



Communicating with an ex-partner

Communicating with an ex-partner can be difficult, given the often-heightened emotions associated with a breakup, and differing ideas associated with making and adhering to arrangements for moving forward, especially when it comes to children. Here are some general tips to avoid or reduce conflict, promote a positive coparenting relationship, and communicate in such a way so as to improve the well-being of the family as a whole.

BIFF Communication*

- **Keep it Brief:** Communication with your ex-partner should generally be limited to 2 to 5 sentences. If communication is overly wordy, it risks shifting focus from the point and may be perceived as being a lecture.
- **Informative:** Say what needs to be said and avoid adding additional information that is unnecessary.
- **Friendly:** No matter how you are feeling, it is important to maintain friendly communication for the sake of the children, who are usually very aware of conflict. Being friendly and communication cost nothing and is likely to reduce the conflict overall.
- **Firm:** Being firm or assertive in communication means respecting your own and your ex-partner's rights without your communication being too passive or overly aggressive.

Here's an example: *"Hi, Jack. Johnny has his second swimming lesson at 9am this Saturday, during your time. I will send his swimming gear in a separate bag with him to school on Friday. Would you please send them back in his schoolbag on Monday. Enjoy your weekend. Jane."*

How and When to Communicate

Communication can be via several methods, including text message, email, parenting apps, and/or social media apps. If there has been conflict, it may be worthwhile to pick one communication method and stick to it. For example, having an email address only for communication with your ex-partner means that anxiety is reduced whenever you get an email notification for your general emails (and you may choose to turn off notifications for this specific email address).

You may choose to check and respond to communication on a particular day, for example 1 to 2 days prior to changeovers. It is important, however, to have an emergency contact method (generally text message). Often Court Orders will suggest methods of contact to assist with communication – Parenting Apps (e.g., My Family Wizard).

Emailed communications can be longer than text communications; however, it is still useful to follow the BIFF method above. Emails may consist of information and/or questions requiring a response. Keeping it brief would mean up to 2 to 3 pieces of information or points of interest (**POI**), and 2 to 3 questions requiring a response (**RR**).

Here's an example: *"Hi Jack, I hope you are having a good week. Just to let you know that Jane came first in her spelling test at school. She was very excited and is looking forward to showing you her certificate this weekend (**POI**). Also, Johnny has been invited to a birthday party the*



weekend after next. As this is your time with the children, I suggested that Johnny brings the invite with him this weekend so you can make arrangements if you are happy for him to go (POI).

Jack, I am just checking:

- 1) Johnny is hoping to start soccer training in April. It would be every Thursday evening with games scheduled on Saturdays each week from the end of the month. I know that he has discussed this with you, and I wanted to confirm that you are happy to take him to training/games when it is his time with you? (RR). I would need to know by the end of next week, so that I can take him to the tryouts on the following Thursday.*
- 2) My sister is getting married in the second weekend of the Spring school holidays. I know this is your scheduled time with the children, and I am wondering if you would be able to swap the first weekend with the second weekend, so that they are able to attend? Would you please let me know by the 15th of this month so that I can RSVP (RR).*

Look forward to hearing from you about the above. Have a lovely weekend – I know the children will enjoy the show you are taking them to this weekend.

Jane.”

Keeping communication to a minimum in a polite manner is important. Even if your ex-partner does not communicate in the same manner, persevering is important. Don't meet emotion with emotion. And if there is nothing in his/her emails that requires a response (RR), you don't need to respond.

Topics for communication can include:

- Extracurricular activities
- Education matters
- Medical, dental, and psychological updates
- Appointments
- Behavioural/management problems
- Other parenting concerns
- Requests for time changes to the schedule
- Offers for additional custodial time.

Do not include the following topics:

- The past – focus on present or future matters
- Significant others
- Blaming
- Money owed
- Legal action
- Allegations – avoid blaming.



General Rules of Communication

Watch your tone in all communications. Avoid blaming, sarcasm, rudeness or meanness (statements that start with “you always/never...” are likely to have an accusatory tone.

Avoid demands – turn these into polite requests for a response.

Don't use any swear words or other profanity.

Consider what is reasonable in terms of deadlines for a response. Generally, an acknowledgement of an email could be expected within 24 hours if only “*thanks for the email – I will respond properly by tomorrow evening.*” Forty-eight hours might be appropriate for simple RRs. And for larger requests, such as in the sample email above, consider when you might need to know by (e.g., to book flights, or to meet a deadline).

Avoid assumptions, admonishments, or giving advice. Remember, you probably started parenting in different ways, and this is unlikely to have changed significantly following your separation. For example, if communicating about behavioural issues, instead of:

“Johnny has been acting out when he comes back from your house – he is probably tired because you let him stay up late (assumption). This is unacceptable (admonishment). Try to be a better parent (admonishment) and make sure you stick to his usual bedtime of 8pm so that he gets at least 10 hours of sleep – this is necessary for his age (advice).”

Consider:

“Hi Jack, just letting you know that Johnny was acting out on Monday night. There didn't seem to be any reason for this and he said he had a good day at school. Just wondering if you might be able to shed any light on this – might he have been tired? I gave him an early night and he seemed fine on Tuesday. I'll let you know if it happens again also. Thanks, Jane.”

Essentially, your communication should be free from emotional language. It can take practice to get it right, but it is worth the practice and perseverance. Even if your ex-partner does not communicate in this manner, he or she may start to make changes over time as you do.