

# Co-Parenting Communication Guide



The 2011 Summit Project of the  
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# Communication Is Essential for Co-Parenting

On a regular and ongoing basis, co-parents will need to exchange information about their child(ren). This guide provides tools, tips and good practices for co-parents to follow to communicate with one another.

Use these two best practices as an overall guide for all your co-parenting communication.

## The #1 Best Practice: ACT

To avoid problems, parents should provide parenting information to one another. The information should be

**Accurate  
Complete  
Timely**

What if the Court restricts my contact with the other parent?

Even if the Court has restricted your contact with the other parent, you will still need to regularly exchange information about your child(ren). You'll need to exchange it in such a way that's consistent with the Court's orders.



### Parents don't always agree but....

Parents may not always agree about which parent has the right to certain information.

If you're in doubt, follow

## The #2 Best Practice: the Golden Rule

Always provide the other parent information that you expect that parent to give to you.

## **When Co-Parents Don't or Won't Communicate**

Here's a story about two people who want to be good parents but aren't good at communicating with each other. They do not follow either one of the best practices of co-parenting communication.

Mother and Father have one child, Maria, who just turned five. They have joint legal custody with a week-on/week-off parenting schedule. They do not practice good co-parenting communication.

Maria will start kindergarten in August, and the school district requires her to be immunized before she starts school. During Father's assigned week in late July, he takes Maria to his selected pediatrician, Dr. Smith, for her immunizations. He does not tell Mother what he's done. Then he sends the immunization record to Maria's new school. During Mother's next assigned week, she takes Maria to her selected pediatrician, Dr. Jones, where Maria gets the same immunizations a second time. Mother does not inform Father and sends the immunization record to Maria's school.

When school starts, the school nurse sees both records and realizes that Maria received the immunizations twice.

**What the Parents Wanted:** Neither parent intended to harm their child. They each wanted to follow the school rules.

**What the Parents Actually Did:** Getting their child immunized twice, especially so close together, was clearly not in their child's best interest.

**Why This Happened:** Even though neither parent intended to harm Maria, they both put her health at risk by failing to inform each another about Maria's immunizations.

Parents want to do what's best for their children. They do not intend to do something that may harm or hurt them. But if they do not exchange information, their child/children may be harmed. **Sharing information with a co-parent is always the best practice.**

# Basic Guides for Communication

The previous example showed what may happen when there is no communication between parents. If parents use poor communication skills or communicate in a hurtful or angry way, it can also be bad for the child.

Use the following list of tips to guide and improve your co-parenting communication.



## Keep Your Focus

- ★ Be brief, to the point, and stay focused on your child.
- ★ Stay focused on present or future events. Don't bring up past problems or situations.
- ★ Be positive and use a business-like tone. Remember the reason for your communication: You are passing on information to the other parent.



## Keep Your Cool

- ★ Don't jump to conclusions or over-react.
- ★ Don't write in all capital letters to make a point. This can give the impression you're angry.
- ★ Don't criticize, blame, or accuse the other parent. If some of your sentences begin with "You always" or "You never," you have slipped into a blaming or angry tone about the other parent. You need to switch your focus back to your child.
- ★ Don't make rude, mean or sarcastic comments about the other parent.
- ★ Don't make demands.
- ★ Don't use profanity.



## Keep It Courteous & Cooperative

- ★ Do provide the other parent with reasonable deadlines and due dates.
- ★ Do use courteous and respectful words such as "please" and "thank you."
- ★ Be cooperative. Write the communication as if someone such as a judge or other decision-maker will read it. Cooperating with your co-parent says your child is your first priority.

## Co-parenting Communication Tools



### Email

Email communication is quick and effective. It allows you to create a true record of your communication.

Your parenting plan might include the use of email to contact the other parent about your child. Your plan may include a specific timeframe that requires you to respond to an email, even if it is just to acknowledge that you have received it. Your communication plan may specify that you file or print all exchanged emails or keep an email notebook for future reference or future litigation.

### Text Messages

Texting allows you and the other parent to quickly exchange basic information. However, if there is a disagreement, texting may not provide a true record of your communication. Sometimes technological problems or an uncharged phone battery may prevent timely delivery of text messages.

If a parent and child exchange frequent text messages during the co-parent's custodial time, the co-parent may not welcome or appreciate this texting. It may seem to intrude on the co-parent's time with the child.

### Telephone Calls

Unless there is a specific reason to restrict direct contact, the telephone can be an important and useful tool to communicate with the other parent. However, regular telephone communication should be used only if you and co-parent have been able to communicate without conflict breaking out.

You may want to set a time for telephone calls, for example, between 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Some families limit telephone calls to five minutes each, one call per day.

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### The Communication Tool That's Spelled R-E-S-P-E-C-T!

Parents should use respectful language when communicating with one another.

A good rule to follow is to write and speak as if someone else besides the co-parent will read or hear their communication.



- NO name-calling.
- NO nicknames.
- NO abusive language.

# THE BASICS OF EMAIL

## Composing Email

Keep email short and clear. If you have more than one issue to cover, number each one. When the other parent answers this email, he/she should refer to each item by number.

