



Using Email to Help Separated Parents Communicate

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Communication between separated or divorced parents can be problematic. Depending on the age, health and circumstances of the child, these parents may find it necessary to communicate with each other anywhere from several times daily to at least weekly. The ties and demands of parenthood require parents to maintain a connection and communicate.

For some parents, unresolved or ongoing conflict cause communications to degenerate, this only leads to more difficulties. With this in mind, several strategies are often suggested, such as telephone contact or written notes via a communication book. Both of these strategies can be problematic.

The telephone requires hearing the emotional tone of the conversation and because of the immediacy of the message, can easily lead to the conversation degenerating. Sometimes one parent will tape the conversations for use in court, but then it becomes questionable if this party goaded the other to increase conflict for the taped conversations. Further, clandestine taping inflames the already bad feelings of the other parent who may seek retribution.

Communication books or notes have the benefit of providing a permanent record and keeps the parents apart, but poses two other concerns. The first is that parents usually rely on the child to act as courier. This places the child directly in the middle of the parental conflict and often subjects the child to the immediate emotional response of the parent as they read the message. Second, if the message is only delivered at the time of access, this makes planning difficult. Quite often, communication requires a back and forth dialogue to accomplish agreements as simple as access arrangements. When using notes or a communication book, the messages often take the form of directives from one parent to the other with the alternate parent feeling either controlled or lacking input into decisions. So, as a solution, this too can contribute to ongoing conflict between parents.

Enter Email. Email provides an alternative communication tool to help parents transmit a message. It allows a thinking or cooling off period prior to replying and provides for a permanent record. The use of email keeps the communication away from the child and removes some of the emotional impact carried by voice.

Because parents can respond back and forth, it also allows for discussion and dialogue and so reduces the risk of one parent just providing directives as the case of the communication book. The email trail can be reviewed if one or the other parent has missed a point and also serves as a clear reference if a parent forgets the content of an agreement. The electronic record, known to both, can easily be printed by either and as such, both are more likely to remain on good behavior knowing the record can be used in court or otherwise be made public.

Next time separated parents in conflict need to chat about their child where conflict exists, try email and consider these guidelines:

1. Stick to the issues
2. Keep the language clean and appropriate. No insults and no name-calling.
3. Prepare and save your message. Wait 1-24 hours to review and edit before sending or replying. Upon reflection, you may want to make changes.
4. Keep a record and back-up these files.
5. Password-protect these files to keep them out of view of your child.
6. Remember, these emails can be used in court and your child may still gain access. Do not act in a way that can be used against you.

Emails are not the same as therapy. As a communication strategy this is not recommended to necessarily make a poor situation better, but it is suggested as a potential solution to keep a poor situation from getting worse. In the event that there are court ordered restrictions on face-to-face or voice contact, email may provide a reasonable solution for parents to still communicate.

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