



Negotiating with a narcissistic ex in family court

Date: Monday April 20, 2026

Negotiating with an ex who shows narcissistic traits in family court feels exhausting and confusing, especially when children sit at the centre of the dispute. This blog gives you practical steps to protect yourself, stay credible, and work toward outcomes the court is likely to respect under Australian family law.

Narcissistic traits in a family law context

Psychologists describe narcissistic personality disorder as a pattern of grandiosity, strong need for admiration, and low empathy. In family law matters, practitioners more often talk about “narcissistic traits” or [“coercive control”](#) rather than the medical diagnosis.

Section 4AB of the *Family Law Act 1975* (Cth) and section 9A(1) of the *Family Court Act 1997* (WA) includes behaviour that coerces or controls a family member, or causes fear, within the definition of family violence. In family law, many narcissistic patterns such as gaslighting, financial control, and stalking, could be viewed as forms of coercive control.

How Australian family courts assess narcissistic behaviour

Parenting matters

The Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia, and the Family Court of Western Australia (The Family Court), must decide [parenting disputes](#) by reference to the best interests of the child. Safety from physical and psychological harm, including [exposure to family violence](#) and coercive control, sits at the top of that list.

The Family Court recognises that it may still be in the best interest of a child to have a relationship with a parent with narcissistic traits. However, this can only be achieved where safeguards exist to ensure there is not an unacceptable risk of harm.

Where patterns of coercive control, substance abuse, or ongoing breaches of orders appear, courts sometimes restrict or even stop time with the parent who presents that risk.

Property settlement

In [property and financial disputes](#), the court expects [full and frank disclosure of assets, income, and liabilities](#). Hidden assets, sham loans, or deliberate delay in proceedings will damage credibility and may influence both findings and costs orders.

Why negotiating feels impossible

Common patterns with narcissistic ex-partners in family law include:

Refusal to compromise, even on minor points, because “winning” matters more than fairness.

Gaslighting, blame-shifting, or re-writing history during discussions and mediation.

Using children, changeover times, or school events to draw you into conflict.

Financial games such as hiding income, running expenses through a business, or claiming poverty despite a comfortable lifestyle.

Smear campaigns and false allegations about your parenting, mental health, or honesty.

These patterns often stall settlement, increase legal costs, and take a toll on your mental health.

You need structure, evidence, and support rather than informal negotiation on your own.

Preparation before any negotiation

Good preparation shifts you from constant reaction to measured response.

Key steps include:

Clarify your goals in parenting and property issues, grounded in realistic legal advice.

Gather documents early, including financial records, communication history, and notes of incidents.

Build a support team, such as a family lawyer with experience in coercive control cases, a GP and/or psychologist, and trusted friends or family.

Set up safe communication channels and safety planning where family violence or stalking risk exists.

Documenting behaviour and building evidence

Evidence often matters more than labels such as “narcissist”. The Family Court responds to patterns of behaviour supported by documents, not broad character descriptions.

Practical evidence steps include:

Keep all texts, emails, and messages in organised folders.

Use a communication app or email for parenting arrangements rather than calls where possible.

Write short, dated notes after serious incidents, including impact on you and children.

Make reports to police, GPs, psychologists, and schools and keep a secure record of where you have reported.

Clear timelines and contemporaneous records in family violence and coercive control matters are paramount. This level of preparation supports both negotiation and any potential Family Court matter.

Language to use, and language to avoid

It is important to focus on specific behaviour rather than calling your ex a “narcissist” in affidavits or with court experts. The Family Court often views unsupported labels like this with concern and will give more weight to detailed examples, supported by evidence and expert opinion.

You strengthen your position when you:

Describe conduct in concrete terms, for example “sent 15 texts between 11pm and 1am demanding responses” instead of “harassed me all night”.

Link behaviour to impact on children, such as missed changeovers or anxiety symptoms.

Use neutral, respectful language even when describing upsetting events.

Judges look for insight, child focus, and respect for the process from each parent.

Communication rules with a high-conflict ex

Ongoing communication often continues for years in parenting matters. Having a structure to your communication may help lower conflict and support your case. This might include:

Using written communication for all non-urgent issues.

Keeping messages short, factual, and neutral in tone.

Responding only to the parts that relate to parenting or practical arrangements.

Avoiding emotional language, insults, or arguments over past events.

