



Difficult Conversations with Children: Let's Talk About It A 4-Part Series

Having difficult conversations is never easy. As young children begin to develop curiosity about the world around them, all sorts of questions come up and sometimes we don't have the answers! Over the last few months we've been faced with several situations and circumstances that could provide for a lifetime of difficult conversations including death and loss as well as race and racism. Additionally, with increased family stressors some families are also dealing with family discord or separation and divorce. During the next several weeks, we will be covering parenting tips around how to have these difficult conversations with our children.

While we know life happens and we must live through it as best we can, as parents we're also tasked with parenting through these tough times. This means ensuring that our children and teens have a level of understanding about difficult situations, and gain the reassurance that they need to live through it as well. For some parents, the idea of addressing these situations can feel like too much and they choose to postpone or avoid difficult conversations all together. However, we want to assure you that we know there is no perfect parent, no perfect time to have these conversations and that it is okay to not have all the answers. It is important that as parents we not withdraw, but instead face these situations and have the conversations because our children will likely be exposed to the information one way or another. We know it's hard, but we have to talk about it! Parents, stay positive and let's get ready talk...

Preparing to have Difficult Conversations

- **Identify your core values & beliefs**
 - What are those values you wish to convey to your child and guide their understanding of the difficult topic? (i.e.: death > value of religion/spirituality; racism > belief in racial equality, etc.)
 - What important lesson should be learned from this conversation?
 - What do you want your child to walk away understanding?
- **Plan the conversation out**
 - Be thoughtful about what information you share with your child and what may not be appropriate (based on age and maturity)
 - Consider planning an initial conversation, allow time for information to digest and schedule a second conversation as a follow up
 - Consider the time and place of the conversation (If the time or place is not appropriate, it's okay to come back to the conversation at a better time)
- **Be clear, concise and direct**
 - Try not to confuse a difficult topic by adding a lot of fluff to it
 - Clearly outline issues and stick to what you DO know about the topic
- **Talk so that your children understand the topic at hand based on their age and maturity**
- **Know that you don't have to fix it**
 - Consider the first conversation a starting point and be open to revisiting the subject as needed
 - Every problem doesn't have a solution
- **It's okay to be vulnerable and honest with your children**
 - Allowing your children to see you in a vulnerable state, allows them to know it's ok to feel and process their own emotions
- **Work to understand it from your children's point of view**
 - Don't assume that you know how your child will handle the situation
 - Honor and validate their feelings
- **Know when to ask for additional help from family, friends, community supports or professionals**

Discussing Death and Loss

- Use clear language and be honest
 - Tell your children what has occurred
 - Use age-appropriate language to ensure children of all ages understand
 - Be honest about the passing of your loved one
- Comfort and reassure your children
 - Listen to your children (look for both verbal and non-verbal communication cues to be better able to reassure them)
 - Console your emotional child
 - Let them know that it's okay to have feelings and it's to be expected
 - Let them know things will be different, but okay
- Help your children communicate their emotions
 - Refer to *Weekly Tips- Emotions: We're All Having Them for additional information*
 - Mecklenburg County Triple P
- Talk about what to expect (i.e. family traditions, funerals, memorials etc.)
 - Allow your child to play a role in how they want to memorialize the loved one
- It's okay not to have the answers and to say "I don't know"
 - All of the information doesn't have to be covered at once
- Individuals, and children, may react differently to this conversation –
 - Check your expectations and allow your children to express themselves. I.e.: some kids may not show emotion, but withdraw to a quiet activity like coloring; encourage them to seek self-regulating activities – walks, coloring, crying, singing, writing a poem

Talking about Race, Racism and Discrimination

- Talk about it for real
 - Plan ahead, a time with limited distractions, when you and your children can share together without outside distraction
 - Be open to change when necessary
 - Create a safe space to discuss race and racism openly (maybe a place where you all feel safe enough to dive into emotions – cry, be angry together, listen and empathize with one another)
- Model self-regulation and resilience for your children
 - Be mindful to model anti-racist behaviors at all times for your children
 - Children typically pick up their beliefs on race by watching their parents at times when the parents are unaware. "They do as we do not as we say"
- Help your child relate to the issue (i.e. being fair is a common issue for children)
 - Every child at some point raises the issue of "being fair"
 - Discuss the emotions your child feels when he/she feel like they're being treated unfairly
 - Connect those feelings to issues of racism or discrimination (when people may be treated unfairly) and how people experiencing this are being treated unfairly
- Respect differences:
 - Specifically, when speaking to teens they are at an age of discovery and there may be a difference in opinion. It's important for parents to respect their teen's opinions. In showing respect you are also modeling this behavior
- Own your mistakes and make a plan on how to handle them differently in the future

Resources for Parents – Teaching Children About Racism and Protests

Recommendations from The New York Times for answering children's questions and leading conversations.

- Ages 0-3: Ezra Jack Keats' books: *The Snowy Day*; *A Letter to Amy*; *Hi Cat!*; *Whistle for Willie*
- Ages 3-5: *Saturday* by Oge Mora; *Hair Love* by Matthew Cherry
- Ages 5-8: *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson; *The Youngest Marcher* by Cynthia Levinson
- Ages 9-12: *Resist: 35 Profiles of Ordinary People Who Rose Up Against Tyranny and Injustice* by Veronica Chambers; *Not My Idea: A Book About Whiteness* by Anastasia Higginbotham
- Ages 12 and Up: *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely; *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi

Communicating with children while dealing with Separation and Divorce

- Talk to the children as a unit with both parents if possible
- Choose a quiet time when there are no other planned activities
- Tell teachers the evening before you tell the children

- Ask the teachers to be discrete and sensitive to the child's needs
- **Have clear messages for the children such as:**
 - This is something mom and dad have decided together
 - This has nothing to do with the children's actions or behaviors
 - No one is blaming anyone
 - Feelings are normal and okay (i.e. sad, angry, fearful, worried, anxious etc.)
 - Mom will still be mom and dad will still be dad- we are still family- things will just be different
- **Share what to expect**
 - Not very detailed but just basics (i.e. who will live where, when moves/transitions will happen, where family members will be living, when the parent that's moving will be seen again, if there are celebrations and family activities upcoming games/practices and what will they look like)
 - Reassure your children that they will be ok
- **Be open to talk about it whenever**
 - Schedule a time after the initial conversations to have a second conversation and answer any questions
 - Let your child know they can come back to you to discuss and revisit any feelings they may be having
- **Be prepared for any possible reaction from your children (i.e. crying, tantrums, being withdrawn, acting as if it hasn't happened, etc.)**
 - Don't take anything personal
 - Remember that your children are processing things from their own lens and perspectives
- **Check in with your children, but don't hassle them**
 - Ask them if they'd like to talk - accept if they don't
 - Don't badger and/or ask multiple questions
 - Create a comfortable space for them to express themselves
- **Help your children understand that you're going through this as a family**
 - Share with them feelings you may be having (age appropriately) and let them know it's difficult for you as well
- **Model treating your co-parent with respect and dignity especially in front of your children**
- **Know when to ask for outside help for yourself and/or your children**