

Guide: How to Talk to Your Children about Difficult Subjects

In our current climate, more and more children are being exposed to or learning about horrific events and subjects. Therefore, it is important for parents to put things in perspective, field questions, and search for answers together.

One of the toughest jobs of parenting is talking to your children about difficult subjects. It is hard enough to explain when their favorite stuffed animal is ruined or someone stole their bike, phone, ect. Thus, it can feel impossible to put into words issues related to violence, racism, drug use and other heavy topics. However, it is important to face this challenge as addressing the tough content with your children contributes to them feeling safer, strengthens your communication together and teaches them about the world.

When communicating with your child it is important to consider your child's age and developmental stage as a guide to starting conversations because children absorb information differently as they grow from babies to teens.

BE MINDFUL THAT EACH CHILD'S PERCEPTION CAN DIFFER DUE TO THEIR OWN SENSITIVITIES, TEMPERAMENT, EXPERIENCE AND OTHER INDIVIDUAL TRAITS.

Ages 2–6

- Keep the news at bay
 - Try to limit exposure to age–inappropriate subjects
- Reassure with both words and gestures
 - "You are safe, Mom/Dad are safe, our family is safe"; Provide hugs
- Address feelings – yours and theirs
 - "It's okay to feel scared/sad/confused"; "I'm upset, but not with you"
- Find out what they know
 - Ask them what they think happened before giving them any imagery
- Catch your own biases
 - Avoid describing a person's ethnicity/sexual identity/weight ect. unless relevant to the issue
- Use vocabulary, ideas and relationships they are familiar with
 - Recall a recent, similar situation from their lives they can relate to
- Use basic terms for feelings (Mad, sad, afraid, happy, surprised)
 - Children may not understand terminology related to mental health

Ages 7–12

- Create a safe space for discussion
 - "These topics are hard to discuss—even for adults. Let's talk, I want you to feel free to ask anything you want"
- Find out what they know
 - Ask what they may have heard, proceed to answer questions simply/directly
- Provide context and perspective
 - Provide context around an issue to provide more sense of it
- Be sensitive to their emotion and temperament
 - Check in by sharing how you feel and ask them how they feel
- Encourage critical thinking
 - Ask open–ended questions to encourage deep thoughts about serious topics

Teens

- Encourage open dialogue
 - "We may not agree on everything, but I'm interested in what you have to say"
- Ask open–ended questions and ask them to support their ideas
 - "What do you think about (content)? Why?"
- Admit when you do not know something
 - It is okay for them to see their parents may not have all the answers—"Let's try to find out more together"
- Share your values
 - Share your stance and explain your values (Example: acceptance, tolerance)
- Get them to consider solutions
 - Show them you trust them to contribute to creating changes for the future