The Use and Misuse of Communication Technologies Among Separated Clients

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Separated parents are increasingly using digital communication technologies (CTs) for co-parenting communication. These include text or instant messaging ('messaging'), email and social media. Organisations and professionals that deliver family law and post-separation services, such as family dispute resolution (FDR), play a key role in encouraging positive communication between separated co-parents. As an FDR service delivery organisation, Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) collaborated with Victoria University to investigate the use of CTs, so as to increase the awareness of the advantages and risks of separated parents using CTs.

What we did

In 2019, we undertook an exploratory mixed methods study into CT use and misuse by parents in RAV's post-separation services. We surveyed 118 clients and interviewed a sub-group of 12 participants. The study investigated the use of common CTs for co-parenting, their perceived advantages and drawbacks, and experiences of CT misuse.

Why we did it

FDR practitioners can assist separated parents to communicate constructively about co-parenting. Technology is increasingly playing a role in such communication, and it's important, therefore, for practitioners to understand the risks and benefits of specific CTs, and the experiences and impacts of CT misuse by post-separation clients. This study aimed to support services and practitioners to provide informed advice to clients on CTs, and discourage behaviours that can harm individuals, as well as relationships and children after separation.

What we found

Use of messaging, email & social media

Of the 3 most common communication technologies:

- messaging was used most frequently for both general and co-parenting use, with many participants sending or receiving texts daily.
- messaging was the only CT which most (80%) respondents reported using for co-parenting.
- less than half of respondents (44%) used email for co-parenting, with a small minority (7%) using social media for co-parenting.

Method

- Exploratory mixed methods study
- 118 client surveys
- 12 client interviews

Participants

- Separated clients attending FDR or parenting after separation courses
- Mean duration of relationship: 10.4 years
- Mean duration of separation: 2.6 years

Use of technology for co-parenting

- 80% used messaging
- 44% used email
- 7% used social media

Advantages of messaging (most used)

- Record of communication (83.0% agreed)
- Indirect communication (74.5% agreed)
- Convenience (72.3% agreed)

Disadvantages of CTs

- Social media is often associated with negative communication or conflict.
- Messaging is more likely to result in misunderstandings or feeling harassed.
- 1/3 of participants felt text, email and social media could all become abusive.
- 82% of clients had experienced at least one form of CT misuse in the last 6 months.

Published work

Heard, G., et al. (2024). The use and misuse of 'everyday' communication technologies in a family law setting...' *Journal of Social Welfare & Family Law, 46*(3): 1–20. doi.org/10.1080/09649069.2024.2382516

Interviewees largely accepted the need for CTs to play a role in contemporary co-parenting, and considered them important for staying connected with their children when in the other parent's care.

Benefits of messaging, email & social media

We asked users of text/instant messaging, email and social media about whether each technology was useful for co-parenting in terms of: convenience, keeping communication 'on track', mitigating conflict, circumventing direct communication, record-keeping and keeping users organised.

Messaging was considered helpful for most aspects by the greatest proportion of users. Email was considered useful for record-keeping by a majority of users, and social media was not considered useful for any of these aspects. Record-keeping (83.0%), indirect communication without talking (74.5%) and convenience (72.3%) were cited as the greatest benefits of messaging for co-parenting communication. The results support the idea that above all else, messaging offered co-parents convenience.

Unhelpful aspects of these specific CTs

Participants identified limitations of communicating via technology, including that it's impersonal and can result in misunderstandings. Relying on CTs where response may not be immediate also enables partners to ignore attempts to communicate, which several participants had experienced.

Participants were asked about specific aspects of CT which may be unhelpful for co-parenting, including that it leads to negative communication, leads to conflict, creates misunderstandings, becomes abusive and makes participants feel harassed.

Social media was most frequently considered to lead to negative communication and conflict. Messaging, however, was considered to be more likely to create misunderstandings or make participants feel harassed. Notably, around one third of messaging, email and social media users believed that each CT had the potential to become abusive.

Several interviewees detailed experiences of harassment by messaging, with 1 client receiving up to 70 messages daily. Another explained the negative potential inherent in messaging in that messages are immediate with no warning that the content may be unpleasant or abusive.

> 'With text messaging, it's instant, it's right there and it's in your space... There's sort of no filter, and [it] doesn't come with a trigger warning at the beginning...'

Interview participants saw little value in using social media for co-parenting, and the use of social media in this context was only ever discussed negatively. Several participants reported that former partners would monitor social media as a form of surveillance.

Experiences of CT misuse

Survey participants indicated how often technology was misused in different ways by their co-parent over the preceding 6 months. Most forms of misuse had occurred rarely (less than 1 to 2 times), however, the great majority of participants (82%) had experienced at least 1 form of CT misuse in the last 6 months.

Most common experiences in the last 6 months:

- 'My ex-partner intentionally ignored my phone calls/messages to hurt my feelings': 5 times on average.
- 'My ex-partner sent harassing or threatening messages to me using social media or text': more than 1-2 times on average.

Several participants noted that CT misuse could be incessant, involving an onslaught of intrusive or abusive messages. The convenience and ease of CTs also facilitated harassment. CT misuse among separated co-parents often occurred in already dysfunctional relationships and situations.

CT advantages for conflictual co-parenting

Despite CT misuse experiences, some advantages were particularly important to those in high conflict post-separation relationships. Interview participants appreciated being able to ignore messages using asynchronous CTs such as email or texting.

> 'The only way to de-escalate it is to ignore a lot of the messages.'

Interviewees also valued that CTs provide a record of their communication with their former partners.

> 'That's one of the reasons why I only communicate with him in writing now, is because I need to have evidence of his abusive behaviour.'

Practice implications

This study suggests that there should be an explicit focus on CT-based communication within post-separation arrangement negotiations.

Services and practitioners could provide guidance and coaching on how to respectfully and constructively use CTs for the purposes of co-parenting communication. Assisted by practitioners, each parent could be encouraged to articulate their expectations and preferences regarding the types of CTs. Consideration could be given to the use of different CTs for different kinds of communication between co-parents, and the frequency with which various CTs may be used.