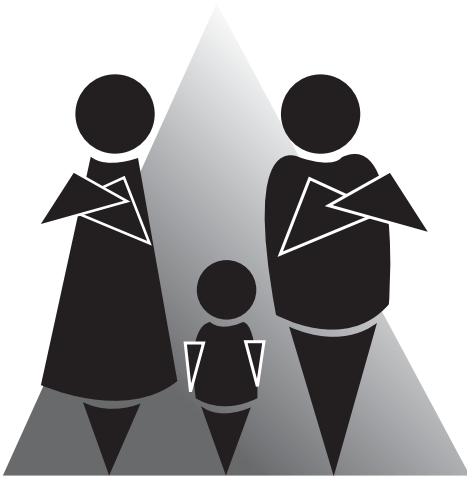


**EXTENSION PROGRAMS**

Agriculture and Forestry  
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 Family and Consumer Sciences  
 4-H Youth Development  
 Natural Resources



Are Your Children in the  
**MIDDLE**  
 of Your Conflict or Divorce?

**Talking With Children - Communicating Within Your Family: Active Listening**

**F**our factors affect a child's adjustment to divorce:

- The level of conflict
- A stable environment
- Maintaining relationships
- Compassionate listening

Parents can have a great deal of influence over these factors by communicating and practicing active listening. Active listening means paying careful attention to what other people are saying.

Parents should, first and foremost, communicate to their children that they love their children and will always be their parents, and that the children are not responsible for the divorce. Children need to know they cannot change the situation because it is not their job. It is not their job to take care of their parents. It is OK for them to be sad, scared, happy, frustrated or upset about the divorce. Parents should tell their children they can talk to them and they will listen.

For parents to listen to their children, they must become active listeners. Parents and children should also practice using "I" messages to help reduce conflict when discussing concerns and feelings.

It is important to be an active listener with your children, especially when they are distressed. As an active listener, you don't offer advice, judge or criticize. Rather, you listen and concentrate on what the speaker is saying. By putting aside other tasks and showing genuine interest, you show your children you care about what they have to say.

**Steps to Effective Active Listening**

- ▶ Realize that all families have communication problems. Children and parents have their own personalities. They think, talk and express themselves differently. It takes work

to communicate so everyone understands.

- ▶ Identify your child's feelings behind the message.
- ▶ Focus on the feelings.
- ▶ Rephrase your child's statement, focusing on the major feeling.
- ▶ Don't give up! Communication is important. It builds a sense of belonging to your family.
- ▶ Check with your child to make sure you have correctly identified the feelings.

**Example:**

**Child:** "I hate my history teacher. She gave me a 'C' on my exam."

**Parent:** "I heard you say you are unhappy with your teacher because she gave you a grade you feel you did not deserve on your last exam. Is that correct?"

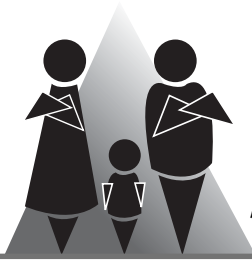
Talking less and listening more promote active listening. Also avoid being judgmental or defensive. Listen for feelings as well as ideas.

**To improve active listening skills:**

- ▶ Stop talking. Try not to interrupt.
- ▶ Concentrate on the other person. Don't try to think of a solution or a comeback.
- ▶ Don't be judgmental.
- ▶ Put the other person at ease.
- ▶ Remove distractions.
- ▶ Be patient.
- ▶ Hold your temper.
- ▶ Go easy on argument and criticism.
- ▶ Make eye contact. Watch the other person's eyes and body. These will give clues about what he or she is feeling. Nod from time to time to show the other person you're listening.

Communicating feelings is one of the most difficult things to do. It is easy to hide our feelings, especially when we think no one is listening or cares to hear how we feel. "I" messages show you take responsibility for your ideas and feelings. They are based on telling the other person how you feel, what has happened to make you feel that way and what he or she can do to help





# Are Your Children in the MIDDLE of your Conflict or Divorce?

Talking With Children - Communicating Within Your Family: Active Listening

change the situation.

When it is your turn to speak:

Start by stating the facts. To make sure you understand, put the other person's feelings into words. For example, say "For some reason, you didn't know about the assignment. So, you weren't ready for the quiz." (Facts) "It sounds like you're confused. You're worried about what I'll do about your poor grade." (Feelings)

Attack the problem, not the other person. Try to understand how the problem developed. Who owns the problem? Is it a problem for you or for the other person?

Try to guide the other person with your words. Encourage the other person by asking questions that may help them to develop a plan. OR you may offer a plan.

Use "I" messages. Talk about how the problem affects you.

"You" messages place blame or responsibility on the other person. When you communicate with a "You" message, it sounds as though you are accusing others, making others feel defensive, blamed and somehow responsible. "I" messages tend to reduce conflict. "You" messages tend to escalate conflict.

Example of "You" message:

"You always leave your clothes lying around. This place is a mess."

Example of changing "You" message to "I" message:

"I feel angry when you leave your clothes lying around. It makes the house look messy. Would you please try to put your clothes away?"

Changing "You" messages into "I" messages takes practice, but it's worth it; it will help you, the other parent and your children.

Here's a formula for an "I" message:

I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
when you \_\_\_\_\_  
Would you please \_\_\_\_\_?

Teaching your children how to use "I" messages will help your children to communicate their concerns and to let you know when they have problems relating to your divorce.

Think of a "You" message you used recently with your child. Write the message below and then rewrite it in the form of an "I" message. Practice saying this "I" message several times so you can say it easily the next time you need to talk about the same concern. Have your children do the same.

"You" message:  
Change to "I" message:  
I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
when you \_\_\_\_\_  
Would you please \_\_\_\_\_?

How did it work to use an "I" message?

What was the response to your "I" message?

"I" messages can go a long way in diffusing conflict. Active listening is an important strategy in communicating with your family.

If you are interested in more information on this and other related topics, please call your local LSU AgCenter parish office. Below is the list of topics in the "Are Your Children in the Middle of Your Conflict or Divorce?" series.

- A Child's View of Divorce
- The Business of Co-parenting
- Coping with Stress and Change
- Costs of Raising Children
- Custody Issues Today
- Dating Issues
- Disciplining Children
- Friendship and Support
- Help! I Feel Overwhelmed
- Loss of a Relationship
- Managing Income and Expenses
- Not Enough Hours in the Day
- Separating Your Finances
- Sharing Parenting
- Talking with Your Children
- Talking with Your Children About Money
- Talking with Your Children -- Communicating Within Your Family: Active Listening
- Visitation Do's and Don'ts

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