



Children-in-Between Learning Guide for Parents

This guide is an optional accompaniment to the Children-in-Between E-Learning for Parents programme. It provides additional practice exercises to deepen your understanding of the skills taught.

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FOREWORD

Overview – Impact of conflict on children

Divorce significantly impacts children's wellbeing and development, with research from Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea demonstrating lasting disadvantages that extend well into adulthood. The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF)'s 2020 study of 100,000 Singaporeans found that children who experienced parental divorce before age 21 were less likely to obtain university degrees, earned less throughout their careers with smaller CPF savings, and were more likely to divorce themselves by age 35.[1]

Continued parental conflict after divorce exacerbates these effects, increasing children's hyperactivity, emotional distress, and conduct problems, particularly when children are caught in ongoing parental disputes, where parents unintentionally put their children in the middle of conflicts. This harms their self-esteem and psychological wellbeing.[2][3] These children often face additional burdens including difficulty managing family occasions (e.g. festive holidays, birthdays, graduation), feeling obligated to mediate between parents, and taking on premature adult responsibilities such as managing family finances or providing emotional support to distressed parents.[4]

Effectiveness of Children-in-Between programme

The Children-in-Between (CiB) programme was developed by the Centre for Divorce Education (CDE) to support families experiencing co-parenting conflict, and has been adapted for Singapore families. Research has shown that parents who attend CiB experience reduced parental conflict, improved co-parenting skills, and create healthier emotional environments for their children[5].

Grounded in established psychological and social theories, CiB is a skills-based programme that teaches co-parenting and conflict reduction strategies, while strengthening protective factors to support children's adjustment during parental divorce or separation. The programme is delivered through e-learning for parents (with post-consultation available when needed) and in-person workshops for children aged 6 to 15.

[1] Tan, T. (2020) Children of divorced parents tend to fare worse than peers from intact families: MSF study. The Straits Times

[2] Chung, Y., & Emery, R.E. (2010). Early adolescents and divorce in South Korea: Risk, resilience and pain. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 41(5), 855-877

[3] Lau, Y. K. (2017). Postdivorce Coparenting and Children's Well-Being in Hong Kong. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 58(5), 329-346.

[4] Yeo, N. (2025) How some broken homes overcome the 'divorce penalty' in their lives, though effects still linger. Channel News Asia.

[5] Research on CiB may be accessed from the website of the Centre for Divorce Education (CDE). <https://divorce-education.com/research-behind-cib>

Through the CiB e-learning for Parents, you will learn to:

1. Be more sensitive to your children's needs, reduce their stress, and help them feel safe.
2. Understand how the brain works, so as to make better decisions.
3. Understand common challenges families in separation and/or divorce may go through, and skills to overcome them.
4. Learn skills to communicate effectively to achieve parenting goals with the other parent.
5. Learn ways to take better care of yourself.

Use of the Guide

This guide is designed to enhance your CiB (Parents) learning experience and serves as a reference throughout and after the programme.

We recommend downloading it at the start of your learning journey to reinforce key concepts as you progress through the online modules. The skills in this guide are introduced in order of appearance in the e-learning, and each skill comes with additional practice exercises to deepen your understanding of the skills taught.

After completing the programme, you may explore the chapter on Additional Resources (page 34) for ongoing support services. Keep this guide handy as your go-to reference whenever you need to apply these skills with your co-parent and children.

You may ask why we need to go through the trouble of learning and practising these skills. We all want our children to do well and be happy. Using Self-talk (and other skills like "I messages", and Active Listening) will help us better manage conflicts with the other parent, and keep our children out of the conflict. These skills when applied, are likely to reduce our stress. They will give us a present and positive focus rather than keeping our thoughts stuck on the past. It is likely we will emerge with more energy to follow our goals and focus on our well-being. We will also set a good example for our children so they can do the same.

2 ABOUT CiB (CHILDREN)

Children caught between parents or affected by parental conflict can benefit from attending CiB (Children). During this programme, they will learn the following:

- Common myths and truths about divorce
- How to name and manage their feelings
- How to calm their thoughts and cope with emotions
- How to navigate tough situations arising from their parents' divorce
- How to ask for help when needed

Early findings from local evaluations also indicate that after completing CiB (Children), participating children in Singapore showed improvements in emotional and behavioural difficulties.

If your children attended CiB (Children), these are some of the skills learnt, and tips on how you may support them in practising the skills at home.

Common myths and truths about divorce

- Remind them that they are not the cause of the divorce, that their parents do not stop loving them despite the divorce, and that they will always be part of the family.

How to name and manage their feelings

- Remind them that their brain is divided into two main areas – the feeling brain (the amygdala) and the thinking brain. They can use their thinking brain to control the feeling brain.
- Do breathing exercises with them

How to calm their thoughts and cope with emotions

- Help them come up with some self-talk statements that they can use when they feel nervous.
- Some examples include:
 - “I am not alone”
 - “I know of the feelings I have”
 - “My feelings are normal”
 - “I can tell my parents how I really feel”.

- Guide them in 5 simple steps in self-talk:

1) **Ask yourself: WHAT am I feeling?**

- Ask yourself how you are feeling. Are you feeling sad, frustrated, angry, worried, tense, confused, scared, tired, numb, or something else?

2) **Tell yourself it is okay to feel this way**

- Tell yourself it is OK to feel that way. It will not last forever. Remember that other children have similar feelings and are learning to deal with them.

3) **Ask yourself: WHY do you feel this way?**

- Try to figure out why you are feeling the way you do. Is it the situation you are in? For example, are you worried because your parents are arguing? Are you hurt because a parent is ignoring you? Are you angry because a parent does not trust you? Are you doing some negative self-talk about the situation?

4) **Make a plan to change your feelings**

- Make a plan to change your feelings. There are several ways to do this. Pick one or two that work best for you:

- Think about alternative explanations for what is going on
- Think about something more pleasant (focus on the more positive or neutral self-talk). It's just like changing channels on the television.
- Do something that you enjoy and concentrate on that (divert your attention away from what is bothering you right now). For example, draw or colour, read a book, watch a television show. Play with a pet. Play a game with a brother or sister or friend.
- Do something active, especially if you feel "down" or sad. For example, go cycling, skating, jump, do cartwheels, do somersaults. Spin around until you're dizzy, go swimming, have a water gun fight, build a sandcastle, play with your pet.

5) **Put your plan into action.**

- Encourage your children to put their plan into action.

Go over and practise these steps with your kids once in a while. The more you practise with them, the more likely they will remember the five steps when they need them.

How to navigate tough situations arising from their parents' divorce

- Practise the use of “I” messages with them and encourage them to use this technique to express their thoughts and to make requests with you.
- Encourage them to tell you with an “I” message whenever they feel caught in the middle of their parents’ conflicts. Respect their feelings and wishes when they share their thoughts.
- Remain neutral and focused on helping them feel heard by you. If they say something you feel is negative about you or your co-parent, try not to react to it by explaining yourself or blaming your co-parent.
- An example would be: if your child told you they wished you and your co-parent would stop using him/her as messengers, you could respond by saying "Thank you for telling me, I didn't realise you felt so stressed. I will speak directly with your father / mother." (and ensure you follow through with doing so).

How to ask for help when needed

- Help them come up with a list of people they can go to for help if they need to.



