

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations



When a child repeats untrue narratives from the other parent, it's important to respond in a **calm, neutral manner, avoiding defensiveness**. The goal is to **plant seeds of critical thinking** while validating the child's feelings and encourage trust. Here's how you could respond effectively.

General Framework for Responses

1. **Acknowledge their feelings** which shows you're listening and care about their perspective.
2. **Gently challenge the narrative** by Encouraging them to think critically without directly calling the other parent a liar.
3. **Affirm your love and support** by reinforcing your commitment to the child.

Examples of Responses

1. "You're a liar."

"It sounds like you've heard something that upset you. I always try to be truthful with you. Can we talk about what's on your mind?"

2. "You've never been there for me."

"I hear that you feel like I haven't been there, and that must hurt. I've always tried to be there for you, and I'd like to understand why it feels different to you."

3. "You are abusive."

"I would never want to hurt you or anyone else. Can you share what makes you feel this way so we can talk about it?"

4. "You only think of yourself."

"It seems like you're feeling upset with me. I try to make choices that are good for us both, but I'd like to understand what's making you feel this way."

5. "You are only trying to buy my love."

"I give you gifts because I care about you and want to celebrate special times, like your birthday. My love isn't something I need to buy, it's always here for you."

6. "My [Dad/Mum] has a bigger family; I'd rather spend Christmas there."

"I understand you enjoy spending time with your [Dad/Mum's] family—it's wonderful that you

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

have such a big family there. Our time together matters too, and I'd like to make Christmas special for us as well."

7. "You only want us for child support."

"I'm sorry if it feels like that. I spend time with you because I love you and want to be part of your life—that's the most important thing to me."

8. "You're always creating problems."

"I hear that it feels like I'm creating problems, and I'm sorry you feel that way. My goal is to spend time with you and make things better, not harder."

9. "You don't want me to spend time with [Dad/Mum]."

"I understand why it might feel that way, but that's not true. I think it's great that you spend time with [Dad/Mum]. I just want to have some quality time with you too because I love being with you."

10. "You always talk bad about [Dad/Mum]."

"I'm sorry if it seems that way. I try to avoid saying anything hurtful about [Dad/Mum] because I know how important they are to you. If it feels like I'm defending myself, it's only because I want you to understand my side too."

11. "You had an affair." (If this isn't the case)

"I understand why you might think that, but that's not what happened. I started seeing someone after [Dad/Mum] and I decided to separate. Relationships can be complicated, but I've always tried to do what's best for us."

12. "You need to stop court." (the other parent isn't encouraging a relationship, and you have no other choice)

"I wish we didn't have to go to court, too. I'm doing this because I love you and want to make sure we can have a relationship, even when things are difficult."

13. "You abused me my whole life." (Not the case, if the other parent is telling half-truths, catastrophising non-abusive events and twisting stories to suit their narrative.)

"I'm really sorry you feel that way. I've always tried to be a good parent to you. Can we talk about what's making you feel this way so I can understand better?"

14. Calling you by your first name in a derogatory tone.

"I hear you're upset with me but calling me by my name instead of 'Mum/Dad' makes me feel sad. I'd like us to talk with respect, even when we don't agree."

15. "You need to give [Mum/Dad] money." (And you're already paying child support)

"I understand you've heard that, but I already pay child support and do my best to take care of you. Money isn't the most important thing—I'd love to focus on spending time together instead."

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

Additional Tips

- **Avoid correcting your child directly** – Instead of saying "That's not true," gently introduce your perspective in a way that allows them to question the narrative.
- **Avoid blaming the other parent** – This could alienate the child further or make them feel caught in the middle.
- **Focus on the relationship** – Reinforce that you're there for them and want to understand their feelings.
- **Calmly clarify misunderstandings** – Focus on facts but avoid over-explaining or becoming defensive.
- **Reaffirm your love and intentions** – Consistently centre your responses on your care and desire for a relationship with your child.
- **Set respectful boundaries** – Address disrespectful behaviour calmly without escalating conflict.

Self-Care Conversation Starters

These are gentle and non-intrusive, aiming to introduce self-care practices without pressure.

