alienation when they initially occur," concluded Dr. Warshak. For instance, in a case where an ad litem attorney has been appointed for the child, it is understandable that an ad litem may feel that 'Daddy' is the better parent when the child is saying that they want to live with Daddy. However, there are many situations that occur like this where the ad litem attorney realizes that the child has been actively brainwashed but is not equipped with the knowledge necessary to handle this situation. They may believe a child's statement that they will hurt themselves if they have to live with the target parent. The ad litem attorney is reluctant to take an action that seems drastic to them but fails to recognize the tragic impact the child experiences when they ultimately lose their relationship with the target parent and often, the target parent's family members. These are important individuals in the child's life who have loved them since birth and appear to literally 'drop off' the face of the earth."

Divorce poison occurs in various degrees. Until recently, parental alienation has been ignored by the family court system. However, due to an increase in the amount of cases where alienation has been detected, this form of abuse has come

to light. Few professionals know how to handle situations where parent/child relationships have been damaged severely, much less have the working skills to assist in the relationship's repair. Richard Warshak's book, *Divorce Poison*, offers a plan of action for parents who find that they are victims of this type of loss. *Divorce Poison* and its author offer hope. *Divorce Poison* is available in bookstores throughout the United States.



RICHARD WARSHAK, Ph.D.