



Coercive Control **versus** **Normal-Range Behaviour**

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This resource gives general information. It is not legal advice. It helps to distinguish the difference between normal relationship problems, behaviour that is hurtful but not controlling, and behaviour that may become controlling, abusive, or unsafe. The laws are not the same in every part of Australia. Some places have a specific law about coercive control. Others include it under family violence laws or use other laws like stalking, intimidation, financial abuse, sexual violence, child protection, or family law. Even though the laws are different, it is important to notice patterns of behaviour. This can include actions that control, scare, isolate, watch, punish, take advantage of someone, or take away their freedom to make their own choices.



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Position Statement

This resource supports careful identification of coercive control by focusing on pattern, function, evidence, proportionality, impact, and the consequences that follow refusal, independence, help-seeking, disclosure, or continued safe relationships.

Coercive control is often missed when behaviour is assessed incident by incident, when post-separation tactics are treated as ordinary parenting conflict, or when children's distress is interpreted without examining adult influence, fear, loyalty pressure, coaching, systems use, or relational consequences.

Accurate identification also requires careful distinction between coercive control, harmful but non-coercive behaviour, normal-range relationship and parenting difficulty, genuine safety responses, defensive behaviour, and misuse of systems or allegations. Normal-range behaviour may still involve conflict, distress, privacy, boundaries, financial disagreement, imperfect communication, help-seeking, reports, or lawful processes; the distinction is whether the behaviour is proportionate, evidence-informed, open to repair, and does not operate through intimidation, punishment, surveillance, isolation, exploitation, or loss of autonomy.

Precision protects victim-survivors, children, parents, families, professionals, and systems from poor assessment and unsafe responses.

Coercive Control Distinction Charts

The tables below show the difference between everyday relationship problems and behaviour that causes real harm over time. They help you see when behaviour starts to affect a person's safety, dignity, money, relationships, parenting, privacy, ability to get help, or ability to make their own choices. They also show that some behaviour, even when it involves strong feelings or conflict, can still be part of normal relationship problems that can be worked through. A behaviour is not coercive control when someone does not like it, feels hurt, or disagrees with it. At the same time, coercive control should not be ignored just because each action seems small or has an explanation on its own. To understand what is really happening, you need to look at the whole pattern, what the behaviour is doing, whether there is evidence, whether the response fits the situation, and how it affects the person over time.

Ask these questions when looking at the pattern:

- Is the behaviour repeated, escalating, or part of a broader pattern, rather than a one-off incident, ordinary disagreement, or poorly handled conflict?
- What does the behaviour do over time to the person's safety, autonomy, relationships, parenting, finances, privacy, sexual autonomy, movement, reputation, decision-making, or ability to seek help?
- What evidence supports the allegation, rule, restriction, report, or protective action? Is the response proportionate to the demonstrated risk or concern?
- What happens when the person says no, asks questions, seeks advice, maintains relationships, spends money, parents independently, sets limits, or makes lawful choices?
- Is the behaviour reasonably connected to genuine safety, accountability, child welfare, shared responsibility, or repair, or is it being used to dominate, frighten, punish, isolate, monitor, discredit, exhaust, exploit, or make the person comply?
- Where children are involved, is the child being protected from harm, or being drawn into adult conflict, loyalty pressure, adult narratives, financial disputes, evidence-gathering, surveillance, or rejection of a safe parent or family member?
- If a claim is unsubstantiated, what still needs to be assessed? Consider whether evidence was limited, the behaviour occurred privately, the person was frightened, the investigation was inadequate, the wrong questions were asked, or whether the claim may be false, exaggerated, malicious, or strategically used.

Table 1: Coercive Control Within an Intimate Relationship

Coercive control within an intimate relationship is identified through repeated patterns that reduce a person's autonomy, safety, privacy, financial agency, sexual autonomy, social connection, help-seeking, and ability to make ordinary decisions without fear of consequences. Normal-range relationships can involve conflict, jealousy, financial disagreement, privacy, different household roles, distress, poor communication, and difficult repair after broken trust; the distinction is whether both people remain free to disagree, set limits, seek support, maintain relationships, access care, and make lawful choices without intimidation, punishment, surveillance, humiliation, deprivation, or retaliation. The assessment should focus on pattern, function, proportionality, evidence, and cumulative impact rather than isolated incidents or one person's preferred description of the relationship.

Coercive Controlling Behaviour	Normal-Range Behaviour
Repeatedly monitoring where someone is, who they speak to, how quickly they respond, what they wear, what they spend, what they post, or where they go, including using tracking devices, location sharing, phone settings, apps, vehicles, children, or other people to supervise their movements, especially when non-compliance leads to punishment, accusation, intimidation, or withdrawal of basic cooperation.	Ordinary checking in, shared planning, agreed location sharing, or reasonable communication about timing, safety, parenting, finances, or household responsibilities. Some healthy relationships involve frequent practical updates; others are more independent and do not require regular check-ins, provided both people remain free to move, communicate, and make ordinary choices without suspicion, punishment, or surveillance.
Demanding phone access, passwords, social media access, location sharing, or message checking as a condition of trust, safety, peace, or continued relationship security, especially where refusal is treated as proof of guilt or punished.	Respecting phone, account, message, and location privacy as the usual starting point. After broken trust or serious relationship difficulty, a couple may agree to specific, proportionate, and time-limited transparency, but this should be discussed openly, remain voluntary and reviewable, and not involve secret searching, coercion, humiliation, surveillance, or punishment for wanting privacy.
Insisting on unrestricted or ongoing bank access, transaction visibility, receipts, spending explanations, or financial disclosure as a condition of trust, obedience, responsibility, or relationship security, especially where refusal is punished or scrutiny is used to shame, restrict, humiliate, or control the other person's choices.	It can be normal to ask for financial transparency or spending accountability where there are shared bills, debts, children, safety concerns, gambling, alcohol or substance-related costs, repeated overspending, or recurring discretionary expenses that affect rent, food, bills, savings, or shared goals.
Financial transparency may be appropriate where there are shared obligations, unpaid bills, debt, gambling, alcohol or substance-related costs, repeated overspending, or other financial harm that affects children, housing, food, safety, savings, or shared responsibilities. The purpose should be practical accountability and repair, not unrestricted oversight. Any request for visibility should be negotiated, proportionate, respectful, reviewable, and focused on the financial impact of the behaviour rather than humiliation, surveillance, character attack, or control over personal identity, appearance, bodily autonomy, or lawful choices.	

