

# Newsweek

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## Parental Alienation Syndrome Isn't in the DSM Yet, but It's in Plenty of Arguments

By Chris Weller / July 10, 2014 1:18 PM EDT

**F**ollowing the 2010 *in vitro*-assisted birth of Gus, Danielle Schreiber claimed that because the name of her former partner, Jason Patric, wasn't listed on their son's birth certificate he didn't have any parental custody rights. Patric, a well-known actor who starred in films such as *The Lost Boys* and *Speed 2: Cruise Control*, says he did that to protect Gus from media attention, but since he and Schreiber weren't married, an arcane law in California categorized Patric as nothing more than a sperm donor.

Over the past four years, Patric has testified three times before California lawmakers, urging them to close the loophole, and has spent roughly 160 hours in courtrooms trying to convince judges that he is Gus's father in every sense of the word. It has been 72 weeks since he last saw his son.

He has also launched the website Stand Up for Gus to promote awareness of parental alienation syndrome (PAS), a mental health syndrome he fears his son may have to deal with for the rest of his life, based on the acrimonious relationship between his parents.

Coined in 1985 by psychiatrist Richard Gardner, PAS describes a set of behaviors exhibited by kids whose parents deliberately turn them against the other parent, through a variety of techniques that are at once coercive, manipulative, vindictive and sociopathic. "It's a violent act to a child's mind," Patric tells *Newsweek*, speaking of PAS, which he says he began investigating following his initial trial to assert his parental rights with Gus. He believes parental alienation is akin to what domestic violence was 40 years ago—a dirty secret that is harming millions but not acknowledged by many mental health professionals.

One of the reasons PAS hasn't been embraced universally is because of controversies that punctuate Gardner's career. In 1992, for example, at the height of the tumultuous scandal in which Woody Allen's former partner, Mia Farrow, accused him of child abuse, Gardner told reporters that "screaming 'sex abuse' is a very effective way to wreak vengeance on a hated

spouse.” Many took this as a tacit diagnosis of PAS—inferring that Gardner had sided with Allen and believed Farrow had manipulated her children into falsely believing Allen was a sexual abuser.

Nor did it help that Gardner, at first, repeatedly declared that fathers are more deserving of legal protection from alienating mothers than the other way around. Writing in *The American Academy of Psychoanalysis* in 1994, he said, “The campaign of denigration embarked upon by many parents (mothers more often than fathers) can be both vicious and creative. Mothers are generally more bonded to their children than fathers, and they are more likely to engage in a wide variety of manipulations designed to strengthen their positions in custody disputes.”

Within the decade, however, Gardner amended his theories about women and PAS. “In the last few years I have seen a shift that has brought the ratio now to 50-50,” he wrote in a 2000 [report](#). But the legacy of his earlier statements remains and has led many to [argue](#) that PAS is just a tool used by men to seize custody from any mother who claims abuse, an idea bolstered by famous cases such as Allen’s. Psychologist Joyanna Silberg says she has seen many divorces in which parents—typically fathers—hoodwink judges and case evaluators with the term *parental alienation* and turn themselves into the victim. Silberg represents the Leadership Council on Child Abuse & Interpersonal Violence, a nonprofit that staunchly opposes many of Gardner’s original notions about PAS. The organization’s president, Paul Fink, has [called](#) PAS “junk science at its worst.”

But many PAS advocates think that this gendered characterization of PAS is inaccurate, and even intentionally misleading. “I know for sure it happens to both mothers and fathers,” says Amy Baker, a developmental psychologist who authored the book *Adult Children of Parental Alienation Syndrome: Breaking the Ties That Bind*.

Joe Rabiega, a 37-year-old counselor from Raleigh, North Carolina, knows fathers can be PAS abusers as well. When he was growing up, at precisely 4 and 8 p.m. on days his mother had custody, Rabiega stood by the phone. Those were his father’s orders, which, by this point, the 12-year-old had learned to obey.

