

Better Co-Parenting through Communication:

Tools and Skills

Your co-parent may be the last person with whom you want to have a polite conversation. However, when it comes to the well-being of your child, successfully exchanging information between the co-parents is vital. Communication is enhanced when certain best practices are followed, and there are many tools available to assist co-parents. Perhaps the best way to illustrate that value of good communication is to show what could happen when communication fails.

When Co-Parents Don't or Won't Communicate

In this scenario, Ron and Linda are the co-parents of a young girl named Sarah. Ron and Linda have Sarah's best interests at heart, but because they don't communicate well with each other, they nearly put their child's health at risk:

Sarah is five years old and will be starting kindergarten when the school year gets underway in August. Ron and Linda have joint custody of Sarah, with a schedule that provides for alternate weeks with each co-parent. The school requires that Sarah's immunizations be up-to-date before the first day of school.

Near the end of July, Linda uses a day from her assigned parenting week to take Sarah to her pediatrician for the immunization. However, Linda does not consult with Ron ahead of the appointment, nor does she inform him of her action afterward. The doctor administers Sarah's immunization and sends the required notice directly to the school.

The following week, Ron's assigned time with Sarah, and is near the start of the school year. He takes Sarah to a different pediatrician, one with an office closer to his home and some distance from Linda's. Before making the appointment, he does not ask Linda if she's taken any steps to fulfill the school's requirement, and he doesn't inform her afterward. The second pediatrician administers the immunization and sends a notice to the school.

Neither of the parents, and neither of the doctors are aware of this duplication of the immunization dosage. It is only when the school nurse compares the two records for Sarah that anyone realizes the girl has received the vaccinations twice. Fortunately, Sarah managed to avoid developing complications from the overdose, but for a young child to receive a full immunization panel twice within such a short time could put their health at risk.

What happened? Both Ron and Linda wanted only to fulfill the school's requirement and do what was best for Sarah. Yet by failing to communicate with each other, they incurred needless expense, duplication of effort, and the real possibility of harming their child.

In this case, the entire situation could have been avoided had the two co-parents simply been willing to talk to each other. However, other communication failures can happen when the co-parents aren't clear about what they're communicating, or if they speak in angry, hurtful ways. These types of communication failures can also be damaging to the child. Following the guidelines for "best practice" communication in co-parenting will help you avoid the bad consequences of communication failure.

Best Practices for Co-Parenting Communication

Sharing information appropriately with a co-parent is always a good practice. Following these tips and guidelines will help you improve your co-parenting communication skills.

The #1 Best Practice: Accurate, Complete, Timely

Co-parents should regularly provide appropriate parenting information to each other. The shared information should always be complete, accurate, and timely.

What happens when the Court restricts contact between the co-parents? Even if this is the case, you will still need to exchange information about your child or children. This must be done in a way that is consistent with the Court's orders.

The #2 Best Practice: the Golden Rule

Co-parents may have different ideas about which parent has the right to certain types of information. When in doubt, follow the "Golden Rule" of co-parenting communication: Always share information with the co-parent that you would expect that parent to give to you.

For another way to view the golden rule, think of R-E-S-P-E-C-T! Always speak or write respectfully when communicating with your co-parent. Imagine that another person was following the conversation, such as your boss, your minister, or your grandmother. Doing this will help you avoid the pitfalls of name-calling and disrespectful or abusive language.

The #3 Best Practice: Keep Your Focus

★ Keep your communication brief and on-point, always staying focused on the best interest of your child.

★ Concentrate on discussing current and future events. Avoid bringing up the past.

★Avoid mixing in other issues when sharing parenting information. For example, do not bring up financial issues. Financial and other matters should always be discussed separately from parenting exchanges.

★Avoid overreacting or reaching conclusions before all the facts are known.

★ Use a positive and grown-up tone in your co-parenting communications. Remember, your primary goal is to share parenting information for the benefit of the child.

Communication Tools for Co-parenting

Email

Properly used, email can be one of the most effective tools for communicating with your co-parent. It is especially useful because it lets you construct a history and permanent record of your communications. If your parenting plan includes email for this purpose, the plan may specify how often and when to use email, including a deadline for response time or acknowledgment of receipt. The plan might also include requirements for storage of exchanged emails, whether by electronic filing, printing and filing emails in a notebook, or both.

