

Co-Parenting With An Abusive Ex

An abusive and controlling partner is also a selfish and self-centred parent. Even when they display behaviours that appear loving or engaged with their children, these gestures are often highly conditional. A self-absorbed parent doesn't truly see their children as separate individuals with their own personalities, needs, and preferences. Instead, they attempt to mould them into who they believe the children should be and punish them for pushing back. To stay safe, children learn to perform a version of themselves that is carefully edited, controlled, and distorted.

In the absence of consistent care and emotional safety from one parent, it becomes even more vital that you, the healthy parent, offer stability, unconditional love, emotional attunement, and grounded guidance when your children are in your care.

01. Provide emotional safety and stability

- ✓ Model calm behaviour – your nervous system regulates theirs. When you stay grounded, it helps kids stay calm and they learn it's possible.
- ✓ Be the stable, safe, and structured parent, not the "fun one" Long-term trust and respect come from being reliable and emotionally present.
- ✓ Reassure children frequently that they are safe and loved.
- ✓ Foster healthy boundaries in your home – demonstrate and respect personal boundaries so children can recognise what "healthy" looks like and have a comparison when they are not with you.

If your child is repeating harmful behaviours, say: "We don't use those words here, even if you hear them somewhere else" or "I know dad talks like that, but in our house, we speak with kindness."

- ✓ Explain to them the importance of boundaries and why everyone has a right to them.
 - ✓ Teach children about assertiveness and self-respect.
 - ✓ Provide them with choices and encourage them to try out new things without fear of making mistakes.
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- ✓ Limit unnecessary contact with the abusive parent when possible (per legal arrangements).
 - ✓ Supervise communication (calls, messages) if legally allowed, or monitor behaviour and mood afterward.
 - ✓ Keep detailed records of any concerning behaviours or statements made by the child or the other parent (e.g., mood changes, statements about you, threats, manipulation).

02. Validate Children's Voice and Feelings

A self-absorbed parent does not validate their children's feelings unless they do it in a manipulative or self-serving way. It falls on you to teach them that their voice and feelings matter and you are always listening.

- ✓ Show them that their opinions and experiences are important by being attentive and responsive.
- ✓ Validate feelings without questioning or minimising (*"It's okay to feel scared or confused"*).
- ✓ Encourage regular communication. For example, ask children to share their daily "highs, mediums and lows" and use these opportunities to discuss acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. Children will begin to form their own connections to the behaviour of the unhealthy parent without you having to say a negative word about them.
- ✓ Share your feelings about everyday things in age-appropriate ways to normalise emotional expression. This lets kids know this is normal, allowed and does not burden others.
- ✓ Establish safe ways to talk about the past or what is happening while they are away from you. Use their observations to help them identify healthy vs. unhealthy behaviour without criticising the other parent.
- ✓ Avoid labels like *"abusive"* or *"narcissistic"* – use terms like *"unkind," "unsafe,"* or *"not okay."* Use age-appropriate language to explain what's happening, for example: *"Grown-ups are supposed to keep kids feeling safe. Sometimes [Mommy/Daddy] forgets how to do that" or "Some people don't know how to be kind all the time"*.

Help children recognise distorted or manipulative narratives such as blaming themselves for what is happening, blaming you because of false information, feeling guilty for things the other parent is oversharing, or expressing shame for not being able to stand up to the abuse. Address these head-on with statements such as:

"Mom and dad's feelings are not your responsibility, we are both adults and can take care of anything".

"Your job is to be a kid, have fun, make mistakes, and try things out. We are adults and it is our job to be parents and look after you".

"It's not your fault when people get angry or mean."

"Some grown-ups have trouble using gentle words or safe behaviour."



03. Support Children's Emotional Health

Increased anxiety (including separation anxiety) and sleep issues (insomnia, nightmares, and bedwetting) are very common, especially during the early stages of parenting arrangements. The anxiety usually escalates in the day leading up to kids having a visit with the unhealthy parent and remains heightened after their return. Anticipating and preparing for these transitions helps most:

- ✓ Give children as much reassurance and physical closeness as they need in these times, especially if you notice regression in their normal development. Use physical comfort – hugs, rocking, holding hands, or sitting close – as this helps regulate their nervous system.

- ✓ Create a calming bedtime ritual – use soothing activities like a warm bath, calming music, reading a book, or gentle breathing.
- ✓ Provide safe ways for children to talk about experiences they're having while away from you.
- ✓ Don't get overwhelmed by their anxiety. Encourage problem-solving, self-protection, and emotional regulation. Give them coping strategies and suggest resilience building affirmations such as "*I am brave, even when I feel scared*" and "*I can do hard things*". Discuss what it means putting them in practice in daily situations.

Simple breathing exercises:

Smell the flower, Blow out the candle" - (inhale/exhale slowly).

