

communication is EVERYTHING

LEARN TO POSITIVELY COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR CO-PARENT

The Collaborative
Co-Parent
GABRIELLA POMARE

“Co-parenting. It’s not a competition between two homes. It’s a collaboration of parents doing what is best for the kids.”

HEATHER HETCHLER

Let’s start the journey together...

THE FOUR PILLARS of healthy parenting communication



1

LISTEN.

Chapter one will explore the need to listen - actively listen. Have an open mind to what is being said and ask questions if you need to better understand the issue raised. By actively listening - we become better at then responding and negotiating.

2

PAUSE.

Chapter two teaches us not to jump in to respond. Stop and take a time out. Go away or take a few moments to yourself to digest what you have been told.

3

REFLECT.

Chapter three reminds us that part of taking time out is the need to digest and reflect. We become better communicators when we think about the topic raised, weigh up the issue and think carefully about the best way forward.

4

RESPOND.

The last part of our preview, **Chapter four**, gives us the rules and tools for positively and effectively responding and getting the outcome you desire.

Parents need to keep
talking, discussing,
sharing. As children grow,
dynamics may change...

BUT THE NEED TO EFFECTIVELY
COMMUNICATE REMAINS THE
SAME



“Today, our relationship might be different but our goals for our children are still the same.”

There is little doubt that the end of a relationship is an incredibly distressing and emotional time. You will go through a whirlwind of feelings, from sadness, to anger, to guilt, to regret and even a desire to go back to the way things were. The biggest challenge is how to move forward when you have children and give yourself the space to work through the rollercoaster of feelings when you still need to either see or hear from your ex-spouse or ex-lover. How do you shift your mindset from couple to co-parents and how do you work out the ins and outs of communicating effectively together, despite the anger or hurt?

By implementing tools to set boundaries around your communication, what seems difficult at the start, will become second nature in no time. Take it from me - this doesn't happen overnight. Communicating with an ex is tough - and seems impossible in the first few days, weeks, months and even, I would say years. But you will get there, and it will become easier - and trust me, your kids will thank you for protecting them from the conflict and exemplifying for them what healthy communication looks like. This will model for them how to communicate with others as they grow and develop and will set a roadmap for your children to avoid arguments, speak with respect, listen with understanding and reflect on their responses.

So where to from here? The first part I suppose, comes down to what method of communication works best? This will undoubtedly differ from family to family depending on circumstances, level of conflict, risk issues and otherwise just the topic that needs discussing. It is important in the early days to set boundaries around what issue requires what type of communication. If it's urgent (think broken bones or emergency room type stuff) a phone call is always best. If it's to discuss a change to parenting arrangements, routine, or your child's development, an email might be best. And if it's to do with day to day issues including ballet shoes being left at the other house, or an upcoming school play, a text message is likely to do the trick.



LISTEN

CHAPTER ONE

The first thing to remember when it comes to the first pillar of effective communication, is to have respect for where each of you sit in terms of the separation. If you were the person who ended the relationship, it is likely you have had a little more time to process and come to terms with your new reality. Pause to remember that your ex-partner is likely still in the grieving stage, and this really needs to be taken into account when starting to communicate again. You are both on this new journey from parenting together as a couple, to co-parenting amongst two homes. The dynamic has changed, and most likely your communication style will have changed.

When starting a conversation with your co-parent, it is so important in the early days to make sure that you do not boast about your new life, or put down their lifestyle choices or changes. Let the other parent know they have not been left behind, but rather you are both navigating this new separated life with the common goal of ensuring your child feels safe, secure, loved and respected.



This is where the need to listen comes in. Whether it's a face-to-face conversation, an email, a text message or a phone call - let the other person speak...and finish. Don't jump in, don't speak over each other and remember *you are speaking with your child's other parent not an enemy. Your relationship with this person is not going to end tomorrow and you need to find a way to make it work for the sake of your child.*

Listening, however, doesn't mean simply keeping silent and letting the other person finish. For communication to be effective, you need to actively hear and understand what your co-parent is saying. This means actively following, digesting the message being made, engaging in terms of a nod or smile, and properly taking in the words being used so that you can go away and pause and reflect (*our next two chapters!*). Your role as a listener is ultimately to take in the message and properly understand. What I often find beneficial is to paraphrase the other person to ensure the right message is coming across. For example, "*It sounds like you are saying...*" or "*am I right to understand...*". This helps to ensure the wrong message is not being communicated which can often encourage an unhelpful or inflammatory response.

You can't go wrong by showing interest in what other people say and making them feel important. In other words, the better you listen, the more you'll be listened to."
Jarvis, T.