Coercive Controlling Behaviour

Normal-Range Behaviour

Restricting access to money, transport, employment, study, medical care, counselling, legal advice, culture, community, or family support, including keeping the person financially dependent, uninformed, or unable to make independent choices.	Couples may share finances, keep separate accounts, or use a mixed arrangement. One person may take greater responsibility for finances because of skill, preference, capacity, workload, or agreement, provided there is transparency about shared obligations, reasonable access to money and information, no punishment for asking questions, and the arrangement can be reviewed or changed without intimidation.
Controlling medication, mobility aids, communication devices, disability supports, support workers, interpreting assistance, appointments, personal care, transport, or access to services in a way that creates dependence, fear, neglect, or loss of decision-making.	Providing care, practical help, transport, appointment support, financial administration, or disability-related assistance by agreement, where the person's dignity, preferences, access to services, communication, and decision-making are respected as far as possible.
Isolating the person from friends, relatives, colleagues, services, cultural supports, spiritual supports, or anyone who may challenge the controlling person's version of events, including pressuring, shaming, monitoring, punishing, or making contact feel unsafe.	Disliking a particular person or influence, or a person choosing to reduce contact with family or friends for their own reasons, while still remaining free to reconnect, seek support, maintain independent relationships, and make social choices without punishment, surveillance, or intimidation.
Using threats, intimidation, humiliation, self-harm threats, exposure threats, financial threats, immigration threats, parenting threats, reputational threats, or threats involving pets to force compliance.	Expressing distress, fear, hurt, or disagreement can sit within normal-range relating when the person remains responsible for their own reactions and does not use emotional intensity, self-harm threats, intimidation, exposure threats, or consequences to frighten, trap, or control the other person.
Repeatedly degrading the person as unstable, dangerous, abusive, defective, selfish, immoral, incapable, or unfit, especially where this causes self-doubt, fear of help-seeking, or reliance on the controlling person's version of reality.	Criticising a specific behaviour, naming a concern, or disagreeing with a decision can be normal where the focus remains on the issue, evidence, repair, accountability, or safety, rather than a repeated attack on the person's identity, credibility, mental stability, morality, or worth.

Withholding or threatening to withdraw affection, peace, money, housing, communication, parenting cooperation, or basic civility to make the other person obey, stay silent, apologise, agree, withdraw a concern, or comply. The coercive issue is not that someone has needs or limits; it is the use of ordinary relational necessities and practical cooperation as leverage.	Having relationship needs, preferences, financial expectations, household limits, communication boundaries, or emotional limits can be normal where those needs are expressed without making basic respect, safety, housing, money, parenting cooperation, or ordinary civility conditional on obedience. The other person should remain able to disagree, decline, negotiate, apologise in their own time, raise concerns, or make a different choice without punishment, deprivation, or coercive consequences.
Pressuring, coercing, pestering, guilt-inducing, threatening, sulking, humiliating, or punishing a partner around sex, sexual contact, contraception, pregnancy, pornography, sexual images, sexual acts, or sexual availability, including sabotaging contraception, ignoring withdrawal of consent, threatening to share sexual images or sexual information, or making refusal feel unsafe.	A consensual sexual relationship in which either person can say no, change their mind, set sexual limits, discuss preferences, use or refuse contraception, or decline sexual contact without punishment, intimidation, coercion, humiliation, manipulation, exposure threats, or loss of respect.
Using religion, culture, gender roles, family honour, sexuality, disability, age, illness, caregiving dependence, immigration status, or financial dependence to restrict choices or impose compliance.	Holding personal, cultural, spiritual, or family values can be part of ordinary family life where those values are expressed without domination, shame, isolation, threats, entitlement, or removal of another person's autonomy, identity, lawful choices, or access to support.
Preventing the person from ending an interaction, leaving a room, taking space, sleeping, accessing medication or care, contacting support, or making independent decisions, particularly where the purpose is to force engagement, confession, agreement, reassurance, apology, or compliance.	Wanting to resolve an issue or continue a difficult discussion can be normal where the other person remains free to pause, leave the room, sleep, access medication or care, seek support, and return to the issue later without being followed, blocked, threatened, interrogated, or punished for disengaging.
Repeatedly disrupting sleep, rest, work, study, parenting routines, medical recovery, or ordinary daily functioning through late-night arguments, demands, threats, forced conversations, crisis creation, or practical obstruction.	Difficult conversations, urgent issues, parenting demands, illness, shift work, or household stress may interrupt routines at times, but the disruption is not used as a repeated tactic to exhaust, destabilise, punish, or reduce the person's capacity to think and function.

Creating a pattern where the person begins self-monitoring, appeasing, withholding opinions, changing ordinary behaviour, or constantly managing the other person's reactions to avoid retaliation, escalation, humiliation, exclusion, financial harm, parenting consequences, or reputational damage.	Ordinary relational sensitivity involves considering another person's feelings while still remaining free to disagree, seek help, leave a conversation, maintain relationships, spend money, and make independent decisions without fear of punishment or retaliation.
Using intimidation through objects, animals, vehicles, space, size, proximity, or physical presence, including damaging property, harming or threatening pets, driving dangerously, punching walls, standing over the person, crowding them, or using implied physical danger to make the person afraid or compliant.	Anger, frustration, or conflict may occur in ordinary relationships, but it remains distinct from coercive intimidation where there is no property destruction, dangerous driving, threats to pets, physical intimidation, implied danger, or repeated use of the environment to make the other person feel unsafe or unable to respond freely.
Using repeated accusations of cheating, lying, abuse, neglect, financial misconduct, instability, or betrayal without reasonable evidence, especially where the accusations justify surveillance, restriction, punishment, isolation, reputational damage, or control.	Raising concerns about dishonesty, infidelity, parenting, safety, money, substance use, or trust where there is a factual basis, while remaining open to evidence, proportionate discussion, support, repair, or appropriate protective action.

