



NEXT TIME

A self help guide to better communication for co-parents (parents who have separated)



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This booklet is designed to help you help yourself at the times when arguing and poor communication are overwhelming your co-parenting relationship.

Disagreeing and arguments are normal, co-parenting relationships often suffer from poor communication. You will always have things you disagree on, there will always be a next time and this booklet will help you to navigate the next time better.

Healthy communication is healthy not because there are no arguments, but because you have worked out how to see each other's point of view, show respect for it and own the impact of your behaviour on the other person.

If you want to learn how to make sure things go better next time you clash, there are some simple steps you can take to improve the way you communicate.

The co-parenting relationship can be a challenging one, so much water under the bridge, a mixture of emotions influencing how you behave towards one another. It can be hard to focus on the needs of your children and easier to end up being critical of each other's choices, decisions and behaviours.

But focussing on the impact that the quality of your relationship has on your children, not to mention your own wellbeing is extremely important. Both yourself and the other parent are likely to want what's best for your child. You just might disagree on what 'best' is and how to achieve it. It can be incredibly hard to remember that the children are witnessing the bad tempered conversations and how that makes your child feel, when you are swamped by your own emotions. But trying to focus on how your child might be feeling can be a helpful distraction away from you and instead on to how you can behave in a way that will cause your child less distress.

Reminding each other to focus on your child's experience in a respectful way can help to defuse tense conversations.



"This isn't the right time to talk about this in front of the children BUT we do need to discuss it. When is a good time for you?"

A key thing to remember if you can is that your co-parenting relationship is not a competition, it's not about scoring points. However, it's easy to get drawn into wanting to have the last word/the upper hand/the feeling of being right.



Ask yourself

"Is what I'm about to say going to throw water on this fire or petrol?"

To pull this off requires some maturity. To not get drawn into who is the best parent requires some grown up behaviour! But your child's wellbeing is worth the effort, right?

Before you say what is on the tip of your tongue, you might find it helpful to do this, check with yourself.

If petrol, try to think about a different way of saying what's on your mind, or if the fire of the argument is really burning, suggest stopping the conversation and talking about things again when you both feel more calm.

With all this in mind, that there is always room to improve how you communicate with each other, use the guidance in this booklet to help you progress to more peaceful exchanges between you.

Let's start with looking at some common disagreements that separated parents have. Typical ways you might talk to one another.



We are going to focus on:

What goes wrong

How might you do it differently next time

For each scenario there are some specific ideas but there are some which apply to most situations.

Point of View

We tend to just see things from our own point of view and it is hard to think about how it feels for the other parent. It is tempting not to care but by not caring you are not putting your children's needs first.

Situation:



What might help:

Thinking how you might feel if you were the other parent

Try to present your ideas in a non-critical way

Try to recognise how you are coming across,
if it's bossy, the other parent may then react like a sulky child

Try to start what do you want to say with 'I' rather than 'You',
this avoids sounding like you are blaming them

Try to focus on the outcome you would like from the conversation
rather than who is winning it!

Notes

Anger

Being angry when you are really stressed and upset

Anger is a very obvious feeling that someone might be having, but most of the time behind the obvious feelings are not so obvious ones like - embarrassment, guilt, hurt etc.

Anger is like a firework, it can be very dramatic for a short period of time, almost out of control fuelled by the emotions you are feeling, but eventually the show is over and things calm down.

But what lit the firework in the first place, what was it that set you off?

Situation:

They could have said instead "I know the children need a lot but it's a hard time to keep hassling me about money when I might lose my job, I am doing my best."

It can be easy to react too quickly to an accusation instead of stopping and to check things out. Ask yourself what might be going on that you don't know about?



**One parent shouts
at the other parent**
*"You are always chasing
me for more money
it never stops!"*

The other parent responds
*"Don't you care about your
own children, you don't
understand how expensive
all their stuff is now"*



Behind the angry comment what's actually going on is the parent is worried about their job and has debts but does not want their ex to know that.

What might help:

Owning your own feelings

Being honest

They could have said instead "I know the children need a lot but it's a hard time to keep hassling me about money when I might lose my job, I am doing my best."

It can be easy to react too quickly to an accusation instead of stopping and to check things out.

Ask yourself what might be going on that you don't know about?

One parent had a go at the other and then the second immediately answers back to defend themselves. This kind of conversation never ends in a solution.

When this happens both parents get drawn into carrying on until one feels like they have won.

When this happens nothing gets sorted out, it just creates more bad feeling. So try to focus on a solution rather than a win.



Accusations

It's very common for separated parents to be quick to accuse each other...

You always / You never

It can make you feel a little bit validated about splitting up.

That's why I left you because you always / never.....

Accusations are fireworks. They get you absolutely nowhere!

Situation:



One parent
*"You are always
changing arrangements and
messing me about"*

Other parent
*"You never take any notice
of what I want"*



What might help:

Stopping to think about something has to change - this time might be a real family emergency rather than assuming the worst

Listening to the answer (anger blocks listening)

Giving an explanation for the change rather than just reacting defensively

Assumptions lead to misunderstandings. Avoid assuming you know what has gone on and ask and then be willing to be open to the answer you get

Notes



Trying to avoid blame

No one likes to be criticised when it happens you probably tend to either defend yourself or switch off. Neither response gets you anywhere.

Blame and criticism usually start sentences with

“ You have done...”

