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FAC NEWSLETTER - SEPTEMBER 2008

Children Who Have Been Brainwashed

By One Parent Into Hating The Other

An Interview with Richard Warshak



ISSUE #115

Can the courts tell someone who to love? They must try, decided Ontario Superior Court Judge James Turnbull, in recent ruling involving the case of "L.S.", a 13 year old boy systematically brainwashed by his father to hate his mother. "Parental alienation is a difficult issue increasingly faced by the courts," said Turnbull. In a bold move, he granted the mother sole custody of her estranged son. The ruling gives her the right to transport him—against his will if necessary—for treatment to counteract years of "subtle emotional abuse" by her ex-husband. Turnbull based much of his ruling on the testimony of clinical psychologist Richard Warshak. L.S. and his mother will participate in a four day program Warshak helped devise to counteract such alienation. Warshak is the author of *Divorce Poison: Protecting the Parent-Child Bond From a Vindictive Ex.*



Q: Explain parental alienation.

A: What I call divorce poison are the things parents do that

undermine the relationship with the other parent. It can range from occasional bad mouthing to a vicious campaign to remove the parent from the child's life. When children succumb to this kind of negative influence they begin to treat the other parent with contempt, or with fear. The term that I've come to use is pathological alienation because I want to distinguish this problem from situations where a child has good reason to reject a parent.

Q: Is pathological alienation an act of love, or of hatred toward the children?

A: I do think this is the most under recognized form of emotional abuse toward children. What happens is parents who do this are so caught up in their emotions that they lose sight of their children's needs. They don't deliberately intend to hurt their children. The children are just collateral damage.

Q: Can you give examples from your experience of how this brainwashing is done?

A: It usually begins with a theme: "Your mom left us." Or, "Your dad goes on business trips because he doesn't care about us." The parent's love for the child is put in question: "She never really want you." Sometimes a par-

ent's past mistakes are exaggerated. Other times entire episodes are manufactured to make the parent look bad to the child.

Q: That's particularly evil.

A: In some cases, children's memories of the good things that were done are wiped out, so they don't remember that the parent was present at an important event. Even though the parent has pictures to prove it, the child's negative view is so fixed that they discount the evidence. Attempts by the rejected parent to reach the child, such as gifts and cards, are withheld. In one case a girl was told that if her father really wanted to see her he would have sent money for airfare.

A few years later the girl found a drawer full of plane tickets that the father had purchased and sent and the mother had hidden. In another case a woman who was in her 30's reconciled with her father after her mother died. She told him she could never get over the fact that he didn't provide money for her to attend college. So he pulled out his cancelled cheques that amounted to four years of tuition that he had sent to the mother but the girl had never seen.

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Q: You say in your book that rejected parents sometimes contribute to their victimization by maintaining a stoic silence or just by refusing to indulge in a similar sort of slander about their ex-spouse. It's not always a good idea to remain passive?

A: It's not a good idea to remain passive. Certainly it's not a good idea to react by doing your own bad mouthing. The single biggest mistake that parents and the professionals who advise them make is to do nothing. This leaves children with no help or understanding of what is at best a confusing situation. In any other situation when children misperceive reality we help correct their distortions. If children act hatefully toward people of another race or religion we teach the importance of judging people fairly and treating others with dignity. This is no less essential when the targets of animosity are parents and other relatives.

Q: What is the price children pay for writing off one of their parents?

A: The most serious consequence is the loss of the parent and sometimes the loss of half their family. It's not uncommon for these children to reject not only the parent but anyone associated with that parent. It's common knowledge when you have problems with your parents it handicaps your future relationships. In addition to that, though, there is long-term damage to the child's personality and character. As adults they suffer low self esteem. Some children feel very guilty for having mistreated the other parent. These are the children who've come to understand what has happened

to them.

Q: Can you tell me if it is unusual for you to testify in court in these situations.?

A: Most of my time is spent doing my research, writing and helping families in my office. I get many requests to testify. Most of these I turn down. When I do offer testimony, I do my best to educate the court about the nature of the problem and the options available to remedy it.

Q: In this case, Judge Turnbull seemed impressed by your proposed remedy. His ruling caused a bit of a stir in Ontario. He ordered this boy flown, against his will if necessary, to this program you helped design, the Family Workshop for Alienated Children. Would that be an unusual ruling?

A: It's becoming more common as the courts learn about the damage to children in the present and on. Particularly when judges learn they hold the power to help the family, judges are more willing to tell kids that they don't get to choose their parents just as they don't get to vote or drink alcohol. Not only do the kids have to stop acting like entitled adults, the judges tell the grown-ups to stop acting like kids.

Q: A newspaper report of that case calls the program "a facility that deprograms children." Is that how you would describe it?

A: Not at all. This is a gross misconception of the work we do. Our program teaches children how to stay out of the middle of adult conflicts, and how to maintain a compassionate view toward each parent. We teach children to think critically. When chil-

dren learn how to see a problem from different perspectives they usually begin to heal their relationship without having to acknowledge that they had been treating the parent with contempt and without having to apologize for it. They begin relating in a more positive way.

Q: Yet I understand that, to varying degrees, children can be forced to attend, either through a court order or by being physically escorted to the workshop. This is after the courts have already said they're going to make them live with a parent they've already rejected. It sound like a recipe for disaster.