3 SKILLS RECAP & PRACTICE EXERCISES

Skill 1: Protect your children from co-parent conflict

This skill is covered in all Modules

Exposing children to parental conflict can be more harmful than the divorce itself.

What is conflict?

Conflicts occur in all relationships, and everyone contributes to conflict at some point. Conflict behaviours may include:

1. Using threatening words or words that put someone down
2. Arguments
3. Interfering with the other parent's life or access to children
4. Aggressive legal action
5. Threats or stalking
6. Property damage
7. Physical violence or murder

Co-parenting conflict impacts children through:

- Fear and worry
- Loyalty conflicts between parents
- Anger and confusion about loving both parents
- Emotional trauma including nightmares, physical symptoms, aggression, and risky behaviours with substances or sex
- Higher stress levels
- Physical and mental health problems
- School difficulties

We can learn to manage conflict without destroying relationships or harming our children. They are:

- Avoid arguing with or voicing your unhappiness about the other parent in front of your children.
- Refrain from asking your children to carry messages to the other parent or question them about your co-parent's personal life.

You may also apply other skills learnt through this programme.

Here is an example of how you can apply the skills learnt to prevent conflict:

You see your co-parent arrive in front of your apartment with your young child in the car. Your child is not in a car seat and does not have a seat belt fastened. You are going to give your co-parent some feedback about this.

1. Pause and notice how you are feeling and thinking, in your body and mind (e.g. Physical: tensed jaws and shoulders; Feelings: concerned, worried, scared, irritated, angry). Remember, it is alright that you feel this way. Focus on what is happening now instead of recalling other similar situations with your co-parent.
2. Use Reframing to think of other reasons your co-parent did not put your child in a car seat or seat belt (e.g. did not notice the seat belt was not tightly fastened, your child took the belt off just before arriving).
3. Use Self-talk to calm yourself and to plan how you want to respond (“OK, take three slow, deep breaths”).
4. Use an “I” Message—and rehearse it silently before speaking: “I feel worried when I see our child with no seat belt because I think of how badly he could be hurt if there is an accident. I need you to make sure he is always properly strapped down”.
5. Stay focused on the present situation (instead of bringing up that you had said this previously) and deliver your “I” Message to your co-parent.
6. When the other parent responds to your statement, be aware of your reactions and repeat steps 2 and 3 if necessary. Then use Active Listening to let them know you heard their response. You may need to deliver another “I” Message, or make a Polite Request where you state what you will do and request a change. (“I need to know our child is safe, so I will text you next time before you start driving over here to remind you about the seat belt. You can text me back when you have belted him in. Would that be OK?”).

This skill is covered
in Modules 1, 3
and 4

Skill 2: Attune to your children’s emotions

Be sensitive in noticing and responding to your children’s emotions, including facial expressions, tone, and body language, in a way that shows understanding and care. Create emotional connections with them.

When we talk about emotions to our child, we develop their empathy and self-awareness. These qualities are important for close, supportive relationships throughout their lives. We can teach our child to recognise and label their own emotions, without judgment. We can share our child's excitement and wonder, or sit quietly with them during difficult times. This is called attuning to their emotions. When others do this with us, we feel understood, accepted, and supported, and when our child experiences this from us, they feel close, secure, and comforted.

Example 1:

My four-year-old took blankets from the bed and clothes pegs from the laundry to build a “house” next to the sofa. He is excited and proud of what he has made, saying "Look at this! I just made it!"

I could react with: "Take that down immediately and return my blankets and clothes pegs! You'll get them dirty!"

Or I could respond: "Wow, beautiful. You must feel proud of yourself! You are excited to show it to me!"

You can guess which reaction will make my child feel that I am attuned with him. It is obvious which of my reactions will make my child "feel heard" by me, thus feel accepted, secure, loved.

Example 2:

You happened to see a pop-up message on the phone of your thirteen-year-old, telling a friend that she is worried that she might fail a subject.

When she comes into the room, I could say: "I'll bet you haven't been studying that subject diligently. Do you want to tell me what is going on?"

Or I could say: "I happened to see the pop-up message on your phone. It sounds like you are scared about not doing well in one of your subjects. I know that is not a good feeling. I can remember feeling that way when I was in school."

In the first reaction, I put my daughter on the defensive because I judged her and said she was at fault. She will react defensively in return, and we may not get the problem solved or help our relationship.

In the second reaction, I purposely avoided judgment and used Active Listening to attune to her emotions. She will feel supported and understood, and will be more likely to open up and talk to me about the problem. Then I can help her reach a solution where she does not feel devalued or pushed around.

When we attune to our child's emotions, we get down to their level and we are open, curious, enthusiastic. Our facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice show this attitude. Our child will feel that he or she is valued and encouraged. This is helpful for building their self-esteem.

Tips for Attuning With Your Child

1. Give your child your full attention when you spend time together. If your child is young, let them lead the play as they wish, and repeat what they say to you to show that you understand them, rather than try to direct them. Try to play with them once a day. If your child is older, let them lead the conversations with you and use **Active Listening** to reflect what they say.
2. When your child is frustrated or discouraged, empathise with them. Start by acknowledging their feelings and letting them know you understand how they feel. Then express confidence in your child's ability and effort to manage these challenges. You can remind them of an instance where they kept trying and eventually solved a problem.
3. Look for your child's nonverbal signals that they are experiencing a strong emotion. Gently voice what you think they are feeling and see if this opens up the conversation.
4. Avoid too much criticism – Give more praise, support, encouragement. Strive for a ratio of 6 supportive comments for every 1 criticism.

Skill 3: Give permission for your children to tell you when they are stressed.

This skill is covered in Modules 1, 3 and 4

Children may experience varying emotions and cope differently with parental divorce and separation. Let your children know they are allowed to tell you when they feel stressed or upset, and that sharing their feelings with you is welcomed and safe. E.g. “If there is anything I ask you to do regarding your dad/mum that makes you feel uncomfortable, it’s okay for you to tell me.”

Respect their feelings and wishes when they share their thoughts, as this will encourage them to open up to you. Help your children express feelings by teaching them words for those feelings. You can refer to page 32 of this guide for a feeling chart which will be useful for this.

Reflection:

- What specific words or phrases can you use to remind your child that their feelings matter and that you want to hear from them?
- How might you respond if your child tells you something that's difficult for you to hear about the divorce situation?
- How can you give your children permission to ask you to stop if they feel uncomfortable with what you are doing?

Creating a safe space for children to share their feelings takes effort and self-awareness. Children often test whether it is safe by sharing smaller concerns first - your calm, non-defensive responses will show they can trust you with bigger worries. When they share something difficult about the divorce, resist defending yourself immediately. Thank them for being honest and acknowledge their feelings first. Regularly ask yourself: do my words and actions invite openness, or might my children sense that certain topics are off-limits? With patience and care, you can help your children feel comfortable in sharing their stressors with you.

Skill 4: Ignore your co-parent's insults.

This skill is covered
in Modules 1, 2
and 3

Choose not to react or argue when your co-parent says something hurtful or tries to provoke you. Instead, calm yourself down and focus on the topic of the conversation. E.g. stay focused.

There are various exercises that can help reduce stress and anxiety. Try some of the following techniques to calm yourself down.

Reflection:

Refer to the 5 ways to calm yourself down on the next page.

