Co-Parent Communication Protocol

A practical guide for communicating effectively after separation

About this guide

Good co-parenting communication is not about being best friends with your former spouse. It is about being reliable, child-focused, and businesslike enough that your children can move between two households with ease and without being caught in the middle of adult conflict.

This protocol sets out practical expectations around how and when to communicate. It is not a legal document — it is a tool you and your co-parent can adapt and use voluntarily.

1. Choose the right channel

Choosing the right channel reduces misunderstandings and keeps a useful written record. As a starting point:

Channel	Best for	Response window
Parenting app (e.g. OurFamilyWizard, TalkingParents)	Routine scheduling, parenting decisions, information sharing, written record	2 business days for non-urgent matters
Email	Longer explanations, attachments (reports, medical records)	2 business days
Text / phone	Same-day logistics only (e.g., “running 10 minutes late”)	Same day — urgent only
Emergency contact	Urgent safety or medical situations	Immediately; call 911 if life-threatening

Many separating families find it helpful to agree on one primary channel — usually a parenting app or dedicated email address — for all routine parenting communication. This keeps things organised and creates a shared record both parents can refer to.

2. Response time expectations

Knowing when to expect a reply reduces anxiety and prevents escalation. A reasonable starting framework:

- Routine matters (scheduling, school updates, activities): respond within 2 business days.
- Requests for a schedule change: respond within 2 business days with a yes, no, or “I need more time to consider this.”
- Immediate Medical or wellbeing concerns: respond within a few hours during waking hours.
- Emergencies: call immediately. If there is a risk to life, call 911 first.

Silence is not an answer. If you need more time, say so briefly. A short “I’ve received this and will get back to you by [date]” is all that is needed.

Avoid sending messages late at night or expecting immediate responses outside of normal hours, except in genuine emergencies.

3. How to make a request

Be specific: use who, what, when, where

Vague requests create confusion and conflict. A clear request answers four questions:

- **Who:** Who is involved (which child or children)?
- **What:** What are you asking for (a schedule change, a decision, information)?
- **When:** When does it apply (specific dates and times)?
- **Where:** Where relevant — location, drop-off point, etc.

Example — comparing a vague vs. specific request

Instead of:

“Can we change the schedule next week? It’s really important.”

Try:

“I’d like to swap parenting days next week. Could Mia be with me Tuesday 8 Nov and Thursday 10 Nov, and with you Monday 7 Nov and Wednesday 9 Nov instead? Please let me know by Friday 4 Nov.”

Keep it BIFF

When you write a message, aim for BIFF: Brief, Informative, Friendly, and Firm.

- Brief: one topic per message; short enough to read in under two minutes.
- Informative: stick to facts; leave out history, blame, or emotional commentary.
- Friendly: a neutral, civil tone — not warm if that feels forced, but not hostile either.
- Firm: say what you need clearly; you don’t need to over-explain or apologise.

Responding to a request

When you receive a request, you have three honest options:

- Yes — "That works for me."
- No — "That doesn’t work. I’m available on [alternative dates] instead."
- Not yet — "I need to check and will get back to you by [date]."

Avoid non-answers, lengthy justifications, or counter-attacks. Keep the focus on the practical question in front of you.

4. What belongs in co-parent messages

Co-parent communication works best when it stays focused on the children. As a guide:

Appropriate topics

- Children's health appointments and medical decisions.
- School events, reports, teacher communications.
- Scheduling: regular parenting time, changes, holidays.
- Extracurricular activities, costs, and consent.
- Travel plans and contact information when out of town with the children.
- Changes to routines that affect both households.

Topics to keep out of co-parent messages

- The separation, financial disputes, or legal proceedings.
- Your feelings about the other parent's choices or lifestyle.
- Complaints about events that have already passed, unless directly relevant to a current decision.
- Anything you wouldn't want a child to accidentally read.

5. Ground rules for respectful communication

- Write to your co-parent the way you would write to a colleague you don't know well: politely, clearly, and about the matter at hand.
- Do not copy the children on parenting messages or read them aloud to children.
- Do not use children as messengers for anything logistical or serious.
- Refer to the other parent as "your mum" or "your dad" when speaking with children, not by name or as "my ex."
- Save difficult conversations for a scheduled call or mediation session, not a string of back-and-forth messages.
- If you receive a message that feels threatening or harassing, save it and seek advice. Do not escalate.

6. When communication gets hard

Even with the best intentions, some conversations are difficult. A few strategies that help:

- Wait before replying. You do not have to respond to a message the moment it arrives.
- Reply to the request, not the tone. If the message was hostile but contained a legitimate question, answer the question.
- If you're stuck in a pattern of conflict, ask your mediator for help. That is exactly what the mediation process is for.
- If one parent is consistently not responding, keep a record and raise it through your mediator or lawyer.