Today Rabiega recalls the countless evenings he spent waiting for his father to call. When the phone finally rang, his dad wasn’t interested in how his son’s day had gone. Instead, he would launch into his own sob stories, followed by pep talks, imploring Joe to tell his mom he didn’t like her, that he wanted to be with his father instead. He insisted Joe be meaner and less afraid of hurting her.

This was the same father, Rabiega says, who threw a bucket of paint on Joe’s sister because she

and her mother attempted to talk with Joe while he was being forced to spend his summer vacations working for his father's painting business; who showed up drunk to Joe's high school graduation and sobbed at the end because he had never earned a diploma; and who had even insisted on standing with Joe at the plate during his tee-ball games, refusing to sit in the stands.

"It was like my mother did not exist. My father brainwashed me to believe that the only parent figure or family member that mattered was him," Rabiega tells *Newsweek*, adding that his father would often tell him that if he didn't do what he was told, no one would want him. His father also routinely threatened to kill himself, he says. "I was trapped in this delusional world he created."

Baker argues that the idea that women are inherently more abusive in this way provides a straw man for PAS opponents. "I don't care about the proportion," she says, "because I think that leads us down sort of the devil's path of coming up with gender-based solutions." What Baker really cares about is what happens to the children—she's worried about Joe Rabiega, not his parents.

When it comes to the kids, the courts have to face a challenge inherent in assessing all forms of emotional and mental abuse: knowing what the evidence looks like. Bruises and bleeding are obvious signs of physical abuse. But PAS is a pattern of behaviors. And behaviors are harder to track—although, Baker suggests, they may be easier to see than ever before, given parents' modern ability to record each moment in a child's life on a smartphone. (One of Patric's strongest arguments that he is a parent to Gus—and not just a chromosome donor—is a home video of Schreiber asking her son to point to "Dada" on a Broadway Playbill. Gus points to Patric immediately.)

Compounding the issue is the fact that it's nearly impossible to find objective data on the disorder. There are no statistics regarding the prevalence of PAS—because it isn't formally recognized by mental health professionals. The bible of psychiatric diagnoses, the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), does not list the term *parental alienation syndrome* in any of its 991 pages. And it never has.

In academia, that is OK. But in a legal setting, decisions have to be made, and they have to be based on facts. William Bernet, emeritus professor of psychiatry at Vanderbilt University, argues that until PAS is in the book, it will remain amorphous in the public eye: How can society accept the syndrome if psychiatry hasn't?

PAS is real, Bernet and Baker argue. "My research has consistently found in numerous

different samples, different measures, different sampling strategies, different analytic techniques that exposure to alienation strategies is highly correlative with psychological maltreatment,” Baker says. “It is a form of psychological maltreatment. There’s no question in my mind about that.”

Peter, whose last name is being withheld to avoid identifying his children, agrees. He hasn’t seen his two children since Father’s Day 2013. On paper, he and his ex-wife have joint custody with no designated primary residence, meaning the kids can move freely between both parents, but ill feelings trump any legal leverage. “I haven’t seen them on any meaningful basis since May 19, 2011,” Peter tells *Newsweek*. And even on Father’s Day last year, he says, “they were not very nice.”

It’s Peter’s firm belief that his children suffer from PAS. He and his wife divorced in 2001, he says, and she made the unilateral decision to move to a different town and enroll them in a new school. But it wasn’t just their distance from him that pushed the kids toward their mother, he says; it was the environment his ex-wife cultivated. He didn’t see it until one day his son off-handedly called him a “sperm donor.” Peter later learned from his therapist, John Joyce, that in his ex-wife’s home, that cutting label was used regularly as an inside joke.

At Peter’s most recent hearing, in October 2013, the judge presiding over the case decided Peter deserved to see his daughter, who is still a minor. And now that Peter’s armed with knowledge of PAS, he’s having a pair of psychologists testify at an upcoming hearing in June.

The judge might hear him out, but may also hear PAS and immediately conjure up all of the baggage that comes with it.

### *Community Guidelines*