

Helping separated parents communicate...

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.

For some parents, ongoing conflict can cause communications to degenerate leading to more difficulties. With this in mind several strategies are often suggested such as telephone contact or a communication book. Both of these strategies pose problems.

The telephone requires hearing the emotional tone of the conversation which can easily lead to the conversation degenerating. Sometimes a 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 conversation. Further, clandestine taping inflames the 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 rely on the child as courier. This places the child directly in the middle of the parental conflict and their emotional response as they read the message. Second, if the message is only delivered at the time of access, planning is difficult. Communication requires a dialogue to accomplish agreements as simple as access arrangements. With a communication book, the messages often take the form of directives from one parent to the other with the alternate parent left feeling controlled. 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 messages. It allows for a 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 the emotional impact carried by voice. Because parents can respond back and forth, it also allows for dialogue and so reduces the risk of one parent just providing directives as per the communication book. The

email trail can be reviewed if a parent has missed a point and also serves as a clear reference if a parent forgets the content of an agreement. The electronic record, can easily be printed by either parent and as such, both are more likely to remain on good behaviour knowing the record can be used in court or be made public.

Next time separated parents in conflict need to chat where conflict exists try email, but consider these guidelines:

1. Stick to the issues.
2. Keep the language clean and appropriate.
3. Prepare and save your message. Wait 1 - 24 hours to review and edit before sending.
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. Do not act in a way that can be used against yourself.

As a communication strategy email 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 is court ordered restrictions on face-to-face or voice contact, email may provide a reasonable solution for parents to still communicate.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW

www.yoursocialworker.com
gary@yoursocialworker.com
(905) 628-4847

Gary Direnfeld is a child-behaviour expert, a social worker, and the author of *Raising Kids Without Raising Cane*. Gary not only helps people get along or feel better about themselves, but also enjoys an extensive career in public speaking. He provides insight on issues ranging from child behaviour management and development; to family life; to socially responsible business development. Courts in Ontario, Canada consider Gary an expert on matters pertaining to child development, custody and access, family/marital therapy and social work.

Buy the book:

To order Direnfeld's book, *Raising Kids Without Raising Cane*, send a cheque or money order in the amount of \$12.00 to:

Interaction Consultants,
20 Suter Crescent, Dundas, Ontario, L9H 6R5

Are you the parent of new teen driver? Check out this teen safe driving program: www.ipromiseprogram.com