

When the talking gets tough

How to navigate the awkwardness of discussing everything from sex and drugs to rocky relationships

by Sara Dimerman



Waiting and hoping the problem will go away is one of the worst strategies

Ever been caught off guard by your children approaching you with tough questions before you're ready with answers? If so, you're not alone. Instead of denying that they're old enough, you would rather defer the conversation so that you can gather the information you need to respond appropriately. Unfortunately, if you don't take their lead and respond, when they show readiness, you may be missing out on a crucial opportunity to pave the way for future communication. To give you a head start, here are six of the most common areas parents find tough to talk about:

Death and dying

When our children ask us questions around death and dying, we are forced to confront our own mortality. No one likes to dwell on this subject. In addition, because death is an unknown to us, it's not so simple to come up with definitive answers. Some may be based on our religious or spiritual beliefs, but for the most part, we too are befuddled by what happens. The best that we can do is try to soften the blow by responding with something such as "All living things die, but that's not going to happen to any of us for a long, long, long time."

The birds and the bees

At around the same time that

children begin to think about mortality, their thoughts often wander to questions about how they came to be. So, when your child asks you questions such as "Where do babies come from?" don't automatically assume that you need to go into details about what happens between couples under the covers. There are many age-appropriate books written for children (and their parents) that can lead to more in-depth discussions. It's normal for you to feel uncomfortable talking about some of this, especially if you weren't raised in a family that did, but the discussion is vitally important.

Separation and divorce

Even if you and your spouse are not considering living apart, you may still be asked questions by your children who are seeking reassurance. If you feel that nothing will ever separate you and your spouse, then you may respond with something such as "We have no plans to be apart. Right now we are happy living together and being part of this family. You are very important to both of us, and we will do whatever we can to make sure that things stay the way you like them."

If your child has picked up on changes in your relationship, and if his or her suspicions are accurate, then you may even want to commend him or her for being

so observant and then defer the talk until you've had a chance to plan out the discussion with your spouse.

Dating, curfews and sexuality

Because children are dating at a young age now, you may need to be prepared sooner than you thought when it comes to discussing safe sex and peer pressure. Become familiar with common words in your child's vocabulary such as "hooking up" so that you can speak the same language. As your child grows, it's good to regularly revisit ground rules. Mutual respect and compromise are key. Authoritarian rules need to fall by the wayside so that the family can establish guidelines as a team.

Alcohol, smoking and drugs

If your child sees you smoking or drinking regularly, he or she may consider it hypocritical for you to talk about the adverse effects of either. Whatever your lifestyle, because children are experimenting and often smoking, drinking and using illegal drugs at a much younger age than ever before, you may want to prepare for this.

Approach your children from a place of genuine curiosity. If they feel that they can communicate what they have been up to and why, you will be better equipped to come up with solutions to your concerns.

It's my body, I can do what I want

Children often want to indulge in adultlike behaviour before they are emotionally ready. Some examples of this include body piercings, hair colour and tattoos. Since most young children cannot comprehend the long-term results of changing or mutilating their bodies, it is generally understood, sometimes required, that parents or guardians give permission before a child can get a tattoo or a piercing.

It may be hard for children to feel that they don't have total control over what they do with their bodies, but it is harder for parents to help their children understand their perspective. It's best for parents to acknowledge their child's feelings by saying something such as "I know it's hard on you when you feel that I am making these decisions for you, but I feel that, as a responsible parent, I must."



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HELPFUL RESOURCES

Parenting support groups

There are parenting support and education programs available throughout the city. Try checking at your local YWCA or YMCA at www.ywcatoronto.org.

Progressive parenting

Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (www.camh.ca) offers many innovative parenting programs including a 15-week program called the Incredible Years for those with kids aged 6 to 12.

Online parenting experts

There are plenty of parenting experts online, be sure to find someone you can trust who has a well documented background. Sara Dimerman offers up many helpful podcasts on all the major parenting issues.