When Kids Need to Know Bad Things About a Parent

Dr. Richard A. Warshak

WHEN KIDS NEED TO KNOW BAD THINGS ABOUT A PARENT

Version 1.1

Adapted from *Divorce Poison: How to Protect Your Family from Bad-mouthing and Brainwashing*

Publisher: HarperCollins

For additional resources on parental alienation, divorce, and child custody, visit http://www.warshak.com

CONTENTS

1. WHEN SILENCE IS NOT GOLDEN
2. THE WARSHAK TEST
3. USING THE WARSHAK TEST TO KEEP KIDS OUT OF THE MIDDLE
4. WHY DID YOU AND DADDY GET DIVORCED?
5. THE DELICATE BALANCE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

1. WHEN SILENCE IS NOT GOLDEN

Like many parents of alienated children, Maureen bit her tongue when her children returned from their dad spewing venom about their mother's alleged wrongdoings. She thought she was taking the high road. She had the support of her counselor whose advice was to give the children time to figure out for themselves that their dad's view of mom was not accurate.

Like many parents of alienated children, Maureen found that the laissez-faire policy recommended by the counselor was a disaster. Maureen thought she was taking the high road, but now she wondered whether she and her children would have been better off if she defended herself back when the bad-mouthing first began. The children never did figure out that they were unfairly judging their mother. The tragic result is that these children lost their mother, and their mother lost her children.

Experts agree that one of the best ways to help children survive divorce is to keep them out of the line of fire. It is equally true, though, that too many parents, often following advice from counselors, slavishly follow this tradition, and avoid criticizing their ex, even when their children could profit from hearing valid criticisms expressed in a constructive manner.

All parents sometimes behave in irrational ways that are confusing and troubling to their children. Some parents physically or emotionally abuse their children. If we say nothing about irrational and destructive 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 appropriate 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."

Before discussing with your children alleged flaws of their other parent, you should consider your motives. And you should weigh the potential benefits and risks to your children. If this seems like too much work, if you do not have the patience to think critically about such matters, if you just want to get on with the business of telling the children how bad the other parent is, then your motives are not good. Rather than acting like a responsible parent you are indulging your whims. Most likely your children will be harmed rather than helped by your revelations.

Even parents with good intentions are often unsure about when to criticize and when they should 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. Chapter 2 gives parents a test to help them judge whether their criticisms are likely to help or hurt their children. The test is 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.

2. THE WARSHAK TEST

You are convinced that your child's other parent, or a grandparent is bad, and the kids should know about it. Do they really need to hear what you have to say?

When facing the impulse to present a parent or grandparent in a negative light, do some serious soul-searching. Five questions help cut through self-deception, expose irrational motives that could be fueling your behavior, and focus attention on your children's genuine welfare. If you review the questions before exposing your children to criticisms of their loved ones, you can avoid destructive communications. Still, lapses in judgment are inevitable. Every breakup has such moments. This test serves 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 help you clarify what is wrong with your ex's behavior.

The Warshak test sets a high standard by which parents can grade their past and future behavior. The closer parents come to meeting the standard, the more they shield their children from the harmful effects of acrimony.

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

You may think of several reasons. 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 much of the

badmouthing and bashing of parents that children hear. 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 withholding this information harmed his children, 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 would actually benefit the children. A woman believes that her ex-husband was stingy in the divorce settlement. She knows that more money would enable her to provide better for her children. But she decides not to complain to the children about their father because she cannot think of how it would help them to hear her opinion that their father is 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 are 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 helps 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.

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 Warshak test.

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.*

3. USING THE WARSHAK TEST TO KEEP KIDS OUT OF THE MIDDLE

The Warshak Test helps parents judge whether their criticisms of each other are likely to help or hurt their children. The purpose of the test is to raise awareness of the impact of your words on your children and to help you learn why and when to keep quiet about the other parent and how to speak when it is appropriate.

