

Co-parenting on the record

What to write, how to word it, and what to keep.

Most of what goes wrong between two homes is not a disagreement about the children. It is a disagreement about what was said, what was agreed, and who changed it. Both parents remember honestly and remember differently, and six months later there is nothing to check against.

A written record fixes that — not because anyone is building a case, but because it ends the argument about the facts and leaves only the actual decision. It also changes how people write to each other. Very few of us send the same message when we know it will still be there, unedited, in a year.

One idea runs through all of this: write so that a stranger reading it a year from now would understand what happened, and could not tell whose side you were on.

The one-minute version

If you read nothing else.

Write it down	The same day, in plain words, including the days nothing happened.
Describe, don't judge	"Arrived 6:24pm", not "late again". The pattern speaks for itself.
One subject per message	And a question the other parent can actually answer.
Confirm out-loud agreements	One line, in writing, straight after the phone call.
Never edit an old entry	Correct it with a new one, dated today.

What's in here

1 Messages	Writing what you mean without lighting a fire — and what to do with the ones that arrive hot.
2 Handoffs	The five facts worth recording every time, and the habits that make a record worth having.
3 Schedules	Changes and swaps, and why "we agreed on the phone" keeps failing.
4 Money	Receipts, shares and requests, in a form nobody has to reconstruct later.
5 The children	The part that isn't administration, and matters more than the rest of it.
6 Later	What makes a record easier to rely on, if it is ever read by anyone else.

This is general information, not legal advice. What matters in your case depends on your court order and the rules where you live — your attorney or mediator is the person to ask.

1 Messages

The message you want to send and the message that gets a useful answer are rarely the same one. This is the highest-leverage thing you can change, because every other part of co-parenting runs through it.

Three rules that do most of the work

- **One subject per message.** Pickup times and the dentist bill in the same message means one of them gets ignored, and you can't tell which.
- **Ask, don't characterise.** "Can we confirm Friday by Wednesday?" gets an answer. "You always change plans last minute" gets a defence.
- **Write the next step, not the history.** If a message needs the reader to remember an argument from March to make sense, it isn't a request — it's a grievance with a question attached.

Gets an answer

"Soccer runs late on Fridays this term. Can we move the Friday handoff to 6:30 instead of 5? Happy either way, just need to know by Wednesday so I can tell the coach."

A request, a reason, a deadline.

Starts a fight

"Once again I'm the only one thinking about her schedule. You never check anything before you agree to it. Are you even planning to be there Friday?"

The reader defends themselves instead of answering.

When one arrives hot

You will get messages designed to get a reaction. The reliable move is to answer only the part with a question in it and leave the rest alone — not to be the bigger person, but because responding to the provocation moves the conversation to the provocation, and that is the part with no answer.

- **Wait twenty minutes.** Almost nothing between two homes is genuinely urgent, and the reply you write at minute one is the one you'd take back.
- **Answer the question, ignore the frame.** "Pickup at 5:30 works" is a complete reply to four paragraphs. You are not obliged to address the rest.
- **Don't correct the record in anger.** If something is untrue and matters, note it plainly once: "For the record, I collected her at 5:58." Then stop.

Where a tone check helps

A second read, before anyone can be hurt by the first one.

Rereading your own message doesn't work well, because you can hear your intention in it. The other parent can't — they only get the words. That gap is where most escalation starts.

This is the one place we think software genuinely earns its place. CalmHandoff checks a draft before it sends: how the message is likely to land, which specific phrases are doing the damage, and a rewrite that keeps your request and drops the accusation. It runs on the draft, never on a sent message, and changes nothing without you. On the receiving side, Message Shield can soften a hostile message down to its logistics, so you can deal with the pickup time without having to read the rest of it.

What it won't do is stop you sending something. Being told "this may read as blaming" and sending it anyway is a legitimate choice — sometimes the plain version is the honest one.

2 Handoffs

Handoffs are where most disputes actually happen, and the hardest to reconstruct later: they're brief, they're in public, and nobody writes anything down at the time.

Five facts, every time

Write them the same day, while you still remember them.

When	Date and clock time you arrived, and the time the exchange actually happened.
Where	The agreed place — and the actual place, if they differed.
Who	Who handed over, who was present, who else was in the car or the house.
What was agreed	Any change to the schedule, and who proposed it.
What happened	Only what a stranger standing there would have seen or heard.

A short note made on the day is worth more than a long one written from memory three months later, and it takes about forty seconds.

Write it like this

"Tuesday 14 Oct. Arrived 5:58pm at the school car park, as agreed. Maya came out at 6:24pm. She had no coat and said she'd left it at her dad's. No other conversation."

Times, places, plain facts. Checkable.

Not like this

"He was late AGAIN, as usual, and of course she had no coat — he never thinks about her. He clearly does this on purpose to wind me up."

Reads as a grievance. Invites an argument.