1. **"What's one thing that makes you feel really calm or happy, even when things feel tough?"**
 - **Follow-up:** *"Maybe we can do that together or find something similar you'd enjoy."*
2. **"If you could create a perfect day for yourself, what would it look like?"**
 - **Follow-up:** *"What part of that could we try to make happen this week?"*
3. **"Have you ever tried something like journaling, drawing, or music to help you when you're feeling overwhelmed?"**
 - **Follow-up:** *"Sometimes expressing things in those ways can feel really freeing."*
4. **"How do you feel when you spend time outdoors or in nature? Would you like to go for a walk or visit a park sometime?"**
 - **Follow-up:** *"Being in nature can really help clear your mind when you're stressed."*
5. **"Who's someone (real or a character) you admire? What do they do to stay strong or calm when things get hard?"**
 - **Follow-up:** *"Maybe we can take inspiration from them together."*

Self-care conversations – Keep them gentle and non-preachy, allowing the child to explore ideas without pressure.

Distractor Conversations

These aim to shift the focus away from conflict and encourage engagement in neutral or enjoyable topics.

1. **"If you could travel anywhere in the world right now, where would it be? What's the first thing you'd do when you got there?"**
 - **Follow-up:** *"Let's look up some cool facts about that place later!"*
2. **"What's the funniest or most random thing you've seen or heard this week?"**
 - **Follow-up:** *"That sounds hilarious! Want to find some more funny videos or memes together?"*

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

3. **"Have you ever thought about designing your own game, movie, or book? What would it be about?"**
 - **Follow-up:** *"That's such a cool idea. Let's sketch out some ideas for it!"*
4. **"If animals could talk, which one do you think would have the funniest voice or personality?"**
 - **Follow-up:** *"Let's imagine what our favourite animals might say to us!"*
5. **"What's one thing you've always wanted to learn how to do? Would you ever want to try it out together?"**
 - **Follow-up:** *"Maybe we could look into some fun ways to learn it."*

Distractor conversation – Match the tone to the child's interests and preferences to make them more engaging and natural.

Important Note: Remember to incorporate self-care practices into your daily routines.

Boundary-Setting Around Interference

When dealing with boundary-setting around interference from the other parent, it's important to remain calm, focus on maintaining quality time, and frame the boundaries in a way that prioritises the child's well-being. Here are some tools and strategies for setting these boundaries.

1. Setting Boundaries Around Calls and Texts

- **Explain Your Intentions to the Child:**
"I want us to have uninterrupted quality time together. It's important for us to focus on our time when we're together."
- **Set Specific Rules for Contact:**
"I know it's important for you to stay in touch with [Dad/Mum], but let's agree on a time for calls, like after dinner. That way, we can enjoy our time together without too many interruptions."
- **Frame It as Balanced for Both Parents:**
"Just like I don't interrupt your time with [Dad/Mum], I'd like the same when you're with me. It's about making our time special."

2. Addressing Overwhelming Video Calls

- **Introduce Limits for Screen Time:**
"I notice video calls can take a lot of our time. How about we set aside one specific time for a call during your stay, so the rest of the time is about us?"
- **Empower the Child to Self-Regulate:**
"It's okay to say, 'I'm spending time with Mum/Dad right now. Can we talk later?' I can help you if that feels tricky."

3. Counteracting "White-anting" Behaviour (undermining or sabotaging someone or something from within)

- **Validate Without Competing:**
"I'm glad you enjoy time with [Dad/Mum]. I've planned something special for us too because our time is just as important."

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

- **Stay Neutral and Non-Defensive:**

"Every family has their own way of doing things. What's most important is that we enjoy the plans we have together."

- **Emphasise the Child's Needs:**

"Our arrangement is designed to make sure you get the best of both worlds. Let's focus on what makes you happy while you're here."

4. Tools for Addressing Interference

- **Create a Structured Communication Plan with the Other Parent (if possible):**

Politely but firmly explain:

"Our time together is important for [child's name] and their stability. Let's agree on specific times for communication so it doesn't disrupt their routine."

If direct communication isn't possible, document the interference to bring it up through appropriate channels, such as family mediation.

- **Teach the Child to Balance Loyalty Pressures:**

"It's okay to enjoy time with both of us without feeling like you have to choose. Your happiness is what matters most."

