

# Talking about Difficult Topics

How to start the conversation about difficult topic to keep your children safe

We've all been on the receiving end of them and most of us have had to instigate them at some time. But that doesn't make it any easier when we realize that we are going to have to have a difficult conversation with our child. It might be because we have to break some bad news or try to find out more about something that doesn't seem quite right with them at the time. It might just be the classic unease about how to talk to teenagers about sex or drugs.

Whatever the subject, and however old the child you're talking to, there are lots of ways to make it a bit less painful for you both and maybe even come away from the conversation knowing that you're even closer to your child than before. How you start the conversation is going to depend on a lot of things, including how old and mature your child is and what you want to talk about. Ultimately, it's always going to be up to your judgment about the best way to tackle it but what you'll read here could give you a few pointers.

## Why it's good to talk

Our children are precious to us. We all want them to grow up in a safe and loving environment and become happy, confident adults. To get there they need to be surrounded by positive influences, good advice and the knowledge that if they ever need help and support there will be someone to talk to. As a parent, it's you who they'll look to for help. And, as they're your child, it's up to you to talk to them when you think they might need a nudge in the right direction or to share news or information that's going to affect their lives.

## Creating the right situation

Whatever it is you want to discuss, it's important to think about where and how to talk so children will listen. There's no telling how long the conversation is going to last, so the first thing to consider is where and when you're going to start it off. And it's probably not a great idea to have it in the evening when people are tired and might not be in the mood to concentrate. Unless it's a chat you want to have with more than one child, it's also sensible to have it at a time when brothers and sisters aren't around to interrupt. It could be good to have it in a relaxed and neutral place like on a walk or a bike ride or even when you're in the car. You could also ask other parents you know how they've created the right situation to talk about difficult topics in the past and see if it would work for you too.

## Starting the conversation

It's never easy to start a serious conversation with a child. Do it too forcefully and they may well clam up straight away. But if you take a more subtle approach you can find the chat gets derailed and you're soon talking about something entirely different.

So it can be a good idea to try to make the conversation relevant in some way. For example, if you're watching TV together and the on-screen action has something to do with the subject you want to talk about – say a character is being bullied – you could kick things off by asking your child what they'd do in the same situation.

If you think this sounds a bit random and that you could be waiting a long time for the right topic to come up on the TV then there's another method that's very useful, especially for younger children. There are lots of story books written specially to help when you don't know quite how to talk to children about serious subjects like death, abuse and bullying. There are different titles for different age groups and they make great starting points for you to broach a subject. After you've read the story together a couple of times just ask some gentle questions about their understanding of what it was about and what they would do if they were the character in the story.

Another very good way to get your child's immediate interest could be to ask their advice about a particular issue and to ask if they have any thoughts on the topic. It's a really nice way to show that you value their opinions while also finding out just how much they know about a subject – like how to stay safe on the internet. It could be that your child has been learning about the subject you want to talk about at school. Talk to them about it and see what everyone in the class thought about what they were being taught.

### **Keeping the conversation going**

However you try to start your conversation, try to have realistic expectations. It might not go as well as you're hoping, but give it time. Your child might not be ready to talk straight away but could actually re-start the conversation with you a few days later. It's also best to think about having a few "bite-sized" conversations over a period of time. It gives your child the time to process what you've discussed and avoids the whole thing sounding like a heavy lecture.

### **Listening is important too**

When you want to have a serious conversation with a child it can be easy to forget that it should be a two-way thing. For them to feel truly involved it's very important to show that you are listening to them and really value what they're telling you. Start by asking questions that don't just have "yes" and "no" answers. This is going to give your child the chance to tell you what they really think. Then give them as long as they need to answer without interrupting. They may be nervous or still working out what they really think and that could take a little time. Don't be afraid to let your child ask you questions too. Be honest with them about how you feel about certain subjects and let them know about things that have happened to you in the past. It's also really important to let them know that they can trust you to keep their confidence and that you want them to always feel they can talk to you or other adults, they trust, when anything is worrying them.

Sometimes your child might actually come to you to talk about a concern. It may be that they want to talk about a friend who is depressed or frightened because of bullying. Or it could be about something they've done themselves like sexting or trying alcohol. It's probably taken a lot of courage to even mention it to you so you need to make them feel as comfortable as possible about continuing the conversation.

If it's not the right time or place, agree when and where you're going to talk. And when you do get together begin by reassuring your child that they can tell you anything they need to and you won't blame them in any way. Listen carefully to what they have to say and if you don't understand anything be honest and ask them to explain. Above all, let them say everything they want to say before you give any opinions or advice. It's OK to ask your child what they'd like you to do about the situation but it could be something where you can't do anything at all; for example, if they're grieving over a death. What you can always do is reassure and support – starting with a big hug. If there is

anything you can do, and if you plan to do it, let your child know. Otherwise they may feel like you're going behind their back and they should never have told you in the first place.

## Talking about life-changing topics

Unfortunately things do happen that can turn young lives upside down. Separation, illness and death obviously have a huge effect and talking about them needs to be treated very carefully. You should also be ready for things to get very emotional and perhaps distressing too.

So, before starting the conversation, there's a great deal to get straight in your own mind:

- when and where to have the conversation – choose somewhere that will be comfortable for you both with no interruptions
- if you have children of different ages, will you speak to them together or separately
- who else should you tell before your child, so they can be ready to give emotional support
- think about the sorts of questions your child's likely to ask you, so you can have the answers ready

When the time comes to break the news, remember to explain everything slowly, in words that your child will easily understand. It's also very important to make sure they know that they're not responsible or to blame in any way for what you are telling them.

Having difficult conversations is hard, but if you handle it well it can bring you and your child closer together and help you to understand each other a bit more. So put a little time and thought into the planning and it won't just help to resolve or explain an issue, it could make your relationship even better too.

### Resources

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/talking-about-difficult-topics/>