

**When a relationship ends there is an important transition from partners to parents. This can be an awkward and painful process that is not always easy to manage. You will be creating a new way of relating to each other at a difficult time. Empathy and patience is needed along with a commitment to clear boundaries.**

### Understanding Separation

After separation you may wonder whether to accept your former partner's invitation to coffee – if you do what would you talk about? Do you ask your partner to stay for dinner when the kids are dropped off? What about sitting together at your child's school concert? If you see them crying or upset, how do you respond or provide support?

Creating a relationship as separated parents will be different for every couple. Unfortunately some will be in conflict for years, others manage polite business-like conversations, then there are those who can eventually form a good friendship.

Separation can be a time of significant stress and hurt. If there is one person who initiated the separation they will be in a much different position to the one who has had to accept the decision. The initiator usually will have experienced emotional distress prior to deciding separation and this distress will ease after separation. The non-initiator takes a while to catch up and is often still reeling from the separation for a while.

### A New Way of Relating

Isolina Ricci in her book *Mom's House Dad's House* uses the term “retreat from intimacy” to describe the process of moving away from being an intimate couple towards creating a new basis for a relationship centred around the children.

She 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 experience in times of relationship stress. If negative intimacy has been a common and recent experience it sets a very risky foundation for future parenting.

Ricci makes the point that retreating from intimacy means the end of the partner relationship – this is a painful but necessary first step to accept. The next step is to create a relationship which has the courtesies and formalities of a business relationship. Friendship may develop later but only when a new foundation has been built without the risk of emotional volatility.

### Negative Intimacy and Risks for Children

If negative intimacy was a characteristic of your relationship as a couple, 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 future mental health. The way out of this pattern is to adopt a business relationship as your new model.

Why a business relationship? Because of the dangers of mixed messages and risks of triggering negative intimacy.



### Characteristics of a Business Relationship

When I work with clients I often hear them say that a business relationship sounds distant and cold after having shared a life together. Others are horrified by the idea that they should be polite to someone who they feel has hurt them so much.

If you think about relationships and communication that you can have with a 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.

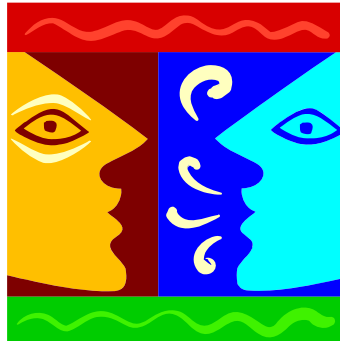
Ricci describes a number of characteristics of the parenting business relationship:

- Not making assumptions
- Respecting personal privacy with low personal disclosure
- Courteous and polite communication
- Having clear agreements
- Minimal confrontation with low emotional intensity
- Building trust by following through on commitments

If a parent hopes to reconcile the relationship, the best start is to make a business relationship work well without trying for friendship.

### Avoid Mixed Messages

The initiator of a separation needs to be particularly careful about giving mixed messages which give a hope of the relationship reconciling. The initiator sometimes feels guilty when they see the other



person so upset. With the best of intent they may provide emotional support like a partner or close friend would. The risk here is that this support can be misinterpreted as affection or re-connection and when it is later withdrawn or not repeated there can be a strong negative reaction.

If the initiator notices that they feel guilty they need to remind themselves that the end of relationship involves both parties even if one person makes the final decision. Words of comfort and empathy can be practiced but you avoid becoming the support person.

### What's wrong with being friends?

The goal of friendship is a very positive aspiration and is achievable. One problem is that people cross the line too easily into sensitive relationship issues and when they get a negative response they find it too difficult to control their own reaction - the result is an escalation into conflict.

Consider one example of a man who had left the relationship after his affair. His former partner was

devastated and they went through a rocky period. After some months she invited him for dinner to try to put the past behind. He saw this as a sign that they could now be friends. With good humour he told her that it would be good for her if she went out more and asked if she had started seeing anyone. This opened up an old wound for her - "How dare he rub my nose in the affair!" she thought - leading to a strong reaction. He realised his comment was out of place but was offended by her strong reaction - "I don't deserve this? What's wrong with her?" - then he angrily retaliated. So much for the dinner!

### Making a Business Relationship Work

To make a business relationship work it helps to recognise that it will be awkward for both of you.

**Keep reminding yourself that this is a parent-to-parent relationship.** This role requires a respectful relationship with clear guidelines.

**Make a commitment to avoiding conflict** and do not start discussion of a sensitive issue if you are too emotional. A clear head is needed in business. Time can be set aside to discuss parenting and treat this as a business meeting where common courtesies are the norm.

**Privacy should be respected.** Avoid inquiry about their private lives - their friends, new relationships and other interests are off limits for discussion.

**Create clear agreements,** do not rely on assumptions that you could make when you were a couple.

**Follow through.** Honouring your agreements is essential to building trust.

**Build other support networks,** your partner is no longer your confidante and emotional support.

**Don't expect a pat on the back.** If you can give positive feedback that is great, but don't expect it back.

**Be persistent.** The pay off is worth it for you and your kids.