

Divorced parents in hostile relationships use technology to sabotage communication, study finds

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Separated and divorced couples are increasingly using emails, texting and social media to communicate with their ex-partners about their children. However, when ex-spouses use that technology to withhold or manipulate information, the children are the ones who suffer most, according to a University of Missouri family studies expert. A new study suggests divorce counselors should teach separated parents effective ways to use communication technology in order to maintain healthy environments for their children.

Lawrence Ganong, a professor of human development and family studies at MU, found that ex-partners who were cooperative with one another used emails and texting to facilitate effective co-parenting, while [couples](#) who did not get along used [communication technology](#) to avoid confrontations and control their former partners' access to their [children](#).

"Technology makes it easier for divorced couples to get along, and it also makes it easier for them not to get along," said Ganong, who also is a professor of nursing at MU. "Parents who use technology effectively can make co-parenting easier, which places less [stress](#) on the children. Parents who use communication technology to manipulate or withhold information from the other parent can cause pain to the child."

Ganong and his colleagues interviewed 49 divorced parents individually about the quality of their relationships with their ex-partners.

Parents who had cooperative relationships saw communication technology (email, texting) as an effective tool to coordinate exchanges of their children, and some even used online calendars to share information about their children's activities. However, separated parents who had hostile relationships used the same technology to manipulate their ex-spouses and limit communication. For example, some parents in the study pretended they never received emails from their former partners. Regardless of how the couples got along, nearly all of the divorced parents used communication technology to maintain household boundaries and establish records of decisions.

When divorces end with some hostility between the parents, Ganong suggests that [divorce](#) counselors focus on teaching the couples effective ways to use technology to communicate with one another. Doing so will help children transition more smoothly between the two homes and keep them from being caught in the middle of their parents' conflicts, he said.

"Parents who are hostile need to set their feelings aside and understand that they need to communicate effectively in order to protect the emotional well-being of their children," Ganong said. "Email is a great resource for hostile parents who can't talk face-to-face. They can communicate essential information while editing what they say to avoid conflict. Also, the [parents](#) have a record of what was agreed upon."

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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