Considering using a [co-parenting app](#) to communicate.

For example:

High conflict response: "You are lying again, you never show up for our children, you only ever want to hurt me and the kids."

Stronger response: "Pick up at 3:15pm outside the school office remains in place. Please ensure you are on time."

Courts and family reports often comment favourably on parents who communicate in a child-focused and businesslike way, despite provocation.

Your messages might later appear in evidence, so write as if a judge will read every line. You can read more about communication rules with a high conflict ex in our blog, ["Text and email like it will be read in court one day"](#).

Negotiation options before and during court

Australian family law encourages out-of-court settlement wherever safe. [Family Dispute Resolution \(FDR\)](#) is compulsory in most parenting matters before filing, with some exceptions for serious risk or urgency.

If the mediator identifies any narcissistic traits, or other safety/negotiation concerns, they may recommend:

Shuttle mediation, where you sit in separate rooms.

Having your lawyer present or available during FDR.

Clear ground rules around time limits and behaviour.

Ending any session where abuse or intimidation resumes.

If you move into court, negotiation continues at events such as conciliation conferences and on hearing days.

Handling common narcissistic tactics in negotiation

“We already had an agreement”

Some narcissistic ex-partners insist you reached a binding deal during a casual conversation or message thread. For example, one parent claims a café chat is equal to a property agreement, even though nothing appeared in writing and both parties lacked advice.

Under Australian family law, property and financial agreements only become binding when strict requirements exist, including written terms, independent legal advice for each party, full disclosure, and proper execution under the family law. The Family Court stresses that informal talks, texts, or draft proposals do not meet this standard.

Financial smoke and mirrors

High-conflict parties sometimes:

Understate income through business structures or related entities.

Transfer funds to relatives before separation and call them “loans”.

Delay bonuses, promotions, or new contracts until after settlement.

False allegations and character attacks

Narcissistic opponents sometimes spread false claims about your mental health, parenting, or alleged substance use. This may be through schools, social media, or extended family.

You protect your position when you:

Obtain letters from treating doctors or psychologists where appropriate.

Keep employment records and performance reviews.

Save school reports and communication showing support for children.

Stay off social media during proceedings or post only neutral content.

Courts look for evidence from neutral sources, rather than accepting contested allegations at face value. Calm, consistent behaviour over time often matters more than one hostile message taken out of context.

Using children to pressure you

Parents with narcissistic traits will often use children as messengers, spies, or bargaining chips in parenting matters. Behaviour also includes discussing court issues with children, running down the other parent, or threatening to “take the children away” unless you accept unfair terms.

Courts treat exposure to this behaviour as a form of psychological harm and a serious parenting concern.

Findings of ongoing coercive control or emotional abuse have led to supervised time, reduced time, or no time orders in high-risk situations, where risk to children and the safer parent outweighs the benefits of direct contact.

Looking after yourself during the process

Your capacity to present as a stable, child-focused parent depends in part on your own health and support.

Helpful steps include:

Regular contact with a GP and/or psychologist familiar with family violence.

Support groups or counselling services specialising in coercive control.

Routines that support sleep, exercise, and time away from legal tasks.

Clear boundaries with friends and family around what you share and when.

Early settlement versus the need for court intervention

Most family law practitioners will prioritise a negotiated resolution where safe. Where the parties can reach an agreement and have that ratified into a consent order; everyone usually saves on costs, the matter finishes faster, and it gives families more control over their lives.

Where a narcissistic ex maintains control over finances or children, structured negotiation with strong legal support still often delivers workable outcomes.

In some situations, priority shifts toward court intervention:

Ongoing serious family violence or threats.

Child safety concerns, including exposure to abuse or serious neglect.

Repeated breaches of orders or intervention orders.

Refusal to disclose finances or comply with basic procedural steps.

In those cases, your lawyer will seek orders that protect you and your children where possible. Evidence of coercive control, risk assessments, and mental health material supports those applications.

How Meillon & Bright supports clients facing narcissistic behaviour

If your ex shows narcissistic traits, you need a plan that combines evidence, negotiation strategy, and a clear focus on safety and

the best interests of your children.

Our experienced family law team can help you decide when to negotiate, when to stand firm, and which outcomes align with both your rights and your long-term wellbeing.

The information contained in this article is of general nature and should not be construed as legal advice. If you require further information, advice or assistance for your specific circumstances, please contact us.