

How Family Law is framing father contact as a risk not a need

By **Dr Stan Korosi and Melanie Gill** July 18, 2026



This is the last 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 earlier articles [here](#).

SOMETHING has gone badly wrong when a family justice system begins to speak of a ‘pro-contact culture’ as though it were a disease. When contact with a parent is no longer treated as a child’s relational need, but as a risk to be licensed, withdrawn or pathologised.

For most people, the idea that a child should ordinarily maintain a safe and meaningful relationship with both parents after separation is neither ideological nor controversial. It reflects the understanding that family relationships are part of a child’s identity, memory, belonging and social inheritance.

Yet this assumption is increasingly being turned on its head.

In a January 2025 episode of *Talking Family Law – The Resolution Podcast*, ‘The Three Rs – Reluctance, Resistance and Refusal’, Jenny Beck KC and Dr Jaime

Craig former chairs of the Family Justice Council working group responsible for drafting the council's guidance, were interviewed about family court disputes over children with lawyer Zoe Fleetwood.

Although speaking in a personal capacity, the former chairs' comments revealed a striking inversion of principle.

It became clear that safe and meaningful parent-child relationships are no longer treated as a child's developmental need but increasingly framed as a potential risk.

The former chairs dismissed Parental Alienation Syndrome as pseudoscience, while simultaneously acknowledging that parents can psychologically manipulate children and damage their relationship with the other parent.

The irony is that experts working in this field today in the UK do not or have never relied on *Parental Alienation Syndrome* as some form of diagnostic concept. In most countries parental alienation is currently understood as a behavioural and relational presentation that needs assessment of both parents and the wider family system and the child's need for safe and continuing family relationships. The syndrome debate is historical and belongs to an earlier stage in the field's development and is therefore a straw man fallacy. Parental alienation is a complex pathological family dynamic not a syndrome resting in one individual.

Contemporary practice is concerned with identifying patterns of psychological manipulation and relational sabotage within that dynamic that may seriously damage a child's relationship with a parent. Yet the historical controversy surrounding the obsolete syndrome label continues to be used to dismiss the behavioural evidence itself.

This is not evidence-based governance. It is category management. One form of harm, domestic abuse, is granted institutional legitimacy while another is viewed with suspicion.

The continuing obsession with a (non) syndrome is not an innocent technical clarification. It is a deliberate Aunt Sally. By repeatedly attacking the label, attention is diverted from the real question: how should courts recognise and respond when one parent deliberately or recklessly damages a child's relationship with the other? That question cannot be dismissed simply by repeating the word 'pseudoscience'. or make the underlying behaviour disappear.

Professor Nigel MacLennan observes that much of the argument surrounding this issue serves to create 'an artificial binary between domestic abuse and alienating behaviours', producing 'a false dichotomy that overlooks psychological complexity'. Rather than recognising that multiple harmful dynamics may co-exist within the same family, the debate is repeatedly reduced to a single explanatory framework.

The proper question, therefore, is not whether Parental Alienation Syndrome is appropriate as a diagnosis. It is whether family courts possess reliable methods of identifying serious relational sabotage when it occurs.

Judging from this discussion, the answer appears to be no.

Yet the answer should be a resounding 'yes', because the family court

reorganises family life. The limited categories it applies decide which harms are recognised, which parents are credible, which children are believed, and which relationships survive the process. If these are wrong, the consequences are not academic. They are lived by children who lose

parents, grandparents, siblings, history and belonging. Why the reluctance to talk seriously about alienating behaviours? Why not examine the assessment frameworks, clinical literature and evidentiary methods developed to identify them?

The reason is disturbing. To do so would disturb the ideological orthodoxy on which the current 'domestic-abuse-first' framework depends.

Rejecting the diagnostic label while dismissing the behavioural reality, Professor MacLennan argues, 'confuses the rejection of a specific diagnostic label (syndrome) with the non-existence of a documented behavioural dynamic (alienating behaviours)'. That is not scientific neutrality let alone a focus on children's relational needs. It is an ideological narrowing of inquiry and a flagrant grab for power and domination.

The podcast exposes more than a policy error. It reveals a governing framework for family justice that is no longer conceptually neutral.

