

THE CLASSIC GUIDE TO PREVENTING
AND OVERCOMING PARENTAL ALIENATION

“A godsend to the many divorcées
who are bashed by their ex-spouses.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

REVISED WITH
A NEW
INTRODUCTION
AND AFTERWORD

DIVORCE POISON

How to Protect Your Family from
Bad-mouthing and Brainwashing

Dr. Richard A. Warshak

AUTHOR OF *The Custody Revolution*



CHAPTER 3

ALIENATED CHILDREN

How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *KING LEAR*

At age eleven, Jeremy was as close to his father as a boy can be. He told his sixth-grade teacher that he was going to attend his father's college, enlist in the navy, and then work for the State Department, just as his dad had done. Within two months of his parents' separation, Jeremy insisted that he hated his father and never wanted to see him again. His hatred spread like a virus to encompass everyone associated with his father. He didn't want to play with his cousins, and he rejected the grandmother who had been his favorite person in the world.

Divorce poison works fast—so fast that it catches target parents off guard, leaving them confused about exactly what is happening and bewildered about why it is happening. Learning about pathological alienation and the typical behaviors of alienated children helped Jeremy's father and his relatives understand exactly what they were up against. It was reassuring to know that others had similar experiences, and that the problem has been recognized and described by mental health professionals.

Experts disagree about how to label and treat this disturbance. Despite their differences, though, most experts agree that alienated children share certain traits and behaviors first identified by Dr. Richard

love. Even when the result is not the complete loss of contact, the relationships are tainted with discomfort, hesitation, inhibition, and the loss of the specialness that comes with relatively unconditional positive regard.

The spread of animosity extends even to pets! I recall watching a videotape of a child who was described by her mother and her teachers as a sweet girl who loved animals. When the father's little dog sought her attention, this "sweet" child could not summon up even the slightest affection for this cute dog. The dog made repeated efforts to snuggle, and the girl rebuffed the dog, and even pushed the dog away. The dog clearly did not understand such irrational behavior, and continued repeatedly to seek affection. Like members of an alienated extended family, the dog must have wondered (if dogs can wonder) what he did to deserve such contempt. This video was a poignant testament to the extent to which everything associated with the target parent becomes tainted in the child's mind.

The spread of hatred is one of the best ways to distinguish between children who are the victims of divorce poison and those whose alienation is a response to mistreatment by the hated parent. Children who are severely abused by their fathers, for example, generally welcome the loving involvement of their father's relatives. Victims of divorce poison, though, act as if every relative of the hated parent has behaved in an equally offensive manner deserving of swift and total abandonment. In this respect the children are following the lead of the favored parent.

Some parents and professionals resist the notion that one parent can be primarily responsible for a child's alienation. They believe that both parents must play a significant role. I think the spread of hatred is the clearest indication that a child's alienation can be, and often is, independent of the behavior of the people being rejected. Very often the child goes from loving to shunning a relative without having had any contact with the relative in the intervening period. No one could attribute such alienation to the behavior of the relative.

One woman told me that shortly following her brother's separation from his wife, her nephew stopped speaking to her. The last thing he said to her was that his mother told him and his siblings that when they saw their aunt and uncle they no longer needed to kiss them or say hello because "they are strangers to you." As far as his mother was concerned they did not exist. His mother took the separation from his father as a reason to essentially declare war on the father's entire extended family,

despite the close ties that existed between her children and their aunts, uncles, and cousins.

In a surprising number of families, divorce results in the total rupture of relations between an ex-spouse and the former in-laws. At first, the children shun the extended family in order to show loyalty to the favored parent. Over time, the children come to believe that the rejected family is truly deserving of contempt.

A boy in rural Kansas was raised by his paternal grandmother from the age of two to twelve, even though his parents were married for five of these years and lived next door. Four years after the divorce, when the boy's mother learned that her ex had a girlfriend, she began bad-mouthing the man and his entire family. She told her former mother-in-law that she wanted to have nothing to do with her anymore. The next time the boy visited his grandmother, he walked in the house without greeting her, kept his head down, avoided eye contact, and went straight to his room, where he stayed for several hours.

How do children justify rejecting their grandparents? In some cases they offer no reasons. The alienating parent decides to break relations with his former in-laws and the children merely follow suit. Often, though, children do give a reason for their negative opinion of their grandparents. They usually recall an episode in which the grandparents defended the alienated parent against the children's criticisms. After that, the grandparents were enemies.

Alienated children succumb to a type of tribal warfare. They categorize every relative as either ally or enemy. No one can be neutral. Failing to take a stand against the alienated parent is equivalent to siding with that parent against the other parent and the children.

In the typical scenario, the alienated parent has confided in her family that the children have been denigrating her. But not having seen it themselves, the family is ill prepared for the harshness of the children's negative attitudes and the dramatic change in their behavior. When the relatives witness it firsthand, they are appalled. They respond as they would to any other instance of the children acting rudely and disrespectfully. They try to reason with the children and they reprimand them. When the children give trivial reasons for their newly acquired attitudes, the relatives dismiss these as ridiculous. If the children claim that they have been abused, they are called liars. In turn, the children feel misunderstood and they resent the implication that they are distorting reality.

of people do this to their children? Why do they do it? And how can we respond effectively?

POOR BOUNDARIES

As we search for the motives behind divorce poison, we should keep one thing in mind. A motive explains only the *impulse* to tamper with children's affections. But an impulse is not an action. Parents often inhibit behavior toward their children rather than succumb to impulse. For example, we don't spank every time we feel like doing so. Most divorcing parents go through a period when they feel chronic impulses to bad-mouth their ex-spouse, but they often suppress these when their children are present.

What is it that allows some loving parents to suspend their role as their children's protector—to renege on their basic parental responsibility—rather than inhibit their behavior as they do other behavior they regard as destructive to their children? In many cases the answer is simple: They do not regard it as destructive to their children. Many parents who bad-mouth are so preoccupied with hurting their ex-spouses that they choose not to think about the impact on their children. Other parents appear incapable of recognizing that their own thoughts and feelings and their children's needs may not be identical. Such parents will often refer to themselves and the children as a single unit. At the onset of the separation one mother told her husband, "We don't want to see you. We don't need you. Why don't you just stay out of our lives?" When this woman thought of her family, she drew no distinction between her feelings and those of her children.

The blurring of parent-child boundaries allows parents to pursue, with single-minded determination, their goal of demeaning the ex, even when this means embarrassing the children; even when this means confusing them, depriving them, or scaring them.

I remember one particularly cruel example. An accountant who had successfully alienated his children from their mother became enraged when his wife refused to postpone a custody hearing for which he felt unprepared. While driving his children to a court-appointed therapy session, he vilified their mother, as he had done many times before. This time, though, he told them that their mother's refusal to postpone the

hearing would cause his cancer cells to spread all over his body and kill him. The father actually did have cancer, but his oncologist testified that the father's condition had a cure rate of over 90 percent. Furthermore, the idea that the man was currently facing death was totally fabricated and without any medical basis. The father knew this. But his children did not.

This man's rage at his wife, his wish to have the children align with him against her, and his unwillingness to modulate his outbursts led him to behave sadistically toward his own children. He made them think that he was near death's door and that it was their own mother who was pushing him through it. To make the scenario even worse, he tied his impending death to the struggle over custody. The children knew that they were the subject of the legal battle, so it was no surprise that they felt some degree of responsibility themselves for his "impending death." Unfortunately, after many years these children still have not recovered their love for their mother.

In their determination to undermine the relationship between the children and the target, parents act as though nothing is more important to their children than the parent's own concerns. An example occurred in a telephone conversation between a mother and her son. I use the word *conversation* loosely because it was mainly a one-sided diatribe in which the boy struggled unsuccessfully to be heard. This mother expected her boy to be her "comrade in arms" in a custody battle. She told him that Daddy suffered from a mental illness and could become violent at any moment (this was not true). She told him that she knew he was scared of his father, even though the boy showed no such inclination. She ordered him to tell everyone he saw that he was afraid of his father. She also told him to call 911 and tell them to send out the police because he was afraid. And then when the police arrive, she said, tell them that you are afraid of your father and that you need to live with your mother.

Throughout the call the boy kept trying to change the subject rather than agree that his father was a horrible person. He tried to tell his mother about a project he was working on for school and about fun things that were occurring in his father's home. The mother ignored his comments. She pursued her agenda until her son finally gave up. The rest of the conversation consisted of the mother repeating her warnings about the father and the son repeating "Yes, Mom" in a flat, monotone voice. When she was convinced of her success, the mother hung up. Her son did, in fact, call 911 and repeat verbatim what he had been coached to say. After many years this boy still refuses to speak to his father.

By treating her son as an accomplice in the custody dispute—a peer—and demanding his support, this woman was obliterating the usual psychological boundary that exists between adults and children. Kids should be able to look to their parents for support and guidance, not the other way around. When they are required to devote themselves to their parents' emotional needs, they must prematurely surrender a part of childhood.

TAKE ACTION

If parent-child boundaries are blurred or in danger of becoming blurred, begin a dialogue with your child about similarities and differences between people. First, talk about relatively neutral topics, such as similarities and differences in appearance and in preferences for food, color, music, TV shows, and so on. How is your child like, but also different from, his two parents? Enlist your child's interest in the conversation by challenging him to think of three ways in which he is like his mother and his father, and three ways in which he is different from them.

Next, move the discussion into the area of feelings. Parents and children don't always feel the same. Begin with feelings other than anger. How is your child like and different in the things that make him happy? Scared? For example, your son loves cartoons; you love romantic movies. He may be afraid of the dark, but you aren't. You may be afraid of snakes, while he enjoys handling them. Again, challenge him to think of his own examples.

Once the principle of different feelings has been taught, use an example that involves anger: Your boy may be furious with his sister and say he hates her, but you continue to love both. Examples like this can be used to show your child that he does not have to share the hatred of the alienating parent. "Because Daddy is very angry with Mommy, he wants you to be angry with me too. But you don't have to be. You don't have to feel everything the same as Daddy. You can have your own independent feelings."

Helping children insulate themselves from a parent's malignant influence is important. But it is usually not enough. To stop divorce poison, we must identify the specific motives, feelings, personality traits, and situations that drive the perpetrator. Different motives call for different responses. A strategy that ends bad-mouthing in one parent may intensify it in another.

REVENGE

Parents who bad-mouth and bash are angry people. Some may feel rejected. Some may feel betrayed. Some may believe they have been treated unfairly. Many want to get even. One way to retaliate is to deprive the ex of the children's love.

A man whose wife initiates the divorce tells her, "If you want to leave me for another man, our children are going to know what kind of woman you are. Leave me and you can say good-bye to your children." Since the court will not generally agree that this is a good reason for children to lose their mother, his next step is to undermine the children's regard for her so that they will not want to see her.

When divorce poison is driven by revenge, the most effective antidote is to eliminate the provocation. Ask yourself, "Why is he or she so angry? Is there anything I can do about it?"

Sam knew exactly why his ex-wife was bad-mouthing him to their children. When Trish decided to leave him after twenty years of marriage, he punished her by being dishonest during the divorce negotiations. He hid much of their financial assets from her. As a result, Trish received a very unfair settlement, and they both knew it. She retaliated by running him down in front of the children, telling them that he was a liar and a cheat. As his children suffered from the bad-mouthing, and his own initial anger about the divorce subsided with time, Sam did something very unusual. He instructed his lawyer to revise the original divorce settlement. This move surprised Trish. Though she didn't thank Sam (she was getting what she should have had all along), she did feel less angry and restrained her bad-mouthing. It was the beginning of a more trusting co-parenting relationship. Everyone benefited.

In most cases the anger behind divorce poison is a response to real or perceived offenses that cannot be undone. All you may be able to do is

NARCISSISM

Bad-mouthing parents act superior. But many actually feel inferior as parents. They put down the other parent in order to convince themselves, the children, and the world that they are the better parent and more deserving of love.

Such parents fail to appreciate that the bad-mouthing and bashing they use to bolster their image as parents accomplishes the exact opposite. It demonstrates, for all to see, a severe parental deficiency: the willingness to sacrifice their children's needs in order to feed their own weak egos.

In *The Custody Revolution* I described how excessive narcissism leads some parents to fight for custody. Readers let me know that it also leads to divorce poison. How can you tell when narcissism is behind efforts to turn your children against you? Look for some of the following traits:

- an overly inflated view of the person's own importance (not to be confused with genuine positive self-regard—a narcissistic man is "a legend in his own mind")
- a tendency to exaggerate accomplishments
- an excessive need for admiration
- a noticeable lack of empathy (He does not put himself in other's shoes.)
- excessive envy
- a constant belief that others envy him
- an imperious, condescending manner
- a sense of entitlement that pervades interpersonal relationships

I consulted on a case in New York City in which a man clearly fit the above profile. Vincent was well known in his community as a father who sought positions of authority in nearly every extracurricular activity that involved children. He was the scout leader, the soccer and baseball head coach, the Sunday school teacher, the safety chairman of the Homeowners Association, and so on. He did everything possible to build his résumé as a parent.

Initially Vincent impressed his neighbors. Then one by one they became disillusioned with him. They described him as someone who acted as if he were entitled to their favors. He took advantage of them. They

also said Vincent always drew attention to himself. He would tell anyone who was willing to listen about how much prestige and influence he had in the community, about how much he did for his son, about how pious he was.

After his divorce Vincent married a woman with custody of her daughter. He quickly became embroiled in two separate custody disputes. First, he tried to erase his stepdaughter's father from the girl's life. Second, he tried to diminish the role of his son's mother in the boy's life. In both cases he seemed on a mission to persuade the children (and the courts) to accept him and his wife as their only legitimate parents. And in both cases the judge ruled against Vincent and expressed concern about his inability to recognize the damage he was causing.

Excessive narcissism is not restricted to men. Wanda continuously ran down her husband in front of their two boys, with little regard for the children's feelings. She craved attention from other men and dreamed of a better life, and finally she decided she deserved more. She told her husband that she was leaving and agreed that the boys would alternate weeks with each parent.

