

Guidelines for Talking With Children About Difficult Issues

Experts tell us that it is never too early to create an atmosphere in which children can talk with their parents, teachers and adults who are important to them. They also tell us that it is never too late to open those lines of communication. They tell us that children, even teenagers, want to talk to their parents and to hear about their parents' beliefs and values. Experts tell us that children who are connected to adults are more likely to negotiate the tasks of growing up successfully.

Here are some specific guidelines for such conversations.

Begin Early

Show your children that you are willing to talk about difficult and awkward subjects. If you are unsure how to respond when your child asks a question, it is okay to say that the subject is important enough to discuss when you can pay attention to it and that you will discuss it later. Be sure that you do. Otherwise, the message is that your child's concern was not important enough to you to remember and discuss.

Keep the Conversation at Your Child's Level

When children ask questions we may overestimate how much they actually understand. Ask what their ideas are and what they have heard. Fit your answers to their level of understanding. Provide as much information as children need to satisfy them. Follow their cues as to when they've had enough discussion. Too much information may confuse and scare children. Remember that you can come back to this discussion at another time.

Be Honest

Children can accept things that are told to them honestly and straightforwardly at their own level of understanding. Be honest in order to develop credibility with your child. Of course, it is all right to acknowledge that a topic is difficult, sad, or awkward for you to talk about.

Start the Conversation

If there is something that you feel should be discussed, feel free to raise it. Especially as children reach the pre-teen and teen years, they may be reluctant to talk about their own experiences or ideas. A natural lead-in may come from discussing a television show that you have watched together, from listening to lyrics of their music, after hearing a news report, or following a classroom discussion. You can also begin a discussion by asking what students in their school or their friends think about an issue. Perhaps you can ask them to imagine how they would feel or what they would do in a particular situation.

Listen, Don't Lecture

The best way to encourage conversation is to really listen and hear what children say. If you anticipate what they will say, finish their sentences, or use this as an opportunity to lecture, chances are you will close off discussion. Expect that you will disagree about some things but try to listen to their point of view.

Really Listen

Of course sometimes you will be talking while doing something else. Sometimes that helps to reduce the intensity of a discussion and is useful as long as you are not too distracted from listening. But at other times, children feel that their concerns and interests are not taken seriously enough. So, also be sure to spend time when the child is the main focus. These times often lead to good discussions.

Share Your Values

Parents are the most important sources of information for children and for their developing values and goals. Begin early before children are also receiving information and values from others and from media.

Be Available

Children do not seek out adults when it is convenient for us. They want adults to be available when they are inclined to talk. The more that you are available, for example, by spending after-school or evening hours in a common area of your home, the greater the likelihood that your child will seek you out.

Be Patient

Children may take a while to get to the main point. They may want to discuss an issue over and over. Each time you have a discussion it will probably be with a greater level of understanding and maturity on your child's part. They will be able to handle more information and more complicated discussions of your values and beliefs. Be willing to have the conversations over and over. Be consistent in your ideas.

Let Us Hear From You

We can all learn from each other to promote the safety and welfare of children. We are interested in hearing your suggestions and especially about techniques that have worked well for you. Please send your comments and suggestions to:

Barbara Bernstein at 914-345-0700, extension 311

Or e-mail BernsteB@mhawestchester.org

Or call our Information and Referral Service at 914-345-5900, extension 240

Or e-mail help@mhawestchester.org

For more information on resources for Positive Parenting see our "[Links to Explore Elsewhere on the Web](#)" at the end of our Positive Parenting home page.