

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ALIENATED CHILDREN

WHEN CHILDREN REJECT PARENTS



RICHARD A. WARSHAK

Author of Divorce Poison

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ALIENATED CHILDREN**

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A VOLUME IN THE COLLECTED PAPERS
OF RICHARD A. WARSHAK

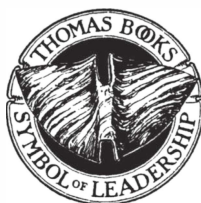
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To the love of my life, my wife, Sandra Lee Warshak

PREFACE

My work on the psychology of alienated children spans over twenty-five years, including chapters in ten books and more than a hundred articles and essays published in academic journals, professional outlets, newspapers, blogs, websites, and on Facebook. For years, I considered compiling a selection of the writings that have proven most helpful to professionals and parents. The idea lingered on the back burner—until Dr. William Bernet encouraged me to bring the project to life. Given Dr. Bernet's stature as a respected scholar and founder of an international organization dedicated to the study of parental alienation, I took his encouragement seriously.

The fifteen chapters in this volume represent a cross-section of my contributions to understanding, evaluating, preventing, and intervening in cases of parental alienation. Although most of the papers first appeared in peer-reviewed journals, I have always aimed to write in a clear, accessible style with minimal professional jargon. The collection is primarily comprised of solo-authored works, with two exceptions: one co-authored with my friend and colleague Dr. Mark Otis, and another—especially meaningful to me—written with then-student Aaron Hands, now Dr. Hands, who also happens to be my grandson.

The chapters are arranged in chronological order, offering readers a window into the evolution of my thinking over time. Like any author revisiting earlier work, I found myself thinking, I could write that better now. Still, I chose not to revise the original texts. I believe the integrity of the work lies in presenting it as it was—complete with its strengths and limitations.

A new introduction and commentary precede each chapter. In some, I recount behind-the-scenes stories—such as the time a journal editor sought to dilute my critique of a colleague just before publication. In others, I reflect on the paper's key contributions, its reception, or its influence on how judges, lawyers, and therapists approach the issue of parental alienation. Interestingly, the portions I view as most important are not always the ones most often cited by colleagues.

The volume concludes with an epilogue in which I step into the roles of historian, current observer, and—perhaps a bit boldly—futurist. I share predictions for the field and offer a wish list to guide future scholarship and practice.

Revisiting these papers has been deeply rewarding, even if sometimes frustrating as I encountered ideas I would now approach differently. Still, while

I might revise some particulars, I remain satisfied with the broader themes and insights. I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce this collection, and I hope the volume will serve as a helpful resource for professionals and parents alike—especially those working to protect children from becoming the unintended casualties of their parents' conflicts.

R.A.W. .

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ALIENATED CHILDREN

CHAPTER 1

PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME IN COURT

1999

Introduction

In 1998, I was appointed by the Texas Bar Association to a committee charged with developing a manual for judges and attorneys to evaluate the admissibility, credibility, and trustworthiness of expert witness testimony in family law litigation.

One of the proposed chapters in this Expert Witness Manual addressed the topic of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS). The attorney preparing the chapter circulated to the committee a journalist's scathing attack on Dr. Richard Gardner, the psychiatrist who introduced the term PAS. The tone and content of the article—hostile, sarcastic, replete with ad hominem arguments and personal smears—concerned me. The article lifted quotes out of context to construct an egregiously misleading portrait of the man and his ideas.

It was clear the attorney thought the article was worth reading, and I worried it might unduly influence the chapter's content, casting a shadow over the legitimacy of the concept and Dr. Gardner's work.

I felt strongly that it would be irresponsible to move forward with the chapter without giving Dr. Gardner the opportunity to respond to the criticisms. I reached out to him, and he graciously invited me to lunch at his home in Tenaflly, New Jersey.

It was a crisp Saturday in January 1999. I arrived at a tastefully furnished two-story home, warmed by a fire in the fireplace. Dr. Gardner served a light lunch on his back patio. At one point, he handed me a New York Times Magazine article he had saved for me about Midwood High School—my alma mater.

I had seen Dr. Gardner once before, some 25 years earlier, at a workshop he gave in Dallas (ironically, that event was also where I met my wife). I remembered being struck by his enthusiasm for working

with children and his distinctive use of humor in clinical settings. During our lunch, those same qualities were evident—along with his passion for ballroom dancing, his pride in his children, and the benefits of self-publishing some of his books (he had already published more than ten books with prestigious academic and trade publishers). He explained that shorter lag times and greater editorial control allowed him to keep pace with developments in his thinking and research, such as by issuing updates and revised editions.

We also spoke about the controversy surrounding his work. Dr. Gardner was the target of ongoing vilification, and his views were often misrepresented. A common accusation was that PAS promoted the simplistic idea that any child who rejected a parent must have been manipulated by the other parent. This, of course, mischaracterized Gardner's more nuanced position, which included clear recognition of cases where rejection was warranted—such as in instances of abuse or neglect.

Years later, Dr. William Bernet would identify this misrepresentation as a persistent and damaging piece of misinformation. He has meticulously documented how a “scholarly rumor” took root: critics repeatedly cited one another's distortions of Gardner's views, often without ever consulting the original sources. Over time, repetition lent a false sense of legitimacy to these distortions.

As I revisited the paper that follows, I was gratified to see that it anticipated and responded to this very strawman argument. For example:

PAS is not diagnosed when the child's alienation from a parent is justified by the history of the parent's treatment of the child. Gardner specifically mentions abuse and neglect as two causes for justified alienation. Warshak notes two additional situations that could result in a child's justified alienation. The first is severely deficient parenting that falls short of being considered bona fide abuse or neglect. The second involves a parent who, after having been totally absent from the child's life, comes back into the picture and begins pressing for extended contact. Because the parent is a stranger to the child, the child, particularly a young child, may resist such contact. If the parent continues to attempt extended contact that fails to take into account the child's reasonable insecurity, the child may respond with justified hostility.