While the children were on a trip with their church youth group, Wanda moved into an apartment in another school district, closer to the friends with whom she liked to party. She took with her nearly all of the children's clothes (except old clothes that no longer fit) and most of the furniture. Her apartment was too small to accommodate everything, so Wanda rented a storage unit. In an incredible display of disregard for her family, she also took the refrigerator, which her mother had given them, and moved it into storage since her apartment was already equipped with one. Wanda told her husband that the children would have to stay with him the first week because she needed time to get settled. So the children returned from their vacation to an empty house.

The teenage son was furious with his mother. He had no clean clothes to wear to school and none of his familiar possessions. When he came to her apartment the next week, he discovered that his "bedroom" was the den, with no privacy. He saw that the refrigerator, which she took, was not there. And he had to wake up earlier than usual in order to take the city bus to his school, which was three blocks from his father's house. The boy complained and asked to spend more nights in his father's home. Wanda responded by accusing her husband of brainwashing. She failed to appreciate that her self-centered behavior angered her

son. The boy's younger brother was also upset by the move, but he tried to please both parents by keeping his complaints to himself.

Parents who make false accusations of parental alienation often have narcissistic traits. Their self-centered behavior antagonizes their children, but such parents blame the resulting problems on the other parent. Narcissists rarely take responsibility for the havoc they create in their relationships.

TAKE ACTION

To protect against false charges of divorce poison made by a narcissistic ex, keep a list of your ex-spouse's behavior that creates problems in his or her relationship with the children. Include behaviors such as repeated broken promises, bad-mouthing you to the children, and ignoring the children's legitimate needs.

Continue to support your children's love and respect for your ex. Help them appreciate his or her positive qualities in addition to empathizing with their dislike of the narcissistic behavior. If you are accused of alienating the children, it is important to demonstrate that: (1) although the children have a strong preference for you, they have a balanced view of their other parent and are not alienated, (2) their difficulties with the other parent are a direct and realistic reaction to the treatment they have received from that parent, and (3) rather than exploit their complaints to turn the children against your ex, you have done the opposite by encouraging the continuation of the relationship. In most cases, even when a parent has significant psychological problems, children are better off maintaining ties in some form. In the long run your children will be grateful that you helped them achieve this.

Some narcissistic parents successfully manipulate their children to side with them against the other parent. Children may join in a campaign of denigration in order to curry favor with the parent whose capacity for genuine reciprocal attachment is more limited. The children sense the shallow emotional investment of the self-absorbed parent, and do what they can to preserve their tenuous tie to this parent. Particularly when narcissism is combined with aggression, children may fearfully endorse

the parent's campaign of hatred rather than risk becoming targets themselves. I will have more to say about this in the next chapter.

Paradoxically, self-absorbed people can be charismatic and charming to others when their needs for adulation are gratified. Some of the rich and famous fall into this category. They may successfully seduce children's allegiance through an aura of excitement and special treatment and the trappings of success that surround them.

Then there are the unlucky children who have two highly narcissistic parents. Such parents blithely fight each other and accuse each other of divorce poison, all the while being oblivious to or complacent about the impact of their battles on their children.

Narcissistic parents like Vincent and Wanda generally make poor candidates for therapy or mediation. Because they are deficient in understanding other's feelings, they do not understand the necessity of compromise or how their behavior affects their children. Although you should try therapy as a first option, unfortunately it often takes the threat of legal sanctions, such as losing custody, to make an impact on such parents.

Because narcissists use divorce poison to compensate for feeling inferior as parents, anything you can do to support their egos in a reasonable manner may lessen their need to put you down. For example, encourage them to make unique contributions to their children's lives, contributions they can brag about. This might be participating in scouts or assisting with special school projects. Narcissists are exquisitely sensitive to appearances. It can be helpful for them to retain the legal title of joint custodian even if the children spend relatively little time in their care and the other parent retains the authority to make most decisions. If, instead, the court strips them of this title, the resulting loss of face could exacerbate the brainwashing.

TAKE ACTION

To respond to narcissism:

- Bolster their self-respect by providing opportunities for narcissists to contribute meaningfully to their children's lives.
- Attempt counseling.
- If divorce poison continues, consider legal action.

GUILT

All parents regret some things they did or did not do for their children. Some divorced parents have so little tolerance for guilt that they try to deflect attention from their own failings by focusing on how much worse the other parent is. A man who spent too little time with his children, for example, decides to make up for this by rescuing them from a mother whom he now regards as the incarnation of everything rotten in a parent.

Guilt can also lead a parent to make a false accusation of brainwashing.

I once received a call from a woman whose ex-husband had abandoned their daughter for seven years. After the failure of his second marriage, he decided to renew contact with his child. He expected that she would be thrilled to be reunited with her father. The reality was markedly different. His daughter was reluctant to spend time with him. To her he was a stranger. She resisted going on visits with him and she was reserved in his presence. Rather than accept responsibility for causing the situation and proceed in a more reasonable manner to gradually build a relationship with his child, this father accused the girl's mother of fostering the child's estrangement. His solution was to seek immediate full custody. Fortunately, he was unsuccessful.

TAKE ACTION

Therapy is often effective when guilt is the main motive behind bad-mouthing or false accusations of brainwashing. The guilty parent must be helped to appreciate that the best way to atone for past misdeeds is to focus on the child's current needs. Bad-mouthing, bashing, and brainwashing only compound the child's problems, and will in turn increase the perpetrator's guilt.

INSECURITY

Some parents doubt their ability to maintain their children's love and affection. They regard the other parent as a competitor for the children's love and are afraid that they will eventually lose the competition. To cope with their insecurity they try to drive a wedge between the children and

the other parent. Their hope is that this will cement the children's relationship with them.

From the time of the divorce Frances rejected every request made by her ex-husband to spend more time with his young son. In the face of growing hostilities, Frances's father called a meeting to try to make peace. At the meeting Frances revealed that she left her little boy with a babysitter nearly every Saturday and Sunday, in addition to the full-time day care she used during the week. Her father gently suggested that she could allow the boy's father and grandparents to care for the child some of these times. Frances was infuriated. Half screaming and half crying, she asked, "Why should I allow that? I don't want my boy to become more bonded to his dad than to me." At a deeper level Frances knew that her ex-husband had more warmth and affection to give a child and that her son probably would feel closer to his father in the long run. What she did not realize was that children have enough room in their hearts to love both parents, despite the limitations of each. You will find this type of insecurity in many instances of bad-mouthing and bashing.

TAKE ACTION

Reassure your ex of his or her importance to your children. Refrain from behavior that can appear to be a competition for the children's favor. If the children enjoy a special activity with their other parent, don't duplicate the activity in your home. Let them have unique pleasures with each parent.

SEEKING VALIDATION

Some parents denigrate ex-spouses merely because it feels good. They seek an outlet for their anger by expressing it to other people, and they hope that their audience will agree with their assessments. The audience is anyone who will listen: coworkers, relatives, friends, and at times, but not always, the children. Even when the children are not the intended audience, they will be hurt if their parents make no special effort to censor their comments when the children are within earshot.

When alienation occurs in these cases it may be an unintended con-

sequence of the children's overhearing repeated put-downs of their other parent. But often it is no accident that the children have been exposed to the criticisms. The parent (whether consciously or not) wants the children to share the same negative opinion of the target.

TAKE ACTION

If the children overhear bad comments about you, don't assume that your ex is deliberately poisoning them. Tell the bad-mouthing parent that you thought he or she would want to know what the children have heard and repeated. Say this in a noncritical tone. If your ex will be unreceptive to anything you have to say, ask someone else in the family to bring up the subject. Parents sometimes need reminders to take care in what they say around their children. This is particularly true in the early stages of separation, when anger and distress are at a peak. Parents who have inadvertently allowed the children to overhear destructive criticisms of their other parent may be willing to alter their behavior with feedback about it if they do not feel attacked for their mistakes.

HOLDING ON WITH HATE

When a recently divorced man goes on his first date and spends most of the time complaining about his ex-wife, his date knows that this man is not yet emotionally ready for a new relationship. He is preoccupied with thoughts and feelings about his marriage and divorce. And this reveals that he is still—in some way—connected to his ex.

This is not surprising. Two people meet, fall in love, marry, conceive and raise children together, vacation together, and share life's joys and tragedies, ups and downs. Through years of shared experiences they form strong emotional ties. When the marriage fails, a judge's signature on a divorce decree may sever their legal tie. But we should not expect their emotional connection to evaporate immediately or completely.

In time most people put the marriage and divorce behind them. They gradually withdraw their emotional investment in the former spouse.

They form new relationships. They think about their ex-spouse less often and with less intense emotion. They find better things to do with their time than obsess about the faults of their former partner. And they neither seek nor want extensive contact.

Some people, though, are unwilling to let go, and they are not necessarily the rejected spouses. It is surprising and ironic that often the ones who initiated the divorce have more difficulty accepting the end of the relationship. They become determined to maintain a passionate relationship any way they can. When they are unable to arouse romantic passion, they will settle for rage. Like children starved for attention who misbehave to get it, they prefer highly charged negative involvement to none at all.

A relentless, virulent campaign of denigration guarantees ongoing contact. The goal is not to end the children's relationship with the other parent, it is to remain entangled with the ex. As long as they attack and accuse, they can look forward to some response. It is as if they are saying "I refuse to give you up. If I cannot have your love, I'll hold on with hate. I will keep you involved whether you like it or not. We will continue to dominate each other's thoughts. We will continue to stir strong feelings in each other."

These parents act as if their main goal in life is to make their ex miserable. Often they succeed. They may be so successful that they drive the alienated parent away: The target parent gives up trying to foster a relationship with the children. But the denigrating parent does not stop pursuing a relationship with the target. He or she merely finds another way to assure contact. A favorite forum is the courtroom.

Litigation provides ample opportunities to provoke hostile engagement. Most of these actually occur before trial, in the form of *discovery*, *interrogatories*, and *depositions*. These legal tactics give bashing and brainwashing parents a front-row center seat from which to observe intimate details of their ex-spouse's life.

Requests for discovery are formal demands that require a person involved in a lawsuit to turn over to the other side specified documents. These can include highly personal material such as diaries and bank statements. *Interrogatories* are pretrial questions put by one side to the other which, by law, require written responses. The requests can be quite intrusive. These often include, for example, questions about the frequency of sexual intercourse with a boyfriend. *Depositions* are pretrial examinations of a witness conducted by an attorney with no judge pres-

ent. The witness is sworn to tell the truth, just as in a courtroom, and a court reporter records the proceedings. Although the opposing attorney can raise objections, because no judge is present to rule on the objections, the witness may be asked irrelevant, provocative, and intrusive questions. In a Connecticut deposition I recently attended as a trial consultant, a man was asked about his masturbation practices. Despite his embarrassment (of the eight people in the room, three were women), he answered the question. If the case goes to trial, and the judge sustains the objection, the answer will not be part of the official testimony. But by this point the damage is often done.

One survivor of brutal litigation felt as if she had been run through "a psychological meat grinder." Most people feel the same. They experience it as a vicious crisis which dominates their life for months, sometimes years. But the crisis is welcome to ex-spouses who refuse to let go. It allows the relationship with the ex-spouse to take center stage. One man harassed his ex-wife by filing repeated suits to modify custody. Even when the judge ordered a two-year moratorium on any such suits, the man violated the court ruling within six months. He simply could not resist embroiling his ex in the turmoil of a lawsuit.

Friends and relatives of such parents eventually withdraw their support and admonish them, in effect, to get a life. This is precisely what may help the situation. When I suspect that the wish to hold on is behind a campaign of hate, I will usually tell alienated parents that their best hope for relief is for their former spouse to find a new love. Only then will they be willing to close the book on their marriage.

IS YOUR EX-SPOUSE HOLDING ON WITH HATE?

The distinguishing feature of an ex who holds on is the high frequency of contact with you. By contrast, the brainwashing parent who truly wants to end the relationship minimizes contact; all his actions are consistent with the goal of erasing you from his life and the lives of your children.

If you think you are the target of bashing and brainwashing by an ex who refuses to let go, look for the following behaviors:

- Constantly pumps neighbors and friends for information about you and your activities
- Frequently initiates contact with you: This may take the form of stalking, calling often, leaving long voice-mail messages, or threatening lawsuits.
- Tries to draw you into arguments that rehash old marital grievances
- Is preoccupied with expressing hatred for you even when you are not around
- Constantly shows up at places where you are sure to be
- Makes no attempt to inhibit hostile exchanges in public; provokes embarrassing scenes at children's school and athletic events
- Seems to take pleasure in the hostile encounters: for example, when talking about the turmoil he creates, is unable to suppress a gleeful smile
- Though denouncing you as evil and worthless, periodically raises the possibility of reconciliation. Or, gives you the distinct impression that he wants to reconcile.

PARANOIA

People who suffer from paranoia have a pervasive tendency to categorize others as either "for" them or "against" them. Any life stress heightens this tendency. When going through divorce, parents with this trait worry about the allegiance of relatives, friends, and even their own children. No one they know can be neutral. Those who are not unconditionally with them are against them. As a result, their children feel pressured into joining in a campaign of denigration against the other parent.

Paranoid people are exquisitely sensitive to slights. It takes very little to arouse their suspicions. One father panicked and thought that his phone contact with his daughter was being permanently cut off simply because one scheduled call was missed. As it turned out, his daughter did try to call, but his line was busy and she went to sleep early. If the children are belligerent, whiny, or disobedient, such parents leap to the con-

clusion that the children are becoming alienated, and they blame the other parent. Of course all children act this way at times. Children are especially likely to be negativistic and oppositional when they have been exposed to marital turmoil. Such considerations will be overlooked by paranoid parents. They will generally dismiss the most probable and benign explanations for behavior in favor of far-fetched and malevolent interpretations. To defend against imagined alienation, these parents may engage in preemptive strikes: They try to turn the children against the parent they falsely accuse of brainwashing.

Shortly after his ex-wife remarried, Gene became increasingly worried that she might try to reduce his time with their four-year-old son. The more he worried about it, the more he convinced himself that she was in fact planning a lawsuit against him. His anxiety heightened when his son spoke positively about his new stepfather. Gene channeled his anxiety into what eventually became a brainwashing campaign. He began to inspect his son for bruises upon every return from the mother's home. The boy got the message that his father did not think the mother's home was safe for a child. Everyday childhood bumps and scrapes became evidence, in Gene's mind, of abuse. The boy tried to explain the innocuous source of the injuries, like falling off a bike or tripping over a shoelace. But Gene dismissed the explanations as cover-ups, excuses made by a child who was too scared to reveal that his stepfather hurt him. In fact, the more the child defended his stepfather, the more Gene became convinced that the boy was afraid of the man. Over time, much of the boy's behavior became signs to Gene of abuse. When the boy had a couple of nightmares, rather than accept these as normal for children this age, Gene assumed that these were traumatic symptoms.

