Dealing with the causes and consequences of parental alienation is one of the most difficult tasks faced by the Family Court. The law reports are littered with cases in which parents have, through no fault of their own, been unable to maintain relationships with their children, even with the support of the family justice system behind them. Practitioners and judges sometimes feel powerless to assist, despite it being apparent that the child involved is suffering harm.

One recent example of such a case is Re A (A Child) [2015] EWCA Civ 910, in which the first instance judge described the father as a 'calm, thoughtful and caring man, somebody who has a good relationship with his own family, and somebody who does not present a risk to [the child]'. No adverse finding had been made against the father at any point. Nevertheless the child – a boy aged 11 – was adamantly and consistently refusing contact. In reluctantly upholding the decision of the first instance judge, McFarlane LJ was driven to say:

'That this should be the outcome of this case is, in my view, a tragedy. It is certainly a tragedy for the father but, more importantly, it is a tragedy for this young man, who had a warm, easy and close relationship with his father when he was much younger before their separation took place.'

How was this an acceptable outcome? Why was this child left in this position? Was the court really powerless? What could have been done before matters reach that point to prevent it? These are important and often unanswered questions. It is clear that this significant area of family law is not receiving enough attention; intractable disputes are being allowed to rumble on; and something must be done about it. On 24 May 2016, Withers and 1 King’s Bench Walk are holding a special event to bring together a distinguished panel of experts for a discussion of these issues. Taking place at our London office, the discussion will be led by Lisa Fabian Lustigman and the panel will include:

- Deborah Eaton QC, Head of Chambers, 1 King’s Bench Walk
- Stephen Jarmain, 1 King’s Bench Walk
- Dr Mark Berelowitz, Consultant Child Psychiatrist, Royal Free Hospital
- Sarah Brooks, Independent Social Worker
- Dr Florian Ruths, Consultant Psychiatrist, South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust
- Karen Woodall, Lead Therapist, Family Separation Clinic

A summary of this special conference will be written up after the event. This article, co-authored by Withers and 1 King’s Bench Walk, appears in full in the May issue of Family Law at [2016] Fam Law 539.