- **Model Respectful Boundaries:**

Avoid retaliating by interrupting the other parent's time, as it reinforces poor boundary-setting behaviour.

5. Scripted Responses to the Child

- **When They Bring Up the Other Parent's "Better" Plans:**

"It sounds like you're excited about those plans! I've got something fun planned for us too. Let's make the most of our time together."

- **When They're Distracted by Calls or Texts:**

"I know it's nice to hear from [Dad/Mum], but let's finish our game/movie/dinner first. You can call back afterward."

6. Teach Assertive Communication to the Child

- **Help them say something like:**

"I'm spending time with Mum/Dad right now, but I'll call you later."

This gives them permission to set their own boundaries and alleviates pressure.

Angry and Defensive

If the child is angry and defensive when discussing boundaries or dealing with interference, it's important to de-escalate the situation, validate their feelings, and maintain a calm, firm stance. Here are strategies to handle such moments.

1. De-Escalate and Validate Feelings

- **Acknowledge Their Emotions:**

"I can see you're upset, and that's okay. It's normal to feel that way when things are confusing or stressful."

- **Avoid Reacting Emotionally:**

Stay calm and avoid taking the anger personally, even if it feels directed at you.

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

2. Shift the Focus to Their Needs

- **Ask Questions to Show You Care:**
"What's making you feel this way? I want to understand so we can figure it out together."
 - **Empathise with Their Position:**
"It must be hard feeling pulled in different directions. I want to make this time as easy and enjoyable for you as possible."
-

3. Maintain Boundaries Firmly but Kindly

- **Reframe Boundaries as Protecting Their Time:**
"I set these limits because I care about you and want us to have special time together, just like you have with [Dad/Mum]."
 - **Deflect Anger Without Backing Down:**
If they're upset about a rule (e.g., limited calls):
"I get that you're frustrated. It's not about stopping you from talking to [Dad/Mum]; it's about making sure you get the best of both worlds—quality time here and there."
-

4. Stay Neutral Toward the Other Parent

Even if the child defends the other parent, avoid getting drawn into a conflict about them:

- **Non-Defensive Response:**
"It's okay to love both of us and spend time with both of us. I'll never ask you to choose."
 - **Redirect Back to the Present Moment:**
"Right now, I'd like us to focus on enjoying our time together. What's something you'd like to do today?"
-

5. Provide Reassurance and Connection

- **Affirm Your Commitment:**
"I'm here for you no matter what, even when things feel tough between us. My love doesn't change."
 - **Use Calming Techniques:**
Suggest a break if emotions are too high:
"Let's take a moment to cool off, and we can talk more when we're both feeling calmer."
-

6. Practical Responses to Angry Statements

Here are examples of responses to specific defensive or angry comments:

- **"You just don't want me to talk to [Dad/Mum]!"**
"That's not true. I want you to have a good relationship with [Dad/Mum], just like I want us to have one too. Let's agree on a time for calls so you don't feel rushed or interrupted."
- **"You're ruining my life by stopping me from doing what I want!"**
"I hear that you're feeling really upset. My goal isn't to ruin anything—it's to make sure we have time together that's good for both of us."

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

- **"You only care about yourself!"**

"I understand why you might feel that way, but I promise I care deeply about you. Let's talk about what's bothering you so we can work it out together."

7. Follow Up After Calm Has Returned

Once the child has cooled down, revisit the conversation gently to reaffirm your intentions:

- ***"I know we had a tough moment earlier. I just want you to know how much I care about you, and I'm here to listen anytime."***

Calm the Waters

Incorporating calming activities into tense or emotional conversations can help the child feel more at ease and create a safer space for communication. Here are some strategies and examples.

1. Use Physical Activities to Reduce Tension

Children, especially those with heightened emotions or sensory needs, often respond well to movement.

- **Go for a Walk:**
"Let's take a walk while we talk. Sometimes moving helps me think better."
- **Do a Shared Activity:**
"Want to play catch or kick the ball while we chat? It might make it easier to talk."

Why it works: Movement can help release pent-up energy and reduce the intensity of emotions.

2. Engage in Calming Sensory Activities

Offer a soothing sensory experience during the conversation.