Gene made numerous complaints to child welfare. Each complaint was dutifully investigated. The outcome was always the same. There was no rational basis to suspect abuse in the mother's home. Eventually, Gene's alienating behavior became too much for his ex to ignore and she did just what he originally feared. She filed a lawsuit to modify their custody agreement in order to protect her son from his father's paranoid behavior.

As Gene's case illustrates, when paranoid people act on their suspicions, they often bring about the very situation they feared in the first place. It is crucial that courts realize that the parent who first raises an accusation of divorce poison may well be the perpetrator rather than the

victim. Otherwise the court might deprive the healthier parent of custody. In this manner, the paranoid parent's efforts are sometimes successful.

More often than not, however, their efforts backfire. They confuse and scare the children and ultimately alienate them. When this occurs the parents almost never recognize their own contributions to the problem. Instead they feel vindicated in their initial paranoid beliefs. They tell themselves, and anyone who will listen, "I knew they were against me all the time."

Paranoid parents gravitate to the courts to seek justice. So you may have no choice but to use legal remedies to respond to their destructive behavior. This is unfortunate. Courtroom battles are inevitably embarrassing and frustrating. They exacerbate rather than relieve a paranoid person's concerns about persecution. Some therapists have reported success when courts have ordered paranoid parents to participate in treatment with groups of families.

TAKE ACTION

If paranoia is fueling divorce poison, you must exercise great care in how you treat the perpetrator. Paranoid people become more anxious when they sense that important information is being withheld, or when things are uncertain. Their anxiety leads to indignation and rage. Like scared dogs, paranoid people can become dangerous when they feel threatened. The less uncertainty they face, the less they will fill in the gaps of their knowledge with suspicions and distortions.

- Try to keep a paranoid ex informed of relevant matters.
- Communicate clearly in a calm and respectful tone of voice. Avoid any appearance of concealing things.
- Give the paranoid parent time to think about any proposals before expecting a response.
- Set clear and reasonable limits and then stick to them.
- As much as possible, follow through on your agreements and act in a predictable manner.

REENACTMENTS = Å GJENTA ET SKUESPILL

A few years ago I made a discovery. In reviewing the backgrounds of parents who foster alienation, I noticed that a very high percentage had a poor or absent relationship with at least one of their own parents. I think there is a connection.

Sigmund Freud wrote about our "compulsion to repeat" past unpleasant experiences and modern psychological research has confirmed this tendency. Sometimes the replay occurs in our minds, as in the case of "flashbacks" or dreams, and sometimes in reality, as in the case of child abuse victims who inflict similar abuse on their own children.

The psychological purpose of reenactment is not clear. One theory suggests that a sense of mastery is gained by inflicting the trauma on someone else so that the formerly helpless victim becomes the powerful perpetrator. This may explain why some parents mistreat their children in the same way the parents were mistreated in childhood, and why some divorced parents who have suffered the absence of a parent will try to inflict the same deprivation on their children rather than protect them from a similar fate. If we recognize when this dynamic lies behind brainwashing, we can use this information to help persuade a parent to stop the destructive behavior.

One woman in San Francisco had not talked to her own father for the nine years prior to his death. She had been programmed to believe that he was a criminal unworthy of her love. Somehow she managed to marry a man whose moral character was above reproach. He was an involved, devoted father, with a patient, good-hearted, optimistic nature. One afternoon this woman came home after having had a few drinks with lunch. She became volatile and enraged over an imagined slight on his part. Despite her sons' presence in the house, she began screaming vile epithets at her husband and clawing at his face. Then she bashed him over the head with a metal garbage can, which left a nine-inch dent (in the can, not his head). After she ripped his shirt and began choking him, he tried to restrain her by grabbing her upper arms. When she still would not stop, he called the police. They came and calmed things down.

A few days later the husband was shocked to be served with papers indicating that his wife had filed criminal charges against him. She told her sons (and everyone else who would listen) that their father was a vio-

lent man. She started calling herself a battered wife, and made it her mission to have her husband declared a felon and thrown in jail. Unlike most truly battered women, she showed no fear of her husband. Quite the opposite: She repeatedly harassed him with taunting and threatening phone calls. None of the domestic violence experts she consulted (all women) agreed that she was a battered woman. Instead they thought that *she* had trouble controlling her own violent impulses. The woman went from one therapist to another until she finally found one, selected by her lawyer, who responded to her persuasive presentation, believed her tales of victimhood, and was willing to testify on her behalf.

The mother filed for divorce and tried to keep the father from having any access to his sons. When the court did not agree, she began programming the boys to fear their father. She told them that she hoped they did not grow up to be like their father because he was evil. She tried to get the boys to regard him as a criminal and reject him, just as she rejected her own father. The court warned her that if she continued her attempts at brainwashing she would lose custody. But the impulse to re-create in her children the alienation she suffered toward her own father was strong and she continued to give in to it. Eventually she lost custody.

It is well known that some children who are abused by their parents grow up to be abusing parents themselves. Custody evaluators see a related phenomenon. Divorced parents who were victims of child abuse, eager to protect their own children from such a fate, and angry and distrustful toward their ex-spouse, may be too quick to conclude that the ex has abused the children. Normal childhood events, such as nightmares, minor bruises, touching the crotch, all become the basis for suspicions of abuse. Parents on the lookout for abuse dismiss the more probable benign explanations for such events. When these parents convince themselves that their ex has abused the children, they have less incentive to inhibit bad-mouthing and bashing because they believe their children should hate their other parent. The added danger is that, through repeated questioning, the children may eventually develop false beliefs that they have been abused. As discussed in chapter 3, such false beliefs create serious psychological problems in addition to the alienation from the alleged abuser.

TAKE ACTION

If your ex seems to be reenacting a childhood deprivation or trauma, ask one of his or her close relatives, such as a sibling, to speak with your ex about the situation. They should help your ex recall the unpleasant feelings associated with the deprivation, and encourage him or her to spare the children a similar fate.

People who reenact earlier traumas may not be fully aware of what drives their behavior. They will be more receptive to hearing this type of analysis from a trusted relative than from the target of their divorce poison. It is likely that your ex will be angry if he or she learns that you spoke to the relatives. This is a risk you will need to consider before taking this action.

HOSTILITY TOWARD THE CHILDREN

Parents with weak psychological boundaries are not fully aware of the damage they are doing to their children. If they were, presumably they would stop acting so destructively. But some brainwashing parents actually harbor substantial hostility toward their children. In some cases they are jealous of the attention the children receive from the ex. To cover up such feelings, they point to their exaggerated efforts to "protect" the children from the other parent as evidence of how much they love the children. *Under the guise of protection, these parents induce unnecessary anxiety while attempting to drive a wedge between the children and the target parent. Loving parents promote their children's emotional security. Cruel and emotionally abusive parents intensify their children's fears and insecurities.*

I participated in one case in which a mother with custody protested the father's desire to spend longer weekends with his daughter, even though the four-year-old pleaded for more time with her father. The mother claimed that spending an extra night would be more than the child could handle. And she found two psychologists to support her claim. (Incidentally, it is a sad commentary on the state of forensic psychology that parents can usually locate a mental health "expert" who is willing to offer, in testimony under oath, biased opinions or opinions with no scientific foundation. Chapter 8, "Getting Professional Help,"

provides guidelines for evaluating those from whom you seek help.)

My review of the case revealed that this woman had a harsh and rigid approach to child-rearing. She admitting to using spanking as a regular form of discipline and seemed to take pride in this. Although the father was available to care for his daughter every afternoon and wanted very much to do so, the mother insisted on leaving the child in a ten-hour day care program five days per week. On weekends she usually left her daughter with baby-sitters while she went out to bars. And her psychological test profile showed several signs of an immature and self-centered personality with severe limitations in being able to empathize with her daughter's feelings. My conclusion: Although she presented herself as obsessively concerned with protecting her daughter, odds were that this woman had far less love for her child than she pretended.

Subsequent events confirmed my impressions. The judge decided that the girl could benefit from having more time with her father and expanded her weekend time to begin Thursday at noon and extend to Monday morning. The judge also awarded the father thirty days of contact in the summer. On my advice the father offered a plan in which the thirty days would not be taken consecutively. I thought one whole month was too long for a four-year-old child to be away from either parent. Remember, the mother originally complained that just three consecutive weekend days were too much for her daughter to be apart from her. If her complaint about three days was sincere (however misguided), she should have jumped at the chance to reduce thirty days to several shorter periods. Instead, she revealed her true colors when she rejected the father's offer and insisted that the entire thirty days be taken consecutively.

TAKE ACTION

When your ex tries to undermine your child's sense of security with you, invite the child to judge for himself whether the other parent's fears are justified. For example, if the allegation is made that you do not allow the child to call his father when he is with you, point out how this allegation conflicts with the numerous times in which such calls were facilitated. Help your child understand that the other parent sometimes has fears and worries that

are exaggerated, and that the child does not have to share these worries. When divorce poison masks a lot of hostility toward the children, you will have a better chance of being effective if you concentrate on helping the children rationally evaluate the alienating parent's overprotective behavior. This should be done in a gentle manner, with sensitivity to your child's anxiety. Consider having a third party implement this suggestion. This may help the children avoid the sense that they are being asked to take sides.

Usually several factors combine to bring about bashing and brainwashing. Two situations, though, are the most likely to provoke a parent into malicious criticism: custody disputes and remarriage. These bring out the worst in parents. I estimate that more than half of all cases of parental brainwashing occur in the context of a custody battle. And an ex-spouse's remarriage may reignite the high degree of rage and hostility that can lead to divorce poison. Often the two situations combine. Remarriage, with its accompanying changes, triggers a renewed battle over where the children will live.

Let us examine how custody disputes and remarriage place your family at higher risk for divorce poison, and what you can do to protect yourself and your children.

CUSTODY LITIGATION

When Jennifer told Karl that she wanted a divorce, he was infuriated. She added insult to injury when she said she was moving to another state and taking the kids with her. Karl was beside himself with rage. He retained an attorney known for his brutal, "take no prisoners" tactics and immediately sued for sole custody. While the suit was pending, Karl took every opportunity to tell the children what a bad, selfish mother they had. He told them secrets that she had confided to him during the early stage of their marriage, such as her confession of a brief lesbian encounter in college. Blinded by his anger, Karl was committed to destroying Jennifer's reputation with her own children. Jennifer countered with some mild bad-mouthing of her own.

Custody litigation is a hostile process. Hostility generates the dispute

in the first place. And the dispute itself—the stress, frustration, and legal maneuvering—breeds additional hostility. One way to express all this hostility is to destroy the other parent's relationship with the children. So if you are involved in a custody dispute, and your children are being exposed to bad-mouthing, bashing and brainwashing may come next.

Divorce poison in a custody battle, however, has a more specific purpose than the mere expression of hostility. Karl's bashing of Jennifer began as a diffuse outlet for his rage. But as the litigation heated up, he began a more systematic and focused campaign to turn the children against their mother. He began brainwashing them. Now he was not merely punishing Jennifer. He was trying to gain a strategic advantage in court. Like many parents, Karl believed that he could win the custody battle if he could successfully manipulate his children's affections. In some cases this works.

Creating False Impressions

If your children turn against you, the burden is on you to prove your innocence. You will need to present evidence of your previous good relationship with the children. And you will need to show that you have done nothing to warrant their rejection. This will be difficult if you are unlucky enough to encounter a certain type of judge or mental health professional appointed by the judge to make custody recommendations. Such professionals understand that parents influence children's affections. But they fail to realize how completely a child can be manipulated to turn against a good parent. They believe that "where there's smoke, there's fire." They assume that if your child hates or fears you, you must have done something to deserve it. And you will lose custody.

You have a better chance of defending yourself with a judge who believes that children can be brainwashed. But even then, many times the manipulations are so subtle that they go undetected. If the judge mistakenly believes that your child's alienation is reality based and not the result of programming, she will deprive you of custody. To hold on to your children, you will need to expose your ex's motives and manipulations. Review the malignant motives discussed earlier and the material in the next two chapters, which explain exactly how irrational alienation is promulgated.

Alienated parents must not only prove that their children have been manipulated, they must convince the judge that the manipulation caused

vinced that Marsha would be perfectly safe with her father. But her next statement devastated the father. Because of the intensity of Marsha's fears, the G.A.L. did not think the court should "force the issue." Instead, she recommended that Marsha be required to see her father only under strict supervision and for brief periods of time. Thus Marsha's preference determined the outcome of this custody dispute, even though the G.A.L. and the judge both knew that this preference reflected nothing more than her mother's indoctrination. What the court needed to know is that sometimes forcing the issue is a child's only hope for normalizing relations with the target parent. Chapter 8, "Getting Professional Help," explains how courts can take a more active role in helping children like Marsha.

Wearing Down the Opposition

Marsha's father eventually gave up. He could no longer afford the toll this ordeal was taking on his physical and emotional health or on his pocketbook. Too many custody cases end up this way. Manipulation is successful not because the court is convinced that the target is a bad parent, and not because the court automatically accepts an older child's custodial preference. **The manipulation is successful in helping a parent win custody merely by wearing down the opposition.**

Parents who are the target of an effective campaign of bashing and brainwashing often feel powerless to reverse the process. Their initial attempts to reason with their children fail. They don't know how else to defend themselves. They see their resources dwindling. Rather than continue the battle, they decide that it is best for them and their children to accept the inevitable, cut their losses, and avoid the ordeal of a trial.

This may mean giving up hope of seeing the children, at least for a while. The estrangement, though, is not always permanent. Particularly when the chief aim of the parent doing the brainwashing is to win custody, the target's resignation may have a paradoxical effect. Once the threat of losing custody is eliminated, the brainwashing parent may reduce the intensity of the programming. The children may be allowed to resurrect positive feelings for the parent they were taught to hate.

No one can tell you when you have reached your limit, or when to call it quits. If this is what you decide, nothing will erase the heartache of losing your child. But I suggest you read chapter 9, "Letting Go," carefully

for tips on how to announce your decision to the children, how to cope with the loss, and how to prepare for a future reconciliation.

