

Improving Communications

Good communications will play an important role in making your shared parenting a success. It will allow you to share important information about your children and can help to ensure that conflict between you is kept to a minimum. When tensions are running high, it can feel easier not to discuss things at all. But not sharing information about your children can make things difficult, even dangerous, for them and can actually make it more likely that you will end up in conflict. It's, therefore, important to think about communication, what works and what works less well. Here are a few ideas to help you get it right:

Things that help...

- **Be respectful**

When tension is high, and particularly if you are feeling hurt or angry, it can be difficult to keep a check on your feelings. Whilst you aren't required to like each other, your parenting relationship needs to be one that's built on cooperation and respect. It's important that you acknowledge each other's parenthood and let your children witness respectful engagement between you. Try to stay respectful even if your child's other parent isn't being respectful towards you.

- **Focus on the issues**

Stick to exchanging important information about your children. What each of you is doing in your own private lives should not be discussed unless it directly affects the children. Try to define issues clearly and try to deal with them one at a time. It can help if you are able to agree the things you are going to discuss in advance.

- **Avoid old problems**

Try to agree not to talk about the past. Your discussions should be about your children, their happiness and well being. Talking about old problems will make it harder to move forward. This is not a time to be settling old scores, your child's future is what matters now. What you are trying to do is build a new parenting partnership that will be different from the past.

- **Think about how and when**

It's generally best if you are able to talk face-to-face but many parents can find this difficult, especially in the early stages. If talking face-to-face is difficult, agree to communicate by phone, email or text until things become easier. Timing is also important. Don't turn up unannounced or under the influence of drink or drugs and, if there is the potential for arguments, meet or phone away from your children. Some parents prefer to meet in a public place, such as a cafe, as this can reduce the likelihood of an argument.

- **Think about language**

Try to be clear, precise and straight forward. If there were patterns of verbal game playing in your relationship before, now is the time to do something different. Choose your words and phrases carefully and talk about your own views and feelings rather than complaining about theirs. Try to avoid accusatory phrases such 'you always' or 'you never'. If you want something to change, be direct. Say 'I would like Jack to spend no more than two hours a night on his Play Station' rather than 'you let Jack spend all night on that Play Station, there's no wonder he can't concentrate at school!'.

- **Listen properly**

Communication is a two way process and you need to listen properly to what the other person wants to say. Even if you disagree with their point of view, simply dismissing it out of hand will create friction. Try not to roll your eyes, twiddle your thumbs or send text messages while your

child's other parent is talking! And be aware of your body language – it should be positive not negative.

- **Don't make assumptions**

Be clear about what you want and offer as much information as you can. Don't imagine that your child's other parent can read your mind or that you can read theirs. Don't set them up to fail by not giving enough information. And never assume that your children will have passed on vital information – they probably won't have done and it isn't their job to do it anyway.

- **Keep family and friends out of it**

Your child's other parent won't want to know what your mum or best friend thinks. They either won't be interested or will feel hurt and embarrassed that they are being talked about and judged by other people. You will find that everyone has an opinion and, whilst it can be reassuring to know that someone understands and supports you, their views should be kept out of your discussions.

- **Find a way to end**

Try to make sure that your discussions aren't open ended. It can be easy to allow a successful exchange of information about your children to turn into a row simply because you allowed the conversation to drift when it should have ended. Agree a word or phrase to signal that you want to close the business. Try not to storm off or hang up the phone without first saying that you want the conversation to end.

- **Don't misinterpret**

If you're a parent who didn't want the marriage or relationship to end and wish that you could all be back together again, don't mistake a good, business like exchange of information as an indication that things between you can be mended. When you're discussing issues about the children, it's important not to talk about your adult relationship. If you want to discuss your relationship, agree to do it at a different time.

Being assertive

It's important that your communications aren't *aggressive* (demanding and dominating) or *passive* (unable to clearly articulate wants or needs) but *assertive*. Assertive communication skills can be learned. There are six elements that contribute to assertive communication. These are:

- **Posture:** your posture should be confident but not aggressive. The body should be open with the torso face on, arms uncrossed and head up. Both feet should be evenly on the ground, hip width apart. Care should be taken not to stand too close.
- **Eye contact:** it's important to make eye contact whilst not making the other person feel uncomfortable or threatened. Look directly at the other person but don't stare. Looking down can appear passive.
- **Gestures:** open hand gestures can show engagement and emphasise important points. It's important not to have clenched fists, to point or display other aggressive hand gestures.
- **Tone of voice:** the right tone of voice is critical to communicating assertively. The voice should be calm but confident, easily audible but not loud and the breathing should be slow and from the diaphragm.
- **Timing:** it's important to speak at the appropriate time. Listen to the other person, avoid interrupting wherever possible and concentrate on saying the appropriate thing at the appropriate time - don't be distracted.
- **Content:** stick to the subject. Be clear about what you want but don't demand.