- **Fidget or Stress Toys:**
"Here's a squishy ball or fidget toy if you'd like to use it while we talk."
- **Drawing or Colouring Together:**
"Let's colour while we chat. You can tell me about your favourite colours or designs."
- **Play with Kinetic Sand or Clay:**
"Here's some sand/clay. It's fun to play with while we talk. Want me to join?"

Why it works: Sensory activities can help regulate emotions by grounding the child in the present moment.

3. Incorporate Mindful Breathing or Relaxation

Simple techniques can calm emotions before or during the conversation.

- **Breathe Together:**
"Let's try taking a few deep breaths together. In through the nose, out through the mouth. It helps me calm down when I'm feeling stressed."
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:**
"Want to try squeezing your hands really tight and then letting go? It can help let out some of the frustration."

Why it works: Mindful breathing and relaxation help the body shift out of a fight-or-flight state.

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

4. Engage in Creative or Playful Distraction

Sometimes redirecting focus can reduce defensiveness and open up space for connection.

- **Draw Together:**
"Want to draw something together? We could each draw our favourite animal or a funny cartoon."
- **Storytelling:**
"Let's make up a silly story together. I'll start with one sentence, and you add the next."

Why it works: Creative activities allow the child to express themselves indirectly while reducing stress.

5. Provide Choices for Control

Offering a sense of control can defuse resistance and anger.

- **Choose the Setting:**
"Would you like to talk here, outside, or while we do something fun?"
- **Pick the Activity:**
"Would you rather do some drawing, listen to music, or take a walk while we chat?"

Why it works: Giving choices helps the child feel empowered rather than controlled.

6. Build in a Transition Ritual

Having a short ritual to start the conversation can make it less intimidating.

- **Start with Gratitude:**
"Let's each say one thing we're thankful for before we talk. I'll go first."
- **Share a Snack Together:**
"Let's grab some fruit or a snack before we talk. Eating together can help us relax."

Why it works: Rituals help establish a calm, predictable start to potentially emotional conversations.

7. Use Positive Physical Touch (if appropriate)

For children who respond well to physical affection, gentle gestures can help them feel safe.

- **Offer a side hug or put a hand on their shoulder:**
"I'm here for you, and I love you."

Why it works: Positive touch releases calming hormones and reinforces your care.

Example Integration in a Tense Moment

- **The child is angry and defensive:**
"I can see you're feeling really upset. How about we take a walk together? We don't have to talk about anything until you're ready. Maybe we can find something cool along the way."

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

The Child Doesn't Want You to Attend an Event

When a child says they don't want you to attend an event because they want to appease the other parent, it's a tricky situation that requires balancing understanding their feelings with maintaining your right to be involved in their life. Here's how to approach it thoughtfully.

1. Validate Their Feelings Without Agreeing

It's important to show empathy for their emotions while gently asserting your presence in their life.

- ***"I understand it might feel awkward or hard for you if I'm there, especially if you're worried about how others might feel. That's a tough spot to be in."***
 - ***"It sounds like you're trying to make sure everyone feels okay, and that's very kind of you. I also want to be there for you because I love you and care about your big moments."***
-

2. Emphasise the Child's Importance to You

Remind them that your attendance is about supporting *them*, not causing conflict.

- ***"I'm coming because it's a special day for you, and I want to cheer you on. This day is all about you, and I want to celebrate that with you."***
 - ***"I'm proud of you, and being there means a lot to me. You're my priority, not what anyone else thinks."***
-

3. Reassure Them About Conflict

If they're worried about tension between parents, provide reassurance that you'll handle it maturely.

- ***"I promise to be respectful and keep things calm. I'm only there to focus on you and your achievements."***
 - ***"You don't have to worry about anything. I'll stay in the background if that makes you more comfortable."***
-

4. Encourage Perspective-Taking

Help them see the situation beyond the other parent's influence while being gentle.

- ***"It's okay to have two parents who love you and want to be part of your life. It's not about choosing one over the other—it's about all of us supporting you in our own way."***
 - ***"I know it feels tricky, but having both parents at your events is something most kids experience, and it's a way for us to show how proud we are of you."***
-

5. Affirm That They're Not Responsible for the Parent's Feelings

Many children worry about upsetting the alienating parent. Reassure them that managing adult feelings isn't their job.