Hoisted with Their Own Petards

Parents who try to poison their children's affections in order to win custody expect the courts to sympathize with their position. Some of these parents are relatively unaware that they are guilty of fostering alienation. Others know exactly what they are doing and are counting on the court's naïveté about such matters. They think they can pull the wool over the judge's eyes.

In the past, this may have been a safe assumption. But I hope books such as this will turn the tide. *As mental health professionals and family courts become more familiar with the phenomena of bad-mouthing, bashing, and brainwashing, and their harmful impact on children, parents who engage in such practices should beware: You run a greater chance of losing custody.*

First, experts and judges will discount children's attitudes and preferences when these are understood as the result of programming. So no advantage will be gained. But there will be a further disadvantage incurred by parents engaged in destructive criticism. They are apt to be judged more negatively because they are jeopardizing their child's emotional welfare. Courts do not look kindly on parents who try to deprive their children of a loving relationship with the other parent. So what is intended to bolster a case for custody will not only fail to help, it will backfire. Rather than accept a child's alienation as proof of the target's deficiency, the court will view the alienation as evidence of the manipulative parent's inadequacy.

But a wise parent does not rely on faith in the court's ability to detect manipulation. You must help the court. You must learn all you can about how your children are being programmed. You must convey this information to any mental health professionals involved in your case. And your attorney must convey this information effectively to the judge.

PREVENTING ALIENATION DURING CUSTODY LITIGATION

There are several things you can do to reduce the incidence of bashing and brainwashing in a custody battle. The most important would be to

CHECKLIST OF MALIGNANT MOTIVES

Just as a proper diagnosis must precede the treatment of an illness, correctly determining motives is the first step in coping with bashing and brainwashing. If you have been the target of vilification, you should be able to identify the perpetrator's motives from the following list. If none of the circumstances, feelings, and personality traits below apply to your situation, then you are probably dealing with something other than bashing and brainwashing. Also, if you have been falsely accused of brainwashing, proving the absence of these motives should improve your chances of establishing your innocence.

- Poor boundaries—failure to recognize the distinction between the parent's thoughts and feelings and the children's needs
- Desire for revenge
- Narcissism—the drive to magnify one's own importance while diminishing the value of the other parent
- Guilt—the attempt to deflect attention from one's own failings as a parent by denigrating the other parent
- Insecurity—the fear that the children will prefer the other parent
- Desire to vent anger about the ex-spouse and have feelings validated by friends without taking steps to protect children from exposure to criticisms of the other parent
- Unwillingness to accept the end of the marital relationship
- Paranoia—unwarranted belief that the other parent is fostering alienation
- History of a poor or absent relationship with at least one parent

- Hostility toward the children—exaggerated efforts to protect the children cover deep-seated antagonism
- Involvement in custody litigation
- Remarriage of one or both ex-spouses

When a prosecutor tries to establish a defendant's guilt, she must show that the accused had the motive and the means to commit the crime. We have finished uncovering the various motives behind the crimes we call bad-mouthing, bashing, and brainwashing. Next we expose the means by which parents manipulate their children's psyches.



CHAPTER 5

THE ALIENATING ENVIRONMENT

Even when your ex-spouse is not consciously trying to turn the children against you, certain conditions, when paired with bad-mouthing and bashing, heighten the risk of this occurring. These are the same conditions that foster indoctrination in cults: isolation, psychological dependence, and fear. These factors may not be essential. But in most cases of unjustified alienation, at least one of these factors is present. They are the soil and nutrients that increase the probability that poisoned messages will take root and crowd out loving memories. In order to maintain or reestablish loving contact with your children, you must protect them from this environment.

Let us take a closer look at how these conditions lay the groundwork for manipulating children's affections. Then, in chapter 6, we will examine the strategies and tactics used by parents within this habitat to twist their children's minds. Chapters 7 and 8 expand on the advice introduced here.

ISOLATION

A precondition of all brainwashing is some degree of isolation of the subject from other sources of support. Sometimes the isolation is complete.

For example, before Patty Hearst's formal indoctrination into the Symbionese Liberation Army, she was kept in a locked closet for several days. She was deprived of contact with any person, including her captors. This disoriented her. It made her more malleable. It made her more receptive to her captors' view of reality. Some religious cults require members to undergo a "disconnecting" process of enforced separation from friends and relatives.

How does this apply to parents intent on poisoning their children's relationship with a target parent? *Isolation makes children more vulnerable to divorce poison.* It does so for two reasons. First, isolation breeds dependence. Second, it prevents exposure to competing views of reality. Isolation removes the child from the influence of people who would counteract the effects of bad-mouthing and bashing.

One common means of achieving isolation is to keep the target from seeing the children. When the parent arrives to pick up the children for a scheduled period of possession, no one is home. Or a parent schedules the children for activities that coincide exactly with the time they are supposed to be with the target. One father scheduled elaborate vacations every time his daughters were to spend extended time with their mother. When the mother objected, the girls became angry with her because she was interfering with their chance to go skiing or to Disney World.

Manipulative parents will also try to restrict children's communication with the other parent and the other parent's relatives. A father who is poisoning his children against their mother, for example, cannot risk allowing them to talk to their maternal grandmother. During such a conversation the children would be apt to repeat the negative messages programmed by the father. Their grandmother would then surely contradict these messages. She would remind the children of how much their mother loved them and provide evidence to support her position.

Alienating parents usually screen telephone calls and let the answering machine take all calls placed by the target. Of course, these calls are never returned. In many cases the children are not even informed of the calls. This can be very effective in promoting alienation. A sixteen-year-old girl told me that her main reason for wanting no contact with her father was that he made no effort to talk with her for a ten-month period following the separation. Although she refused to see him throughout this time, she expected to hear from him. When he did not call, she assumed that he was not genuinely interested in a relationship. This was

exactly what her mother had programmed her to believe. The father, on the other hand, told me that he made numerous attempts to reach his daughter by phone and that his ex had intercepted each of these calls.

Any attempt by the target parent to have contact with the children is generally thwarted. Letters are concealed from the children or returned unopened. Information is withheld about children's illnesses, academic problems and achievements, and important school and extracurricular activities. Basically, the children never learn of the other parent's interest and love. This sets them up to feel rejected by the target and makes them more dependent on the parent doing the bad-mouthing and bashing. As birthdays and holidays pass with no cards or gifts, the children feel unwanted and angry toward the parent who has disappointed them.

As with most psychological problems, alienation is most likely to be alleviated if you do something about it right away. Some therapists routinely advise parents to wait patiently until the child is ready to see them; in most cases this is bad advice. Except in rare circumstances, you should not permit your children to be totally isolated from you. You must act decisively. This does not mean using physical force or creating frightening confrontations. If peaceful means do not work, including therapy, it is time to consult a family law attorney experienced in representing parents in similar situations. When your ex is intent on keeping the children from you, it may take a court order to reunite with your children. As one psychologist, Dr. Mary Lund, put it, "Court orders for continued contact are the cornerstone for treatment" in these cases.

The importance of taking an active stance in the face of isolation tactics has been noted in several studies. In his study of ninety-nine alienated children, Dr. Gardner found that every case in which the court decreased the child's time with the programming parent resulted in a reduction or elimination of the alienation. By contrast, when the court did not reduce the child's time with the programming parent, nine out of ten children remained alienated.

The largest study of brainwashed children was published by the American Bar Association. A husband-and-wife research team, Dr. Stanley Clawar and Dr. Brynne Rivlin, found that increasing the child's contact with the alienated parent was the most effective way to reverse alienation. Here is what they reported: "Of the approximately four hundred cases we have seen where the courts have increased the contact with the target parent (and in half of these, over the objection of the children),

the value of their children's relationship with the other parent. Thus, when they want to move, they see no drawback to doing so. They don't program their children to hate the other parent, but their words and deeds program the children to regard regular contact with that parent as expendable.

Phyllis dreamed for years of living in Paris. She was so eager to fulfill her ambition that she dismissed all reservations expressed by Peter, her nine-year-old son. While Phyllis rhapsodized about France's fabulous cultural opportunities, Peter despaired at the thought of leaving his father, relatives, friends, school, baseball team, and neighborhood. Contemplating the *Mona Lisa* was a poor substitute for his weekly dinners with his grandmother. His father, who coached the baseball team, would be unable to attend games in Paris, if they even had Little League.

Phyllis denied that she was trying to alienate Peter from his dad. She thought that he should still love and admire his father. But she also wanted to convince him that his father's presence was not an important value when compared to something as exciting as living abroad. Not surprisingly, the father did not agree.

In court Phyllis testified, honestly, that she was not trying to disrupt Peter's relationship with his father. Her goal was not to keep them apart. The proposed separation was merely a by-product of her wish to pursue her own happiness and fulfillment. And that, her lawyer argued, was enough reason to place five thousand miles between father and son. Because a happy mother makes for a happy child.

The judge might have rejected such an obvious rationalization were it not for the testimony of a psychologist. This expert witness, brought in by the mother's lawyer, claimed that research studies proved that a mother's happiness was more important to a child's emotional well-being than such factors as the type of contact he had with his father, the stability of his living arrangements, and the familiarity of his environment. If Phyllis's desire to move to France were frustrated, the expert testified, she might become depressed and this would create more problems for Peter. Although the studies he cited did exist, a careful reading of them would not support the conclusions he reached. Unfortunately, the judge was not made aware of the errors in the psychologist's interpretation of the research. In the end the judge allowed Phyllis to move with Peter out of the country. I never learned what happened to Peter's relationship with his father after the move.

Some courts allow a custodial parent to move a child out of the

TAKE ACTION

Set a good example for your children by leaving photographs of your ex on display and showing an interest in their life with their other parent. If your ex has stripped the home of reminders of you, give the children a photograph of you and your ex together to take home with them. If your ex destroys the picture, give the children a small picture that they can keep in their possession. It is easier for children to appreciate the irrationality of stripping when they see the other parent acting differently. By taking the high road you let your children know that you accept them as they are without requiring them to conceal their positive feelings for the other parent.

Sometimes the stripping process is quite literal. One mother met her little boy on the doorstep whenever he returned from his father. Each time she went through the same ritual. She took off all of his clothes. Then she placed them in a green plastic garbage sack, which she left on the front porch. When there were leftovers from the lunch his father packed, these too would go in the sack with the clothes. By the time the father received the bag several days later, the food was rotten and the clothes stank. Through this ritual, her son learned that anything associated with his father was unwelcome in his mother's house.

FEAR

This mother's behavior was so extreme that it frightened her son. This, in turn, made him more receptive to her distortions about his father. Fear is usually a precondition to brainwashing. Like isolation, *fear increases psychological dependence on the bad-mouthing and bashing parent.*

When a child observes his mother vent her anger in an irrational, uncontrolled manner, his main concern is to avoid becoming her next target. With the hope that she follows the dictum "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," he will turn on his father as the price he has to pay to stay in her good graces. Not to do so is to risk having her wrath fall on him.

Jill picked up her son from preschool one afternoon. She was still

fuming about an incident that had occurred earlier in the day with the boy's paternal grandmother. Jill had demanded that her ex-mother-in-law give her household objects to which Jill was clearly not entitled. The mother-in-law, who had already been extremely generous with her time and money on behalf of her grandchildren, refused to comply with Jill's latest demands. On the way home from the preschool Jill called her ex-mother-in-law on her cell phone. With her little boy sitting beside her, she began ranting. She called his grandmother a "greedy cunt" and screamed into the phone, "I hope you die a lonely old woman." After the tirade Jill turned to her son and said, "Grandma is a mean old witch. Right?"

How was he to respond? He correctly perceived that his mother was out of control. He had just witnessed her verbal assault on a grown-up who refused to see things her way. Although he adored his grandma, he certainly was not going to contradict his mother while she was in this state. His safest option was to join in his mother's hatred.

Jill lacked the maturity or the commitment to her children's welfare to consider what effect her tantrums were having on them. Although she did not see the connection, most people would have no trouble understanding why, shortly after this incident, her son began misbehaving and having tantrums of his own. Or why her daughter faced a dilemma when completing a routine school assignment. She was given a sentence completion exercise in which one of the sentence stems was, "The person I most admire is . . ." She automatically began to complete the sentence with, "Grandma." But then she changed her mind and wrote "Mom and Dad" over the "Gra—." One can imagine the mental gymnastics she went through responding to this one simple task. She could not afford to alienate her mother by revealing positive feelings for the hated ex-mother-in-law. But she also did not want to show a preference for her mother over her father. Her response was the safest she could think of at the moment. This is just one example of how parents' attempts to alienate children's affection for others permeate the children's lives.

A five-year-old girl faced the same dilemma. She figured out a unique solution to the conflict between her wish to be loyal to her mother and her love for her grandmother, whom she knew her mother hated. She told her grandmother "I hate you," and then added that whatever she said was the opposite of the truth. With this clever device, the girl could simultaneously gratify the need to align with her mother and express her love to her grandmother.

TAKE ACTION

Consider encouraging the children to ask their other parent to stop bad-mouthing you in front of them. This is best done when the other parent is calm and in a good mood. If your children tend to be overly anxious and fearful, you might not want to do this. If your ex is liable to punish the children for even this mild act of self-assertion, let the children know that you understand and accept why they want to remain silent in the face of their parent's anger toward you. Some bad-mouthing parents will inhibit destructive criticism when they hear directly from their children about how uncomfortable this makes them. Expressing feelings forthrightly will also enhance your children's self-esteem.

If your children are physically isolated from you and psychologically dependent on a vindictive ex, the chances of preventing or reversing alienation are slim. Any plan to counteract the bashing and brainwashing must place a priority on physically reuniting the children with the estranged parent. This must be done in a thoughtful manner, carefully safeguarding the children's welfare. But as long as the children are exclusively dependent on the parent doing the bad-mouthing and bashing, there is little hope that they will be able to resist the mental manipulation maneuvers that we are now ready to examine.

the end, Stephanie's alienation not only cost her mentally and emotionally, it cost her financially: When it was clear that his daughter would have nothing to do with him, her wealthy grieving father wrote the girl out of his will.

REPETITION

Jill's children did not start calling their grandmother a witch the very first time their mother used this put-down. But when they heard the word used many times, it began to seem natural.

