# Parental Communication

## How to talk with one another

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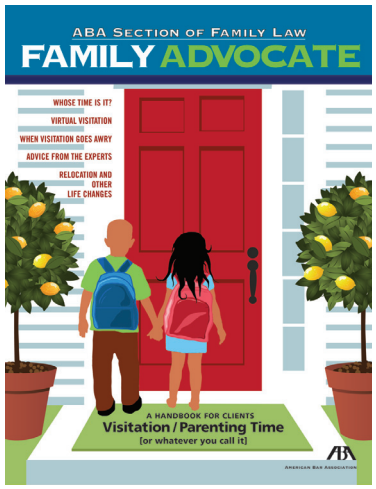


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Raising children is one of the most difficult and important challenges of adulthood. Children are best served when two parents communicate effectively, regardless of their marital status. Even in intact families, communication is difficult because parents have been raised in different family cultures. When you add divorce to the mix, tenuous communication between parents can further break down. Parenting from two different households after divorce is even more challenging, in the best of circumstances, and requires the best possible skills and highly focused attention.

**Children of divorced families need and deserve their parent's best efforts to communicate effectively,** because it often is more difficult to be a child of divorce than a child in a functional intact family. From major decisions about health and education, to more mundane matters, such as where to find soccer shoes, ballet slippers, and homework assignments, children of divorce need their parents to have effective parental communication, strong planning skills, and sound decision-making.

Coparenting communication is often viewed as the exchange of child-related information (e.g., medical, academic, and travel plans) and making some basic decisions about logistics and children's needs (e.g., medical, academic, religious, and extracurricular activities). However, communication is far more complex and can be thought of as based on five skill sets that build on one another. Parents need all of them.

The first rung on the "ladder" of skills is communicating basic information about the children, such as schedules for soccer games, specifics of homework assignments, etc. Communication then progresses to the second skill set—logistical planning (i.e., deciding who will do what, when, and where). Who will register the child for dance class, schedule the dental check-up, and pick up a child after therapy sessions.

The third skill set requires communicating about developmentally appropriate parenting decisions and policies (e.g., toilet training, bedtime routines, homework expectations, curfews, and, teen driving), which should be consistent in both households. Thus, parents are similar to teachers in different classrooms who have different teaching styles, but the same rules and policies apply to the child regardless of which class he or she is taking.

The fourth skill set is based on the ability to exchange input about the child (e.g., how particular behaviors/habits are best dealt with, what strategies have worked with the child) so that one parent doesn't need to "figure out" something the other parent already knows. This communication can be immensely helpful so that the child does not suffer from each parent's separate learning curve as he or she tries independently to figure out how best to meet the child's needs. The fifth and last skill set relates to parents being able to discuss the child's overarching needs and challenges (e.g., how to address a child's self-esteem issues, concerns about a child's being

bullied, how to protect a child from Internet predators, etc.).

Viewing parenting communication as a series of skills makes it easier to recognize which rungs on the "ladder" need to be addressed first (starting at the bottom). For example, before parents can coordinate an "intervention" for a child who has behavioral issues at school, they need to coordinate who will pick up the children from activities. If parents cannot handle that basic step, they are unlikely to be successful at more complex communication.

We have found the following approaches helpful in building coparenting communication skills, even among high-conflict parents.

Divorcing and postdivorced parents exhibit a wide range of conflict levels, roughly described in terms of low, moderate, and high. In general, the level of conflict in any coparenting arrangement will dictate the best means of training parents to communicate. The general rule is that the higher the level of conflict, the more structure is needed in parental communication.

## Reframing the postdivorce relationship

It is crucial to understand that the many roles you shared during your marriage (spouses, life partners, lovers, friends, and parents) are now defined by the one critical role you continue to share. Parents continue to have the monumental job of raising children in two different homes. Each of you is important to the other in the task of parenting your beloved children. Your relationship needs to focus on the present and future, not the past. Your children need, require, and deserve a functional team of coparents, rather than the chaos of warring ex-spouses. By concentrating on what unites you, rather than what divides you, you can begin to set the intention and motivation to develop functional parental communication.

Using the metaphor of "a business partnership," in which the business product is the successful raising of your children to adulthood, helps parents conceptualize and protect the parenting role and acknowledge the value of bringing their best selves to the task. Seeing each other as highly valued partners in the business of raising your children allows you to develop a framework for organizing your parental relationship and communications. It also can help limit highly emotional communication that can distress children and easily escalate into conflict. It's important to understand that you each have a stake in the healthiest connection between your children and the other parent and a role in protecting that relationship. This can be a novel concept that enables you both to recognize conflict addiction and avoid going down that slippery slope.

