

Better You than YouTube – Having the Hard Conversations with Your Kids

Janelle Durham, MSW, Parent Educator. GoodDaysWithKids.com, InventorsOfTomorrow.com

Every parent probably has one (or more) topics that they dread having to talk to their kids about. Are you wondering how (or if) to begin talking to your child about any of these topics: Sex? Sexual Abuse? Drugs? Alcohol? Gun Violence? War? Natural Disasters? Illness? Death? Racism? Differences and Discrimination? When Bad Things Happen to Good People?

You may feel like your child is too young, or it's too early to have those conversations. But, it's easy to put them off till it's too late.

Your child *will* be exposed to all these topics, and more. Whether that exposure comes from things happening in their own lives, or in the lives of their friends and classmates, or seeing things in their community, or from over-hearing the news or peering over your shoulder as you read social media, or from stumbling upon really startling videos on the internet. They *will* learn about them all, often younger than you might think.

And, with their limited life experience, when they do run across challenging concepts, they can be overwhelmed, or frightened, or confused. They can also get information that is incorrect, counter to your values, or potentially harmful.

It is far better for you to talk to your kids about these things in advance, in ***developmentally appropriate ways***, a little bit at a time.

You are your child's first, and most important, teacher. You are in a unique position for teaching them, because:

- you're the most likely to be with them in those early "teachable" moments when questions and issues present themselves
- you know your child and can tailor the info to their learning style and life experience
- your words and your actions can communicate your family values on these topics
- if you're an "askable parent" they'll know you're a lifelong resource for support

What You Might Worry About

You might worry that you don't know the right answers, or might not find the right words, or will get embarrassed and awkward. Just do the best you can. Acknowledge that some things are awkward but are important topics. If you don't know the answers, learn more.

You might worry that you'll give too much or too little information. Start by asking your child what they *already know*. Use those answers to help you set the right level. Listen to their questions. Watch non-verbal clues that they've had enough and move on to another topic.

You might worry that talking about hard topics might make your child sad or scared. It might. But it's actually *more scary* if we refuse to talk about things. Talking openly and honestly can help your child work through some feelings and build skills in advance of hard things happening. I'm not saying go out of your way to terrify your child about all the scary things in the world, just don't shy away from talking about them just a little at a time, in a gentle way.

You may worry that they'll *do* something risky because you talked about it. Research shows kids are actually less likely to engage in risky behaviors if they have a trusted adult to talk to.

When to Talk About Things

Don't try to do any of these topics all in one big conversation... don't feel like you need to have "The Talk." Look for all the little opportunities in everyday life. For preschool to early elementary children, these are itty-bitty bite-sized conversations. Often just a sentence or two.

These topics may naturally arise when you're reading books together, or watching movies, or something happens in the lives of their friends. Take time to talk it over. Debrief what you saw: "What happened? How did they feel? What did they do? What could you do in that situation?"

When your child overhears news about gun violence, or a hurricane or an earthquake, talk about it. Don't talk a lot about the scary parts. Instead focus on "How likely is it that this scary thing would happen to you? What can we do to prevent it? If it happened, what would we do? Who will help to protect you?" This approach helps them to not feel totally powerless.

We teach our children to do lots of things to protect their health and safety. Every once in a while mention why it's important, in a non-scary way. Like "brushing our teeth helps to keep them healthy. If you don't brush them, they may get cavities that need to be fixed."

When your child says "one of the kids at school says....", that's a great time to address it. If their peers are talking about it, you should be too! Correct any misconceptions they have.

Respond to Questions

Often, your child creates a teaching opportunity by asking a question. I really appreciate this checklist from [Advocates for Youth](#) on responding to a child's questions:

1. Remember that if someone is old enough to ask, they are old enough to hear the correct answer and to learn the correct word(s).
2. Be sure you understand what a young child is asking. Check back. For example, you might say, 'I'm not certain that I understand exactly what you are asking. Are you asking if it's okay to do this or asking why people do this?' What you don't want is to launch into a long explanation that doesn't answer the question the child actually meant to ask.
3. Answer the question when it is asked. (Sometimes it's asked loudly and in public!) It is usually better to risk embarrassing yourself a little, or having strangers overhear something awkward than to waste a teachable moment. Your child would prefer it if you answer right then. If you cannot answer at the time, assure the child that it's OK that they asked and set a time when you'll answer fully. 'I'm glad you asked. Let's talk about it on the way home.'
4. Answer just *slightly* above the level you think your child will understand, both because you may be underestimating him/her and because it will create an opening for future questions.

Being an Askable Parent

Within sexuality education, there's the concept of being "an askable parent." This idea applies to *all* the difficult topics. It's about creating an environment where your child knows that they can come to you with questions, rather than turning to their peers or the internet. An askable parent: is approachable; shows respect for the child; listens; provides factual information; doesn't laugh at the child, even if questions seem cute or seem stupid; can be embarrassed or awkward about questions the child has asked – acknowledges their discomfort, then does the best they can to answer the question; respects confidentiality.

Resources

There are links to several resources to help get you started with each of these difficult topics linked at the bottom of this post: <https://gooddayswithkids.com/better-you-than-youtube/>