Table 2: Post-Separation Coercive Control Targeted at the Other Parent

Post-separation coercive control targeted at the other parent is identified through repeated patterns that continue control after the intimate relationship has ended, often through parenting communication, legal processes, finances, child support, recorded care, school and medical systems, property, housing, technology, reputation, professional complaints, and third-party involvement. Normal-range post-separation behaviour can involve disagreement, imperfect communication, legal advice, financial disputes, changes to care, safety concerns, parenting apps, and formal processes; the distinction is whether these actions are proportionate, evidence-based, adult-led, and connected to child welfare or lawful resolution, or whether they are being used to destabilise, exhaust, monitor, discredit, financially pressure, or interfere with the other parent's relationship with the child. Assessment should focus on the pattern over time, the purpose of the behaviour, the consequences that follow non-compliance, and whether systems or children are being used as pathways of ongoing control.

Coercive Controlling Behaviour Targeted at Other Parent	Normal-Range Post-Separation Behaviour
Using parenting communication, parenting apps, shared calendars, handovers, school events, sport, medical appointments, or children's belongings as repeated opportunities to intimidate, provoke, monitor, insult, destabilise, or control the other parent.	Communicating about parenting logistics, school, health, sport, belongings, routines, calendars, appointments, and child-related decisions can be normal even where the tone is imperfect or the parents disagree, provided the communication remains connected to the child's needs rather than intimidation, provocation, monitoring, or domination.
Flooding the other parent with repeated messages, demands, accusations, corrections, threats, screenshots, administrative tasks, or urgency claims designed to exhaust, intimidate, provoke, or keep them engaged, including treating delayed replies as proof of neglect, abuse, or non-cooperation.	Sending necessary parenting communication, reminders, clarifications, or records where the purpose is practical coordination, accountability, and child-focused decision-making rather than domination.
Refusing to communicate essential child-related information, such as school notices, medical updates, medication, appointments, travel details, emergency contacts, reports, expenses, or safety information, then blaming the other parent for confusion, missed information, or failed arrangements.	Limiting communication to necessary topics because conflict is high, provided essential child-related information is still shared in a timely, usable, and child-focused way.
Repeatedly changing arrangements, withholding information, delaying replies, refusing reasonable consent, or creating logistical instability in ways that interfere with work, study, health, sleep, finances, parenting capacity, or the child's relationship with the other parent.	Needing flexibility because children get sick, plans change, work rosters move, or unexpected events occur, with reasonable notice, proportionate explanation, and cooperation where possible.

**Coercive Controlling Behaviour
Targeted at Other Parent**

**Normal-Range
Post-Separation Behaviour**

Leveraging child support, care percentage claims, property settlement, debts, school costs, medical costs, extracurricular expenses, tax, business interests, or financial disclosure to punish, control, financially exhaust, or interfere with the other parent's time and relationship with the child.	Lawfully negotiating financial matters, disputing affordability, seeking disclosure, correcting care percentages, or setting boundaries about expenses can be appropriate when handled through adult channels, evidence-based processes, and proportionate communication rather than threats, child involvement, withheld time, or reputational pressure.
Using care arrangements, fabricated safety concerns, exaggerated neglect claims, or blocked time with the child to increase recorded care, reduce the other parent's recognised care, or alter child support and related benefits.	Seeking changes to care or child support can be appropriate where arrangements have genuinely changed, the child's needs have shifted, a parent's income has changed, or there is evidence of risk. The process should remain evidence-based, proportionate, adult-led, and child-focused, rather than using alleged care levels or safety concerns as leverage to reduce the other parent's relationship, credibility, or recognised care.
Using the child to parrot financial demands, blame the other parent for money problems, request payment, shame the parent for alleged non-payment, or carry messages about child support, reimbursements, or expenses.	Teaching children that adult financial matters are handled by adults protects the child from guilt, loyalty pressure, and adult responsibility. Practical, age-appropriate conversations about ordinary costs may be appropriate, but the child should not become a messenger, advocate, debt collector, witness, or emotional carrier for disputes about child support, reimbursements, debts, or expenses.
Making knowingly false, malicious, materially exaggerated, or vexatious complaints to police, child protection, schools, employers, regulators, services, courts, or community groups to punish, discredit, exhaust, frighten, or control the other parent.	Making a report in good faith because there is a genuine safety, welfare, professional, or legal concern can be appropriate even if the concern is later not substantiated, provided the report is not knowingly false, materially exaggerated, retaliatory, or used to punish, discredit, exhaust, or control the other person.
Using the child as the apparent source of allegations, disclosures, incidents, recordings, or reports to create distance from the controlling conduct and make the allegation appear independent.	Supporting a child to speak to safe adults or services when there is genuine concern, while keeping adult disputes, coaching, evidence-building, and pressure out of the child's role.

Using legal processes, subpoenas, complaints, applications, delays, threats of proceedings, or excessive correspondence as a campaign of harassment, financial depletion, reputational harm, or control.	Using legal processes to resolve genuine disputes, clarify parenting arrangements, protect safety, obtain evidence, or seek lawful advice can be appropriate where the process is connected to a legitimate issue and is not being used as a repeated strategy of harassment, delay, financial depletion, or reputational harm.
Refusing to use a court-ordered or agreed parenting communication app, shared calendar, or written communication process, or deliberately moving communication into unrecorded channels, to avoid accountability, prevent evidence of non-cooperation, create confusion, or keep the other parent exposed to direct conflict.	Raising genuine concerns about a parenting app or communication tool, such as cost, safety, disability access, technology limits, privacy, cultural or language barriers, or poor fit, and seeking agreement, support, or variation through appropriate channels while continuing to comply with orders or interim arrangements as far as possible.
Breaching orders, undertakings, communication agreements, handover arrangements, parenting plans, or service expectations in a repeated way that destabilises or intimidates the other parent.	Occasional mistakes, misunderstandings, lateness, or disagreement may occur after separation, particularly where arrangements are complex, but they are different from coercive control when they are corrected, explained where appropriate, and not part of a repeated pattern of destabilisation, contempt for orders, or avoidance of accountability.
Recruiting relatives, friends, new partners, online networks, schools, services, employers, or professionals to pressure, shame, monitor, exclude, or discredit the other parent.	Seeking emotional, practical, or legal support after separation can be healthy and necessary, provided supporters are not recruited to harass, intimidate, monitor, shame, exclude, punish, or pressure the other parent or to reinforce a one-sided narrative without evidence.
Using technology after separation to monitor, locate, intimidate, impersonate, access, or destabilise the other parent, including tracking devices, vehicles, shared accounts, cloud access, cameras, smart-home systems, parenting apps, children's devices, or fake profiles.	Using agreed communication tools, parenting apps, shared calendars, school portals, safety apps, or device settings can support practical coordination, child safety, accountability, and lawful record-keeping. These tools should not be used for covert access, surveillance, impersonation, intimidation, harassment, data manipulation, or interference with the other parent's privacy or parenting.
Using online posts, private messages, community gossip, professional complaints, selective screenshots, edited communications, out-of-context material, or reputation-based attacks to isolate the other parent socially or professionally.	Speaking privately with trusted supports about the separation, distress, or concerns without running a reputational campaign or circulating distorted material to damage the other parent's credibility.

