

## BIFF™

### How to keep texts, emails and social media posts unconflictual

BIFF™ was invented by Bill Eddy, an American family lawyer, mediator and therapist. He looked at how it might be possible to change the way co-parents communicate, thus leading to improved outcomes and a reduction in conflict. BIFF stands for:-

**Brief      Informative      Friendly      Firm**  
**Avoiding 'Blamespeak'**

Parenting children is a hard job, even if you are in a couple. When you separate it can be a minefield for fear, anger, hurt and blame. The problem with this is that parenting with someone who is hurt or angry results in unhappy and hurt children.

Learning not to take things personally is a skill and perhaps one of the best things you can learn as a parent. A lot of what is thrown at you might not be about you, it might be much more about how the other person is feeling, or it might be that they are just not that good at communicating their feelings or solving problems. They might use 'blamespeak' and think that everyone else in the world is responsible for their problems, and you might not be able to change that behaviour. But you can change how you deal with it and how you respond to it.

You can recognise blamespeak quite easily. It's usually **emotionally intense** and out of proportion to what you need to discuss. It can be very **personal** and feel like an insult. It's usually **all your fault** and the other person can't or won't see that they have any responsibility for it. It can be **out of context**, for example it ignores all of the good things you've done and all of the bad things they have done. It's often **shared with others** to highlight how awful you are and how blameless they are.

The problem with blamespeak is that it makes you want to retaliate. It feels hard to take a step back and you feel that you can't let the allegations or accusations go unanswered, and you need to reply immediately. That's where BIFF comes in – it helps you break that cycle.

Before you reply, think about whether you need to give any response at all. Sometimes it might be better not to, for example, when there is no real issue being discussed or if the other person is simply giving you their opinion about you! It might be clear that you will not

be able to change their mind, so a response would be pointless, or you may have replied before about the same thing.

Below, you'll see a description of what each stage of BIFF looks like.

## **BRIEF**

Short, ideally 2 or 3 sentences, even if you are responding to a long email. don't give too many words to the person you are writing to; the more you say the more likely you are to trigger another blamespeak reply. Think about giving your reply to someone else to check before you send it. They might be able to help you trim it down.

## **INFORMATIVE**

Give straightforward, useful information. Don't include your opinion or be defensive. Just stick to neutral terms

## **FRIENDLY**

This is the hardest of all, but it is the most important. Start with something like 'thank you for telling me how you feel' or 'thanks for your email', or 'I appreciate your concerns, here is some information you may not have had'. Always end with a friendly comment, for example 'I hope you have a nice weekend'.

## **FIRM**

The goal of your BIFF response is to bring an end to the conflict, and to get an end to the conversation. You need the other person to know that you are not going to engage in a high conflict situation, and you have to stick to that.

The next thing to remember is that you should avoid the three A's:

### **Admonishment**

### **Advice**

### **Apologies**

Admonishments are personal criticisms by someone in a superior role, such as a judge. When you admonish a co-parent, it makes them feel that you think you know best. The message you are giving is that you are superior to them or have a right to criticise. Don't say things like 'you should have known better', or 'I'm surprised you would even consider this'.

Giving advice feels as bad as an admonishment. You might think it's constructive, but they haven't asked for your advice or feedback! It feels disrespectful to give unwanted advice and makes someone act defensively.

Avoiding an apology seems like the opposite thing to do. Although apologies can be helpful in some situations, in a high conflict case they will backfire if someone is merely looking for a fight. An apology might seem to a blamespeaker that they are right, and that you agree with them. They will remind you about that over and over! Simple apologies however, such as 'I'm sorry I was late' or 'I'm sorry we couldn't agree' is OK.

Some examples :-

## CHANGING DATES

Mum to Dad, trying to use BIFF

*I know I sent you our holiday dates, and having checked things, those dates were wrong. I need to change them from 6-13 July to 13-20 July instead. I know you haven't chosen your holiday dates yet so this shouldn't be a problem. I appreciate your understanding in making this change. I look forward to receiving your summer dates.*

Dad's reply to Mum (he has a higher conflict personality).

*How dare you muck around with the dates like this, what gives you the right to change them? I was just about to send you my dates and they are 13-20 July so I am having those and you can't have them. I have it in writing that you wanted different dates, so you can't do anything about it. You always think you can do what you want, this shows your true colours.*

Mum to Dad, using BIFF again.

*I was able to make the change of dates before your dates were chosen. If you have booked something before you received my email with the change of dates, and paid money that is non-refundable please let me have some details and we can talk about how to reimburse you. Our exchange of emails will show that I let you know about my dates before you chose yours. Our children will be able to have a lovely summer holiday with both of us this summer.*

## BIFF checker

Brief?	Yes	Informative?	Yes
√		√	
	No		No
	Maybe		Maybe

Friendly?

✓

Yes

No

Maybe

Firm?

✓

Yes

No

Maybe

## SWAPPING WEEKENDS

Peter to Jenny

*I just found out that Michael's wedding is set for 5<sup>th</sup> August, so I am asking if we could swap weekends to make sure that I have the children from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> August for the celebrations surrounding the wedding. This is very important to my family and you know how close Michael is to the children, and he would be devastated if they couldn't attend. As that is your scheduled weekend, we could swap one. It's March now, so I hope you will have no objection and could let me know which of my weekends you would like in the summer. The children are really excited about the wedding.*

## BIFF checker

Brief?

✓

Yes

No

Maybe

Informative?

✓

Yes

No

Maybe

Not as brief as it could be, are the extra sentences about how important it is, or how devastated Michael would be, really necessary?

No mention of where the wedding is. Might be helpful to include travel details.

Friendly?

✓

Yes

No

Maybe

Firm?

✓

Yes

No

Maybe

It focusses on Dad, and doesn't concentrate on Mum's interests

## ASKING FOR SOMETHING

*I hope you're well. I am trying to make plans for time off with Oscar and Millie this summer, along with summer camps and other activities. I noticed, when I looked at our parenting plan, that this is your year to choose holiday dates first. I propose that you email me your chosen dates to me no later than the end of April, and then I will let you have mine no later than 15<sup>th</sup> May.*

*Thank you for helping me to plan for the children this summer.*

*Take care,*

*Sarah*

## BIFF checker

Brief?	Yes	Informative?	Yes
✓ No		No	
Maybe		✓ Maybe	
Friendly?	Yes	Firm?	Yes
✓ No		✓ No	
Maybe		Maybe	

Doesn't contain any admonishments,  
advice or apologies.

## BIFF checker – for you to use

Brief?	Yes No Maybe	Informative?	Yes No Maybe
Friendly?	Yes No Maybe	Firm?	Yes No Maybe
Does it contain an admonishment?	Yes No Maybe	Does it give advice?	Yes No Maybe
Does it contain an apology?	Yes No Maybe		

Extracts from BIFF for coparent communication, Your Guide to Difficult Coparent Texts, Emails and Social Media Posts

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