To illustrate the use of this test, consider a scenario that often prompts divorced parents to criticize their ex-spouses to their children: reacting to a parent who is chronically late. A father is always late to pick up his children. This often disrupts his ex-wife's schedule. After repeated instances of such inconvenience, she wants to berate him in front of the children. She thinks of telling them, "You can't count on your father," or, "He's so irresponsible," or, "Your father cares more about his girlfriend than he does about you."

When this mother asks herself question one of our test, *"What is my real reason for revealing this information to the children?"* she realizes that she has mixed motives. On the one hand she feels bad for the children and angry with the man who disappoints them. On the other hand she is angry that he is inconsiderate of her needs. She concludes that her concern for the children is genuine, but that if she decides to talk with them about their father's lateness, she will need to be cautious not to allow her anger at him to influence the way she handles the situation.

Next she asks, "*Are my children being harmed by the behavior I am about to criticize?"* Yes, they are being harmed. They are constantly disappointed when he does not get them on time and they are anxious that he will fail to show. Not only are they disappointed and anxious, but they may assume that their father is late because they are not important enough to him. This could hurt their self-esteem.

The next question, *"How will it help the children to hear what I am about to tell them?"* It could help them have a different mind set while waiting for their father so that they can avoid excessive disappointment and worry. If the issue is discussed openly, their mother could help them find a healthy way to cope with his lateness. It could also help them place their father's behavior in perspective so that they do not regard it as an index of their worth to him.

Question four, *"Do the possible benefits of revealing this to the children outweigh the possible risks?"* The risks are the discomfort they could feel when their mother criticizes their father. Their mother's criticisms could cut deeper than their father's lateness. Nevertheless, if she chooses her words with discretion, she can help the children while minimizing the likelihood of stressing them even further.

The question that helps the most is question five. *"If I were still happily married to my husband, and I wanted to protect our children's relationship with him, how would I handle the situation?"* This forces her to think about the best way to discuss the issue with her children. She realizes that she actually handled the same issue during the marriage in a different manner. She can think of no reason not to handle it in a similar way now. While she was married her husband's lateness was chronically irritated her. But the children always showed much more tolerance of this trait. By the way, this is true in general: *Children are more able and*

willing to tolerate faults in their parents than spouses are with each other.

Armed with this perspective the mother realizes that it will not help the children to hear her berate their father as irresponsible or inconsiderate. It could undermine their respect for him. Instead, she tells them, "You may have noticed that Dad is usually late to pick you up. I know he loves spending time with you, but Dad has always been late for things, even things that are very important to him. A lot of people have a problem being on time. I wish Dad did not have this problem, but it does not have to be a big deal. Instead of just waiting by the door for him each time, find something to do that will keep you occupied and take your mind off the time. That way you won't have to worry so much. You know he always shows up and then you have a great time together." It would not have been wrong if she also encouraged the children to tell their father how they felt about his lateness.

None of the above discussion is meant to justify the father's lateness or to minimize the inconsiderateness of his behavior. His ex-wife had good reason to resent his irresponsible handling of his time with the children. His behavior hurt the children. It caused her to be late for her own appointments. Time is a precious commodity, especially for a single parent.

This mother deserves our respect because she handled the situation constructively. She carefully balanced her children's need to respect and admire their father with their need for assistance in coping with his lateness. She did not allow her resentment to dictate her behavior. The result is that she remained focused on what was most important to her—her children's welfare.

4. WHY DID YOU AND DADDY GET DIVORCED?

When parents decide to divorce they face the difficult challenge of telling the children. The task is so difficult that about one in four parents say nothing to the children. They leave the kids to figure out for themselves what is happening to their family. Only one in twenty parents do it right. They explain what is going on, what is going to happen, and what will be different for the children. And they promote an atmosphere in which kids feel free to ask questions and express their worries.

