



Communication Strategies for Co-Parents

Communicating well with your co-parent and your children can be difficult, especially when you disagree with each other. Healthy communication encourages your children to have lifelong positive relationships. Even though your co-parent is no longer your romantic partner, your children deserve to have healthy, cooperative, and functional adult role models who work together.



With your co-parent:

Even though it may be difficult, it is important for co-parents to communicate in ways that are healthy and productive. If you find that negative emotions are the focus of your communication, try these strategies.

KEEP IT SIMPLE:

Think ahead about what you really have to find out. If you need basic information, like the location of soccer practice or the time of the dentist appointment, consider sending a text message, email, or a short voicemail. If the question can be answered with a simple response, you may not need further conversation. Choose one issue to address at a time. Remember, your goal is not to win; your goal is to do what is best for your child.

SLOW DOWN:

Before you engage with your co-parent, take a moment to stop, think, and breathe. Will you be role-modeling good problem-solving skills for your children? Can you clearly communicate what you need, and can you hear what your co-parent has to say? Use active listening strategies by watching for nonverbal cues, refraining from judgement, staying focused, and summarizing what you heard.

TIME AND PLACE:

Resist the urge to bring up a heated issue—even over the phone—when the children are present. If the discussion might lead to conflict, find a time to talk when the children will not be around. Do you want to address your concerns in a public space? Over the phone? Research shows that ongoing arguing between parents hurts children, and though you may not agree with your co-parent all the time, you can minimize the impact on your children.

With your children:

Your tone, body language, and actions let children know that no matter what, there are caring adults who will be there for them.

LISTEN:

Learn to listen to verbal cues and recognize nonverbal cues in your child. A child's tone of voice, posture, and actions can tell you a lot about how they are doing. Be aware of changes in their habits and watch for signs of sadness. Though you may feel overwhelmed with your own issues, you have the power to help make things easier for your child. Take a few minutes to drop everything and really listen to your child talk. Let them interrupt you—within reason—during the day and get a caring response. They may not even be talking about the deeper issues your family is facing, but when children feel listened to, it builds confidence that they are loved and trusted.

REINFORCE YOUR LOVE IN WORDS AND ACTIONS:

One of the most important things you can communicate to your children is that you love them unconditionally. It is healthy for children when adults express empathy toward them and other people; it helps in children's own emotional development. Find a time this week to have a one-on-one conversation with your child that reinforces how much you love them by listening and repeating affirming messages.

KEEP CHILDREN OUT OF CONFLICT:

Children have the right to love both of their parents. Don't put your children in the position of having to be loyal to one parent or the other.

Make sure to:

- Avoid talking negatively about the other parent in front of your child.
- Avoid asking prying questions to get private information about the other household.
- Avoid using your children to send messages to the other parent. Communicate with them directly.

UW–Madison Division of Extension offers co-parenting courses and support for families in caring for each other in ways that promote growth and understanding. For more information about these courses, contact your county Extension educator or visit <https://extension.wisc.edu/family/>.