Repetition of desired messages is common to all forms of indoctrination. The more we hear an idea or a word, the more familiar it becomes. When children have heard their grandmother referred to as a witch for several months, it is a shorter mental leap to begin thinking of her as basically bad and undesirable. We come to assume that there must be some truth behind an idea, merely because it is repeated so often. This is a common tactic of politicians and propagandists. In fact, *parental brainwashing can be thought of as propaganda in the home.*

Repetition also helps embed messages in memory. This is the principle behind rote drill. Repeat the multiplication tables enough times and they become second nature. If a false impression—an unjustified denigration of a parent or grandparent—is repeated enough times, it too can become second nature. And ultimately it becomes indistinguishable from beliefs based in reality.

Recall the research discussed in chapter 3 in which Cornell University researchers demonstrated how easy it is to implant false memories in young children. What they found is that repetition is a key element in convincing children that they have experienced bad events that never actually occurred. If children can be led to believe that a parent has grossly mistreated them, alienation of affection is a predictable outcome.

TAKE ACTION

If your ex repeats false negative messages about you, take action before the negative messages take root. Help your children protect themselves against brainwashing by explicitly identifying

Selective attention is a potent image-shaping tool. If a child attends only to things that make a parent look bad, eventually negative perceptions, feelings, and memories will crowd out the positive.

The movie *Hook* provides a good example of this process. The evil pirate Captain Hook reminds the little boy that his father missed his most important baseball game because he was working at the office. Hook taps into all the child's resentments and disillusionments to persuade the boy that his father doesn't truly love him.

Psychologists call this technique "selective attention." It is the stock-in-trade of skilled magicians, salesmen, politicians, and lawyers. The magician directs our attention to his left hand while he reaches in his pocket with his right hand. We see only what he wants us to see. The salesman extols the virtues of his product while overlooking its drawbacks. The politician focuses the spotlight on the opposing candidate's worst mistakes, hoping that these low points will define the opponent's image in the public eye.

As a participant in custody trials I have held a ringside seat watching attorneys practice the art of selective attention. They introduce only the facts that support their client's position. They don't pursue the "whole truth" but only that portion of the truth which will further their case. When I am being cross-examined, the lawyer wants to control my testimony so that I say only things that support the position the lawyer is arguing. To do so, she or he attempts to restrict my answers to yes or no. If I try to explain myself or elaborate an answer, the lawyer interrupts: "Objection, the witness is being nonresponsive." In fact, trial lawyers are taught to refrain from asking any question whose answer they cannot anticipate. The reason for this practice is to avoid the possibility that testimony will be elicited that directs the court's attention to facts that the attorney would prefer that the court overlook.

Selective attention is a potent image-shaping tool. It helps racists maintain their bigotry. They listen to the evening news, for example, and selectively attend to crimes committed by members of the hated race. They pay no attention to announcements that do not support their preconceived opinions. Significant accomplishments by members of the

hated race go unnoticed, as do crimes committed by people of the same race as the racist. The result is a self-perpetuating prejudice that filters out information that might correct distortions.

Indeed, selective attention is a gatekeeper that allows only material that conforms to the program to enter consciousness. If the program is "Don't love your other parent," everything that makes that parent look bad is welcomed; everything that opposes the program is rejected.

TAKE ACTION

Teach your children about how selective attention is used to manipulate thoughts.

- Begin with familiar situations that are far removed from divorce poison. Television commercials for toys suit this purpose. Point out how the commercial presents the toy in the best possible light. It uses special effects and additional props to make the toy appear more elaborate than it is, while the fine print at the bottom of the screen discloses that the toy's movements are simulated. Or the announcer discloses in rapid-fire speech that assembly is required, or batteries are not included. You might tell the children about a time when you bought something that subsequently disappointed you because you failed to pay attention to the drawbacks. Make a game of challenging the children to find examples of selective attention in advertisements.
- Next show how selective attention can be used to devalue a person. Again, use examples that are familiar to your children, such as sports: If we judged a baseball player only by his errors, we would have a distorted picture of his abilities.
- After laying the previous groundwork, relate selective attention personally to your children. Ask them how they would feel if their teacher judged their ability

TAKE ACTION

If your children view your ex as all good and you as all bad, try to help them understand that ambivalence in relationships is normal. Explain that everyone has good and bad points, and that parents and children don't stop loving each other just because they are not perfectly good all the time. Gently remind them of some of the negative things their other parent has done and explain that these do not wipe out all the good that parent has done. Don't let your anger keep you from thinking of your ex's good points; in most cases the alienating parent has done many things over the years on behalf of the children. If your children grasp the concepts that no one is perfect and that it is okay to have mixed feelings about people you love, they will be less apt to view you in an entirely negative light.

Incidentally, mental health experts, even those appointed by the courts, are not immune to selective attention. When a custody evaluator writes a report, lawyers look to see if the criticisms of each parent are balanced by a discussion of each parent's assets. A report that fails to say anything good about a parent (other than that they love their children) is strongly suspected of being biased. Very often when I am asked to give a critique of a custody evaluation I detect more subtle signs of selective attention. For example, the examiner may cite only the psychological test results that support his or her conclusions and ignore test results that are incompatible with the conclusions.

JUDGING BEHAVIOR OUT OF CONTEXT

We can thank Sigmund Freud for helping us appreciate that things are not always as they seem. This is especially true when we judge someone's behavior without knowing the full context in which the behavior occurred. It is easy to draw wrong conclusions. A brainwashing parent takes advantage of this to persuade the children that their other parent has acted without regard for their welfare.

suspend her contact with her children pending the results of a family evaluation. He also wanted Johanna to pay child support for the children she was not allowed to see.

By the time Johanna had her first interview with the court-appointed social worker, she was desperate and distraught. Her patience taxed beyond its limit, Johanna came across as angry, hysterical, and unstable. She reviled her ex-husband and the judicial system that threatened to deprive her of her children. She did not make a good impression on the evaluator. Failing to put herself in Johanna's shoes, the social worker thought, "No wonder these children don't want to be with her." The final report recommended that Johanna seek treatment to improve her parenting skills before the court allow her to spend time with the children.

Johanna's experience is all too common. To protect yourself from a similar fate you must learn all that you can about the behavior of alienated children and about how you can best respond to it.

TAKE ACTION

Rejected parents must exercise self-restraint. When you know that your ex wants to make you look bad, don't make it easier. Expect no mercy when you are the target of a hate campaign. When you give in to anger and frustration, your behavior will be taken out of context, and will provide ammunition for a campaign of hatred. Your ex will put a spotlight on your mistakes, claim that this is typical of your behavior, and cite this as the reason for your children's alienation. Your ex's contributions to alienation may then be overlooked or minimized.

To help avoid losing your temper in response to your child's rejection, remind yourself that this would be playing into the hands of your ex. Instead, channel your anger into devising an effective response to brainwashing. If you must blow off steam, find a friend to listen, not your ex or your children. Remember, *no parent ever softened a child's heart by treating her harshly.*

know the long-term outcome of this case. When I last spoke with Dan he despaired of ever repairing his relationship with his sons.

Often a target parent reacts to a campaign of vilification by indulging the children. Wanting to avoid their rejection, he tries to make their time with him as rewarding as possible. He will relax the usual limits, perhaps giving in to a child's demand to watch an R-rated movie, stay up too late, or engage in a marginally dangerous activity. The other parent then cites the excessive permissiveness as proof of poor parenting ability. I have seen many cases in which mental health professionals failed to recognize the bind in which the target parent finds himself. When the target's context is taken into account, often his indulgent behavior appears more understandable and less pathological.

Before rushing to the judgment that a rejected parent's behavior is directly responsible for the children's estrangement, we should place it in the following context. Making mistakes as a parent or grandparent (absent a pattern of gross negligence or abuse) does not normally result in children's hatred and does not mean we are unworthy of their love or companionship. If all parents who ever lost their tempers or overindulged their children were to be judged as unfit parents, every child would become a ward of the state.

EXAGGERATION

Selective attention and context dropping both involve focusing on certain aspects of reality while excluding others. Many times parents will actually depart from reality by exaggerating the target's behavior. A shove becomes a violent attack. A parent who is three days late on a child support payment is a "deadbeat." A father whose work schedule does not allow him to coach his son's teams is labeled "uninvolved" despite all the other activities he shares with the boy. A mother who occasionally dates is said to be preoccupied with men.

When combined with repetition and selective attention, this strategy can be difficult to counter. Repetition increases the likelihood that the exaggerations will be accepted as true accounts. Selective attention keeps the child from recognizing positive traits that would modify the impression created through exaggeration. Because there is a kernel of truth, it is often difficult for the target to defend herself. Both parents may have

experimented with marijuana. But on this basis the target is labeled a drug addict. If the exaggeration is repeated enough times, it becomes incorporated into the child's view of the target. The child has heard so often that his mother is a drug addict, that he assumes it is true. It is used by the brainwasher regularly and casually, as in, "Well, you know, she was probably stoned again and that's why she was late to get you." The brainwasher speaks of it as fact, and eventually the child comes to share this distortion.

TAKE ACTION

If you are the victim of a hate campaign, expect your past deficiencies as a parent to be taken out of context, attended to selectively, and exaggerated. Though these past errors do not justify your children's total rejection, the sensible response is to do everything possible to improve your skills as a parent. For example, you may have been relatively uninvolved, or frequently delegated responsibility for your children's care to baby-sitters, or treated your children with little interest or patience. Correct these deficiencies. When the children are finally reunited with you, let them experience you not as you were before, but better. *Why?* The more your behavior differs from what the children have been programmed to expect, the easier it will be for them to recognize that they have judged you wrongly. Also, by using unfair and harsh criticism as a stimulus to self-improvement, you remove yourself from the passive victim role and are less likely to feel despondent. Your self-respect and your confidence as a parent will grow and you will find that any such improvements will make you more effective in your other relationships.

LIES

Selective attention, context dropping, and exaggeration are generally sufficient to smear a target parent or grandparent. When more is needed, the next step is a further departure from reality: outright lying. Sometimes the lies are gross distortions of actual events. Other times they are manu-

factured totally out of thin air. Though such behavior is common among psychotic parents who have lost touch with reality, it also occurs among less disturbed people.

Louise and Gary were recently separated. They met in a restaurant to begin negotiations on the terms of their divorce. Louise announced her intention to move with their nine-year-old son, Jeffrey, to another city. Gary objected. Jeffrey was enrolled in a superior elementary school. He had lived in the same neighborhood all his life and had many friends within a few blocks of his house. He participated in several team sports. Living in another city would drastically reduce Gary's contact with his son. And Gary's parents were available to baby-sit every day after school while both parents worked. Ever since he was born, Jeffrey spent at least one night a week with his grandparents, and he enjoyed these contacts. In fact, he was at their house while his parents were meeting.

Louise countered that she would either enroll Jeffrey in a day care center before and after school, or leave him home alone. Gary said he could not accept that arrangement. Louise had not expected any resistance from Gary; she was furious that he intended to thwart her plans. She stormed out of the restaurant, sped over to her in-laws', and when she was let in the door yelled, "Come on, Jeffrey. We're out of here!" His grandfather asked if Jeffrey could finish his dinner. Louise said she didn't want him spending another second in the house. Jeffrey burst into tears. He was scared and quickly gathered his things. His grandfather helped him into his jacket and then gave the boy a hug and kiss. Louise jerked Jeffrey out of his grandfather's arms and charged out of the house.

Later the grandparents were shocked to hear Louise's account of the incident. According to her, the grandfather had forcibly detained Jeffrey and was not going to let him leave the house. She repeated her version of the incident so many times on the return home that she actually had Jeffrey believing that this is what happened. The episode was then used as the kernel of a campaign to program Jeffrey to believe that his grandparents were volatile and could not be trusted. Though Jeffrey had always experienced them as more patient than either of his parents, he also learned that the way to please his mother and ward off her anger was to tell her that he didn't want to see his grandparents anymore.

One father distorted an actual event when he successfully convinced his children that their mother kidnapped them. In reality she had been granted temporary custody and took the children on a vacation. At the

and returned unopened without the children's knowledge. The children never learn that their rejected parent provides ongoing financial support. They are kept in the dark about the rejected parent's numerous efforts to contact them. Phone calls are screened. Voice mail is deleted. The alienating parent may even tell the children that the other parent has lost interest in them. The net result is that the children receive no signs of the other parent's love and caring. They feel abandoned. This makes it even more difficult for them to approach the rejected parent in the future.

One woman waited until she was in her thirties and her mother died before seeking out her estranged father. Eventually they developed a close relationship. She told her father that she could understand that he was blocked from seeing her. "But why," she asked, "wouldn't you support me to attend college? Mom said we didn't have enough money for tuition. I'll always regret not going to college and I can't get over the fact that you didn't come through for me." The father was flabbergasted. For four years he sent the mother large checks that were specifically designated for college tuition.

REVISIONIST HISTORY

Who controls the past controls the future.

—GEORGE ORWELL

Communist rulers in the Soviet Union were masters at propaganda. When it came time to convince the populace that a formerly revered leader was really a scoundrel, they knew the job required more than implanting false beliefs about the target. Their corruption of reality had to reach back in time. They had to erase benevolent memories of the person—memories that conflicted with the new party line. They had to silence potential critics who would object: "How could this person [Stalin, for example] be so bad when for years we were told that he was great and worthy of adulation?"

So they simply rewrote history. One strategy was to say, in effect, "Our previous judgment was mistaken." The other tactic was an outright denial that the leader was ever held in high esteem. Textbooks were revised to conform to the new doctrine. Institutions and places named in the person's honor were renamed. Portraits were removed from public

in the world. I love you very much." One boy claimed that the only reason he gave his mother a gift on Mother's Day was that the entire class made something and he didn't want to be different from his classmates. This did not explain why he signed the accompanying handmade card, "Love and kisses."

In one of the worst cases of divorce poison I have seen, a girl named Mindy claimed to have total amnesia for a music box that her mother had used to wake her up every morning of her life. The mother brought the music box to a meeting with her alienated daughter. "Remember this?" asked the mother. She wound it up and lifted the lid to release the tune, "You Are the Sunshine of My Life." The mother choked back tears evoked by memories of better times, but Mindy sat stone-faced. "Sure," she said, "I've heard that song. But I've never seen that music box before." Her mother was astounded. How could her daughter not remember the morning ritual that had been a fixture in their lives for eight years? Mindy could have been lying. Or she could have blocked out these memories in the service of maintaining her cold rejection of her mom.