The emails should BE BRIEF and limited in number (once or twice per day) unless there is an emergency situation.

- Emails should relate to present or future activities only.
- Emails should not rehash or make judgments about past events.
- Emails should not blame or criticize the other parent about past events.
- An email should be limited to exchanging parenting information. Do not bring up financial issues. Financial matters should be handled separately from parenting discussions.

## Sending Email

Use specific subject lines for all email. Examples are “John’s football practice”; “Melissa’s dance.” Parents may end up with hundreds of emails within a file, so using a specific subject line will make finding a certain email quick and easy.

If there has been a thread of emails about a certain subject (such as Gmail uses), change the subject line if the email’s subject or focus changes.

Parents should provide each other only one email address to use for all co-parenting communication. This email address should be one that a parent has easy access to and checks regularly.

## Receiving Email

Sometimes an email requires the co-parent to reply. In general, a parent should reply within 24 hours, even if the reply just says that the email and information was received.

## Email & Stepparents

Stepparents or significant others should not be involved in email communication unless the co-parent agrees or gives permission.

- Stepparents should not send email.
- Stepparents should not be copied on email sent to the other parent.
- An email should not be sent from a stepparent’s name and email address.
- A stepparent’s name should not appear in the CC section.
- If you choose to blind-copy (BCC) your spouse or significant other on an email to your co-parent, that is your business.



# EMAIL SUMMARY



- \* Limit email to one topic.
- \* Keep email brief, such as one paragraph with five sentences.
- \* Keep the email focused on sharing information about present or future activities or about a developing problem.
- \* Keep the focus of the email on the child/children.
- \* Say something once and don't repeat yourself.
- \* Use respectful language. No abusive, sarcastic or insulting words. No profanity.
- \* Respond to an email in a timely manner, within 24 hours of when it was sent.
- \* Each parent should send no more than two emails per day unless there is an emergency.
- \* Emails should be sent between the two parents instead of a stepparent or significant other to a parent.



# Useful Co-Parenting Tools

## The Child News Report

The Child News Report is a great way to help parents easily share basic information. This communication tool works something like a progress report between a teacher and a parent.

The Child News Report can be as simple as a notebook that travels with the child to each parent's home. Notebooks with a binding are better than loose-leaf pages or a spiral notebook. The notebook is an inexpensive tool that does not require the use of any technology.

There are some disadvantages of using a notebook instead of technology. A notebook can be lost, changed or destroyed. Your child could read it. The notebook may not be effective in dealing with time-sensitive issues. This can be especially true during longer blocks of parenting time.

### How to Use This Tool



At or near the end of your parenting time with your child, begin a new dated entry in the notebook and write down information about your time with the child. The information you write in your child's news report will depend on the child's age.

Include details about medical care, serious injuries or illnesses, diet, education, school or events, major social events, and upcoming appointments. You should also include any issues that came up while your child was in your care that call for further discussion.

After the child's exchange, the other parent should read and initial the news entry in the notebook. Then at the end of their parenting time, this parent will write down an entry and send the notebook along with the child.

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#### A Child News Report for Infants & Toddlers might include:

- Feeding
- Nap and sleeping schedules
- Ways to soothe and calm the child
- How bumps and bruises occurred
- Potty training techniques and updates
- Moods
- Medical appointments
- Illness and medications
- Developmental milestones

#### A Child News Report for Pre-School & School-Aged Children might include:

- Relationships with friends and social activities
- School, extracurricular and religious activities
- Scheduled events and activities
- Homework and school projects
- School progress
- Behavioral and disciplinary issues
- Bed, bath and meal routines

# MORE TOOLS & SYSTEMS

## The 12-Month Calendar

Parents can avoid many co-parenting problems by using a yearlong child-centered calendar. Either parent, or perhaps both parents, can be responsible for filling in the calendar.

This yearly calendar system can help parents resolve conflicts well in advance of upcoming events.



### Preparing the Calendar

For this calendar to be useful for co-parenting, it should include the following information:

- ⌚ The regular week-to-week parenting time schedule
- ⌚ The holiday schedule
- ⌚ School breaks
- ⌚ Vacation plans
- ⌚ Any other events included in the parenting plan

### How to Use This Tool

When one parent is responsible for preparing the calendar, follow this process:

1. Have two deadlines: one for sending a draft of the calendar to the other parent and another deadline for the co-parent to review and return the calendar draft.
2. When the other parent receives the completed calendar, he/she should review the dates and information on the calendar.
3. Make notes of any possible conflicts or problems.
4. Return the calendar to the other parent by the deadline.
5. After both parents have agreed on the final 12-month calendar, both should approve it in writing and keep a copy for the coming year.
6. Both parents should check the calendar often to confirm dates. If a scheduling conflict comes up, changes to the parenting schedule can be made in advance.

### Internet Resources

Many Internet services and programs are available to help parents communicate. They are usually easy to set up and use. These tools will help your co-parenting communication go more smoothly.

Free online shared calendars such as Google calendars are available.

Other online resources are available that provide co-parenting systems plus co-parenting calendars. However, these services charge monthly or yearly subscription fees.