Even more difficult than announcing the divorce is the task of explaining to children the reasons for the divorce. Children will ask why, and they need and deserve an explanation that takes into account their intellectual and emotional maturity. In some situations, particularly with older children, the reasons for the divorce will necessarily include facts that will lead the children to hold one parent more responsible than the other.

Years ago I consulted to a couple struggling with this task. The mother became pregnant in the course of an extramarital affair and decided to leave her husband and three sons to move to another city and marry her lover. Naturally the children knew what their mother had done. They were liable to blame the divorce on her behavior. But even in this situation, the information can be conveyed to the children in a manner that does not encourage them to reject their mother. Without condoning the mother's behavior, the father can explain to his sons that he was not able to make their mother happy enough to stay in the marriage.

If we feel wronged, or do not want the divorce, we may want to tell the children that the divorce is the other parent's entire fault. Question 1 of the Warshak Test asks parents to search for motives. This will usually reveal that our wish to blame the divorce entirely on the other parent has less to do with our children's needs than our own.

At least three motives drive our desire to assign blame. First, we want to deflect blame from ourselves. We want to avoid accepting responsibility for the failure of our marriage. We do not want our children to be angry with us and we do not want to feel guilty for hurting them. Second, we want our children's sympathy and alliance. Third, we want to punish our spouse. By making the other parent the bad guy, we manipulate the children to be angry with, and perhaps even turn against, the other parent.

The message that our spouse is to blame for the divorce, therefore, carries three hidden requests. "Don't be mad at me. Pity me. Join me in being angry at your other parent." None of these serves our children.

Perhaps even more to the point, many people are wrong in blaming the failure of their marriage entirely on their ex-spouse. Though the initial decision to divorce might not have been their own, in the majority of cases both spouses contributed to the marital difficulties. (Let me quickly add that in some higher conflict cases, such as those with allegations of physical or emotional abuse, it is mistake to blame both spouses equally for the failure of the marriage. For a critique of the assumption that all conflict is bilaterally instigated see STOP DIVORCE POISON http://warshak.com/blog/?p=189) An honest answer to question 1, therefore, puts us on notice that we may be about to indulge our destructive urges under the guise of helping our children.

Question 2: Are my children being harmed by not having the information I am about to reveal? The answer to this question

gives no justification for telling the children that their other parent is fully responsible for the divorce: How can we say that they will be harmed by *not* hearing this?

Question 3: How will it help the children to hear what I am about to tell them? It is difficult to think of any clear benefit they would gain by hearing our opinion that the other parent is totally at fault. (This does not mean that we should deprive children of an explanation for the divorce.)

Question 4: Do the possible benefits of revealing this to the children outweigh the possible risks? This question forces us to acknowledge that placing blame gives our children no particular advantage in coping with the divorce, and it creates a clear risk. The children may share our anger. This may add unnecessary strain to their relationship with their other parent, thereby impeding their adjustment to the divorce.

Question 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 us identify the type of explanation that would best suit the needs of our children and protect their relationship with both parents. This will vary, depending on the circumstances of the marital conflict. But most helpful accounts of the divorce will avoid laying exclusive blame on one parent. The children will learn that their parents have decided to end their marriage. They may hear that the parents do not get along, or make each other unhappy. They may even learn of extramarital affairs. But they will be reassured that the divorce is not their fault. They will not be asked to take sides in the conflict. They will not have to view either parent as "the bad guy."

5. THE DELICATE BALANCE

"We try to present a united front to our children," one mother said. "When we reprimand the children, he backs me up and I back him up. Even when we disagree about how to handle the children, we don't let them know."

The "united front" approach is the traditional gold standard of good parenting. Maintaining a united front usually results in more secure and better-behaved children. Parents who drop the united front run the risk of tearing down their child's positive image of the other parent. They may also set a bad example that the child emulates.