Contacting or threatening to contact the other parent's employer, clients, university, regulator, professional body, school community, sporting club, church, cultural group, or service network to damage reputation, income, study, credibility, or social support.	Raising a concern with an employer, regulator, institution, or service only where there is a genuine, relevant, evidence-based safety, professional, or legal concern, and where the report is proportionate rather than retaliatory or reputationally targeted.
Withholding children, pets, documents, medication, property, sentimental items, school information, passports, devices, identity documents, records, or money as leverage.	Making lawful arrangements about children, property, documents, pets, or money can be necessary after separation where the purpose is practical management, safety, record-keeping, or compliance with orders. The distinction is that access is not withheld as punishment, leverage, retaliation, or a way to keep the other parent unstable, dependent, or engaged in conflict.
Withholding or obstructing access to housing, utilities, insurance, vehicles, keys, repairs, documents, personal property, children's belongings, sentimental items, business records, or financial information to create instability, dependence, cost, or pressure after separation.	Negotiating property, belongings, documents, repairs, vehicles, housing, or financial information through lawful, practical, and documented processes, even where there is disagreement, provided access is not withheld as leverage or punishment.
Using third parties, private investigators, family members, friends, or online accounts to locate, monitor, intimidate, or contact the other parent after separation.	Taking lawful safety steps, obtaining legal advice, or using agreed communication channels can be appropriate where the purpose is protection, coordination, or record-keeping, and does not involve surveillance, proxy harassment, covert monitoring, intimidation, or attempts to force unwanted contact.
Making the other parent's relationship with the child dependent on submission, silence, withdrawal of allegations, financial concession, public apology, or acceptance of a false narrative.	Negotiating arrangements, boundaries, apologies, or dispute resolution can be part of post-separation repair where the focus remains on safety, accountability, practical functioning, and the child's welfare. Parent-child contact should not be made conditional on adult submission, silence, financial concession, withdrawal of concerns, or acceptance of a narrative that has not been properly assessed.
Presenting themselves as the only protective, competent, safe, or morally acceptable parent while constructing the other parent as entirely defective or dangerous without balanced evidence.	Believing one has parented responsibly, or raising concerns about the other parent, can be normal where the parent remains open to evidence, balanced assessment, child-focused safeguards, and the possibility that the child may still benefit from safe relationships with both sides of their family.

Refusing reasonable assessment, mediation screening, parenting support, child-focused intervention, counselling, or structured repair because scrutiny may expose the pattern.

Declining or questioning a service may be reasonable where there are concerns about safety, cost, bias, qualifications, methodology, conflict of interest, cultural fit, disability access, or inadequate safeguards, provided the person remains open to appropriate assessment or support where needed.

Table 3: Post-Separation Coercive Control Around Children

Post-separation coercive control involving children is identified through repeated patterns that draw the child into adult conflict, loyalty pressure, surveillance, financial blame, adult narratives, suggestive questioning, coached reports, relational rejection, secrecy, emotional caretaking, or institutional pathways against the other parent or family members. Normal-range post-separation parenting can involve giving children age-appropriate explanations, supporting genuine safety disclosures, adjusting arrangements, seeking professional help, and helping children manage mixed feelings; the distinction is whether the child is being protected and supported, or pressured, coached, burdened, rewarded, frightened, or used to carry adult allegations, evidence, emotions, or conflict. Assessment should take children's words and distress seriously while also examining development, adult influence, questioning, fear, loyalty pressure, rehearsal, misinformation, and the consequences the child may face for affection, curiosity, contact, or relational flexibility.

Coercive Controlling Behaviour Involving Children	Normal-Range Post-Separation Parenting Behaviour
Placing the child in an adult role by using them as a messenger, informant, spy, emotional ally, advocate, witness, negotiator, comforter, or pressure point against the other parent or family member. This shifts adult conflict, evidence-gathering, emotional responsibility, or loyalty management onto the child.	Giving the child age-appropriate information about routines, arrangements, and practical changes is appropriate when the information helps the child understand what is happening without making them responsible for adult communication, adult emotions, adult decisions, evidence-gathering, persuasion, protection, or loyalty management.
Interrogating, repeatedly questioning, or suggestively questioning the child after time with the other parent, including questions that revise history, reinterpret ordinary events as neglectful, harmful, frightening, or abusive without evidence, twist the child's account into a negative narrative, or imply that affection, enjoyment, or safety with the other parent is wrong, risky, or disloyal.	Asking ordinary, open, non-leading questions about the child's time away, wellbeing, routines, safety, or support needs. Questions should not coach the child, insert adult assumptions, reinterpret the child's experience, or pressure the child toward a preferred answer, particularly because younger children rely heavily on adults to guide meaning, language, memory, and emotional interpretation.
Encouraging the child to report, monitor, record, photograph, test, or gather information about the other household, including treating ordinary details from the other home as evidence to be collected, scrutinised, or used later.	Teaching the child basic safety skills and encouraging them to speak up if something genuinely unsafe or confusing occurs, without turning the child into an informant, investigator, recorder, or evidence-gatherer.
Coaching, pressuring, rewarding, or frightening the child into baiting, provoking, setting up, recording, or creating incidents with the other parent so the child's behaviour, distress, account, or recording can later be used in school, police, child protection, court, counselling, family, or community narratives.	Helping a child seek help or document concerns may be appropriate where there is a genuine safety issue, but the child should not be instructed to provoke, manufacture, exaggerate, rehearse, record for adult strategy, or create evidence for use against the other parent.

