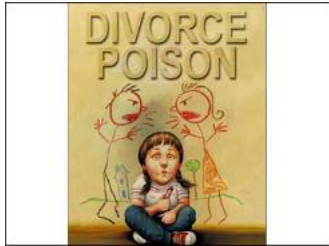


# Dealing With "Divorce Poison"

## Keeping Your Kids Out Of The Mix



(HARPERCOLLINS)

(CBS) When parents divorce, children often wind up stuck in a crossfire of negative feelings and nasty words. Richard A. Warshak, author and psychologist, says that while divorce may hurt kids in the short run, it doesn't have to scar them forever. On *The Saturday Early Show*, he identifies warning signs that your child may be suffering a dose of "divorce poison" and offers suggestions for improving the situation.

Warshak has two words for divorcing parents: **Behave yourselves!** Bad-mouthing a spouse is so common, most people assume it's an unavoidable symptom of divorce. But

while the temptation to do so is natural, acting on it is not.

Typically, parents want to protect a child during a crisis. Yet speaking poorly about an ex puts the child right in the middle of the dispute by forcing him to choose sides. And that's the last thing he needs.

The failure of a marriage tells children that love is unreliable. So, at this time, children need love more than ever. Turning a child against a parent - "poisoning" him - deprives him of that love he needs.



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Warshak believes children can escape a divorce unharmed. It's a sad event and a key event in the whole family's life. But if parents handle the separation well, their children don't have to carry emotional scars. Handling the situation well means not exposing children to hatred or animosity. Keep the complaints between adults. Don't involve the kids.

Unfortunately, divorce poison is common. Every parent has said or done something he/she later regrets. In half of divorces, this goes beyond mild bad-mouthing, and in one of four divorces, the negativity is very severe.

Parents often try to gain their children as allies months before the divorce. The bad-mouthing then escalates at the time of separation.

As a divorced parent, how do you know that your child is being exposed to this poison? Warshak says to look for any of the following behaviors from a child:

- **Shy to show affection.** The child does not want to hug or kiss you in front of your ex and/or doesn't tell you about the good times he had with your ex.
- **Refers to you by first name.** The child drops "Mom" or "Dad" and instead calls you "Sherry" or "Sam."
- **Shows less respect.** When Dad complains to Junior, he is trying to get his son to agree that Mom is a bad person. Essentially, he is making his son an equal and choosing to abandon his authority as an adult. At the same time, he is undermining Mom's authority by convincing Junior that she makes bad choices. Parents must maintain a "loving authority."
- **Mimics adult complaints.** This is the most blatant signal of all. When a 5-year-old says, "Dad, you don't give me enough privacy," or "Mom, all you do is buy me toys," you can bet he didn't come up with that idea on his own.

It's important to note that children may display any of these behaviors immediately following a divorce, Warshak says, so don't overreact. However, parents should worry when the behaviors become extreme or don't subside.

If you *are* worried about your child, what can you do?

- **Get involved.** Many parents believe they should "take the high road" and ignore the negative comments kids are hearing from an ex. But children mention the comments or act out after hearing them because they are concerned. They don't know what to do, and it's a parent's job to help.

Ask your child how the comments made him feel. Then, teach him to think for himself. Is the comment really accurate? Does he really believe it? Remind him to think like this the next time he hears something negative. Also, let him know it's OK to love both parents.

According to Warshak, a parent may be so bold to say, "Look, daddy's really mad at me. Sometimes angry people say things they don't mean. He wants you to hate me, but you don't have to choose sides. You can love us both."

- **Don't get angry.** Never, never respond to an ex's bad-mouthing with anger. Don't yell at a kid for repeating something that was said to them. Parents do not win a child's affection through hatred.
- **Don't give up.** Divorced parents need a thick skin. Their kids are going to be upset and will act accordingly. When a child says, "I don't want to see you," or "I don't want to be here," it's easy for a parent to just give up and suggest a breather. It's the parent's responsibility to keep the relationship alive; if left to his own devices a child may never want to see the parent.

Warshak is a psychologist in private practice and a clinical professor at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. He wrote another book about divorce titled "The Custody Revolution" in the early '90s.

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[Read an excerpt from "Divorce Poison."](#)