Which of the exercises are helpful for you? Are there other ways you can calm yourself down should your co-parent say something hurtful or try to provoke you?

Find out what works best for you and practise these techniques when you're calm, so they're easier to use when you're stressed. You may find more information about reducing stress here: <https://divorce-education.com/reducing-stress-for-you-and-your-family/>



5

Ways to Calm Yourself Down

1 Breathing Exercises

- 1. Find a comfortable position** - Sit or lie down with your back straight and shoulders relaxed. Close your eyes if preferred.
- 2. Place one hand on your chest, one on your belly** - This helps you feel which part of your body is moving as you breathe. Focus your attention on your breathing.
- 3. Breathe in slowly through your nose for 4 counts** - Feel your belly rise while keeping your chest still.
- 4. Hold your breath gently for 4 counts** - Don't strain, just pause naturally.
- 5. Breathe out slowly through your mouth for 6 counts** - Let your belly fall as the air leaves your body.
- 6. Repeat 5-10 times** - Continue until you feel calmer and more relaxed.



2 Physical Exercises

- **Progressive muscle relaxation** - Tense and then relax each muscle group in your body, starting from your toes and working up to your head
- **Gentle stretching** - Simple neck rolls, shoulder shrugs, or reaching your arms overhead
- **Walking** - A slow, mindful walk outdoors or even around your room

4 Quick Relief Techniques

- **Cold water** - Splash cold water on your face
- **Humming or singing** - The vibrations can help relax your nervous system
- **Gentle self-massage** - Rub your temples, shoulders, or hands

3 Mental Exercises

- **5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique** - Pause for a moment. Name 5 things you can see, 4 you can touch, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell, and 1 you can taste
- **Counting backwards** - Start from 100 and count down by 7s, or simply count backwards from 20
- **Visualisation** - Picture a peaceful place (e.g. a quiet beach or mountain top) in detail

5 Creative Activities

- **Drawing or colouring** - Even simple doodling can be calming
- **Listening to music** - Choose slow, peaceful songs
- **Writing** - Jot down your thoughts or feelings

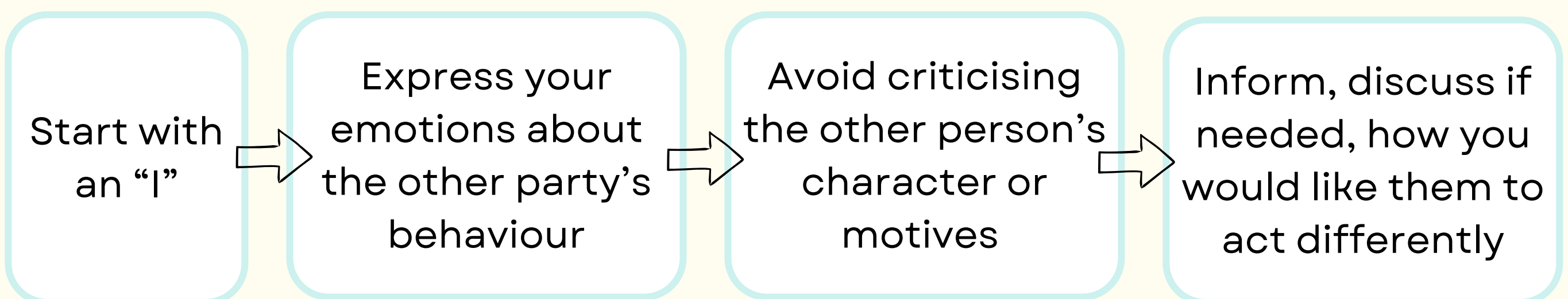


Skill 5: Use “I” messages or “I” statements to diffuse blame and hostility.

This skill is covered in all Modules

A calm, clear statement that starts with “I feel”, explaining how you experienced a situation. This reduces conflict by taking responsibility for your feelings instead of using “you” statements, which sound blaming.

Components of an "I" message are:



Examples of “I” Statements

Example 1 - Your two children are arguing and calling each other names:

“I get worried when you say hurtful things to each other, because I think that means you don’t respect each other. I would like you both to be kinder with your words.”

Example 2 – Your new partner tries to help your children with their homework but they do not take it well and usually talk back when he/she tries to engage them:

“I am feeling very uncomfortable when you are rude to Joey. I would like you to be kinder when you speak to him/her.”

Example 3 - Your co-parent often calls the children after their bedtime to wish them good night:

“I feel irritated when the kids are awakened when they are about to sleep. I want them to get a good night’s sleep, so I would prefer if you could call before 9pm.”

Example 4 - When you hear from your child that the other parent is complaining about how you spend your money:

“When I hear our daughter saying I am not responsible with money, I worry that she will lose respect for me. I would appreciate it if you would speak positively.”

Example 5 - When your co-parent does not provide you with timely updates about the children’s activities:

“I feel frustrated when I don't receive timely updates about the kids' appointments and schedule, because it makes it harder for me to stay involved in their activities.”



Let's Practise!

In each of the following situations, use an “I” message to express your feelings rather than blaming your co-parent.

Scenario 1:

Your co-parent is supposed to meet you at a HDB void deck at 6pm to take the children for access. He/She shows up an hour late.

Scenario 2:

Your co-parent tells you that he/she intends to come for your child's birthday party held at your place with his/her new partner. You are not comfortable with their new partner being at the party.

Scenario 3:

The children's new step-parent shows up to pick them up for access. You were expecting your co-parent to pick them up, and you are very uncomfortable and dislike the idea someone you do not know picking up your children.

Scenario 4:

You arrive at your co-parent's home to pick up your children, but they are not ready and are at the nearby playground with friends.

Scenario 5:

