

# Counter-Parenting

*"I choose to make the rest of my life the best of my life." Louise Hay*

You can watch the Counter-Parenting video here: [www.ownmylifecourse.org/cp](http://www.ownmylifecourse.org/cp)

Hello and welcome to this Counter-Parenting resource!

This pack provides support materials for our short video, Counter-Parenting. The video and this pack are designed to help women and those that support them (family, friends, paid workers or volunteers) understand the ways their partner or ex makes it difficult to positively co-parent.

At Own My Life we are committed to ensuring that every woman (and the people who love her) is able to make sense of her life, and this Counter-Parenting resource is part of that.

## What is Own My Life?

We are a registered charity working across the UK and Ireland (and sometimes beyond). We train workers to run the Own My Life course with women. The course is 12-weeks long and is run with groups or one-to-one; enabling women to make sense of their lives, process the ways a partner or ex may have harmed them, and learn to own their lives. The course is for women with and without children.

We also have **Own My Life Discovery**, our online e-learning platform where anyone can get access to our course videos and support activities: [www.ownmylifediscovery.org](http://www.ownmylifediscovery.org).

## How do I access an Own My Life course?

We don't centrally deliver the course, but lots of organisations across the UK, Ireland and the Isle of Man do. You can find your nearest course is here: [www.ownmylifecourse.org/findacourse](http://www.ownmylifecourse.org/findacourse).



## What is counter-parenting?

When we have children with someone (including where that person is a step-parent), we will each have an individual relationship with each child (as a parent) and with each other (as a partner). As parents, our partner relationship involves being a co-parent. This remains the case whether we remain partners or if our intimate relationship ends. To be a positive parent means not only loving each child and ensuring their needs are met, it also means being a supportive co-parent who has positive and kind intentions towards the child's other parent. Positive co-parenting is a crucial part of being the best parent we can be to our child.

Some parents do not understand the importance of positive co-parenting; others deliberately use the co-parenting relationship as a way to punish, control or harm their partner or ex. It is incredibly painful to be subjected to this, and to have your children used as a weapon. Along with various other experts and specialists, we call this counter-parenting. It is deeply harmful to children to have a parent or step-parent who is counter-parenting.

During the relationship, counter-parenting can be difficult to identify, and so it is most often when the relationship ends that our ex's counter-parenting becomes noticeable and is often increasingly difficult to cope with.

Own My Life is solely for women and is focussed mainly on heterosexual relationships. As a result this resource centres women dealing with their children's father (or step-father) engaging in counter-parenting.



# Counter-Parenting

*"The spirit that continually resurfaces in women's lives indicates that each of us is capable of remaking the worlds we are given, even against impossible odds." Evan Stark*

It can be hard to make sense of why our partner or ex is counter-parenting. No matter how reasonable or careful we are, he will find ways to twist the situation into us being the bad one. You may have come across messages which suggest that as the children's mother, you are to blame for his behaviour. Some of the other explanations for this sort of behaviour across include that he is:

- A narcissist.
- Emotional disregulated.
- Autistic.
- Struggling with issues from his childhood.
- Mentally unwell.

None of these are accurate explanations. Fathers who use counter-parenting tactics generally believe that the women they have relationships with are their possessions (that they own their partner or ex) and this possessiveness leads them to believe they have the right to do whatever they want to that woman and her children (that they are entitled).

We use a tree image to help understand this (based on the work of abuse expert Lundy Bancroft). Counter-parenting is a way for a man to use his children to control his partner or ex (the branches), but this behaviour stems from roots of ownership and trunk of entitlement.