Text Messages

Sending text messages is useful for providing you co-parent with quick updates, such as a change in meeting time. However, disagreements are difficult to resolve with texting, and it may be more difficult to create a permanent record than with email. Due to technical issues such as a weak phone battery, text messages might not be delivered instantly. If the child and a co-parent persist in exchanging text messages during the other co-parent's custodial time, it can instill resentment in the custodial parent, who could legitimately view the exchanges as intrusions into that parent's time with the child.

Telephone Calls

Telephone contacts can be another helpful tool, but only for those co-parents who can communicate directly without starting up conflicts. Often, however, conflict can be reduced by setting time limits and other boundaries. For example, one co-parent might specify that calls will only be received between 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. on weekday evenings. Other boundaries might limit the calls to one per day, for no longer than ten minutes. If your parenting plan includes such limits on telephone contact, being respectful and observing the boundaries may help re-establish trust between the co-parents.

The Basics of Email Communication

Do's and Don'ts for Composing Email

Emails should be brief and to the point. In most cases, you should stay with one topic or issue per email, but if you have more than one issue, number them separately. The co-parent can refer to each issue by number when responding. Emails should be limited to one or two per day, unless you are writing during an emergency situation that may require more frequent updates. The wording of the email should follow these points:

- DO discuss only current, ongoing, or future events.
- DON'T bring up past events or make judgments about things that have already happened. Avoid blaming the co-parent about past situations.
- DO give your co-parent reasonable requests, due dates, and deadlines.
- DON'T issue demands or make sarcastic, mean, or rude comments about your co-parent.
- DO use polite and courteous phrases, including "please" and "thank you."
- DON'T try to make your point by writing in capital letters. The effect is one of angry shouting, rather than reasonable emphasis.
- DO strive to keep the tone of the email cooperative and courteous. Keep the focus on providing the best interests of your child.

Sending and Receiving Email

To avoid confusion, use just one email address for sending and receiving co-parenting communication. Give this address to your co-parent. Make sure you can access this address easily and that you check it frequently.

Before sending your co-parent an email on a new topic, be sure to fill in the subject line. It's best to use brief but specific subjects, such as "Billy's doctor appointment" or "Jennifer's band practice." Be consistent and use the same subject line for follow-up communication on the topic. However, if the topic changes, you can change the subject line accordingly.

When you receive an email from your co-parent, look for any requests or requirements that call for a reply. In most cases, it's best to reply in 24 hours or less. Sometimes all that's needed is a simple "received and noted" statement to acknowledge that you have in fact received and read the original message. These constraints might also be covered in your co-parenting plan, but even if they're not, a prompt reply is always courteous.

Email and Stepparents

Unless your co-parent agrees and give specific permission, stepparents, spouses, and significant others should not take part in email communication on co-parenting issues:

- Do not use a stepparent's email address as the email contact you give to your co-parent.
- Stepparents should not email you or your co-parent using your preferred email contact address.
- Do not put a stepparent's name in the CC field of any co-parenting communication.

Summary of Email Best Practices

- Emails should be written so they are brief and focused on a specific topic. Include a short description of the topic in the subject line.
- Discuss only current or future activities; avoid bringing up past events.
- Focus on providing for the best interests of the child or children.
- Unless there is an ongoing or developing emergency situation, limit emails to no more than one or two per day, for each parent.
- Reply to an email within 24 hours of the time it was sent.
- Exchange emails only with your co-parent. Avoid involving stepparents or others in your co-parenting communication.

Other Helpful Tools for Co-Parents

The Child News Report

Similar to a diary, this report is a useful way to make a permanent record of daily or weekly events and observations about your child, as they occur. However, instead of a diary recorded by one person, both co-parents will contribute to the weekly or daily record.

The Child News format is simply a handwritten record that is contained in a notebook, which travels with the child as they transit from one parent's home to the other. For this purpose, a bound notebook, such as an inexpensive composition book, is ideal.

Keep in mind, however, that there may be some problems with using the notebook: It could become lost, altered, or damaged. An older child might read it and become upset at what her parents are saying about her. Due to the longer time span between records in the notebook, it may not provide timely information for fast-moving issues — although it can provide a useful record of how the issue was resolved, and its after effects.

How to Use The Child News Report Tool

You will write at least one dated entry for every time your child stays with you as custodial parent. Near the end of the child's visit, write down basic information about your time together. If the child's stay was more than one week long, you may want to break the entry into two or more sections. Be sure your writing is timely enough that the events described are fresh in your mind.

