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By J. Steven Svoboda...

[Divorce Poison: Protecting the Parent-Child Relationship from a Vindictive Ex](#)

By Richard A. Warshak. New York, NY: ReganB



A decade after writing the much praised *The Revolution*, Richard Warshak has returned with a book that, as far as I can see, is virtually perfect. Warshak thoughtfully, and perhaps most remarkably, passionately and compassionately analyzes the relatively neglected topic of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS). To the author's credit, he is not attached to the term PAS and in fact adopts the alternative formulation "parent-child relationship poisoning" as an easily comprehensible shorthand. As its definition states, PAS results when one parent intentionally inserts a wedge between the child and the other parent. The methods of doing this (e.g., lying, forbidding contact, failing to bring the child to school exchanges, etc.) are many but the catastrophic result is the same: the child's life is poisoned.

Right on page one in the book's introduction, it becomes clear that the author will not shrink from challenging widespread "wisdom." He contests the suggestion that a "united front" is paralyzing after divorce and that it is never right to criticize the other parent. On the contrary, according to Warshak, parents who poison their child's relationships with loved ones deserve to be confronted and to right these wrongs. The author succinctly lays out the signs of PAS, which essentially amounts to brainwashing a child by one parent.

Warshak also includes a wealth of practical checklists

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and none of these serves our children. Moreover, because kids identify with both their parents, badmouthing their other parent amount to badmouthing your own children.

Warshak details the four main factors affecting a child's ability to resist divorce poison: 1) environment and manner in which badmouthing and brainwashing occurs; 2) your prior relationship with your child; 3) your child's specific characteristics; 4) your response to divorce poison. He helpfully follows this with four actions you can take against divorce poison: 1) exercise self-restraint; 2) maintain contact—ceasing contact won't help no matter how tempting it might be; 3) develop a thick skin; 4) avoid being drawn into a debate with the other parent, which is a no-win situation.

One chilling fact that comes through crystal clear in this book is the speed and frequent irreversibility of PAS. Following well-intentioned advice to wait and be patient and hope things will work out will often simply result in the loss of a relationship with one's children. Swift, specific, targeted action is often much better, and Warshak outlines the way to do this in a variety of situations.

Often an author writing about a particular phenomenon may, through no fault of their own, end up supporting the expansion of whatever category they are discussing. Warshak avoids this danger, grounding the discussion by providing a very useful section with examples of whole categories of child behavior that do NOT constitute divorce poison or PAS. One frequent situation is a child in an explosive family who, simply to avoid a war zone and to protect himself or herself from tension, fear and embarrassment, sometimes tells one parent he/she no longer want to see the other parent. If the origin of the rejection of the parent comes from the child and not from the other parent or an ally of the other parent, this does NOT constitute PAS.

False accusations of child abuse are frequently associated with divorce poison. Recent studies prove that children are remarkably suggestible and easily manipulable into convincing themselves that something entirely fictitious actually happened. Suggestions that children don't lie about such things are quite mistaken. Even experts are utterly unable to tell which children are telling the truth and which are lying about such things. Another temptation Warshak avoids is fostering an implicit and ultimately unhelpful alliance with the reader, by among other things providing a checklist to enable the reader to evaluate his or her own contribution to any alienation that may have occurred.

Chapter 4 catalogs the many reasons why a parent might foster divorce poison—narcissism, guilt, insecurity, etc. Again, specific examples flesh out these potentially hazy terms we have all heard before. Warshak has, to paraphrase Mark Twain, an all-too-uncommon common sense, and sprinkles his book with a good number of real life cases from his own years of work in the field as a psychologist specializing in these issues.

Chapter 5 intriguingly fleshes out the perhaps unsurprising but still fascinating fact that the same conditions that increase the risk of alienation from a parent are the conditions that foster indoctrination into cults, such as isolation, psychological dependence, and fear.

Chapter 6 sets forth the most common ploys used to coerce kids into rejecting their parents and often grandparents as well—pejorative labeling, use of first names to describe the adults ("Bill" instead of "Dad," for example), even creating a new name for the child. Alienating parents are not above exploiting an eminently understandable, momentary explosion of anger from the alienated

parent, or even provoking such a conflict with the stage set and witnesses in place. Sometimes parents will go to the Stalinist extreme of cutting alienated parents out of family photos and persuading a child that certain events involving that parent never occurred. In order to avoid the intense discomfort they would otherwise feel, children may even convince themselves that a parent must deserve mistreatment. Innuendo can be a very effective alienation technique, though Warshak provides some excellent suggestions on action steps to take to confront this ruse.

Chapter 7 contains invaluable poison control pointers, such as guidelines for increasing a child's receptivity to your communication (e.g., communicate genuine empathy, speak to someone else within the child's earshot about things you want the child to hear!) Advice on selecting and working with a therapist or therapists is very well thought out. Chapter 9, the most difficult one for the author to write, advises a parent on letting go when all else has failed.

A parent who engineers divorce poison breaks normal family boundaries and commits a sort of incest, transforming a child into an accomplice and often saddling the child with worries and fears that ought not be visited on children. Warshak does not dwell more than necessary on the tragic results of PAS, but it is clear that its victims suffer a lifetime of shortcomings and problems in virtually all phases of their lives as a result of being a pawn in a game of divorce poison. As with incest and child abuse, a tragically high percentage of those parents who foster alienation themselves had poor or absent relationships with at least one of their own parents and thus are reenacting their own childhoods.

Richard A. Warshak obviously cares deeply about parental alienation. One can scarcely help but be moved by his plea to leave divorce poison in its bottle. Despite their dark and eminently understandable feelings, parents must hold themselves to a higher standard for the good of the little ones who are the truly blameless victims here. The problem is clear, and the way forward is also clear. Every case the author knows of in which the court reduced an alienated child's time with the programming parent reduced or eliminated the alienation. When the time with the programming parent was not reduced, nine out of ten kids remained alienated. This magnificent book, sad though it is that it ever had to be written, is bound to alleviate heartache for countless children and parents.

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