

# Has Psychiatry Gone Psycho?

By Kelly Patricia O'Meara

**A pop-psychology theory, parental alienation syndrome, is being used in custody cases to defend fathers accused of incest by blaming mothers for being narrow-minded.**

**S**ix-year-old Eric Hashimoto described to Merced, Calif., detectives and child protective services how he was forced to perform oral sex on his father and the abuse he endured if he refused. In Sacramento the sexual-assault team believed Eric's claims, thoroughly supported by horrifying details. But despite overwhelming evidence presented to the court that both Eric and his mother, Michelle, were victims of physical and sexual brutality, sole custody was awarded to the father in this 1996 case. Michelle has been allowed just one four-hour visit since.

Irene Jensen of Salt Lake County, Utah, also can document a long history of physical and sexual abuse by her ex-husband. He is listed in Utah's Child Abuse/Neglect database, and nine experts, including 6-year-old daughter Brittany's pediatrician, provided testimony to the court supporting the abuse accusations. But Jensen's ex-husband was awarded sole custody of Brittany in 1995, and Jensen is allowed just one eight-hour visit each month and prohibited from making any other contact with her daughter.

Karen Anderson's daughters, ages 4 and 7, told her and child protective services that they had been molested by their father. The Amador County, Calif., sheriff's department provided a statement supporting the accusations. But during the custody hearing, Anderson was barred from testifying or presenting evidence and witnesses. Her ex-husband was awarded sole custody of the children, and she is allowed only court-monitored three-hour visits twice a week.



**Mom and Brittany:** Jensen lost custody of her daughter despite experts' testimony of the father's sexual abuse.

The bizarre outcomes of such cases—in which child custody can be awarded to a sex abuser—is the result of court acceptance of an unscientific psychological fad. This theory, referred to as parental alienation syndrome, or PAS, holds that one spouse, usually the mother, is at fault for accusations of sexual abuse that may arise during a custody case. A mother's objections to the behavior, according to PAS, has the indescribable effect of turning the child against the father. Therefore, the mother's influence over the child should be halted.

According to the developer of the theory, Richard A. Gardner, a clinical professor of child psychiatry, PAS is "a disorder of children, arising almost exclusively in child-custody disputes, in

which one parent (usually the mother) programs the child to hate the other parent (usually the father)."

If a child demonstrates negative feelings toward the father, Gardner's PAS puts the blame on the mother and explains that the confusion is best remedied by increasing the child's time with the father.

Although PAS is not exclusive to mothers, they are said to make up the majority of the so-called offenders, especially when there are accusations of sexual abuse. The syndrome has been a focus of pop-psychology attention for more than 10 years but, as is typical of such fads in the mental-health fraternity, no statistics about the number of parents who have been "diagnosed" with PAS are available.

Critics of Gardner's PAS charge that because the theory is not based on systematic research or testing it should not

be called a syndrome, but that charge makes little difference to true believers. Gardner developed his theory through personal observations of families during child-custody disputes. And it doesn't matter to advocates that PAS has not been recognized by the American Medical Association or the American Psychiatric Association. Nor does it matter that many of Gardner's peers who have reviewed his

theory openly say that it lacks scientific reliability and validity.

"PAS is not research-based, and it has done a great injustice to the family and the justice system," says Jon Conte, a psychologist at the University of Washington. He adds, "The criteria that Dr. Gardner has developed are virtually useless. He operates on the premise that if you say a lie often enough people will believe it." Bruce Wiseman, president of the Citizens Commission on Human Rights, a California-based organization that investigates and exposes violations of human rights by mental-health practitioners, concurs, saying Gardner's approach "has no scientific basis. This is a guy who comes up with a theory and sells it to the courts because the judge does-



n't know any better. Anyone who tells you this is science is wrong."

Brian Holmgren, a senior attorney for the National Center for Prosecution of Child Abuse, says, "The [PAS] decision doesn't belong in the courtroom, and when we get calls where someone is testifying about PAS we attempt to provide scientific information on how best to argue against it. There has been extensive literature in well-respected medical journals ridiculing his theory, but still there is some perceived relevance to it in the court."

