

“I” Messages for Co-Parents - A More Peaceful Way of Communicating

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When parents are going through custody and divorce issues, conflict may reach a higher level. Often when in conflict, we communicate using words which blame and attack. These messages may begin with the word “You.” For example,

Mom attacks Dad’s character by saying, “You are very irresponsible. All the kids do when they are at your house is play video games.” Dad retaliates and says, “The kids say you are a dictator. They never get to play video games; it’s always just homework and chores...never any fun.”

“I” messages are a way to express feelings and identify solutions, without attacking and blaming each other. Here are the steps.

- Explain feelings such as: concerned, worried, uncomfortable, disappointed, pleased or excited. **“I feel...”**
- Explain the behavior or action that brought on the feeling. **“When...”**
- Explain why, or the reason behind that feeling. **“Because...”**
- Explain or ask for a solution. **“Could we...” or “What are your ideas?”**

Mom says, “Is this a good time to talk? I **feel** concerned **when** the kids don’t get their homework done **because** I don’t want them to fall behind in school. It seems like they would rather play video games than do their homework. **What are your ideas?**”

Dad replies, “I don’t want them to fall behind on their school work either. It does make sense to limit video game time until after the homework is done. Let’s try it and see how it’s working.”

Here are additional strategies:

Use neutral words similar to what are used in business situations. Words such as *concerned, worried, anxious* are not as emotionally charged as words such as *angry, bitter, sad* or *resentful*, which sound more blaming and attacking.

Avoid absolutes such as “never” and “always.” These words create hostility and barriers to solving the problem.

Use when situations which are currently going well and you wish to continue future the behavior, such as both parents participating in parent-teacher conferences.



It is sometimes difficult to express feelings, especially when we focus more on the solution to a problem. However, when communicating for mutual understanding, it is helpful for the other person to know how a certain problem is affecting you. Being human, we see things from our own perspective, and we don't always realize how our actions are affecting others. This is especially true the younger we are, so it is helpful to use I-messages with our children so they can begin to understand how their actions affect others.

Putting “I” messages into practice is not always easy. It may take several times until you feel comfortable and confident using them with your co-parent. They are worth the effort to create peaceful solutions for your children, your co-parent and you!

**Additional information, including a worksheet:** <http://lancaster.unl.edu/family/IMessagesHandout.pdf>

**This is part of the Co-Parenting for Successful Kids program:** [www.extension.unl.edu/divorce](http://www.extension.unl.edu/divorce)