- ***"I know you're worried about how [Dad/Mum] feels, but that's something we as parents have to handle. You're not responsible for making sure everyone is okay."***
 - ***"I'll deal with any grown-up concerns, so you don't have to. I just want to be there for you."***
-

6. Maintain Firm but Loving Boundaries

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

If they push back or become defensive, stay calm and compassionate while asserting your role.

- ***"I know this might feel hard for you, and I'm sorry if it's stressful. But it's important to me to be there for you, just like [Dad/Mum] is."***
- ***"I won't miss out on your special moments because I love you too much to stay away. My being there doesn't mean anything bad about [Dad/Mum]."***

7. After the Event: Reinforce Connection

After attending, thank them for letting you be part of their moment and affirm how proud you are.

- ***"I loved seeing you at [event] today. You were amazing, and I'm so glad I could cheer you on."***
- ***"Thanks for letting me be there—it really meant a lot to me to see you in action."***

Tips for Managing the Situation at the Event

When you attend an event where tension is high or the other parent's influence is present, your focus should remain on your child and maintaining a calm, supportive presence.

1. Stay Neutral and Composed

Avoid engaging in drama or reacting to potential provocations.

- ***Keep conversations polite but minimal if interacting with the other parent or their circle.***
- ***If tension arises, focus on your child. Say something like, "I'm here to celebrate you. That's all that matters today."***

2. Position Yourself Comfortably

Choose a spot where your child can see you but doesn't feel pressured to interact more than they want.

- ***Sit somewhere visible but nonintrusive. For example: "I'll be over there cheering you on, but you don't need to worry about me."***

3. Respect Your Child's Boundaries

Some children may feel nervous about showing affection in front of the other parent.

- ***Offer small gestures like a thumbs-up or a wave rather than insisting on hugs or close interaction.***

4. Bring a Supportive Friend or Relative

If appropriate, having someone neutral with you can make you feel more comfortable and diffuse tension.

- ***This person can also act as a buffer if the other parent attempts to engage you.***

5. Keep the Focus on Your Child

Avoid discussing custody or other conflicts during or after the event.

- ***"You did an amazing job! I'm so proud of how hard you've worked."***

6. Document the Day Positively

Take photos or videos to celebrate the moment without being overbearing.

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

- **Later, share them with your child if they seem open to reminiscing: *"Here's a picture from the event. You were fantastic!"***
-

Post-Event Communication

After the event, reinforce positive emotions and connection without delving into any drama.

1. Thank Them for Letting You Be There

Even if the day was awkward, express gratitude for the opportunity.

- ***"Thanks for letting me come today. It was wonderful to see you [perform/play/be celebrated]."***
-

2. Avoid Criticising the Other Parent

Even if there was interference, maintain a neutral stance to avoid putting your child in the middle.

- ***Instead of, "Your dad/mum made it hard for me to enjoy the day," say, "I'm glad I got to see you. You made my day."***
-

3. Reassure Them About Your Presence

If they seemed hesitant, gently remind them of your unconditional support.

- ***"I'll always be there for you when I can. Being part of your life is so important to me."***
-

4. Highlight Your Child's Achievements

Steer the conversation back to their accomplishments.

- ***"What was your favourite part of today? I loved when you [specific example of their success]."***
-

5. Respect Their Need to Process

If they seem overwhelmed, give them space but remind them you're there if they want to talk later.

- ***"I know today might have felt like a lot. If you ever want to chat about it, I'm here."***
-

Tools for De-Escalating Tension During or After the Event

When emotions run high during or after an event, your ability to remain calm and guide the conversation can help defuse tension. Here are strategies for managing these moments.

During the Event

1. Use Calm, Non-Defensive Body Language
 - Stand or sit in a relaxed posture with open arms and avoid crossing your arms or looking confrontational.
 - Maintain a soft tone of voice to signal your peaceful intentions.

