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**PRESENTATION TO THE 29<sup>TH</sup> AUSTRALIAN FAMILY THERAPY  
CONFERENCE - UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND THURSDAY 2<sup>ND</sup>  
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## ***“SEPARATING RESPECTFULLY”***

**“How to Separate Without Causing Emotional Harm to your Children”  
Based on the book of the same title co-authored by Lynne Clark and Cheryl Smith.  
Published by Grayfel Pty Ltd 2007**

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- **Origins of the ideas**
- Based on both modernist and post modernist family therapy theory and practice. Developed by applying brief, solution focused and narrative therapeutic models to prevention.

### **Purpose of the program**

- Reduces the impact of separation on both parents and children by providing a preventative structure for parent’s at a time of little structure and confusion after having left the structure of their family unit.
- Promotes efficiency in dispute resolution and those who dare to collaborate by preparing parents to focus on the needs and rights of their children.
- Accesses parents before they become embedded within more involved legal and psychological processes.

### **THREE SECTIONS**

#### **One**

A simple non-blaming model of what led to the parental separation.  
Gender neutral and focuses on the beliefs rather than the person.

Promotes respect and self responsibility

## **Two**

- Addresses the needs of children

## **Three**

- Ten scenarios illustrating typical separating and post separation issues. Questions enable participants or readers to use the model provided in section one to analyze each situation and suggest possible solutions.
- Professional interpretations are provided

## **PARENTS**

**The objectives are:**

- To promote self responsibility and respect
- To generate a respectful co-parenting relationship
- To reduce the incidence of blame
- To provide a structure for parent's at a time they have little after having left the old family structure
- To help reduce the likelihood of a dysfunctional future relationship by understanding their past failed relationship.
- To facilitate a focus on the needs and rights of children

## **CHILDREN**

**Objectives:**

- To provide a focus on the need for children to have it **THEIR WAY**
- *By*
- Outlining their needs and how to protect them from the fallout of the separation to ensure these are met

## **WHY COUPLES SEPARATE**

- The beliefs they grow into about how to be as men and women.
- These are gender influenced and lead to imbalance in relationships.
- When the balance is wrong the relationship is wrong.

### **Beliefs are simply ideas that lead to habitual ways of relating**

- His should's, ought's, must's about her
- Her should's, ought's, must's about him.
- Beliefs influence how you feel about yourself and others.
- They change over the years and vary from culture to culture.
- The program offers parents an opportunity to critique of the beliefs that shaped their individual behaviors throughout their relationship.

### **Male Beliefs**

- Make people secure
- Take responsibility
- Act with authority
- Protect
- Provide/earn
- Have the answers
- Make the big decisions

### **Female Beliefs**

- Make people happy
- Take emotional responsibility
- Nurture, feed, nurse
- Make little decisions
- Put others first

### **The need for balance**

- **Seesaw's will only work well if there is balance of weight on both ends**
- Men less emotional responsibility and greater rights
- Women more emotional responsibility and fewer rights
- These can work when choice is involved.

### **NO BALANCE - NO INTIMACY.**

- Intimacy requires a balance of power.
- Legitimate and illegitimate power
- Power over self in relationships is strong power
- Power over others in relationships is weak power

### **BLAME**

- Abdicates responsibility by placing this on others
- Imposes an unwanted reality on the other
- Focuses on others rather than self
- Permits feels of self righteousness

### **CHILDREN**

- **How they can have it THEIR WAY**
- **Their right to continue to feel loved and valued by both parents**

### **CHILDREN NEED TO FEEL SECURE AND STABLE**

- Security and stability are not products of more time in one household -
- They are products of parental cooperation.
- Children's security is jeopardized when parents prioritize their own needs for stability and security. For example by fighting to have their children live with them to maintain emotional equilibrium

### **CHILDREN NEED REASSURANCE**

- How they will fit into their new family structure
- Not insecurity while parents litigate to ensure their own security.