The events and information you describe in your entries will vary with the child's age, but in general should typically include:

- medical care — doctor's visits; injuries and serious illness, and how these issues were resolved.
- diet — what the child ate, and any issues or allergic reactions as a result.
- school events and any educational issues
- planned or upcoming appointments, including the need to make new appointments such as a doctor's visit for required immunizations
- any issues arising during your time with the child that require further discussion between the co-parents.

Be sure to send the notebook with your child at the end of your custodial time. Your co-parent should receive the notebook and, as soon as reasonably possible thereafter, should read your latest entry describing the time period just concluded. At this time, the co-parent receiving the notebook should initial and date the entry to verify that they have read and understood it. Finally, at the conclusion of their time with the child, your co-parent should make a similar entry and return the notebook to you during the child's exchange.

The 12-Month Calendar

Often co-parenting problems derive from scheduling conflicts, or simply from not being aware of major events that determine the child's, and therefore the parents' time schedule. Making and keeping a 12-month calendar with events noted in advance can greatly help in reducing these conflicts.

One co-parent should take the lead in setting up the calendar, and should be sure to include all essential information from the parenting plan:

- Week-to-week schedule of parenting time for both co-parents
- Parenting schedule for holidays
- School year start and end dates, and school breaks
- Vacation plans for each co-parent
- Any other major events identified in the parenting plan

With one parent responsible for collecting and scheduling the above information, the parents should establish deadlines for finalizing the draft calendar. There should be one deadline for the lead parent to send the draft of the calendar to the co-parent for review. There should be another deadline for the reviewing parent to return the draft with notes and comments. Then, follow these steps to compile the calendar:

1. The reviewing parent receives the calendar from the compiling parent and makes notes on any potential conflicts indicated by the information posted in the calendar. The reviewing parent then returns the calendar and notes to the compiling parent.
2. The compiling parent adjusts the calendar events as much as possible to resolve the conflicts. If events can't be adjusted, the problem dates can be flagged so the conflict shows up on the calendar, allowing for more time to resolve the issue.
3. When both co-parents are satisfied with the calendar, they should sign and date it to indicate their approval. Each co-parent should have a copy of the calendar to reference throughout the year.
4. The co-parents should check the calendar frequently during the year. Doing so will help identify possible conflicts and scheduling difficulties so changes can be made in advance to the parenting schedule.

Internet Resources

Free online apps and tools are available to help co-parents with their communication needs. For example, the tasks of compiling, sharing, and revising calendars can be greatly eased with the Google calendar app.

Other web-based services provide calendars and additional tools that are specific to co-parenting needs. These sites include:

www.familywizard.com/ofw

www.jointparents.com

www.sharekids.com

www.parentingtime.net

Note, however, that these sites may require a subscription fee in order to use them. The fee may need to be paid on a monthly or yearly basis.

Communicating About Medical Care

In the areas of physical, behavioral, and mental health, providing for your child's best interests requires cooperation and good communication between the co-parents. When communication breaks down, appointments can be missed, needed treatments could be duplicated or dropped entirely, and other mishaps might occur. These mixups could endanger your child, or put her health at risk.

Medical Clearinghouse and Care Continuity

Continuing with the services of your current medical providers is generally considered to serve the child's best interests. Changes in circumstances, however, may necessitate changing providers. This could happen due to a move, for example, or to a change in medical insurance. In some cases, a change in providers could take place if both co-parents agree that the new provider is needed to better serve the needs of the child.

Whether you change providers or not, continuity of care is greatly facilitated by having a primary care provider for your child. Typically this would be your child's pediatrician or your family physician. For example, if your child is referred to a specialist, it's important that the specialist's findings be reported back to your primary provider.

If this flow of information is interrupted and the primary provider does not receive the specialist's reports, the medical clearinghouse no longer functions as it should. Situations leading to this breakdown can be as mundane as paperwork "lost in the shuffle" at a busy specialist's office. Frequently, it can also occur when your child goes to an emergency room or urgent care unit, or when the co-parents live at a distance from each other and each has their own primary provider. To prevent this from happening, the co-parent who ordered and scheduled the care must take the lead in requesting that appropriate reports be sent to the primary provider. It may also be advisable to check with the primary provider to be sure that they did, in fact, receive the report.

When Co-Parents Attend the Child's Medical Appointments

Both co-parents, understandably, may want to attend their child's appointment at the same time. This is acceptable only if you and your co-parent are able to be together in a public space without engendering or expressing conflict. Parental conflict during a visit is disruptive to the healthcare practice, the other patients present, and can be upsetting to the child. If such a conflict occurs, the healthcare office might place restrictions on the co-parents' presence; in extreme cases, they might even decline to provide your child with services in the future. This clearly does not serve your child's best interests. To prevent this from happening, it's usually best for the co-parents to make appointments separately with the health provider.