Rainbow Breathing – Trace a rainbow with your finger and breathe in/out with each colour.

Square Breathing – Trace a square: Inhale 4 seconds → Hold 4 → Exhale 4 → Hold 4.



Worry Busters

The Worry Monster: Draw or decorate a small box or plush toy with a “mouth.” Invite your child to draw or describe a worry and “feed” it to the box or monster. Say: “*Let’s give this worry to the monster so it can take care of it for now.*”

The Nightmare Magic Spray: Mix together a “special potion” that protects against nightmares. You can use glitter, food colouring, flower leaves etc. Store it in a spray bottle and spritz their pillow at night to help make them feel safe and protected.



Practice Affirmations with Your Child

You can say these together each day, turn them into songs, or put them on cards. Let the child pick a “favourite” each week and repeat it daily in the morning or before bed. You can also draw/print them on cards they can carry.

I am safe.
I am loved no matter what.
My big feelings are okay.
It's okay to make mistakes.
I am brave, even when I feel scared.
I can do hard things.

Use a grounding strategy to help shift attention away from big feelings:
Ask them to name 3 things they see, 2 they can touch, 1 they can hear.

Engage in Therapy and External Support

- ✓ Consider therapy for your child to give them a safe, neutral space. A therapist can validate their experiences and assist with documentation if needed (around age 14 they may not need approval from both parents).
- ✓ Talk with teachers or other carers – ensure they are aware and can respond consistently and gently to anxiety flare-ups.

Use Books as Tools

To talk about abusive behaviour:

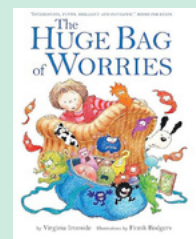
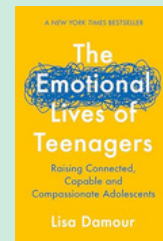
Floss and the Boss by Catherine Lawler & Abigail Sterne

For Anxiety:

The Huge Book of Worries by Virginia Ironside

Ruby Finds a Worry by Tom Percival

Hey Warrior by Karen Young



Building Emotional Resilience:

The Bucket Books Series by Carol McCloud (ages 4–9)

The Big Bright Feelings Series by Tom Percival (for young kids)

Kindness is My Superpower by Alicia Ortego

The Emotional Lives of Teenagers by Lisa Damour (for teens)

04. Take Care of Yourself

- ✓ Don't neglect your own rest and well-being – it is very hard to be clear, resilient and emotionally regulated when you are under constant stress and have no time to recharge or take a break.
- ✓ Build a support network so you're not carrying everything alone. You need friends and family that you can call at any time to debrief or consult with, as well as ask for help.
- ✓ Avoid oversharing with your children – establish your own safe space to talk about your feelings, fears and plans for the future. Such a space can be people from your social network, a support group or a therapist.
- ✓ Consider if you are experiencing trauma symptoms (e.g. flashbacks, hypervigilance, panic attacks, nightmares) and seek treatment when possible. Appropriate interventions include working with a trauma-informed therapist, EMDR therapy, trauma-informed yoga, self-defence classes, joining support/treatment groups for DV survivors etc.
- ✓ Find online communities of parents that are going through similar experiences – they give you an opportunity to share experiences, learn practical ideas and provide validation so you can keep going.
- ✓ Shift your focus from the harm that the other parent is inflicting to **what you provide your children with – safety, love, consistency**. It is incredibly disempowering having to send off your child into what you know to be an unsafe environment. However, the secure home base and the healthy attachment they have with you helps buffer them against psychological harm and goes a long way to offset long-term psychological damage.

Helpful Resources

www.thedivorcecourse.com.au

A podcast, webinars, and an online course led by a female lawyer and her daughter for navigating divorce. Very practical and providing all the information you need to know when facing a separation.

dremmakatz.substack.com

The blog of Emma Katz, a UK researcher and expert in coercive control and how it affects children and the mother-child relationships.

www.onemomsbattle.com

Online community and various online programs about navigating the legal system when separating from a narcissistic partner.

www.coercivecontrolconsulting.com

Christine Cocchiola's website with resources for protective parents as they navigate parenting children who have been or are being coercively controlled. There is an online course called The Protective Parenting Program.

The Understanding Emotional Abuse in Relationships Workshop - presented by psychologist Krasi Kirova with the aim of equipping women to navigate abuse in relationships, as well as separations.

<https://kirovapsychology.com.au/workshop>

Books

Surviving Your Split: A Guide to Separation, Divorce and Family Law in Australia by Lucy Mannering and Rebekah Mannering

Effective Co-Parenting or Parallel Parenting with a Narcissist by Claire Brown

Divorcing a Narcissist: Advice from the Battlefield by Tina Swithin

Framed: Women in the Family Court Underworld by Christine Cocchiola and Amy Polacko

