

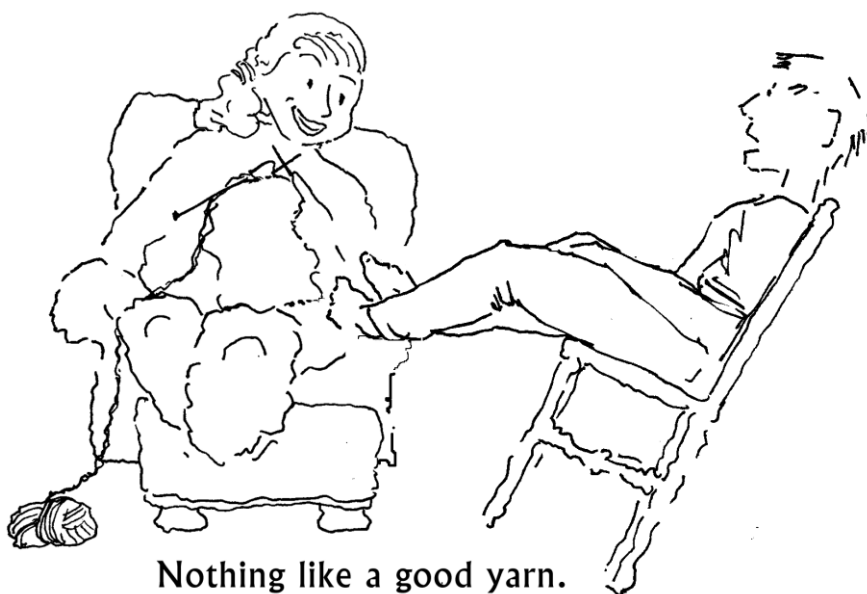
Ten Tips for Talking to Your Kids About Anything

Raising a child is probably the most gratifying job any of us will ever have -- and one of the toughest. In large part, that's because times have changed. We live in an increasingly complex world that challenges us everyday with a wide range of issues that are difficult for children to understand and for adults to explain. Here are practical, concrete tips and techniques for talking easily and openly with young children ages 8 to 12 about some very tough issues: relationships, HIV/AIDS, violence, drugs and alcohol.

Some parents question the appropriateness of talking about such sensitive topics with *young* children. Maybe you're one of them. But consider this: our kids are already hearing about these issues from TV, movies, magazines and school friends. If we don't talk with them early and often -- and answer their questions -- they'll get their facts from someone else. And we'll have missed an important opportunity to offer our children information that's not only accurate, but also in sync with our own personal values and moral principles. Make sense? We think so. So let's get started.

1. Start early.

Medical research and public health data tells us that when young children want information, advice and guidance, they turn to their parents first. Once they reach the teenage years, they tend to depend more on friends and the media. As a parent, you have a wonderful opportunity to talk with your child about these issues *first*, before anyone else can confuse your child with incorrect information or



Nothing like a good yarn.

explanations that lack the sense of values you want to instill. We need to take advantage of all "windows of opportunity" with young children and talk with them earlier and more often.

2. Initiate conversations with your child.

While we want our children to feel comfortable enough to come to us with any questions and concerns -- and thus give us the opportunity to begin conversations -- this doesn't always occur. That's why it's perfectly okay -- at times even necessary -- to begin the discussions *ourselves*. TV and other media can be tools for this. Say, for instance, that you and your 12-year-old are watching TV together and a sexually explicit advertisement comes on. You could ask if he agrees with how advertisers presented girls in that ad? Just one or two questions could help start a valuable discussion about respect of self and others. Also, when speaking with your child, use simple, short words and straightforward explanations. If you have more than one child -- and your kids are widely spaced -- try to speak with them separately, even about the same subject. The reason? Children of varied ages are usually at different developmental levels, which means that they need different information, sensitivities and vocabulary.

3. ...Even about sex and relationships.

If you feel uncomfortable talking about such sensitive subjects -- particularly sex and relationships -- with your young child, you're not alone. Think about what makes you feel positive about these subject areas, and bring these positive feelings in to your discussions. Many parents feel awkward and uneasy, especially if they are anxious about the subject. Don't be. For your kid's sake, try to overcome your nervousness and bring up the issue with your child. Information in the media may not have the values that we want our kids to have.

4. Create an open environment.

Young children look to us for answers only if they feel we will be *open* to their questions. It's up to us to create the kind of atmosphere in which our children can ask any questions -- on any subject -- freely and without fear of consequence. How do you create such an atmosphere? By being encouraging, supportive and positive. For example, if your child asks, "Mum, what's a condom?" while you're negotiating a tricky turn in rush-hour traffic, it's perfectly okay for you to say something like, "That's an important question. But with all this traffic, I can't explain right now. Let's talk later, after dinner." And make sure you do. If it is a very young child, you might say "When you're a bit older, we'll talk *all* about that."

5. Try to be honest.

Whatever your children's age, they deserve honest answers and explanations. It's what strengthens our children's ability to *trust*. Also, when we don't provide a straightforward answer, kids make up their own fantasy explanations, which can be more frightening than any real, honest response we can offer. While we may not want or need to share all the details of a particular situation or issue with our child, try not to leave big gaps either. When we do, children tend to fill in the blanks themselves, which can generate a good deal of confusion.

6. Communicate your values.

As a parent, you have a wonderful opportunity to be the first person to talk with your child about tough issues like drugs and violence before anyone else can confuse him with "just-the-facts" explanations that lack the sensitivity and moral principles you want to instil. Likewise, when talking with your child about sex remember to talk about more than 'the birds and the bees', and communicate your values. Remember: research shows children want and need moral guidance from their mums and dads, so don't hesitate to make your beliefs clear.

7. Listen to your child.

How many times do we listen to our children while folding clothes, preparing for the next day's meeting, or pushing a shopping cart through the supermarket? While that can foster togetherness, it's important to find time to give kids our undivided *eye-contact* attention.

8. Be patient.

Often it can feel like forever before a youngster gets his story out. As adults, we're tempted to finish the child's sentence for him, filling in words and phrases in an effort to hear the point sooner. Try to resist this impulse. By listening patiently, we allow our children to think at their own pace and we are letting them know that they are worthy of our time.

9. Use everyday opportunities to talk.

Kids resist formal discussions. And don't forget, bed time is 'key' for a quality yarn!

10. Talk about it again. And again.

Repetition is perfectly normal, so be prepared and tolerant. Don't be afraid to initiate discussions repeatedly, either. Let a little time pass, then ask the child to tell you what she remembers about your conversation. Correct any misconceptions and fill in missing facts.

Source: Expanded text at www.healthresources.caremark.com