

Tips for Creating a Safe Space to Discuss Challenging Topics with Youth of All Ages

Based on insights from pediatric and behavioral health experts

Why These Conversations Matter

- Strengthens your relationship and builds trust
- Helps kids learn your family's values before peers take the lead
- Linked to:
 - Lower rates of risky behaviors
 - Better emotional health
 - Increased confidence asking for help

First: Prepare Yourself

- Feeling awkward or nervous is normal
- Your discomfort is about your experience, not your child
- Reflect on:
 - How sex and bodies were talked about (or avoided) when you were growing up
 - Cultural, religious, or personal beliefs that may make this harder
 - You don't need all the answers, humility goes a long way

Big Picture: Reframe “The Talk”

- There is no single big sex talk, think many small, ongoing conversations throughout their childhood.
- Starting early and continuing often builds trust, safety, and openness.
- Kids who feel comfortable talking with parents are less likely to rely on peers or social media for misinformation.

Use Everyday Moments:

- In the car (no direct eye contact helps!)
- While cooking dinner
- During walks or errands
- After a scene in a movie or TV show
- When they mention something they heard at school

It's Okay to Say:

- “I’m not sure - let me find out.”
- “That’s a great question for your pediatrician.”
- “I feel a little uncomfortable, but I’m glad you asked.”

To learn more, access podcasts with Emerson Health pediatric experts:

Emersonhealth.org/conversations

Talking About Sex with Kids: How to Get Started - From Body Safety to Puberty

Based on insights from pediatric and behavioral health experts

Use Simple, Clear, Accurate Language

- Use real anatomical terms (penis, vagina, uterus)
- Avoid euphemisms - they can send the message that bodies are “shameful”
- Keep explanations factual and age-appropriate

Teach Body Safety Early & Often

- Private parts are private
- No one should:
 - Touch them
 - Ask to see them
 - Ask them to touch someone else
- If something feels wrong:
 - Tell a trusted adult
 - They will not get in trouble

Normalize Curiosity & Development

- Exploring their body is normal at many ages
- Use this as a chance to talk about:
 - Privacy
 - Body ownership
 - Boundaries
- Simple message:
 - “Your body is yours. Some things are private. You can always come to me if something feels confusing or unsafe.”

Talking About Puberty

- Keep it private and respectful
- Use neutral observations:
 - “Have you noticed changes like body odor or voice changes?”
- Talking about others’ changes can feel less personal and ease the conversation
- Reading a puberty book together can help

Follow Their Lead

- Answer what they ask - no more, no less
- Kids will often ask, get what they need, then move on
- If they want more detail, they’ll ask

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A Guide to Open Conversations about Teen Relationships and Sexuality

Based on insights from pediatric and behavioral health experts

Listen more than you talk.

- Listening helps teens feel safe opening up to you. The more they talk, the more you can guide them. Try not to interrupt or jump to conclusions.

Ask what they already know or have heard.

- This helps you correct misinformation, understand their perspective, and avoid giving too much or too little detail.

Be calm, factual, and non-judgmental.

- Teens shut down when they feel judged or lectured.
- Stick to clear, accurate information.
- Your tone matters as much as your words.

Encourage questions - anytime.

- Let them know:
 - No topic is off-limits
 - They will not be in trouble for asking
- Pay attention to their reactions and body language.
- Remind your child that the conversation can remain open; it does not need to end on the day (or night) it began. You can revisit the conversation over time, as long as your child wants to ask questions and keep learning about the topics.

Don't assume:

- Your child already knows everything
 - Even if teens seem mature or confident, they may not have important facts.
- A question means they are “doing it”
 - Curiosity does not equal behavior. Teens often ask questions because they hear about things at school, online, or from friends.
- They fully understand what you said
 - Teens and adults often mean different things, when they use the same words.
 - Ask them to repeat back what they heard in their own words. If something feels unclear, pause and clarify.

Remember, no book, peers, or website can replace your values and guidance.
You don't have to do this perfectly, you just have to keep showing up.

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Talking About Sex with Kids: The FRIES Method of Consent

The FRIES model explains true consent for kids of all ages.

For any physical or sexual interaction to be consensual, it must be:

F - Freely Given

- Consent should never be forced, pressured, or coerced.
- Saying yes should come from comfort, not fear, guilt, or pressure.

Teach kids: If someone feels pressured, it is not consent.

R - Reversible (or Revocable)

- Anyone can change their mind at any time.

Teach kids: "No" always means no, even if things already started.

I - Informed

- Everyone involved should understand what is happening and any risks involved.
- This includes conversations about STD status and birth control.

Teach kids: You can not truly consent if you do not know the full picture.

E - Enthusiastic

- Consent should be a clear, excited yes. Silence, hesitation, or "maybe" is not consent. If it does not feel enthusiastic, it should be treated as a no.

Teach kids: A hesitant yes is not the same as a real yes.

S - Specific

- Consent for one activity does not mean permission for everything. Each new level of physical interaction requires its own agreement.

Teach kids: Consent must be given each time and for each activity.

These conversations do not have to be perfect, they just need to happen. Teaching consent is not about encouraging sex, it is about teaching safety, respect, and self-worth.

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