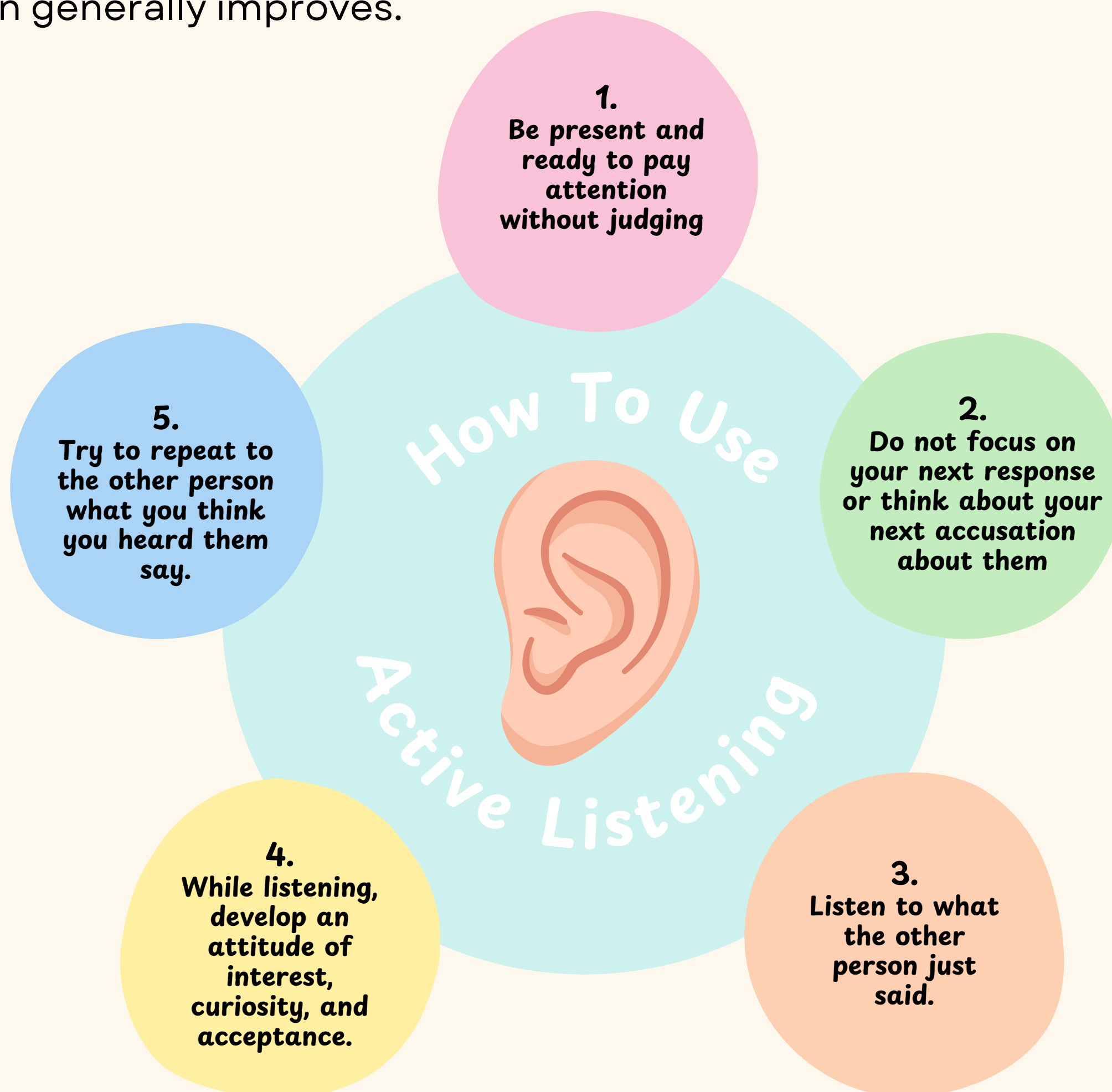
Your former mother-in-law tells you that you need to get a job that pays better so you can support your children.

Skill 6: Use active listening to let your co-parent and your children know you heard them.

This skill is covered in Modules 1, 2 and 3

Many people, especially children and spouses or partners, do not like to talk about their problems or feelings, because they think what they are saying is not really being heard or respected.

Active listening is understanding the other person, not just listening to respond and reply. It does not mean you agree with what the person is saying, it just shows that you are listening to them. It involves repeating the key parts of what someone has said or putting it into your own words, and gives the person you are talking to a chance to hear out what he/she has just said and decide if that is really what he/she meant to say. When the other person feels heard, cooperation generally improves.



Example of active listening:

"I hear that you feel uncomfortable when I ask you to speak to your mother, and you prefer I speak to her myself. Let me know if there is anything else I can do to make it easier for you."



Let's Practise!

Choose the responses that show the best examples of Active Listening.

Scenario 1:

Shaun gets off the phone after talking to a friend and curses under his breath. Dad says:

- a) What happened to make you curse?
- b) It sounds like you are upset.
- c) I feel worried when I hear you curse, because I think it might become a habit you do out loud.
- d) Sometimes I feel upset after talking to someone on the phone.
- e) Let's talk about what you can do when someone upsets you like that.

Answer to Scenario 1:

Both b) and d) are suitable examples of Active Listening. Option b) is a simple example of reflecting the other person's feelings. Option d) is a good demonstration of empathy by Dad, that he has been in Shaun's shoes.

Option a) is a question, not a reflection of what Shaun may be feeling.

Option c) is a good "I" statement but it is not Active Listening

In option e), Dad is attempting Problem Solving. He loses the chance to let Shaun open up and discuss what happened.

Scenario 2:

Sandra has been putting off doing her homework until late at night when she is tired. This affects her school results. When Mum asks her to start her homework earlier, Sandra angrily tells Mum to leave her alone. Mum says:

- a) Ah, there goes the nagging mother again.
- b) Homework is not a punishment. No one likes to do it, but we all have to.
- c) You sounded frustrated when I remind you to do something you dislike. Maybe you would be less frustrated if you started earlier.
- d) I'm sorry; I should not have pressured you.

Answer to Scenario 2:

Both a) and c) are suitable examples of Active Listening. In option a), Mum uses humour and simply states what she is seeing without making a judgment. In option c), Mum combines active listening with advice-giving.

In option b), it is good that Mum makes it clear she is not punishing Sandra by asking her to do what is expected. But it is not Active Listening and does not encourage Sandra to share about her feelings.

Scenario 3:

Dad wants his two children to like their new stepmother. They are not feeling close to her, and often show anger about what she does and says. After dinner one day, the stepmother asked Andy to do the dishes. He mutters angrily about not getting a break. Dad says:

- a) You don't like to think about doing housework when you are looking forward to relax after dinner.
- b) She is just trying to get you to help around the house. It's a simple reminder. Take it easy.
- c) I told your stepmother to remind you about helping with housework. So don't get mad at her.
- d) You don't like your stepmother telling you what to do.

Answer to Scenario 3:

Both a) and d) are suitable examples of Active Listening. In option a), Dad guesses at the reason behind Andy's anger and tries to understand his feelings and perspective. In option d), Dad's simple statement is a good guess about why Andy is angry.

In option b), Dad is giving advice and tries to calm Andy. He didn't let Andy know he hears or understands his frustration.

In option c), Dad explains the note to take some of the sting out of it. He is not reflecting about what Andy is feeling or thinking.

Scenario 4:

Mum is struggling to pay their bills and is worried about meeting basic needs of food and housing. Her daughter Jeanne has lost her jacket and wants her mum to buy her another one that is as nice as the one that she lost. Mum has no intention of spending that much. Mum says:

- a) I think you need to take responsibility for losing your jacket and either get another one secondhand, or do without.
- b) Would you rather have an expensive new jacket and have no food and shelter?
- c) You must be upset to lose that jacket that you liked so much.
- d) How about if you earn some money this week and pay for half the cost of another jacket?

Answer to Scenario 4:

Only option c) is a suitable example of Active Listening. This is a good reflection of what her daughter is feeling.

In option a), Mum misses a chance to make a connection first and show she understands Jeanne's needs.

In option b), Mum has not listened first and jumps to justifying her decision. She should be careful about the what choices she gives Jeanne.

In option d), Mum jumps to problem solving before listening first.



This skill is covered
in all Modules

Skill 7: Use self-talk to keep your emotions in control and to reach your goals.

Self-talk is talking to yourself to stay calm and focused. It involves:

a) Setting a goal for a conversation

If we set a goal for the discussion, we can remind ourselves what the purpose is. We will be more likely to stay focused and not get side-tracked.

b) Telling ourselves to stay calm

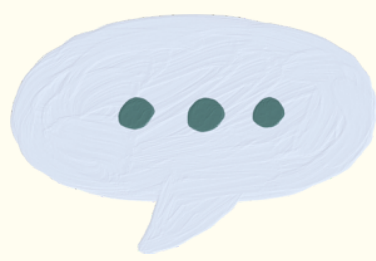
Combining Self-Talk with Self-Soothing techniques can keep your emotions in check. Use tried and tested methods for calming yourself. Taking full, deep breaths can be helpful, because when we exhale, our heartbeat slows down slightly.

