

Take the Warshak Test Before Talking to Children About Your Ex

All parents sometimes behave in irrational ways that are confusing and troubling to their children. If we say nothing about this irrational behavior, we give our children no help in understanding it. We leave them on their own to cope. And when children lack an accurate understanding of their parent's troubling behavior, they may blame themselves for it.

Contrary to the "do nothing" approach, I believe it may be appropriate, at times, for one parent to acknowledge the other parent's shortcomings and help the children make sense of the behavior and place it in proper perspective. Note the key phrase "may be appropriate." Whether or not it is depends on a very careful and sensitive assessment of the situation. If we are not careful, we may cause as much damage as the parent we are criticizing. The need to respond effectively to denigration is never a license for unbridled retaliation.

First and foremost we must maintain a steadfast commitment to shield children from unnecessary stress and destructive communications. Some parents never make this commitment. Others lose it somewhere in the tangle of the disappointment and anger of a failed marriage. They allow their impulse to indulge personal wrath take priority over concern for their children. So, for example, they run down their ex in front of the children with total disregard for the children's need to maintain a positive image of that parent. They may try to justify their destructive behavior by hiding behind superficial rationalizations. Some common excuses: "I'm just telling him the truth about his mother," or "She needs to know what her father is really like."

Even parents with good intentions are often unsure about when to criticize and when to remain silent. Separated and divorced spouses struggle with heavy doses of anger, fear, uncertainty, and hurt, along with the very human temptation to express such feelings in destructive and irrational ways. Resisting this temptation is a genuine challenge. Occasionally parents succumb.

Most children can withstand their parents' isolated mistakes and lapses of good judgment. Repeated mistakes, though, can be damaging, especially when they become a familiar pattern of behavior. The following test gives parents a tool to help them judge whether their criticisms are likely to help or hurt their children. You can use it as a guide to learn why and when to keep quiet about the other parent and how to speak when it is appropriate. Using the test will help raise your awareness of the impact of your words on your children.

When faced with the impulse to present a parent or grandparent in a negative light, do some serious soul-searching. The following five questions will help you cut through self-deception, expose irrational motives which could be fueling your behavior, and focus attention on your children's genuine welfare. Of course it is best to review the questions before exposing your children to criticisms of their loved ones. The more you do so, the more you will avoid destructive communications. Still, lapses in judgment are inevitable. Every breakup has such moments. This test can serve as a reminder to be careful about what you say. When you do slip up, reviewing these questions can help strengthen your resolve to do better in the future.

If you believe that you are the target of bad-mouthing, these questions will help you clarify what is wrong with your ex's behavior.

The test sets a high standard by which you can evaluate your past and future behavior. The closer you come to meeting the standard, the more you will shield your children from the harmful effects of your acrimony.

The Five Questions

1. What is my real reason for revealing this information to the children?

You may think of more than one reason. But if any one of these does not concern their best interests, think again about whether the children will truly benefit from what you plan to say. If you decide to tell them, you will need to make sure that you do so in a manner that does not serve motives other than their best interest. Divorce Poison presents a list of motives that fuel a lot of the badmouthing and bashing of parents to which children are exposed. Make sure that your criticisms do not serve purposes such as getting revenge, needing to feel superior, or assuaging guilt.

2. Are my children being harmed by the behavior I am about to criticize? Or, are they being harmed by not having the information I am about to reveal?

You may have a legitimate grievance about your ex-spouse, but there is no reason to share this with the children if they are not hurt by the behavior in question. For example, a man wanted to tell his children, who were raised Catholic, that their mother had an abortion years earlier. He insisted that they had a right to know the truth. But when asked how his children were harmed by withholding this information, he drew a blank.

3. How will it help the children to hear what I am about to tell them?

Even if the children are being harmed by their other parent's behavior, before discussing it with them you should be convinced that your revelations will actually benefit the children. A woman believed that her ex-husband had been stingy in the divorce settlement. She knew that more money would enable her to provide better for her children. But she decided not to complain to the children about their father because she could not think of how it would help them to hear her opinion that their father was a cheapskate. There was nothing the children could do about the situation. Her revelations would only succeed in placing the children in the middle of an adult conflict and perhaps diminish their respect for their father.

4. Do the possible benefits of revealing this to the children outweigh the possible risks?

In many situations there is reason to believe that the revelations might benefit the children, but at the same time might create problems for them. An honest discussion of the other parent's flaws might help the children have more realistic expectations. But it might also poke holes in their idealization of the parent before they were emotionally prepared to give this up. Or it might lead to greater conflict in the parent-child relationship. If, after weighing the benefits and

risks, you decide to share your criticisms with the children, you will want to do so in a manner that maximizes the benefits while minimizing the harm. The next question will help you accomplish this goal.

5. If I were still happily married to my spouse, and I wanted to protect our children's relationship with him or her, how would I handle the situation?

This question helps raise your consciousness so that the content and style of your communications with your children avoids the influence of irrational motives. It challenges you to think of the most constructive course to take. If, when happily married, you would not want your children to have the information you are about to give, why do you think they need to know it now? And if, when happily married, you would find a way to discuss it that minimized harm to their relationship with the other parent, an approach that did not undermine their general respect and regard for that parent, that same discretion is called for after divorce.

A Simple Rule to Remember

Remember, it is easy to fool ourselves into thinking that bad-mouthing is justified. Because of the potential damage to our children, we should be convinced that what we say, and how we say it, meets the test of the five questions.

What if we are unsure about whether to include a particular observation or opinion in our conversations with the children? Here is a simple rule to follow:

When in doubt, leave it out.

About This Article

This article is adapted from DIVORCE POISON: HOW TO PROTECT YOUR FAMILY FROM BAD-MOUTHING AND BRAINWASHING (Harper, © 2001, 2010 by Richard A. Warshak, Ph.D.), the classic book that gives parents powerful strategies to preserve and repair loving relationships with their children.

Dr. Richard Warshak is a clinical, research, and consulting psychologist whose work on divorce, child custody, and parental alienation has shaped family law reform worldwide. His research-informed challenges to common assumptions and practices, combined with his commitment to evidence-based analysis, have established him as a leading authority on divorce, child custody, and the psychology of alienated children. Dr. Warshak's groundbreaking studies appear in 19 books and more than 90 articles, with his work translated in more than a dozen languages.

Through his work as a White House consultant, author, clinician, researcher, speaker, expert witness, and litigation consultant, Dr. Warshak has advanced family law and championed the well-being of children and families.