

Communicating Effectively After Divorce or Separation: Strategies for Parents

Presented by Karen Lemke, M.A., Registered Psychologist
In partnership with *City of Leduc Family & Community Support Services*
December 2020

Learning Objectives

- Develop interpersonal skills to communicate and co-parent effectively after divorce or separation
- Improve the likelihood of getting your own wants and needs met, while maintaining a positive relationship with the other person
- Balance the needs of the relationship with your own sense of dignity and self-respect

Situations Where Communication Skills are Important

- You need to make a request
- You need to set a limit or boundary
- You want your opinion or point of view to be taken more seriously
- You need to maintain your position, even if there is intense pressure to change it

What Makes it Hard to Communicate Effectively?

- Lack of skill
- Other people who lack communication skills and/or who are more powerful than us
- Fear of consequences
- Intense emotions (anger, impulsivity, assumptions, judgments)

Prioritizing your Goals

- Objective/goal: What do I want from this interaction? (be specific!)
- Relationship: How do I want the other person to feel (regardless of whether I get what I want)?
- Self-respect: How do I want to feel about myself (regardless of whether I get what I want)?

Double-check...

1. **Is it the right time?** Are you and the other person in a calm state of mind, ready to hear each other out, free from distractions, and able to devote your attention and energy to the conversation? If children are around, is the subject matter appropriate for them to hear?
2. **Is it the right place?** Is this a conversation best had in private, or would it be better to meet in a public place? Is it better to talk, or to communicate in writing?
3. **Is it the right person?** Am I speaking with the person who can actually give me what I want, or is there someone better who would be able to help me get my needs met?

Obtaining Your Objective/Goal

What to say

- **DESCRIBE the situation.** State the facts as objectively and non-judgmentally as possible; resist making assumptions or interpretations.
- **EXPRESS your feelings and opinions.** Use “I” statements; avoid judging, blaming, or accusing the other person.
- **ASSERT yourself clearly and directly.** Ask for what you want, set a limit, or reinforce your point of view as clearly as possible; don’t assume the other person will figure it out.
- **REINFORCE the other person ahead of time.** Explain the positive effects *for the other person* of getting what you want or need from them.

How to say it

- **Stay on track.** Ignore attacks or efforts to divert; act like a broken record if the other person is trying to pull you off course.
- **Act confident.** Use voice tone, physical posture, and eye contact that convey confidence. Avoid passivity or arrogance.
- **Be willing to negotiate.** Offer other solutions or consider reducing your request; if the other person is still unwilling to give you what you want, turn the tables by asking them for solutions or ideas.

Maintaining the Relationship

- **Use a kind and gentle approach.** Be respectful and avoid verbal or physical attacks, threats, judgments, or sneering. Express yourself calmly and leave your attitude at the door.
- **Act interested.** Face the other person and maintain eye contact. Avoid interrupting. Respect the person's wishes if they want to have the discussion at a later time.
- **Validate.** Show that you understand the other person's point of view, *even if you don't agree with it*, through your words and actions.
 - **Pay attention:** see *Act interested* above.
 - **Reflect back:** Summarize what you just heard or observed to make sure you really understand.
 - **Mind-read:** Pay attention to what is not being said by focusing on facial expressions, body language, and what you already know about the person or situation.
 - **Have empathy:** Put yourself in the other person's shoes to understand how they might be thinking or feeling, even if you don't approve of their behaviour or agree with their perspective. You can always validate feelings.
 - **Acknowledge the kernel of truth:** Try to find one thing that you can understand or agree with in what the person is saying. If you can't find anything, again, focus on feelings.
 - **Show equality and genuineness.** Treat the person as capable and competent. Don't give advice that isn't asked for. Accept that you could be wrong. Adopt a curious and open approach if you don't understand the other person's perspective.

Maintaining Your Self-Respect

- **Be fair.** Take a non-judgmental stance and be fair to both yourself and the other person. Validate your feelings as well as the other person's.
- **Be truthful.** Don't act helpless when you're not. Avoid exaggerations. Try not to make up excuses for your feelings, thoughts, or opinions.
- **Avoid unnecessary apologies.** Resist apologizing to "soften the blow." Don't apologize for being alive, making a request, having an opinion, or disagreeing.
- **Act in line with your values.** Ground your decisions and behaviours in the values that are important and meaningful to you. Resist urges to give up your values for the sake of the relationship or approval from others.

Troubleshoot Ahead of Time

- Visualize having the conversation before you actually have it.
 - Where and when will you have it?
 - How will you prioritize your goals (objective, relationship, self-respect)?
 - What will you say and how will you say it?
- How do you think the other person will react?
 - What obstacles do you see potentially getting in the way of getting your goal(s) met?
 - How will you navigate any challenges, conflicts, or confrontations that occur?
- How do you think *you* will react?
 - If the other person becomes angry or upset, or tries to divert the conversation, how will you keep things on track?
 - How will you monitor your own level of emotional intensity?
 - How will you make sure you stay in control? How will you know if or when it is time to step away and suggest continuing the conversation another time?
- How will you cope if you don't get your way? Will you be able to accept it if the other person isn't willing to honour your request? How will you handle the worst-case scenario?
- Consider safety -- in situations where you think the other person may become violent or aggressive, how can you plan ahead to keep yourself safe? (meeting in public; having someone else with you; communicating in writing, or through a lawyer or mediator?)

Community Resources

- **Collaborative Divorce Alberta Association:** Increases access for collaborative divorce by providing information for family divorce lawyers, financial advisors, and mental health specialists.
collaborativepractice.ca
- **coParenter app:** Provides tools to help families manage, organize, and resolve everyday co-parenting responsibilities, with or without the assistance of a coach or mediator.
coparenter.com
- **Parenting After Separation:** Free online course for parents or guardians who are separating or going through a divorce.
alberta.ca/pas.aspx
- **Access 24/7:** Single point of access for adult addiction and mental health community-based programs, including crisis support.
Phone: 780-424-2424
- **City of Leduc Family & Community Support Services:** Free, confidential support and resources for residents of the City of Leduc.
Phone: 780-980-7109
leduc.ca/fcss
- **The Family Centre:** Low-fee or no-fee counselling and community support services for adults, youth, and families.
Phone: 780-900-6129
familycentre.org

If you have questions or feedback, please contact Karen Lemke at 780-908-2376 or karen@eropsych.com