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## Differing views on parenting

One comes to parenting with a set of experiences and philosophies based on many complex factors (e.g., one's upbringing, values, habits, and experiences). Some parents may value being more focused or goal-directed, whereas others may value a child's free expression to experience the world in different ways, perhaps being a more permissive parent. Different parenting styles can actually lead to the child's having a richer range of skills. It is similar to a child having teachers or coaches with differing styles. Children can benefit from the different emphasis of each mentor, particularly if they respect one another's style and see it as valuable.

In joint custody, parents are in essence the "board of directors" for the family. They often are required to make joint decisions about important parenting matters. Yet, unlike most boards, they do not have an odd number of members so that one can cast a tie-breaking vote. Parents often get locked into debates over what is in the best interests of their children. This can unfortunately take the form of major prolonged arguments about two reasonable options, either one of which may be "in the best

interests" of the children, even if there is not agreement about which is ultimately best. When this happens in a healthy parenting relationship, parents make a decision on a particular option, rather than getting stuck in a control battle. They can listen to and respect each other's concerns and still come to a decision, recognizing that the decision that seems "best" at the moment may need to be revisited in the future.

Often the conflict is not really about selecting from two reasonable alternatives (e.g., times for a medical appointment, extracurricular activities, or even different schools), as it may be difficult to truly predict which is best given the subtle differences or nuances among the options. Rather, the conflict and, at times, the debacle occur when parents get stuck in the argument, sometimes leading the child to refuse whatever option is chosen or ultimately decided. When parents are in conflict, there is often a tendency for one or both to reject out of hand any option proposed by the other parent, even when it is reasonable and even knowing that if it were proposed by anyone else it would be accepted. This can cause parents to become paralyzed and hold important decisions hostage.

It is much better to recognize that neither parent knows ultimately what will work best in every circumstance. The goal is to make decisions together and without excessive conflict. This means at times agreeing with the other parent to move things along, especially on something that is not critical. It also means brainstorming options so that both parents' concerns are taken into account. Such brainstorming actually fosters an atmosphere of cooperation and valuing the other parent's perspective. This can lead to alternatives that were not apparent to either parent at the beginning of the discussion.

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## Medical concerns

Children's medical issues can be a flashpoint for parental conflict. Sometimes the issues are not acute, and there is time to work through a process to make a thoughtful joint decision. At other times, the problem is more urgent and a quick decision or plan must be made. At these moments, having previously built a solid foundation for healthy communication really pays off.

The first step for coparents is reaching a joint understanding and definition of the problem. Focusing on the problem, rather than on blaming or criticizing the other parent, is critical. If there is a lack of clarity about a problem, parents can agree on an approach to clarify the problem and provide options for addressing it. Perhaps parents can agree to consult a trusted physician, dentist, pharmacist, or other appropriate specialist.

A joint consultation or conference call can reduce the possibility of each parent hearing something different. It also shows the provider that parents value working together for the child more than being adversaries. A focus on defining the problem and subsequently generating options for resolving it can shift the energy from parental conflict to resolving the issue at hand. Once the options have been laid out—even if a second opinion is required—parents can evaluate them and create a coordinated plan of action that includes each parent's responsibilities. Both parents can then feel like partners in taking care of their child. Stringing together multiple successful problem-solving experiences can go a long way toward increasing cooperation and decreasing conflict.

It can be extremely helpful to anticipate, plan, and structure the "out of the ordinary" events whenever possible, especially when there is high conflict. This "choreography" helps contain the conflict and creates more predictability, thus protecting the children when they are most vulnerable. For example, when divorced parents anticipate a child's surgery or wisdom teeth extraction, planning and then confirming the logistics in advance can help each take an important role in being

there for the child. Reviewing expectations and deciding who will transport the child to the procedure, provide admissions information, stay with the child before and after the procedure (if both can't do it together), and transport the child home are key considerations. If the child is confined during recovery, parents must decide in advance how each can participate in the aftercare and how the parenting schedule will be modified. Carefully mapping out each step and putting it in writing can help ease the most contentious situations.

