

TALKING WITH KIDS: Positive Ways to Talk and Listen

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Why should you talk to your kids?

Children are naturally curious about all of life's events including birth, death, money, prejudice, sexuality and, of course, Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. Kids are very resourceful. They will eventually find the answers to all their questions. The important question is from whom.

If you want to be your children's primary source of information, start early in their lives talking to them openly, honestly and basing the discussion on facts. With the exception of Santa, of course (ho ho)! Strive to be an **"approachable"** parent – someone who your child feels will not judge, tease or punish them for asking questions. An **"approachable"** parent responds to questions with words and actions that say "Thanks for asking me."

Open communication is a powerful parenting tool. Most children intuitively sense how receptive their parents are to talking about certain subjects. If you avoid talking about **emotionally sensitive** topics – like death, adoption or an addicted parent – they are taught to keep their concerns silent: The famous "no talk rule". If you ignore **embarrassing** issues – like pornography, homosexuality and masturbation – your children will get information or **misinformation** from someone else. If you discount or minimize the importance of **life experiences** such as moving to a new home, illness, starting school, your children will believe their fears are not valid. Remember what your children don't know can hurt them.

Communication Skills

Skill #1: Spend Time Listening

Listening actions include making eye contact, kneeling down to your child's level and positive facial expressions. If you can't talk at the moment, just say "Let's talk in a few minutes. You deserve my full attention."

Repeat what you heard and help put your child's feelings into words. "You seem sad about us being apart today." You are either validating their feelings or giving them a chance to correctly state their feelings.

Finally, ask specific questions to gather more information. Questions such as "Please tell me exactly what happened." Or "What upset you the most?" Follow-up questions acknowledge your child's feelings and get her talking about them.

Skill #2: Consider your Child's Opinion

See the situation through your child's eyes. Remember that it is their perspective based on their limited life experience. Avoid these judgements: "That's ridiculous." "You don't really mean that" or "How can you think like that." Instead, acknowledge your child's perspective. In response, you might say "I'm glad you told me" or "I understand". Try not to correct your child's statement immediately even if you think he or she is wrong. Listen to your child's request without judging or correcting it.