Contrary to the caricature painted by his critics, I found Dr. Gardner to be thoughtful, balanced, and grounded in clinical reality. He

understood that pathological alignment with one parent against the other was just one form of parent–child conflict among many he had addressed in his earlier work.

When I returned from our meeting, I decided not to wait for a draft of the PAS chapter. Instead, I offered to write it myself, and the committee chair accepted. That chapter became my first publication about parental alienation—at the time still referred to as a syndrome to denote a recognizable cluster of behaviors and attitudes in children affected by the problem.

PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME IN COURT*

1 INTRODUCTION

Mental health professionals increasingly diagnose Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) in child custody matters. Critics of this diagnostic label, however, believe that it lacks an adequate scientific foundation and that testimony regarding this diagnosis, its course, and its treatment should be inadmissible. This monograph examines the issues behind this controversy from a social science and legal perspective.

The first part discusses the symptoms of PAS, recommended treatments, and research on the efficacy of different treatments. Next is an analysis of specific criticisms of the PAS label. A section on case law provides some citations regarding PAS testimony, and discusses statutes and case law regarding sanctions for visitation refusal, and articles by attorneys and judges on PAS. The monograph ends with specific suggestions for proposing and opposing admission of PAS testimony.

2 GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS), named by child psychiatrist Richard A. Gardner, M.D., refers to a disturbance whose primary manifestation is a child's unjustified campaign of denigration against a parent. Dr. Gardner believes PAS arises primarily in the context of child custody disputes and results from "the *combination* of a programming (brainwashing) parent's indoctrinations and the child's own contributions to the vilification of the target parent." [Emphasis in the original.]¹

PAS is not diagnosed when the child's alienation from a parent is justified by the history of the parent's treatment of the child. Gardner specifically mentions abuse and neglect as two causes for justified alienation. Warshak notes two additional situations that could result in a child's justified alienation. The first is severely deficient parenting that falls short of being considered bona fide abuse or neglect. The second

*Original citation: Richard A. Warshak, *Psychological Syndromes: Parental Alienation Syndrome*, in *EXPERT WITNESS MANUAL* (Richard A. Orsinger ed., 1999).

involves a parent who, after having been totally absent from the child's life, comes back into the picture and begins pressing for extended contact. Because the parent is a stranger to the child, the child, particularly a young child, may resist such contact. If the parent continues to attempt extended contact that fails to take into account the child's reasonable insecurity, the child may respond with justified hostility.

3 SYMPTOMS

According to Gardner, children who suffer from a moderate or severe type of PAS exhibit all or most of a cluster of eight symptoms.² Children who suffer from a mild type of PAS may have only some of the symptoms. The symptoms are:

1. "A campaign of denigration." The campaign against the alienated parent (also called the target parent) has two components: the alienating parent's indoctrinations and the child's own contributions.
2. "Weak, absurd, or frivolous rationalizations for the deprecation." The child defends the alienation toward the parent with trivial or irrational excuses that would not reasonably or ordinarily justify that level of alienation.
3. "Lack of ambivalence." Instead of the ambivalence which characterizes normal human relationships, the child can describe the target parent only in negative terms, can think of nothing good to say about that parent, and may have few, if any, positive memories of the parent. By contrast, in many cases the child regards the other parent as perfect.
4. "The 'independent thinker' phenomenon." The child professes that her rejection of the target parent is her own decision and that the other parent has exercised no influence or contribution to the alienation.
5. "Reflexive support of the alienating parent in the parental conflict." The child accepts the allegations of the indoctrinating parent against the target parent without hesitation, sometimes without hearing the target's response, and sometimes in the face of obvious contradictory evidence.
6. "Absence of guilt over cruelty to and/or exploitation of the alienated parent." The child exhibits no gratitude for the parent's contributions nor guilt for treating the target parent with malice and disregard for the parent's feelings.

This compilation of selected writings by respected scholar and author Richard Warshak will prove to be helpful to professionals and parents dealing with the issue of parental alienation. Written in a clear, accessible style with minimal professional jargon, the fifteen chapters in this volume represent a cross-section of his seminal contributions to understanding, evaluating, preventing, and intervening in cases of parental alienation. The chapters are arranged in chronological order, offering readers a window into the evolution of Warshak's thinking over time. A new introduction and commentary precede each chapter. In some, behind-the-scenes stories are recounted. In others, he reflects on the paper's key contributions, its reception, or its influence on how judges, lawyers, and therapists approach the issue of parental alienation. The volume concludes with an Epilogue that distills five decades of study into insights and suggestions for the road ahead—clarifying terminology, deepening understanding of alienation, and pointing to new ways to help children and families heal. The volume will serve as a helpful resource for professionals and parents alike, especially those working to protect children from becoming the unintended casualties of their parents' conflicts.

Going far beyond the original insights in *Divorce Poison*, Warshak discusses:

- The most potent — yet often overlooked — trigger of parental alienation
- The landmark study of children who overcame severe alienation
- Rationale for courts to temporarily suspend a child's contact with an alienating parent
- How to assess when a rejected parent's behavior is wrongly blamed for a child's alienation
- Seven criteria for evaluating whether a child is alienated from a parent
- How to evaluate behaviors of an alienating parent
- How to identify and represent parents who are falsely accused of parental alienation
- Practice tips for lawyers on either side of a parental alienation case



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