Example:

- ***"I'm just here to enjoy the event and support you. Let's keep things simple and positive."***
-

2. Acknowledge the Child's Emotions

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

- If they express anger or frustration, acknowledge their feelings without defending yourself right away.
 - ***"I can see this is upsetting for you. That's okay—we can figure it out together later."***
-

3. Redirect the Focus

- Shift attention back to the event or something positive happening.
 - ***"Look, your friend just made a great play!"***
 - ***"I'm so excited to see what you do next—let's talk about this after the game."***
-

4. Remove Yourself From Conflict Zones

- If another parent or person tries to provoke you, avoid engaging in arguments or debates.
 - ***"Today is about [child's name], not us. Let's leave this for another time."***
-

5. Stay Solution-Focused

- Offer a quick compromise if possible, but don't let it derail the event.
 - ***"I'm happy to step back if it makes you more comfortable, but I'll be right here if you need me."***
-

After the Event

1. Decompress Together

- If your child is overwhelmed, suggest an activity that helps them calm down, such as grabbing a snack or going for a walk.
 - ***"That was a big day. Let's do something relaxing now—how about [specific activity]?"***
-

2. Set the Tone for Reflection

- Let your child express their feelings while guiding the conversation toward constructive thoughts.
 - ***"What's on your mind about today? I'd like to hear what you think."***
-

3. Address Their Concerns Without Conflict

- Reframe their statements to reduce the emotional charge.
 - ***Child: "It was so awkward with you and Dad/Mum there."***
 - ***You: "I can see how that might feel strange for you. I want to make sure you know I was there for you, not to make things hard."****
-

4. Model Emotional Regulation

- If they become angry or defensive, show them how to handle emotions calmly.
 - ***"I hear that you're upset, and that's okay. Let's take a deep breath and talk about it when we're both feeling calmer."***
-

5. End on a Positive Note

- Reinforce your love and commitment, even if the interaction was challenging.
 - ***"No matter what, I'm so proud of you. I'll always be here to support you."***
-

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

Example Scenarios

1. **Child:** "Why did you have to come? Dad/Mum didn't want you here!"
 - **You:** "I came because I wanted to celebrate your big day. I know it's tough sometimes, but I'm here to cheer you on, just like [Dad/Mum]."
 2. **Child:** "You made everything worse by being there."
 - **You:** "I hear you feel that way, and I'm sorry if it seemed that way to you. My only goal was to support you."
 3. **Child:** "Next time, don't come."
 - **You:** "I know it's complicated, but I love being part of your life. Let's talk more about what's worrying you when you're ready."
-

Confrontational Situations with the Other Parent

De-Escalation Strategies for Confrontational Situations with the Other Parent or Adults

When tensions arise between you and the other parent (or adults associated with them) at an event, it's crucial to prioritise your child's well-being and maintain a calm, composed presence. These strategies can help you navigate confrontations effectively.

1. Avoid Reacting to Provocation

Remain calm and don't engage in verbal sparring, even if accusations are made.

- **Example Response:**
 - *"I'm here to focus on [child's name]. Let's save any disagreements for another time."*
-

2. Politely Set Boundaries

If the other person encroaches on your space or disrupts your time with your child, calmly but firmly set a boundary.

- **Example Response:**
 - *"This is [child's name]'s special day. Let's keep things positive for them."*
-

3. Use Neutral and Non-Defensive Language

Avoid blaming or accusatory language. Use "I" statements to keep the conversation neutral.

- **Example Response:**
 - *"I'm just here to support [child's name], and I hope we can both make this a good experience for them."*
-

4. Redirect or Defer the Conversation

If the other parent tries to start an argument, redirect the focus to a later time or defer the topic entirely.

- **Example Response:**
 - *"This isn't the right time or place to discuss this. Let's talk another time."*
-

5. Focus on the Child's Needs

Keep steering the conversation back to the child to avoid conflict escalating into a personal dispute.

- **Example Response:**

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

- ***"Let's focus on supporting [child's name] right now. That's what they need from us both."***

6. Create Physical Distance if Needed

If the situation becomes heated, excuse yourself calmly and relocate to another area of the event.

- **Example Action:**
 - ***"Excuse me, I'm going to check on [child's name]. We'll catch up later."***

7. Have a Trusted Support Person Present

- Bring someone who can help defuse tensions or act as a witness if conflicts arise.
- If the other parent becomes confrontational, your support person can redirect the conversation or provide a calming influence.

8. Use Non-Verbal De-Escalation Techniques

- Maintain open, relaxed body language. Avoid eye-rolling, crossing arms, or using dismissive gestures.
- Keep your tone calm and your volume low, even if the other parent raises their voice.

