

Communication about Children after Separation

By Monica Kreiner, Chartered Mediator

When you have a child together, you are tied for life to another person because your children will likely outlive you. Figuring out how to communicate as co-parents after having separated is challenging.

Early after the break-up, try keeping the topic on the children.

Looking at the purpose of the communication often helps in determining how best to communicate. Is it information sharing, a simple decision or a complex decision?

Information sharing is about things like a child being sick and staying home from school or an activity being cancelled. Information sharing does not require a reply. Some couples choose to include FYI (for your information) in the communication so that it is clear no reply is required.

Simple decisions might be things like changing an exchange time or figuring out how to get a forgotten item from one household to another. These often require a yes/no or short answer reply.

More complex decisions are around extra-curricular activities or what to do if a child is falling behind at school. These discussions require more back and forth to share opinions and values. Talking together is the best option for complex decisions. If you can't communicate without arguing, consider meeting in public or inviting a neutral third person, either a mediator or a mutually agreed upon friend or family member. Writing is also an option.

In my experience as a mediator, co-parents often get into trouble texting. Texts are short and have little context so can easily be misinterpreted. Assume the best of the writer of the text. Don't reply right away if you can't be constructive.

Focus on Children in Separation (FOCIS) is a free course from Alberta Justice. In Grande Prairie, you can register with the John Howard Society at 780-532-0373.

There is co-parenting software that can help as well. This allows parents to share information without involving the children. The records kept can also be of use by professionals like teachers or counsellors. Some examples include: Our Family Wizard, CustodyXChange and 2Houses.

To help you emotionally untangle yourself, talk to friends, family members, counsellors or clergy. Avoid talking directly to your children or letting them overhear you talk about their other parent to reduce their stress during this difficult time for them.

With time, communication becomes easier and you can get on with the business of co-parenting.