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By **Jesper Lohse** July 10, 2026



This is the latest in a series of articles we are publishing in TCW designed to challenge one of the most powerful orthodoxies shaping family justice across the Western world, an orthodoxy that is harming children and parents alike. You can read previous articles [here](#). Today we look at a different approach taken by Denmark.

FOR years, politicians, judges and family court professionals across the Western world have been locked in a bitter argument about what happens to children after their parents separate.

The argument is familiar. One side insists that the greatest danger facing children is domestic abuse and that family courts must be constantly alert to hidden coercion, manipulation and control. The other points to a growing body of evidence showing that large numbers of children lose meaningful relationships with one parent after separation, not because that parent is dangerous, but because conflict, hostility and psychological pressure gradually drive a wedge between them.

The result has been paralysis.

Professionals disagree. Campaigners disagree. Politicians disagree. Reports are commissioned. Consultations are launched. Conferences are held. Years pass.



Meanwhile, children continue to lose parents.

Across Britain, Australia, Canada, the United States and much of Europe, countless mothers and fathers describe a similar experience. Contact that once seemed secure becomes fragile. Communication breaks down. Allegations emerge. Court proceedings begin. Months become years. Eventually, many children lose not only a parent but grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles and entire branches of their family history.

The scale of the problem remains astonishingly absent from public discussion.

This is one reason why Denmark's recent reforms matter so much.

On January 1, 2025, Denmark became one of the first countries in the world formally to recognise that a child's relationship with both parents deserves protection not only in principle but in practice. The legislation requires family courts and administrative authorities to consider co-parenting obstruction and parental alienation when determining what is in the child's best interests.

To many outside Denmark this may sound unremarkable. In reality, it represents a profound shift.

For decades, much of the international debate has revolved around adults. Mothers' rights. Fathers' rights. Domestic abuse. Gender politics. Professional disagreements. Competing ideologies.

Denmark chose a different starting point. It chose the child. That distinction may seem subtle, but it changes everything.

The Danish reforms did not emerge overnight. They are the culmination of almost twenty years of policy development designed to strengthen children's relationships with both parents following separation. Shared parenting became increasingly normal. Shared legal custody became the legal starting point. Fathers became more involved in childcare from the earliest stages of family life. Parental leave became more balanced. Family support services became more accessible to both mothers and fathers.

By 2024, equal parenting arrangements were among the fastest-growing family models in Danish society.

Against this backdrop, Danish policymakers began confronting an uncomfortable reality. Even in a country where parental equality had advanced significantly, substantial numbers of children were still losing meaningful relationships with one parent after separation.

The question became impossible to ignore. If a child loses a loving parent without good reason, is that not itself a form of harm? For years, this question generated fierce controversy.

Like many other countries, Denmark experienced intense disputes between different advocacy groups. Some argued that parental alienation represented a serious and under-recognised form of psychological harm. Others insisted that recognising such a phenomenon would endanger women and children by allowing abusive parents to evade responsibility.

British readers will find these arguments familiar because they have dominated family policy discussions throughout much of the English-speaking world. Yet Danish politicians ultimately reached a different conclusion. Rather than asking whether parental alienation was politically acceptable, they asked whether children losing parents was a real phenomenon.

The answer appeared increasingly obvious. Research, professional experience and the testimony of thousands of families all pointed in the same direction. Significant numbers of children were becoming estranged from one parent following separation under circumstances that could not be adequately explained by abuse or neglect alone.

Denmark therefore decided to address the problem. Importantly, the new legislation does not assume that every child rejecting a parent has been manipulated. The reforms include explicit safeguards against such assumptions. Children may refuse contact for many reasons, including genuine experiences of abuse, neglect or emotional harm. Danish professionals are required to investigate these possibilities carefully.

What makes the reform distinctive is that it seeks to move beyond ideology altogether.

Instead of beginning with assumptions about mothers or fathers, professionals are encouraged to examine the child's behaviour and circumstances. Does the child express extreme fear, hatred or anger that appears inconsistent with previous experiences? Has the child's attitude changed dramatically over time? Are there signs that conflict between adults is influencing the child's perceptions?

These are difficult questions. But they are questions that must be asked.

The Danish approach reflects a broader commitment to systemic thinking. Family professionals are encouraged to examine the entire relational environment surrounding the child rather than searching for simplistic explanations or convenient villains. Risk factors, protective factors, family dynamics, developmental vulnerabilities and broader patterns of interaction are all considered. The objective is understanding rather than ideology.

This may sound obvious. Unfortunately, it has become surprisingly controversial. One of the most striking aspects of the Danish debate was the extent to which it mirrored disputes taking place elsewhere. For years, parts of the domestic violence sector argued that recognising parental alienation would undermine the protection of women and children. Organisations representing fathers, shared parenting advocates and many family researchers argued precisely the opposite.

Behind these disagreements lay a deeper question. Who gets to shape family policy?

Across much of the Western world, family law has increasingly been influenced by ideological narratives that frame family conflict primarily through the lens of violence against women and girls. While protecting victims of domestic abuse remains essential, many Danish reformers became concerned that this perspective was gradually eclipsing other realities, including the experiences of fathers, children and extended families.

Critics argued that policymakers were repeatedly being presented with consultations, reports and recommendations that reflected a narrow range of viewpoints while excluding evidence that challenged prevailing assumptions. Whether one agrees entirely with that criticism is beside the point. What matters is where Denmark ultimately arrived.

The country concluded that protecting children and protecting relationships with both parents are not competing objectives. They are often the same objective. This conclusion reflects changing social realities. Denmark today is not the Denmark of previous generations. Fathers are deeply involved in family life. Shared parenting is commonplace. Children frequently grow up with meaningful relationships with both parents. Family law increasingly reflects this reality. Perhaps the most important lesson from Denmark is that another path is possible.

For years, many countries have treated parental alienation as too controversial to discuss. Professionals have become cautious. Policymakers have hesitated. Courts have struggled. Children have continued to lose parents. Denmark chose a different response. It decided that difficult problems do not disappear simply because they are politically inconvenient.

The reforms are still new and no legislation is perfect. Courts will make mistakes. Professionals will require training. Complex families will remain complex. Yet Denmark has already achieved something significant. It has acknowledged that children can be harmed not only by violence and neglect, but also by the systematic destruction of their relationship with a loving parent.

That should not be a controversial statement. Yet in much of the Western world it remains one. For the thousands of children who lose fathers, mothers, grandparents and entire branches of their family identity after separation, Denmark's reforms offer something that many other countries have been reluctant to provide: recognition.

Because the first step towards solving any problem is having the courage to admit that it exists.