Just as listening means paying attention and showing respect to the person who is speaking, it also means ignoring emotionally inflammatory language (whether in person, by email or in text). The best part of actually listening is that you get to pick and choose the information that gets to be stored in your brain for later. We know that storing aggressive or emotional conversations does nothing for our mental health and wellbeing - so the best thing to do in these situations is to ignore, nod and move on (or leave the conversation if required).

Similarly, as a parent, it is imperative that while it is important for you to listen to your co-parent, your children should be kept out of any child-related or adult type communication. It is your first and foremost role to protect your child from witnessing, overhearing, listening and participating in any communication which may involve them or negatively impact their relationship with their other parent. If your co-parent tries to start communication during a changeover, end the conversation and let them know you will reconvene at a later time without your child present. Password protect your emails and text messages and don't share these with your child - even when emotional.



PAUSE

CHAPTER TWO

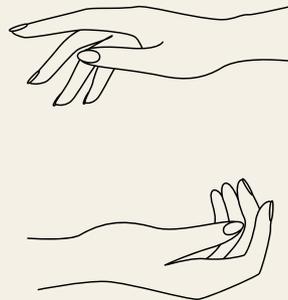
Pause. Don't shoot from the hip. Take a deep breath. Digest. Easier said than done right? But, there is a reason I am telling you to pause or stop before responding. Experience tells us that when you are communicating with someone you probably would rather not ever speak to again, you are already on guard. You will feel emotional and, even positive or nice things, may sound hurtful or aggressive. Just speaking with your co-parent might catch you off guard. The best thing you can do in this situation, and any time you are in communication with your co-parent is to P-A-U-S-E. Imagine how much better your responses would be, and the flow of your conversation may be, if you take a little bit of time to process before you respond.



It is not for me to tell you to take three seconds, three minutes, three hours or even three days to respond (the nature of the communication will often tell you that). If you receive an email that, for example, is asking you to consider a change to your parenting routine or schedule, or proposing an overseas trip with your child, you might want to take a few days to process before then reflecting and responding. If you wake up to an SMS from your co-parent accusing you for forgetting to put sunscreen on your child during your visit to the beach over the weekend, you might want to take a few hours before angrily typing back a response. And if you are having a face to face chat with your co-parent, or had scheduled a time for a phone catch-up, and you are taken by surprise by a request, or have been given some information about your co-parents new living arrangements (but you don't have three days to respond), take a breath, take a few seconds, explain you need a minute and take time for yourself. Everyone deserves a minute - and your brain (and probably your heart) will thank you for it in the long run!

“Effective parenting has nothing to do with pointing out our faults and everything to do with working out solutions.”
—R. Knost

People often say that when you feel frustrated or triggered even, it is best to be silent. This is another reason the ‘pause’ is so important. This is particularly relevant during the early days or weeks following a separation, when emotions are flying high and you are unsure of your future, and when communications with an ex-partner can seem impossible. Emotion takes over. You want to yell, scream, tell them all the things they did wrong, all the hurt they have caused. At the same time though, you need to organise school drop offs and pick ups, enrolment in extra-curricular activities, changeovers, medications, sleep routines and work out the way forward. By implementing these tools, you can have these much needed conversations without angst or anxiety. The best part of communication post-separation is that you have the control. You can decide how long you need to stop and take a time out before coming back with an answer.



Too often we send an email without thinking, we fight back by text message or we let our anger get the better of us in a difficult face-to-face conversation. We all know better, but these automatic reactions continue happening. It is not until we are consciously listening and become aware of our need for a pause, that we will actually stop ourselves from reacting and instead move on to reflect. The power of a pause gives us the time and space to see an issue clearly, to take control of the situation and to decide how we respond. The power of that decision is everything. Without a pause, we instinctively react without any real thought or consideration of the most appropriate way forward. And with that often comes regret. The power of the pause allows us to be aware, to be objective and to have real perspective.



REFLECT

CHAPTER THREE



The beauty of the pause that we learned about in the previous chapter is that it gives us time to breathe, contemplate and overall reflect on what we have been told. With time to reflect, we are able to compose ourselves, manage emotions and feel emotionally safe during our communications. The key to reflection is the ability to place boundaries around the manner of communication and to take back control over the nature of conversation. You may have been thrown a series of demands about forthcoming school holiday time, or questions about your new relationship and how and when that person interacts with your child. You get to choose how you respond, how you steer the next wave of communication and by reflecting, you are taking back the power to understand, obtain perspective, think more flexibly and minimise possible conflict.

During your period of reflection, weigh up the pros and cons of the topic. It is always important to be open minded and see the issue from several perspectives. It can often be helpful to toss around ideas with your nearest and dearest who can offer a third-party view and hopefully sensible and productive advice. Often when you are too close to the core of an issue, emotion takes over. A close friend or family member might be able to see reason a little easier and sensibly look for alternative options for you to raise.

