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A Guide to Using a Communication Book for Separated Parents

When parents are separated, maintaining effective communication about their children can be challenging, especially if there is ongoing conflict. A communication book serves as a neutral, structured tool to share essential information about the children's well-being, routines, and any other updates while children are with the other parent. The communication book helps minimise misunderstandings and reduces the need for direct verbal communication, which often might lead to escalation.

Here are some principles of how to use the communication book.

1. Focus on the child. The communication book should revolve solely around the children's needs, routines, and well-being. Do not use the book to write personal criticisms.

- **What to write:** "Ella had a slight cough yesterday but seems better today. I gave her paracetamol at 10am and 4pm.", "Sam has a school trip on Wednesday. The consent form is in his school bag."
- **What not to write:** "You're always neglecting Ella's health! This cough wouldn't have happened if you were more responsible.", "I doubt you even know about Sam's school trip."

2. Use clear, neutral, and respectful language. Avoid emotional or accusatory language. Keep your tone neutral and professional, focusing on facts rather than opinions.

- **What to write:** "Ben enjoyed playing soccer yesterday and mentioned he'd like to try it again next week.", "Please remember to pack Sofia's swimming costume for her lesson on Friday."
- **What not to write:** "It's clear you don't support Ben's interests because you never ask about his soccer games.", "You never remember important things like Sofia's swimming lessons!"

3. Share relevant, specific information. Include details that are useful and necessary for the other parent to know, avoiding excessive or irrelevant commentary.

- **What to write:** "Alyssa didn't eat much dinner last night, so I made sure she had a big breakfast this morning.", "David's math teacher suggested extra practice with fractions. I've added some worksheets to his bag."

- **What not to write:** "Alyssa hardly eats at your house, and it's becoming a real problem.", "David wouldn't need extra help in math if you paid more attention to his homework."

4. Stay solution oriented. If there are challenges or concerns, focus on finding solutions rather than assigning blame.

- **What to write:** "Jake mentioned he's been feeling tired in the mornings. Could we discuss his bedtime routine?", "Emily forgot her lunchbox on Tuesday. Maybe we could keep a spare one packed just in case?"
- **What not to write:** "Jake is always exhausted when he comes back. You need to stop letting him stay up so late!", "Emily is constantly forgetting things because you don't teach her responsibility."

5. Maintain consistency and accountability. Use the communication book as a reliable record of shared information. Both parents should commit to completing it regularly and reviewing its contents before making assumptions or decisions.

- **What to write:** "I've noted in the book the dates for the parent-teacher evening and the holiday schedule. Let me know if you need further clarification.", "Zara has mentioned she'd like to bring her favourite book back and forth between homes."
- **What not to write:** "You're always changing plans without telling me. It's impossible to keep track of anything!", "Zara doesn't want to bring her things because she's uncomfortable at your house."

6. Logistical considerations

- **Frequency of updates:** The communication book should be updated at the end of each parenting time. Ensure the book is handed over with the child or placed in their bag during handover times.
- **Accessibility:** Both parents must have equal access to the book. It should travel with the child and remain readily available for review.
- **Record keeping:** Treat the book as an important document. Avoid misplacing it or using it for anything other than its intended purpose.
- **Emergency communication:** Use the book for routine – non-urgent – matters. For urgent issues, communicate directly through an agreed for this purpose channel (e.g., text). It is possible to negotiate the latter to be used for emergency purposes only.
- **Child involvement:** The communication book is a tool for the parents, not the children. Avoid showing or discussing the book with the child to keep them out of parental issues.
- **Choosing a communication book:** choose notebook that has enough pages to last, in case you need to refer back to past information and choose one with hard covers to guarantee durability since it is regularly transferred between parents.

When used correctly, the book fosters a collaborative parenting approach, ensuring that both parents are informed and aligned in meeting their children's needs.