## Concerns about discipline

Discipline is a particularly difficult issue because parents may have very different approaches and even moral or ethical differences about how best to address a child's inappropriate behavior. Some behaviors clearly are rather trivial (e.g., leaving one's sneakers in the kitchen), while others are more significant (cheating on a test). Each parent should deal independently with trivial issues at home. These consequences are best administered during that parent's parenting time and do not require the other parent's involvement, although notifying the other parent of any infraction and the subsequent discipline can be helpful. This can lessen the tendency of a child to "play" parents one against the other by falsely claiming a behavior is fine in one or the other's home.

Additionally, when a child complains about one parent's parenting, it is important for the other parent not to side with the child, but to support the parent's decision and suggest that the child talk with that parent. You can also ask the other parent what happened, recognizing that the child might not always give the most accurate account. The key here, as in a business environment, is not to undermine the other parent's authority, even if you would have handled the situation differently.

## Parenting policies

Children often benefit from parents' setting consistent policies and directions on issues in both homes. This can relate to things such as bedtimes, study habits, and other behaviors that need addressing. Parents can set policies together and then inform the child, "Mom and Dad decided…" This is a very powerful phrase as it says to the child that you are working together and have made a joint decision.

Parents can agree on a policy and even implement it differently. For example, parents can set a policy that the child cannot play computer games until homework is done. In one residence, this might mean that homework is done immediately after school and that the homework is checked to make sure all questions are answered correctly. The parent in the other residence may allow the child to go out and play before starting homework and only check it to make sure it was done diligently, allowing wrong answers to be corrected by the teacher. In both cases, parents are enforcing the policy, while at the same time applying it in the context of their different parenting styles.

## Coordinating discipline

On serious issues, a child may benefit from a consequence applied jointly by both parents. Before telling the child, parents should consult one another and agree on the consequence. When there is a serious problem, a child can be told, "Mom and Dad need to discuss this and we will let you know what we decide." Then, the parents can decide whether to meet jointly with the child to discuss the incident and who will say what. They also can decide the specifics of the consequence, i.e., what it will entail and for how long. This way the child gets consistent direction with little room to manipulate the parents.

## Educational issues

For many parents, even in intact families, educational decisions can be stressful and difficult to sort out. Children's educational issues and needs can be subtle and difficult to perceive or diagnose. Often, parents have differing views as to whether a child is working hard enough or has some type of learning issue. This can make addressing the child's needs quite complex. One parent may think the child needs to be prodded and disciplined. The other parent may think the child has a learning disability that needs to be evaluated or needs a tutor or even a different school.

Divorced parents can find this particularly vexing, especially when one adds the expense to the mix. Hiring an educational consultant can be of great help. Such a professional is trained to objectively look at the fit between what the child needs and what the school and parents are providing and then communicate pertinent options. This can decrease the tendency for parents to battle over differing opinions and increase their cooperation as they focus on recommendations from an objective third party.

Often parents argue about which school district is best for the child. They pull data about performance on standardized tests and college admissions to justify one school or another. However, in an intact family, the decision to live in one town versus another would not be based solely on the school system. However, in a divorce, this often becomes an issue of contention as parents feel they are in some way abandoning their children if they don't send them to the best available schools. A parent also may anticipate that this will make a difference in child support payments and perhaps have other reasons to engage in a dispute over schools.

It is important though to consider the experience of the child when looking at alternative school systems. For example, is it crucial that the child change schools and leave his or her current social network at the same time he or she is adjusting to the parents' divorce? Alternatively, will the new school provide new opportunities for the child? A child who has had social difficulties at one school may find a more welcoming environment in another. Parents should make this decision based on the needs of the child, rather than on their own views about what they want for the child or what is more convenient. Here again, an educational consultant may be of help.

## Religion

Religious traditions, practices, and rituals have tremendous meaning for families, often across multiple generations. Many divorcing couples come from different cultural and religious backgrounds. During the marriage, these differences may have been embraced and tolerated, or may have been a source of conflict. Even in families where both parents are of the same religion, there may be differences in level of observance and religious practices. When parents fight about religion, a child can feel caught in the middle. The child who is following the religious practices of one parent may fear he or she is betraying the other. This, of course, can be a stress on the child that goes on for years.

In intact families, parents decide how to help their children learn about religion, even if the parents are of different faiths or have different religious practices. They decide what formal religious education the children will have and how they will respectfully celebrate different religious holidays, milestones, and traditions. This also can happen in a divorced family. Children need not be in the middle of their parents' religious differences if parents work together to help the child learn about religion without judging the other parent. Parents also can plan for religious milestones in a way that does not communicate to the child that he or she is taking sides on small and large issues. At such milestones, it is the child's experience that needs to be celebrated. These milestones are not an opportunity for battles over control. The key is making it meaningful for the child and giving the child a positive and memorable

life experience. Ultimately, children will make their own decisions about religion as they move into their adult lives.