**Coercive Controlling Behaviour
Involving Children**

**Normal-Range
Post-Separation Parenting Behaviour**

Pressuring, coaching, or involving the child in false, exaggerated, rehearsed, or adult-shaped reports to police, child protection, schools, courts, counsellors, or other services.	Supporting a child to disclose genuine harm in their own words, with developmentally appropriate support, non-leading questions, and protection from adult pressure, rehearsal, retaliation, loyalty demands, or preferred answers.
Framing the other parent as dangerous, uncaring, abusive, abandoning, selfish, unstable, immoral, or unworthy without proportionate evidence or appropriate professional assessment, particularly where isolated, contextual, or relationship-specific concerns are generalised into broad conclusions about the other parent's overall character, safety, or parenting capacity. This includes encouraging or reinforcing fear, contempt, rejection, or hostility toward the other parent in the absence of bona fide abuse, neglect, demonstrated harm, or an evidence-based safety concern.	Supporting the child to understand a genuine safety concern using careful, developmentally appropriate language where there is credible evidence of abuse, neglect, harm, or risk, without escalating fear, encouraging hostility or rejection, or portraying the other parent as entirely unsafe, bad, or incapable of care.
Rewarding rejection, hostility, refusal, secrecy, contempt, or emotional cut-off from the other parent or family member through praise, relief, special closeness, reduced pressure, gifts, attention, approval, or emotional comfort.	Respecting the child's feelings while still supporting safe relationships, emotional flexibility, and age-appropriate repair, without making rejection the pathway to approval, relief, or closeness.
Punishing or discouraging warmth, curiosity, affection, enjoyment, grief, missing, questions, or positive memories connected to the other parent or family member, including through withdrawal, sadness, anger, interrogation, ridicule, guilt, suspicion, or treating the child's affection as betrayal.	Acknowledging that the child may have mixed feelings and can love, miss, question, remember, and enjoy more than one person without betraying either household. A child should not have to conceal warmth, grief, curiosity, positive memories, or ordinary attachment needs to protect an adult's feelings or avoid consequences in the other household.
Removing, hiding, discouraging, or contaminating ordinary relational symbols connected to the other parent or family members, including photos, gifts, cards, messages, calls, family stories, cultural connections, siblings, grandparents, memories, or shared routines, so the child's sense of belonging is narrowed or redefined.	Supporting the child's safe relationships, memories, family stories, photographs, gifts, questions, and cultural or kinship connections where appropriate, while managing any genuine safety issues through proportionate adult processes.

Telling the child adult allegations, court material, financial disputes, police matters, child protection claims, sexual details, mental health allegations, or private adult history to shape the child's view of the other parent.	Giving limited, developmentally appropriate explanations about changes in family arrangements can be appropriate where the explanation helps the child understand practical realities without exposing them to adult allegations, court material, financial disputes, sexual details, mental health claims, or private adult history that burdens the child or shapes rejection.
Making the child feel responsible for protecting one parent emotionally, financially, legally, socially, or physically, including making the child feel they must comfort the parent, defend the parent's reputation, help win adult disputes, prevent abandonment, manage money worries, or keep the parent safe from the other parent.	Encouraging empathy and care can be healthy when the child is not made responsible for adult stability, adult decisions, finances, safety, legal matters, reputation, or conflict. Children can learn compassion without becoming an emotional partner, protector, rescuer, advocate, or adult substitute.
Blocking, delaying, sabotaging, or making contact unpredictable through excuses, emotional pressure, last-minute changes, gatekeeping, or practical obstruction.	Adjusting arrangements for genuine illness, safety, school, travel, sport, work, or practical constraints can be normal when changes are communicated reasonably, explained proportionately, documented where needed, and not used to make the child's relationship with the other parent unpredictable or dependent on adult conflict.
Linking the child's time, relationship, or communication with the other parent to child support, money, reimbursement, property disputes, or adult financial demands, including statements such as the child will not see the other parent unless money is paid.	Keeping child support, reimbursements, property disputes, and adult financial conflict separate from the child's relationship with each parent is the safer adult responsibility. Financial disagreements should be handled through adult communication, legal advice, Services Australia, mediation where appropriate, or other formal channels rather than being used to condition time, affection, communication, or respect.
Telling the child that the other parent does not pay, does not care, owes money, contributes nothing, or does not deserve time, respect, or affection, when the other parent is paying child support or contributing in ways the child is not developmentally equipped to assess.	Giving children age-appropriate reassurance that adults are responsible for money matters, without requiring the child to judge who pays, who owes, who is morally better, or who deserves contact.

Treating a child's stated refusal as conclusive without examining fear, loyalty pressure, adultification, conditioning, misinformation, avoidance learning, or consequences for connection.	Listening to the child's expressed feelings is necessary, but those feelings should be assessed alongside age, development, family history, adult influence, fear, loyalty pressure, avoidance learning, safety evidence, and whether the child needs protection, support, repair, or relief from adult pressure.
Recruiting schools, doctors, counsellors, relatives, coaches, or services into a one-sided narrative through selective disclosure, adult framing, emotional urgency, or withholding contradictory information, without balanced information or proper assessment.	Sharing relevant information with professionals can be appropriate where the purpose is the child's welfare, provided information is not selectively curated to recruit the professional, contradictory information is not withheld, and the professional is able to undertake balanced assessment rather than being drawn into an adult campaign.
Using the child's statements, distress, behaviour, drawings, messages, recordings, or school disclosures to activate institutional consequences against the other parent, without assessing whether the child has been pressured, coached, frightened, rewarded, rehearsed, or exposed to adult narratives.	Taking a child's words and distress seriously while also assessing how the concern emerged, whether questioning was non-leading, whether the account is developmentally plausible, and whether adult influence, fear, loyalty pressure, or rehearsal may have shaped the presentation.
Using a new partner, siblings, grandparents, relatives, household members, or extended networks to reinforce rejection, contempt, fear, surveillance, exclusion, secrecy, or a one-sided narrative about the other parent or family member. The child may then experience the pressure as socially confirmed rather than coming from one adult alone.	Allowing extended family, siblings, new partners, and wider support networks to care for the child can be healthy where they support the child's stability and belonging without pressuring the child to reject, monitor, report on, fear, or emotionally manage either parent or family group.
Creating rituals of loyalty, such as requiring the child to hide contact, report affection, refuse gifts, reject calls, use adult language, or demonstrate which side they are on.	Respecting the child's relationships and allowing ordinary transitions, calls, gifts, photos, memories, and affection where it is safe.
Pathologising the other parent-child relationship as unsafe, manipulative, traumatic, or harmful without adequate evidence, especially where this justifies blocking contact or relational repair.	Raising concerns about contact where there is evidence of harm and seeking careful assessment rather than relying on assumption or adult narrative alone.