Mindy's mother expected to correct her daughter's misperception of their past relationship by presenting clear evidence to the contrary. She did not count on the tenacity of a brainwashed child's corrupted view of reality. In a clash between reality and an alienating parent's distortions, the distortions usually win out, unless groundwork has been carefully laid. One cannot reason with an alienated child until the child's mind is open to reason.

TAKE ACTION

Don't squander valuable opportunities by naively assuming that brainwashing will be reversed by the simple presentation of reality. When you have strong evidence that a child's view of the past is distorted, withhold the evidence until there is a good chance that your child will be open to considering it, rather than reject it out of hand. It is best to use a therapist's assistance with this process. With correct timing, the evidence can be a potent antidote to divorce poison. With poor timing, you will encounter the brick-wall resistance of a mind closed to reality and reason, and you will have wasted an important weapon in the battle against alienation.

SUGGESTIONS AND INNUENDOS

Parents can communicate negative messages about the target without telling a single lie, even without lodging a single criticism. Consider the following very common scenario. The children are at their father's home, watching cartoons or playing, and their mother calls and asks to speak with them.

In one home the father says, "Mommy is on the phone. Come and talk to her. Who wants to go first?" If the children respond, "Not now. We're busy," he says, "I know you're busy, but now it's time to talk to Mom. Let's go." The father essentially handles the call the way he would have before the divorce. His attitude conveys his belief that talking to Mom is a priority and is nonnegotiable. The underlying message is that their mother deserves their respect.

In another home the father announces, in a disdainful tone, "Your mother is on the phone. Do you want to speak with her?" His attitude suggests that he does not welcome her call and they don't have to either. The underlying message, communicated solely by implication but not lost on the children, is that their mother is not worthy of respect. They sense that it would be perfectly fine with Dad if they snubbed Mom. In fact, even though he has not explicitly said so, he would probably be pleased with them if they did reject their mother's call.

Often the most potent divorce poison takes this form. It relies on suggestion, innuendo, and implication. It is more difficult to expose because it is sneakier and more subtle than outright lies and misrepresentations.

A mother phoned her children while they were with their paternal grandparents. Her daughter enthusiastically described a variation of tag that she and her brother invented and were playing. The mother's only response was to express concern: "I hope you're not getting hurt." This conveyed the impression that the grandparents could not be trusted to prevent the children from playing a dangerous game. The other hidden message was that the mother was not interested in hearing that her daughter was having a good time with her grandparents. When her son got on the phone, also sharing his excitement about the game, his mother asked, "Are you having fun or is it kind of silly?" Her inflection made clear what answer she wanted to hear. Although her son had been having a great time, he muted his expression of enjoyment and instead said, "It's okay."

This boy was very troubled by his mother's negative attitude about

his dad and his dad's family. He tried to cope by pleasing her. He would rather tell his mom what she wanted to hear than forthrightly state his own opinion. But in the process of doing so, his own feelings changed. His mother's small dose of divorce poison, administered in her brief suggestion that he was not having fun with his grandparents, achieved its purpose. Following the phone call, the boy had mixed feelings about what had been a very gratifying activity.

An example of the power of suggestion to alter a child's view of reality occurred in my own home while I was writing this book. My grandsons were spending the night and the youngest boy, Shaun, talked us into ordering pizzas from a certain heavily advertised franchise rather than from our favorite local pizzeria. The pizza arrived burnt on top, with a crust that was too soft, and with too little of a bland sauce that had lived in a can too long.

My wife and I could not restrain our disappointment with the product. As we openly expressed our opinion, hoping to instill better taste in a nine-year-old, we unwittingly programmed Shaun to dislike the pizza. He went from loving it to passing up seconds. All he could say, in his defense, was that this franchise outlet did a worse job than the one in his neighborhood. His father later verified that the pizza we had was perfectly consistent with what they usually get and with what his son loves. We had inadvertently changed our grandson's normal taste preference merely by repetitively expressing our very negative opinion of the food.

One of the most common complaints of divorced parents is shabby treatment during the transfer of the children. A mother arrives a few minutes early to pick up her son. It is raining outside. She rings the doorbell, but there is no response. The boy has his coat on and is ready to leave. He watches his mother from the window. But his stepmother makes him stay in the house until the very last second. After repeated experiences like this the mother learns that she will be kept waiting, regardless of the weather, until the exact time that her official period of possession begins.

What is the effect on children of witnessing such treatment? The boy in the above example received two messages through his stepmother's behavior. First, his mother's wish to be with him is seen as an unwelcome nuisance. She is excluded as long as possible, as though spending time with her has no value. Second, she is not worthy of being treated with compassion or common decency. She is given less consideration than a door-to-door salesman.

Children will usually feel very uncomfortable when a parent is treated so disrespectfully. This is especially true when the mistreatment is at the hands of someone else they love. To relieve themselves of loyalty conflicts, they may join in devaluing the parent. By convincing themselves that the parent deserves poor treatment, they avoid conscious feelings of guilt.

Younger children are most susceptible to suggestion. Treat them as though you expect them to be scared of the target, and they will respond with fear. Shortly after the marital separation a mother tells her daughter: "Daddy is coming to take you for a visit, but you don't have to be afraid." Prior to this the girl had no reason to fear being with her father. She generally was excited to see him. But now her mother has introduced the idea of fear as an expected response to her father. A small seed of insecurity has been planted. When the father arrives, the programming continues. In front of the girl the mother says, "She seems to be a little uneasy about going with you." The mother then turns to the child and says, "Now remember. I told you there is nothing to be afraid of. Don't be scared." With this repetition the seed has taken root. The girl is reluctant to leave her mother's side. The mother feels triumphant. The father feels bewildered.

Suggestions can be just as powerful when conveyed without words. Behavior and gestures do the job. A father and his new wife constantly roll their eyes and smirk when the children speak about their activities with their mother. The disapproval is obvious. Over time, the children either adopt the same critical attitude toward their mother or learn to avoid speaking about her in their father's home.

Infants and toddlers can learn to fear someone merely by seeing how their parents act in the person's presence. When a mother begins to cry and cling tightly to her daughter as the paternal grandmother reaches out to take the child for a visit, she "infects" her daughter with her anxiety. Predictably, the little girl will respond with her own tears and clinging behavior.

Older children are generally less suggestible but not immune. A father cautions his twelve-year-old daughter, "Don't get too close to your stepfather in the swimming pool." After a few such warnings it is difficult for the girl not to look at her stepfather in a different light. A fleeting physical contact becomes a possible cause for concern. The girl has succumbed to her father's suggestion that the stepfather could be a sexual predator.

son's life. She was not even to have the pleasure of getting a photograph of her son and his date in their prom clothes. Perhaps the height of audacity was a young lady's expectation that her father would contribute substantially to her wedding expenses, even though she refused to invite him or any of his family to the wedding.

For the child, exploitation is another expression of alienation. For the parent who encourages or sanctions this behavior, it is a form of divorce poison, another means of corrupting the child's view of the formerly loved target. By not expressing disapproval of the exploitation, the alienating parent contributes to the notion that the target parent is so worthy of contempt that the usual rules of civility and decency do not apply.

This tactic is especially pernicious. The sense of entitlement corrupts not only a child's relationship with a parent but the child's character. Alienating parents teach their children to suspend the usual rules of morality when dealing with the target. What these parents may not appreciate is that a child can become accustomed to treating others as objects to be used. Exploitation can become a permanent mode of dealing with people and handicap the child's ability to form and maintain emotionally gratifying relationships. When this occurs, the alienating parent is guilty of contributing not only to the loss of love but to the perversion of the child's soul.

PROJECTION

When a person makes several accusations about another person that have no basis in reality, very often the accusations turn out to be self-descriptive. This was true of Louise, who accused her father-in-law of being volatile when she herself was prone to fits of rage.

The practice of falsely attributing to others one's own unacknowledged feelings, impulses, or thoughts is known as "projection." It happens so much in custody disputes that I often advise parents to begin keeping a list of possible projections. It is uncanny how often a parent will be guilty of the very things he or she accuses the ex-spouse of doing.

Sometimes projections provide clues to behaviors and intentions that the parent attempts to conceal. I remember one woman who told me that her ex-husband repeatedly accused her of tape-recording their phone conversations. I advised her that it was a good bet that he was taping.

This proved to be true. As I discussed in chapter 4, very often the first parent to raise an accusation of brainwashing is the one who has already begun such a campaign.

To detect the possibility of projection, follow this procedure. First you must be sure that you are not guilty of whatever is being attributed to you. Then ask yourself: Why would he be saying that? Where did that idea come from? Since it isn't true for me, perhaps it is on his mind because it is something he thought, felt, or did, or is contemplating doing. Is there any evidence for this?

Not every false accusation is the result of projection. It is only one possible explanation. But when projection is present, you need to know about it. It alerts you to potential and actual destructive behavior on the part of your accuser. It helps you explain the situation to your children when appropriate. And it is essential in defending against allegations in court.

PROJECTION: NOT I, YOU!

Following are some examples of the use of projection in custody litigation. In each case, the person attributes his or her own thoughts, feelings, or behavior to another.

- A man attributes his ex-wife's effort to gain more time with the children as retribution for the divorce that he initiated. In reality she is happily remarried and grateful to be free of her first husband. He, on the other hand, has gone through a series of unsuccessful relationships and regrets the divorce. His envy of her newfound happiness fuels his refusal of her request. *He projects his unhappy preoccupation with the divorce and his ulterior motives in the dispute onto his ex-spouse.*
- A man wants joint custody of his daughter. His ex-wife accuses him of merely trying to avoid child support payments. In reality the father has no intention of reducing his support even if his girl spends more time in his home and his expenses increase. But the mother has sued for more child support, despite currently

receiving more money than she actually spends on her daughter. *She projects her preoccupation with finances onto her ex-spouse.*

- A girl in the custody of her father asks to live with her mother. She is uncomfortable with her father's ongoing criticisms of her mother and the parade of girlfriends who spend the night with Dad. The father is unable to recognize or admit that his daughter's preference is a result of his behavior. Instead he attributes her request to "the grass is greener" phenomenon. In reality his behavior is constantly motivated by the expectation that the key to happiness lies elsewhere. It is what resulted in his divorce and in his inability to settle down with one woman. *He projects his belief that "the grass is greener" onto his daughter.*
- In her previous marriage a mother relinquished custody of her three boys to their father. When she is going through her second divorce, her husband tells their daughter that her mother abandoned her other children. In truth she reached her previous decision after agonizing over it. She stayed in close touch with her boys and had a good relationship with them. However, her current husband did threaten to move to Ireland and never see their daughter again. *He is projecting his thought about abandonment onto his wife.*
- A woman accuses her husband of being cruel. In reality she has falsely accused him of child sexual abuse, thereby subjecting their son to numerous unnecessary examinations and smearing the father's reputation. She disrupted his family reunion by sending the police to investigate a frivolous complaint that the children were being mistreated. She spread a rumor throughout the community that her husband was violent toward her and the children. And she called his employer in an effort to get him fired. *She projects her cruel behavior onto her spouse.*

People are usually unaware that they are projecting. Projections are not only self-descriptive, they are self-deceptive. In fact, psychologists regard projection as a defense that people use to protect themselves from facing their own unpleasant thoughts or feelings.

The woman in the last example who accused her husband of being cruel was not just trying to win a custody battle. She actually convinced herself that her husband was a monster. This corruption of reality was the price she paid to avoid the disturbing truth that the cruelty she sensed was her own. Because of its protective function, confronting the woman with her projection was futile. When the court-appointed psychologist suggested that she was trying to brainwash her children, she was indignant. She was convinced that she was a victim of a terrible injustice. In her mind all she was doing was trying to protect her children from their cruel father.

RATIONALIZATION

While working on this chapter I came upon a news item that illustrated, in another context, a form of reality corruption favored by bad-mouthing and bashing parents. In an entire Alabama school system of 2,600 students, the only Jewish high school student complained of ongoing harassment. Some examples he cited were the assistant principal ordering him to write an essay on "Why Jesus loves me," and a teacher ordering him to remove a Star of David lapel pin. The superintendent confirmed the allegations but explained that the teacher thought the Jewish Star was a gang symbol.

This sort of excuse is known as a rationalization. It is a lie that is intended to seem plausible. In this case the school superintendent apparently thought it sounded reasonable enough to repeat to the national media.

Men who beat and intimidate their wives rationalize their disgraceful behavior. A man testified that he did not verbally abuse his wife. During his cross-examination he admitted that he frequently called her a whore, a liar, a slut, a horrible mother, and worse epithets, usually modified with curse words. When asked how he reconciled such behavior with his prior testimony that he did not verbally abuse her, he said that his insulting and name-calling was not abusive because it was true. The judge was not convinced by such twisted logic.

A woman told her husband that if he didn't agree to all her demands in the divorce, she would call his employer and get him fired. During her deposition, she denied making such threats. On further questioning she admitted that she "may have alluded to getting him fired," but she did not regard this as a threat. Quibbling about the exact meaning of words is a common form of rationalization used even by presidents of the United States.

SPISSKINDICHET

When confronted with evidence of wrongdoing, a popular rationalization is to dismiss the behavior as a joke. The woman who ignored her stepson unless he addressed her as Mom told the court that she was only kidding. The judge dismissed this rationalization because the behavior occurred over a long period of time and was consistent with other versions of the name game played by this woman: She referred to the boy's mother by her first name in conversation with him and she required her own son to call his stepfather Dad.

Parents dispensing divorce poison use rationalizations in two ways. Most frequently they rationalize in order to defend their behavior, as did the Alabama schoolteacher. They attempt to convince themselves and others that they are doing nothing wrong. The rationalization is a cover-up to hide their real motives. Second, rationalizations can be used to make the target's behavior look bad.

A noncustodial mother complained that despite repeated requests she was never shown anything her six-year-old daughter brought home from school, including report cards. The father and stepmother responded that they were not deliberately withholding the material. They were merely respecting the girl's own choice. If the girl wanted her mother to see her schoolwork, she would have taken it with her when she saw her mother every other weekend.