## Extracurricular activities

Conflict about extracurricular activities usually is based on the type and number of activities, as well as where the activity is taking place (if parents live in separate communities). It can be helpful for parents to work together well in advance to plan in which activities the child will participate. Signing a child up for an activity and then convincing the other parent of its benefit often produces more conflict. It is important for parents to make sure they can logistically arrange to get the children to their activities, even if it means modifying the routine schedule. Similarly, parents need to make sure that children are not overscheduled and that parents can actually afford the activities. Parents may even decide to modify who pays what percentage for particularly expensive activities, e.g., hockey or horseback riding. Here again, it is crucial not to put children in the middle of parental disputes. This can cause a child to feel guilty about the activity, as opposed to doing something that is fun and can help the children develop a sense of competency.

Parents must work together and give the child a sense of mutual support and encouragement, even if they have different views about the activity. Even in intact families, well-meaning parents can disagree on an activity yet decide to enroll the child. Even when both parents agree that an activity will be a positive experience, they may later find that the child is not benefiting and the activity needs to be discontinued. Even the most caring and loving parents cannot know for sure which activities will ultimately be positive experiences for each child. We do know, however, that the child is more likely to thrive if parents do not use extracurricular activities to demonstrate conflict. The more you work together, the more your child will feel supported and reap the benefits.

## Concluding thoughts

Parenting communication is one of the most essential skills needed to help children grow and thrive, especially when they live with the additional challenges of a family of divorce. Parents do not have to respect, like, or trust one another. Their adult marital relationship need not be resolved. Rather, they must strive to communicate in as healthy a manner as possible, regardless of the communication of the other parent, so that their children will grow in a family where the needs of the children are more important than the conflict. Children need to know that their parents love them more than they love to fight. Consistently showing children that parents can work together can preserve a sense of family beyond the end of the marriage. Your children deserve no less. **FA**

Sidebar:

# Strategies for Improving Communication

In coparenting relationships with minimal conflict, these strategies may already be in place, or may not be necessary, as communication is spontaneous and robust, while remaining focused and respectful without the need for intervention. In families with more conflict, it may be helpful for parents to structure their communications, including (but not limited to) planned and scheduled weekly parenting calls, with an agreed upon agenda of issues, and limiting communications to children's issues and problems. In some cases, these parenting calls require facilitation and practice. If the

potential for conflict is great or one parent is in too much distress for a one-on-one talk, communications may need to be in writing.

Some specific communication strategies are:

- **Use "I statements":** to formulate communications, e.g., "I think, I feel, I believe," rather than critical "you" statements.
- **"Active listening":** Upset parents in conflict may often focus on their own emotional reactions and assumptions about the other parent's motivations or what he or she is feeling or thinking. It can be helpful to slow down communication and listen carefully to the other parent, repeating in your own words what you believe you've heard. Then ask if there's anything you've missed. This allows the other parent to correct any misunderstandings on the spot and to feel heard.
- **Use a problem-solving approach for any dilemma or decision:** It often helps to define the problem in very specific and nonaccusatory terms.

  Once you agree on the definition of the problem, you can begin to come up with solutions. Generate as many options as possible, even ones that seem absurd. Then, both of you can evaluate the options and chart a plan of action to resolve the problem. It helps to make sure that each parent is clear about his or her responsibility and how and when parents will evaluate what they've learned and decide what's next. By doing this problem-solving exercise, you are engaging in a child-focused discussion, rather than a battle for control or emotionally based interactions so common to the dynamics of a failing marriage.
- **Avoid criticism and blameful defensiveness:** Blame and criticism can lead to conflict or avoidance of an issue. Think about when you have been criticized, especially by someone you may not trust or with whom you don't have a positive relationship. That discussion has not likely led to your saying, "Gee, I'm so glad you were critical of me. I really see your point and am sorry I was so blind to the truth. What a lughead I have been." Rather, it likely leads you to respond by arguing (a fight) or withdrawing from the conversation (flight), or becoming immobilized and paralyzed (freeze). When you are in this mode, you are likely unable to access the part of your brain that is responsible for rational thought and sound judgment. Avoiding such critical dialogue is often crucial to having a productive discussion on child-related issues. Focus on devising action plans and not on the flaws you see in each other.

*— J. Z. & L. B.*

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