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

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.

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“"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)

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)

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)

“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) __________________________________________