

# TALKING TOUGH TOPICS



Children have a lot of stuff to deal with in today's world: Sex. Drugs. Bullying. Death. The list goes on and on. It can leave parents feeling scared, uncomfortable and overwhelmed. But talking openly with your children is critical to their healthy development and will help foster open and ongoing communication.

Try different methods and figure out what works best for your family. Consider reaching out for support by attending a **parenting group** or using the **"Village" approach** and asking another trusted adult to talk to your child when you can't get through.

## WHY is it so important to talk about these issues?

If you don't talk to your children about the serious issues they may face in life, you can be sure someone *else* will. And it may be a child or even adult providing misinformation and negative influence. If possible, **parents should be the FIRST person bringing up tough topics**, so they can provide a foundation of honesty and support.

## WHEN should I talk with my child?

Start talking with your kids as early as possible **so that they feel safe bringing up subjects (like sex and drugs) in the future** if/when they have more questions. No matter how old your child might be, you can begin to address challenging issues right away by being a good listener, modeling positive communication skills and valuing honesty. Your child's age is less important than his or her environment (is this coming up at school and with friends?) and maturity. If he's watching movies that show drug use, for example, then it's definitely time for that subject to come up in family conversation.

## WHAT should I do to keep our talks productive when I'm upset about what my child is saying?

It's critical that parents remain open to what their children have to say. **If you immediately get angry, criticize or yell at them, they will shut down.** And that can mean they won't come to you in the future when they are scared, confused or considering risky behavior.

## HOW can I start a conversation without making my child (or me!) feel uncomfortable?

- **Use TV shows, video games, books, news stories**, etc. to first bring up the subject, and so your children can relate it to their own life.
- **Role play** by acting out a situation to learn how your child might react, taking turns so you can model an appropriate/healthy response as well.
- **Do not judge, get angry or yell while talking.** You don't want to scare your children and make them NOT want to talk with you. Try to remain calm and listen quietly when they share.
- **Be selective about using "why" questions**, which might make them go on the defensive.
- **Talk about an end point** so your child knows the conversation (which may be uncomfortable) will not go on forever. Chat while walking the dog or making a trip to the grocery store.
- **Try using tools**, such as "conversation cards" at the dinner table (check out The UnGame or "Time to Talk" cards at [samhsa.gov](http://samhsa.gov)); the National Education Association's "Can We Talk" program; or The Library Association's [daybydayva.org](http://daybydayva.org) site.

**But wait - my child doesn't even know about this stuff, right?!** WRONG! Kids are VERY young - think elementary school! - when they first start to hear about drugs, alcohol, sex, video games, etc.

## START TALKING TODAY!

Check out the great "Conversation Starters" on the next page or learn more online at [www.scanva.org/prc](http://www.scanva.org/prc)

# START TALKING TODAY:

When you get a chance to talk, consider:

1. Have you reminded them you care (a lot)?
2. Have you assessed their understanding?
3. Have you asked about their feelings?
4. Have you been honest?
5. Have you kept your emotions in check?

## My child is in PRESCHOOL:

"That's an important question. I would like to talk about this tonight at home when we have lots of time." (Be sure to follow up.)

"It looks like you are thinking hard about that TV show (website, radio commercial, etc.) that we just heard/saw."

"That's a really good question. I'm glad that you asked me about this."

"What else have you learned? Who else has talked to you about this?"

"I was just wondering about that too."

"I feel sad that Johnny cried because (his friend called him mean names) OR (because you called him mean names). How do you feel about it?"

"What do you know about \_\_\_\_\_?"

"I got this book from the library and I want to read it together." (Ask school or local library for ideas.)

## My child is in ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:

"What do you/your friends think about \_\_\_\_\_?"

"What do you think about \_\_\_\_\_?"

"Does anyone make you feel uncomfortable?"

"How do you feel when \_\_\_\_\_?"

"What would you do if \_\_\_\_\_?"

"How do you decide when to keep a secret or when you should talk to an adult?"

"Who are your role models?"

"What's your favorite song/movie/TV show? Why?"

"Have you heard about \_\_\_\_\_?" (Use current events.)

"What was your favorite part of the day?"

"What was your least favorite part of the day?"

## My child is in MIDDLE SCHOOL:

"What do you think about \_\_\_\_\_?"

"How do you think \_\_\_\_\_ felt?" (Reinforce empathy.)

"It must be difficult or hard to \_\_\_\_\_."

"It's sometimes harder to be a kid, especially when \_\_\_\_\_."

"I noticed you've been spending a lot of time with \_\_\_\_\_. What do you like about him/her?"

"It's not easy to talk about some of this stuff, is it? It might be a little uncomfortable, but it's important you have a safe place to ask questions. I'm here for you."

"I heard you mention \_\_\_\_\_. I'm interested to know what have you heard about that."

"What did you think when you read that book/watched that TV show/heard that song?"

"Things have been so busy lately! I'd love to set aside time and hear about what's going on with you."

## My child is in HIGH SCHOOL:

"I read/heard an interesting article/story about \_\_\_\_\_. What do you think?"

"I have several thoughts on that, but I'd like to know what you think first."

"I saw that you have pictures of your friends on your phone (on Facebook, online, etc). I love you and want you to know \_\_\_\_\_."

"My job as a parent/guardian is to help you grow up healthy and safe and \_\_\_\_\_ behavior is unhealthy and unsafe." That's why I have a problem with it/am concerned about it."

"Yes, I smoked/drank but I didn't know better, now I know better so I can do better."

"What do you think about the way \_\_\_\_\_ died/was arrested/was covered in the news?"

"I worry about \_\_\_\_\_."

"Does this kind of thing happen at your school?"

# SCAN

Building hope for children & families  
in Northern Virginia

## START TALKING TODAY!

Try ANY of these conversation starters when they feel relevant and age-appropriate for you and your child. Don't wait - start talking today, and do it every day!

Learn more online at SCAN's Parent Resource Center: [www.scanva.org/prc](http://www.scanva.org/prc)