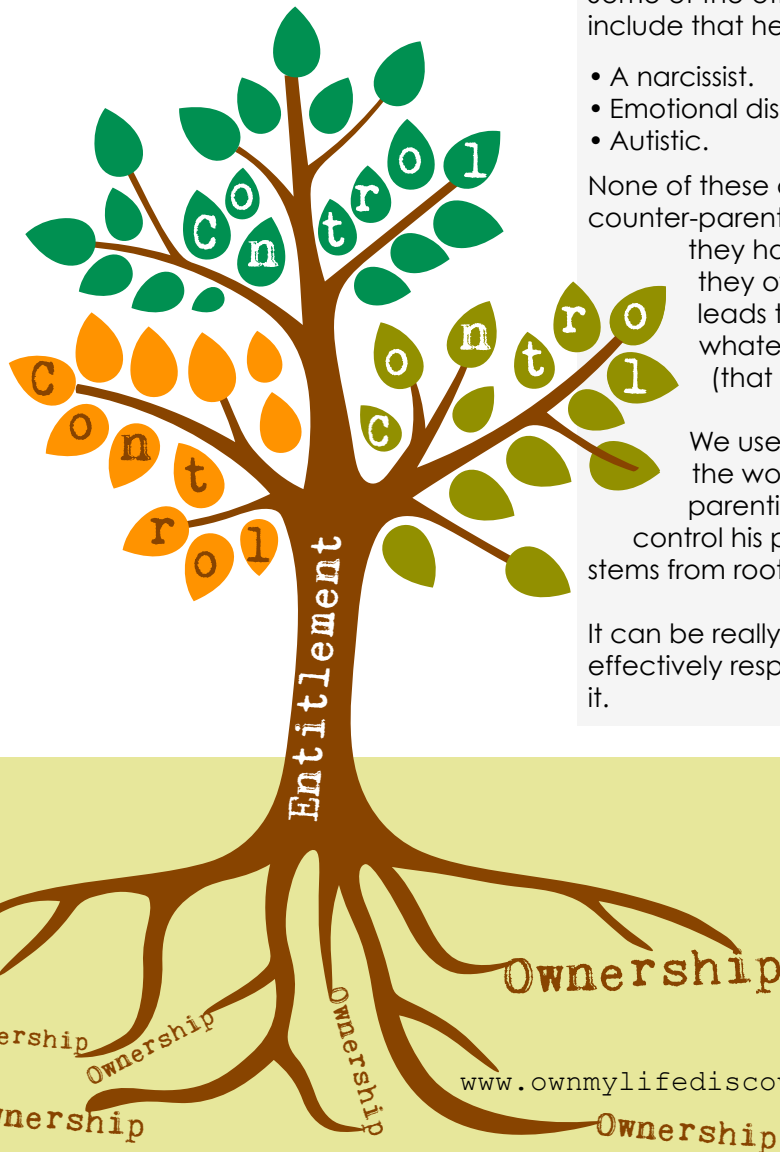
It can be really hard to accept this explanation, but we can't effectively respond to a situation unless we properly understand it.

How do I use the Counter-Parenting video and this resource pack?

You may simply want to watch the video and show it to the people around you to enable them to better support you.

After watching the video you could:

1. Read through this resource pack to give you greater insight into your situation.
2. Print out the resource pack and then complete the different sections.
3. (If you don't have access to a printer), use a separate notebook or paper to draw/write responses to the prompts in this resource pack.
4. Go through this resource pack with someone who cares about you (a family member or friend) to help you both better understand your situation.
5. (If you're supporting someone who is being subjected to counter-parenting) use this resource pack to better understand how to support them, or as part of your support for them.



## A few thoughts on how to be a brilliant dad

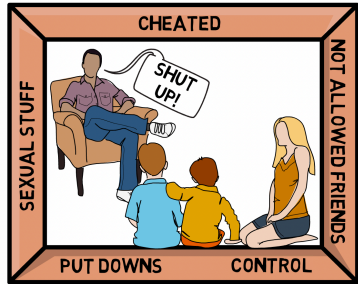
Respect and value his children's mother whether or not he is in an intimate relationship with her. Meaningfully support his children's relationship with their mother. Deeply know who the children are. Meet the children's practical and emotional needs, prioritising them over his own and not expecting "brownie points" for being a decent parent.

[www.ownmylifediscovery.org](http://www.ownmylifediscovery.org)



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# Counter-Parenting



This is Maz. She and her partner Barry have two children, Rory and Michael.

Throughout their relationship, Barry would put Maz down make her feel bad about herself and control her. He wouldn't let her have any friends, cheated on her and made her do sexual stuff when she didn't want to. He wasn't ever violent and Maz tried to hide from the kids how bad she

felt. Overall, Maz felt that Barry was a good dad even though he rarely did any of the practical stuff for them, undermined Maz's parenting rules and often got irritated if they interrupted him when he was relaxing.

Like Maz, when we have children with someone, or they take on the role of step-parent, we want to believe they are a brilliant parent. It can be really hard to admit that they may be having a negative impact on our kids. If you feel able, note down anything you recall from your situation which would fit into this category.

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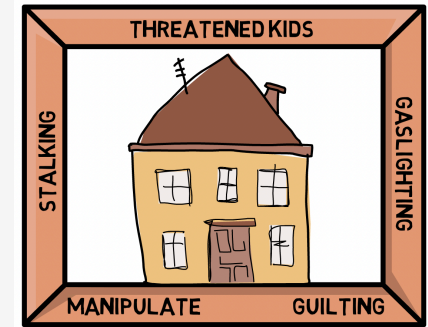
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Maz broke up with Barry. She and the kids moved into temporary housing until they could find somewhere proper to live.

