



Respectful Communication Cheat Sheet

3 Proven Communication Formulas for
Divorcing or Divorced Couples



3 Formulas for Better Communication

All divorcing couples struggle in their own unique ways, but their universal characteristic is a breakdown in communication. This leads to more arguments, blocking the possibility of resolving issues in ways that both people feel respected and valued.

This guide is designed to help you navigate the divorce process and your post-divorce life with a sense of mastery and confidence. It's your "cheat sheet" of proven communication techniques.

Using these 3 formulas consistently will help you resolve common coparenting issues, promote a greater sense of collaboration and cooperation, and perhaps most importantly, model respectful communication for your children:

1

**COMPLAINTS
VS.
CRITICISMS**

2

**REQUESTS
VS.
DEMANDS OR
THREATS**

3

**REPAIRING
VS.
AVOIDING
RESPONSIBILITY**



1

Complaints vs. Criticisms

EXAMPLE OF UNHELPFUL CRITICISM

"What is your problem? Why can't you even be on time for your kids?! You never respected my time, of course, but the least you can do is show up for your kids. That's ok, they know which parent loves them more!"

RESPECTFUL COMPLAINT-MAKING FORMULA:

- ✓ **Label problematic behavior:**
When you... (action/behavior)
- ✓ **Label the negative effect on you:**
it makes me feel... (these uncomfortable, negative emotions)
- ✓ **Label the additional consequences on the larger system:**
which... (negatively affects me/situation).
- ✓ **Request a better action:**
I would prefer it/it works better for me if you would... (request changes)
- ✓ **Label expected improvement for all:**
so that you...(more positively affect our situation).
- ★ **BONUS POINTS: Assume beneficent (or at least neutral) reason for problem behavior, and offer to work towards a resolution together:**

Is there something in our agreement that needs to be adjusted?

Just the Facts, Ma'am!

Be as factual and descriptive as possible in your feedback. Label behaviors with objective descriptions, not subjective interpretations.

"When you lied about the time..." is a subjective accusation, which will lead to defensiveness.

"When you agreed to pick them up at 5 and you showed up at 6..." is objective.

EXAMPLE OF RESPECTFUL COMPLAINT-MAKING

"When you are late picking up the kids, it makes me feel anxious and stressed about time, making me get snappy with you and the kids. It would work best for all of us if you could make a conscious effort to be on time. (BONUS) Do the times that we agreed on still work for you? If not, why don't we look at the schedule and come up with something that could work better?"

2

Requests vs. Demands

EXAMPLE OF UNHELPFUL DEMANDS OR THREATS

"If you let our kids see your new boyfriend again, I will go for full custody so fast your head will spin! See how far you get without my child support payments—the gravy train ends right now!"

RESPECTFUL REQUEST-MAKING FORMULA:

- ✓ **State your need clearly and softly:**
It's important to me that...
I would prefer/appreciate it if...
What works best for me is...
- ✓ **State desired request:**
that you... (action/behavior)
- ✓ **Share motive beneath desired request:**
so that... (likely a better result will occur)
- ✓ **Clarify and assume pure motives by all:**
I know that you... (assignment of pure motive)
- ✓ **Offer to help:**
I will... (helpful action).

EXAMPLE OF RESPECTFUL REQUEST-MAKING

I would appreciate it if you would give our kids more time before we introduce any new people into their lives so that they can fully adjust to the divorce before they need to manage another big change.

I know how much you care about our kids' well-being, and probably just overlooked how hard it might be for them to meet the people we date right now. We can always consult with our family therapist to see when the best time would be.



3

Repairing vs. Avoiding Responsibility

EXAMPLE OF AVOIDING RESPONSIBILITY

"Fine, so I was late picking up the kids this one time. One time in 15 years - compared to the countless times YOU were late for their baseball games!"

RESPECTFUL REPAIR-MAKING FORMULA:

- ✓ **Describe the ineffective or hurtful behavior:**
When I... (hurtful action),
- ✓ **Label injury to other person:**
I/it... (caused you to feel these uncomfortable emotions)
- ✓ **Label secondary effects that validate the injury:**
which... (negatively affects us/situation)
- ✓ **Give explanation (NOT an excuse or opportunity to blame):**
I was... (action/inaction that caused the problem), so I... (problem decision).
- ✓ **Acknowledge, take responsibility and APOLOGIZE:**
I should have... (better choice). I AM SORRY.
- ✓ **Create corrective action plan:**
Next time, I will... (action plan to resolve/prevent problem).

EXAMPLE OF RESPECTFUL REPAIR-MAKING



I know that when I am late picking up the kids it makes you feel disrespected and anxious, which makes you stressed and we argue more. Sometimes I forget that we are now in two homes and I need to leave earlier to get there on time.

I should have prioritized your and the kids' need for consistency; I am sorry. From now on, I will set a reminder 30 minutes before I need to leave.



Benefits of Better Communication with Your Ex

- Enjoy a smoother, less stressed atmosphere.
- Feel relieved and proud that you have truly put your marital conflicts in the past.
- Relish the certainty that your new skills make you more likely to succeed in your next relationships, and that you are modeling and teaching healthy relationship skills in your children.
- Savor the ability to connect with your coparent—the only other person in the world who adores your children as much as you do—over the wonders that are your children. Begin to heal and rebuild.



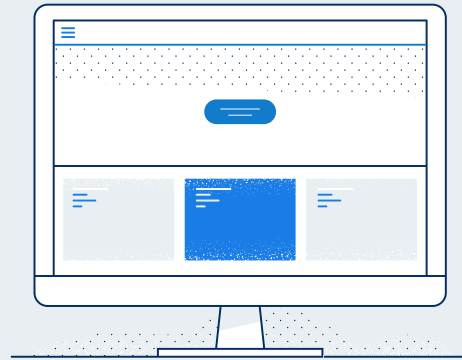
REMINDER

Even when these formulas are used perfectly, people may not always get the result they want. However, communication and collaboration are not zero-sum, win-lose games.

The goal is to move towards areas of mutual ground, and we exponentially increase our odds of doing so when at least one of us brings our best selves to each interaction. Deciding to do so allows you to feel clear and confident in your own motives.

NEED MORE INSIGHT & SUPPORT?

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and learn about my services for couples & families.**



www.sandywolfttherapy.com



**As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were
two ways in which I could respond to my situation -- either
to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering
into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course.**

— Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.