

Communicating Effectively with a Co-parent: I-Messages

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Communication difficulties between co-parents....

After divorce, the role of spouse ends, but the role of being a parent continues. While transitioning into the new co-parenting role, negative and hurtful feelings often come to the surface as parents are required to communicate. When parents feel overwhelmed by intense emotions, it becomes easy for them to be reactive and communicate with unclear and nonspecific messages. This makes it difficult for the other parent to hear the message and may result in the parent becoming reactive.

Learning to manage conflict is not easy and can become more difficult after divorce. However, learning to communicate, negotiate, or compromise effectively is absolutely critical. How well children adjust in the years following divorce largely depends on how well both of their parents manage their divorce and learn to communicate effectively.

“I” messages

An effective method to help improve communication is the use of “I” messages. “I” messages are a way to identify thoughts and feelings and then express solutions without attacking and blaming your co-parent. These messages help individuals express their thoughts and feelings in a way that conveys a clear message and encourages the other person to express their point of view. In order to accomplish his “I” messages will begin with “I” instead of “You”. For example a co-parent could say:

- ***I am worried*** about how junior is doing in school right now.

Instead of saying:

- **You don’t help** junior with his homework and I am worried about how he is doing in school.

The key with an “I” message is to facilitate conversation between co-parents so that the messages are sent in a non-accusatory or aggressive

manner so the other person can hear the message and then respond without reacting or feeling defensive.

Thus, the responsibility for having a beneficial conversation starts with the person sending the “I” message since they are the initiator of the conversation. Effective use of “I” messages will entail communication which is genuine and include real expressions of one’s feelings in appropriate context. However, an ‘I’ message that invalidates your co-parents perspective may result in defensiveness.

The formula for creating an I-message includes THREE main components:

1. Clearly identify your personal thought or feeling. “I think...” or “I feel...”
2. Explain the behavior or action that brought on the thought or feeling. “When...”
3. Formulate a statement that connects your thought, "I think..." and explanation "when" that allows your co-parent to hear the message.

When formulating an “I” message, first slow yourself down and think about the message you want to convey. In a co-parenting situation, it may be that you feel unheard when trying to communicate with your co-parent that you have concerns about your child, or that you have thoughts about an upcoming holiday.

Keeping it simple with these thoughts can help translate them into I-messages. The examples above can be stated as I-messages:

- *When we get heated in our conversations, I often feel unheard.*
- *I would like to share some thoughts I have regarding the upcoming Christmas break.*

Parents often inadvertently allow emotions to cloud their I-message when their thought or feeling is a reaction to something their co-parent has done. Remember to BE CAREFUL using words that qualify your statement such as “because” or using the word “you.” These words may feel blaming to the other person, which may trigger a defensive response.

Examples of how the use of “you” or “because” may not be effective are below:

- *I feel unheard when we get heated in our conversations and **you start yelling.***
- *I would like to share some thoughts I have regarding the Christmas break, **because you** won't be flexible with the schedule.*

The use of the word “you” in these statements may result in the person listening, feeling attacked and becoming defensive.

How to use “I” messages

Before you begin a conversation with your co-parent, it is important to recognize your own physical, mental, and emotional state. If you are overly tired, emotionally drained, or feeling overly emotionally reactive to the topic or situation, it may be best to take a time out (or not approach the topic at that time) before beginning an important conversation with your co-parent.

Understandably, any interpreted “attack” will likely shut the conversation down before it starts. Thus, it can also be helpful to think about and practice writing, rehearsing, or saying out loud the “I” message you would like for your co-parent to receive. It can be helpful to practice different ways of saying the same thing, but in a way that you can imagine your co-parent being able to hear it without becoming defensive. Practicing can be done by yourself or with an objective and trusted third party to help ensure the message you are sending is what you want to send.

It is important for co-parents to have some ground rules in place, especially when beginning to use “I” messages. Thus, co-parents need to be clear with each other about how they will implement “I” messages as they communicate. This will help co-parents clarify their intention to keep the focus not only on the child, but also on the content of the intended messages and validation of each parents’ perspective.