The Family Justice Council guidance strips parent-child relationships of their presumptive social value as part of the social infrastructure that family law should protect. Contact (all too often with the father) is no longer treated as a child's relational need. 'Pro-contact' – which should simply mean supporting a child's safe and meaningful relationships – is spoken of almost as though it were a dirty word. An approach in which evidence is interpreted through a single explanatory lens and alternative hypotheses become progressively invisible. A justice system cannot remain objective if one form of harm is presumed while another must first overcome institutional scepticism.

In family law, a child's relationship with a parent should not merely be an optional lifestyle benefit. Severing that relationship without disciplined evidence is not safeguarding. It is state-enabled relational dispossession. Of course, unsafe contact should never be imposed on children. Nobody serious argues otherwise. But protection from harm cannot become a licence to treat family continuity itself as inherently suspicious.

A mature family justice system should be capable of recognising more than one form of harm. It should be able to identify domestic abuse while also recognising psychological manipulation, relational obstruction, coercive litigation, false narratives and the profound damage caused when a child is unnecessarily cut off from a safe and loving parent.

Relational justice requires:

- that family courts should begin from the principle that safe and meaningful family relationships are a public good unless disciplined evidence demonstrates otherwise.
- Evidential discipline. Courts should neither infer alienation simply because a child resists contact nor assume protection simply because abuse is alleged. The proper question should always be: what has happened within this family; what evidence supports that conclusion;

what harm is actually occurring; and what intervention best protects the child's entire relational world?

Above all, relational justice restores a principle that appears to have been forgotten: a child's relationship with a safe parent is not a disposable private preference. It is part of the child's identity, memory, kinship and future. A family justice system that cannot recognise this is no longer child-centred. It is institution-centred.

The podcast discussed above exposed the worldview underpinning the Family Justice Council guidance in its own words: contact as danger, parental alienation as pseudoscience, domestic abuse as the master explanation and relational severance as an acceptable outcome.

That is not child-centred justice. It is relational injustice. A family court system that operates on the basis of this thinking is not merely incapable of recognising harm. It has itself become harmful.

Postscript from Melanie Gill

This series should never have been necessary. But across the Western world, parents and professionals have come to see how ideas originating from radical feminist scholarship and advocacy are exerting a massive and destructive influence over family justice policy and practice, how children and families are being unnecessarily harmed by it on an industrial scale.

The series looked beyond parental alienation to how children are actually understood. Rather than asking which parent is simply to blame, the contributors asked about the relational patterns that develop during family breakdown; patterns that 'maintain' the child's position, including those catalysed by court interventions, that may be negatively influencing the child.

They couldn't remain silent. They have seen too many children experiencing the consequences of adult ideology – an ideology which translates into the gradual disappearance of one of their parents and that side of their family, divided loyalties, impossible choices, chronic anxiety and the burden of carrying adult conflicts they were never meant to bear.

Nowhere is this more sharply focused than in the 2024 Family Justice Council guidance discussed above. Guidance intended to help judges and family justice professionals respond consistently to allegations of alienating behaviour in children proceedings but that has achieved the opposite. One assertion made in the podcast stands out in its ignorance: 'a child's behaviour is not evidence of a parent's behaviour'. It not only ignores attachment theory, it appears to misunderstand what attachment is.

The need for attachment is innate. So innate that one of the most consistent findings in attachment research is that children typically adapt to inadequate, frightening, or abusive care in order to preserve that attachment relationship at all costs, not by abandoning them. Yet the guidance reduces sophisticated developmental science to a simplistic description of children's stated preferences.

These concerns are not mine alone. The Change for Children International's recent submission to the [Family Justice Council consultation](#) (signed by experts including Professor Ben Hine, one of the United Kingdom's foremost researchers on parental alienation, and retired judge Philip Marcus) warned that denying this deeper understanding of children's behaviour risked leaving children less rather than more protected.

The purpose of this series is not just to defend a theory. It is a defence of scientific inquiry and, above all, of the child. It adds up to a damning critique of feminist ideology and its nihilistic beliefs about family. Beliefs built into the justice system that children are the double victims of.

There comes a moment in every profession when silence ceases to be neutrality. For us, that moment is now.