At first Barry tried to manipulate Maz back, guilting and gaslighting her to give the relationship another go. Then he threatened to hurt the kids and began stalking her. Maz wants the kids to have a relationship with their dad, but she's scared Barry won't return them after contact. She doesn't know what to do.



If we break-up with them, the kids' dad or step-dad may start to behave in ways that are differently harmful from how they were when we were in a relationship with them. This is likely to be confusing for both us and our kids. If you're no longer with your partner and feel able to, note down what you've noticed about this in your situation.

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# Counter-Parenting



Maz has to accept three things.

- 1. This situation is Not Fair:** Maz wants to move on with her life. She has tried her best to be a good partner and parent and Barry has done neither of these. It is okay for Maz to be angry, frustrated or desolate about the situation.
- 2. Abuse is the name of the problem:** Nobody wants to acknowledge that their partner is abusive, and certainly they don't want their kids to have an abusive dad. However, by correctly naming the problem, Maz can take action to deal with it.
- 3. It's Barry's fault:** In some break-ups, both partners have caused the break-up. In situations of abuse, it is the abuser that is the problem. Recognising this will protect Maz from Barry's gaslighting and help Maz to avoid false guilt.

1. Take some time to consider the different feelings you have about how unfair the situation is. You could use the space below to draw, write or doodle as a way of representing your feelings.

2. It can be overwhelming to even consider that our children's father is abusive. Most of us wouldn't want to take on that label for our experiences as it is simply Too Much. Tick any of the suggestions of why you may be unwilling to label your situation "abuse" (you can add extra ones at the bottom).

- It's not bad enough to be abuse.
- I don't want to think of him as an "abuser".
- I would have realised it was abuse already.
- I want to believe he's a good dad.
- Everyone thinks I'm the bad one.

3. Often our partner or ex has made us feel like everything is our fault; combine that with other people in our lives saying or doing things that make us feel to blame, and it can be hard to contemplate that we might not be responsible for the issues. Use this space to note down what you feel about the idea that the situation is not your fault:

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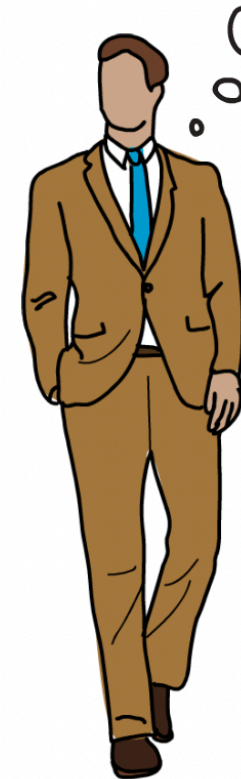
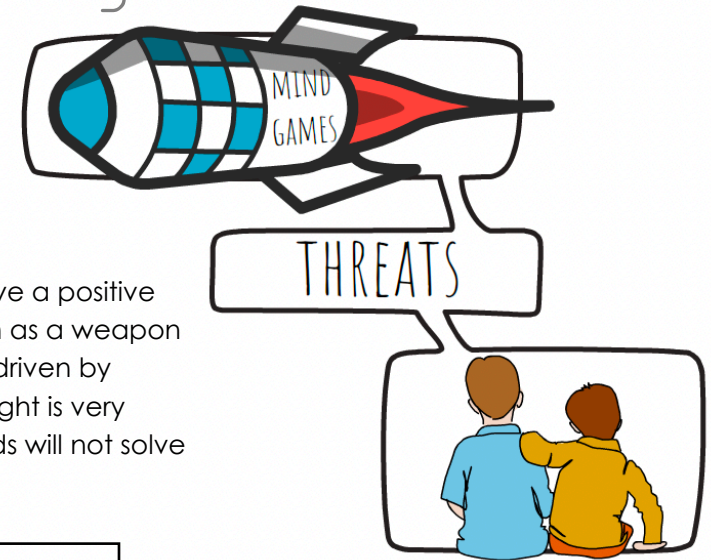
# Counter-Parenting

Next up, Maz must prepare for war.

This might seem melodramatic, but the reality is, Barry already sees this situation as a battle to control Maz. He's using mind games and threats, and sees the children as a weapon in his war. Which doesn't only hurt Maz, it hurts the children as well.

If we have children with someone, even if the relationship breaks down, we generally want to have a positive relationship with our children's father. It can be very painful to accept that he is using the children as a weapon and treating us as an enemy in a war he has invented. Understanding that the counter-parent is driven by feeling he is entitled to have whatever he wants, and that he views our precious children in that light is very upsetting. However, pretending it's not a war or trying to appease him or comply with his demands will not solve the problems he is creating.