Speaker listener

A process called the “speaker listener technique” has proven effective in helping parents communicate with “I” messages. This technique has specific roles, “the speaker” and “the listener” that

both parents follow when using “I” messages. The following are the rules for this process:

- **Speaker:**
 - Speaks for themselves.
 - Does not attempt to read their co-parents mind.
 - Keeps ownership of their own thoughts and feelings.
 - Keeps their message brief in order for the co-parent to hear the message they are sending.
- **Listener:**
 - Attentively listen to the speakers “I” message (even if somewhat attacking).
 - Paraphrases the message they heard from the speaker.
 - Refrains from rebutting or adding their own thoughts or feelings while paraphrasing.

When using the “speaker listener” technique, the speaker is given the opportunity to send an “I” message and then the listener is given the opportunity to paraphrase the message they heard. Once the speaker feels understood regarding the topic of conversation, the listener is then given the opportunity to send an “I” message. This process is continued until both co-parents feel understood.

Examples of how to use “I” messages

Learning to communicate with “I” messages may seem challenging at first. Co-parents may have the best intentions when using an “I” message; however, they may unintentionally invalidate their co-parent. When a co-parent feels invalidated it limits their ability to hear the message being sent. Remember effective “I” messages invite your co-parent to express their opinions. The correctly used “I” message will facilitate communication between co-parents. The following are some bad, better, and best, examples of how to use “I” messages:

Example 1:

- **Bad:** *“You don't care about anything I say.”*
 - This is not an “I” message and blames the other co-parent, which will easily shut down communication.
- **Better:** *“I feel frustrated because I don't know if you understand me.”*

- This is a better example because it focuses on your feelings and provides a concise explanation; however, the use of "you" in the message may potentially be invalidating to the receiver and lead to defensive response. It may seem like you are blaming them for not understanding you.
- **Best:** *"I am getting the sense that you and I are on two different pages."*
 - This gives both the speaker and receiver a voice and validates the other co-parents position. This allows for the acknowledgment of differences and sets the tone for further communication.

Example 2:

- **Bad:** *"I wish you could pick the kids up from school on time. I am concerned about their safety while they sit around waiting for you."*
 - Again the use of "you" provides the feel of an attacking statement and will lead to defensiveness and the communication process shutting down.
- **Better:** *"I am concerned about our kids safety while they are waiting to be picked up from school. Can we talk about what is happening?"*
 - This example eliminates the use of "you" and will increase the co-parents ability to hear the message.
- **Best:** *"It seems like our kids are waiting a while to be picked up after school and I am concerned about their safety during this time. Do you think we can work to find a better solution to help our child(ren)?"*
 - In this statement the co-parent takes responsibility and is the least confrontational. This statement also encourages the other co-parent to share their thoughts as well.

Understanding thoughts versus feelings

Recognizing and communicating the difference between our thoughts and feelings may be difficult, especially during intense emotional situations. The process of using "I" messages helps us clarify the difference between our thoughts and our feelings. Feelings are emotions attached to our experiences, while thoughts are our interpretation of experiences. For example, "I feel overwhelmed" is a

feeling while "I don't think I can get everything done" is a thought.

For co-parents, it is critical that they communicate with more thoughts and less feelings. Any time you catch yourself starting off your "I" message with "I feel like..." this may cloud the thought that you aim to convey.

What if my co-parent is not willing to listen?

It is important to remember, that although you cannot control what your co-parent does, you can control how you choose to speak and respond. How well you manage yourself and your divorce will affect how well your child will respond and adapt following the divorce.

Using **disclaimers** or statements that soften your message when initiating conversations can help your co-parent hear your intended message. The following are examples of how a disclaimer may be used:

- *"I know we haven't seen eye to eye lately...(but I'm worried about Johnny)",*
 - "I'm worried..." is the "I" message.
- *"I was hoping that we could chat about something sometime when you might be open...just let me know when you are in a good place",*
 - "I was hoping..." is the "I" message. The rest is the disclaimer.

"I" messages can still be an effective form of communication even if your co-parent does not seem willing to communicate. Remember clear messages that state your position are more easily received and digested—no matter what the response is. Further, when used effectively, the "I" message will validate your co-parents perspective without invalidating your own. Over time, validation is likely to open the communication process.

Summary

"I" messages can be an effective tool in improving your co-parenting relationship and ultimately improving your child's wellbeing. When "I" messages are used correctly, they will ideally facilitate communication, invite your co-parent to express their thoughts and feelings, and contribute to problem resolution. "I" messages will also help

you learn how to take responsibility for your own thoughts and feelings and express them appropriately to your co-parent and your children in such a way they can be heard.

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