“ You are always ”

“ You never ”

Try to remember that your children are watching you blame and criticise one another. You don't want them to adopt this habit too.

Situation:



One parent

“This happened because you just want your own way, you're so selfish”

Other parent

“You are just as bad as you are never interested in what I want to do with the children”

(argue - answering back)

“I am not listening to you it's a waste of time as you always just have a go at me”

(opting out / walking away)





What might help:

Think about your usual response to stress, do you walk away or do you argue? Either way you're thinking brain switched off and you are just reacting and not in a good way - Blame and criticism

Try to own your own feelings and start sentences with 'we' for example; "what can we do to sort this out so we don't keep arguing"

Think how horrible it feels to be on the receiving end of criticism, your co-parent will feel the exact same way about it. Try to avoid at all costs!

Some more specific scenarios

Scenario - New partners being involved with the children

What tends to go wrong:

One parent moves on quickly and feels rejected / left behind

Children can be introduced to the new partner too soon without thinking how they might feel

One parent finds out about the new partner from the children and is angry / upset / disrespected

Each blame the other...
"It's all about what you want getting a new partner so soon"
"You just want to stop me being happy - moving on"

What might help:

Accepting you will feel very differently - one is moving on, the other is still coping with the end of the relationship

Owning your own feelings - acknowledge how you are feeling and that your feelings are legitimate but they don't justify poor behaviour

Slowing down and focusing on how the children might be feeling
"What can we sort out so the children are okay with your new partner"

Other things that might cause disagreement and arguments:

- One parent being late bringing back children
- Money
- Families interfering
- Not planning ahead for special festivals Christmas, Eid etc and assuming they will have the children
- Child complaining to one parent about the other and that parent over reacting
- Not listening to each other's ideas re: childcare and competing with each other
- Shouting and trying to sort out problems at handover when children listening



Situations like these often cause problems because they create an atmosphere of disrespect, mis-trust, frustration and misunderstanding.

All these things are obviously bad for the co-parenting relationship AND unhelpful for a child to witness/be involved in.

When these feelings erupt there are some things you can do that might help to calm things down.

- Take a deep breath before you react (more effective than you might think)
- Say what you want to say using 'I' not 'You'.
- Be clear about what you want to communicate, steering clear of blaming.
- Listen to the other persons view/opinion, even if you don't agree with what they are saying.
- Focus on communicating what you would like to be different

Of course, things don't always go to plan, sometimes you fall out, you don't manage to talk to each other with enough control, you bruise the relationship with your co-parent.



When this happens, there are things you can do to try to repair the damage.



Try to do some of the following:

Express remorse if you have hurt the other person
(even if they have neglected to do so in the past!)

Acknowledge the hurt / harm caused by what you said / did

Take responsibility for what you are responsible for

Offer an explanation ... not an excuse

Show a commitment to change, try to do things differently next time

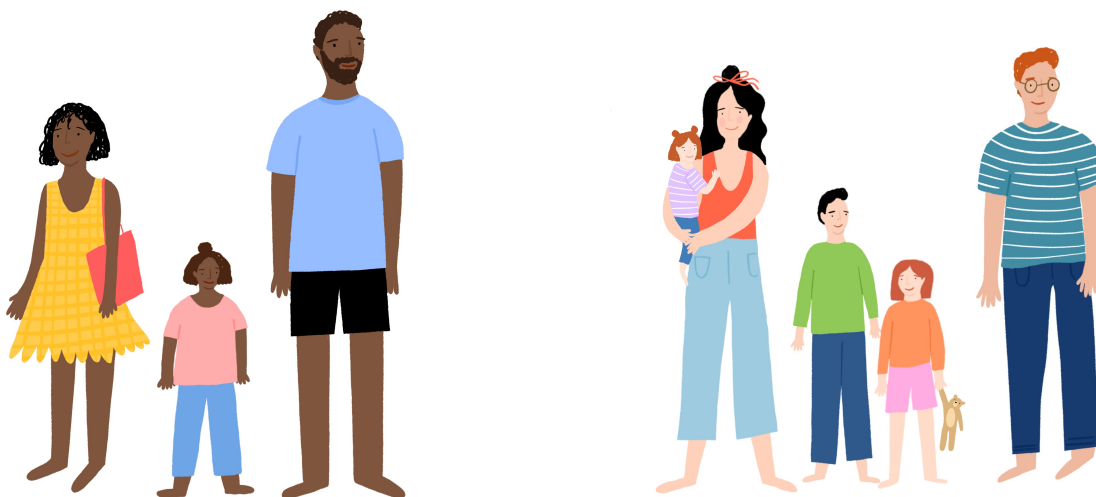
Request forgiveness if that feels important to you
i.e. you want to take back something unkind / untrue

You might not be able to do all of these but even if you only do some of them you are helping to repair the damage done. This is worth doing if you can, repair is always better than ruin. It is possible to co-parent in a co-operative way, but it's not easy, it takes maturity and dedication to put the needs of your children first.

Sometimes you will need to bite your lip, take a deep breath, not say what you want to say but say what is best to say.

Everyone wins this way, your children especially gain from more positive communication between you both. But so do you, your wellbeing and mental health are greatly affected by the quality of the relationships that surround you, so it is worth taking on board the messages from this book and trying to implement them where you can.

We hope you found this little guide helpful. Being a co-parent is not always straight forward and it can take time for things to settle down after separation. The thing to remember is that children always do better when their parents get along and are respectful towards to each other. They need you both.





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