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## Kids Caught in the Middle

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*Madonna and Guy Ritchie. Christie Brinkley and Peter Cook. Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger. Celebrity divorces may be juicy gossip, but the toll on them and their kids can be similar to what non-celebrity families experience. These high-stakes splits serve to draw attention to a hotly debated form of emotional child abuse known as "parental alienation." Mental health experts say such abuse occurs when one parent alienates a child against the other parent. It's most apparent as a byproduct of hostile divorces, though it often starts in high-conflict marriages. How can you protect your child from a vindictive parent... or you? We asked Dr. Richard Warshak, author of Divorce Poison (HarperCollins, 2001)...*

This phenomon reached its public peak in the Baldwin-Basinger custody battle, in which Baldwin famously left his daughter a voicemail message in which he called her a "rude, thoughtless little pig." Basinger's lawyers claimed the message was evidence of his inability to parent their pre-teen daughter. Baldwin, on the other hand, claimed his inappropriate words grew out of extreme frustration at his ex-wife's long-term campaign to destroy his relationship with his daughter. In a public apology on his Web site, he wrote:

"I'm sorry, as everyone who knows me is aware, for losing my temper with my child. I have been driven to the edge by parental alienation for many years now. You have to go through this to understand..."

If you've been through a divorce or a polarized marriage, it's very likely that you've been either the perpetrator or the target of parental alienation on some level. But what exactly does that mean? Given little attention until recent years, parental alienation is now recognized by a growing number of psychologists and courts as a form of emotional child abuse. Parents can commit it consciously or subconsciously, and it ranges in degree from mild (complaints to a child about a parent) to extreme and ongoing (severe, systematic brainwashing).

"What is washed out of their brains is any awareness of positive, loving feelings for a parent," writes Warshak, an international parental alienation expert. "All that remains is a catalog of complaints ... about a parent who, in the past, had been a source of love and comfort."

When extreme vindictiveness by one parent toward another gets re-directed through the children they share, it can have devastating effects not only on children and parents, but on the extended family, too.

Warshak explains that when parents use their children as agents in a systematic campaign to destroy each other (most common during high-conflict custody battles), the consequences are nothing short of devastating. They often last well into the child's adult life. He estimates that several million people are now victims of parental alienation and that the numbers are growing.

### Common Traits of Alienation

While experts in the field continue to debate treatment, they agree on these four hallmarks of seriously alienated children under the influence of a vindictive parent.

#### 1. The child displays disrespectful behavior.

Children may stop greeting or talking to the targeted parent, avoid eye contact and shun the parent and his or her family members. They may also disregard rules and boundaries set by the targeted

parent.

In more serious cases, Warshak says, the child may go so far as to spit on a parent, act violently toward the parent and show disrespect by calling the targeted parent by their first name rather than “Mom” or “Dad.” The child may also show uncharacteristically high levels of contempt and cruelty to the alienated parent. Warshak says that the alienating parent typically promotes this behavior by championing it as the child’s right to express himself or herself.

## **2. The child’s behavior contrasts sharply with his or her past behavior.**

Parental alienation is most obvious in cases where a child and parent have had a warm, loving relationship that for no rational reason ends or deteriorates severely. This is different from children who have a longstanding poor relationship with a parent or who have good cause to break ties with a parent, neither of which suggests parental alienation. “In some cases when children reject a parent they are doing so because of that parent’s behavior... and the child has a good reason,” Warshak tells LifeScript.

## **3. There is no rational basis for the behavior change.**

“When you ask the children why they are behaving differently, they give very trivial reasons that just don’t add up,” Warshak says. In his book, he gives an example of a child who became estranged from her mother because the mother was “always telling me to brush my teeth.”

In the most extreme cases, children are encouraged by an alienating parent to lob unfounded allegations of abuse. A 1999 *Florida Law Review* article, citing a study of 700 high-conflict divorces over 12 years, found alienating parents commonly engaged in allegations of emotional abuse “presumably because physical abuse leaves visible evidence. It is, of course, much easier to falsely accuse someone of something that leaves no physical sign and has no third-party witnesses,” the article noted.

## **4. The child fears angering or wants to protect an alienating parent.**

Alienating parents often overtly or covertly control the child by withholding love and approval or by playing the victim who needs protection from the other parent. The motivations and techniques are numerous, Warshak says, and they cross gender lines.

“If there is one underlying unity among parents who do this to children, it’s that they seem unwilling or unable to inhibit destructive behavior,” Warshak says. Often an alienating parent’s preoccupation with hurting the ex-spouse - or the spouse within a marriage - supercedes all rational behavior. “It’s as if they don’t have a clear sense that what their children need is different than what they need.”

## **What to Do If You’ve Been Targeted As a Parent**

### **1. Keep your cool.**

You may feel tempted to lash back at a child whom you believe is being disrespectful and hurtful toward you. But as Baldwin - who was blocked from contacting his daughter after his outburst - learned, that’s the wrong thing to do.

“Getting angry with the child ... is an understandable reaction because parents are not prepared for the level of mistreatment and contempt [from their child],” Warshak says. But not only is it hurtful to your child, it also confirms the message the alienating parent is giving him or her.

### **2. Drop the lectures.**

When a child is programmed by one parent to disrespect the other, lectures on proper behavior fall on deaf ears. Worse, they diminish the time you could spend enjoying each other’s company. Minimize the attention you pay to your child’s poor behavior; instead, focus on positive things.

### **3. Acknowledge your child’s feelings.**

When a child expresses emotions you suspect were planted by the other parent, don’t dismiss his or her feelings. It will only entrench the child’s alienation. Chances are, he’ll claim the feelings are his or her own and not the other parent’s. Instead, Warshak suggests, acknowledge the feelings when the child expresses them, but don’t allow them to take center stage. Respond by saying something like, “I can see that you don’t want to be here. But what can we do today that will be fun for both of us?”

### **4. Remain calm.**

If your child tells you bad things your spouse or ex-spouse has said about you, don’t get upset and don’t bad-mouth him in return. Talking trash about parents scars children. Calmly ask children how

they feel about the comments they heard and tell them you understand how painful and stressful it can be to hear such talk.

#### **5. Don't under-react.**

“Many parents, following the advice of a therapist, will under-react by allowing children to repeat lies about [them],” Warshak says. A better solution: Help your child deal with the untruths and maintain as much custody time as possible with him or her.

“It’s important to express love and affection, despite the child’s denigration,” Warshak says. “Children who later reconcile [with the targeted parent] say the thing that helped them was to know that the parent never gave up on them despite how horribly [the targeted parent] was mistreated.”

Want to learn more? Get your own copy of [Divorce Poison](#).

#### **Are Your Kids Caught Between You and Your Ex?**

There are few things more painful than losing a child to an angry ex-spouse intent on revenge at any cost. But identifying the signs of parental alienation and taking the correct action will help you avoid making matters worse. Take this [parenting quiz](#) to find out how to best protect you and your kids.

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