- ***BY REASSURING CHILDREN AND NOT INVOLVING THEM IN THE LITIGATION PROCESS, THEIR EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING IS PROTECTED***
- **RULES FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN      Develop a Protective Umbrella**
- When the boundary is strong, the parent is strong, and the children are protected.
- Reflect on your own history    Recall experiences and feelings, not times
- Parents often litigate to try to make the **time right** and in so doing they make the **experience wrong**.
- **DON'T DUMP** your own **TRUTHS** about each other on your child. Children have a right to keep their own truths
- Whatever you do to the parent you do to the child
- Do not believe all your children tell you.
- Parents must make the decisions
- Communicate directly with each other, not through the children.
- Do not make unilateral decisions regarding their needs and activities
- Do not engage in conflict in their presence
- **Focus on your former partner and what he or she does wrong – supports your legal case**
- **Focus on yourself and what you do right – supports your child/children**

## **SUMMARY**

**Children can be harmed by parents failing to develop a protective umbrella and:**

- Denigrating each other in their presence
- Leaving the decision making to them
- Not having a reliable care plan
- Communicating through them

- Involving them in legal issues
- Making unilateral decisions
- Engaging in conflict in their presence
- Focusing on the other and what they do wrong

**Children can be healed by parents:**

- Cooperating
- Respecting each other's role
- Negotiating when children are not present
- Having a clear and reliable care plan
- Communicating directly
- Focusing on themselves and what they do right
- Prioritizing children's experiences
- Keeping their own truths about each other to themselves.

**This says it all**

- **“My sadness would shrink if my mum and dad talked to each other because if they did I would feel that I still have a family, even though my mum and dad live in separate houses.”**
  
- **PARENTS DO NOT HAVE A CHOICE - THEY HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO PRIORITIZE THEIR CHILDREN'S NEEDS AND PERMIT THEM TO HAVE IT THEIR WAY**

## **TYPICAL SEPARATION SCENARIO**

### **John and Margaret**

John and Margaret have been married for fifteen years. They have two sons aged twelve and nine. John is a self employed carpet layer who has worked approximately ten hours a day, often six or more days a week for the past four years. Margaret has a part time secretarial business she runs from home. This allows her to be available to the children when they are not at school.

Margaret has been increasingly unhappy for the past two years. Her general practitioner has prescribed antidepressants to help her cope with her unhappiness. While she initially supported John's belief about the value of working long hours, more recently she has pleaded with him to work fewer hours and spend more time with her and the children. John has insisted that he should continue to work long hours to allow them to pay off the mortgage.

Margaret recently commenced a relationship with Bob — a man for whom she provides secretarial support. Bob is divorced from his wife and has two daughters aged eleven and nine.

Margaret initiated a separation from John and they are now living apart. They agreed that the boys would live with Margaret and spend alternate weekends with John who would move into a nearby unit.

Bob has moved in to Margaret's home and his two girls visit alternate weekends. Margaret is encouraging family outings with all four children.

Both boys' behaviour toward her has deteriorated over recent months and Bob has begun to help with their management. It distresses him to see her spoken to so rudely.

John has been feeling extremely distressed. He is drinking more than usual to help him cope with his loneliness and is very tearful. When the boys visit, he tearfully tells them how much he loves their mother and how he would do anything to continue to be together as a family unit. He asks questions about her new partner.

The elder son has informed Margaret that he wants to live with his father. He argues with her constantly and refuses to do as he is told.

The younger son has started bed-wetting and his asthmatic attacks have increased. He is very close to his mother and wants to continue to live with her.

### **Questions for you to consider**

What has been the impact of this separation on Margaret?

What ideas has she grown into about how to be a woman?

What has been the impact of the separation on John?

What ideas has he grown into about how to be a man?

What has been the impact of the separation on the two boys?

What could Margaret do differently in order for the boys to feel better and for their behaviour to improve?

What could John do differently in order for the boys to feel better and for their behaviour to improve?