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When experts become targets: How fear is silencing family court professionals

By **Lynn Steinberg** July 14, 2026



This is part of 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 earlier articles [here](#). Here a family reunification counsellor describes being the target of a campaign of abuse by opponents which ruined her practice.

There was a time when I believed that professional disagreement was a sign of a healthy society. Nobody expected unanimity because human beings are complicated, family relationships are complicated and the problems that bring families into court are often among the most difficult any professional will encounter. The assumption was that evidence would ultimately matter. Arguments would be tested. Research would be challenged. New ideas would emerge. Understanding would gradually advance.

Looking back, I know that this is not how things work.

Over the past decade I have watched something deeply troubling unfold within the world of family courts and child welfare. Professionals who work in parental alienation cases with high-conflict families, estranged children

and complex custody disputes have increasingly found themselves subjected not merely to criticism, **but to organised campaigns designed to destroy reputations**, eliminate livelihoods and deter others from entering the field. This should concern everyone, regardless of their views on parental alienation, reunification therapy, domestic abuse policy or family court reform. Because once professionals become frightened to speak honestly, it is children who ultimately pay the price.

I have spent more than 50 years working with children and families. During that time I have served as a family therapist, psychologist and expert witness in family, dependency, civil and criminal courts. I've seen profound changes in professional practice, social attitudes and public understanding. I have never experienced anything quite like the climate that now surrounds certain areas of family court work. Ironically, my interest in these issues began with an entirely different controversy. Early in my career I worked with adults who had become convinced that they had been raised in satanic cults. At the time, extraordinary allegations were sweeping across North America. Families were torn apart. Professionals became convinced they were uncovering hidden networks of ritual abuse. Yet as investigations progressed, many of the claims proved impossible to substantiate.

The lesson was never that abuse does not occur. Abuse does occur and must always be taken seriously. The lesson was something far more uncomfortable. Fear can sometimes become more persuasive than evidence. Once a society becomes emotionally invested in a particular narrative, questioning that narrative can itself become grounds for suspicion. Alternative explanations become harder to discuss. Complexity disappears. Certainty begins to replace curiosity. History shows that this pattern is not unusual. Moral panics emerge repeatedly because human beings are vulnerable to them. The details change but the underlying dynamics often remain remarkably similar.

I found myself thinking about those experiences again in 2009 when increasing numbers of parents began seeking help because their children had become completely estranged from them. What struck me was not simply the estrangement itself but the intensity of it. Children who had once enjoyed loving relationships with a parent now appeared to reject him or her entirely. The reasons they offered often seemed wildly disproportionate to the strength of their hostility. As a clinician, I wanted to understand what was happening.

I attended conferences, immersed myself in the research, consulted colleagues and eventually devoted much of my professional work to helping families experiencing severe parent-child estrangement. I became involved in reunification work. These interventions were never intended to force children into unsafe situations or dismiss allegations of abuse. Their purpose was to rebuild relationships in cases where courts and child protection agencies had already concluded that abuse had not been established and where ongoing estrangement appeared harmful to the child.

Reasonable people can disagree about these interventions. What surprised me was not the disagreement. It was the hostility. Over time, public debate surrounding reunification and parental alienation became increasingly polarised. Social media transformed professional disagreements into public battles. Complex family situations were reduced to slogans. Emotional narratives travelled around the world in hours while court judgments,

psychological evaluations and child welfare investigations remained largely unread. Internet technology itself changed the nature of the debate.

In previous generations, professional disagreements took place in journals, conferences and courtrooms. Today they unfold before millions of strangers online. Algorithms reward outrage rather than nuance. Emotional certainty spreads more quickly than careful analysis. A compelling accusation will always travel further than a complicated explanation.

The consequences are profound. I experienced them personally.

Following one court-ordered reunification matter in which allegations against a parent had been investigated and found unsubstantiated, I became the target of an extraordinary social media campaign. Literally millions of views accumulated online. Demonstrations took place outside my home and outside courthouses where I was due to testify. Family members living overseas were contacted. False allegations circulated internationally. Threats arrived with disturbing regularity. Police advised me to take precautions for my safety.

Eventually, after years of harassment, I relocated to Canada. The professional practice I had spent decades building was destroyed. Yet what troubles me today is not what happened to me. Careers can sometimes be rebuilt. Reputations recover. Individuals move on. What concerns me is what happened afterwards. Other professionals watched. Colleagues called privately. Some offered support. Others expressed concern. Many asked the same question. 'How do you keep doing this work?' Beneath the question lay something more worrying. They were not asking because they disagreed with the work. They were asking because they were trying to calculate whether the personal cost of undertaking similar cases themselves was simply too high.

Increasingly, conversations among professionals began to revolve not around children but around risk to practitioners. Complaints to licensing boards became commonplace. Social media campaigns became routine. Experienced therapists withdrew from family court work. Others decided that the emotional, financial and reputational risks had become impossible to justify. None of this happened publicly. This should alarm anyone concerned about children. Family courts depend upon the willingness of psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists and evaluators to undertake extraordinarily difficult work. These cases require experience, judgment and the ability to tolerate uncertainty. Yet uncertainty itself has become increasingly difficult to defend. Complex situations are reduced to simple narratives. Individuals become heroes or villains. The pressure to choose sides grows stronger.

The reality of family life is rarely that simple. No ideology possesses a monopoly on truth. That is precisely why professional inquiry matters. Science advances through criticism. Courts should be scrutinised. Open debate is not a threat to knowledge. It is how knowledge grows. There is a profound difference between criticism and intimidation. There is a difference between exposing bad practice and attempting to silence those with whom one disagrees. There is a difference between demanding accountability and creating an environment in which experienced practitioners conclude that helping children is no longer worth the risk.

Looking back over the past decade, I sometimes wonder what future historians will make of this period. They may notice that at precisely the moment family relationships were becoming more fragile and children needed the very best professional help available, many experienced practitioners began to disappear. Not because they stopped caring. Not because they lacked expertise. But because the environment became increasingly scary to anyone prepared to engage with complexity. Children deserve protection from genuine abuse. They also deserve protection from misinformation, ideology and the suppression of honest inquiry. Above all, they deserve access to professionals who are free to follow evidence wherever it leads. A society that intimidates its experts should not be surprised when experts stop volunteering. The tragedy is that when that happens, it is not the experts who suffer most. It is the children and families who lose the people willing to help them.