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Adoptive U.S. Mom Guilty of Abuse

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Jessica Beagley sitting in a courtroom in Anchorage, Alaska, on Tuesday. **Mark Thiessen**

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — An Alaskan woman who squirted hot sauce into the mouth of her adopted Russian son for lying about getting in trouble in school has been convicted of misdemeanor child abuse in what prosecutors said was a ploy to get on a television show.

Jessica Beagley, 36, made a videotape of how she punished the boy and submitted it to the "Dr. Phil" TV show. The tape shows Beagley yelling at the crying boy, then tipping his chin up and pouring hot sauce in his mouth.

Beagley then had the screaming boy stand in a cold shower for sword-fighting with pencils in school.

Both actions were recorded on a videotape submitted to the "Dr. Phil" show.

Neither Beagley nor her husband, Gary Beagley, an Anchorage police officer, showed any emotion when the seven-person jury announced its decision Tuesday. The couple walked quickly from the courtroom and down a set of stairs without responding to questions from reporters.

Jessica Beagley could face the maximum sentence of one year in jail, a $10,000 fine and up to 10 years of probation when she is sentenced Monday, said District Court Judge David Wallace. She remains free without bail because the case is a misdemeanor.

Prosecutor Cynthia Franklin also left the courtroom without commenting.

Beagley and her husband, Gary, an Anchorage police officer, adopted the twins in 2008 when they were 5 years old. The boys had already spent three years in an orphanage. When located by Russian authorities, their family was living in a shack and the twins were sleeping on shelves in an armoire.

One of the twins made a fairly easy adjustment to his new home in Alaska, but the other exhibited behavioral problems that included lying and urinating on the floor.

Beagley's attorney said his client turned to unconventional forms of punishment when spankings, timeouts and restricting television weren't effective in changing the boy's behavior.

Defense attorney William Ingaldson said his client was faced with a difficult situation dealing with a child with emotional problems when she reached out to the "Dr. Phil" show for help. If she hadn't done that, she never would have been charged with child abuse, he said.

"It is our feeling Jessica was doing the best she could. ... This is a very good, loving family," Ingaldson said.

He believes that the city child abuse ordinance fails to spell out what is acceptable in terms of punishment. For example, under the law it would be possible to convict a parent who put a child in a timeout for what a jury might consider too long, he said.

Ingaldson will request that Beagley receive no jail time. Asked whether the children could be taken from the family, he said the Office of Children's Services had already investigated and found no reason to take action.

In closing arguments Monday, Franklin said Beagley recorded the punishment on Oct. 21, 2010, for a segment of the show titled "Mommy Confessions."

Beagley's defense lawyer countered that she made the video and eventually went on the show because she was desperate to find help for her son, an orphan from Magadan with psychological and emotional problems.

Both prosecutors and the defense attorney acknowledged that the eight-minute video showing Beagley punishing the boy was hard to watch.

"There is no reason in the world why someone has to hurt a child to get on a reality show," Franklin said in her closing argument.

When the episode aired, it sparked public outrage in Russia, with some people demanding that the boy and his twin brother, who were both adopted by Beagley and her husband, be returned to their native country.

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