



Child Builders

Houston's Advocates for Mental Health in Children

Tender Topics: Talking with children about serious matters

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Difficult situations and hardships are inevitable, however, a parent-child relationship based on trust and openness can soften the realities of life. Although all parents want to shelter their children from hardships and tragedies, an open and honest relationship is the best way to deal with these life events. Lecturing about friends, sex, drugs or your child's choices is uncomfortable for both you and your child. Teens, especially, dread lectures.

A more positive approach is to view the difficult situation as an opportunity for honest conversation - a mutual sharing of information and experience. Children learn openness and honesty from their parents, which creates a foundation of trust in the relationship. This communication and trust between parent and child sets a pattern that will continue into the important teen years when pressures are much greater and communication becomes even more challenging.

Preparing for a difficult conversation:

- Be calm. If you are anxious, your child will be, also.
- Be honest. A child can recognize dishonesty; therefore, be honest about what you know and do not know about the topic. Remember that there's no harm in admitting you don't know everything. The two of you can look up the information together, or discuss possible solutions. Sometimes there is not a "right" answer.
- Be brief. Too much information can become boring and your child may become easily distracted.
- Be clear. Use simple words and examples that relate to your child's life and experiences.
- Listen. Listen and ask for your child's opinion. Allow some quiet time for reflection. Ask them to tell you what they heard you say.

Sometimes children feel guilty about a situation, even if it is impossible that they could have been responsible for causing it. This makes it all the more important to explore children's feelings.

Timing your discussions: The timing in which you approach a topic is equally as important as how you present it. A prior explanation prepares a child for an upcoming change such as a new baby or a hospital stay. Although many situations (such as natural disasters, sudden death, or fatal illness) do not allow time for you to prepare yourself, it is still important to address the situation and talk it over with your child. If possible, initiate the conversation when the child is in a receptive mood and not involved in an activity.

Choosing a time when you and your child are not rushed may require other activities to be put aside; however, the time spent in explaining a situation is invaluable. Not only is it a chance for bonding, but it also prevents the child from receiving wrong information from other sources.

Give your child positive feedback: Remember to make positive statements about your child's willingness to talk about a serious matter. Celebrate the opportunity to talk with one another. This creates a willingness in the child to want to continue talking about issues, anytime and about anything. Note correct information a child shares about a topic and encourage him/her. Also, be aware that your child may have his/her own ideas about a topic. Although you

may feel that these ideas are incorrect, simply offer your own comments without debating or getting angry. Mutual respect and sharing will help your child be more open to listening to you. Your child needs the opportunity to explore new ideas and see how they fit into his/her view of the world. Finally, remember that children are inquisitive. Expect questions later that may seem to come “out of the blue”. From the ages of four to twelve, children are developing a foundation of their own beliefs and are more susceptible to parental guidance. Instead of viewing a difficult situation as a dreaded experience, seize the opportunity to learn more about your child and develop a trustworthy relationship when addressing tender topics.

ChildBuilders (formerly known as HAMIC), founded in 1974, is a non-profit organization that provides innovative programs to educate parents, children, teachers and the community about the emotional well-being of children and their families. www.childbuilders.org ChildBuilders Community Education.

For further information & referral
call your child’s school counselor

DePelchin Children’s Center	713-730-2335
ESCAPE Family Resource Center	713-942-9500
Harris County Psychiatric Center	713-741-5000
Jewish Family Service	713-667-9336
Mental Health Association	713-522-5161
MHMRA of Harris County	713-970-7070
NAMI Metro Houston	281-579-3750
United Way of Texas Gulf Coast	211 or 713-957-4357

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