Using allegations of harm to prevent the child from having safe contact, while refusing reasonable assessment, therapeutic support, supervised transition options, or evidence-based repair work.	Seeking protective arrangements where risk exists, while remaining open to properly qualified assessment, proportionate safeguards, child-focused support, and safe relationship repair if appropriate. Refusing an intervention may be reasonable where the service is unsafe, unqualified, biased, poorly designed, unaffordable, or lacks adequate safeguards.
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Cross-cutting cautions

An unsubstantiated claim of coercive control should not be assumed to be fabricated. A claim may be unsubstantiated because evidence was limited, the person was frightened, the behaviour occurred privately, the system did not investigate properly, the threshold was not met, the harm was difficult to prove, or the assessment process did not sufficiently identify the pattern or impact of the behaviour.

Fabricated, malicious, or vexatious claims require a different analysis because they involve invented, knowingly false, materially distorted, or strategically exaggerated allegations used to punish, discredit, control, isolate, financially exhaust, or frighten another person. The distinction is not whether an allegation was accepted by a system, but whether it was made in good faith, supported by available evidence, proportionate to the concern, and handled in a way that protected rather than exploited the child or the other person.

Defensive behaviour must be assessed with chronology and function rather than isolated presentation. Anger, repeated messages, evidence gathering, avoidance, refusal to communicate directly, help-seeking, or strict boundaries may be protective responses to a broader pattern. These behaviours should not be automatically treated as mutual abuse without examining what preceded them, what risk was being managed, whether the response was proportionate, and whether one person's conduct has repeatedly reduced the other person's freedom, safety, credibility, parenting capacity, relationships, finances, movement, help-seeking, and ability to make independent decisions.

Practice cautions and areas often missed

Legislation, policy, and public education are developing across Australia, but practice can still miss coercive dynamics when professionals assess incidents in isolation, rely too heavily on who appears distressed or confident, or fail to examine the consequences that follow refusal, independence, disclosure, or contact with the other parent or family members. Areas that require particular care include:

- child-related coercive control after separation
- use of complaints or allegations in ways that are knowingly false, misleading, coercive, retaliatory, or strategically exaggerated
- systems abuse and legal abuse
- proxy abuse through relatives, friends, new partners, professionals, private investigators, online accounts, children, or community networks
- post-separation financial control, including child support, recorded care, reimbursements, and expense disputes
- school, medical, counselling, sporting, religious, and child protection systems being drawn into adult control dynamics
- reputational abuse through professional complaints, social media, community gossip, selective disclosure, and workplace or regulatory reports

- technology-facilitated monitoring, including devices, accounts, shared apps, cloud access, location data, children's devices, vehicles, cameras, and smart-home systems
- abuse involving pets, property, housing, documents, medication, transport, immigration status, disability, caregiving dependence, culture, sexuality, age, religion, or language access
- sleep disruption, crisis creation, and administrative overload as tactics of exhaustion and destabilisation
- defensive behaviour being misread as mutual abuse
- children's stated views being treated as independent without assessing adult pressure, fear, loyalty conflict, misinformation, rehearsal, suggestive questioning, avoidance learning, and consequences for connection

Cognitive distortions, interpretation, and patterned influence

Care is needed when discussing cognitive distortions because the term can be misused to suggest that a victim-survivor is simply thinking inaccurately or overreacting. The starting point should be the behaviour of the person using coercive control. They may justify domination as protection, frame entitlement as love, treat jealousy as evidence of care, interpret ordinary independence as betrayal, or recast their own intimidation as the other person being difficult, unstable, unsafe, or ungrateful. These interpretations can become part of the control pattern when they are used to punish autonomy, excuse surveillance, rationalise restriction, or pressure the other person into compliance.

Coercive control can also shape the victim-survivor's interpretations over time. Repeated blame, intimidation, contradiction, degradation, secrecy, fear of consequences, dependency, and exhaustion can make a person doubt their judgement, minimise danger, over-explain the abusive person's behaviour, blame themselves for the other person's reactions, or feel responsible for preventing escalation.

This does not mean the victim-survivor caused the abuse or that their perceptions should be dismissed. It means assessment must examine what has shaped the person's thinking, what pressures they have been living under, and whether their responses are consistent with fear, survival, appeasement, trauma, coercion, or repeated relational punishment.

In normal-range conflict, people may misread each other, assume the worst, or react defensively. The difference is that healthy relating allows correction, reflection, apology, repair, and respect for evidence. Coercive control uses distorted interpretation to maintain power, punish independence, and keep the other person compliant.

Critical thinking, stress responses, and vulnerable thinking states

Coercive control often works by narrowing reflection and increasing urgency, fear, shame, confusion, dependency, or emotional consequence. The person using coercive control may rush decisions, overload the other person with accusations, demand immediate answers, punish disagreement, isolate them from reality-testing, or make ordinary independence feel dangerous. Over time, this can reduce the other person's ability to pause, compare evidence, seek advice, or consider alternative explanations.

Critical thinking is better understood as a capacity that can be strengthened or impaired by relational conditions, emotional state, safety, information, and time to reflect. It can be reduced when a person is frightened, threatened, sleep deprived, isolated, depressed, ashamed, financially dependent, traumatised, or repeatedly forced to respond under pressure. In those states, the first thought may be fear-based, self-blaming, catastrophic, or compliance-focused because the mind is trying to reduce immediate danger or emotional consequence.

This should not be used to criticise victim-survivors for not thinking clearly enough. In many coercive situations, quick compliance, appeasement, silence, withdrawal, or agreement may be adaptive in the moment because it reduces the risk of escalation. The problem is that repeated pressure can train the person to bypass reflection, doubt their own judgement, and accept the controlling person's version of reality.

Public education should therefore teach people how to slow the process down where it is safe to do so: What evidence supports this claim? What evidence contradicts it? Am I being rushed, threatened, shamed, isolated, or made responsible for another adult's behaviour? Would I be allowed to disagree without punishment? Is this a genuine safety concern, or is fear being used to gain compliance? These questions are also relevant for professionals, because poor assessment can mistake survival responses for instability, resistance, aggression, or mutual abuse.