Four habits that make a record worth having

- **Same day, every time.** A record kept only on bad days looks like a case being built. One kept every time is simply a log.
- **Describe, don't characterise.** "Arrived 6:24pm" rather than "late again". Let the pattern speak; you don't have to label it.
- **Never edit an old entry.** If you got something wrong, add a new note correcting it, dated today. Edits are what get a record doubted.
- **Keep the boring ones.** Ninety uneventful entries are what give the three difficult ones their weight.

If it goes badly at the kerb

- **Don't debate in front of them.** Whatever is being argued about will keep. Being watched having that argument is the part the children remember.
- **Leave, then write.** Write it in the car before you drive off, while the times are still exact.
- **If you felt unsafe, say so plainly.** Record what was said and done, without adjectives. A safety concern is a conversation for your attorney or the police, not a note.

What not to put in a record

- **Your opinion of the other parent.** It adds nothing a reader can use, and it is the first thing that makes a log look like a campaign.
- **Anything you'd be embarrassed to read aloud.** Assume every entry will one day be read by your child, your co-parent and a stranger. That is not a legal warning, it is a writing test.
- **Guesses about what they were thinking.** "He forgot on purpose" is unprovable. "He didn't bring the coat" is a fact.
- **The children's private words, unless they matter.** A child who learns their confidences get filed stops offering them.

3 Schedules and changes

The custody order is the easy part. Almost every dispute is about a change to it — a swap, a late finish, a holiday — agreed in a hurry and remembered differently.

- **Put every change in writing, even the easy ones.** Especially the easy ones: nobody argues about the swap that went fine, until the next one doesn't.
- **Confirm anything agreed out loud.** “Just to confirm what we said on the phone: I'll keep her Sunday night and drop her at school Monday.” One line, sent straight after.
- **Give a deadline, not an ultimatum.** “If I don't hear by Wednesday I'll assume the usual schedule” is a plan. “Answer me” is a fight.
- **Ask early, and accept an answer.** A request three weeks out is a favour. The same request on the day is a problem someone else has to solve.

A shared calendar both parents can see removes a whole category of argument: not who is right, but what the arrangement actually is. Recurring events matter more than they sound — “every Tuesday until the end of term” is one agreement, not twelve chances to disagree.

4 Money

Money between two homes goes wrong for an unglamorous reason: the receipt is in one person's pocket and the memory of agreeing to it is in the other person's head.

- **Agree before you spend, where you can.** “Boots are \$45, here's the link, splitting as usual?” before the purchase avoids nearly every expense argument.
- **Photograph the receipt the same day.** A receipt you have to find later is a receipt you will argue about later.
- **Record what it was for, not just the amount.** “\$45” means nothing in April. “\$45 school shoes, agreed 3 Feb” settles itself.
- **Keep a running balance, not a list of grievances.** The question worth answering is what is owed today. Anything else becomes a ledger of who has been less fair.

5 The children in the middle

Everything above is administration. This is the part that actually decides how they come out of it, and none of it needs an app.

- **Never send a message through a child.** “Tell your mum I need the forms” makes an eight-year-old responsible for an adult negotiation, and puts them in the middle of the next argument about it.
- **Don't ask them to report.** “What did he do at the weekend?” teaches them that what they say in one house is evidence in the other.
- **Keep your opinion of the other parent to yourself.** They hear criticism of a parent as criticism of half of themselves. This holds even when the criticism is deserved.
- **Let them look forward to going.** “I'll miss you” is honest. “It'll be lonely without you” asks a child to feel guilty for leaving.
- **Tell them the plan, not the dispute.** They need to know where they'll be on Friday. They don't need to know who made that difficult.

6 If it ever matters later

Most of this record will never be read by anyone else. That is the point — the version of you who keeps it is doing a favour for a version of you who may need it, and usually doesn't.

If it is read by a mediator, an attorney or a judge, what tends to make a record easier to rely on is dull and consistent rather than dramatic:

- **It was written at the time.** Contemporaneous notes carry more weight than a recollection assembled afterwards.
- **It is complete.** Including the days nothing happened, and the days you were the one running late.
- **It hasn't been edited.** A record that can be changed after the fact invites the question of whether it was.
- **It describes rather than concludes.** “Arrived 6:24pm” three weeks running makes the point. “He is always late” asks the reader to take your word for it.

Be careful what you claim about your own records, and sceptical of any product that claims it for you. Whether something is admitted, and what weight it carries, is for a court to decide under the rules where you live. What you can do is keep something specific, complete and unaltered — and be able to show that it hasn't been altered.

What CalmHandoff adds

Briefly — the advice above works with a notebook too.

Messages, handoffs, calendar changes and expenses go into a record neither parent can edit or delete: each entry is chained to the one before it, so a change anywhere breaks the chain visibly. Once a day that chain is timestamped by an independent authority, which is what lets you show a record existed on a given date rather than merely say so. Export any date range, and anyone you hand it to can check it themselves at calmhandoff.com/verify — no account, no software. Both parents see the same record, so there is no version only one of you holds.

Your next few handoffs

Print this page, or keep it in the glovebox. Fill it in before you drive away.

Date & time	Place	What happened — plain facts only