Before You Send That Message

Separation can make even simple parenting conversations feel emotionally charged. Use this worksheet to slow down, reduce conflict, and keep your child's needs at the centre.

Why this matters: Children benefit most when parents separate relationship conflict from parenting decisions. Effective co-parenting doesn't require agreement on everything — it requires keeping children's needs at the centre, even during difficult moments.

STEP 1 What Happened?

Describe the situation objectively — just the facts.

e.g. "Alex emailed asking to switch weekends."

Your situation:

STEP 2 What Am I Feeling?

Check all that apply:

- ☐ Angry
- ☐ Rejected
- ☐ Afraid
- ☐ Disrespected
- ☐ Overwhelmed
- ☐ Hurt
- ☐ Frustrated
- ☐ Anxious
- ☐ Guilty
- ☐ Sad

Other:

STEP 3 What Story Am I Telling Myself?

When emotions run high, our minds fill in missing information.

"They're trying to control me." • "They don't care about the children."

My thoughts:

STEP 4 What Do I Actually Know?

List only verifiable facts — no interpretations.

Facts:

STEP 5 What Does My Child Need?

If my child were sitting beside me, what would matter most to them?

- ☐ Stability
- ☐ Predictability
- ☐ Reduced conflict
- ☐ Consistency
- ☐ Emotional safety
- ☐ Flexibility
- ☐ Connection with both parents

Other:

STEP 6 Child or Emotion?

My first reaction is:

Does this response:

- ☐ Help solve the problem?
- ☐ Reduce conflict?
- ☐ Support my child?
- ☐ Move toward a solution?

If not, revise before continuing.

STEP 7 Draft Your Response

Keep it:

- ☐ Brief
- ☐ Respectful
- ☐ Child-focused
- ☐ Solution-oriented

My draft:

STEP 8 The 30-Minute Rule

If your emotions are elevated:

- ☐ Wait 30 minutes before sending
- ☐ Re-read your message
- ☐ Remove blame or assumptions
- ☐ Would a judge be comfortable reading this?

Reflection: What kind of co-parent do I want my child to remember me as?

Communication That Harms vs. Communication That Helps

The same situation can be handled in ways that escalate conflict or ways that protect your child's wellbeing. The examples below show the difference. Neither response requires you to agree with your co-parent — only to keep your child's needs at the centre.

Scenario	✗ Hostile / Reactive	✓ Child-Focused / Purposeful
Schedule change request	You always do this at the last minute. I'm not switching weekends — you should have planned better. *Why it harms: Blame and refusal with no alternative*	I can't do this weekend swap, but I'm open to looking at the following weekend if that works for the kids' schedules. *Why it helps: Maintains boundary while offering a child-centred solution*
Child is upset after visit	What did you do to them this time? They always come home like this from your house. *Why it harms: Accusatory; puts child in the middle*	I noticed [child] seemed a bit down after today. Has anything been on their mind? Let's keep an eye on it together. *Why it helps: Invites collaboration; focuses on child's emotional state*
School communication	I shouldn't have to tell you — you'd know if you actually read the newsletters I send. *Why it harms: Implies incompetence; creates resentment*	Just flagging that [child]'s school concert is on the 15th at 7pm. I'll be there and thought you'd want to be too. *Why it helps: Informational; assumes positive co-parenting intent*
Disagreement over rules	You let them do whatever they want. No wonder they don't listen to me. You're undermining everything. *Why it harms: Blaming language; no solution offered*	I've noticed [child] has been struggling with bedtime. Would you be open to a brief call to align on routines? It would really help them. *Why it helps: Focuses on child's need; invites cooperation without attacking*
Financial discussion	I'm not paying for that. You should have consulted me first. You just spend money to spite me. *Why it harms: Assumes bad intent; no path forward*	I'd like to discuss [child]'s tutoring costs. Can we schedule a call this week to agree on how to share this? *Why it helps: Factual, non-blaming; proposes a process*
Child caught in the middle	Tell your dad that if he can't be on time, I'll stop the handovers. *Why it harms: Using the child as a messenger*	[To child:] "I love you. Let me handle anything I need to sort out with Dad directly — that's not your job." *Why it helps: Shields child from adult conflict; models healthy boundaries*
Parenting style conflict	My house, my rules. What you do there is your problem. Just don't expect me to fix it. *Why it harms: Stonewalling; no shared ground offered*	I think we might have different approaches to screen time. I'm not looking to argue — just wondering if there's any overlap we could agree on for the kids' sake. *Why it helps: Acknowledges differences without confrontation; keeps kids central*

The BIFF Test: Before sending any message to your co-parent, ask — is it **B**rief, **I**nformative, **F**riendly, and **F**irm? Messages that pass the BIFF test de-escalate conflict and keep children protected.

These examples are for educational purposes. They are not legal advice. Please consult your lawyer and therapist for guidance specific to your circumstances.