Boundaries, boundary pushing, and healthy limits

The language of boundaries can be misused when a person describes control as a boundary, frames surveillance as safety, presents isolation as protection, calls punishment accountability, or treats another person's refusal as disrespect. Boundary pushing often begins with small intrusions, guilt, entitlement, pressure, sulking, interrogation, repeated requests, or consequences for refusal. If those intrusions are rewarded or tolerated because the person is frightened, exhausted, dependent, or trying to keep peace, the demands may escalate.

A healthy boundary usually defines what a person will do to protect their own safety, privacy, body, time, emotional wellbeing, finances, parenting space, or participation in a relationship.

It does not require domination over another person's thoughts, movements, relationships, finances, body, beliefs, or lawful choices.

People who have not been taught healthy boundaries, or who have learned that keeping peace depends on pleasing others, may struggle to recognise early boundary violations. This is not a failure of character. It can reflect developmental learning, trauma history, fear, social conditioning, dependency, low self-worth, or previous punishment for saying no.

Healthy boundaries protect relationships because they clarify consent, responsibility, respect, safety, and personal limits. Boundary pushing becomes coercive when refusal is punished, when access is treated as entitlement, when the person is made responsible for another adult's reaction, or when a so-called boundary is used to isolate, surveil, silence, control, or punish. In normal-range relationships, people may feel disappointed by a boundary, ask questions, or need time to adjust, but they do not retaliate, intimidate, degrade, threaten, or make safety and affection conditional on compliance.

Bi-directional problematic behaviour and coercive control

Some relationships involve bi-directional problematic behaviour, where both people behave poorly, escalate conflict, communicate aggressively, breach trust, avoid responsibility, make accusations, or use unhelpful coping strategies. This can be harmful and may still require intervention, boundaries, counselling, parenting support, or legal structure. However, bi-directional conflict is not automatically coercive control.

The assessment question is whether both people are contributing to a difficult or unsafe pattern in similar ways, or whether one person's behaviour is repeatedly organising the relationship around fear, compliance, dependency, surveillance, restriction, punishment, isolation, reputational harm, or loss of autonomy. Coercive control is more likely where one person's conduct consistently reduces the other person's freedom, credibility, parenting capacity, help-seeking, relationships, finances, movement, or ability to disagree safely.

It is also possible for a victim-survivor to respond in ways that look difficult, reactive, avoidant, angry, controlling, or defensive when assessed without chronology. This is why professionals need to examine sequence, function, proportionality, evidence, and cumulative impact rather than treating every conflict behaviour as equal. Poor behaviour on both sides may indicate a high-conflict or mutually harmful relationship. It does not remove the need to identify whether one person is the primary driver of coercion, whether there is defensive behaviour, or whether allegations are being used to obscure the broader pattern.

Child support, care percentages, and post-separation financial control

Child support can become part of post-separation coercive control when money, recorded care, allegations, and children's relationships are used together. This requires careful wording because child support is a lawful federal system designed to ensure children are financially supported, and many parents make genuine applications, disputes, objections, income updates, and care-percentage updates in good faith.

The coercive concern arises when a parent uses child support, claimed care levels, withheld time, fabricated or exaggerated allegations, or the child's own words as leverage. In Australia, child support assessments consider parental income, the costs of children, and the amount of care each parent provides. Because recorded care can affect child support and related payments, some cases may create a practical incentive to maximise recorded care or minimise the other parent's recognised care, particularly where false, inflated, or strategically maintained care claims are difficult to correct quickly.

This does not mean every child support dispute is coercive control. Some parents genuinely cannot afford discretionary expenses, need arrears paid, object to inaccurate income reporting, dispute care calculations, or seek financial transparency because children's needs are not being met. The distinction is whether the financial issue is being handled through proportionate adult processes, or whether money, care percentages, allegations, and withheld time are being used to punish, restrict, discredit, exhaust, or weaken the child's relationship with the other parent and extended family.

Children should not be recruited into child support disputes. A child should not be told to demand money, repeat adult claims that the other parent pays for nothing, refuse time until money is paid, report on spending, or carry financial blame between households. Where a parent is already paying child support, telling the child that the parent contributes nothing can distort the child's view of care, responsibility, and relationship value. Where a parent is not paying or expenses are genuinely unmet, the issue still needs to be handled by adults and appropriate systems rather than being used to burden the child or condition the child's relationship with either parent.

Public-facing summary

Coercive control should not be confused with ordinary conflict, poor communication, emotional upset, a firm boundary, a parenting disagreement, separate finances, privacy, lawful help-seeking, or a genuine report made for safety. It refers to a repeated pattern of behaviour used to dominate, restrict, intimidate, punish, isolate, monitor, discredit, exhaust, exploit, or make another person comply. The concern is not only what happened in one incident, but how the behaviour operates over time and what it does to the other person's safety, autonomy, relationships, parenting, finances, reputation, movement, privacy, sexual autonomy, access to support, and ability to make lawful choices.

Normal-range relationships can involve argument, misunderstanding, withdrawal from conflict, firm limits, difficult conversations, privacy, separate finances, spending concerns, financial disagreement, different household roles, family distance, cultural or spiritual values, sexual boundaries, help-seeking, reports, parenting communication, changed arrangements, or legal processes without those behaviours amounting to coercive control. These behaviours become more concerning when they are repeated, disproportionate, unsupported by evidence, used as leverage, or tied to consequences for non-compliance. The distinction is usually found in the pattern, the function of the behaviour, the proportionality of the response, and whether the other person remains free to disagree, leave, seek support, maintain relationships, spend money, parent independently, set sexual limits, access care, and make lawful choices without intimidation or retaliation.

Coercive control within a relationship may involve direct restriction, surveillance, financial control, sexual or reproductive coercion, threats, humiliation, identity-based pressure, disability or care-related dependence, sleep disruption, property intimidation, technology-facilitated monitoring, or the gradual narrowing of the person's privacy, confidence, choices, relationships, and help-seeking. Some behaviours may appear ordinary when examined one at a time, such as asking about spending, wanting reassurance, questioning a relationship, managing finances, or expressing distress. Assessment requires closer attention to whether those behaviours are negotiated, proportionate, respectful, and open to repair, or whether they become a repeated method of surveillance, punishment, shame, restriction, dependency, or control.

