



Building Stepfamilies That Work[©]

Dealing With the Ex: Dos and Don'ts

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Keep in mind:

- That the “high road” is always a good choice.
- Ninety percent of the emotion associated with a conflict-laden exchange with your Ex stems from the history (yours, theirs, and your shared history) rather than the event itself.
- Conflicted incidents with your Ex actually trigger **thoughts** that produce your negative **emotions**, which, in turn, lead to your making a negative response. This sets the stage for more negativity in any subsequent interactions with them. You can choose to substitute a negative-emotion-inducing thought with a more productive thought.
- Anger is the most frequently cited feeling associated with conflict-laden exchanges with the Ex. However, anger usually masks a more specific and accurate feeling.
 - If you are feeling “controlled” or “suffocated”, chances are that you are acting in irresponsible ways.
 - If you are feeling “overwhelmed” and “unappreciated”, chances are that you have been overly responsible in your actions.
- To find out who owns the problem, sort out:
 - 1) What, precisely, is the problem?
 - 2) Who is having a negative reaction to it?
 - If it is you, ask yourself: “What thoughts are provoking these feelings?
Change the thought(s) if necessary.
 - 3) Who brought the issue up? Usually, the person who brought up the issue is the one who “owns” the problem and needs to do something about it.
 - 4) Ask yourself: “Is this a big deal?” If not, don't sweat the small stuff.
- When an issue needs to be addressed with your Ex:
 - Book a time with them to address it.
 - Keep it to one issue at a time.
 - Use a neutral location.
 - Be clear, ahead of time, regarding your feelings concerning the issue.
 - Know why you are feeling the way that you are.
 - Be clear on what you want them to do differently.
 - Be able to state, in a positive way, what you want them to do differently (e.g., I want you to leave earlier so you will be on time to pick up the kids.) rather than in a negative way. (e.g., Stop being late.)
 - Avoid using “never” and “always” as in: “You're never on time”.
 - Keep your voice tone in check.
 - Have an “out” prepared. For example, “We'll have to keep this brief because I have to pick up the kids in five minutes.”

- Have enforceable consequences (for non-compliance) identified before hand. Ensure that you **can** follow through, and **will** follow through with any consequences you decide to impose.
- Use an “I message” formulated to include the following four parts:
 - 1) The action that gives you concern
 - 2) The way you feel about that action
 - 3) Why you feel the way you do about the action, and
 - 4) A statement of the desired action.

[If you are addressing a female, put the feeling segment at the start of the “I message”. If you are addressing a male, state the “desired action” first.]

If the discussion is simply not moving forward, it may be necessary to “be a broken record” and reiterate the desired behaviour several times during the discussion. The goal here is to get the focus clearly on a particular point, not to inflame the situation. So your tone of voice should convey your clarity of focus. Do not use this strategy in a situation that is becoming hostile or in a situation where aggression may erupt.

If the exchange provokes hostility:

- 1) acknowledge their reaction (e.g., I can hear your displeasure in the tone of your voice.),
- 2) assert that further discussion is necessary,
- 3) propose another time when you can reconvene to discuss the issue, and
- 4) leave.

If your Ex indicates they have no intention to comply, or they fail to change their behaviour in the way you have requested, put your consequences in place—and stick to them. If you fail to stick to them, you can be sure that they will be more difficult to deal with the next time—and there will be a next time.

As a general rule, don’t agree to any revisions or changes of plan without first “touching base” with your partner. For example, say: “Before I can give you the ‘OK’ on that, I’ll need to make sure that it won’t conflict with any existing commitments. Can I get back to you later today, or tomorrow to let you know for sure?” Don’t ‘hang the blame’ on your partner. Your Ex needs to know that you have a backbone.

Don’t be stampeded: If your Ex is demanding an answer ‘right now’, say: “If you have to have an answer right now, it’ll have to be ‘No’. However, if you can hold off until I can see how things are shaping up, my answer might be ‘Yes’.

If communication through verbal means is too emotionally charged, try written or electronic communication.

If you absolutely cannot talk with your Ex, find a neutral third party to exchange information. Children are not a neutral third party.

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