9. Involve a Neutral Third Party

If the conflict escalates beyond what you can manage, involve a coach, mediator, or other neutral party.

- **Example Response:**
 - ***"It seems like we're both feeling strongly about this. Maybe it's something we can work out with someone neutral later."***

10. Exit Gracefully If Necessary

If the situation becomes too toxic, prioritise your child's comfort and exit with calm words.

- **Example Response:**
 - ***"This is too tense for [child's name] right now. I think it's best if I step away."***

Example Scenarios

1. **Other Parent: "Why are you even here? You're just making [child's name] uncomfortable!"**
 - **You:** "I'm here to support [child's name]. Let's focus on them today and set aside our differences."
2. **Other Parent: "This event would've been better without you!"**
 - **You:** "I'm sorry you feel that way. I'm only here to celebrate [child's name] and be part of their life."
3. **Other Parent's Family Member: "You always make things worse."**
 - **You:** "I'm here for [child's name], and I'm committed to keeping things positive for them."
4. **The Conflict Escalates:**
 - **You (to child):** "Let's go grab a drink/snack and take a breather. I'm here for you if you need me."
 - **Exit calmly if it's no longer possible to de-escalate.**

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

Tips for Discussing the Importance of Staying Connected with Family During Breaks

When talking about spending time with family, especially in the context of balancing relationships between households, it's helpful to approach the conversation with positivity, understanding, and an emphasis on the child's feelings and experiences. Here are some strategies.

1. Emphasise the Value of All Family Connections

Highlight how spending time with family is an opportunity to build relationships and make memories with everyone who loves them.

- **Example:**
 - *"Holidays are special because they give us a chance to spend time with the people who love and care about us. It's important to stay connected to everyone who matters in your life."*

2. Acknowledge Their Perspective

Start by listening to their feelings about spending time with family, even if they seem resistant.

- **Example:**
 - *"I know it can feel tricky to decide how to spend your time during breaks. I'd like to hear what's important to you."*

3. Frame Family Time as a Positive Experience

Share how family traditions and moments create lasting memories.

- **Example:**
 - *"Some of my best memories are from holidays spent with family. I hope we can make some new ones together this year."*

4. Talk About Balance and Inclusion

Stress the importance of spending time with all sides of the family in a way that feels fair and balanced.

- **Example:**
 - *"It's great that you get to spend time with [other parent's family]. I'd love for us to have some special time together too, so you can feel connected to everyone who cares about you."*

5. Involve Them in Planning

Let them have input in how the time is spent to give them a sense of control.

- **Example:**
 - *"What's something you'd love to do together during the break? Let's plan something special so we can make the most of our time."*

6. Address Any Guilt or Pressure

Reassure them that it's okay to enjoy time with all family members, regardless of what others might say or expect.

- **Example:**
 - *"It's okay to love both sides of your family and want to spend time with everyone. You don't have to choose between us—we're all part of your life."*

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

7. Use Neutral Language When Referring to the Other Parent

Avoid making the child feel torn or responsible for adult dynamics.

- **Example:**
 - *"I'm glad you get to spend time with [other parent's family]. Let's make our time together just as special."*
-

8. Share Why Connection Matters

Explain the importance of staying connected to family and how it supports their growth and identity.

- **Example:**
 - *"Family helps us feel rooted and loved. Spending time with everyone who cares about you helps you feel supported as you grow."*
-

9. Offer Reassurance

If they feel pressured to choose, let them know it's okay to value relationships with everyone.

- **Example:**
 - *"You don't have to worry about pleasing everyone. What's important is that you feel loved and cared for by all of us."*
-

10. Suggest Ways to Stay Connected Even When Apart

If spending equal time isn't possible, encourage ways to connect with family through calls, messages, or shared activities.

- **Example:**
 - *"Even if we can't spend the whole holiday together, we can still stay connected. Maybe we can do a video call or share pictures of what we're doing."*
-

Handling Resistance When a Child Prefers One Side of the Family

When a child expresses a strong preference for spending time with one side of the family, often influenced by the other parent, it's important to remain patient, empathetic, and focused on maintaining a healthy relationship. Here are some strategies for addressing this dynamic.