Gardner explains to *Insight* that PAS "is being misapplied in some cases" but nevertheless argues, "It can't be that all the people who have written articles about it or the judges who use it are wrong."

While many articles have been written critiquing Gardner's PAS theory, it is his view on sexual-abuse allegations by children that is the most controversial. In the pages of his numerous self-published books and articles, Gardner proposes that pedophilia serves procreative purposes. Says a peer review in *Treating Abuse Today*, "The younger the survival machine at the time sexual urges appear, the longer the span of procreative capacity, and the greater likelihood the individual will create more survival machines in the next generation."

Gardner further asserts that "society's excessively moralistic and punitive reactions toward pedophiles ... go far beyond what I consider to be the gravity of the crime." When a child has been sexually abused and feels guilt about it, Gardner suggests, the child may be helped to appreciate that "sexual encounters between an adult and a child are not universally considered to be reprehensible acts. The child might be told about other societies in which such behavior was and is considered normal." If sexual urges continue after the abuse ends, Gardner suggests such children be encouraged to masturbate.

As for the alienating mother, Gardner explains that many of these women have been victims of sexual abuse themselves and may have sexual problems in their marriages. To address this problem, the psychologist suggests that "one has to encourage experiences, under proper situations of relaxation, which will enable her [the mother] to achieve the goal of orgasmic response." In this instance, according to the same peer review article, Gardner suggests that vibrators can be useful and "one must try to overcome any inhibition she may have with regard to their use."

An apparent benefit of the mother's use of a vibrator is that "her diminished

guilt over masturbation will make it easier for her to encourage the practice in her daughter, if this is warranted." With this imagined solution, Gardner

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**PAS author:** To Gardner, a psychiatrist, morality is relative and pedophilia may result from natural urges.

believes, the mother's "increased sexuality may lessen the need for her husband to return to their daughter for sexual gratification."

On the other hand, Gardner suggests that the molesting-father's behavior should be understood. The father "has to be helped to appreciate that, even today, [pedophilia] is a widespread and accepted practice among literally billions of people" and "he [the father] has had a certain amount of bad luck with regard to the place and time he was born with regard to social attitudes toward pedophilia."

During a brief interview with *Insight*, Gardner refuses to answer personal marital or family questions, saying that "they aren't relevant." He does,

however, offer information that he never has "been in a custody case, sexually abused, accused of sexual molestation — and had never sexually abused a child." When asked if he supports pedophilia, Gardner says, "I'm not recommending it for a second, and anyone who says I'm supporting it is wrong."

Judith Reisman, president of the Institute for Media Education and author of *Kinsey, Crimes and Consequences*, has another view. "Anyone who thinks and says that incest can be avoided if the mother has better sex with the father may clinically be defined as a psychopath and needs help." She adds that "buying a vibrator is not going to make a happy home. Obviously he has his own demons to deal with."

David Gatewood, supervisor of counseling at Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, believes that Gardner's theory is an attempt to bring a nonadversarial approach to custody issues. "It can be a legitimate syndrome," Gatewood says, "but I think Gardner is trying to get it applied in every child-custody suit. It's just not appropriate. Gardner seems to minimize the abuse that is going on, and I have great trouble with him being used as a resource, given his ideas on pedophilia."

Many of the mothers who have been stripped of their parental rights because of alleged PAS blame not only Gardner and his theory but the court system that credits it. "The entire system is perverse," says Anderson. "The more evidence you have, the more you are attacked and, in the meantime, the kids are being destroyed." Anderson concludes that "as long as you have a mother fighting for her kids, psychologists and lawyers who credit this sort of thing know they're going to keep making money."

Hashimoto also thinks money is the bottom line but, for her, being branded as having PAS has caused damage that no amount of monetary damages could fix. "By accepting the PAS, the system has abused my son as bad, if not worse, than his father," she tells *Insight*.

Jensen vows that she never will stop fighting for her daughter. She sees the system as money-generated but is convinced that with official acceptance of Gardner's PAS theory and changing state laws, mothers seeking custody can be in a no-win situation. "I never should have allowed the pediatrician to mention the abuse," she says, "but if I didn't, I could have lost her for failure to protect. It really is a 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' situation." •