

## **Message in a Bottle? Digital Co-parenting With You, Your Ex and the Children**

By Amy A. Edwards

As the holiday season approaches, separated and divorced parents have to face the inevitable discussions, sometimes more aptly called heated disputes, about the where, when and how the children will spend time with each side of the family. Even if you are an experienced veteran in this regard, a refresher course never hurts.

### **The Good**

The children are "the good" in your lives. What is the message you should send to the other parent when talking about your child? Think about your child's best interest when you talk with your co-parent. This requires a business-like tone, as odd as that sounds. The two of you do share a "business" and it is your child. We've all had jobs that were unpleasant. Think of the other parent as that irritating person at work who is a real pest. While annoying, that coworker does certain unique tasks that only can be done by him or her. By doing so, that person makes everyone's work load a little lighter. It is the same way with co-parenting.

Before you contact your ex, set a goal for the communication. For instance, your child must have both parents sign a permission slip in order to go on a field trip or summer camp. Decide beforehand to discuss only that issue. Focus on getting to the goal of joint decision making, not how angry or hurt you are by inconsiderate behavior by your ex or, worse yet, the new dating partner. Keeping conversations brief will help you avoid straying into irrelevant issues about your joint past. Your child will grow up to make his or her own decisions about your ex, but until then, your child needs nurturing and care from both of you. If your child is lucky enough to have two parents, nurture that support system. Encourage the bond with your child and the extended family of the other parent. Even if your ex is a lousy parent, he or she is the only other parent your child will ever have. Your child did not start the war between you and your ex but needs and loves both parents, and frequently, both sets of grandparents and extended families.

### **The Bad and the Ugly**

Unless you have a great relationship with your co-parent, communication between you can rapidly disintegrate and turn into an argument, name-calling or even an altercation if you aren't careful. Children certainly do not benefit by having a parent who is right and another who is wrong. That is *your* war, not your children's war. Even if you think you know everything there is to know about your child, you probably don't. When your child hears a parent criticizing the other, there is a perceived obligation to either defend the other parent or show solidarity to you when you take sides against your ex. This applies whether the ex is a good parent, bad parent, or something in-between.

Children might be pressured by parents to pick a team. They are ill equipped to referee divorcing or separated parents. This is especially true with teens, who are old enough to have a clear understanding about the custody battles during the parenting divorce war. Placing responsibility on teens by putting them in the middle of complex adult relationships forces them to take measures to protect the younger children, which they can't handle emotionally or even physically. Over the years, I have seen many children in custody battles suffer from intense anxiety, lose sleep, lose their appetites and develop stomach troubles because they are forced to make efforts to fix the parent relationship so they can have relief. Children should not have to play politics, nor are they rewarded for good behavior by the "good" parent. Instead, they have two parents that they wish wouldn't fight all the time.

Too often, children are caught in the eye of the storm with no way to escape. Especially if you grew up in a family separated by divorce, remember how unhappy it made you feel when your families went to war. Think about your child's perspective the next time you tell a child to "go tell your mother/father" to do something, buy something or discuss child support. If you need to vent about the ex, talk with a therapist or counselor who actually is equipped to unpack some of the baggage you have because of a separation or divorce. Your child might also benefit by having a neutral person to listen to problems and make suggestions about possible solutions.

### **One Solution: Digital Co-parenting**

Digital communication is fast and fairly inexpensive. One way to reduce the tension is to make an effort to communicate only by e-mail unless there is a *bona fide* emergency, and agree to check it at least once a day. People tend to communicate more politely and are more reluctant to hurl insults at the other parent when he or she knows it is easily documented, and can be proven in court. Although they are becoming "old school" e-mails can be more easily stored, in contrast to text messages that aren't kept by the service provider for very long. These providers intentionally avoid keeping records of text messages to make it more difficult for people seeking copies of texts, even by means of subpoenas. If you use text messages, print them or forward them to a computer or other device that has storage capacity and backup protection. Be sure the children don't have passwords to the e-mail address use. Get a separate e-mail address that you use only for co-parenting communication.

North Carolina law specifically encourages electronic communication between parents and children as a supplement to visitation but not as a substitute for visitation. In this context, the law defines "electronic communication" as contact, other than face-to-face contact, facilitated by electronic means, such as by telephone, electronic mail, instant messaging, video conferencing, wired or wireless technologies by Internet, or other medium of communication.

The Court must first find it is in a child's best interest to order digital communication. Then, "the court may set guidelines for electronic communication, including the hours in which the communication may be made, the allocation of costs between the parents,

and the furnishing of access information between parents necessary to facilitate electronic communication." Further communication between a child and parent is subject to supervision by the court. Parents cannot use the "amount of time electronic communication is used" to argue he or she should be entitled to move out of state because of it. NC Gen. Stat. §50-13.2.

### **Another Solution: Creating a Shared "Family Calendar"**

Consider using a shared online calendar. There are many options for free calendars, including those available from Yahoo and Google.

Note reminders for school events, doctor's appointments, and organize the summer visitation time to avoid confusion. Remember to add extracurricular activities, such as sports or band practice, to the calendar, as well as any web site links where permission slips or other important documents can be printed and signed. Include days off from school, teacher workdays, and holidays as the school calendar is made available. Most schools have online access to the school calendar on the school web site, including Pitt County Public School System.

The only two people with access to it should be the two of you, with one password. Hard feelings can be minimized if you refrain from having your dating partner or new spouse involved in calendar notations. Although he or she may mean well, it will make things worse if you delegate this chore. It would be inconvenient to discover that, because your partner did not remember to tell you the visitation schedule had to be changed, your angry call to the other parent went unanswered for thirty minutes while you sat there in the car griping about it with your child in the backseat. Calendars can be printed, but each of you needs to commit to regularly checking the calendar in case there are schedule changes, perhaps three times per week.

I find that clients frequently believe the other parent is being spiteful when there is a change of plans or one fails to meet the other at the designated time or location. However, it is often the case that the other parent genuinely thought plans had been changed or other arrangements had been made. Although exes can be spiteful, most do not want to do things that would upset the kids. After all, it is safe to assume communication with each other when you were married or dating was not good, which is a factor that led to the separation in the first place.

Handling the scheduling issues with your child or children with a shared calendar can cut down on misunderstandings. The more you take the high road with your co-parent in your communication, the better the odds are that he or she will grow tired of doing things just to push your buttons. If you routinely correspond in a business-like manner and ignore the insults and childish behavior from your ex, the more you take the wind out of his or her sails. Doing that might allow you to train your ex to find and receive that message in the bottle, benefiting you and your children.

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