



2 Practical Strategies for Communicating with the Other Parent

The source of most post-separation parental conflict is ineffective communication. Sometimes it can be very difficult to simply talk to your former partner, especially if you are experiencing strong emotions about the separation. Nevertheless, you need to be able to carry on the job of parenting without letting these feelings get in the way.

Effective Communication

Here are some tips to think about before talking to the other parent

1. Get prepared by reminding yourself:

- I will stay calm and take deep breaths
- I will focus on solving a problem or reaching a solution
- I will deal with one issue at a time
- I will keep the conversation short and to the point
- If the other parent gets angry, I will stay calm
- If I feel that I cannot control my emotions, I will end the conversation politely
- I will be kind and forgiving

2. State the problems clearly

- Think through what you want to say, make sure you have all the facts, and state your concern.
- Describe what is happening concentrating on the issue, not the person
- Don't bring up things that happened in the past; focus on the present and future

3. Use “active listening”

- Listen carefully to what the other parent is saying. The goal is to have a clear understanding of what you both want. If you are busy thinking about what you want to say when the other parent is speaking, you are not truly listening.
- Do not interrupt, talk over, or make comments while the other person is speaking.

- Ask open-ended questions to get a good understanding of what this issue or concern means to the other parent, and listen to their responses. (“How do you think we can work this out?”, “Can you tell me more about...?”)
- Check to make sure you understand what the other parent is saying. Calmly repeat what you think you heard. For example, “It sounds like you feel frustrated with the way this has been going.” Ask if you got it right.



4. Avoid negative comments

- Name calling (“You are such a dumb ass!”)
- Bringing up the past (“This is just like last time!”)
- Questioning the other parent’s motives (“What’s in it for you?”)
- Drawing conclusions (“You just don’t care!”)
- Blaming (“It’s all your fault!”)
- Undermining (“You don’t know what you are talking about!”)
- Making unfair comparisons (“You’re just like your mother!”)
- Words “never” and “always” (“You never listen!”)
- Words or phrases that imply that the other parent is always wrong or not trying

Remember that your negative comments or statements are bound to provoke negative reaction, and are likely to escalate the conflict.

5. Use positive language

- Use “I” statements wherever possible to state your feelings about the situation, and to avoid criticizing
- Re-phrase your messages so they don’t sound negative

An example:

Jason comes home from a long weekend with one of his parents and has done no homework.

You could say:

“I feel concerned that Jason did not get his homework done over the long weekend. Can we discuss some ways to help him do his homework?”

Rather than:

“I knew Jason would never get his homework done if he spent the long weekend with you! You never learned how to get things done on time; no wonder he’s picking up your bad habits.”

6. Be willing to compromise

- Give a little to get a little. Show appreciation for the other parent's efforts. Everyone likes a little recognition for what they've done.
- Back off if it seems that the other person doesn't want to come to an agreement. Don't keep talking – you will just get angry and the other person will get more stuck in their position. Just wait for a better time.
- If you are attacked verbally, say "I won't accept that. I need to be respected in this conversation and if you can't do that we should continue this conversation later."

Different Methods of Communication

Different methods of communication have their own pros and cons. Choose the most appropriate method based on your situation.

In person

- Be aware of the messages your body language is giving to the other parent. Make sure your gestures and facial expressions are consistent with your words.
- Seeing your former partner face-to-face can trigger strong emotions that are hard to control.
- If you feel unsafe in the presence of your former partner, it is best not to talk in person.

On the phone

- Be aware of the tone of your voice.
- It is easier to react to voice tone and hang-up when it appears that the other parent doesn't agree with you, or fails to hear you.
- Use the non-violent hang-ups. Tell the other parent courteously, "I'm going to hang up now. I'll talk to you later".

Email, text messaging, fax or mail

In situations where there is a lot of strong feelings and conflict, you may find it less stressful to communicate by email, text messaging, fax or letter. You may feel emotionally fragile and need more time before being able to meet face-to-face.

- Take time gathering your thoughts and expressing them in a non-hostile, positive and respectful way; don't send anything on an impulse!
- Remember that letters/messages are less personal, and in the case of emails and text messages on the cell phone – instant. A parent may respond with something they'll regret after, such as offensive and abusive things.

- Don't fall in the same trap – don't fire back a response right away! Think it over first.



Abusive Messages

If you receive abusive messages from your former partner, consider the following:

1. Do I need to respond?

Most of the time it is better not to respond to an abusive email/letter/message. But if it is about something that involves the children, you do need to answer.

2. If you need to respond, wait a while

Calm yourself down before responding. Take a break, go for walk. You may want to set yourself a rule: no responses to angry messages before 6 or 12 hours have passed.

3. Be brief, factual and non-hostile

- The more you say the more likely the other parent will find something to disagree with.
- Focus on “just the facts”. Do not respond with an item-by-item defence against a personal attack. It just escalated the conflict and keeps it going.
- If you respond with hostility it will simply make matters worse. Avoid personal attacks, digs, sarcasm, and threats. Do not use all capital letters in your emails – IT LOOKS LIKE YOU ARE SHOUTING!

Communicating When There is a High Level of Conflict

The process of moving into a “business-like relationship” when you have contact with the other parent is part of the normal changes that occur once you separate. But with intense conflict this may not work. Any contact with the other parent can be a major source of stress – your anxiety level rises, and you prepare yourself for a negative reaction from the other person. You might be afraid to “lose it” and that things will get worse.

Here are some practical suggestions for how to communicate successfully with the other parent when there is a high level of conflict:

1. Choose the appropriate method of communication; many parents find non face-to-face way to work the best (for example, email).

2. Use your communication skills! Good communication skills do not necessarily reduce the level of conflict, but they can help you to manage it.
3. Set boundaries and stick to them. Setting boundaries or limits is like drawing a line in the sand and then holding to it. Separation requires that parents set new boundaries with each other. During the relationship when there was physical and emotional intimacy, there were few boundaries. In a separation with conflict there may need to be very clear boundaries about the contact between you and your former partner.

Here are some examples of boundaries after separation:

- No phone calls at work
- No dropping by the house
- No sending messages through the children – ever
- No canceling access except in the cases of emergency (for example, illness)
- No discussion of each other's personal lives

Two major ways to set boundaries are: limiting contact and focusing on your children and nothing else.

You need to be gentle but firm in setting your boundaries. You may need help from a counsellor or a lawyer.

Both you and the other parent need to be clear about the boundaries established on each side. Use your communication skills to work out what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, and seek help from a third person if you cannot reach an agreement.

Once boundaries have been set it can be very challenging to live by them, but it is important to stick to them.

