

**Celebration of the Relocation of the
Family Relationship Centre Darwin, 3 April 2009
SPEECH by His Honour Mr Tom Pauling AO QC
Administrator of the Northern Territory**

The Honourable Malarndirri McCarthy, Minister for Children and Families,
Marie Morrison, CEO of Relationships Australia NT, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for inviting me here today. It is most rewarding to see such a welcoming referral hub for the Family Relationship Centre here in the centre of Darwin.

In Latin, the word *familia* means household, a group living in fellowship with each other. But the Encyclopaedia Britannica explains that “family” is a group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood, or adoption, constituting a single household and interacting with each other in their respective social positions, usually those of spouses, parents, children, and siblings – a family. It goes on to state that the essence of the family group is the parent-child relationship.

This is often where difficulties lie - when the glowing feeling of first planning for a family, welcoming children into the world and growing up together dissipates and relationships begin to go off the rails. The statistic from the United States that more than 40% of custodial parents are either separated or divorced is reinforced by the Australian Institute of Family Studies which notes that currently some 40% of the marriages in our own country can be expected to end in divorce.

Of course the word divorce does not simply mean a certain date when the certificate, the *decree absolute*, turns up in the post. Rather, it is an often prolonged period of discord that affects the nucleus of the family. Though there are often cases when those further removed have absolutely no idea that a marriage is collapsing as the family seems perfectly alright to the outsider’s eye and no more dysfunctional than most.

Sometimes that is the most important lesson to share with children caught up in family dispute: relationships can result in conflict in even the most harmonious homes. It is not a sign of failing, but of normal human frailty.

Disaffection between parents should not be a reason for guilt to be carried by a child, although this is often the sad consequence.

Children are extremely sensitive barometers of conflict between parents. And over a period of time this can cause the young person their own set of disorders. The games sometimes played between warring parents can be downright cruel as offspring are pressured to support one or the other. Instead help needs to be sought to restore harmony, change discord into understanding and to emphasise stability and steadfast love.

This Family Relationship Centre has a mandate to assist people at all times in their relationships. Careful counselling can help translate negatives into positives, sadness to reassurance and aid the re-establishment of healthy self esteem.

I therefore thank all the staff for their efforts for the families of the Northern Territory and I wish you well in your new premises.