If you are feeling anxious or tense, here's how you can practise doing a few deep breaths:

- i) Inhale deeply through your nose.
- ii) Exhale completely through your mouth. When you get to the bottom of your natural exhalation, try and exhale even more, pushing any remaining air out.
- iii) Repeat the above for seven or more breaths (most people start to feel significantly calmer around breath five).

c) Rehearsing ahead of time what we will say

Rehearsing what to say ahead of time will increase your level of preparedness and keep you from reacting from your emotional brain. When you use your thinking brain, you can choose how to respond in helpful ways and also exercise better judgement.



Reflection:

Here are a few exercises to practise self-talk

Scenario 1:

You received word from your son's school that he is in trouble for fighting. He is on his way home. What do you say to yourself to handle the situation well?

First, begin calming yourself. How would you do this?

Second, think about your intentions. What do you want to accomplish when you talk with him?

Third, tell yourself what steps to take to accomplish your goals.

Scenario 2:

Your daughter is arguing with you about meeting her friends on Saturday night, which is when the family visits grandparents. She is angry and responds disrespectfully with curse words. What do you say to yourself before reacting to her profanity?

First, be aware of how you are feeling.

Second, if you are getting emotional, calm yourself. How can you do this?

Third, rehearse what you will say to her to let her know how you feel about her response.

Fourth, suggest to her another way to express her feelings other than using curse words.

Scenario 3:

You hear from your child that the other parent has been serving meals that you think are unhealthy. You want to call the other parent and try to get them to serve healthier food.

First, how are you feeling when you hear this? Accept negative feelings as normal.

Second, if you are feeling very irritated or angry, calm yourself before making the phone call or sending a message.

Third, what do you want to accomplish in the conversation? What can you say to keep communication open?

Fourth, rehearse what you will say before making the call or read through your message again. Be very specific and use the exact words you will speak (so you don't get into reacting emotionally and automatically).

Scenario 4:

The other parent has messaged you that they cannot take the kids the coming weekend. You have plans that now have to be changed. You are not happy about this. You are about to call your co-parent. How do you prepare yourself for this call so that it will not become a big argument?

First, what are you feeling about this message? Is it okay you feel this way?

Second, what are you telling yourself about your co-parent's motives? Is this helpful for keeping yourself calm?

Third, what can you do to calm yourself before making the call?

Fourth, what is your goal for the conversation? Keep in mind that you want to preserve a good working relationship.

Fifth, what skills will you need to use to keep a decent working relationship and also solve the problem?

Sixth, rehearse exactly what you will say before making the call. Sometimes it helps to say it aloud

Let's Practise!



See if you can spot good examples of self-talk in the below scenarios. Each of the answers is what you would be thinking before responding.

Scenario 1:

You get a call from your co-parent criticising you for letting your kids watch too much TV. You think to yourself:

- a) Who does he think he is telling how to parent? I will let him know that he needs to mind his own business.
- b) He is probably upset about something else. I will take a few breaths before saying anything and let him finish.
- c) I need to put a stop to these calls. He has no right to criticise me. I must be firm.
- d) I am feeling very irritated right now. I need time to calm down, and use an I-message to tell him how this makes me feel.

Answer to Scenario 1:

Option d) is the best example of Self-Talk. You accept your feelings, so you can respond wisely and use skills.

Option a) does not require much planning and is just your reaction to the situation. Such self-talk may make you more angry and less effective.

In option b), it is a reasonable example of self-talk. You are giving your co-parent the benefit of the doubt and not taking it personally. This makes it easier for you to calm down.

In option c), you are making yourself more upset and this may result in you responding in an aggressive manner. Your co-parent is likely to counter-attack. You can be firm without being hostile.

Scenario 2:

You run into your co-parent at your child's sports event. She is with her new partner and you wish she had not brought him. They are walking up to you. You think:

- a) I am feeling hurt, angry, and jealous. I need to be polite and say very little. Keep it brief. Get my thoughts on the important stuff: that our child is having fun.
- b) I am going to pretend I don't see them, and walk in the other direction.
- c) I will let her know that bringing him along is not good for our child. Someone has to tell her this is not right.
- d) Why does she like to embarrass me in public like this?

Answer to Scenario 2:

Option a) is the best example of Self-Talk. Labelling and accepting all of your feelings reduces their power over you. Now you can make a plan and stick to it. In option b) you are making a plan to avoid conflict, but they may call out to you. You may need an alternative plan.

In option c), making this judgement will increase your anger and make you reactive instead of choosing how to respond.

In option d), you are assuming she has negative motives for bringing her boyfriend. This will make you angry and more likely to start an argument. This will stress your child and make future cooperation harder.

Scenario 3:

You have told your child to put away food after taking it out of the refrigerator. You come home and see milk that has been sitting out for hours and think you may have to throw it out. You think:

- a) I really need to make an impression here. This has got to stop. Money does not grow on trees.
- b) I am not going to say anything to spoil my day. I will just check if the milk has turned sour and discard it if needed.
- c) He probably forgot again. I will tell him that I feel frustrated about reminding him so often and tell him what I expect. Maybe throw in a consequence this time.
- d) He has no respect for me. I am not going to put up with this. I will ground him for the next two days.

Answer to Scenario 3:

Option c) is the best example of Self-Talk. You don't assume bad motives and gave him the benefit of the doubt. You are aware of your feelings and plan a good I-message.

In option a), you are getting yourself upset over something that may not need such a strong response. If this is a pattern, sitting down and doing some problem-solving will work better.

In option b), you are avoiding your feelings and running away from fixing the problem. It will happen again.

In option d), when you assume the worst of his motives, you make yourself angrier and more reactive, and you may end up punishing your child too harshly.

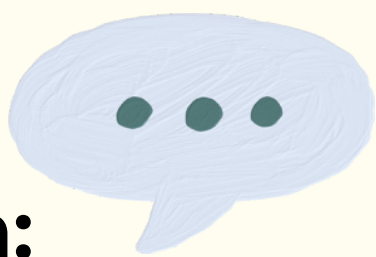
This skill is covered
in all Modules

Skill 8: Don't assume your co-parent's motives.

Reframe them to give the co-parent the benefit of the doubt.

Looking at your co-parent's actions in a positive or neutral way instead of assuming the worst about them.

E.g. Your children shared that they had more fun with the other parent and want to spend more time there. Instead of assuming your co-parent is trying to win over the children, you may reframe the situation to say: "This does not mean my children do not enjoy spending time with me. My children can and should have fun with both parents."



Reflection:

What are some motives your co-parent may have had that are not negative (either neutral or positive motives)?

Without realising it, we often make assumptions about others' motives or intentions. We may think they are trying to control us, not respecting us, wanting to hurt or anger us, or wanting to embarrass us. If we think their motives are negative, we tend to get defensive and may prepare to respond with an attack. This is a natural response that comes from our emotional brain. If we think motives are positive, we are more likely to respond kindly.

This happens when our thinking brain is activated. We pause, think things through, and use empathy, reasoning and problem-solving.

