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Baldwin case underscores argument about PAS

It was the voice mail message heard 'round the country.

When Alec Baldwin left a vehement, profanity-laced message for his 11-year-old daughter, Ireland, calling her a "thoughtless little pig," he came off looking like the anti-dad of the year. When he went on a talk show to explain his behavior, he said he was in the process of writing a book about "parental alienation" that would come out soon.

What he was referring to is parental alienation syndrome, or PAS, a phenomenon that reportedly is well-known among those who work in the field of divorce and custody law but one still steeped in controversy.

Coined in 1985 by Richard Gardner, an equally controversial child psychiatrist, the term refers to the practice of one parent intentionally or unintentionally turning a child against the other parent, usually in the midst of a high-conflict divorce.

"Anyone who works in the field of forensic psychology in the context of divorce will say, yes, it's possible for a child to be turned away from a loving parent," says Michael Bone, a noted custody consultant in cases where PAS is involved. "Everybody knows that happens."

According to news reports, Baldwin's ex-wife, Kim Basinger, with whom he's embroiled in a custody battle, in the past has been charged with disregarding court orders concerning her former spouse's visitation rights with his daughter.

Blocking access or visitation to children is one of the classic red flags indicating possible PAS, say experts.

There's an academic debate about whether PAS constitutes a true "syndrome." Some mental health experts and legal professionals have deemed it "junk science," not backed up by the kind of double-blind studies that constitute scientific veracity. Some claim PAS just is a ploy for abusive fathers to get custody of their kids.

"Parental alienation happens, but there's no clinical syndrome you can say in court and get away with," argues Paul Jay Fink, professor of psychiatry at Temple University School of Medicine. "Richard Gardner was a charlatan and hundreds of women and children across the country have been damaged because of his crazy idea. PAS is not in the DSM-IV (psychiatry's bible) and it never will be."

But experts like Demosthenes Lorandos, a clinical psychologist and lawyer who has co-written the definitive manual on PAS — "The International Handbook of PAS" — says the phenomenon has been well-studied and documented in more than 160 peer-reviewed articles from around the globe.

"The people who are screaming and hollering and advocating (against PAS) wouldn't know science if it bit them in the butt," he says.

There are different degrees of parental alienation, he says.

In the mild form, the alienating parent simply badmouths the other parent (called the "target" parent) to the child. He or she may interfere with visitation for the target parent.

In the moderate form, the child will begin to take on the negative view of the alienating parent and refuse to go visit the target parent.

In the severe form, the child might be abducted by the alienating parent, and the child may profess to hate the target parent.

It's not uncommon in cases of PAS, Lorandos says, for the alienating parent to falsely accuse the target parent of physical, sexual or emotional abuse of the child. Over time, the child may come to believe these charges, even if no abuse has occurred.

The alienating parent may tell the child the target parent no longer loves them. They may withhold affection from the child if he or she says anything positive about the target parent.

"In some cases, it's clear that the child is actively being taught to hate the parent," says Richard Warshak, author of "Divorce Poison." Younger children are particularly vulnerable to this kind of emotional manipulation, he says.

What often happens is that the targeted parent overreacts in anger and irritation to the rejection by the child, further playing into the hands of the alienating parent's drive to portray the former as unfit.

"I don't know if that's what happened with Alec Baldwin or not," Bone says. "He may be a bit of a hothead anyway."

He is quick to note that any charge of sexual abuse of a child must be investigated thoroughly and not simply dismissed out of hand as the result of one parent trying to alienate the child.

"If there are critics of PAS, it's that it's been used in that way," Bone says. "That's a gross misuse of it. To assume that someone is not abusive when they really are is a terrible disservice to children."

The incidence of PAS may be on the rise, Warshak says, because of the high rate of divorce and angry custody battles. Experts who study PAS say it cuts across gender lines — an alienating parent can be a mother or a father.

Warshak says PAS typically arises in only a minority of high-conflict divorces, but even so he estimates between 25,000 and 50,000 children could be affected. PAS also can happen in intact families, too, he says.

"This is not just the purview of bitter ex-wives seeking revenge on their husbands," says Amy J.L. Baker, a development psychologist.