Use this space to write or draw how it feels to have been forced into a war with the person who is counter-parenting.



*"Knowing what must be done does away with fear."  
Rosa Parks*

# Counter-Parenting

To protect her children and herself, in this war Barry has started, Maz needs a PACT:

Her and the children need a safe **place**. This includes a suitable home and sufficient resources to meet hers and her children's needs.

Maz needs to **anticipate** that this will not be a short term situation. Sadly,

until the children are both eighteen, Barry may use them as a weapon. This is going to be years long; a marathon rather than a sprint.

Maz needs to identify who the **colluders** are. While she might expect family courts, children's services, teachers, and others to be on her side (as the one who has her children's best interests at heart), very often these

services will be on Barry's side, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Maz needs to identify who will fight alongside her; who her **team** are; her family, friends, abuse services, and others around her who recognise Barry is using the children as a weapon to hurt and control Maz.



Note down anything that you and your children need in order to have a safe **place**.

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Use this space to write or draw how it feels to **anticipate** this is a long term situation.

Note down anyone you've experienced to be a **colluder** with your partner/ex.

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Use this space to write or draw who the people in your **team** are.

# Counter-Parenting

Maz then needs to put on her armour and ensure her children have their armour on too.



**Helmet of Knowledge** Maz needs to know what Barry is trying to do:

- He wants to use the kids to control their mum.
- He intends for the kids to blame their mum, like he does.
- He wants to maintain his view that he has the right to do what he likes to Maz and the kids.

**Breastplate of Peace** Maz and the children need to be able to recognise their negative feelings, and be supported to a place of peace with them. Having safe places to go and safe people to talk to about this (like a counsellor or mentor) will help with this.

**Gloves of Good Communication** Where possible, it would be helpful for Maz to increase healthy communication between her and the children. This can include:

- Finding fun activities to do together.
- Being affectionate with the children and showing them she loves them.
- Getting her team's support so she isn't relying on her kids to support her.

**Boots of Confidence** Maz needs to build confidence that she is a good mum, and find ways to encourage her children to respect and value her. Maz's team will be an important resource in doing this.

Four books/podcasts that will help me build my knowledge.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Four things that will help me to feel more peaceful.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Four things I can do to have fun with my kids or help them know I love them.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

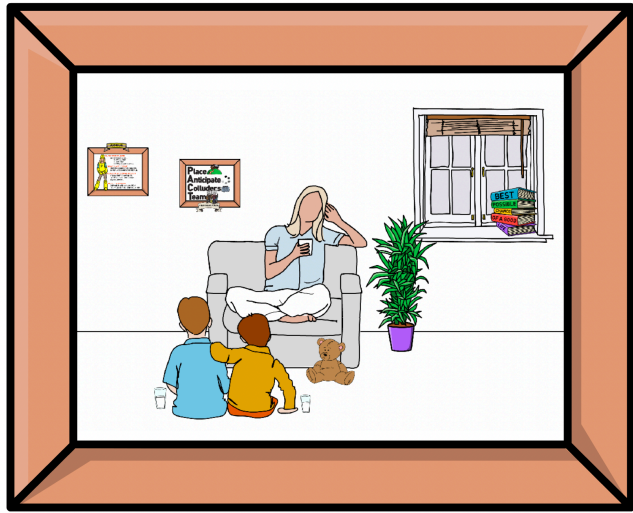
Four things me and my team can do to help build my parenting confidence.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Four things I can do to help my kids build their respect for and value of me.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

# Counter-Parenting



Being in the middle of a battleground is never easy, and it is tempting to be in denial. But it's impossible to win a war we refuse to acknowledge that we're in the middle of.

Accepting the three things, building a PACT, and putting on her armour may not solve everything for Maz, but will enable her to own her life. And when she's sitting in the safe place she has built with her children, breathing deeply and enjoying peaceful moments, Maz will know she's given herself and her children the best possible chance of a good life.

*"Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are and Courage to see they do not remain the way they are."*

Use this space to reflect on anything else that the Counter-Parenting video (or this resource pack) has raised for you.





This resource pack was made possible thanks to players of People's Postcode Lottery. We are very grateful to them!

Own My Life is delivered by:  
The Women's Liberation Collective

Registered Charity no.1184411

WEBSITE: [www.ownmylifecourse.org](http://www.ownmylifecourse.org)

EMAIL: [info@ownmylifecourse.org](mailto:info@ownmylifecourse.org)

PHONE: 07818 328391