

A New Way of Relating

Isolina Ricci in her book *Mom's House Dad's House* uses the term “retreat from intimacy” to define the process of transforming from an intimate partner relationship to creating a new business-like relationship centred around the children.

Ricci explains intimacy from two perspectives: “positive intimacy” which is the positive feeling of connection, warmth and reciprocity between a couple; secondly there is “negative intimacy” which are the negative patterns of disrespect, conflict or hostility that some couples’ experiences in times of relationship stress. When negative intimacy has imbedded itself, it sets a very hazardous basis for the future co-parenting relationship.

Ricci makes the point that retreating from intimacy means the end of the partner relationship, this is a painful but necessary step to towards successful post separation lives for parents. The next step is to create a relationship which has the courtesies and formalities of a business-like relationship.

Negative Intimacy and Risks for Children

If negative intimacy was a characteristic of the relationship, a commitment must be made to end this pattern. Research highlights that ongoing conflict between separated parents is one of the most significant risks for children’s wellbeing and their future mental health. The way forward is to adopt a business-like relationship as the new healthy co-parenting model.

The "Business-like Relationship"

Parents often feel that a business-like relationship feels distant and cold after having shared in a intimate relationship together. Others are horrified by the idea that they should be civil or polite to someone who has hurt or betrayed them.

If you think about relationships and communication that you can have with co-workers or a customer, there can be genuineness and a positive feeling but there are also clear boundaries. There are unspoken rules about how you speak to each other and what you will or won’t talk about. Ricci describes several characteristics of the parenting business relationship:

- Not making assumptions.
- Respecting personal privacy, no disclosure about personal life unless it relates to the children.
- Courteous, civil and polite communication.
- Have clear agreements and expectations.
- Minimal disagreement and very low emotional intensity if there is disagreement.
- Build trust by following through on commitments, stick to agreements.

Avoid Mixed Messages

The parent who initiated the separation needs to be particularly careful about giving mixed messages which give a hope of reconciliation. The initiator sometimes feels guilty when they see the other parent upset. With the best of intentions, they may provide emotional support as a partner would. The risk here is that this support can be misinterpreted as a willingness to reconcile. If the instigator of the separation notices that they feel guilty they need to remember that the end of the relationship involves both parties even if it was only them that made the final decision.

Problems with Being Friends?

The ambition of a friendship is a positive aspiration and is achievable, eventually. One problem is that people can cross the line very easily into sensitive relationship issues and when they get a negative comeback they find it very difficult to control their emotional reaction, the consequence is a very fast climb into conflict.

Making the Business-like Relationship Work

To make a business-like relationship work it helps to recognise that it will be difficult for both parents. Keep reminding yourself that this is a co-parenting relationship. This role requires a civil, polite and respectful relationship with clear boundaries.

It is important to make a commitment to avoiding conflict and not start any discussion of a sensitive issue if a parent is feeling emotional. A clear head is needed in any business situation. If a parent wishes to discuss a parenting topic with the other parent it is a good idea to send a text message to the other parent to make an appointment, nominating the subject of the proposed discussion, with the other parent. Appointments for parenting discussions can be either via phone or face to face. It is important to treat it as a business meeting where common courtesy is the norm.

Privacy should be respected. Never inquiry about the other parent's private life. Their friends, new relationships and other interests are off-limits for discussion. Create clear agreements, do not rely on assumptions that could be made when there was an intimate partner relationship.

Honouring agreements is essential to building trust in a co-parenting relationship. Don't expect to see a pat on the back when an agreement has been fulfilled. It is a business-like relationship. If parents can, give positive feedback, that is great but don't expect it back.

*Be a parent that is:
Bigger, Stronger,
Wiser and Kind.*

See information sheets: **Emotional Divorce** and **Co-parenting Business like Relationship**