



Co-Parenting: Using “I” Messages

August 2019

Matthew Brosi

Associate Professor, Marriage and Family Therapy

Ron Cox

Associate Professor, Human Development and Family Science

Kyle Barth

Former Graduate Student, Marriage and Family Therapy

Few things are more frustrating than parents struggling to communicate calmly and effectively. Sometimes, nothing you try seems to work. Someone almost always feels blamed and becomes offended. This can quickly end up with either parent shutting down or blowing up.

“I” Messages

One potential solution is to use “I” Messages. “I” Messages are designed to help communicate thoughts and feelings without blaming. In fact, a key part of an “I” Message is that the person communicating their feelings must accept responsibility for what they are feeling or experiencing.

For example, instead of saying:

You never help Junior with his homework. He is probably failing in school. (Even though it might not be said, the other person hears, “because of you!”).

An “I” Message would say:

I am worried about how well Junior is doing in school when he does not get the help he needs with his homework. Do you have any ideas about how we can make sure that Junior gets the help he needs?

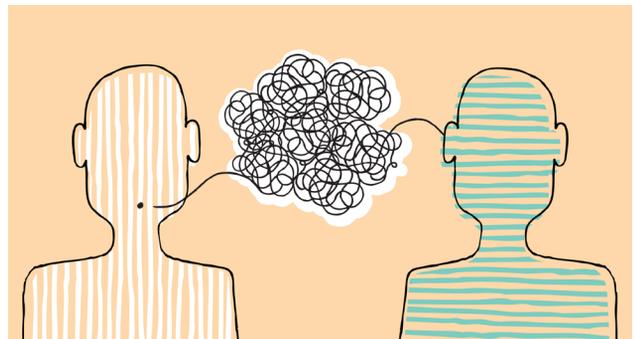
When reading these two statements, you should be able to feel a difference. The first one sounds like blaming and urges a person to become defensive or to fight back. The second, however, addresses the problem without blaming and invites a conversation.

“I” Messages include four main parts:

- 1) Describe the event or situation you have feelings about.
- 2) Clearly state and explain how you feel about what is happening.
- 3) Suggest what you want to have happen differently.
- 4) Clearly state the consequence if the behavior continues. (Optional, mainly for use with children)

“I” Messages generally are more effective than threatening, commanding, judging or using other negative behaviors that can create defensiveness. “I” Messages are not an easy concept to grasp at first, but with practice, they can become a very useful communication tool.

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets are also available on our website at: facts.okstate.edu



The pronoun “you” is used all the time in daily conversation. While in many situations the use of “you” is positive, it can also be used to state personal opinions as facts and over-generalizations which can be dangerous when trying to problem solve with your co-parent.

“You” - Statements

Read the statements below to become aware of the ways “You” is used.

1. Blaming: “You make me so mad.”
2. Judging or labeling: “You are an inconsiderate, arrogant creep.”
3. Accusing: “You are always late!”
4. Ordering: “You shut up!”
5. Questioning: “Are you always this demanding?”
6. Arguing: “You don’t know what you are talking about.”
7. Sarcasm: “Of course, you are an expert!”
8. Approving: “You are a better cook than I am.”
9. Disapproval: “You are just like your mother.”
10. Threatening: “You had better...”
11. Moralizing: “You ought to ...”
12. Treating: “You need to rest and...”
13. Analyzing: “You did that out of spite because you knew it would hurt me!”

“You” statements also come with baggage. In other words, we have experienced negative “you” statements so often, we react almost immediately with a defensive type posture. Others expect us to use “you” statements and are often planning their defense even before the conversation starts! Making the transition to sincere “I” messages can be a game changer. However,

it takes work to get into the habit of speaking this way to our co-parent, children and others with whom we experience conflict.

Let's practice

Below are several real-life scenarios. How could you formulate an "I" message to start having a conversation?