One way to help ourselves pause and change which parts of our brain are influencing us is through reframing. Reframing means when we are irritated or stressed by another person, we think of a positive or neutral motive behind what this person did or said. Reframing motives changes our mindset and feelings, keeps us from becoming too stressed or angry, so we can choose how to best respond. This often leads to more cooperation and kindness.

Here are some steps for Reframing:

1. First, when we are feeling upset with another person, identify what we are thinking about their motives.
2. Second, think of a different motive this person might have that is not negative.
3. Third, consider how we feel towards this person now that we have reframed their motive.
4. Fourth, think about the different skills we could use to respond, and choose the skills that fit best (e.g. Active Listening, “I” Message, Self-Talk, Stop-Look-Listen, Polite Request).

When we demonstrate Reframing, we also role model for our children that we can trust others and give others the benefit of the doubt.

The following are some situations where a child’s behaviour may be reframed:

1) *Fighting between siblings.*

When siblings fight, it does not mean that they intend to hurt each other. They may be seeking excitement, or attention, are bored, or jealous of each other.

2) *Coming home later than agreed to.*

It could mean that the children/youths are enjoying their time with their friends rather than acting rebellious. Parents get upset over this because they are worried, and not because they are trying to be too strict or unreasonable.

3) *Talking to or texting friends instead of doing homework.*

It could mean that they found the homework too difficult and lacked the confidence. They may find other things more important or they are embarrassed to ask you for help and prefer asking friends instead. It could also mean that their peers are distracting them from doing homework, or talking to friends helps them manage stress from school.

4) When children talk back or use curse words.

The child could be showing their need for independence and that they can think on their own. They are frustrated and may not know how to express themselves, or they may be imitating an argumentative parent.

The following are some situations where a co-parent's behaviours may be reframed:

Example 1 - Your co-parent shows up late to pick up the children

Reframe as:

“They may be busy with other things and did not plan well, or mistook the pick-up time. Something unexpected could have happened, or there was a miscommunication about pick-up time.”

Example 2 – Your co-parent does not ensure that your children complete their homework.

Reframe as:

“There may have been other priorities that cropped up over the week. They are also worried about the children’s academic performance, but may not know how best to guide the children academically. They may have tried, but your children were resistant as they were influenced otherwise by peers, or were not truthful about their homework.”

Example 3 - Your co-parent criticised you for what you feed the children

Reframe as:

“They are worried about the children’s health, or do not have enough information on what you feed the children. They may have a different philosophy from you about healthy eating.”

Example 4 - Your co-parent complains about the way you spend money

Reframe as:

“They worry that there is not enough money for two households. He/She does not have enough information on how you budget, or they are trying to express their concern but used poor choice of words.”



Let's Practise!

Try to spot good examples of reframing in the following scenarios. Each of the answers is what you would be thinking before responding.

Scenario 1:

Your child argues with you when you tell them it is time for bed. You think:

- a) I am the parent here. I will not put up with this disrespect.
- b) He is just trying to see if he can win this one and take advantage of me.
- c) He is enjoying what he is doing and does not want to stop.
- d) He is putting going to bed off because he is afraid of the dark.

Answer to Scenario 1:

Option (d) is the best example of reframing as it is understandable for him to feel that way.

Option (c) is also a good example of reframing: it is normal for kids to want to stay up late when they are involved in something. This is a neutral or positive motive.

In Option (a), you think his motive is to show you disrespect. Thinking this way will not help your relationship.

In Option (b), thinking that your child is trying to take advantage of you is a negative motive.

Scenario 2:

Your daughter tells you that she has more fun at her other parent's house and wants to spend more time there.

- a) This is understandable. That parent has more free time to play with her than I do.
- b) She is trying to get back at me for not letting her stay up late to watch TV.
- c) She lets herself be conned by someone trying to get back at me.
- d) She doesn't mean that. She is trying to hurt my feelings.

Answer to Scenario 2:

Option (a) is the best example of reframing as you recognise her motive is innocent so you will not become angry at her.

In option (b), you are taking her comment personally instead of giving her the benefit of the doubt that she is being honest.

In option (c), you are assuming the worst of the other parent's motives although you still assume your daughter's motives are innocent.

In option (d), you assume your daughter is being dishonest and has a negative motive against you.

Scenario 3:

Your co-parent did not bring along your child's medicine when dropping her off, so you have to make an extra trip to do so.

a) This is so typical—he never thinks of anyone but himself.

b) He loves to frustrate me and make me run extra errands to fix what he messed up.

c) He forgot. I wish he had not because now I have to make the time to do it.

d) He wants our child to be sick while she is with me.

Answer to Scenario 3:

Option (c) is the best example of reframing as you recognise that people may accidentally forget things. You are also aware of your own frustration over the hassle this will cause you.

In option (a), thinking that he is selfish and does not care about his child's health is a negative motive. Thinking this way may cause you to start an argument that hurts the co-parent relationship and your child.

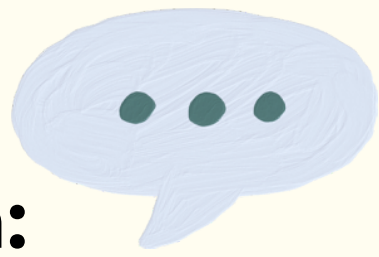
In option (b), you think he forgot the medicine on purpose, which is a negative motive.

In option (d), thinking of a highly negative motive like this will really cause you to become stressed and angry.

Skill 9: Don't criticise your co-parent in front of your children

When parents talk bad about each other, children may feel hurt. This is because children love both parents as much and often see both parents as part of themselves, so criticisms of one parent can feel like criticism about themselves.

- E.g. Have phone calls with your co-parent in the absence of your children.
- E.g. Practise calming down through self-soothing techniques (e.g. deep breathing) before speaking to your children about the other co-parent.



Reflection:

Reflect on a past instance where you criticised your co-parent to your children. How do you think your children felt at the time? How did they react?

Sometimes, you may also hear criticism from your co-parent. The following is an example of the steps we may take to manage such situations:

You receive an email from the other parent criticising you harshly for not paying for some of your child's expenses.

1. Scan your body to see how it is reacting to this email (e.g. muscles tensing, heart rate increasing, breath becoming shallow). Be aware of what feelings you are having (e.g. irritation, anger, guilt) and accept these as normal.
2. Use **Stop-Look-Listen**. Stop yourself from reacting quickly with an email or call. Look at your options for how you could respond:
 - a) counter the criticism with one of your own,
 - b) use active listening to repeat what was written, in your own words,
 - c) state what you are willing to do or your understanding of your obligations.

Listen to your better nature and respond with respect. Give your co-parent the benefit of the doubt and **reframe their motives** (e.g. they are scared that they do not have enough money, or they are stressed about finances, or they are worried that you will not cooperate in working out differences, or they are feeling frustrated with various stressors from work and family).

3. Respond to the email with a phone call or email in a way that does not hurt your co-parenting relationship. You may use skills such as “I” messages and polite requests.

This skill is covered
in Modules 2, 3 and
4

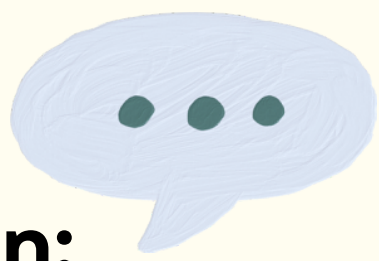
Skill 10: Observe and label your own feelings

Pause and notice any physical sensations you have (e.g. clenched jaw, racing heart, tensed muscles, heavy breathing) and name your feelings (e.g. “I am angry, and that’s okay. I can calm myself down.”).

