

After storm, child needs his calm

BY PAT BURSON

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When a parent loses it and pops off in anger at his child — as Alec Baldwin did during a recorded rant at his 11-year-old daughter, Ireland — it can be hurtful and humiliating.

The pain can multiply exponentially if, as in this case, his words go out across the world over the Internet.

But, parenting and legal experts said, if parents take action to correct their own behavior and do what is in their child's best interest, the words may sting for a while but don't have to leave a permanent scar.

There's no doubt that her father's angry tirade "will affect her [Ireland's] self-esteem and her self-worth and her feelings about herself," said Joan D. Atwood, professor of marriage and family therapy at Hofstra University and co-founder of Peace Program, a statewide, court-based psychoeducational program that offers parent education and custody evaluation for couples going through divorce. (The recording of Baldwin's voice mail, in which he berated his daughter for not tak-

ing his scheduled call, was published Thursday by celebrity news site TMZ.com)

"It would not be surprising if she didn't want to go outside the house, not go to school, not interact with her peers," Atwood said.

When the dust settles, she said, it's most important to get to the reasons why Baldwin's daughter may not have been taking her father's calls.

"To turn the phone off, she's getting messages from some place," Atwood said. "An 11-year-old child, typically they would be wanting to speak to daddy and tell him what's going on in her life. Somebody is giving her permission" to cut back on communication.

When a divorce turns nasty, children often get caught in the middle. If a child hears one parent repeatedly speaking ill of the other parent, "then the child feels split in half," she said. "They want to love the other parent, but they can't because if they love the other parent, then they're hurting the one parent and not obeying the other parent."

When it reaches that point, the child and the parents



AP PHOTO

Alec Baldwin has apologized for his voice mail tirade.

should be in therapy, Atwood said. Ireland, in particular, "needs a supportive therapist who could be her advocate," she added.

"When you need to have a divorce, the couple relationship is dissolved, but the parents will parent forever," she added.

Baldwin — or any parent who snaps harshly at his or her child out of frustration — should admit his bad behavior to his child and apologize, Atwood said.

"He should apologize to her

and tell her he was angry and feeling very frustrated because he can't reach her by phone or see her as often as he would like. He should tell her that he behaved inappropriately. Hopefully, she has enough positive experiences with him that will offset this negative experience."

The actor apologized for the incident in a statement on his Web site as reported by Newsday yesterday.

For the child's sake, former spouses should work it out — either on their own or more formally through the courts — so that non-custodial parents have regular, scheduled access to their children, Atwood said.

If you're divorced, have children and don't get along with your ex, you still need to acknowledge how important he or she is to your child, says Armin Brott, an author of several books on fatherhood, including "The Single Father: A Dad's Guide to Parenting Without a Partner" (Abbeville Press).

"Your child sees herself as half mom and half dad. If dad is portrayed in the newspaper and everywhere else as a horrible beast, what does she think of herself?" he said.

Anyone who has been involved with the court system could understand a parent erupting in anger after reaching Baldwin's apparent level of frustration, said Sari M. Friedman, a matrimonial and family law attorney in Garden City.

Even so, "if his goal is to see the child and improve their relationship, that's not going to help the situation," she said.

"Neither one [of the parents] can act in the best interest of the child if their anger toward each other is more important than the child," Friedman said. "If people could love their children more than they hate their ex-spouse, then you wouldn't have this problem."

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