- 1. **Your co-parent often is late picking up your son from school because he/she is tied up at work. This leaves your young son waiting on the front steps of the school in a not-so-great neighborhood. Furthermore, your son has expressed to you that he starts getting nervous and confused as to whose day it is to pick him up and hopes they remember to get him.**

FIRST: Identify the event or situation you have feelings about: (When our son is left alone waiting for a ride in an unsafe environment; he becomes nervous because he doesn't know if someone is really on their way or not)

SECOND: Identify how you feel: (I feel angry, frustrated, worried, helpless, sad, etc.)

THIRD: State what you want: (If you are unable to pick Ben up on time, can we discuss alternatives to keep him safe and calm? Perhaps we could arrange for aftercare or you could call the school or me if you are running late)

FOURTH: State the consequences if the behavior happens again. (I am worried that our son will suffer and possibly be harmed if the situation doesn't change)

NOW, using all four of these steps, what would you say to your co-parent?

When _____ I feel _____.

Next time, I would like _____.

If this happens again, _____.

- 2. **When your co-parent and you get into arguments, he/she often calls you hateful and degrading names that really bother you.**

FIRST: Identify the event or situation you have feelings about: (When I'm called bad names)

SECOND: Identify how you feel: (I feel angry, frustrated, worried, helpless, sad, etc.)

THIRD: State what you want: (It's fine to tell me how you feel when you are angry, but I would like you to be respectful and not call me names)

FOURTH: State the consequences if the behavior happens again. (If you keep calling me names, I believe it will be hard for me to have a productive conversation with you)

NOW, using all four of these steps, what would you say to your co-parent?

When _____ I feel _____.

Next time, I would like _____.

If this happens again, _____.

- 3. **Your son's chores are to keep his room tidy, load the dishwasher and walk the dog. Lately he has been forgetting to load the dirty dishes, even after being reminded several times.**

FIRST: Identify the event or situation you have feelings about: (When the chores aren't done, I have to remind (son's name) multiple times to do his chores and the dishes are often still dirty when I am ready to make dinner)

SECOND: Identify how you feel: (I feel angry, frustrated, worried, helpless, sad, etc.)

THIRD: State what you want: (I want all the chores completed without me having to ask multiple times and nag)

FOURTH: State the consequences if the behavior continues: (If the dishes are dirty, I won't be able to make dinner on time)

NOW, using all four of these steps, what would you say to your co-parent?

When _____ I feel _____.

Next time, I would like _____.

If this happens again, _____.

Now that you have had some practice with these three situations, think of a recent example in your family when you could have used an "I" Statement. Briefly describe it and write down an "I" Message you could have used.

The situation: _____

The "I" Message: _____

Summary

Look for chances to use "I" Messages when talking with either your children, co-parent or other adults when something they do or say bothers you. It will not always improve the behavior, but they may be more likely to listen and try to make some changes.

References

Erford, B. T. (2010). I-messages. *35 Techniques Every Counselor Should Know* (27-35). Columbus: Pearson.
Gladding S. T. (2011). Experiential family therapy. (5th ed.), *Family Therapy: History, theory, and practice* (233-234). Boston: Pearson.
Kerr, M. E. & Bowen, M. (1988). An odyssey toward science by Murray Bowen. *The role of the family as an emotional unit that governs individual behavior and development: Family evaluation* (339-387). Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd.
Markman, H., Stanely, S., Blumber, S.L. (1994). Communicating clearly and safely: The speaker-listener technique. *Fighting for your marriage: Positive steps for preventing divorce and preserving a lasting love* (36-39). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Oklahoma State University, as an equal opportunity employer, complies with all applicable federal and state laws regarding non-discrimination and affirmative action. Oklahoma State University is committed to a policy of equal opportunity for all individuals and does not discriminate based on race, religion, age, sex, color, national origin, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity/ expression, disability, or veteran status with regard to employment, educational programs and activities, and/or admissions. For more information, visit <https://eeo.okstate.edu>.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President for Agricultural Programs and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 20 cents per copy. 0619 GH.