

For Emails and Texts Between Divorcing Spouses &/or Co-Parents

Start With the Following Skills Practice:

(We'll practice these in sessions/meetings as well!)

All of the following skills decrease conflict and your costs (less professional intervention is required). Emails/texts allow you time to think, prepare and practice the skills you'll need in person. Your kids also need you to be equipped to reliably model these skills for respectful engagement, and to reduce their exposure to conflict.

1. **Ask "Curious Questions"** – seek to understand, and verbally *communicate understanding*, **before adding your own ideas**.
2. Whenever referencing the kids, be sure to use **"we"/"our" language** – e.g. *"Our kids," "Our Child Specialist"* when you've jointly selected someone, instead of *"My kids"* or *"My kids' Child Specialist."* To the kids/others: *"We decided . . ."* Avoid language that has you take sole "possession" of your kids.
3. Use the **BIFF skills** (Brief, Informative, Friendly & Firm) you learned in the Co-Parenting class we required of you before mediation/collaborative divorce processes and/or Co-parenting work. Take the 16 hr online course: <https://www.onlineparentingprograms.com/online-classes/parenting-without-conflict-class.html>
4. When you have the impulse to complain, blame or criticize, instead: stop to think through how to make a **respectful, reasonable request for the specific behavior you want**. What, specifically, can your Co-parent say/do that would make a difference to you? When making a request, *tone is everything*. Aim for a "matter-of-fact" tone. Avoid *all* negative assumptions/judgments.
5. Remember: *Everything* related to your kids is now *a proposal* - not a demand, unilateral decision or declaration. **"I suggest/propose xyz . . . What do you think?"** Explicitly solicit feedback. You can't practically move forward without your co-parent's input anyhow, when you have joint custody.
6. Offer **"Win-Win"** and **"Bilateral Proposals"** – proposals that prioritize your kids' wellbeing, and work to *benefit you both*, as well as require something of *both* of you, not just your spouse/co-parent.
7. Avoid saying things like "no" or "I disagree" as this polarizes and can pit people against each other. Instead respond with: **"Hmm. I have a different idea/memory/view about that. Are you willing to hear it?"**
 - This allows you to come up *alongside* your Co-parent, without just opposing them.
 - Even 2-4 year old's easily learn to buck authority *respectfully* by declaring this, e.g. "Mommy/Daddy, I have a different idea."
 - Collaborative attorneys also avoid polarizing groups in meetings by just saying yes/no, I agree/disagree, etc.
 - If there's no request/interest in hearing your view, **reflect**: **"So you are unwilling to hear a different view? Ok."** (Nice way to point out my-way-or-the-highway approach.)
8. **Reliably use "and;" Avoid "but."** "But" denies the valued item/issue that went before it. An *"I-love-you-but"* structure never works well! e.g. "I want to accommodate you, *AND* I need to know by noon."
9. **Respond in a timely way**. Failures to respond/address your spouse/co-parent's concerns or efforts to agree on something put your Spouse/Co-parent and your kids on hold in ways that increase everyone's anxiety, escalate conflict and erode trust in whatever divorce process you are using.
10. **Be scrupulous in following any Divorce/Co-parenting agreements**. When you don't keep agreements as you go, you create distrust, increase anxiety and conflict, and increase *both* your costs. No one can "just remember" all the agreements! This means you take responsibility for doing *whatever you need to do* to "hold agreements in mind:"
 - **Copy/paste parts of from emails/texts** into word docs for **any scheduling agreements and related conditions**, so they're easy to find/follow.
 - Religiously **calendar** any agreement **dates/deadlines**, including calendaring **prep-time you need** to keep a given agreement.
 - **Type/print out all behavioral agreements** - e.g. Keep them handy/by your bedside in a file you review.