Post-separation coercive control requires particular attention because the tactics often shift rather than stop. Control may continue through children, parenting communication, parenting apps, handovers, school systems, medical information, child protection reports, police complaints, legal processes, child support, care percentages, finances, online reputation, extended family, new partners, professional complaints, employers, community networks, property access, housing, vehicles, technology, and administrative systems. Refusing court-ordered or agreed communication tools, moving communication into unrecorded channels, withholding essential child information, creating logistical instability,

or using systems to avoid accountability can become part of the coercive pattern where the function is to destabilise, exhaust, discredit, or control the other parent.

Children may be affected directly when they are drawn into adult fear, loyalty pressure, suggestive questioning, secrecy, surveillance, emotional caretaking, information-gathering, financial blame, denigration, false or rehearsed reports, baiting, set-ups, institutional pathways, or rejection of a safe parent or family member. A child's words and distress must be taken seriously, but they should not be treated as independent of adult influence without assessment of how the concern emerged, what questions were asked, whether the account was rehearsed or adult-shaped, and whether fear, loyalty pressure, reward, punishment, misinformation, or relational consequences shaped the child's presentation. These patterns should not be dismissed as ordinary parenting conflict when the child is being used, pressured, frightened, burdened, coached, rewarded, or positioned inside adult control dynamics.

Coercive control laws and public education must also be protected from misuse. An unsubstantiated claim is not automatically fabricated, because evidence may be limited, difficult to obtain, poorly investigated, or assessed against the wrong questions. Fabricated, malicious, materially distorted, or vexatious claims require a different analysis. When allegations, complaints, proceedings, professional reports, child disclosures, recordings, or public narratives are knowingly misused to punish, discredit, isolate, financially exhaust, frighten, or control another person, they may form part of a coercive pattern and require careful scrutiny.

Bi-directional problematic behaviour also requires careful assessment because some relationships involve harmful behaviour from both people, including escalation, hostility, avoidance, poor communication, mistrust, accusations, or retaliatory conduct. That does not automatically mean coercive control is present, and it does not automatically mean coercive control is absent. Professionals need to examine chronology, evidence, function, proportionality, power, fear, dependency, defensive responses, and cumulative impact, with particular attention to whether one person's conduct is repeatedly organising the relationship around compliance, restriction, surveillance, punishment, reputational harm, isolation, or loss of autonomy.

A fair assessment does not begin by believing every claim or dismissing every claim. It examines the pattern, the evidence, the function of the conduct, the proportionality of any protective action, the consequences that follow refusal, who gains control, who loses freedom, and whether the behaviour is reasonably connected to genuine safety, shared responsibility, child welfare, accountability, or repair, or is being used to dominate another person. This distinction supports accurate identification of coercive control, safer responses, stronger protection for children, and a lower risk that coercive control language itself becomes another tool of harm.

Disclaimer

This resource is provided for psychoeducational purposes by Co-Parenting Australia. It is intended to assist public understanding of coercive control, post-separation coercive dynamics, and the distinction between coercive behaviour, harmful but non-coercive behaviour, and normal-range relationship or parenting difficulties.

This resource is not legal advice, clinical advice, risk assessment, diagnosis, or a substitute for advice from appropriately qualified legal, mental health, child protection, family violence, medical, or safeguarding professionals. Coercive control laws, domestic and family violence definitions, protection order frameworks, child protection responses, and criminal offences differ across Australian jurisdictions. Any legal question should be considered with reference to the relevant state, territory, or federal law and the specific facts of the matter.

The examples in this document should not be read as a checklist where one behaviour automatically proves coercive control. Coercive control is usually identified through pattern, function, proportionality, evidence, impact, and the consequences that follow refusal, independence, help-seeking, disclosure, contact, or non-compliance. A behaviour may be concerning in one situation and normal, protective, or proportionate in another. Careful assessment is required.

Nothing in this resource should be used to dismiss genuine disclosures of abuse, neglect, family violence, sexual violence, child harm, or safety concerns. Equally, unsubstantiated does not automatically mean fabricated. Some genuine concerns are difficult to prove, poorly investigated, or assessed against the wrong questions. Fabricated, malicious, materially distorted, or vexatious claims require a different analysis, particularly where allegations, systems, children, or professional processes are used to punish, discredit, isolate, financially exhaust, frighten, or control another person.

Where children are involved, their words, distress, behaviour, and disclosures should be taken seriously while also being assessed with attention to development, questioning, adult influence, fear, loyalty pressure, coaching, rehearsal, avoidance learning, and the broader family pattern. Children should not be placed in adult roles, used as messengers, informants, witnesses, advocates, emotional supports, financial intermediaries, or instruments of adult conflict.

If there is immediate danger, contact emergency services. If there are concerns about domestic and family violence, child safety, sexual violence, coercive control, or post-separation abuse, seek advice from appropriately qualified services in your jurisdiction.

Support and emergency contacts

If you or someone else is in immediate danger, call **Triple Zero (000)** for police, fire or ambulance.

For domestic, family or sexual violence counselling, information and support, contact **1800RESPECT** on **1800 737 732**. 1800RESPECT is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and also provides online support options.

For children and young people aged 5 to 25, contact **Kids Helpline** on **1800 55 1800**. Kids Helpline provides free 24/7 phone and online counselling support.

For crisis support and suicide prevention support, contact **Lifeline** on **13 11 14**. Lifeline provides 24-hour crisis support in Australia.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people seeking culturally safe crisis support, contact **13YARN** on **13 92 76**. 13YARN is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

For men seeking support with relationships, mental health, family violence, anger, stress or suicidal thoughts, contact **MensLine Australia** on **1300 78 99 78**. MensLine provides free 24/7 telephone counselling support.

For LGBTQIA+ people, their friends, families, and professionals seeking peer support and referral, contact **QLife** on **1800 184 527** or use QLife webchat. QLife provides free and anonymous LGBTIQ+ peer support across Australia for people wanting to talk about sexuality, identity, gender, bodies, feelings or relationships. QLife is available every day from **3 pm to 9 pm local time**.

For child safety concerns, contact the relevant child protection authority in your state or territory. If a child is in immediate danger, call **000**.



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