- [www.familywizard.com/ofw](http://www.familywizard.com/ofw)
- [www.jointparents.com](http://www.jointparents.com)
- [www.sharekids.com](http://www.sharekids.com)
- [www.parentingtime.net](http://www.parentingtime.net)

# Communication About Medical Care

Your child's physical and mental/behavioral health may cause several co-parenting issues. If both parents do not work together, your child's health and well-being could be harmed or put in danger.

## Continuity of Care



In general, continuing the services of current medical providers is in a child's best interests. However, changing medical providers may be necessary if circumstances change (such as a move or a change in medical insurance).

A change to a new medical provider may also take place if both parents agree that such a change is in a child's best interest.

## The Medical Clearinghouse

Your family physician or pediatrician usually serves as your child's primary healthcare provider or medical case manager. If your child is referred to a specialist, the specialist usually reports back to the primary healthcare provider.



Sometimes primary healthcare providers do not receive medical reports from other providers. This can happen when your child is seen at a hospital's ER or at an urgent care center. Another example is when you and the other parent use two different primary care providers (in cases of a long distance parenting plan). In both of these situations, it is critical that the parent who obtains the medical care is responsible for requesting that a report is sent to the primary healthcare provider.

## Parents Attending Medical Appointments



At times both parents want to attend a child's healthcare appointment. Both parents being present at the same time may create issues at the healthcare provider's office. It is not in your child's best interest if there is parenting conflict in the healthcare provider's office. If conflict takes place, the office could put restrictions on the parents or even refuse to provide future services for your child.

Often the best solution is for parents to schedule separate appointments with a child's healthcare provider.

## **Medical Treatment Information**

Parents must exchange a healthcare provider's medical instructions about a child's illness, injury, or treatment plan. The parent who receives medical information or instructions is responsible for sharing with the other parent at least the following information:



- Diagnosis
- Prescription information including instructions and any side effects
- Treatment plan
- Warnings and symptoms
- Follow-up care and future appointments



## **Second Opinions**

Parents should not obtain a second opinion from a healthcare provider unless both parents are involved. Without the input of both parents, a provider will have difficulty making the right recommendation(s) for your child.

If you intend to get a second opinion that is not restricted by court order, follow these guidelines:

- If either parent wants a second opinion, the other parent must be notified.
- After the other parent is notified, the parent who

wants the second opinion may choose the professional at his/her expense (minus any insurance coverage).

the child, the second-opinion professional should discuss the procedure with both parents.

- A parent may make the child's appointment for the second opinion. However, the other parent must be able to attend or consult separately with the professional.
- The second-opinion professional should be provided all records that relate to the child's healthcare concern.
- Before an invasive procedure is performed on

- The second-opinion results should be put in writing, provided to both parents, and sent to the diagnosing professional and the primary healthcare provider.

# HANDLING SPECIAL MEDICAL SITUATIONS



## Handling Emergencies

Both parents have the right to timely notice of any emergency or urgent healthcare situation affecting your child. If you are the parent dealing with the emergency, you must notify the other parent within a specified time period, such as two hours. At a minimum, you should notify the other parent of the following:

- Nature of the emergency
- Your child's current condition
- Name, address, and phone number of the treating facility
- Location within the facility where the child is being treated
- Name of a contact or treating professional at the facility



## Handling Medical Insurance

Both parents should have access to their child's medical insurance information, no matter



which parent carries the child's insurance. The parent who carries the insurance should provide at least the following information to the other parent:

- Insurance ID card
- Name and address of insurance provider
- Policy and group ID numbers and, if necessary, the name of the employer through which the insurance is issued
- Insurance company phone numbers for verifying coverage and obtaining authorization
- Details of policy provisions (This may be listed in the parent's benefits booklet or on paperwork explaining the coverage.)

# The ABC's of Communicating About School

Conflict can be prevented or reduced if parents follow communication guidelines regarding their child's school and education. Both parents should contact the school directly to set up a way to receive communication from the school. This includes how parents will receive progress reports, school schedules or events, and any other information that a parent has the right to receive from or provide to the school. However, situations may come up that require parents to notify each other about school-related matters.

## Information Both Parents Are Entitled To

- Both parents have the right to specific information about a child's education. This includes school name, address, phone number, and email contact information about the school.
- If your child's educational information is available online, both parents have the right to know the child's login information.
- Your child may receive services, such as through an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or an Individual Service Plan (ISP). If your child receives special services, both parents have the right to receive information and attend any meetings about these services.
- The school may require your child to use a day planner or a similar tool to keep track of assignments and schedules. If the child is required to use a planner, both parents must have access to that planning tool when the child is in their care.

## The School's Responsibility

The school must list both parents' names and contact information on the child's official school records. Both parents' names and information are required even if others are also listed as emergency contacts or are listed on other school forms.

## Receiving and Sharing School Information

Sometimes one parent may receive important information from the school that will involve the other parent's time with the child. The parent receiving the information is responsible for providing it to the other parent in a timely manner. This could be information about important assignments and deadlines. It could also be information about school activities that will continue into the other parent's time.

