



“I” Messages for Co-Parents

A More Peaceful Way of Communicating

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When parents are experiencing custody and divorce, conflict may reach a higher level. Often when in conflict, we share messages which blame and attack. These messages may begin with the word “You.” For example, “You are very irresponsible.” “I” messages are a way to express feelings and identify solutions, without attacking and blaming each other.

“I” messages:

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

For example, “I feel frustrated **when** the children have not gotten enough sleep **because** they have trouble staying awake in school. **Could we** get the children to bed by 9 p.m. on school nights?”

Here are strategies to choose words which are not emotionally charged, blaming or critical.

Use “I” instead of “You” because “You” feels blaming and attacking. “I feel that *you* are undependable when *you* don’t pick the kids up on time” feels blaming and doesn’t express your feelings. A better option is:

- 1) **I feel** concerned (explain feelings)
- 2) **When** the kids are not picked up on time (explain behavior)
- 3) **Because** they get worried. (explain why)
- 4) **Could we** call each other if we could help out in emergency situations? (explain or ask for a solution)

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. “You are irresponsible because you don’t require the kids to wear seatbelts,” is emotionally charged. A better option:

- 1) **I feel** anxious (explain feelings)
- 2) **When** Mary doesn’t use a seatbelt (explain behavior)
- 3) **Because** I want her to be safe. (explain why)
- 4) **Could we** make sure the kids buckle up? (explain or ask for a solution)

Avoid absolutes such as “never” and “always.”

These words create hostility and barriers to solving the problem. For example, “You always cuss around the kids.” A better option:

- 1) **I feel** embarrassed for Cole (explain feelings)
- 2) **When** he says naughty words (explain behavior)
- 3) **Because** he doesn’t know these are not appropriate in public. (explain why)
- 4) **Could we** limit his exposure to profanity? (explain or ask for a solution)

“I” messages can include situations which are currently going well which you wish to continue in the future. Example:

- 1) **I feel** good (explain feelings)
- 2) **When** we both participate in parent-teacher conferences (explain behavior)
- 3) **Because** Mary knows we both value her school success. (explain why)
- 4) **Could we** continue to do this as we’ve done in the past? (explain or ask for a solution)

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Now it is your turn to complete "I" messages.

List 3 (solvable) issues you wish to discuss with the other parent. Complete "I" messages for each situation.

1

Describe a situation: _____

I feel (explain feelings) _____

When (explain behavior) _____

Because (explain why) _____

Could we (explain or ask for a solution) _____

2

Describe a situation: _____

I feel (explain feelings) _____

When (explain behavior) _____

Because (explain why) _____

Could we (explain or ask for a solution) _____

3

Describe a situation: _____

I feel (explain feelings) _____

When (explain behavior) _____

Because (explain why) _____

Could we (explain or ask for a solution) _____