Belinda consulted me with a problem shared by many single mothers. Her twelve-year-old son, Chad, was becoming increasingly disrespectful to her. He felt no need to comply with her simplest requests. She asked him if he finished his homework, and he told her to shut up. She told him that he couldn't go outside after dinner, and he said he didn't have to listen to a crazy lady. "Crazy lady" was the term his father used freely around Chad. The more Chad identified with his father's put-downs of Belinda, the freer Chad felt to defy her authority.

Many well-intentioned parents steadfastly adhere to a united front at all costs. This is a mistake. At times children need to hear constructive criticisms of their other parent. I am not advocating open season on your ex. Before criticizing, you must be convinced that it is primarily for your children's welfare, and not primarily for your own satisfaction, and that the disclosure primarily helps your children rather than hurts them.

There are two circumstances in which it is a mark of good parenting to drop the united-front approach. The first is when you are the target of malignant criticism.

After months of arguing, Denise asked her husband, Evan, to move out of the house, and he did. Whenever he phoned to speak with his sons, Denise took the call and launched into a tirade about what a lousy husband and father he was. What bothered Evan the most is that he could hear the boys in the background and knew they overheard their mother. When his sons came to his apartment, they told him that Mommy said he abandoned his family and didn't care about them anymore. They also said that she told them he was lazy and stupid. Evan simply ignored these comments. He was determined not to stoop to her level.

Even when a parent has not bad-mouthed us, we may need to discuss his faults with our children. Frank was an angry, depressed man who would periodically lash out at his daughter with harsh disapproval for normal childlike behavior. When Gail forgot to hang her coat in the closet, Frank yelled at her and called her a slob. Gail was too young to understand that her father’s outbursts were a symptom of emotional disturbance. Instead, Gail came to think of herself as a bad child. Gail's mother said nothing. She subscribed to the idea that you should never say anything bad about the other parent. By withholding her opinion of Frank's behavior, she compounded Gail's suffering.

The key to successfully navigating the delicate balance between helpful and harmful criticism is to understand our true motives (Warshak Test question 1). It is easy to fool ourselves. We can shrink our awareness of malevolent intentions by hiding them behind noble-sounding rationalizations. Trauma theorist Alice Miller showed how parents heap even the worst abuses on their children while telling them, “This is for your own good.”

To get beyond such rationalizations, review the malignant motives discussed in DIVORCE POISON. Ask yourself whether any of these could be influencing your decision to portray your ex, or a grandparent, in a negative light. It may help to discuss your intentions with a friend whom you trust to be objective. Be honest. Instead of quickly dismissing the likelihood of ulterior motives, stretch your awareness to detect even the hint of their presence. These efforts will pay off. The more we are in touch with our true feelings, the more control we have over their expression. When we surrender this control, we are more likely to act destructively and sabotage our children's relationship with loved ones.

Divorce is one of life's most painful passages. It is painful for the spouse who wants it. Painful for the spouse who feels rejected. Painful for the children.

We can understand and empathize with the spouse who feels wronged and wants revenge, or the spouse who is overwhelmed with anxiety at the thought of losing the children, or the spouse who prefers to forget that the marriage ever was. But using the children to express the pain, to get revenge, to cope with anxiety, to erase the past, is unacceptable. Parents must hold themselves to a higher standard. They must have the courage to face what they are doing to their children. They must honor their mission to safeguard their children's welfare, even when the darkest feelings beckon them to dim their awareness to their betrayal of their children. Divorce poison must be left in the bottle. Children deserve no less.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Richard A. Warshak is the author of DIVORCE POISON: HOW TO PROTECT YOUR FAMILY FROM BAD-MOUTHING AND BRAINWASHING (HarperCollins), the classic and best-selling parental alienation resource in the world, and co-author of WELCOME BACK, PLUTO: UNDERSTANDING, PREVENTING, AND OVERCOMING PARENTAL ALIENATION, the leading resource for families whose children struggle to stay out of the middle of parental conflicts. You can learn more about Dr. Warshak and find plenty of resources at http://www.warshak.com and his blog, Plutoverse (http://www.warshak.com/blog).