1. Validate Their Feelings Without Agreeing

Acknowledge their preferences to show you're listening, but avoid reinforcing any negative biases.

- **Example:**
 - *"I understand why you might feel that way. It sounds like you enjoy spending time with [other family]. That's okay, and I'm glad you have good times with them."*
-

2. Gently Emphasise Fairness

Highlight the importance of giving both sides of the family the chance to spend time with them.

- **Example:**
 - *"It's great that you have such a good time with [other parent's family]. I'd love for us to have some quality time together too because I miss you and value our relationship."*
-

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

3. Avoid Criticism of the Other Parent or Family

Even if you suspect manipulation, keep your tone positive and avoid saying anything that could make the child feel defensive.

- **Example:**
 - *"I'm not here to compete with anyone—I just care about spending time with you."*
-

4. Use a Collaborative Approach

Involve them in the decision-making process to give them a sense of control.

- **Example:**
 - *"I want us to have some time together during the break. Is there something you'd really like to do while you're here?"*
-

5. Set Boundaries While Remaining Flexible

Be clear about the need for time together but remain understanding if they're resistant.

- **Example:**
 - *"I know you're feeling torn, but spending time with me is important too. Let's find a way to make it work for both of us."*
-

6. Counteract Influence Subtly

Offer your perspective without directly contradicting what they've been told.

- **Example:**
 - *"I know [other parent] has a big family and lots of activities going on, and that's wonderful. I hope we can also create some memories that you'll enjoy."*
-

7. Address Guilt or Loyalty Conflicts

Reassure them that loving both sides of their family are okay.

- **Example:**
 - *"You don't have to choose between families. It's perfectly fine to enjoy time with both sides without feeling like you're letting anyone down."*
-

8. Create Positive Incentives

Plan enjoyable activities that make time with you appealing without making it feel like a competition.

- **Example:**
 - *"How about we plan something fun, like a movie night or a trip to [activity they enjoy]? It'll be a special time for just us."*
-

9. Stay Calm in the Face of Rejection

If they strongly resist or make hurtful comments, don't take it personally. Keep the focus on your love and support.

- **Example:**
 - *"I know it's hard to balance everything, and I want you to know that I love you no matter what. I hope we can still find time together."*
-

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

10. Keep Building the Relationship

Continue showing love and support even if they prefer the other family, as consistency is key in countering negative influence.

- **Example:**

- *"I care about you so much, and even if you're feeling unsure, I'll always be here for you when you need me."*

Example Responses to Common Statements

1. "I don't want to come to your house. It's boring."
 - *"I get that you might feel that way. Maybe we can come up with something fun to do together. What's something you'd enjoy while you're here?"*
 2. "I'd rather spend the whole break with [other family]."
 - *"I understand you love spending time there. I miss you too, and it's important for us to have time together to stay connected. Let's talk about how we can make it work for everyone."*
 3. "You don't need me to visit—just FaceTime me."
 - *"I love hearing your voice on FaceTime, but spending time in person is really special to me. It's how we keep our bond strong."*
-

Staying Calm, Staying Connected: How to Handle Tough Conversations

If you found this resource helpful, please consider making a small donation to EMMM.

We are a self-funded ACNC registered charity. We rely solely on your generous donations.
Without your donations, we cannot continue to do this work.

Donations of \$2 or more are **Tax Deductible**.

OPTIONS:

1. Make a **ONCE OFF** donation.
2. Become a **RECURRING MONTHLY** donor. (min. \$2 month)

Secure, online credit card payment by PayPal

[DONATION LINK](#)

Resource created by Amanda Sillars, BPsycSc.

Disclaimer:

This resource is designed for adults, particularly parents, who are navigating challenging conversations with children, especially in the context of separation or divorce. It provides general information and examples for responding to difficult statements and fostering healthy communication. It is not intended as a substitute for professional legal or psychological advice. Individual situations may vary, and it's important to tailor your approach to your child's specific needs and circumstances. Parental alienating behaviours are a complex issue, and seeking professional guidance is recommended when dealing with high-conflict situations or suspected parental alienating behaviours. This resource does not constitute legal or therapeutic counsel. For legal advice, consult with a qualified lawyer. For psychological support and guidance, seek a licensed mental health professional. This resource is not intended for use by children.