It can often also help to put yourself in your child's shoes. What really is in their best interest? Reflection means considering not what will make you happiest, but will be the best possible outcome for your child.

Reflection can be harder depending on the type of communication. There is little doubt that when faced with an in person discussion or a surprise phone call, you often feel the need to immediately respond without any real consideration of what has been put to you. It is a great idea that you work with your co-parent on a roadmap for communication that will work for you. It will often depend on the context or issue, but with appropriate communication protocols - you can build in time to pause and reflect before needing to respond.

In my experience, co-parents manage communication best when they have agreed rules around conversations and the modes of communication to be used.

“Make a positive difference in your children’s lives. Act and speak about your co-parent with respect and integrity.” — Allison Pescosolido

Where possible, try to implement the following modes of communication that will allow you to have more time to think and really consider your responses.

Planned meetings

With a ‘meeting’ planned, you can set an agenda and take time to reflect on the important issues to be discussed. These might happen biannually when you need to chat about more important issues such as international travel, school, or behavioural issues. A public setting is often useful to avoid rising tempers and risk of conflict.

Email

Email works great when you want to put a more difficult proposal to your co-parent. Remember to use polite, respectful and ‘business like’ language. Use a descriptive subject line and break your email up into discussion points. This often helps to achieve a more productive reply and keeps the conversation flowing. Email is also great because you can open, read, pause and reflect on your own terms and in your own time.

Text Message

Messages are great for urgent issues or times when you need a quick response. Again, try to keep your language conflict free. A text is not a way to shame another parent, criticise or blame. Instead, it is a productive way to inform your co-parent if you are running late to changeover, to enquire about lost school shoes or to ask for help with school-drop off last minute. When you are the recipient of a text message, have the respect to read and determine how urgent the need for a response is. There is nothing worse than ignoring a message that required a rather timely response. If you have read it, and it is straightforward and does not require long reflection - respond as soon as possible and be done with the issue. Conflict free texting is key.

Parenting Apps

In this modern age, co-parents are blessed to have several phone apps available to download which provide a safe space for parents to communicate. This is particularly important for parents whose relationship ended on bad terms, is high conflict or where there is a history of violence. Unlike traditional text messages or email, apps can you when messages are sent/received and whether they have been read. Exchanging messages in a neutral and secure environment often reduces the risk of conflict and allows parents to feel safer and able to open up and communicate effectively. Through your co-parenting app, you can share photos, events, newsletters and the like. You can also take time to receive information, reflect on it and think about the best way forward before reengaging with the app.





RESPOND

CHAPTER FOUR

As difficult as it may seem at first, the key to healthy co-parent communication is that it is civil, courteous and respectful. Remember, you are modelling what a positive relationship looks like to your child.

What often works best (when engaging in email, text message or on an app) is to draft a response and sit on it. I suppose you could say that this is a blend of reflect and respond. This is particularly important if you have received an inflammatory communication and you automatically draft a response during a state of heightened emotion. I often suggest sending the text to a friend, or saving your email to drafts. Take some time to go away and reflect. Then come back and you will more likely than not re-draft your response to something passive and effective. We all experience the desire to “fight fire with fire” - but responding in a civil and respectful manner will always achieve your desired outcome more effectively. If the initial communication is inflammatory - you are probably best to ignore and instead craft a response which is to the point, informative and sticks to the issue at hand. There is no place for emotion in business-like communications (which is often what works best following separation). Think about it - would you send your boss or colleague a highly emotional text or email when in a state of anger? Probably not. Your child won't benefit from this type of communication between their parents either.

Some tips: use plain language, be as pleasant as you can, avoid CAPS, keep your communication informative and to the point, and avoid intrusive questions.



How you structure your communication will often depend on the message to be delivered. Do you need to pass on information? Are you looking to resolve an issue that has been on the back burner about your child's schooling or wellbeing? Or are you merely communicating to make a point or start an argument. If it is the latter - do not send. These types of communications are the ones that should be sent to a friend and deleted - or stored away in your draft emails as a reminder of unproductive and unhelpful communications.

You will likely find that as the months and years go on, you require less time to pause and reflect and pleasant, productive communications will become easier and more regular. Communication about big issues will seem less arduous once you have both mastered the four pillars to effective communication.

Experience tells us that the best responses steer clear of a need to defend yourself or justify your position. If you want to take your child on a holiday during the other parent's time, a simple *"I would like to take Rose to Hawaii during the first week of the school holidays - can we talk about swapping weeks?"* will promote a better response than including a spiel about how you haven't been on holidays forever, that Rose has been down because of the separation, or that you need some time out from life. The background story often encourages a high conflict and emotionally driven response, which can in turn lead to an argument.

