

Three Tips for *The Talk*

Parents, You Can Do This!

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When it comes to figuring out how to talk to their kids about difficult topics, parents want all the help they can get.

How do we talk about sex? How do we talk about abstinence, affirmative consent, birth control, STDs? How do I talk to my kid about drugs and alcohol? Tobacco? How do we talk about dating violence and personal safety? How do we talk about depression? Eating disorders? Self-esteem? Respect?

It's overwhelming, right? There are so many "Talks" to be had. The truth is, talking with children and teens about difficult topics is a skill parents can develop. And I have a few tips on how to build some confidence and muscle in that area using a life transition that we have all gone through. In a word: puberty.

For those of us who need a refresher, puberty is the process of physical changes when a child's body matures into an adult body capable of sexual reproduction. Thank you, Wikipedia! As we know, this process takes a number of years.

Tip 1: The Talk is Actually *the Talking*

Puberty is a time when young people have a lot of questions. And they don't find a lot of answers for their questions—or at least not a lot of answers they find useful. Children may feel embarrassed or uncomfortable bringing up questions about what's happening to their body. They might not know where to go for good information.

Parents, you know about puberty! You might wonder if your own experience of puberty is relevant to your child, considering the cultural differences between your past experiences and contemporary times. I find that parents are often surprised at how sharing their own story can help their child. It helps children normalize their own experience and lets them know that they aren't as weird as they might feel. Plus, parents can start the conversations about puberty and menstruation when kids are young—nine, eight, or even younger.

Talking about difficult subjects like sex and consent and safety is not a "one-and-done" conversation. These are complex issues. If you're like most parents, you have complicated and nuanced ideas about these matters. Your ideas and what you want to say may evolve over time.

The same is true for talking about puberty. Children are interested in different aspects of puberty at different times. Ask what your child would like to know. A younger child will probably want to know how their body will grow. An older child may want to know when to expect their period.

Tip 2: Talking is Collaborative

You don't have to be the expert on everything your child needs to know. Parents often feel the pressure to know everything there is to know and be ready to answer any possible questions that come up. That's a lot of pressure! It's no wonder parents hesitate to bring up sensitive topics.

It's okay not to know everything. And it's okay to admit this to your kids. This is a chance to say, "You know what? I don't know the answer to that. Let's look it up together." This can also be a great opportunity to help a child find another trusted adult who can help with answers or offer support: an aunt, a cousin, a trusted neighbor or teacher.

I have been this support person in my own extended family, and I love it! I've also really loved leading groups of girls gathered with their moms or female caregivers to talk about periods. In this group space, fourth or fifth



grade girls love hearing about what it's like to have your first period. And they're curious to see real pads and tampons and learn how to use them.

In these groups, we talk about physical changes to expect during puberty and why kids sometimes feel like they're on an emotional roller coaster—happy one minute, sad the next. In the group setting, the girls feel less awkward because they realize they're not alone. As the girls and their caregivers practice talking about something that might be uncomfortable, their later conversations won't be as scary to have.

Tip 3: Talking is Listening

Talking about puberty is a fertile space for talking about self-esteem. Some young people are confident during puberty. They like getting taller, looking more like an adult, feeling more mature. But some are insecure about the changes taking place. Maybe they're maturing slower or faster than their friends. Different growth rates can cause discomfort.



To keep the conversation open and moving, listen to find out what's going on with your child. This is a great way to practice bringing awareness and attention to your conversations with your kids.

Imagine a child comes home from school and says, "I just had the worst day of my life. I started my period at school and I didn't have any pads with me and I had to go to the office to get some pads and everybody knew what I was doing. It was the worst day of my life."

This child doesn't want to hear their parent say, "Don't be silly. It's not the worst day of your life. Just wait until blah blah blah happens. Then you'll know what the worst day of your life is."

No. This child wants their parent to understand that, "TODAY was the worst day of my life." Period. It's the worst day of their life. For them. Period.

Remember not to ask your child to start from your space, with an adult's perspective and hindsight. You don't need to make everything better or make your kids think the day was NOT the worst day of their life. Hear them out. You may be surprised by what you hear—worries and concerns you never expected. I've heard stories about teens who worry their parents will be angry with them for having a period because it ruined a pair of their pants. It's amazing to see what details we focus on in a state of confusion or panic.

Once you practice listening to your child, you'll be more prepared to let them know, "I understand where you're coming from, and I take your concerns seriously." And it's likely that child will be more prepared to talk about their concerns. This is a foundation you can build throughout your relationship with your child.



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