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## **Baldwin: It's Not Alienation, It's Abuse**

By Jan Kurth

I don't write about celebrities. Really. Okay, I sometimes read about them, but I consider it something of a personal weakness or vice, like the occasional fast-food French fry.

Still, there are times when some celebrity goings-on touch larger issues that are impossible to ignore. Such is the Alec Baldwin affair.

For those of you who may have missed it, the actor Alec Baldwin left an answering machine message for his 11-year-old daughter Ireland that was somehow leaked to the press. On the tape, you can hear Baldwin berating the girl as "a rude, thoughtless little pig." That was before he started screaming that "you've insulted me for the last time."



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And what did the poor girl do to deserve such a verbal bashing? As I understand it, she didn't answer the phone at what was a pre-arranged time. That's all.

But Mr. Baldwin was apparently not content to stop at the temper tantrum above. In fact, he continued on his potty-mouthed tirade thus: "I don't give a [expletive] that you're 12 years old or 11 years old, or a child, or that your mother is a thoughtless pain in the [expletive] who doesn't care about what you do." And then there was this: "Once again I've made an [expletive] of myself trying to call you at a specific time. I'm going to straighten your [expletive] out when I see you."

So he hurls four-letter words at his own daughter (though not sure of her age), ridicules his daughter's mother, and makes vague threats as to additional "punishment." But that's just the warm-up act.

His memorable parting words include the following: "You don't have the brains or the decency as a human being."

Gee, love you too, Dad.

Honestly, this is pretty hateful stuff for any parent. In fact, this is full-fledged emotional child abuse by any credible standard.

But does Mr. Baldwin take responsibility for his actions? Hmm. Not really. There have been some half-hearted apologies in the media. But for the most part he blames Ireland's mother, the actress Kim Basinger, for all the trouble. You see, Baldwin claims, if the mother hadn't engaged in something called "parental alienation," this never would have happened.

Utter nonsense. Unfortunately, too many abusers have been hiding behind the fashionable "parental alienation" excuse for some time now. After witnessing one or more of your violent tirades, the kids are scared of you and don't really want to see you anymore? Why, it isn't YOUR fault. You don't have to take responsibility for the repercussions of your actions. It's the mother's fault, see. ("Parental Alienation" proponents nearly always blame mothers, very rarely fathers.) She set you up for it, she brainwashed the kids into disliking you. YOUR actions are apparently irrelevant. So blame somebody else! Which, of course, abusers (like alcoholics and drug addicts) are always eager to do.

Also note that in his phone message, Baldwin engages in precisely what he accuses his ex-wife of doing: bashing the other parent. A little hypocrisy and projection here? Unfortunately, this is also very typical of batterers and abusers of all stripes. In fact, they are very often guilty of the very same verbal bashing and "alienating" that they accuse others of doing.

In Baldwin's case, we know that the telephone message is not an isolated incident. In addition to his recent phone call to his daughter, Baldwin is widely known to have engaged in the following activities: punching a photographer, assaulting a New York City pedestrian for walking in front of his car, getting into a shouting match with a New York City police officer the day Cory Litel's plane hit a New York City building and caused a massive traffic jam, frightening an actress and causing her to quit a Broadway show due to his temperamental punching in of a wall because the air conditioning was too low, and calling for the murder of Congressman Henry Hyde and his entire family on the Conan O'Brien Show. In addition, witnesses have described Baldwin screaming at his daughter at the airport for packing her suitcase "wrong."

So just who is responsible when a little girl is reluctant to chat with such a man on the phone? Common sense should give you the answer.

Even if for the sake of argument we were to assume that Kim Basinger were "alienating," Baldwin would have an extra responsibility to conduct himself with dignity and provide a good example of patient and loving parenthood. That, of course, hasn't happen at all. Quite the opposite. And frankly, that's what seals the deal for me.

But this isn't just about Alec Baldwin and hoity toity celebrities. Even in Chautauqua County, the "parental alienation" excuse has received undeserved attention from the press and the courts over the past decade or so.

And that's what concerns me.

Back in October 1997, this newspaper offered a feature article on a local fathers' rights group which included an extensive discussion about Richard Gardner, a leading "parental alienation" advocate. Gardner has a long and sordid history that I can't go into here. But suffice it to say that Fathers rights groups in general have been notable proponents of "parental alienation." (In fact, Alec Baldwin himself has extensive ties to the fathers' rights movement.)

This article also included a human interest angle, the story of a local father (and board member of the aforementioned fathers' rights group) who had joint custody with his ex-wife.

But here's the interesting part. Because if you read the paper's Area Police Blotter with any attention, this fellow's name has had an odd way of showing up. Various charges related aggravated harassment and trespassing at his ex-wife's house and the like. Of course, he blamed her for everything a la "parental alienation." He was the one who was the true victim, you see. Sorry, buddy. No dice.

During the county's June 2002 Fathering Summit, Dr. Anthony Bongiovanni repeated the same one-sided myths in his discussion of "maternal gate keeping" – basically another name for "parental alienation." Mothers were roundly condemned for the apparent crime of "gate keeping" the father's access to the children (while simultaneously "alienating" the children, one assumes). No discussion was offered as to whether, in some circumstances, such actions might be justified as responsible parenting (e.g., when the other parent shows up and is disorderly or intoxicated). And certainly no discussion of the fact that fathers, especially abusive fathers, may very well verbally bash the mother or restrict the mother's access to the children. But I'm guessing that this particular audience wouldn't have appreciated a frank and unbiased discussion of the issues.

So it seems to me that where ever you look – whether it's in the national gossip columns or in your local police reports – "parental alienation" is starting to look more and more like the pathetic, self-serving fad that it is.

It's about time.

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