If we identify what we are feeling, we can accept that feeling as normal. Unpleasant feelings often lose their power over us. When we acknowledge them instead of ignoring them, we can use self-soothing techniques to cope and choose how to respond rather than react emotionally.

The feelings map may be useful in helping to label how we feel:





Reflection:

1. Think of recent incidents when you felt overwhelmed by your feelings. Try to recount how you felt physically, identify and label your feeling based on the feelings wheel, and reflect on how you might have responded differently.
2. In the coming days, practise being more aware of how your body responds, and what your thoughts and feelings are as you go about your day.

Skill 11: Stop-Look-Listen

This skill is covered in Modules 3 and 4

Stop yourself from reacting emotionally by using your breath and other self-soothing practices. Look at all your options before responding, and listen to your better nature to choose the best response.

This skill is a series of steps that can keep us from reacting automatically and making the situation worse. We can give ourselves time to move away from our emotional brain and engage our thinking brain, so we can use our best judgment to decide how to respond.

The steps to this skill are:



Pause and do not say or do the first thing that comes to mind. Notice how you are feeling and thinking.

Use self-soothing practices (e.g. deep breathing, counting to 10) to calm down and give yourself time to respond.

Reframe the motive the other person may have for what they said or did that upset you, or think about how you might feel in their position.



LOOK



Look at different ways you can respond. Review the advantages and disadvantages of each response.

Choose which communication skills (e.g. "I"-messages, polite requests, active listening, ask for permission to make a request) you may use to keep you from getting more stressed and to show respect.

Also decide if you might need more time to respond wisely, so you can inform your co-parent accordingly.



LISTEN



Listen to your better nature (thinking brain) to decide on the most helpful response to resolve the situation and not damage the relationship. Give the other person the benefit of the doubt and treat your co-parent the way you would like to be treated

When you have completed these three steps, you are ready to make a wiser response. You do not have to "win" the argument. By showing respect, you will set an example of maturity, kindness, and strength for the other person and your children, and lay the foundation for a more co-operative co-parenting relationship. If you are not ready to make a wise response, wait for a different time to continue the discussion if possible. Meanwhile, rehearsing what you will say, using Self-talk will also prepare you to stay on track and achieve your goals.

See how you can apply **Stop-Look-Listen** in the following scenarios:

Scenario 1:

You receive an email or text message asking for a change in schedule at the last minute.

STOP - Be aware of your feelings as you read the message. If you are feeling stressed, accept your feelings and calm yourself down. Reframe the motive the other parent may have for the last-minute change.

LOOK - Review several ways you could respond to the message and evaluate each one. Which response would resolve the problem without damaging your relationship with the other parent? What skills are needed?

LISTEN - When you are confident, kind, and able to set limits as needed, how would you respond? How would you want the other parent to respond if you made a similar request?

Respond to the message respectfully, without anger.

Scenario 2:

You run into your co-parent and their partner at your child's school event.

STOP - Allow yourself time to become aware of your reactions to this awkward surprise. Accept your feelings and do not try to hide them from yourself. (You do not have to show or act on these feelings.) Calm yourself if you are feeling stressed, anxious or uncomfortable.

LOOK - What are several ways you could respond? What are the pros and cons of each way? What kind of example do you want to set for your child?

LISTEN - How would you want your child to think of your character? What would you want your child to feel in this awkward situation? Your better nature would show kindness and respect for everyone.

Respond as you would like your co-parent to treat you.

Scenario 3:

You forgot to send something home with your child and got a phone call from your co-parent who used curse words on you.

STOP - Take a moment to notice your physical reactions. What are you thinking and feeling as you hear this harsh criticism? What works best to calm yourself? If you need more time, tell the other parent that you will call right back.

LOOK - Review what you could say, using skills you have learned (e.g. Active Listening, "I" Message, Reframing). Think of the advantages of each response, and the downside. Think long term, that you will have a long relationship with this person.

LISTEN - Decide on the best response that will help resolve the situation. Rehearse what you will say using Self-talk

Respond with firmness about any curse words that offend you. Continue the conversation as long as it is productive and respectful.

Scenario 4:

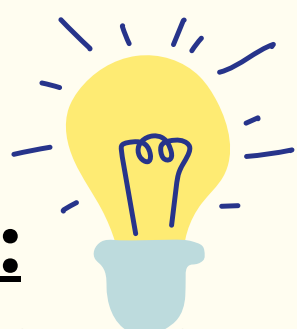
Your co-parent makes a negative comment on your appearance ("You look terrible in that top.")

STOP - Quickly survey your bodily reaction, thoughts, and feelings about this comment. Naming your feelings as this will lessen its hold over you." Calm yourself and allow yourself to feel confident. You are worthy of respect.

LOOK - Remember you have choices about how you respond. Which responses will keep the discussion from getting worse? What can you say to show respect for yourself and your co-parent?

LISTEN - If you said that to someone else, how would you like them to respond? You are a kind person, so what would a kind person say?

Respond in a way that maintains your self-respect and does not damage the relationship. Humour is often very effective.



Let's practise:

In the following situations, practise how you would use Stop-Look-Listen:

- Your child has not done any homework and instead spent hours on their device.
- You receive an angry phone call where your co-parent blames you for being late to pick up the kids.
- Your child made a mess in the kitchen after you have just cleaned it. You are expecting friends over soon.
- Your child is careless and loses the new jacket you bought.
- Your co-parent emails you about paying for your child's extra expenses. You do not believe that is your responsibility.
- You see your co-parent at the fast-food restaurant with your child late at night, well past your child's normal bedtime.

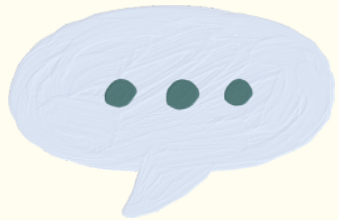
This skill is covered
all in Modules

Skill 12: Polite Request

Asking someone to change his/her behaviour in a respectful and considerate way.

Think of a past request you had made to your co-parent. Was it a polite request? If not, what could you have said differently?

Reflection:



Let's practise: In each of the following situations, craft a polite request to your co-parent. You may consider using an "I" message.

Scenario 1:

You have a work event this coming Saturday and will need your co-parent to take care of the children, even though you normally have access on Saturdays. You know that he/she is likely to be unhappy with this request.

Scenario 2:

You heard that your former in-laws have been bad-mouthing you in front of the children, and would like your co-parent to speak to your former in-laws about this.

Skill 13: Mentioning Shared Goals

This skill is covered
in Modules 2,3 and
4

Reminding yourself and your co-parent about the things you both want for your children, such as their health and happiness, or feeling loved and secure, to bring the conversation back to what is most important.

Reflection:

Let's practise: In each of the following situations, draft a verbal or written message to remind your co-parent of shared goals you have for the children. Consider using "I" messages.

Scenario 1:

Your co-parent often forgets to send the children for tuition when they are with him/her.

(an example of a common goal in this instance might be the children doing well for their school subjects)

Scenario 2:

You found out that your child has been using her mobile phone unsupervised and for long hours when at the co-parent's place.