A: Again, what we have going for us is that the child really has an underlying wish to get out of this bind. I should clarify that often it is not the judge who orders the child to attend the workshop. Rather, the judge awards decision making authority to the rejected parent who may choose to enroll the child in the program, just as the parent is free to make other decisions regarding the child's health and education. Our program is designed to jump start the reconciliation and offer a safe way to contain a child's anxiety and conflict. It's a misconception that the children are restrained. No child has been brought to me in restraints, and I would never work with a child under such conditions. They are often-times lectured by the judge about the necessity that they repair the damaged relationship. Once they understand they no longer hold a power that they should have never been given in the first place it's remarkable how much they cooperate.

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Q: A newspaper editorial on the Ontario case calls the “judicial reaching on a gargantuan scale,” and says “it has the potential to cause further harm.” How do you respond?

A: The courts sometimes have to make difficult decisions. In another context, a court would not allow a child to live with the consequences of a major life decision made at such a young age, and under emotional distress. For instance, physically abused children will commonly plead with authorities to allow them to remain in the abusive home. But despite their protests, we protect children from abuse in the interest of safeguarding their long term needs. If children refuse to attend school or seek necessary medical treatment, it is considered perfectly appropriate to require them to comply.

Q: How long does a workshop last?

A: The initial phase lasts four days in terms of our work with the child and the rejected parent. This seems kind of rapid. Traditional attempts to help this problem usually involve weekly therapy sessions. And after two

years the therapist decides the treatment has been a failure, at which point the child is even older and it's more difficult to reverse the problem. When divorce poison takes hold it often works so rapidly that a child who is loving one day acts hateful the next. Fortunately, reversing the problem can almost be as rapid. What we have on our side is that the child wants to reconnect with the parent and wants to be released from the bind in which he's found himself. Certainly in four days we can't undo all the damage of years of living in a family war zone. What we do is help the child recapture a major part of his identity. When the child no longer feels the need to pledge allegiance to one parent by rejecting the other, that's enormously liberating and it reinforces the child's desire to maintain the gains. In four days we can't help the child come to terms with what is really a very tragic chapter in his life. But we do put a stop to the tragedy and, if needed, we connect the family to local professionals.

Q: You've got some major parental repair work to

do as well then?

A: We do. And in truth we're not as successful with (alienating) parents as we'd like to be. We have much more success in healing the damaged relationship the child has with the parent who was rejected. We have had success with the other parent sometimes but in other cases they have no interest in cooperating. In the most unfortunate situations, the other parent will end up rejecting the child themselves. “If you're not on my side you're against me.” Even if the other parent does not change their attitude the children can learn enough often to withstand that kind of influence without succumbing to it.

Q: They're inoculated?

A: Yes. We give the children the tools to be children and to stay out of adult conflicts.

Happy face Babies smile 200 times a day, and women smile nearly eight times more than men. The average man smiles just eight times a day.



FAC NEWSLETTER - JUNE 2008

Your Seventh Sense

Sometimes All You Need Is A Good Laugh How To Find More Humor In Your Life



Knock-knock. Who's there? Sarah. Sarah who? Sarah reason you're not laughing?

Okay, so most knock-knock jokes are groaners—but you're smiling aren't you? It's amazing what a little humor can do. The problem can be remembering how to laugh. We're so busy taking life seriously. Sure, stressors abound, but the key is to find humor wherever we can. It's possible! We're all born with a sense of humor, and for good reason. Research reveals that humor helps us handle stress, emotionally and physically.

Laughter can improve heart rate, lung function, blood oxygenation and abdominal contraction (laugh up a six-pack!). It also eases muscle tension and strengthens the immune system.

In a study volunteers were shown a war film and a comedy. The serious move caused their blood vessels to constrict, while the comedy increased blood flow and lowered blood pressure, both of which are linked to a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease.

A good cackle burns calories, too. Twenty percent more calories are burned when laughing, than at rest. A hearty guffaw expends the same energy as walking a half mile. In other words, laugh 15 minutes a day and you'll lose about four and a half pounds this year!

Finding what's funny reduces stress and anxiety, and, of

course, creates pleasure.

Laughter can help your relationship, too. One study showed that couples who laugh about shared humorous experiences feel more relationship satisfaction. Humor fosters hope. Even anticipating laughter will lift your mood. Volunteers waiting to see a funny movie showed an increase in beta-endorphins, natural pain and stress relievers.

So how do you get to the laughing matter? You don't have to be a comedian, you just have to be open to it. Lie any ability, your sense of humor can wither, or it can be enhanced. Here are some ways to strengthen your mirth muscles:

At work—Pick up some toys for your desk. Keep a funny childhood picture of yourself at your desk. Eat lunch with people who can laugh at things... their sense of humor will rub off.

At home—Clip cartoons and post them on the fridge. Surround yourself with funny things—photos, greeting cards, buttons, toys.

In the den—take a break from the news. You need to stay informed, but it's hard to find humor in wars and corporate malfeasance. Switch the channel to humorous or educational shows. Try music with funny lyrics. Read the funnies right after the front page.

In the closet—Add colour or fun to your wardrobe. A wild hat or

funky tights can provoke infectious giggles.

With people—Get social. People laugh 30 times more when in a social arena than when alone. If you don't come from a humorous home, find funny friends. Spend time with playful types—kids and animals are good bets for giggles.

On the shelf—Create a humor library of books and DVD's. Start a jar of silly things to do. Kids will love this.

On the road—Keep a humor CD in the car for those traffic jams.

In your mind—Make a contract with yourself that you are going to laugh and have fun every day.

Knock-knock. Who's there? Orange. Orange who? Orange you glad life's funnier?



Alina Larson. *Your Seventh Sense*. *Positive Thinking* March/April 2008. pp 24-25.

SUGGESTIONS/COMMENTS?

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We welcome your feedback. Please contact Wanda Mueller at 403-266-2017 or wmueller@worldpsych.ca