

1 A Respectful and Cooperative Relationship

“Aboriginal cultures share a belief that people must live in respectful, harmonious relationships with Nature, with one another, and with themselves. The relationships are governed by what are understood as laws, which are gifts from the creator. The laws are fundamentally spiritual, imbuing all aspects of life. As fundamental as this perspective may be, each Aboriginal culture expresses it in its unique ways, with its own practises, products and knowledge.”

Voice of the Elders, June 2000 Western Canadian Protocol Framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture Programs

“Thanks for taking me to the zoo even though you’re not together anymore.”

Children need both parents and both families and will benefit from a respectful and co-operative relationship between both parents and both families.



Joe, Maple Drive Junior Secondary

This is about moving away from an intimate relationship with the other parent to a “formal” relationship which is focused on the children.

You may wish your former partner would disappear from your life, but when you have children, this is not possible. **Separation ends your relationship with your partner, it doesn’t end the parenting.**

Parents who are separating often do not know how to act around each other. Parents may find their former feelings of love and trust changed into anger and resentment. Some try to avoid dealing with anger by not speaking. Others explode with angry arguments when they do speak.

If safety is not a problem, practicing good communication skills can help the children.

To do this, you must begin by rethinking your role. Do not think of being a partner, you must now think in terms of being a parent.

You must move away from an intimate relationship to a more “formal” relationship with your former partner.

Relationship Changes

INTIMATE

Many assumptions

A lot of emotions and personal involvement

Not much privacy

Share a lot of information

Unspoken and/or unwritten expectations

FORMAL

No assumptions

Less emotion and personal involvement

A lot of privacy

Do not share a lot of information

Detailed agreements and/or court orders

After the separation, you need to communicate about the children without having the same old fights. It may feel strange at first to only talk about issues affecting the children, but in time it will feel more natural.

Understanding the “Games” Some Parents Play

Sometimes parents play “games” that put children in the middle of their battles. The children can be hurt by these “games”.

These “games” are often a result of feelings of anger and hurt about the ending of the relationship which have not been dealt with. It is important to deal with your emotions and to change to a new, “formal” way of communicating with the other parent.

Here are some common “games” parents play:



1. The nasty game

Threatening to get what you want. “If you don’t pay child support on time I won’t let you see the kids.”

When you behave in this manner, you are focusing on your relationship with your former partner. You must focus on your children’s needs, not your feelings.

2. The messenger

Telling the children to take messages to the other parent. “Tell your father to get the support payments to me on time!”

Being a messenger is a painful burden for children. Parents must communicate directly with each other.

3. The set-up

Interfering with the time the other parent has to spend with the child.

Example: *Dad telephones son and tells him he has tickets to a game but it's not happening on the weekend of their regular visit. Dad tells the son to ask his mother. Mom in turn says no. The child is then angry with Mom for not allowing the treat.*

4. I spy

Trying to get information about the other parent. “Who is your father seeing?” / “Who does your mother have over to the house?”

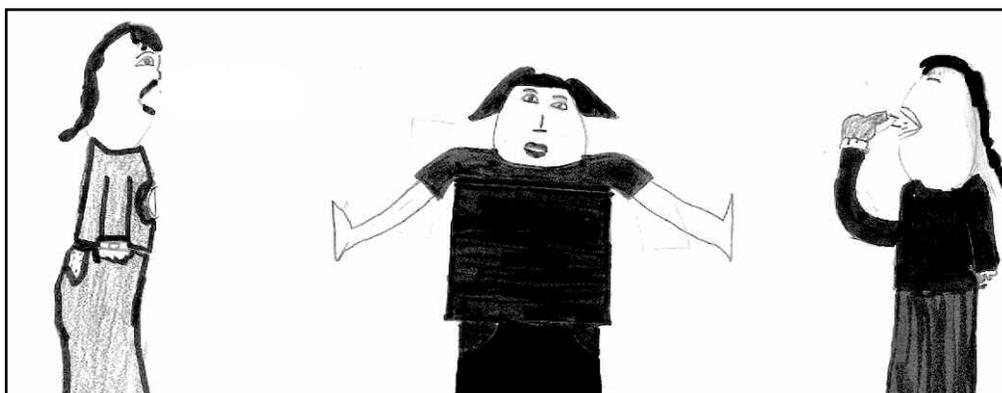
Children do not like being used, being asked to break the trust of a parent, or bearing the anger of a parent who is upset with the information.

5. I wish

Dreaming about what things would be like if the family were back together. A child may tell a parent how nice it would be to be all back together. The parent agrees that would be good. Doing this may give the child false hopes of getting back together.

6. Expensive parent

Buying expensive gifts or taking the kids on expensive outings. Often the parent who buys the gifts cannot afford them, but feels they are the only way to connect with the kids. Children may come to expect special gifts, treats, and rights on an ongoing basis. They may not develop a realistic relationship with the parent or a realistic view of family life.



Celestine, Nipisikopahk Middle School

7. Party pooper

Criticizing the child's visit with the other parent. For example, the child has just returned from a trip to the zoo. The other parent criticizes everything they did. The child ends up feeling bad about the day.

8. Put downs

Putting down the other parent in front of the children. Parents may do this for two reasons. Either they feel that this is the only way they can win the child's affection or they are relieving built-up anger. Either way, this only hurts the children. Because children experience themselves as made up of both their parents, they feel an angry remark as an attack on part of themselves. A put-down directed at the other parent effects the child as well, causing pain and lowered self-esteem.

Working With the Other Parent

Where safety issues are not involved:

1. Accept the idea that you will be parents forever; the family is not ending, it is being reorganized.
2. You still share love and mutual concern for your children. This is the new basis of your relationship.
3. Separate the children's needs and concerns from your own. Your child does not experience your former partner in the same way you do.
4. Create new limits in the relationship with your former partner. Do not use old patterns, create new ones.
5. Behave toward your former partner as your "business partner" in raising the children, not your mate.
6. Focus on the strengths in your relationship – what you have done well together as parents – and build on those strengths.