Try to keep your communications child-focused. Usually, the only reason you need to communicate following a separation is because of your child. So keep that special boy or girl at the forefront of your mind when composing your responses. With a child-focused response, you are more likely than not to achieve a child-focused outcome.

If a response is instead required face-to-face during a conversation, or over the phone, your body language and tone of voice is more important than anything. A few tips: avoid the eye roll, don't laugh or smirk, there is no need for raised voices, and if you can't compose yourself, it is often best to walk away.

"Don't use communication to bring up past problems. Use healthy communication to model a happy and secure family for your child".

So, why improve your communication ?

BECAUSE IT'S ABOUT THE CHILDREN

Above everything, it is important to remember that it is your most important role as a parent, and indeed more so as a co-parent, to protect your child from hurt, upset, confusion and feelings of guilt. When parents are unable to communicate effectively and healthily, children are too often dragged into adult conflict; forced to pick sides, to send messages, to keep secrets. What parents often don't realise is the significant negative impact this is having on their child's future development. The signs aren't always immediately obvious, but social science tells us that children turn into teenagers who turn into adults that have difficulties forming relationships, communicating, concentrating and generally coping with life, when they have been embroiled in unnecessary conflict during their early years.

Children should not be made to feel like they need to align with either parent. They should not be used as messengers to discuss changeovers or routine, and they should not be involved in, or placed in hearing distance of any communication which negatively discusses their other parent. Children of separation need reassurance, love and stability. They need to see their parents communicating despite no longer being together. Children need to know that although their family unit may have changed, they still belong to a family and their life won't be majorly disrupted.

You have the power to change how you communicate and to give your child the gift of harmony, unity and security.



About the Author

THE COLLABORATIVE CO-PARENT
GABRIELLA POMARE

A passionate, contemporary family lawyer and separated mum of a gorgeous 3-year-old boy. With a passion for both writing and family law, I have had experience spanning across both media and law during a dynamic and rewarding career so far. The daughter of a family lawyer, I was always inspired to make a change in the world of separation and divorce.

I worked in journalism while I was studying law, writing for publications including *Cosmopolitan* and *Take 5*, before transitioning into law upon graduating. From the get-go, I wanted to experience family law at the coal front, so I jumped into the role of Associate to a Justice of the Family Court of Australia. The role allowed me to see the best and worst from that side of the bench, before moving to private practice. I then joined my dad, who is an established accredited specialist family lawyer.

Under my vision, the firm grew from a sole practitioner practice to a modern, boutique firm with three offices. I was a finalist in the 2018 Lawyers Weekly 30 under 30 Awards, nominated in the 2019 Lawyers Weekly Australian Law Awards as a “Rising Star of the Year”, 2022 Lawyers Weekly Partner of the Year Awards “Family Law” and 2023 Lawyers Weekly Partner of the Year Awards “Family Law” and Women in Law Awards “Partner of the Year – SME”.

I separated at 31 years of age and started co-parenting my then 1 year old son, ‘Teddy’. I instinctively knew I had to find a way effectively co parent. Through my experience working with separating families and navigating the co-parenting world myself for the first time, I gained a passion for assisting separated families to help them “collaboratively co-parent” and work on rebuilding their family unit, albeit separated. My motivation is uncoupling does not have to equate to breaking up the family unit. Instead, we learned to effectively work together, and I found my passion for encouraging the possibility that separated parents could jointly grow resilient, secure children of divorce.

Last tips...

FROM A FAMILY LAWYER.

This isn't a book which is purporting to give legal advice. I'm not here to tell you what is right or wrong from a lawyers perspective. I am however an experienced family lawyer and have helped many families through their separation to better co-parent and communicate more effectively. Why? Because ending up in the Court system and being involved in expensive and protracted litigation doesn't help anyone.

Lawyers can be an important source for encouraging and facilitating communication, particularly during the early days. Lawyers aren't always adversarial and (believe it or not!) do not always encourage a fight. They are often a useful point of contact and person to bounce ideas off when you are unsure about your responses to communications.

There is definitely a growing new trend for lawyers to be more collaborative and to work with their clients on the separation journey. It is often your lawyer who sets the foundation for future communications with your co-parent (if you have engaged with one). For that reason, remind your lawyer to set a strong but very respectful tone in communications. As lawyers, we are able to take the emotion out of the decision making process and communicate effectively about issues that arise at the start of a separation.

To assist with the 'pause' and 'reflect', I often get my clients to send me emails they have drafted during an emotionally driven time - better sent to me than to their ex. This gives them time to calm down, gain perspective, and then make a decision on their own to send a calmer, more neutral response to achieve their desired outcome.



