

## How to talk with children about difficult topics

### 1) Which difficult topics?

- a) Politics/news
- b) Family difficult moments (family transitions, losses)
- c) Sexual education related topics
- d) Religious and spiritual beliefs
- e) Others?

### 2) Why should we talk with children, and particularly young children, about these topics?

- a) They may hear about these issues from other sources and you may want them to receive these information from you
- b) If they are asking questions, this means they are thinking about it
- c) It may be better to share some truths from the beginning, than having children find out in an unexpected way
- d) Children may sense that we are unwilling/uncomfortable to talk about certain topics and therefore they may not ask about them, but that does not mean they will not wonder about it
- e) Sharing with children may make everybody in the family less tense and stressed about “covering” some difficult truths
- f) Talking about difficult topics with young children models from the very beginning that they can use us as a resource and share things that may trouble them
- g) Are children going to lose their innocence if we share about these things?

### 3) Who is uncomfortable?

- a) Most topics may be more uncomfortable for us than for our children
- b) Different parents may be uncomfortable talking about different things
- c) If we can be open to listen to our children’s thoughts and questions they will feel more at ease

### 4) Getting ready to talk

- a) Think about which message you want to give your children and what are the values you want to communicate. Children (even young children!) may ask deep questions and lead you to talk about deep issues (i.e. discussing news they may ask about life, death and afterlife)
- b) Share with other parent/caregiver so that you can be on the same page
- c) Think about the time of the day/situation that is most appropriate to discuss these topics:
  - It may be best not to discuss difficult topics right before bed (This is a difficult topic to talk about before bed, but we can talk again tomorrow)
  - We may want to choose a quiet situation, when we can have one-to-one time with our child

- Expect children to want to revise the topic over time. Children often absorb information gradually and think about them. They may ask more questions and go back on the topic days, weeks or even months later

## 5) What to say and how to say it?

a) Consider your child's developmental level. Younger children may need shorter and simpler explanations, while older children may need more details. Follow your child's lead. For some children, few facts are enough and they quickly get distracted and think about something else, whereas other children ask more questions. Children often revise the same topic over time, and given that their developmental level changes, they are able to ask for more details and digest more information. The important thing is not how much our children learn in one sitting, but the fact that they experience open communication with us and realize that we are there to answer their questions if they have some.

b) Consider your child emotional maturity. Just because a child has the cognitive and language skills to understand certain issues, this does not mean that they have the emotional maturity to cope with the content they are learning. For example, a first grader maybe a strong reader, but we would not let the child read news about Austin bombings from the newspaper. We will still explain to him what happened and shelter him from scary/gruesome details

c) Consider using different means to communicate with your child: drawings, doll play, can be very helpful to explain things to young children

d) Whatever you are talking about, communicate to your child the fact that you are the adult and your job is to keep your children safe. If child is old enough you may want to share some safety guidelines (i.e. do not open packages, do not let anybody touch your private parts), but the overarching message for your children is that they are safe with you and other adults they trust

e) What to do if you also have strong feelings talking about these issues? It is ok to show our feelings to our children. We may say things like "Mommy/Daddy is also very sad about this" and may talk with our child about things that you both can do to feel better. It is important to keep in mind though that you are the support for your child and not vice versa. To be able to support your child, find other sources of support for yourself (friends, other family member, therapy etc.)

## 6) When is it time to seek therapy/consultation services?

- a) If your child is unusually scared/distressed about one of these topics and fears are affecting their functioning at school or at home
- b) One of these topics triggered memories and feelings related to past difficult experiences your child went through
- c) You are unsure about the best way to approach a topic with your child, but feel it is very important to discuss the issue with them

- d) The uncomfortable topic is related to a transition/change that is hard to deal with for your child and/or the whole family

**Parents' resources:**

- 1) How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk. By Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- 2) The huge bag of worries. By Virginia Ironside and Frank Rodgers
- 3) The Parentalk guide to your child and sex. By Steve Chalke
- 4) It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health (The Family Library) by Robbie H. Harris
- 5) I said no! A kid-to-kid guide to keep private parts private. By Kimberly King
- 6) <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/talking-to-children>