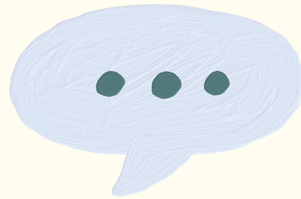
(an example of a common goal in this instance might be ensuring your child is not engaging in harmful online behaviours, or addictive scrolling behaviours)

Skill 14: Ask for Permission to make a Suggestion

This skill is covered in Module 3

Asking the other parent if it is okay with them before offering a suggestion.

Reflection:



What are some situations where you might wish to ask for permission from your co-parent to make a suggestion?

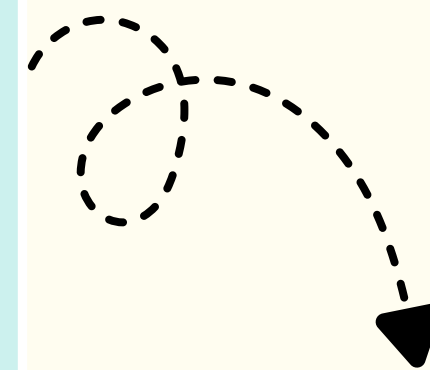
How to deal with a request and how to make a request:

A festive holiday is coming and you receive a text message from your co-parent saying they want to spend the whole day with the child. However, you have also planned to bring your child for house visits with relatives which would take up the majority of the day.

BECOME AWARE OF HOW YOU ARE FEELING ABOUT THIS REQUEST

(i.e. you feel irritated as you think that your co-parent always wants to have the child on important days and does not seem to care about disrupting your plans.)

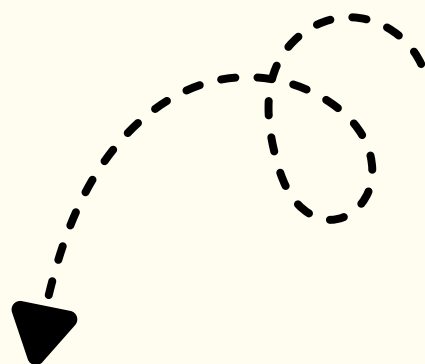
Accept that feeling, and if you need some time to prepare your response, you can always choose to reply when you are ready.



REFRAME WHAT YOU THINK ARE THE MOTIVES FOR THE OTHER PARENT MAKING THIS REQUEST

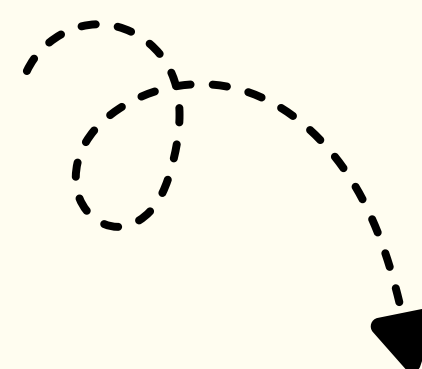
(e.g. maybe the other parent is excited about spending time with their child and planned an outing, or they might not know you had made plans too, or they also want their child to maintain connections with relatives).

Reframe your thoughts that their statement was made to merely show you disrespect or to be controlling.



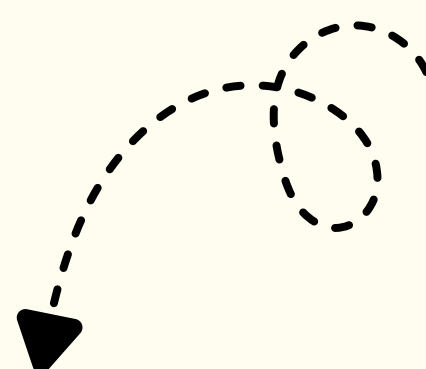
USE ACTIVE LISTENING TO SHOW THAT YOU HEARD THEIR STATEMENT

(e.g. "I understand you are looking forward to spending time and doing something fun with our child this holiday.")



COMPOSE AN "I" MESSAGE IN YOUR HEAD AND REHEARSE HOW YOU WILL SAY IT TO YOUR CO-PARENT

(e.g. "I feel like I have been taken for granted. I have actually made plans and changing those at the last minute would be pretty inconvenient. May I suggest we make a compromise?").



DELIVER THE "I" MESSAGE IN A CALM TONE

Be prepared to work out a compromise with your co-parent

(e.g. "I know that you often have a gathering with relatives over lunch. How about our child stays with you in the morning and I pick her up after lunch in the afternoon?").

You may be in the same position someday, asking the other parent to make a change.

Skill 15: Assurance

This skill is covered
in all Modules

Letting your child know it is safe to share his/her feelings with you, and that you will respond with understanding, so he/she feels confident opening up.

Reflection:

When you catch yourself asking inappropriate questions of your children, or when they send you verbal or nonverbal signs that they are feeling uncomfortable, what can you say or do to assure them?

How can I connect with my child after conflict or stress?

While many of the skills in the CiB (Parents) programme focus on improving your communication and relationships with your co-parent, we also know that the involvement of both parents in your children's lives is likely to have long term benefits for them, and probably for you.

One of the best ways you can help your child make a healthy adjustment after separation or divorce is to improve the quality of your relationship with your child. We know that conflict and stress affect your child's brain. While we cannot prevent all conflict or stress, being nurturing is a good way to mitigate the effects of stress. These strategies include: talking to your child gently and actively listen to what they say, touching and smiling and being fully present, recalling a pleasant event with them, or reading a bedtime story. For young children, engage them in pretend play like creating adventures with their toys.

What can you do when you have conflict with your child and you both feel disconnected? Just ignoring it and telling yourselves to move on may not be helpful. These are some steps you can try:

First, calm yourself down. You might make a cup of tea, take a walk outside, and calm your breathing. It is important to understand your own feelings and to accept them, and to be attuned to your child's feelings. You may have to admit that parents also have meltdowns and lose control. Screaming at our child makes him/her feel shameful, which is not healthy for his/her development.

When you start to repair the disruption (which will be harder if you have hit your child), pick a suitable time. Let your child know you want to feel good about each other again. If child rebuffs you after your first attempt, do not give up. You cannot reconcile or repair if you are placing blame. Acknowledge that you two have had difficulties and listen for your child's reaction.

You can follow the following steps when repairing the relationship between yourself and your child:

1) **Calm yourself first**

- use skills such as deep breathing to calm down



2) **Acknowledge and be accountable for what happened**

- genuinely apologise for the specific behaviour / words used without using “but” to justify yourself.



3) **Validate the child’s feelings**

- practice active listening to hear how it affected them
e.g. “I hear that it was scary when I shouted at you/hit you.”.

4) **Reconnect**

- this can be done through touch (e.g. like a hug if appropriate) or through an activity (e.g. sharing a meal).



5) **Solve the problem**

- work with your child on solutions for the future.



4 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you require further support, please visit Family Assist, an online resource portal for stressed families and for couples seeking to strengthen their marriage, or considering divorce.



To find out about divorce support programmes or counselling, contact a Strengthening Families Programme (FAM) Centre near you. A list of FAM Centre locations may be found here.



If you prefer to speak to a counsellor online through live chat or email, you may access the Online Counselling service here.





*Children-in-Between (Parents) is adapted with permission from
The Center for Divorce Education (CDE), developers of the
Children-in-Between programme.*