This explanation sounded reasonable to them. But of course it was a rationalization to justify their lack of support for the girl's relationship with her mother. We don't ordinarily expect a six-year-old to be responsible for keeping track of her school papers. And we don't ordinarily assume that if the child neglected to pack her schoolwork then she did not want her mom to see it. Finally, we would not leave such a decision to the child. Everything else that went with her on weekends spent with her mother was packed by her stepmother. If the father and stepmother wanted the mother to see the schoolwork, it would have happened.

This couple used the rationalization about the girl's failure to show

her mother her work not only to excuse their own behavior. They also cited it as evidence that the girl must not feel close to her mom.

Like many rationalizations, this one was easy to expose, especially because it was part of a wider campaign to exclude the mother from her daughter's life. This couple also played the name game by requiring the girl to call her stepmother Mommy and her mother by her first name.

The "respect for the child's choice" shown by this couple is another popular rationalization used by most parents in the latter stages of brainwashing. Once a child has been successfully alienated from the target, the programming parent sits back and disavows any role in the conflict. When the child protests seeing her mother, the father says, "That is her choice." As an enlightened parent he "respects her autonomy"; he fails to facilitate the contact.

But curiously his permissiveness seems to operate only in this sphere. He sends his daughter to school even when she feels like staying home. He would never allow her to avoid a checkup because she was afraid of the doctor. And before the divorce, when she protested going somewhere with her mother, he insisted she do as she was told. But now, after months of programming, when his daughter resists spending a weekend with her mother, her choice is elevated to the status of a sacred precept not, under any circumstance, to be violated.

Parents who use the "I respect my child's autonomy" defense pour salt on the wound by blaming the target for the child's alienation. This is always some variant of "My child does not want to see you because you mistreat her." The perpetrator never acknowledges responsibility for masterminding the schism between the child and the target.

Norma testified that, despite her best efforts, she was unable to overcome her five-year-old daughter Megan's refusal to go to her father's home. She claimed that Megan was afraid of her father and her paternal grandparents. Norma blamed this on the father's yelling and not keeping all his promises to Megan and the grandparents' ignoring and teasing her. The court-appointed psychiatrist found no evidence to suggest that Megan feared her father, but did conclude that she avoided her father because of subtle pressure from her mother, combined with a wish to please her mother and avoid her anger. Like many alienated children, Megan insisted that it was her own choice to avoid her father and that her mother had nothing to do with it. In fact, her mother wanted her to see her dad. The following conversation exposed the flimsy rationalization:

Doctor: What does Mommy do when you don't want to take your bath?

Megan: She makes me.

Doctor: What does Mommy do when you don't want to go to bed?

Megan: She makes me.

Doctor: What does Mommy do when you don't want to see your Daddy?

Megan: She says I don't have to if I don't want to and Daddy should respect my feelings.

During cross-examination, the lawyer accused Norma of actively inducing the alienation. She was indignant. Here she had been doing everything possible to persuade Megan to visit her scary father, and instead of being commended for her valiant efforts she was portrayed as the villain. Norma failed to consider that she was asking the judge to give her custody of a child whom she admitted she was unable to control. If the judge were to believe her testimony, he could conclude that Norma was a weak parent who lacked appropriate authority over a five-year-old girl.

TAKE ACTION

To show your children how their rejection of you fulfills the desires of their other parent, despite your ex's rationalizations, initiate a conversation similar to the one that took place between the psychiatrist and Megan. Most children know that if one parent really wanted them to see the other parent, they would insist on it and back it up with the threat of punishment. Exposing this rationalization provides a relatively strong demonstration of how a parent can indirectly influence a child, and it paves the way for other efforts to reverse alienation.

HOLIER THAN THOU

Indignance, such as Norma's, is common among brainwashers. In her case it was a reaction to being accused of brainwashing. Beyond its defensive use, self-righteousness helps foster indoctrination. By combining moral

outrage with certainty of conviction, the aim is to ward off careful scrutiny of the programmer's reality distortions. The strident tone is the argument.

Trial attorneys favor this tactic. In deliberations before the judge, who is not likely to be taken in by such maneuvers, lawyers show emotional restraint while advocating their position. But let the jury enter the courtroom, and the emoting begins. Haughty, reproachful, disdainful, lawyers attempt to bypass the jurors' critical faculties. They want the jury to believe, in effect, "The lawyer feels so strongly about his position: It must be justified."

Jurors may not always be swayed by such tactics, especially since they get it from both sides. But children are much more suggestible. The tone of their parent's voice carries weight, even more than the words being spoken. And the self-righteous tone of a bad-mouthing parent communicates that the target deserves contempt.

The particulars of the condemnation are limitless. A man accuses his ex-spouse of neglecting her children because she cares passionately about her career and relies on baby-sitters too much. A wife accuses her husband of being a lousy father because he lets them do things she views as dangerous. A man tells his children that their mother and her new husband are "liars and morally bankrupt" because they began dating before the divorce was final. The "holier than thou" attitude is expressed with comments such as "That's just what I would expect from her" or "I can't believe he did that!" Whatever "that" is, the child gets the idea that it is very bad.

TAKE ACTION

If your breakup is accompanied by your ex using self-righteous tones to denounce you to your children, take this as an early warning signal that your children may be pressured to turn against you. Children are easily impressed by self-righteousness. Therefore, as soon as possible arm your children with a defense by teaching them that a strident tone is no index of the reasonableness of an idea. Children should learn to judge ideas by their merit and not by the emotion surrounding their delivery. They need to learn to recognize a parent's strong denunciations of the other parent as expressions of hostility, not representations of truth.

TAKE ACTION

Confront overindulgence directly by reminding your children that a parent's job is to set and enforce limits, and that this is one way to show love and caring. Explain that even though you and your ex do things differently, you both love the children and they need to have a good relationship with both of you. Children understand that responsible adults set limits. It is relatively easy for them to understand that it is unfair to reject you merely because you do not indulge them as much as their other parent.

Look for ways in which you could "lighten up" or compromise with the children without excessively indulging them. Alienated children need to have enjoyable times with the rejected parent to rebuild bonds of affection and respect and offset divorce poison. Parental authority is best exercised when it is grounded in a loving relationship. You may have to temporarily relax some of your expectations while you concentrate on reestablishing affectionate bonds.

ENCROACHMENT

Overindulgence works as an alienating tactic only if the child is kept from enjoying time with the target. When efforts to eliminate contact between the target and child are unsuccessful, one option remains. The parent tries to sabotage the child's enjoyment of the contact. There are many ways to accomplish this goal. All involve some form of encroachment on the child's time with the target or on their relationship.

A common ploy is to involve the child in frequent and lengthy telephone calls while the child is in the target parent's home. This serves several purposes. It reduces the time the target parent and child can interact; it keeps the child focused on the brainwashing parent; and it provides an opportunity to reinforce the programming.

When parents call they will ask, regardless of how happy the children sound, "What's wrong? Are you okay?" This reminds the children that the parent fostering the alienation expects them to have problems when in the company of the enemy. Children who have not fully succumbed to the brainwashing may regard such inquiries as a nuisance; they will

answer in an annoyed tone, "Nothing." Often, however, the children will oblige the parent by thinking of some complaint about the target. "Mommy is making me eat food I don't like." "Daddy won't let me watch TV." This is music to the brainwasher's ears. He or she is very receptive to such complaints and commiserates with the children's terrible fate of having to be with the target. When the children get off the phone, their mood has soured. The brainwashing parent has successfully diminished their enjoyment of the target.

Often the call generates homesickness or guilt. The children hear about all the fun things they are missing while away from their other home. A father heard his daughter say during a phone call, "No Mommy, we're not having too much fun to miss you." Often a parent tells the child how much she misses him. She cannot wait until he returns home. One mother carried this to extremes. She told her son, Ward, not only that she missed him, but his dog, guinea pig, plants, teddy bear, goldfish, grandparents, the house, and the swing set missed him. At the end of the conversation Ward felt that somehow it was wrong for him to be enjoying himself with his father. His proper place was with his mother. Like many parents who promote alienation, Ward's mother worried when her son was out of her orbit of influence for very long. Her frequent calls carried the underlying messages, "You must think about me at all times. If you spend time away from me you might forget me. I can't bear the thought of being without you."

Some parents interfere with the child's enjoyment of the target by promising rewards for returning home soon. One father told his son that there was a great surprise waiting for him when he returned. Naturally, the boy could not wait. What parent could compete with such enticement?

Even without phone calls parents can intrude into the time children spend with the target. One mother devised a creative strategy for monopolizing her son's attention during his one-week vacation with his father. She sent seven gift-wrapped packages in his suitcase. The boy was instructed to open one package a day. Each package contained one module of a toy; when the modules were joined they formed a whole. The catch was that each module took hours to assemble. And the one condition of the gift was that the boy assemble it himself without any outside help. Thus the mother gave her son a vehicle for avoiding meaningful contact with his father throughout the week. I have seen several variations of this maneuver. All serve the purpose of keeping the child focused

on the brainwashing parent while encroaching on the relationship with the target.

A common strategy for undercutting children's pleasure with a parent is to refuse to let the children take important possessions with them when they spend time with their other parent. A father would not allow his son to take his baseball glove with him when he returned to his mother's home. This was a problem for the mother because sometimes she had to take her son to his practices. For those readers who never played baseball, let me tell you what a problem this is for the boy. Over time, with proper preparation and care, a baseball glove conforms to its owner's hand. It becomes indispensable to the enjoyment of the game. To a child who loves baseball, his own glove is as important as the teddy bear was in earlier years.

What does it mean when a child cannot bring his glove, or other important possessions, with him to the other parent's home? If he is allowed to bring it anywhere else, such as friends' homes and to school, the message conveyed is that either the object will become tainted at Mom's home, or not returned, or that Dad is so angry with Mom that he does not want her to benefit from anything he bought his son. As with all such vindictive behavior, the child suffers.

The other message to the child is that he does not really own the glove. Ownership means the right to use and dispose of the possession. If he can't decide where he takes it, is it really his? Or is it Dad's? Of course parents place restrictions on children's use of their toys. Sometimes children are not permitted to bring a toy in the car. But the only reason for not allowing the boy to take his baseball glove to Mom's is to gratify Dad's own wish to hurt his ex. Many parents who apply such restrictions rationalize their behavior by expressing concern that the object would not be returned. The child is old enough, though, to take responsibility for his possessions. And if he forgets it, his mother can always return it for him. Without divorce poison in operation, the situation could be handled the same way it would if the child left the glove at school or on the baseball field.

One of the ways children experience a bond with a parent or other relative is by sharing special interests and activities. Parents who wish to break such a tie, or prevent its development, must find a way to dilute the significance of the shared pursuits. They can do so by duplicating the

activities in their own home. In this way they undermine the child's association of the pleasurable activity exclusively with the target.

For example, Sammy's grandparents introduced him to the hobby of collecting seashells. They kept the shells for Sammy in a shoe box in their home and the boy looked forward to handling the shells every time he visited them. Sammy's dad, intent on promoting his son's alienation from the grandparents, began buying bigger and better shells for Sammy and a beautiful glass case in which to store and display them.

Another time the grandparents discovered a television comedy that appealed equally to children and adults. Because the shows aired way past their grandson's bedtime, they videotaped the shows. Each time Sammy visited, they played the episode from the previous week. Watching these shows and laughing out loud together became a highlight of the visits and a potent antidote to the father's negative programming. When Sammy's dad learned about this, he simply allowed Sammy to stay up late and watch the shows when they originally aired. This effectively extinguished Sammy's excitement at viewing the programs with his grandparents.

When confronted with his obstructive behavior the father pleaded innocent: "What is wrong with supporting my son's interests?" What's wrong is that his selection of which particular interests to support was dictated by what he feared would foster a unique bond between Sammy and his grandparents.

A common maneuver is to arrange a very enjoyable activity for the children that encroaches on the time they are scheduled to be with the target. The target must then choose between forgoing the time with the children or interrupting their fun. The children come to associate contact with the target with disappointments such as prematurely ending a game, leaving in the middle of a movie, or missing the chance to go ice-skating. The effectiveness of this tactic is enhanced when the programming parent expresses indignation, as in "I can't believe your mother insists that you go home right now when we are in the middle of this great video!" The self-righteous tone makes it difficult for the child to see through the father's manipulation.

Dr. Clawar and Dr. Rivlin described a mother who upstaged a father's birthday celebration plans for their ten-year-old son. She hosted a lavish party for the boy's entire class and then told him that it was silly to have two parties and that the father would never provide the big celebration that he deserved. Initially the boy was unenthusiastic and withdrawn at

It is easy to see how covert operations corrupt children's characters. The alienating parent encourages and sanctions dishonest and even cruel behavior. Also, as we see next, the more children behave in this manner, the more alienated they become. Their role as pawns for the brainwashing parent further entrenches their estrangement.

TAKE ACTION

Set a firm limit on dishonest behavior. Try to arouse your children's underlying guilt and discomfort with covert operations by telling them that it must not feel very good being dishonest. Remind them that they were always taught not to keep secrets from their parents, and that this rule doesn't change just because parents don't get along with each other. Children know that dishonesty is wrong. Despite their overt behavior, they often welcome external control when their behavior is out of bounds. Particularly when an authority figure sanctions immoral behavior, children need someone to uphold proper standards and provide a moral compass.

Explain that experts on divorce tell parents not to put their children in the middle, and that you follow that advice. Help them decide how to assert themselves appropriately with your ex in order to resist colluding. For example, "Tell Mom that you love both parents and don't want to take sides." Or "Tell Dad that you don't want to keep secrets from either of your parents." Children need permission to stand up to a parent when that parent is asking them to do something wrong. If your ex persists in involving the children in covert operations, legal intervention may be necessary.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

Think back to the last time you purchased a car. If you are like most people, chances are you were even more convinced that your choice was correct after the purchase than before. Psychologists explain this process as reducing "cognitive dissonance." It is the tendency to bring our beliefs in

line with our behavior. This helps reduce uncertainty, inconsistency, and conflict. Thus, if we act in a manner inconsistent with our beliefs, we may change what we believe.