Sharing Information about Medical Treatments

It is vital that both co-parents have timely access to the provider's medical information and instructions for care. The co-parents who requests and receives this information should, as soon as possible, provide at least the following material to the other co-parent:

- Diagnosis, including symptoms and warnings
- Treatment plan
- Prescribed medications, with instructions for each, and any potential side effects

- Future appointments and follow-up care

Obtaining Second Opinions

A second opinion regarding your child's diagnosis or treatment plan should be sought only if both co-parents can be involved in the process. Without the cooperation of both parents, the provider of the second opinion may not be able to make appropriate recommendations for your child's care. Unless a second opinion is restricted by court order, the co-parents should follow these steps:

- The co-parent who seeks the second opinion must notify the other parent. Once this is done, the co-parent seeking the second opinion can choose a healthcare specialist or provider to provide the service. This is done at the seeking co-parent's expense and insurance coverage, if applicable.
- The co-parent seeking the second opinion may make the appropriate appointments for the child. The other co-parent must be able to either attend the appointments, or consult individually with the second-opinion provider.
- All medical records relating to the child's healthcare issue must be transmitted to the second-opinion provider.
- Before performing any invasive procedure upon the child, the second-opinion provider should discuss the options with both co-parents.
- The second-opinion provider should consult, as appropriate, with the primary provider and the diagnosing physician.
- Results of the second-opinion consultation should be put into written form, delivered to both co-parents, and transmitted to both the primary provider and the diagnosing physician.

Emergency Medical Situations

When the child experiences a medical crisis or emergency situation, both co-parents must be promptly provided with full information, generally within two hours. The co-parent who is in contact with the emergency care providers must give the following information to the other co-parent:

- The nature of the emergency, and the child's current condition as known.
- Full contact information (name, address, telephone or switchboard number) of the facility where the child is being treated. Also, the location where the child is being treated within the facility.
- Name of the emergency treatment professional who is providing the child's care.

Dealing with Medical Insurance

The child's medical insurance is usually carried by one co-parent. However, both co-parents are entitled to and must be able to access the insurance. As a minimum, the co-parent who carries the insurance must give the following information to the other co-parent:

- Identifying information about the insurance provider. Often the provider's name and address are sufficient.
- Child's insurance ID card
- Specific policy and group ID numbers, including the name of the employer that issues the insurance, if applicable.
- Phone numbers and other contact information from the insurance company, for verifying coverage and obtaining authorization.
- Policy provisions and exclusions. The usually can be found in insurance company paperwork that details the coverage. An abbreviated version can usually be found in the company's benefits booklet for parents.

Communication with Schools and about School Conflict

School conflict can arise from such everyday matters as a change in schedule that affects a co-parents planned time with the child. Conflicts can come from deeper issues, however, such as issues with the child's fellow students, an individual teacher, or with the school itself. Good communication for school-related matters requires identifying lines of contact between the school and both co-parents.

School-Parent Contact Lines

The school is required to list names and contact information for both co-parents on the child's official records. This is necessary whether or not other adults are shown as emergency or secondary contacts on the child's other school forms

To develop these lines of communication, each co-parent should directly contact the school to provide and receive the required information. How the co-parent wishes to receive school schedules, events, progress reports, and so on may differ from how the other co-parent's preference. At other times, school-related issues may arise in which the co-parents should notify each other about the matter.

Co-Parents' Rights to Specific School Information

By rights, both co-parents are entitled to the following information about their child's education:

- Name of the school and full contact information, including physical address, phone number, and email address to be used for electronic access,

- Login information, for any part of the child's educational record that is stored online.
- If your child receives such special services as an Individual Service Plan or an Individual Education Plan, both co-parents are entitled to attend all plan-related meetings and to receive complete information about the services.
- Schools may require their students to use an organizer or planner for tracking schedules and assignments. If this is the case for your child, both co-parents should be granted access to the child's planner when the child is under their custodial care.

When Co-parents must share School Information

Occasionally one co-parent receives school information that may affect the other parent's planned time with their child. For example, this information could involve important deadlines or assignments, or about school events and activities that would occur during the other parent's planned custodial time. The co-parent who gets this information from the school must relay it to the other co-parent in a prompt and timely manner.