

Difficult conversations with teenagers

It's normal to feel uncomfortable talking to your teenage child about topics such as sex or drugs. But difficult conversations can give you the chance to guide your child towards sensible and responsible decisions and to talk about your family values.

Difficult conversations: the basics

Difficult conversations cover any topic that might be embarrassing or controversial for either you or your child. It could also be something that might cause a heated discussion or a blow-up between the two of you.

Sex, sexual orientation, masturbation, drugs, alcohol, academic difficulties, work and money are all topics that families can find difficult to talk about.

It's normal to feel uncomfortable discussing these things. But being prepared can help you feel more confident and comfortable to tackle difficult conversations.

Managing difficult conversations

There are no scripts for difficult conversations and tricky topics.

But it's a good idea to **think about these topics before your child asks**. If you work out a few key points about sex, alcohol, parties and so on beforehand – and even practise them – you might not be caught so off guard when your child asks a tricky question about sex while you're driving!

Here are some tips to help you manage difficult conversations:

First reactions

- **Try to stay calm.** Be honest if you're shocked by the topic, but reassure your child that you do want to discuss the issue. This can help your child feel he can talk to you about anything.
- Make sure the first thing you say to your child is something that lets her know you're happy that she wants to talk to you. For example, 'I'm so happy that you trust me to help you with this'.
- **Listen to your child.** This means giving your child a chance to talk through what's going on, without you trying to fix the situation. Often, teenagers aren't expecting you to fix things – they just want you to listen.
- Avoid being critical or judgmental, or getting emotional. If you need to let off steam, choose another adult to talk to when your child isn't around.
- Thank your child for coming to you.

Next steps

- If you need a bit of time to cool down or gather your thoughts before you talk, set a time to talk later. Make sure it's soon – don't wait until the next day. The longer you wait, the harder it will be. Your child might go ahead without your input in the meantime.
- If your child has some specific issues he wants your help with and you're not sure how to advise him, say so. Offer to work with your child to find out what he needs to know – for example, about contraception, sexuality, alcohol and so on.
- If your child wants your **help with a tricky situation**, read our article on [problem-solving](#) for steps to finding a workable solution.
- If your child wants your **opinion**, let your child know how you see the situation rather than telling her what to do. For example, 'I would prefer it if you don't have sex until you're older.'



did you know ?

Sexual orientation, sexual activity and bullying are the top three topics parents find difficult to discuss with their teenagers, according to Parentline.

Girls are more likely to talk to parents than boys, and younger teenagers are more likely to talk than older teenagers.

But if you're going to, let's talk about making sure it's safe'.

A study on communication about sex found that teenagers are less anxious and are less likely to avoid talking to their parents about sex **when parents are receptive to their teenagers' ideas** and opinions. Staying calm, casual and composed, and keeping things informal, can also help those lines of communication stay open.



Our [Talking to Teens interactive guide](#) explores some tricky parent and teenager situations. For example, you can see how different approaches to talking about a difficult issue can get different results.

Benefits of difficult conversations

Tackling difficult conversations together with your child is a sign that you have a healthy relationship.

It helps to keep your relationship with your child close and trusting. If you're **warm, accepting, non-judgmental and uncritical**, and also open to negotiating and setting limits, your child is likely to feel more connected to you. Your child is also more likely to discuss issues with you in the future.

And if you know what's going on in your child's life, you're better placed to help him manage difficult situations. Discussing tricky topics with you gives your child the opportunity to explore his choices and work out whether they're the right ones for him.

Try not to avoid difficult conversations with your child. If you do, your child might end up making choices that have negative consequences. For example, a sexually active teenager who doesn't ask for advice about contraception might end up with an unwanted pregnancy or a sexually transmitted infection.



Your child is likely to be more embarrassed talking about sex than you are. If your child wants to talk about sex with you, it means her need for help or discussion is outweighing any discomfort she might be feeling.

When your child won't talk

Some teenagers are very reluctant to start difficult conversations with their parents.

This might be to do with age, gender or past experience. For example, some teenagers might have had an angry or disapproving response from their parents in the past. This can put teenagers off discussing controversial topics with their parents.

If your child doesn't want to have difficult conversations with you, you could try the following:

- Try to set aside some time each day to talk with your child. Ask him open-ended questions, and let him know that if he does want to talk, you're happy to listen. This will help you stay connected with your child and might help him feel more comfortable to come to you in future.
- Keep up to date with your child's interests. This gives you things to talk about and shows that you're interested in your child's wellbeing.
- If your child won't talk to you, it might be helpful to find another adult she can talk to. You could suggest a relative, teacher, counsellor or neighbour.



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