This is one reason it is so important to interrupt your children's hateful behavior toward you as soon as possible. The more they mistreat you, the more they must convince themselves that you deserve to be mistreated. The more they reject you, the more they convince themselves that you are bad and worthy of rejection. This reduces the dissonance caused by acting so hateful to a person who was loved for so long. It spares children inner turmoil about their behavior. In this manner, alienation feeds on itself and becomes entrenched.

TAKE ACTION

If your children's alienation is not too severe, and your ex wants them to testify in a custody trial, consider asking your attorney if there is a way to prevent their participation. *Why?* After publicly denouncing a parent, a child may intensify negative feelings in order to reconcile his beliefs with his disloyal behavior.

CONSPIRACY

Parents intent on promoting alienation often get assistance from others who serve as co-programmers. For example, a father's extended family might join in the denigration of the mother and her family. This increases the pressure on the children to conform or else risk being rejected by grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Bad-mouthing the target becomes the family pastime, uniting them with a common enemy.

Sometimes the co-programmer is an older sibling who has already been brainwashed. This is particularly effective when the children visit the target away from the alienating parent. The older sibling carries on the brainwashing campaign by proxy, making sure that the younger ones remain loyal to the brainwashing parent.

One boy had been abducted by his father and brainwashed against his mother. The court reunited the mother and son and eventually the boy began calling her Mom again. However, when his severely alienated sister



CHAPTER 7

POISON CONTROL

Love must be supplemented by deliberate efforts on the part of the parent.

—BRUNO BETTELHEIM

Love is not enough. It is not enough to protect children from divorce poison. And it is not enough to reverse its pernicious effects.

Every brainwashed child once expressed love for the now rejected parent. Given the conditions and treatment discussed in the preceding chapters, most children will succumb to divorce poison. They may escape the complete rupture of their relationship with the target, but they will suffer in other ways.

One of the disturbing conclusions from divorce research is that children who receive clean bills of health when examined by gross measures, such as behavior checklists and report cards, may be suffering great emotional distress that goes undetected. Sometimes a parent uses a child's apparent good adjustment to keep the other parent at arm's length. The argument goes like this: If the child gets along well with teachers, friends, and one parent; earns good grades; stays out of major trouble; and claims to be happy, why rock the boat? Why require the child to relate to the other parent? This is often punctuated with a warning that this "well-behaved" child has threatened to run away if forced to have contact with the hated parent.

NB!
 Too many therapists endorse this misguided thinking. They fail to recognize the devaluation of the parent-child relationship that is inherent in ranking school and friends above family. They take an astonishingly casual attitude toward the child's loss of a parent, and the parent's loss of a child. These therapists advise courts to allow children to suspend contact with alienated parents, essentially to disown their parents. And they admonish alienated parents to cease and desist efforts to reconnect with their offspring. By now I am sure it is clear that, in most cases, I oppose such a hands-off policy.

FOR NAME

 AVHOLD
 SEG FM

It makes sense to consider letting go as a last resort after years of failed attempts to resolve chronic and severe alienation. In too many cases, though, the advice comes early in the process from professionals who hope time will heal the wounds, or who mistake incipient signs of alienation for short-term reactions to divorce. Temporary suspension of parent-child contact, like a temporary marital separation, may eventually give way to a renewed relationship. It may also be the prelude to prolonged estrangement. This book grew out of the conviction that children deserve protection from divorce poison. It won't help merely to blame your ex, bemoan your sorry situation, and sink slowly into the passivity of victimhood.

If you fail to take responsibility for responding effectively, how can you expect your children to do otherwise? If you fail to take a firm stand in support of your relationship with them, how can you expect them to withstand your ex's manipulations? If you fail to uphold the reality of your value to them, how can you expect them to remain in touch with this reality when assaulted with a campaign to corrupt their positive vision and memories? By your actions, you must demonstrate your conviction that your relationship with your children is worth fighting for, is worth preserving.

X
 Taking responsibility does not mean that you should blame yourself for the problem. And it does not mean that your efforts will always pay off. At some point the sensible thing to do may be to back off and postpone the project. Chapter 9, "Letting Go," can help you with this tormenting decision. If you decide to let go, at least let it be with pride in the knowledge that you did everything in your power to help your children, rather than with regret that you passively allowed your children to slip away.

In this chapter I revisit and expand on the coping tips found throughout the book and give additional antidotes to divorce poison. Before doing so, I want to suggest some general guidelines for increasing your child's receptivity to your communications.

EMPATHY

The late great child psychologist Dr. Haim Ginott taught parents how to speak to their children's hearts. To connect emotionally, he advised, parents must learn to communicate genuine empathy. Dr. Ginott's seminal books are filled with practical suggestions and examples of how to do this. Though he wrote the books many years ago, his advice is timeless. If ever a parent needed good communication skills, it is a parent whose children's hearts are determinedly and tightly shut.

When your children express contempt or fear of you, regardless of whether these feelings were implanted by your ex, the feelings are real for your children at that moment. If you too quickly attempt to dispute their words, or defend your view of reality, the result is likely to be a communications impasse. Your children will feel that you have not taken them seriously, that you fail to recognize the extent of their unhappiness. Instead of dismissing your children's negative feelings, identify them with words and let your children know that you understand exactly how they are feeling. Dr. Ginott showed how strong feelings can "lose their sharp edges when a sympathetic listener accepts them with understanding." It may seem a paradox, but the way to get rid of your children's hatred is first to show them that you acknowledge the reality of their feelings and that you treat their feelings with respect. This does not mean that you approve of your children's rudeness or misbehavior. Nor does it mean that you tolerate repetitive expressions of hatred. But it does mean that you face the reality of the negative feelings before attempting to change them.

THE POWER OF INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

Children know how to frustrate adults. When we want to help them, they make it difficult. They clam up. They evade communication. They erect a simple three-word barricade that many parents find impenetrable. In response to questions about feelings, they shrug their shoulders and say, in an innocent voice, "I don't know." And they keep repeating it until we give up. Breaking through this requires special techniques that child psychotherapists have developed to communicate with reluctant children.

First, we must appreciate that children do not necessarily want to foil our efforts at communication. Most younger children are simply not able

often means that some things about their parents' divorce really bug them. The article also said that most girls feel bad that they aren't doing as well as they used to." With older children such indirect communication may result in more candid discussions. But this girl said, "Yeah, well, I don't really care." Her mother responded, "Well, I can understand if you did feel that way," and then dropped the conversation.

The next day the mother took the conversation one step further by identifying the feeling she thought was tied to her child's problem behavior. She said, "I've been thinking about what we talked about yesterday. Many girls feel really mad at their parents for getting a divorce." This time the girl said, "What difference does it make? You're not going to get back together." Her mother said, "I know that sometimes girls will try to get back at their parents by doing poorly in school, especially when they know that good grades are important to the parents. I've been thinking that maybe you are angry with me. I don't blame you if you are. I know you didn't want this divorce. But it would be better if we could talk about your feelings, or maybe you could write me a letter about how angry you really feel. Why should you take your anger out on yourself and have to feel bad about screwing up in school when it's really your father and me that you're angry at?" In this way, the mother was suggesting a healthier way for her child to cope with angry feelings. The girl did not acknowledge that her mom was correct, but later that night the mother saw the girl in her room doing schoolwork.

An excellent book for learning more about effective communication is *Growing Up with Divorce* by Dr. Neil Kalter. He describes a six-step strategy for using indirect communication and illustrates it with numerous examples. If you are tempted to dismiss indirect communication as ineffective, or only second-best, consider this: Throughout the ages fables have been used to teach moral principles. If you want your child to *appreciate the value of persistence, you'll get much further with Aesop's "The Tortoise and the Hare"* than with a lecture.

FLY ON THE WALL

Another way to get a message across is to let the children "accidentally" overhear you speaking to someone else. All children eavesdrop on private conversations, and alienated children are no exception. In fact, children

in advanced stages of alienation may try to monitor everything the target says in order to report back to the favored parent. Take advantage of this to say to someone else what you want your children to hear. As flies on the wall they will get the message.

An alienated parent who tries to correct her children's distortions directly will find them resisting the conversation. Many children cover their ears as soon as the hated parent begins talking to them. But these same children will listen intently as the object of their scorn speaks openly with a friend or relative over the phone. This is a good opportunity to give your version of what is happening between you and the children.

In these conversations, it is best to emphasize what you and the children have lost, how sad you feel for the children, and how different things used to be. Talk about all the past signs of the loving relationship. Speak of your confusion and puzzlement about the dramatic change in attitudes. Tie the alienation to the divorce and to your ex's anger at you. But be careful not to focus on your anger at your ex for maligning you. The children are primed to believe bad things about you. If they overhear you discussing your anger at their other parent, they will interpret this as an act of bad-mouthing and will use it to justify their criticisms of you.

Repeated conversations that the children overhear lay a foundation for a more explicit and direct discussion at some later point in time. By then, the children have heard your side of the story expressed in a manner that might garner their sympathy for you and their willingness to begin healing the ruptured relationship.

TWO STEPS REMOVED

Even when using the fly-on-the-wall technique, it is usually more effective to introduce emotionally laden topics by discussing a situation two steps removed from the children's personal experience. Alienated children, like brainwashed cult members, are unaware that their feelings are the result of manipulation. If you try to explain that they have been brainwashed by their other parent, they will probably resist listening to anything you have to say about it. Instead, approach the topic by first talking about another means of manipulation, and one not involving the children. For example, you can discuss how advertisements induce people to focus selectively on certain attributes and overlook others. This introduces the general idea of

are older, you can decide for yourself what kind of food you think is best to eat. But why do you think Daddy says these things about me? Do you think he is really worried about your health, or do you think maybe he says these things because he is still mad at Mom?"

When your children repeat something critical about you that they heard from your ex, resist the temptation to immediately correct the distortion. Instead, invite the children to judge for themselves. If necessary, help them consider the evidence for and against the statement. And then help them figure out what might have motivated their other parent to say these things about you. By engaging your children in this way, you encourage the virtue of rationality and strengthen their ability to resist mental manipulation.

BRAINWASHING 101

Whether or not the procedures presented above are successful in preventing or overcoming alienation, an important aspect of helping children caught in the middle of their parents' battles is to educate them about divorce poison. This can help children who have already recovered their affectionate feelings cope with future exposures to divorce poison. And it can help open the minds and hearts of children who are still alienated.

A reminder: Any of the following strategies for educating children about brainwashing may be more effectively introduced through third parties and through the indirect means described earlier. Also, it is best to implement these strategies under the guidance of a therapist.

Victims of brainwashing—whether prisoners of war, members of cults, or alienated children—do not recognize that they are brainwashed. If you tell an alienated child that he is brainwashed, he will resent the implication that his attitudes are not his own. He does not recognize that he is a puppet controlled by the alienating parent. Indeed, a common feature of these children is their insistence that they have arrived at their negative attitudes about the target solely through their own independent judgment.

The key to recovering from divorce poison is to gain the insight that one has been influenced by it. It will be easier for a child to grasp and accept that he has been brainwashed if he understands and accepts the possibility of such an occurrence. The first step, therefore, is to provide general information about how people can influence our thoughts and feelings. I recommend doing this in a graduated fashion. Begin with situ-

If you live in an area where no therapist is known for expertise in working with alienated children, choose someone who has general experience in treating parent-child conflicts and who is willing to learn about effective interventions with victims of divorce poison. Most therapists will make the effort to learn through books and consultations with specialists in the field.

Therapists to Avoid

It is well known in the professional community that some therapists do their clients more harm than good. When treating families in which divorce poison is rampant, too many therapists take sides in the tribal warfare and lose their objectivity. They meet with only one parent and the alienated child, conclude that the child's alienation is reasonable, and never speak with the rejected parent to get the other side of the story. Often these therapists have a poor understanding of the dynamics of brainwashing and thus have a hard time believing that a child's hatred could be the result of manipulation. They will recklessly offer opinions to the court about a parent they have never seen. They may write letters to the judge recommending that a parent have no contact or only supervised contact with the child. In some cases they go so far as to diagnose a parent they have never even met as a pedophile.

The best therapists judge their clients on the facts and not on preconceived biases. It is usually a mistake to choose a therapist who has worked extensively with your ex and your child without asking to meet with you. How can a therapist expect to repair your child's relationship with you without seeing you or at least collaborating with your therapist? The very fact that you were excluded from the work must raise a suspicion of bias. The therapist knows you only through the eyes of your ex and your child, and may have formed a negative first impression. This impression could make it more difficult for the therapist to see you from a neutral perspective. You should consult your attorney prior to speaking and visiting with a therapist whom you had no part in selecting. Depending on a number of factors, such as the reputation of the therapist and the history of the therapist's involvement with opposing counsel, your attorney may advise you to reject belated invitations to meet with the therapist. Or, the attorney may first insist that both sides agree that the thera-

pist's feedback will play no role in litigation, neither in the form of reports or testimony nor in information provided to others who might use the information in their own reports or testimony.

Some therapists believe that children who reject a parent should be allowed to withdraw from contact until they change their attitude. These therapists hope that time and therapy alone will heal wounded relationships. In most cases they will be disappointed. And so will you if you put your hopes in such a therapist. Although research on treating alienated children is still at an early stage, every published study to date has reached the same conclusion: If a child's alienation is unjustified, the most reliable path to recovery is to get the child together with the target parent. Unless there are compelling circumstances that require postponing contact, one aspect of the treatment plan should be to have the child spend time with the rejected parent. If the therapist opposes this on principle, he or she is not the best therapist for the job.

Another type of therapist to avoid is one who is biased against either women or men. Even if the bias favors you, this type of bias compromises the quality of the treatment. But be aware that sometimes a therapist's reputation for bias is undeserved. It is important to investigate the source of the accusation, speak to the therapist about it, and give him or her a chance to explain. You may learn that the therapist has helped many mothers and many fathers. The allegations of bias may have originated from one disgruntled parent who blames his problems on the therapist's alleged prejudice rather than accepting personal responsibility.

If allegations of abuse accompany alienation, avoid therapists who believe that all such allegations must be true. You can recognize such therapists by their opinions that "children never lie" or "where there's smoke, there's fire." Either they are unaware of the professional literature in this area, or they have a personal ax to grind. Also, avoid any therapist who tends to deny the reality of child abuse and assumes that all such allegations are false.

The Selection Process

If you and your ex agree to seek professional help for the family, it is important that both of you have a say in choosing the therapist. Recommendations can come from your child's pediatrician, school, a former or