

# Healthy Connections: Tips for Successful Co-Parenting Communication



## What is Co-Parenting?

Co-parenting is a commitment to raising children together, even after separation or divorce, by prioritizing their needs above all else. It requires collaboration and clear communication between parents who may no longer agree on much, but who share a common goal: giving their children the stability and support they need to thrive.

## Common Co-Parenting Styles

Understanding your co-parenting dynamic is a helpful first step toward improving communication. Most co-parenting relationships fall into one of three patterns:

**Cooperative:** The most effective approach, characterized by open communication, mutual respect, and joint decision-making.

**Parallel:** Each parent manages their own household with minimal direct interaction. This can be a workable

option in higher-conflict situations — and for many families, it is the most realistic starting point.

**Conflicted:** Marked by ongoing fighting and undermining. Research consistently shows this pattern is harmful to children's well-being.

Children do better when their parents cooperate and keep conflict to a minimum. Reflecting honestly on where your relationship falls — and being open to growth — is one of the most meaningful things you can do for your child.

## Healthy Co-Parenting Communication Tips

How you communicate with your co-parent directly impacts your children's development. The goal is to keep interactions respectful, child-focused, and free from the dynamics of the past relationship.

- **Plan Ahead.** Anticipate potential friction points — scheduling conflicts, upcoming events, changes in routine — and address them proactively rather than reactively. If you know a holiday schedule is coming up, don't wait until the week before to bring it up.
- **Stay Child-Focused.** Keep every conversation centered on your child's needs. If a topic is not directly relevant to them, it probably does not belong in a co-parenting exchange.
- **Watch Your Tone.** Be mindful of your words, tone, and body language in all interactions — whether in person, by phone, or in writing. How you say something often matters as much as what you say. Even a neutral message can feel hostile if the tone is cold or clipped.
- **Keep Written Communication Brief and Neutral.** Texts and emails should be factual and concise. Avoid language that could be read as accusatory or combative. If you wouldn't want a judge or your child to read it someday, revise it before sending.
- **Don't Respond in the Heat of the Moment.** If a message triggers a strong reaction, give yourself time before responding. A short delay is far better than an exchange you'll regret. It is completely appropriate to say: "That's a good question. Let me think about it and get back to you by the end of the day tomorrow." That is thoughtfulness, not indecision.
- **Consider a Different Approach.** If the same communication patterns keep producing conflict, consider alternatives: a dedicated co-parenting app that keeps records and reduces misunderstandings, a shared calendar for schedules and school events, or communicating primarily in writing to reduce in-person tension. If communication has genuinely broken down, a mediator, parenting coordinator, or family therapist can help restore a workable dynamic. Seeking that help is a sign of strength, not failure.
- **Build a Support Network Outside Your Children.** Process your frustrations with a trusted friend, counselor, or support group. Your children should never serve as emotional support for your feelings about their other parent. And when choosing who to turn to for advice, seek people who support resolution and your children's well-being — not just your own position.

## The Role of a Clear Parenting Plan

Common co-parenting conflicts can often be resolved by having a clear, detailed parenting plan in place. A thorough, easy-to-understand parenting plan removes much of the guesswork and reduces unnecessary arguments. When both parents know exactly what to expect, there is less room for confusion and less to fight about.

The best parenting plans are built around your family's specific situation. Think about what causes tension or confusion right now. Write it down and be sure it is addressed in your parenting plan. Then, think about what might cause tension or confusion in the future and add that, too. The goal is to leave nothing open to interpretation. The more you work out in writing ahead of time, the less you will have to argue about later.

### 20 Key Elements of a Co-Parenting Plan

*A well-thought-out parenting agreement is essential for ensuring both parents are on the same page when raising their children.*

1. Custodial and visitation schedule
2. Communication procedures
3. Financial accountability
4. Enrichment activities
5. Emergency contacts
6. Long-distance parenting
7. Tax issues (children as dependents, etc.)
8. Childcare and educational expenses
9. Medical and mental health responsibilities
10. Appropriate time to introduce new partners
11. Relocation protocols
12. Vacation and holiday schedules
13. Conflict resolution strategies
14. Periodic review of plan elements
15. Establishing rules for babysitters and sleepovers
16. Parenting mediator to resolve disputes
17. Social media rules
18. Written agreement for reimbursement requests
19. What date child support ends
20. Consequences for intentional violation of the agreement

Source: Todd, Carlos, R. (2024), *14 Key Factors to Include in a Co-Parenting Agreement*. <https://parentclassesonline.com/about/>  
Adapted and expanded by Chiquita Miller



Kansas Legal Services offers a free parenting plan form to help you get started. You can find it at <https://www.kansaslegalservices.org/>. Keep in mind that parenting plan laws vary by state, and this article is general guidance only and not legal advice. Work with a licensed attorney to ensure your plan complies with Kansas law and meets your family's needs. Free or low-cost legal help is available across Kansas through Kansas Legal Services.

### Keeping a Children-First Mindset

A children-first mindset means making every decision based on what is best for your child, not on what feels fair or satisfying in the moment. This is one of the hardest and most important shifts a co-parent can make — and it applies regardless of where you fall on the cooperative-to-conflicted spectrum.

#### **Practical ways to put children first:**

- Never use children as messengers — communicate directly with your co-parent about adult matters.
- Do not speak negatively about the other parent in front of your children.
- Actively support your child's relationship with the other parent and encourage connection, not distance.
- Separate your identity as a co-parent from your identity as an ex-partner, because the relationship has changed, but your shared responsibility to your child has not.
- Check in with your children regularly and create space for them to share how they are feeling without pressure or leading questions.
- Where possible, align on core routines — homework time, bedtime, screen time — to provide consistency across both households.

A quick reminder: If you're in a more parallel or conflicted co-parenting dynamic right now, that does not mean improvement is out of reach. Small shifts — a calmer text, a schedule shared in advance, a comment left unsaid — add up over time.

### Moving Forward

Co-parenting is not always easy, but every time you choose communication over conflict and your child's needs over your own frustrations, you are building something that lasts. The goal does not have to be a perfect partnership — it just has to be good enough to give your children the stability they deserve.

Start with one step today. It might be sending a clearer message, planning a schedule further in advance, or simply pausing before you respond. Your efforts now shape their confidence tomorrow.

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